Article

Understanding and Reducing NEET: Perspectives of Schoolteachers and Career Advice Service Providers

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Abstract: There are growing concerns about the number of children and young people who are "Not in Education, Employment, or Training" (NEET). The literature suggests that further research is warranted to help understand what can be done to reduce the number of pupils at risk of NEET, to enable a successful transition into education, employment, or training. In this study, the views of schoolteachers (who provide careers support in schools and make NEET referrals) and career advice service providers (who receive NEET referrals from schoolteachers) are gauged to gain better insight regarding existing careers provision in schools and the efficacy of NEET referral processes. Using a qualitative interview approach, two schoolteachers from the West Midlands (UK) and three career advice service providers were recruited for the study. Thematic analysis of the interviews with schoolteachers identified four superordinate themes: Pupil Contact and Support; A Whole-School Approach to Careers Guidance; Broadening Horizons and Creating Opportunities; NEET Identification and Referral: When, How, and What Happens Next? The interviews with career advice service providers distinguished three superordinate themes: Navigating a Dynamic Landscape; Integration and Affiliation with Schools; Reaching Pupils at Risk of NEET. Taken together, the findings indicate that providing improved and continued communication, collaboration, and coordination of different services appear to be key leverages to address the multiple service needs of young people at risk.

1. Introduction

The transition from school-to-work is a crucial developmental task in the lives of young people, a make-or-break period that can impact on a range of later outcomes, ranging from associated employment opportunities, patterns of family formation, to health and wellbeing [1,2]. Yet, the UK, like most countries across Europe and other advanced economies, has experienced an alarming shift towards precarious employment arrangements and low pay, even among graduates [3]. This trend towards increasing precarity, characterised by a rise of temporary, self-, and part-time work employment and of zero-hour contracts with no guarantee of minimum working hours has been evident before the 2008 Great Recession [4] but has accelerated ever since [5]. Young people have been hit particularly hard by this trend, compared to older workers [6–8], and the levels of young people (aged between 16 and 24 years) who are disconnected from education and employment, who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) has increased [1,9]. NEET refers to a heterogenous group of young people and there is considerable debate regarding its definition [10,11]. Nonetheless, it can be a useful tool in enhancing understanding of young people's vulnerabilities in terms of labour market participation and social inclusion [11,12].

Recognizing that the experience of NEET is shaped by multiple interlinked and changing influences, including characteristics of the individual, their immediate and wider social context as well as institutional structures [7], this study focuses on the role of institutional

support structures as implemented in career guidance services to facilitate a smooth transition into the labour market. Adopting a qualitative approach, we aim to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by service providers within a particular UK region: the West Midlands, a region which experienced relative high levels of NEET among 16–24-year-olds.

In the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession, there had been a considerable increase of young people aged 16 to 24 experiencing NEET, rising from 13.4% in 2007 to 17% in 2011, but decreasing to 12% in 2016 and further to 9.5% in June 2021 [12]. In 2021, the average NEET rate among 16–25-year-olds in the UK was slightly lower than the average EU-27 NEET rate [11]. According to the UK Office for National Statistics [13], the percentage of all young people who were NEET in April/June 2022 was estimated to be 10.4%, down 0.6 percentage points compared with pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic levels (October to December 2019). In addition to country-specific differences, there are regional variations in employment opportunities [14], highlighting the crucial role of institutional structures. For example, estimates from the UK Labour Force Survey [13] suggest that in 2021, 10.5% of 16–24-year-olds in England were NEET (compared to 15.6% in 2010), while in the West Midlands 9.9% were NEET in 2021 (compared to 19.6% in 2010). According to this evidence, it seems that services in the West Midlands succeeded in reducing the percentage of young people being NEET over the last 10 years. Focusing on experiences of service providers in the Midlands might, thus, provide insights into what worked for this region and have implications for other regions in the UK. Given the centrality of the transition into employment in young people's lives, we focus on career advice service providers.

1.1. Career Guidance and Information Services

Effective career guidance (defined loosely here as service provision that is designed to help individuals to manage their careers and to make appropriate educational, training, and occupational decisions) can help to facilitate the school-to-work transition and support young people as they make choices about education and training and progress within the labour market, during times of economic uncertainty [15]. Career guidance provides services which help people of any age to make the educational, training, and occupational decisions that will affect who they might become in life and work. Ideally, they should provide people with personalised, impartial, and timely information and support, helping to implement lifelong approaches to learning and active approaches to labour market engagement and transitions. Indeed, the Gatsby Charitable Foundation [16] outlined eight benchmarks ('The Gatsby Benchmarks') for good career guidance, which aims to form part of the key statutory advice for schools and colleges in England. These suggest school interventions that focus on providing a stable career programme, learning from career and labour market, enabling opportunities for engagement with work experience, employers, and one-to-one professional guidance (whether this be an internal member of staff, or external). Recent research has suggested that engagement in careers guidance (as measured by the Gatsby Benchmarks) is significantly related to higher levels of career readiness in young people aged 12–18 in England [17].

Generally, in the UK, support for NEETs falls to local governments—-this in the face of large budget cuts. Considering this and the level of young NEETs in the UK, organisations like the Local Government Association (LGA; https://www.local.gov.uk/, accessed on 15 January 2023) are calling for devolved support strategies to allow councils to deliver skills provision locally and ensure every young person can realise their full potential and that the needs of employers are met.

In this study, we focus on experiences within an established careers advice service (kept anonymous for the purposes of this manuscript). This service purportedly offers impartial information, advice, and careers guidance for young people and has links to and strong relationships with training providers and specialist employment agencies, locally and more widely. The service also provides information, advice, and careers guidance at main transition points in the lives of young people; when choosing Year 9 options, when

moving from Year 11 to post-sixteen education, training, and employment, and when leaving post-sixteen education for higher education or employment.

1.2. Research Questions

Guided by a multi-systemic framework [7], we aim to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by teachers and career service providers in delivering effective support to young people at risk of becoming NEET. There were two principal research questions:

(1)   How do schoolteachers describe existing careers provision and NEET referral processes in their schools?
(2)   How do career advice service providers describe existing NEET referral processes and efforts to support pupils' transition to post-sixteen education, training, or employment?

2. Method

2.1. Design

A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted as the focus was to "understand several individual's common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" ([18], p. 60).

2.2. Sample and Procedure

The sample was situated within one distinct area within the West Midlands (UK), served by an established careers service. Despite historically higher than average levels of NEET in the West Midlands as a whole, levels in 2021 were below national averages and this was also true of the area selected for the current study. In 2021, this area was relatively affluent compared with England as a whole (within the highest quartile) but had similar levels of pupils with special educational needs or disability (SEND). Five participants were recruited from the West Midlands (UK). This comprised two schoolteachers (one male, one female), who had a substantive careers support role within the school and were involved in or responsible for referral decisions (to the participating career advice service provider), and three staff members employed by the career advice service providers (one male, two females). Participants were interviewed individually to learn more about their experiences of existing careers provision in schools and the efficacy of NEET referrals processes.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained by the University's Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited via self-selective sampling by responding to an advert about the study disseminated on local teacher networks (schoolteachers) and via a mailing list at the targeted career advice service provider. Participant information sheets and informed consent forms were distributed via email prior to participation: these clarified the aims and objectives of the research. Participants were assured of their rights to confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study with no penalty. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in October and November 2021 with those who agreed to take part: this took place online via Zoom for straightforward recording and transcription purposes (and due to restrictions resulting from the pandemic). A semi-structured interview was used, where responses were probed further, as necessary, for clarification or further understanding. At the end of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions or provide additional comments that may not have been sufficiently covered during the interview. Interviews lasted between 44 and 66 min in duration.

2.3. Interview Schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed, which focused on how schoolteachers and career advice service providers describe existing NEET referral processes and efforts to support pupils' transition to post-sixteen education, training, or employment. Open questions were asked to address the participants experience [19]. Responses were probed further as necessary for clarification or further understanding. At the end of the interview participants were invited to ask any questions or add any additional comments that may

not have been sufficiently covered (see Appendices A and B, for the interview schedule guides for schoolteachers and career advice service providers, respectively).

2.4. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was chosen as this allows for rich, detailed, and complex description of the data, and was congruent with the focus on identifying recurrent patterns (themes) across the data [20]. The first step of the analysis was to transcribe the interviews verbatim: this was done automatically via Zoom functions, although some editing was required due to lexical errors. The analytical procedure after this followed very closely the six-stage process described in Braun and Clarke [20], involving: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1. Experiences of Schoolteachers

Four superordinate themes of the experiences of schoolteachers were identified (see Table 1). Due to the vastness of the data, a reduced sample of excerpts from the transcripts will be provided to illustrate themes (the full analysis is available on reasonable request— see Supplementary Material statement).

Table 1. Superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Pupil Contact and Support	■ Personalised and Sustained Careers Provision for Pupils ■ Navigating the Pandemic: Online Resources
A Whole-School Approach to Careers Guidance	■ Resourcing and Senior Leadership ■ Staff Collaboration and Embedded Careers Provision
Broadening Horizons and Creating Opportunities	■ Pupil Ambition, Aspirations, and the Role and Influence of Parents ■ Work Experience and Employer Involvement
NEET Identification and Referral: When, How, and What Happens Next?	■ Assessment and Recognition of NEET ■ Referral Processes and Associated Challenges

3.1.1. Pupil Contact and Support

1i. Personalised and Sustained Careers Provision for Pupils

Schools are required to offer careers support to pupils, although the time devoted to this, and the form and nature this takes, can vary widely between schools. Schoolteachers in our sample argued that personalised (one-to-one) meetings were effective for supporting pupils with their careers, particularly those who may be harder to reach (i.e., at risk of NEET):

> "*What students say to me and kind of parents as well, is that that one-to-one conversation is a lot more effective . . . it takes them (pupils) out of that environment as well, where they've got their friends around them where you know they might not necessarily feel comfortable asking questions . . . and it's very much bespoke to them and their situation rather than being more generic.*" (Participant A–Teacher)

The effectiveness of a more personalised (hands-on) approach was echoed by another teacher, who argued that sometimes it is best to just "*sit there and make the application with them.*" (Participant B–Teacher).

This approach also helps to ensure that pupils are attending and engaging actively with the careers-related activity, as there are often issues regarding non-attendance for pupils at risk of NEET:

"(Pupils at risk of NEET) . . . are likely to be the ones that are late . . . because of poor attendance . . . quite often can be the case with those groups of students, they miss that and that's it." (Participant A–Teacher)

The importance of more personalised, one-to-one support is clearly highlighted; however, it remains that in accordance with the statutory guidance, pupils need only have a single one-to-one careers meeting by the time they finish Year 11. This would seem insufficient for engaging pupils with their careers, especially for those who may be at risk of NEET. Indeed, it would seem that " *. . . more structured time and space and resources (are needed)*" (Participant A–Teacher).

Not only is there a need for more frequent, one-to-one, and personalised provision, but there is also a need for 'sustained' provision, so that pupils' career development can be supported over a longer period of time:

"The biggest challenge with the one-to-one is . . . we have that discussion, I will write up their notes, I will send them to them, with their permission, I will send them to other colleagues and I might send them to parents, but there is no space or structured time for them to go and complete the objectives and actions that we have come out with from that discussion." (Participant A–Teacher)

A single, one-to-one meeting is, therefore, insufficient for addressing the needs of pupils (particularly those who may be at risk of NEET). It is likely that, unless there are more frequent and follow-up meetings, careers progression will be stunted, and any development lost:

" . . . it is very much left to the student to take up those actions . . . it becomes an isolated event . . . when we meet students one year later, (they are) exactly where they were when we last met." (Participant A–Teacher)

Taken together, although careers provision is evident in schools, much of this is optional, generic, dependent on the actions of the pupil, and may fail to reach those who are at risk of NEET who may have attendance-related (and other) issues. Sustained and personalised one-to-one provision, which builds on earlier insights and career developments, would likely yield more positive outcomes for pupils.

1ii. Navigating the Pandemic: Online Resources

The previous section emphasised the importance of pupil contact; however, the pandemic and the associated restrictions on social distancing meant that many schools had to communicate with their pupils online. This was seen to exacerbate the already-known non-attendance issues for those pupils at most risk of NEET:

" . . . although efforts were made to continue offering careers support sessions (online), these were often not taken up and pupils did not reach out...we didn't have 100% coverage of every single student . . . it meant that so much was missed" (Participant A–Teacher)

Conversely though, the need to develop online provision did provide opportunities for alternative provision and some students, including those most as risk of NEET, were thought to benefit:

"We offer virtual work experience that has been quite successful . . . (it) has proved popular and interestingly quite popular among students who were persistent absentees . . . (it was) seen as a non-threatening way to engage in the world of work" (Participant B–Teacher)

Taken together, the evidence presented aligns well with Benchmark 3 and 8 of Gatsby's Career Benchmarks (https://www.goodcareerguidance.org.uk/, accessed on 15 January 2023) on Address the Needs of Each Pupil and Personal Guidance, respectively. Here, teachers (or other careers lead) should be sensitive to individual needs and provide opportunities for careers guidance especially when significant study or career choices are being made. However, the evidence here also suggests that this can be a challenging endeavour

that can be attributable in part to heightened likelihood of pupil non-attendance (particular due to the pandemic) and limited resources in the school.

3.1.2. A Whole-School Approach to Careers Guidance

2i. Resourcing and Senior Leadership

Benchmark 1 of Gatsby's Career Benchmarks (https://www.goodcareerguidance.org.uk/, accessed on 15 January 2023) on A Stable Careers Programme points out that every school should have an embedded careers programme that is backed by senior management and understood by all major stakeholders, such as pupils, parents, teachers, and employers. However, certainly for one teacher in the sample, there was a level of discontent with the job description and feelings of being misunderstood and unsupported in their role. For example, it was said of senior leadership/management, that they have:

> " . . . *a general lack of understanding (of the role, thinking that) . . . one careers interview will fix it.*" (Participant A–Teacher)

Further, it was felt that their role, as described in an official documentation, does not accurately reflect the reality:

> " . . . *the job description is . . . not reflected in day-to-day understanding . . . I can't possibly do that within the time that I have.*" (Participant A–Teacher)

In another school though, senior leadership/management teams seemed to work more collaboratively and with greater clarity and coherence, for example:

> "*I don't act in isolation . . . my conversations with the attendance team, pastoral leads, teachers.*" (Participant B–Teacher)

Although there is some variation in experience here, it is apparent that for some, the careers support role is not always well-defined, is sometimes not reflective of reality, can be less well-understood by others (including senior management), and can leave the teacher concerned feeling overwhelmed and under-supported.

2ii. Staff Collaboration and Embedded Careers Provision

Not only should there be a Stable Careers Programme understood by all stakeholders, but there should also be: Linking Curriculum Learning to Careers (Benchmark 4 of Gatsby's Career Benchmarks: https://www.goodcareerguidance.org.uk/, accessed on 15 January 2023) with careers coverage embedded within other subjects and curricula. For one teacher, this did not seem to be the case. It was felt that other teachers did not know what the careers' advisor role entailed. It was also felt that other teachers did not incorporate sufficient reference to careers in their own teaching:

> "*(There is) a lack of understanding from general teaching staff on what is the careers' role and what does that one-to-one appointment do, and what should they (other teachers) be doing alongside it because they should be supporting careers development as well.*" (Participant A–Teacher)

Further, there did not seem to be satisfactory collegiate discussions of these issues:

> "*A member of staff might have asked me to pick them (a referred student) up as a priority but then I don't get given any (profile) information . . . that would have been extremely important and changes the dynamic*" (of interviews with pupils) (Participant A–Teacher)

However, another teacher described a more collegiate environment, where other teaching staff were supportive of their careers provision:

> "*I am asking heads of year, form tutors, pastoral leads, etc., to identify those pupils who are potentially NEET.*" (Participant B–Teacher)

There were also clearer efforts to embed careers within the curriculum:

"(teachers work together to) . . . increased awareness of careers and how this relates to subject areas . . . if you're teaching geography, you need to demonstrate how geography is used in particular careers . . . this is made explicit." (Participant B–Teacher)

Taken together then, schools need to work together more effectively to provide greater clarity (and accuracy) regarding the careers support role. Improved opportunities for communication and collaboration would also be beneficial. This 'whole-school' approach would likely result in heightened collegiality and improved support for both staff and pupils.

3.1.3. Broadening Horizons and Creating Opportunities

3i. Pupil Ambition, Aspirations, and the Role and Influence of Parents

Pupils at risk of NEET may be lacking in ambition and aspiration and this, in part, may be influenced by their home environment. For example, it was argued that:

"Our demographic of pupils haven't necessarily got parents at home that are in the top jobs that will help and support them and everything else, they are kind of your more disadvantaged, working class roles, if they are working, and this does mean their aspirations can be quite low because they are not exposed to those higher levels of even just the kind of standard aspirations, sometimes, which is sad . . . because we only think of careers we are exposed to." (Participant A–Teacher)

This may imply that one barrier to pupils' career aspirations is their home environment and the influence of their parents, specifically. There is a need then, to expose pupils to a range of different careers, experiences, and opportunities that they might not be readily afforded in the home.

3ii. Work Experience and Employer Involvement

It was commonly felt that more connections with the workplace, e.g., via employer involvement and work experiences opportunities, would improve the careers prospects of pupils. For example, it was argued that:

"Work experience helps . . . it gives them this opportunity to kind of test this career idea . . . being able to do work experience allows them to give it a bit of a trial before they commit to a college course or some other training or education." (Participant A–Teacher)

It is: *"Useful to talk to someone in that industry."* (Participant A–Teacher)

Although work experience opportunities are encouraged, and link closely with several of Gatsby's Career Benchmarks (https://www.goodcareerguidance.org.uk/, accessed on 15 January 2023) (e.g., 2: Learning from Career and Labour Market Information; 5: Encounters with Employers and Employees; 6: Experience of Workplaces; 7: Encounters with Further and Higher Education), provision might not be optimal in its current form. For instance, while it was acknowledged that different schools do things differently, it was argued that:

" . . . students should be doing experiences of the workplace, and that does normally take the form of a block of work experience in year 10 . . . although we've dropped it down from a two-week to a one-week option." And *"if you then go on that experience and you don't particularly enjoy it, you are back to square one."* (Participant A–Teacher)

The popular design of one block of experience, might, therefore, not be optimal for exposing pupils to a range of different careers, employers, and employees etc. It also can be the case, that work experience is chosen out of convenience rather than out of linkage with underlying career aspirations:

"for some students it ends up being 'well I've tried, people haven't got back to me, so I'm just going to work with mum and dad, or auntie and uncle' because that's the only thing they can get to fill that time . . . this hasn't tested their career idea in any way, shape or form." (Participant A–Teacher)

Schools would do well to expose pupils to a broader range of careers and employment opportunities rather than the current, popular, one block of experience in a single area. However, there are two important points of note: (1) environmental factors beyond the

parents might contribute to limited ambitions and aspirations, and (2) it is not the case that work experience opportunities are as readily available as one might imagine. For example, one teacher argued:

> "*A real problem with regards to ambition and aspiration is that most of the jobs in the areas are low skilled.*" (Participant B–Teacher)

It is clear then, that while addressing pupil ambitions and aspirations, and providing additional and varied opportunities to engage with the world of work would enhance careers provision, this is challenging due in part to parental influence (negative role models) and affluency of the locale in which one attends school.

3.1.4. NEET Identification and Referral: When, How, and What Happens Next?

4i. Assessment and Recognition of NEET

What was apparent in our sample, was that the strategies for identifying pupils at risk of NEET was varied and often heavily reliant on the intuition of the careers lead. For example, one teacher said:

> "*(We) Do not really have a formal system within school.*" (Participant A–Teacher)

This was the same for another teacher in the sample; although he seemed to draw heavily on his own experience and intuition to identify pupils who may be at risk of NEET:

> " . . . *because you have seen these students day in day out for five years, you almost get a sense of that (being at risk of NEET) . . . and where they are heading.*" (Participant B–Teacher)

This same teacher outlined their approach for identifying pupils who may be at risk of NEET:

> "*(We adopt) . . . A holistic approach . . . one of the things I have been looking at is postcode data . . . we are trying to look at students who, right from the outset, come in pupil premium, free school meals, and a Quintile 1 area, and if you add to that they are a looked after child, you know that potentially you've got a NEET student on your hands . . . I am [also] asking heads of year, form tutors, pastoral leads etc. to identify those pupils who are potentially NEET and to focus on them for careers interviews.*" (Participant B–Teacher)

Although it is likely that these efforts will yield some success, it seems apparent that schools and schoolteachers are working heavily with their own intuition and require more support and guidance in identifying pupils who may be at risk of NEET.

4ii Referral Processes and Associated Challenges

The schoolteachers in the sample had experience of working with the career advice service providers to identify and refer pupils, and the value of the service was acknowledged. However, schoolteachers felt that the collaboration between schools and this provider was far from optimal. For example, reflecting on the form that was used to identify and refer pupils, one teacher said:

> "*(I was) . . . Not overly impressed with the form . . . (it is) . . . a very basic form, name, address, date of birth, the basic information to identify the right student, then there is kind of like a notes section about what you've done . . . before the MS forms when I did it through the email process, I used to attach any careers notes that I'd had with them but there isn't necessarily that capacity to do that with the MS forms.*" (Participant A–Teacher)

It seems that current procedures may not comprehensively (or adequately) capture details of referred pupils. A system that allows for additional information to be made available, shared, discussed, and connected to the pupil form, would be of added value to all concerned.

Relatedly, it was felt that communication between schools and the service provider could be improved. For example, both schoolteachers noted the lack of clarity and continuity in correspondence:

> "*Having not had the full information, whether that's me or (the provider) . . . can get really tricky.*" (Participant A–Teacher)

> "*Once it goes to (the provider) you don't really hear very much thereafter . . . it's lost . . . particularly when it comes to tracking students after 3 years, you don't really have a hope.*" (Participant B–teacher)

Taken together, from the teacher perspective, it would seem there is room to enhance the current pupil referral process via improved collegiality, communication, and a shared resource bank for recording and monitoring important pupil information.

3.2. Experiences of Career Advice Service Providers

Three superordinate themes of the experiences of career advice service providers were identified (see Table 2). All of which seemed to have high importance to some or all participants regarding the question of how service provider staff describe existing NEET referral process efforts to support pupils to enter post-sixteen education, training, or employment. Note, that one member of staff at the service provider (Participant D) features slightly less in the analysis, as her work (and commentary) focused more on other contracts, funded work, and college students (rather than Year 11 pupils) (e.g., on at risk of NEET referrals: " . . . *I personally don't get many of those.*" (Participant D–Service Provider).

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Navigating a Dynamic Landscape	■ Major Changes in Careers Provision ■ Opportunities and Misconceptions in a New Labour Market ■ The NEET Pupil has Changed ■ The Pandemic: Challenges and an Opportunity for Heightened Flexibility
Integration and Affiliation with Schools	■ NEET Referrals: The Need for Increased Collaboration with Schools ■ Guilty by Association and Being Part of a 'Failed System'
Reaching Pupils at Risk of NEET	■ Moving from Pillar to Post and Alternative Provision ■ Parents as the Gatekeepers

3.2.1. Navigating a Dynamic Landscape

1i. Major Changes in Careers Provision

All service provider staff were experienced, qualified, and committed to improving the education and employment (and also wellbeing) outcomes for referred pupils. However, the landscape is dynamic, and staff are having to adjust in order to successfully navigate ever-changing relationships (e.g., with schools), labour markets, environmental restrictions (e.g., resulting from the pandemic), and pupil needs. Regarding the former, all of those included in the sample reflected (negatively) on the significant changes to the careers service in schools:

> "*There's been a lot of changes in the way the career service works . . . there's been obviously a reduction in funding (and) a lot of redundancies. Whereas we used to be funded to have advisors in all schools . . . it's now down to individual schools to provide that impartial guidance in whatever way they individually decide . . . it's created a very piecemeal situation . . . some of them buy in our service, some of them have their own people, but it does mean . . . the system does not work as well as it used to.*" (Participant C–Service Provider)

It was felt that this new system, where service provider staff are no-longer embedded within schools, has hampered preventative efforts to reduce NEET:

> " . . . *I used to work really closely with the school . . . they would identify those at risk of NEET and then you would meet them . . . you would think okay these (are the) ones I need to make sure to follow up with . . . it was almost like a seamless link. And then obviously things changed, and you know, lack of funding . . . (now) we just don't have those links with schools.*" (Participant D–Service Provider)

> " . . . *it always seems to me that the work we (now) do in school, and the work we do with NEET is just two separate things really . . . don't seem to be joined up in any way . . . no link between them.*" (Participant E–Service Provider)

Clearly then, the current system has resulted in reduced, infrequent, and less well-developed contact (and relationships) with pupils. This would seem to have had negative repercussions, whereby service provider staff have to adopt a more reactive (upon referral) rather than preventative approach to reducing NEET.

1ii. Opportunities and Misconceptions in a New Labour Market

Not only have there been changes in the careers service but there have also been significant changes in the labour market. It was generally felt that there were insufficient opportunities for young people at risk of NEET to enter the workplace, especially in terms of the number of apprenticeships available:

> "*If they (at risk of NEET pupils) don't want to be in the sixth form college it's fairly limited what's on offer . . . a lot of them aspire to apprenticeships, but . . . the supplies are wiped by demands.*" (Participant E–Service Provider)

With fewer apprenticeship opportunities available, it is more difficult for pupils at risk of NEET to pursue areas of interest, gain work experience, and enter the job place. Interestingly though, this predicament is at odds with pupil perceptions, where gaining access to employment is seen as a less difficult and more seamless than the evidence might suggest:

> "*One of the barriers . . . (those at risk of NEET) understand very little about the labour market and what it's like (and) don't really realize how tricky it is . . . (especially) without really having much to offer in terms of qualifications and experience.*" (Participant E–Service Provider)

This misapprehension is not restricted to the pupil concerned and often also reflects the thinking of their parents, for example:

> "*There's so many that I talked to and parents as well, who actually think that it's quite easy still (to get a job) . . . a lack of awareness of just how difficult the labour market has become.*" (Participant E–Service Provider)

Taken together, a dynamic job market has made it more difficult for service provider staff to support pupils at risk of NEET to gain access to post-sixteen education, training, or employment. However, part of the problem seems to be that pupils at risk of NEET (and their parents) often do not recognise just how difficult it is to enter the job market. Increased and earlier realisation of this might yield positive results for pupils.

1iii. The NEET Pupil has Changed

The NEET landscape has "*changed over the years*" (Participant C–Service Provider), and it seems an increasing number now present with a multitude of more significant and complex difficulties than before, which are not easy to address or overcome. The high incidence of issues relating to mental health, anxiety, and depression were highlighted:

> "*A disproportionate number of NEET seem to have mental health issues . . . they won't leave the house . . . there is no discrete provision to deal with that.*" (Participant E–Service Provider)

Thus, while NEET numbers have declined over the years, the complexity and severity of NEET cases has increased. This is captured well by one service provider staff member:

"the nature of NEETs has changed . . . the numbers are lower . . . but the ones that are on it are so much more complex, the barrier, there's multiple barriers, huge barriers . . . they take a lot more work and a different kind of work . . . barriers based." (Participant C–Service Provider)

1iv. The Pandemic: Challenges and an Opportunity for Heightened Flexibility

Not unlike the experiences of schoolteachers, service provider staff also referred strongly to the pandemic and the impact this, and associated social distancing restrictions, had on their ability to effectively support pupils at risk of NEET. The results were also somewhat similar in that the pandemic was reported to present both challenges and opportunities.

It is fair to say that the pandemic *"hit staff"* (Participant C–Service Provider) and demanded a radical rethinking of how staff might reach and support pupils. The inability to conduct in-person meetings was challenging especially in light of the common consensus that provision for NEET pupils is " . . . *far more successful if you can meet them face-to-face."* (Participant D–Service Provider). Moreover, as expressed by one service provider staff member: " . . . *with COVID that (in-person, door-to-door pursuit of NEET pupils) died a complete death."* (Participant E–Service Provider). However, after some initial challenges, the pandemic gave rise to some transformative strategies that proved effective for reaching certain kinds of NEET pupils:

" . . . *the ones that we had always found really hard to reach and help because their mental health was such that they could not come out of the house to an appointment or wouldn't, the pandemic has actually had a really good side in and helped us to become more creative and flexible . . . and actually we are realising we can help all these ones if we offer them a choice."* (Participant C–Service Provider)

This was echoed by another service provider staff member who reflected on the opportunities and developments resulting from the pandemic:

"I find them very accepting of it all really and I think for some they actually saw it as a positive." (Participant D–Service Provider)

Taken together, the evidence presented here suggests that while the pandemic inevitably presented physical barriers to reaching NEET, this was largely overcome via the use of alternative technological methods, such as the use of telephone and videocall, which were not readily utilised before. An implication here might be that continued exploration of alternative methods of contact and support might be beneficial for pupils and staff at the careers advice service provider.

3.2.2. Integration and Affiliation with Schools

The previous theme (especially 1.1) illustrated, among other aspects, how the careers service has changed with regard to its relationship with schools. Service provider staff no longer work as careers advisors within schools, but instead work more externally handling NEET referrals that are received via the school (and from other sources). While not all schools use this service provider, for those that do, there are both challenges and some slight advantages resulting from the level of integration and affiliation this provider has with schools.

2i. NEET Referrals: The Need for Increased Collaboration with Schools

Recall that in commenting on current NEET referral processes, schoolteachers felt, among other aspects, that current NEET referral processes were far from optimal, and that there was scope for an improved pupil referral form, improved collegiality and communication with service providers, and perhaps opportunities for a shared resource bank where pupil information could be recorded and monitored. Interestingly, service provider staff also felt that current information sharing processes were undesirable and in need of improvement.

It remains the case, that: *"(For those at) risk of NEET, we only know when the school refer them to us . . . we now have a pretty well used referral form that nearly all school use."* (Participant

E–Service Provider). Much rests then, on the quality and detail included on this form. However, the level of detail provided seems variable. For example, one service provider staff member acknowledged that it does vary, but that in some cases: " . . . *you might just get well we've never seen them in Year 11 and have no idea what they are doing or what they are going to do.*" (Participant E–Service Provider). This makes it very difficult for service provider staff, as they are often contacting students with very limited detail regarding their capability, circumstances, and needs. Opportunities for additional information sharing would be of great benefit:

> "*it's (the form) sort of what you might call dry information or factual information rather than what they aspire to or what they are good at . . . I suppose it is quite negative information rather than positive.*" (Participant E–Service Provider)

Service provider staff emphasise the importance of early identification and intervention (something that was perhaps afforded more prior to the changes in the careers service). For example, one staff member states they are eager to know: "*Who are your Year 11s, who are the ones that you know, are going to really struggle with that transition and you know, could we help a bit more with that could we do some work.*" (Participant D–Service Provider). However, this communication does not seem to happen, and there are thoughts that the information about pupils at risk of NEET comes far too late:

> " . . . *talking about the Year 11 at risk of NEET . . . we get a list . . . it comes too late . . . usually done in a rush.*" (Participant C–Service Provider)

It would seem then, that one action of great benefit for both schoolteachers and service provider staff alike (based on the evidence in this report), would be to explore ways of enhancing communicative and collaborative opportunities. On occasion, when service provider staff have been in the schools, this has been useful. As one service provider staff member put it:

> " . . . *sometimes in school they'll refer someone to you, and they'll actually say we're a bit worried about this person because of X, Y and Z, it could be the issues at home, or it could be that they suddenly stopped taking an interest in school when they were interested before.*" (Participant E–Service Provider)

This additional information is useful, and recall that one schoolteacher said that they had lots of additional information but was unable to attach and include it in the referral form. There is clearly work to be done, then, that might support and promote partnerships between schools (and schoolteachers) and the service provider, to help improve current referral processes.

2ii. Guilty by Association and Being Part of a 'Failed System'

The above coverage implies that a close service provider–school relationship will be beneficial with regard to the pupil referral process. However, there were some recurrent comments that too close an affiliation might actually be detrimental to service providers in their efforts to support pupils at risk of NEET. For example, it is often the case that pupils at risk of NEET (and their parents) have a very negative view of schools and the education system:

> " . . . *the parent . . . and you'll get it from the young person as well is how let down they feel by the education system by the school and that they've been blamed rather than supported by it.*" (Participant C–Service Provider)

It may be advantageous then, to actively differentiate the service provider from this system that pupils and parents feel let them down. For example, according to one service provider staff member, "*The parents label us as part of the system that they didn't get on with and maybe . . . they don't really think we're going to be much use.*" (Participant E–Service Provider). Further, when one parent answered the door (during an unannounced visit due to unsuccessful prior contact) he said, "*you're not from such and such a school are you? So, I said Well no I'm not, and he swore quite loudly about that school.*" (Participant E–Service Provider).

It would seem important then, to retain a level of objectivity and separation from schools (and the education system) if one is to reach successfully and engage these pupils and their parents. When this is done well, it seems to be appreciated and highly valued:

" . . . *you do get some where the parents are genuinely amazed that someone's taking an interest . . . and sometimes having somebody who isn't part of the school somebody from outside talking to them can help.*" (Participant E–Service Provider)

Furthermore, on having an opportunity to speak out about their child's negative school experience:

"*I don't think people have probably asked them that before . . . you'll get the parents' perspective, and so I think almost sometimes it's the first time they've been able to sort of really offload yeah.*" (Participant D–Service Provider)

In summary, it would seem that for service providers to optimise the NEET referral process, heightened communication, coordination, and collaboration with schools would be beneficial; however, when it comes to contacting pupils (and their parents—see the next theme) to support their transition to post-sixteen education, training, or employment, a healthy degree of separation, impartiality, and objectivity would more likely yield positive results.

3.2.3. Reaching Pupils at Risk of NEET

It is well known that one of the biggest challenges in supporting pupils at risk of NEET is gaining access to them in the first place. This has been described as " . . . *the big frustration*" where sometimes, these pupils "*are not responding to anyone.*" (Participant E–Service Provider). Indeed, being absent, disengaged, and unresponsive is often part of what makes someone at risk of NEET. It in unsurprising, then, that a recurrent issue experienced by service provider staff was the difficulties in gaining access to these pupils.

3i. Moving from Pillar to Post and Alternative Provision
One of the barriers relates literally to the locality of the student. For example:

"*What tends to happen . . . is that they get moved about from pillar to post . . . they'll say well you know in couple months' time, I may not even be living here . . . and they don't seem to get much notice . . . every time they move from one area to another, someone else is assigned to them . . . there's no consistency.*" (Participant E–Service Provider)

It seems, then, that many NEET pupils reside in less permanent housing, and this can present challenges in terms of identification, but also in terms of sustained support, which is less likely (or not possible) when pupils move to different regions.

It is also the case that an increasing number of pupils at risk of NEET find themselves in some form of alternative provision. For example, it was argued that " . . . *a disproportionately high number (of NEET pupils) are in care...lots in care or care leavers.*" (Participant E–Service Provider). Other may reside in the youth justice system: " . . . *you'll be working with someone, and then they disappear off the face of the earth . . . sometimes it's because they've been gone into custody suddenly.*" (Participant E–Service Provider)

It is clear that gaining access to pupils at risk of NEET is challenging. Sometimes pupils will not leave their bedroom or house (see Theme 1.iii) while others may move house altogether or find themselves in some form of alternative provision without much notice. This makes the process of supporting pupils at risk of NEET more difficult for service provider staff.

3ii. Parents as the Gatekeepers
As alluded to earlier, difficulties gaining access to pupils at risk of NEET is sometimes due to having incorrect contact details or to changes in locale. However, in other cases, the pupil and their location are known to service providers, but it does not necessarily follow that the service provider staff member is able to easily access the pupil concerned. A recurrent issue experienced by those in the sample was the important role that parents play in efforts to support pupils at risk of NEET. While this can be positive, and often parents

do seek support for their child and may instigate a referral, parents can also be seen as a possible barrier:

> "It is quite hard to get hold of these (NEET) people . . . quite often the number we get is a parent's number . . . I joke that you tend to speak more to the parents of NEETs than NEETs . . . sometimes you go months and months and only talk to their parents . . . sometimes you feel that the parents are almost shielding them . . . that they don't want you to talk to them . . . as they see you as some authority." (Participant E–Service Provider)

Some of this resonates with Theme 2ii on being found Guilty by Association and Being Part of a 'Failed System', and it is not to say parents are always a hindrance but for service provider staff, gaining access to pupils, in spite of the fact that it is the pupil that is sought, can be made more difficult by parents of those pupils. It would be fruitful to explore ways to either successfully manoeuvre unhelpful parents or better still, to increase efforts to gain their support for the cause.

4. General Discussion

Taken together, the findings highlight the need for a dynamic multi-systemic framework to gain a better understanding of how to support young people in their transition to the labour market. Youth transitions are shaped by multiple interlinked processes, involving characteristics of the individual, their immediate and wider social context, and their dynamic interaction over time [7]. This is for example reflected in the views of teachers, who considered personalised one-to-one meetings with students to be most effective, in particular if there is some consistency in support over time. The restriction to one meeting per pupil (anchored in the statutory guidance) is insufficient. The reflections of the teachers also point to the interlinkages between individual needs, institutional structures, and contextual change. For example, the risk of non-attendance of students who are most vulnerable of experiencing NEET has been heightened during the pandemic and potentially also due to lack of access to the internet, preventing students to attend courses online. Moreover, teachers feel unsupported in their role to provide career guidance and the current NEET referral process was not optimal. In particular, teachers ask for a stable careers programme and opportunities to link curriculum learning to careers (to make lessons relevant for students, to raise their aspirations, and to prepare them for the world of work). Closer involvement of employers and opportunities for work placements are considered as a way forward.

Moreover, the reports from career service provider staff highlight the dynamics of multiple interlinked influences and the need for joint-up service provision to address the multiple needs of vulnerable young people and changes over time. Service provider staff are required to navigate ever-changing relationships with schools, labour markets, environmental restrictions, and pupil needs. Critical risk factors for NEET include mental health problems, out-of-family care, young people in contact with the law, and unstable housing. In providing effective support, their biggest worries are the reduction in funding and devolved responsibility (schools are now tasked with providing impartial guidance to students), the breakdown of labour market opportunities (in particular regarding good quality apprenticeships) for young people, and the inability to effectively interact face-to-face with pupils during the pandemic (due to lockdown measures). Current information sharing processes and collaboration with schools are not optimal and early identification and intervention is hampered. The findings highlight the complex needs of those young people at risk of being NEET, and the careful balancing of support services to effectively reach out to those most at need. As such, our findings somewhat extend our understanding of young people's vulnerabilities in terms of labour market participation and social inclusion [11,12].

4.1. Limitations and Future Directions

For the purpose of this study, it was beneficial to gain a rich account of the experiences from both schoolteachers and service provider staff separately (as well as this being a

practical consideration). However, adopting alternative approaches (e.g., focus groups) may have afforded greater insight into the NEET identification and referral processes by way of discussion amongst both groups. As such, future researchers may consider alternative methods to explore further the experiences of providers and employability staff in relation to the topic of NEET. Relatedly, the sample size in the present study (comprising just two schoolteachers and three staff members employed by the career advice service providers) is rather limited. More research is, therefore, needed with larger samples but also with more diverse samples comprising other important stakeholders. For example, it is important for future research to investigate the experiences of pupils at risk of NEET 'through their own eyes' drawing on their own lived experience. Moreover, given that parents were identified as crucial to the success of NEET transition in this study, triangulation with parents may prove fruitful in further qualitative work.

4.2. Conclusions and Recommendations

Following the findings, we outline a series of recommendations addressing the multiple and diverse needs of students at risk of becoming NEET:

- Clarify and simplify NEET referral procedures.
- Introduce risk assessment and screening for specific service needs.
- Offer personalised services that continue over time.
- Support continued participation in education among the most vulnerable groups.
- Link curriculum learning to careers with increased collaboration between teachers and subjects within schools.
- Undertake work to assess skills needs locally through collaboration with large employers and other council departments.
- Initiate a mentoring scheme, connecting employers to students and invite career talks in schools where different professionals describe their tasks and responsibilities of a normal working day, offering role models to students.
- Collaborate with service providers including teachers from different schools, FE colleges, training providers, career providers staff, social workers, (mental) health services, housing services, police, and probation officers, to develop a strategy for an integrated service delivery.
- Consider sourcing funding for a specialist role (sometimes called a careers coach) to support NEET young people who face the greatest challenges and barriers to securing and sustaining EET. This offer can include initial intensive support and a tailored response that also addresses wider factors that impede progress such as mental health problems.
- Develop online provision that is complementary to standard service delivery. This should include clear signposting, information, and advice alongside the development of specific resources to address the varied needs of young people (including career guidance, skill training, opportunities for work experience as well as mental health services, family planning, housing provision, and other relevant services).
- Schools and councils working together—learning, looking forward, and co-building of resource structures for young people.

Taken together, the findings indicate that providing improved and continued communication, collaboration, and coordination of different services appear to be key leverages to address the multiple service needs of young people at risk.

Appendix A. Interview Schedule (Schoolteachers)

(Q1) First, would you mind telling me a little bit about yourself?

(Q2) What is currently done in Year 11 to support pupils' transition from school to post-sixteen education, training, or employment?

(Q3) At school in Year 11, are there any careers or other activities that are designed to support students with this transition?

(Q4) How were these activities received by students? Please explain how.

(Q5) If they were not useful, how might they have been improved?

(Q6) Are you involved in the pupil referral process? If so, please tell me how you are involved.

(Q7) What are the benefits associated with the current NEET referral process?

(Q8) What are the challenges associated with this process?

(Q9) What kind of support might pupils and schools need to improve pupils' transition from school to post-sixteen education, training, or employment?

(Q10) What may help or hinder (NEET and non-NEET) pupils' aspirations, ideas, and plans for transition from school to post-sixteen education, training, or employment?

(Q11) How has the pandemic influenced Year 11 pupils' transition after leaving school?

(Q12) Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of pupils' transition from school to post-sixteen education, training, or employment?

Appendix B. Interview Schedule (Career Advice Service Providers)

(Q1) First, would you mind telling me a little bit about yourself?

(Q2) Please describe the pupil referral process to me, and then explain your role in this process.

(Q3) How do you try and support pupils to transition from school to post-sixteen education, training, or employment?

(Q4) What are the benefits associated with current processes designed to support students at risk of NEET?

(Q5) Would you say that these actions/processes are successful? Please explain how.

(Q6) What are the challenges associated with this process?

(Q7) What kind of support might pupils and (service providers) need to improve pupils' transition from school to post-sixteen education, training, or employment?

(Q8) How has the pandemic influenced Year 11 pupils' transition after leaving school?

(Q9) How has the pandemic influenced operations within (the service provider)?

(Q10) Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of supporting pupils who have been referred to you because they are at risk of not being in education, training, or employment (NEET)?

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