

Against the odds

Re-engaging young people
in education, employment
or training

Briefing for colleges and sixth forms, October 2010

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

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On Friday 13 August 2010, the CLG announced the Audit Commission will be abolished in 2012/13. The Audit Commission published *Against the Odds: Re-engaging young people in education, employment or training*, before the announcement. This briefing supports *Against the Odds*, and the research was completed before the announcement. The themes and messages of the report, and this accompanying briefing remain relevant for sixth forms and colleges in this time of economic uncertainty.

Introduction

1 Young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) are likely to feel bored and isolated. They have more chance of long-term unemployment, ill-health, and criminality than their peers. When they do get work, they are more likely to be in low paid jobs.

2 *Against the Odds* looked at how local authorities, schools, colleges, Connexions and other partners can work together to re-engage young people who are NEET in learning or training. Key messages from the study are:

- Young people NEET at 16-18 have fewer life opportunities and are more likely to be a long-term cost to the public purse.
- Councils get better outcomes by targeting their approaches to the profile of their local NEET population.
- Commissioners must target resources to the most sustained NEET group, and remove waste and duplication.
- Better targeting and collaboration can reduce lifetime cost and increase well-being.

3 This briefing highlights the key role further education colleges, sixth form colleges and school sixth forms play in:

- helping young people make successful transitions from secondary school to post-16 learning or training;
- preventing young people becoming NEET; and
- ensuring young people who are NEET can re-engage in learning.

The messages in this briefing are also relevant to other post-16 learning or training providers such as third sector organisations and independent training providers.

4 The briefing also includes local examples and self-assessment questions that colleges can use to assess and improve their own performance in working with young people who are NEET, or in danger of becoming NEET.

The role of colleges

Effective information

5 Collegesⁱ have a key role in preventing young people becoming NEET and helping young people who are NEET re-engage in learning or work. Young people may become NEET if they have a lack of information about what is available, or make the wrong decision about learning, and subsequently drop out. When young people have a good understanding of the choices on offer in sixth forms and further education, they are less likely to make the wrong decision on learning options. Connexions and schools are key to providing information, advice and guidance (IAG) about choices for young people. Colleges can ensure schools and Connexions have a good knowledge of the college's offer, and can share this information with young people.

6 Close working with partners can also help colleges share information with young people directly. This may be through visits to schools, open days or taster courses. Colleges can also share information with parents, helping to raise their own ambitions and their ambitions for their children. Schools and Connexions can share information on what young people want to know and provide feedback to colleges on what communications young people have found most useful. Close working also prevents duplication of effort and helps ensure a consistent message from the services that provide IAG to young people.

Support at transition and beyond

7 Colleges already work with schools to support young people as they prepare to move into post-16 education. By collecting information on young people, in particular those who may find the transition difficult, colleges can organise suitable support. This could include classroom assistance, lunchtime support groups, taster courses or summer school before starting college. The case studies in the next section describe approaches colleges have taken to aid the transition.

ⁱ For the basis of this briefing, all references to colleges include further education colleges, sixth form colleges and school sixth forms.

8 Some young people may already receive support from children's services. This may include young people with special education needs (SEN), young offenders, care leavers and teenage parents. Colleges that work with the children's services that are providing this support can ensure a smooth transition and reduce the likelihood of duplication of work. The Audit Commission has published briefings on the issues faced by these young people and ways of working with them. The briefings are available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/neet

'We don't have any problems hitting our target numbers... where we do perhaps have difficulties is putting in the support that is essential for these young people...that's where the expense issue for us lies.'

College principal

9 Working with schools can help colleges identify some barriers to learning or engagement before a young person arrives at college, but other barriers may arise while at college. If young people have opportunities to talk about issues or problems, they are less likely to drop out. Support is more likely to be rapid and suitable if teaching and other staff know who to report any early warning signs too: Connexions, student support, or other children's services.

Learning options

10 Different young people will have different interests, ambitions and learning styles. Colleges and sixth form centres can provide a varied programme to meet local young people's needs. Links with schools help colleges plan provision based on the needs and ambitions of the students in the area. Young people in year 11 will be the focus during conversations with schools, but colleges may also be talking to schools about younger pupils. Colleges can increase their understanding of young people's future choices, and the demand for different subjects by listening to younger people.

11 Some young people will not be ready to go into options such as A levels or vocational qualifications when they enter college. Others will have struggled at school and may be unsure whether college is right for them. Colleges therefore provide provision for young people with various needs. Certain courses, for example foundation learning can be an appropriate link to further education or employment. Flexible start dates and roll-on roll-off courses have proved successful in encouraging young people, who may otherwise be NEET, to engage. Young people most at risk of long-term disengagement may require tailored provision to encourage the initial engagement. When providing courses at level 1ⁱ or below, it is important to think about how and where young people will progress to, whether it is into mainstream education, an apprenticeship, or work. Without a clear progression pathway there is a danger young people will become NEET or unemployed once college provision finishes.

12 Colleges can work with councils' economic development teams to improve their understanding of the local economy, and to ensure they offer courses that will give young people the skills to progress into the local job market. Economic development teams can also help develop links for work experience placements and apprenticeships. Colleges can play an active role in consultations on economic development strategies, and ensure young people are considered in the plans for the area. Colleges also have an important role to play in local strategic partnerships - both in the main forum and in education and regeneration sub committeesⁱⁱ.

13 It is also important for colleges to work with employers and Jobcentre Plus to ensure they design courses that provide young people with the skills that employers are looking for. Focus groups with employers, conducted as part of the research for *Against the Odds*, found young people's lack of sector specific and technical skills were a barrier to employing young people. Employers reported attitudes and behaviour, such as turning up late, communications skills and dress code that were also barriers. By working with local employers colleges can find out what businesses in their area are looking for, and plan provision to meet these needs. Working with employers also helps colleges develop work experience opportunities for young people.

ⁱ Level 1 qualifications are equivalent to five GCSE's, grade D-G.

ⁱⁱ The Audit Commission's report *Working Better Together* (2008) reviews good practice in making local strategic partnerships work for local communities.

14 Audit Commission research for *Against the Odds* highlighted ways colleges can re-engage young people who are NEET and prevent others becoming NEET in the future. Colleges can make a difference to NEET levels by:

- working with schools and children's services to identify young people at risk of disengagement and supporting them in making the transition into college at age 16;
- working with schools, councils and other partners to identify and remove barriers to young people accessing learning from age 16-18, and put support in place to ensure continued attendance on courses for those at risk of dropping out;
- collaborating with schools, Connexions and Jobcentre Plus to provide information advice and guidance while reducing waste and duplication;
- working with parents, carers and young people to raise ambitions and awareness of future learning, training and employment opportunities;
- ensuring some flexibility to tailor provision to the needs of young people most at risk of becoming NEET; and
- working with post 18 education and training providers to support young people making the transition to further learning at age 18.

15 The following chapter gives local area examples that colleges can learn from to make changes.

How colleges make a difference

16 Colleges use different approaches to prevent young people becoming NEET and to engage young people who are already NEET. Colleges can help young people most at risk by:

- providing appropriate support to young people during the transition into college;
- removing barriers to engagement in education or training;
- offering continued support for at risk young people to prevent drop out; and
- providing learning options that meet the needs of young people.

Appropriate support during transition into college

17 Young people can join college at different times and through various routes, for example from school, employment or from being NEET. Some young people may have dropped out of college previously but want to re-engage. Suitable support when young people start college will reduce the risk of disengagement.

18 Working with partners can be important to share information about the support required and reduce the likelihood of duplication. Flexible start dates and the opportunity to join at different times of the year means young people who are NEET do not have to wait until September to re-engage. Summer holiday activities, bridging courses, and taster sessions can also be an effective way of engaging young people before enrolment on a mainstream course.

Case study examples

Case study 1

Support to transition

William Morris Sixth Form, in Hammersmith and Fulham, works with schools to ensure a smooth transition for year 11 pupils into the sixth form. Student services staff from the sixth form visit each school in the area to talk to mentors and head teachers about issues or barriers in the transition to the sixth form. Students at risk may be asylum seekers, have special education needs, or have been through the youth offending service. Students at risk are tracked: tutors are then told about any students who are at risk and the support they may require.

When term begins, the tutors hold one-to-ones with their students to identify if they need continuing support. Some at-risk students might not need any further support, whereas other students may be referred to other support services such as Connexions.

Case study 2

Bridging courses

Northumberland College run employability and personal development bridging courses that start three times a year. Young people can start the course part-way through the year, meaning they can engage as soon as they are ready and not have to wait until September. Young people can remain engaged in these courses until the start of a mainstream course.

Case study 3

Basic skills alongside team activities

Using European Social Fund (ESF) funding, South Nottingham College developed a summer school to help young people who were in danger of becoming disengaged during the summer holiday. The young people worked on basic/ key skills and work related skills. This sat alongside football coaching and other group activities. 16 of the 18 young people who completed the course made a positive progression.

Removing barriers to engagement

19 Young people can face various barriers to engagement, which can have a negative affect on their college life. Barriers can include negative experiences of education, low educational attainment, lack of money, or problems with transport. Other barriers may follow personal circumstances such as being absent through illness or having a disruptive home life. Mentor support and distance learning provision are some ways of removing, or lessening the impact of barriers, so young people are more likely to maintain engagement.

Case study examples

Case study 4

Guidance and support

South Nottingham College employ Guidance and Support Tutors (GSTs) to act as critical friends and support young people in the college. One GST works with the Entry to Employment (E2E) students. They work alongside tutors to do interviews and reviews with students as well as offering support for any issues individual students are having. The GST will work to remove any barriers to engagement, for example resolving housing issues or finding more support for young people with caring responsibilities. The GST also acts as a critical friend; they talk to students who are not attending lessons and help them to resolve problems.

One issue was a group of students on the E2E course were struggling with early starts, either failing to get in on time or struggling to concentrate in the lessons. The college responded by setting up a breakfast club to help deal with this. The breakfast club takes place directly before the lesson and a rota of staff run the club. Students can come in, have some breakfast and talk to their friends and tutors about any issues before the lessons begin. This has helped student's concentration in lessons.

Case study 5

Distance learning

Northumberland College use the Blackboard distance learning programme to enable young people to remain engaged in their education when they are temporarily unable to attend college, such as through pregnancy or illness. The college puts materials online so young people who cannot attend can continue to follow the course.

Continued support for at risk young people

20 Some young people require long-term support that lasts throughout their college life. They may have special education needs or care responsibilities. Classroom assistance, lunchtime support groups and mentors are examples of support that can help students remain engaged and reach their potential.

Case study examples

Case study 6

Peer support

Using ESF funding, Connexions and South Nottingham College have set up a mentoring system where young people who are struggling with both academic and social issues can gain peer support. Connexions and the college wanted the mentors to have experience of disengagement so that they would be able to pass on their experience to students and help the students stay focused. Following a formal interview process, which included being interviewed by students and staff, two mentors were employed. The mentors work with students on the E2E courses through one to one peer support throughout the year. The college are also working with the mentors to increase their skills for their future careers.

Case study 7

Lunchtime support

Salford College run lunchtime support groups for teenage parents to help them remain engaged and receive moral support from other young people facing similar barriers.

Case study 8

Getting Back on Track

Tower Hamlets College run the Back On Track programme for learners who are in danger of dropping out of learning programmes. The course is delivered flexibly, taking into account individuals needs. The course lasts for six weeks, with attendees spending up to six hours a week covering a variety of topics, including barriers to learning, behaviour, communication and setting goals. After the six-week programme of engagement activities, the college's advice team support learners back on to their course, or where appropriate on to another course.

The college also run an intensive one-day programme for some groups, such as AS students, using parts of the six week programme. Tower Hamlets College is also working in partnership with a local sixth form college to deliver the programme and support their at risk learners. The project budget is £15,000 and so far 142 young people have attended sessions.

Varied learning options

21 Different young people have different interests, ambitions and learning styles. They will also enter college at different levels. Flexible provision is important to meet these varying needs. Start dates through the year, roll-on-roll-off courses and clear progression pathways are important in engaging some of the harder to reach groups. By consulting young people, schools, economic development teams and local employers, colleges have a good understanding of both the demand for different courses and the skills and training that young people need to equip themselves for the local jobs market.

Case study examples

Case study 9

Employability skills and vocational tasters

Rotherham College developed the Choices programme for young people aged 16-18 who are NEET. The programme, originally funded through the ESF and the Learning Skills Council, is a 12 week, roll-on roll-off programme to develop employability skills and provide a progression pathway to more learning or work. As well as developing key skills in English and Maths, young people have the opportunity to complete progression awards through the National Open College Network as well as first aid, health and safety and work experience.

As well as developing employability skills, young people on the programme have the opportunity to take part in vocational taster courses. This includes taster courses in construction, care, business administration and hair and beauty. The project has proved a success and the college now have four intakes for the programme each year. The success has also led to the college mainstreaming the provision, which means the college can avoid having to look for more commissioning opportunities every few years.

Case study 10

Volunteering on-site

Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College run a volunteering programme through 'vTalent' with young people working in different departments of the college. 15 young people are involved in the programme, nine were NEET before joining the programme. The volunteers spend 44 weeks working in the college in various departments, including student services, sport and leisure and the crèche. The volunteering placements are tailored to meet individual needs, with the aim of young people achieving a level 2ⁱ qualification at the end of the placement.

ⁱ Level 2 qualifications are equivalent to five GCSE's, grade A*-C.

Case study 11

Skills for Working Life

Salford College work with Connexions on the Skills For Working Life programme. Young people learn basic maths, English and IT skills with a focus on a career they want to follow, such as catering, hair and beauty or sport. The course includes several opportunities for visits to employers and they have a learning mentor working with small groups of young people. The course is full-time and participants can progress to any level 1 course on completion. The personalised nature of the programme enables it to remove individual barriers.

Conclusions and self assessment questions

22 Colleges play a key role in preventing young people becoming NEET and helping young people who are NEET re-engage in learning or work. This role begins pre-16 when colleges talk to schools about the students coming to college the following year. Colleges will also work with Connexions to help young people who are NEET access provision.

23 Supporting students who are in danger of dropping out of college is another important role. The college may provide this support or they may work in partnership with other children's services or the voluntary and community sector.

24 It is also important the college understands the needs of the local economy and the ambitions and needs of young people. This way they can provide a varied programme of courses to cater for the varied wants and needs of young people, including those who are most at risk of long-term disengagement.

25 Colleges can use the following self-assessment questions to assess current provision and identify improvement actions.

- How does the college ensure young people have a good understanding of the options available to them?
 - How does the college ensure Connexions have good information about the courses it offers, particularly for young people who are NEET?
 - How does the college ensure schools have good information about the courses and other services it offers?
 - In what ways does the college communicate directly with prospective students and their parents or carers?
 - How does the college collect feedback and evaluate its approach to communicating the programme of courses?

- How does the college use information to plan provision and support?
 - How does the college work with schools to collect information on young people who are moving from secondary school to college, particularly those who may find the transition difficult?
 - How does the college work with Connexions to understand the support needs of young people NEET?
 - How does this information feed into planning support provision?
 - How effective is the college's support in helping young people stay in college and complete their courses?
 - Which partners does the college work with when planning support for young people?
 - Which partnerships are working well, which could be improved?
 - How can the college improve partnership working when providing support to young people NEET, or in danger of being NEET?
- How effective are the college's methods for identifying young people at risk of becoming NEET?
 - What has the college done to allow students to report any issues they are having that could lead to disengagement?
 - How effectively is this working?
 - How do staff report any risk signs, which could lead to disengagement?
 - How effectively is this working?
- How effectively do the college's courses meet the needs of young people in the area?
 - How do schools contribute when the college is planning its education and training provision?
 - How do employers contribute when the college is planning their education and training provision?
 - How are young people's views considered when planning provision?
 - How does the college ensure the programme of courses meets the needs of young people at different levels (in particular young people at level 1 or below)
 - How does the college build progression pathways into provision at level 1 or below?
 - What provision do the college have to encourage young people who are NEET back into learning throughout the year?
 - How does the college measure how successful different provision is at:
 - providing progression pathways?
 - preventing young people dropping out?
 - Where provision is not providing the planned outcomes, what changes have you made?

26 This briefing is one of the tools that accompany the report *Against the Odds*. The report and accompanying tools are available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/neet

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We welcome your feedback. If you have any comments on this report, are intending to implement any of the recommendations, or are planning to follow up any of the case studies, please email:

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