ENGAGING YOUTH ENQUIRY

New Approaches to Engaging Youth:

Understanding the problems and implementing the solutions

October 2008

Background

The Engaging Youth Enquiry was set up in September 2007 to listen to the voices of 16-18 year olds classified as being Not in Education, Employment or Training – 'NEET'. Despite a considerable investment of public money, the proportion of young people who are classified as 'NEET' has remained stubbornly high at around 10% of the age cohort – in 2008, this corresponds to some 200,000 young people in England and Wales.

The 'NEET' category was formally created by the Social Exclusion Unit in 1999. This group of young people had been a growing policy concern since the late 1970s and early 1980s, largely as a result of the collapse of the youth labour market, increasing rates of youth unemployment and crime, and disturbances in Inner City areas, such as the Toxteth riots. The term 'NEET' was closely associated with ideas about the emergence of an underclass in societies undergoing long-term economic and social change, and it focussed the policy gaze in the British context on 16-18 year olds.

Key questions

This is an enduring policy problem. Each of those young people costs the economy on average £45 – 50,000 per annum, an annual cost to the economy of £3 billion.
The following questions inspired our year-long investigation

- Why is it proving so difficult to persuade some young people of the merits of staying in education and training?

- Why do so many young people who want to work not find employment?

In a series of 36 workshops with young people who had had significant experience of being 'NEET' and were at risk of becoming long-term 'NEET', we asked them about their lives, aspirations and needs, and about what kinds of support they would find helpful. The result is a better understanding of the problems and issues from the perspective of young people themselves. We have also worked with youth workers, Connexions advisers, magistrates and others who work with these young people on a daily basis.

A historical perspective

Taking a historical perspective is essential if we are to understand the issues surrounding young people who are classified as 'NEET'. It is useful to remember that only 40 years ago, the 80% of young people not in grammar schools took no public examinations and left school at 15 with no qualifications, although a sizeable number then moved into apprenticeships with day release to study at a Technical College. The remainder moved into low and semi-skilled jobs primarily in manufacturing. That world has gone. The manufacturing heartlands of Scotland, the north of England, the West Midlands and South Wales lost huge numbers of manufacturing and mining jobs.

New jobs in the service sector are not evenly distributed across the country. The result is localised structural unemployment, such as in the rural areas of Northumberland where some of the Engaging Youth Enquiry workshops were held. The situation is difficult for those young people who live in regions where there are very limited employment opportunities, especially as they lack the skills and experience to compete for the jobs that are available. Such structural unemployment has a disproportionate impact on the young people in these areas.

Policy initiatives

Relevant policy initiatives include the reform of the 14-19 curriculum, the Ten Year Youth Strategy, investment in targeted youth support and improved financial support.

Recently we have indeed begun to see a downturn in the proportion of young people who are 'NEET', at least in England. This is obviously welcome but there is still a way to go to meet the ambitious government targets for reducing 'NEET' numbers, as well as ensuring sustainable outcomes.

The decision to raise the age of participation to 17 and then 18 by 2015 makes it a matter of urgency that we understand more about these young people, their hopes, ambitions and aspirations, how they want to be supported, how they can be helped to lead economically successful lives and to make a positive contribution. Let us listen to them and those who work with them.

Who are these young people?

Often represented in the media as being work-shy, feckless and even feral, young people classified as 'NEET' are a highly heterogeneous group: young mothers, those who have simply lost their way, those with learning disabilities, young offenders. Others are engaged in criminal activity or coping with risk on a daily basis. Positive role models may be scarce: some of the young people we spoke with are the third or fourth generation in their families to be workless.

However, they also share some characteristics: after 11 years of statutory education they are united by their common experience of social and economic disadvantage, low educational attainment, relative underachievement and alienation from the education and training system, resulting for many in low levels of self-confidence. The educational reform process that has continued apace in England since the Education Reform Act 1988 has completely failed these young people.

But listen carefully and you will be surprised: these young people have aspirations. They want the same things that most of us do out of life: a stable job that pays a decent wage, a home, a car and eventually a family. What they lack is the economic and personal means to realise their aspirations.

Sustaining engagement with learning: a key to success

Staying engaged: learning matters

Many, but by no means all, of the young people we worked with had dropped out of education before 16, part of the alarming exclusion and truancy rates among 13-16 year olds. Listening carefully to their views it becomes apparent that this is not primarily about the school curriculum or about a lack of vocational learning opportunities, but more about an inability to cope with the necessary authority structures of schooling. This is not to say these young people are not difficult; they will readily admit to poor behaviour at school and anti-social attitudes. Nor is it to blame teachers coping under difficult circumstances. But their active dislike of the experience of schooling makes dropping out a rational response for them. Their 'lived experience' of schooling has to be recognised and taken into account when re-engagement strategies are planned.

There are multiple potential reasons for school failure including having to stay at home to look after sick relatives, persistent bullying, low expectations and consistently being given a message of failure. This is not to paint these young people as victims: they understand the consequences of poor behaviour and anti-social attitudes.

Many leave school with no formal qualifications and many have poor literacy and numeracy skills. By and large they recognise this is a problem: learning matters to them. But their

unhappy memories of schooling means that in most cases they do not want to re-engage with learning through 'going to college'.

But bring learning to them, on the street corner in many cases, and many will respond. With support they can make the transition back to more formal learning, often with voluntary organisations that can offer small groups and one-to-one support. Ask them what they want and you will find perfectly sensible choices: basic skills classes, developing IT skills, learning a trade. We will never forget the night in Hackney when the youth worker's father turned up to plaster an outside wall of the youth centre. He soon attracted an audience of largely young men: they could visualise themselves doing that sort of work.

Finding a job: employment matters

For the overwhelming majority of young people we spoke with what mattered most was getting a job. They want paid work rather than working towards more qualifications. What they do not want is to be placed on a training initiative. Many had had experience of being placed in short-term training initiatives which raised their expectations of getting a job only for those hopes to be dashed. Raising expectations in this way may do more harm than good, causing a downward spiral in motivation.

These young people are being realistic about the sorts of jobs available to them. They want to be hairdressers, builders, car mechanics, or work with children. This is where a period of training with a voluntary body can help, but it must be training that leads to a good chance of getting that all-important first job. These young people also recognise the difficulty of sustaining employment. Many have experience of short spells of low-paid work followed by unemployment in a weakly regulated youth labour market. They need considerable resilience to keep going back out to look for work and they need support while doing so. One young man's experience was not uncommon. James had worked on-and-off for three years: largely doing bar work. He liked the work and wanted eventually to be a bar manager. He had been laid off again the week before. That afternoon he was going back to his former employer to see if there was any chance of getting his job back.

But why should employers take these young people on? They can be difficult and they may be expensive to train. Often they make excellent employees but the support has to carry on after they get their job, and the employers also need support. Work provides an effective context for these young people to learn: they learn to be adults and to behave responsibly. They can also gain qualifications and they develop positive work attitudes and experience. For these young people, work matters.

Listening and caring: youth work matters

Young people spoke at length of the importance of working with a 'significant adult', often a youth worker or a Connexions adviser. This does not mean just an occasional conversation but a sustained relationship. These professionals do not take the place of parents: mum was still the most important person in many young people's lives. But they provide a point of contact, someone who will listen to them, take them seriously, help them engage with social networks essential to getting a job that have all too often disintegrated in local communities blighted by worklessness.

Listening to young people is essential for re-engagement

They are absolutely crucial for those young people who find themselves without parents and in care homes. They are crucial for those who have left home or been forced out, finding themselves sleeping on couches or in hostels. These young people are at risk as they live their lives on the street. They have to be actively sought out by detached youth workers on street corners, encouraged and persuaded to re-engage with education, employment and training.

The young people talked about how they were treated with respect by these professionals, about how they gained dignity through such interactions. These 'significant others' helped them to rejoin an increasingly complex and confusing society. The detached youth workers we have worked with are extraordinary people: spend an evening with them on the streets of Manchester, Tower Hamlets or Hackney and you will quickly realise how skilled they are. They are successful because they have worked, often for years, in the same community building trust and local knowledge. Youth work really matters.

What is needed is sustained funding to support their work. But again and again we found these people working on short-term contracts, subject to short-term funding. As we head towards a new era of devolved Local Authority commissioning for young peoples' services a major programme of investment in detached youth work and mentoring is required.

Indeed, the Government is committing £190m to new youth facilities as part of the Ten Year Youth Strategy. This investment is a positive step, but it is the people on the ground that will make the difference. They must have the necessary funding and support to remain involved with and committed to individual young people over time and not just, as is all too often the case, over the life of short-term initiative or project.

In addition, commissioning bodies are often under pressure to deliver outcome targets that result in either volume or process change, such as reductions in the headcount of young people who are 'NEET' or the integration of youth support services. There is a risk, therefore, that commissioning plans can be, and often are, developed without the direct involvement of end-users. This can lead to services being designed and procured in response to top down targets based on questionable assumptions about what does or might work, rather than with the active involvement either of those who are the intended beneficiaries/users of such services or those who will provide them.

Prospects for the future

We now look towards a future in which all young people must participate in learning up to the age of 18. This means we must think about what kind of arrangements are needed to ensure that every young person has access to a place of learning, or an opportunity for learning, throughout their secondary years appropriate for their needs.

It is essential to offer young people places to learn in which they feel valued, feel safe, make good progress in their learning and experience positive relationships with their peers and adult tutors. Should we consider the possibility that the reform of mainstream schools has limited potential in this regard for 'NEET' young people? Do we need to think radically and afresh about the possible contributions of other models of providing schooling: models which are smaller in scale, more personal in their approach and more sensitive to meeting the specific needs of individuals?

Invitation to participate in the consultation

The consultative report from the Engaging Youth Enquiry can be found at: www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk

We invite you to participate in the consultation process outlined in that report, and welcome comments and suggestions. Contributions can be made until **March 31st 2009**.

To talk further please contact:

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Thank you for your interest in the Engaging Youth Enquiry.

THE NUFFIELD REVIEW OF

14-19

EDUCATION & TRAINING

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