ASCL Association of School and College Leaders

THE PATH TO #NEETZERO

What the Education Sector Can Realistically Deliver

An education-led framework for propelling participation



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FOREWORD

Too many young people are becoming disconnected from education, training and employment. The most recent data (Office for National Statistics, 2026) indicate that 981,000 16 to 24-year-olds were not in education, employment or training (NEET) from April to June 2026.

Behind every statistic sits a young person whose confidence, wellbeing, aspirations and future prospects are at risk. At the same time, employers face significant recruitment challenges, public services deal with increasing demand, and the country loses the contribution of talented young people who have so much to offer.

There is widespread agreement that reducing the number of young people who become NEET should be a national priority. There is far less agreement about how this should be achieved and, importantly, where responsibility lies.

Published following the interim report of the Milburn Review and ahead of its final recommendations, this paper seeks to inform the national conversation about reducing the number of young people who become NEET. Whereas the review is examining the challenge across a wide range of social and economic factors, this report concentrates on the contribution that schools, colleges and trusts can realistically make.

This report seeks to answer a simple but important question:

What can the education sector realistically do to prevent young people becoming NEET?

Drawing on discussions with ASCL Council members (October 2026) and current evidence, the report identifies the actions that schools, colleges and trusts can take to reduce risk, strengthen engagement and support progression, recognising that education providers already do significant work in this area and mindful of the workload implications of any recommendations. It also identifies the limits of educational influence and the areas where action is needed from government, employers and other public services.

The report argues that schools, colleges and trusts have a critical role to play. Through engaging education, strong relationships, effective careers education and early intervention, they can significantly reduce the likelihood of young people becoming NEET.

However, education cannot solve the challenge alone.

Schools, colleges and trusts cannot eliminate poverty, create jobs, provide housing, improve transport or replace public services. Achieving #NEETzero therefore demands a shared commitment: an education system that engages, a public sector that intervenes early and a society that refuses to give up on any young person.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of young people who are not in education, employment or training remains one of the most significant challenges facing England's education and skills system.

Research consistently demonstrates that young people who spend prolonged periods NEET face poorer employment prospects, lower lifetime earnings and reduced social mobility (Department for Education, 2026c; Youth Futures Foundation, 2023).

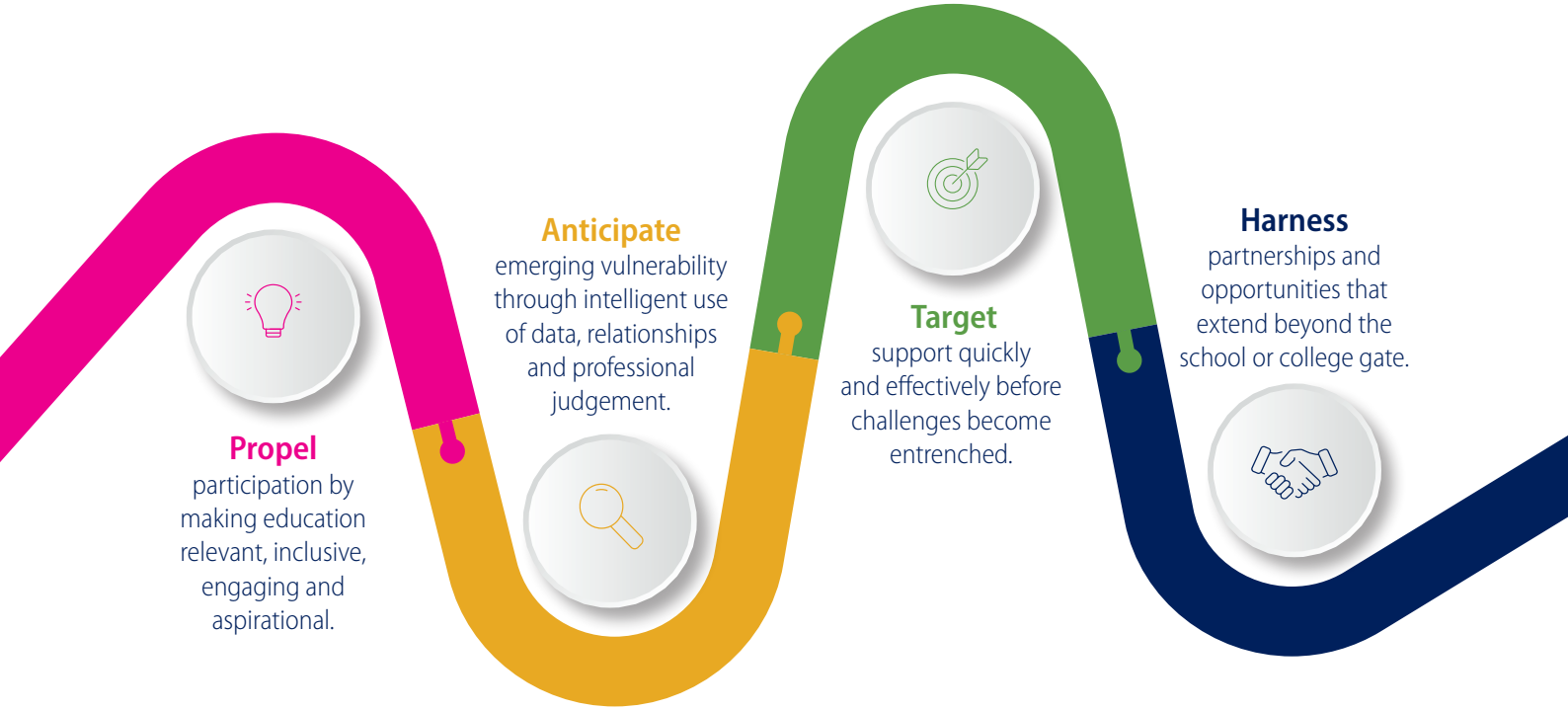
While much attention focuses on what happens after a young person becomes NEET, ASCL Council focused discussions on preventing disengagement from occurring in the first place. This allows recommendations to be made that lead to sustainable ways of reducing the NEET figure in the longer term.

ASCL Council members worked in focus groups to explore themes arising from the interim Milburn Review (May 2026). Each group identified factors that the education sector could influence to help prevent young people becoming NEET. These factors were subsequently prioritised by Council members according to their likely impact, providing the foundation for the analysis and recommendations set out in this report.

The strongest emerging theme was that NEET prevention is not primarily a destinations issue; it is an engagement issue. According to research by Russell et al. (2026), young people are less likely to become NEET when they:

1. **experience meaningful pathways** that reflect their strengths, interests and aspirations
2. **have their voice heard** and play an active role in decisions about their future
3. **are recognised for their strengths and potential** through positive, relationship-based support
4. **feel a sense of belonging** and benefit from trusted relationships with peers and adults
5. **receive support for their wider needs**, including wellbeing, mental health and SEND
6. **receive consistent support through transitions**, helping them navigate change and overcome barriers

The report introduces the **ASCL PATH to #NEETzero**: a practical framework for preventing disengagement before it becomes disconnection.



This framework reflects a fundamental shift in thinking. Rather than asking how we reconnect young people after they become NEET, we should focus on how we reduce the likelihood of them becoming NEET in the first place. The four actions recognise both the power and the limits of education. Schools, colleges and trusts can change lives, but they cannot tackle poverty, poor transport, labour market barriers or unmet health needs on their own.

The framework is designed to support leaders in taking practical action within their sphere of influence to prevent disengagement and sustain participation. ASCL will continue to press government to address the wider structural barriers that contribute to young people becoming NEET and which cannot be resolved by schools, colleges and trusts acting alone.

ASCL intends to use the PATH to #NEETzero framework to create a practical guidance tool for school and college leaders to use alongside emerging government reforms.

CHAPTER 1 | THE NEET CHALLENGE IN 2026

1.1 Why NEET matters

Being NEET is often described as a labour market outcome. In reality, it is also an educational, social and economic issue.

Young people who become NEET face increased risks of unemployment, economic inactivity, lower earnings and poorer long-term outcomes. Evidence suggests these effects can persist well beyond the period in which a young person is classified as NEET (Youth Futures Foundation, 2023; Department for Education, 2026c).

The consequences also extend beyond economics. Periods of disengagement can affect confidence, wellbeing, motivation and social participation. They can weaken connections to learning and reduce confidence in future opportunities.

ASCL Council members consistently emphasised that becoming NEET is rarely a sudden event. Instead, it tends to represent the end point of a much longer process.

> **By the time a young person becomes NEET, the signs have often been visible for years.**

1.2 Current trends and evidence

Although participation in education and training remains high for the majority of young people, substantial inequalities remain. National participation statistics continue to demonstrate variations associated with disadvantage, SEND status and geographical location (Department for Education, 2026a; Department for Education, 2026b).

At the same time, attendance rates remain significantly below pre-pandemic levels. Persistent absence continues to affect a substantial proportion of pupils and is increasingly recognised as both a symptom and driver of educational disengagement (Department for Education, 2026d; Department for Education, 2026e). The Children's Commissioner has consistently argued that school attendance is not simply an educational outcome but a protective factor for children and young people. Regular attendance supports educational achievement, wellbeing, social development and participation, while prolonged absence is associated with increased vulnerability and poorer long-term outcomes, including an increased risk of becoming NEET (Children's Commissioner for England, 2023; Department for Education, 2026c).

The evidence base is becoming increasingly sophisticated. A range of factors (Department for Education, 2026c) is associated with a greater likelihood of becoming NEET, with the three stand-out factors being: persistent absence from school during key stage 4; having an EHCP, and not attaining 5 GCSE passes, including English and maths.

Similarly, research commissioned by the Youth Futures Foundation (2025) found that educational engagement, school connectedness and psychosocial factors all play an important role in shaping future participation. This is reinforced by recent work from the IPPR (2026), which highlights growing levels of loneliness, social disconnection and weakened support networks among young people, arguing that these factors increasingly shape educational engagement, wellbeing and transitions into adulthood. The Fonagy Review (2026) likewise emphasises the protective role of belonging, relationships and resilience, arguing that strong social environments and early support are critical to promoting positive outcomes and reducing later vulnerability.

1.3 Why prevention matters

A recurring theme throughout ASCL Council workshops was the distinction between prevention and recovery. Young people who feel connected to learning, peers and school life are more likely to maintain participation through periods of challenge. Belonging should therefore be viewed as a core component of effective NEET prevention rather than an optional pastoral consideration.

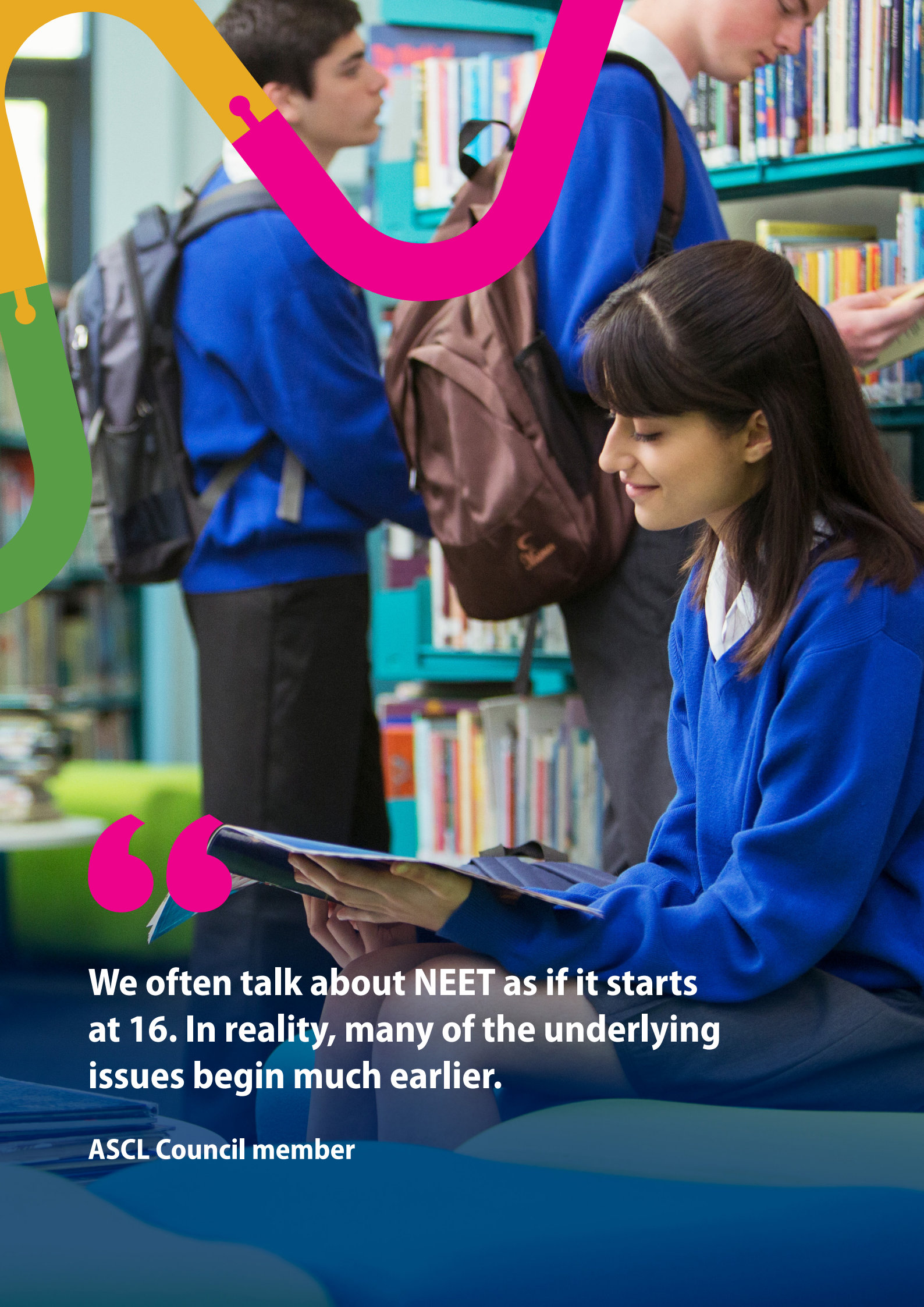
Many interventions currently focus on supporting young people after disengagement has occurred. While these interventions remain important, Council members argued that the greater opportunity lies in preventing disengagement in the first place. This requires a shift in thinking. Rather than asking:

"How do we re-engage young people once they become NEET?"

we should ask:

"How do we reduce the likelihood of young people becoming NEET in the first place?"

The remainder of this report explores the role of education in answering that question.



We often talk about NEET as if it starts at 16. In reality, many of the underlying issues begin much earlier.

ASCL Council member

CHAPTER 2 | WHAT EDUCATION CAN REALISTICALLY DELIVER

2.1 Defining educational responsibility

There is an important distinction between educational responsibilities and wider societal responsibilities. ASCL has previously explored this theme in *A Roadmap for a Sustainable Education System* (2025), arguing that schools, colleges and trusts are increasingly expected to address challenges which originate elsewhere in public policy.

The same challenge is evident in discussions about NEET. Council members strongly rejected the notion that schools and colleges can single-handedly eliminate or prevent NEET.

> **Schools can identify many of the problems. We cannot solve all of them.**

This distinction should not be mistaken for a lack of ambition. Rather, it reflects realism about how lasting change happens. Educational institutions play a critical role, but they operate within wider social, economic and public-service systems.

2.2 The ASCL PATH to #NEETzero framework

Educational institutions cannot remove every risk factor associated with becoming NEET. However, they can positively influence many of the conditions that support participation and progression.

The PATH framework identifies four areas in which education can make its greatest contribution.

Theme	Purpose
Propel *participation*	Foster cultures that deepen engagement and enhance belonging
Anticipate *vulnerability*	Recognise emerging vulnerability and risk
Target *support*	Deliver timely intervention and support
Harness *partnerships*	Connect young people with wider opportunities and services

Together these actions provide a practical organising framework for local and national NEET prevention strategies. While the PATH framework is presented as four distinct strands, they are interconnected and often overlap. Many interventions contribute to more than one area. For example, careers education and guidance can help *propel* participation by raising aspirations while also providing *targeted* support for learners at greater risk of becoming NEET. The framework should therefore be viewed as a joined-up approach to prevention rather than a set of separate actions.

2.3 What education cannot deliver alone

Council members were equally clear about the limits of educational influence.

Schools, colleges and trusts cannot eliminate poverty, create employment opportunities, solve housing insecurity, improve public transport infrastructure or replace mental health services. These are important determinants of participation, but responsibility lies elsewhere.

> **We increasingly know who is vulnerable. The challenge is whether the support system exists once we've identified them**

This observation captures one of the report's key messages. The challenge facing England is not simply one of educational improvement, it is one of system capacity. Education has a vital role to play, but achieving #NEETzero will require action well beyond education alone (see Appendix).

CHAPTER 3 | THE ASCL PATH TO #NEETZERO FRAMEWORK: PROPEL *PARTICIPATION*

CREATING CONDITIONS THAT PROMOTE ENGAGEMENT THROUGH RELEVANT EDUCATION, BELONGING AND ASPIRATION

3.1 Engagement and belonging as protective factors

A growing body of evidence shows that belonging is not simply a wellbeing issue; it is a participation issue. A strong sense of belonging is associated with improved attendance, wellbeing and attainment. Conversely, disengagement frequently begins when learners no longer see themselves as successful participants in education.

Research (Department for Education, 2026g; Allen et al., 2021) shows that young people are more likely to remain engaged when they feel known, respected, included, valued and connected.

Council members highlighted concerns regarding increasing loneliness, social isolation and disconnection among young people. These concerns mirror wider evidence (Fonagy, 2026; IPPR, 2026) suggesting that weakened social networks and limited opportunities for participation can negatively affect engagement and progression.

Creating cultures of inclusion, participation and achievement should therefore be viewed as a core NEET prevention strategy. Student leadership opportunities, enrichment activity, extracurricular participation and strong pastoral systems were all identified as important contributors to creating environments where young people feel they belong.

3.2 Meaningful pathways and progression

Meaningful educational pathways that align with young people's interests, talents and aspirations can help to maintain engagement.

A recurring phrase throughout Council discussions was:

"The right course for the right child in the right context."

Young people are more likely to remain engaged when they understand:

- why they are learning
- where learning may lead
- how qualifications support progression
- how education connects to future opportunities

There are concerns that too many young people follow pathways that feel disconnected from their interests, strengths and aspirations. Greater flexibility within the 14-19 system could enable movement between academic and technical routes without stigma, while accountability measures should place greater value on successful transitions and progression outcomes.

The quality of teaching and learning is fundamental to sustaining engagement. Young people are more likely to remain connected to education when learning is relevant, inclusive and responsive to their needs. Multi-modal approaches to teaching, learning and assessment can further support participation by enabling learners to access and demonstrate learning in different ways, helping to build confidence and reduce the risk of disengagement.

The importance of genuine parity of esteem between academic and technical education remains a significant issue, alongside a growing need for schools to provide high-quality level 2 pathways for learners who are not yet ready to progress to level 3.

The role of English and maths also warrants further consideration. While literacy and numeracy are essential, achieving a grade 4 GCSE is arguably a poor proxy for the skills required in adult life and employment. A greater focus on progression and demonstrated competence over time could provide a more meaningful measure of readiness while reducing the cycle of repeated failure associated with the current GCSE resit policy.

Finally, greater emphasis on preparation for adulthood and the explicit development of life skills could help equip young people for successful transitions from compulsory education into further learning, employment and independent living. The existing framework developed by the National Development Team for Inclusion (2022) could be implemented more consistently to support this objective.

3.3 Careers education and aspiration

Council members viewed careers education as a central component of propelling participation.

Many young people develop aspirations through exposure to opportunities and role models. However, access to these experiences is often shaped by family circumstances, geography and social capital. Schools and colleges frequently act as the primary source of future visibility for young people.

> **Young people need to see possibilities before they can pursue them.**

Effective careers education helps learners understand the connection between current learning and future opportunities. It broadens horizons, challenges assumptions and raises aspirations. There is also arguably a need for more parental education around pathways and opportunities for progression.

Careers education should therefore be understood as a preventative intervention rather than a compliance exercise.

3.4 Recommendations

Schools, colleges and trusts

1

identify and respond to early signs of disengagement, using attendance, participation, behaviour and learner voice data to trigger timely support before young people become at risk of becoming NEET

2

design clear and flexible progression pathways, ensuring young people can move between academic, technical and vocational routes without encountering unnecessary barriers

3

ensure teaching and learning is relevant, inclusive and responsive to learner needs, using multi-modal approaches to support participation, achievement and progression

4

actively promote the value of technical and vocational education, through curriculum, careers education, employer engagement and communications with learners and families

5

measure and strengthen learners' sense of belonging, recognising belonging as a protective factor that supports engagement, persistence and successful progression

6

guarantee access to a trusted adult, ensuring every learner has a consistent relationship with a member of staff who can provide guidance, advocacy and support

7

deliver personalised careers education and guidance throughout the learner journey, with enhanced support at key decision points including transitions, examinations and results days

8

create meaningful opportunities for participation, enrichment and leadership, particularly for learners who are less likely to engage in extracurricular activities

9

explicitly teach preparation for adulthood, including communication, self-management, wellbeing, financial capability, digital literacy and workplace readiness

10

equip parents and carers with accessible information about pathways and progression options, enabling them to support informed decision-making at key transition points

Government

1

strengthens recognition of technical and vocational pathways, ensuring post-14 and post-16 curriculum and qualification reforms promote parity of esteem and that accountability measures value all progression routes equally

2

reviews progression requirements that create unnecessary barriers to participation, including the expectation of a grade 4 in GCSE English and mathematics for entry to most post-16 pathways, to ensure that learners can continue to progress while developing essential skills

CHAPTER 4 | THE ASCL PATH TO #NEETZERO FRAMEWORK: ANTICIPATE *VULNERABILITY*

RECOGNISING VULNERABILITY AND EMERGING RISK FACTORS BEFORE DISENGAGEMENT BECOMES ENTRENCHED

4.1 Understanding NEET risk

Schools, colleges and trusts possess significant insight into the factors associated with future disengagement. The challenge is rarely a lack of information. Instead, it is recognising what existing information may be signalling and how to act on it to prevent disconnection.

Recurring indicators of becoming NEET age 17 to 19, according to Department for Education (2026c) data, include:

- SEND status – highest risk of NEET for young people with an EHCP
- persistent absence at key stage 4 (and, to a lesser extent, key stage 3)
- low GCSE attainment (failure to achieve five GCSE passes including English and maths)
- non-participation in leisure activities
- parents without formal qualifications
- care experience
- moving school during key stage 4
- receiving free school meals
- school suspension/exclusion
- parental disability
- parental unemployment
- social services contact
- low school engagement
- smoking (age 16)
- economic disadvantage
- police contact
- social renting (age 16)
- poor physical health (pre-16)
- being bullied
- cannabis use (age 16)

It should also be recognised that the risk of becoming NEET is rarely attributable to a single factor. Rather, vulnerability is typically cumulative and intersectional, with multiple challenges interacting and reinforcing one another over time. A full analysis of what Milburn (2026) refers to as 'interacting risk factors' (including age, gender, ethnicity, inequality, place, education, disability and health) can be found in chapter 1 of his *Young people and work: Interim report*.

4.2 Applying a NEET lens

A widely supported proposal was the adoption of a "NEET lens" when reviewing existing information.

Rather than establishing new systems, schools, colleges and trusts should examine current data with greater focus on future participation risk. The government's latest guidance on 'Risk of NEET Indicators (RONI)' (2026f) is extremely helpful in this work.

Effective approaches combine:

- attendance information
- attainment data
- SEND information
- vulnerability indicators
- professional judgement

Regular review processes can help identify emerging concerns before they escalate, while avoiding the risk of labelling learners or lowering expectations.

4.3 Recommendations

Schools, colleges and trusts

1

apply a dedicated NEET prevention lens to existing learner data, using the Department for Education's (2026f) *Using a risk of NEET indicator (RONI)* approach guidance alongside attendance, attainment, behaviour and participation data to identify emerging concerns early

2

develop and maintain vulnerable learner registers, ensuring learners facing multiple or complex risks are identified, monitored and supported in a coordinated way

3

establish multidisciplinary vulnerability reviews where concerns persist, bringing together pastoral, safeguarding, SEND and other relevant expertise to agree and monitor targeted interventions

4

integrate attendance, pastoral and SEND intelligence, creating a comprehensive understanding of learners' circumstances and support needs

5

include measures of belonging and participation within risk assessments and review processes, recognising that disengagement often emerges before it is reflected in attendance or attainment data.

Government

1

improves information-sharing and data-sharing arrangements across agencies and services, enabling earlier identification of risk and more effective coordination of support

2

increases access to targeted support services, ensuring timely specialist intervention for young people facing barriers to engagement, participation and progression

3

promotes consistent approaches to identifying learners at risk of becoming NEET, supporting schools, colleges, trusts and local authorities to use evidence-informed risk indicators and interventions

4

strengthens support and progression planning for learners in Elective Home Education (EHE) and Education Other Than At School (EOTAS), ensuring they can access high-quality education, careers guidance and clear routes into education, employment and training

5

recognises participation in approved live online learning within attendance frameworks, ensuring attendance measures reflect meaningful engagement with education rather than physical presence alone

6

introduces a bespoke approach to post-16 attendance data collection and monitoring, recognising the diverse patterns of participation and delivery models across further education and sixth-form provision

7

extends requirements for reporting children missing education to age 18, ensuring local authorities can identify and support young people who disengage from education or training after compulsory school age

CHAPTER 5 | THE ASCL PATH TO #NEETZERO FRAMEWORK: TARGET *SUPPORT*

DELIVERING TIMELY SUPPORT

5.1 Acting on vulnerability

Once risk is identified, intervention needs to be timely, personalised and proportionate.

Effective support may include:

- mentoring
- coaching
- additional careers guidance
- family engagement
- attendance support
- mental health provision
- targeted curriculum adjustments

Support should focus on restoring engagement through trusted adults, building confidence and strengthening progression opportunities.

5.2 Targeted support for vulnerable young people

Equal provision does not automatically produce equitable outcomes. Instead, differential support based on need is optimal.

Examples include:

- enhanced transition support
- additional mentoring
- intensive pastoral interventions
- SEND-specific support
- targeted careers guidance

Resources should increasingly be directed towards those facing the greatest barriers to participation.

5.3 Peer mentoring, coaching and student leadership

Peer influence can be a powerful protective factor against disengagement. Opportunities for young people to support their peers, contribute to decision-making and take on leadership responsibilities can strengthen belonging, confidence and commitment to education (Russell et al, 2026).

Examples include:

- peer mentoring and coaching programmes
- student ambassadors and transition mentors
- learner-led wellbeing initiatives
- student leadership and representation roles

These approaches help young people develop agency, build trusted relationships and see themselves as active participants in their educational community.

5.4 Successful transitions

Transitions create particular vulnerability for many learners. Movement between schools, colleges, training providers and employment can disrupt relationships, support networks and established routines.

While key stage 2 to 3 transition is often very thorough, with time invested in transition visits and getting to know young people, other transition points are often prioritised less.

Particular challenges:

- between key stage 3 and 4
- between key stage 4 and post-16 education
- between education and apprenticeships
- between education and employment

Transition planning should therefore begin early, involve young people and families, and include effective information-sharing between organisations.

5.5 Recommendations

Schools, colleges and trusts

1

provide targeted support for vulnerable learners, using early identification, coordinated interventions and tailored support to address barriers to engagement, participation and progression

2

expand mentoring and coaching programmes, ensuring learners have access to trusted adults who can provide guidance, encouragement and practical support during key stages of their education

3

expand peer mentoring and student leadership programmes, creating opportunities for young people to support one another, build confidence and strengthen their connection to education

4

strengthen engagement with parents and carers before, during and after transitions, building shared understanding of progression options and enabling timely support when challenges arise

5

develop personalised progression plans for learners at risk of disengagement, identifying aspirations, support needs and next steps to help sustain participation and successful progression

Government

1

ensures data and admissions systems support effective transitions, enabling the timely sharing of information needed to identify needs, coordinate support and prevent learners from falling through gaps between services

2

defines clear roles and responsibilities for organisations involved in transitions, ensuring accountability and effective collaboration between education providers, local authorities and other partners

3

aligns funding and support services with identified learner need, ensuring resources are targeted towards those most at risk of becoming disengaged from education, employment or training

4

coordinates with strategic authorities to secure a suitable and sustainable post-16 destination for every young person, ensuring all learners can progress into education, training or employment

CHAPTER 6 | THE ASCL PATH TO #NEETZERO FRAMEWORK: HARNESS *PARTNERSHIPS*

WORKING WITH EMPLOYERS, PUBLIC SERVICES AND GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS BARRIERS EDUCATION CANNOT REMOVE ALONE

6.1 Employer engagement and meaningful workplace experiences

Employers play a critical role in helping young people understand the world of work.

Meaningful workplace experiences can improve motivation, raise aspirations and help young people connect learning with future opportunities.

Opportunities should be available to all learners rather than only to those already succeeding within the system or those with access to professional networks.

Employers can contribute through:

- work experience
- industry encounters
- mentoring
- workplace visits
- apprenticeship pathways

6.2 Partnership working and coordinated support

No single organisation can address all factors associated with becoming NEET.

Effective local approaches require collaboration between:

- schools, colleges and trusts
- independent training providers
- universities
- employers
- local and/or strategic authorities
- health services
- voluntary organisations
- Chambers of Commerce

Strong partnerships help create more coordinated support, improve information sharing and provide clearer progression routes for young people. FE colleges are particularly well placed to lead this work, bringing together extensive local partnerships and specialist expertise in supporting learners with a wide range of needs and backgrounds.

6.3 Recommendations

Schools, colleges and trusts

1

share information proactively, securely and comprehensively to support sustained destinations, ensuring receiving providers and relevant agencies have the information needed to maintain continuity of support and prevent disengagement

2

build strong partnerships to prevent young people becoming NEET, working collaboratively with education providers, local authorities, employers, voluntary organisations and support services to coordinate interventions and strengthen progression opportunities

Employers

1

expand access to high-quality work placements and workplace experiences, helping young people develop skills, confidence and understanding of available career pathways

2

provide mentoring opportunities and meaningful encounters with the workplace, enabling young people to build networks, raise aspirations and gain insights into employment and career progression

3

remove barriers that prevent disadvantaged young people from accessing opportunities, ensuring recruitment, outreach and workplace programmes are inclusive and accessible

Strategic and local authorities

1

convene local NEET prevention partnerships, bringing together key stakeholders to coordinate action, share intelligence and develop local solutions to emerging challenges

2

strengthen information-sharing arrangements across organisations and services, enabling earlier intervention and more effective support for young people at risk of disengagement

3

align education planning with labour market needs, ensuring provision reflects local employment opportunities and supports progression into sustainable destinations

Government

1

provides dedicated investment for local and regional sufficiency planning to enable colleges and training providers to assess current and future demand, coordinate provision effectively, and ensure all learners and employers have access to high-quality education and training opportunities

2

provides dedicated investment for FE colleges to act as local participation hubs, coordinating outreach, reengagement and tailored support to help more young people access and sustain education, employment or training

3

supports place-based partnerships focused on youth engagement and progression, enabling local areas to develop coordinated approaches that reflect local needs and circumstances

4

enables effective and secure data-sharing across agencies and sectors, supporting the early identification of risk, coordinated intervention and sustained participation, while prioritising the relevance and quality of information shared over the volume of data exchanged

5

delivers full rollout of Mental Health Support Teams across all schools and colleges to ensure equitable access to early mental health intervention

6

introduces a specific waiting times standard for all community mental health services, ensuring that children and young people are offered support through CAMHS before mental health concerns escalate

7

incentivises employer engagement in NEET prevention and youth progression, encouraging businesses to provide placements, mentoring, work experience and entry-level opportunities for young people

8

extends the Youth Guarantee to offer every 16 to 24-year-old a job, apprenticeship, education place or re-engagement programme without having to wait 18 months to qualify

9

addresses transport barriers to participation, ensuring young people can access education, training and employment opportunities regardless of where they live

10

provides secure accommodation for vulnerable 16- to 19-year-olds, ensuring the stability needed for young people to access education, attend regularly and sustain engagement in learning and progression



Young people often stay because of people rather than programmes.

ASCL Council member

CHAPTER 7 | CONCLUSION: A REALISTIC PATH TO #NEETZERO

The evidence reviewed for this report suggests that NEET prevention is most effective when it focuses on sustaining engagement and addressing emerging risks before disengagement becomes entrenched.

Schools, colleges and trusts can make a significant contribution through:

- relevant, engaging and multi-modal education
- strong relationships
- meaningful pathways
- effective careers guidance
- early identification of risk
- timely intervention
- effective and timely data-sharing

The PATH framework provides a practical structure for this work:

Propel participation.
Anticipate vulnerability.
Target support.
Harness partnerships.

However, educational institutions cannot overcome all the factors that influence participation on their own. Sustainable reductions in NEET rates will require coordinated action across government, employers, health services, local authorities and education providers, with each playing their part in supporting young people to engage and progress.

The education sector is central to any credible strategy for tackling the NEET challenge and future government reforms may place additional expectations on schools, colleges and trusts. However, the sector's capacity to do more has been constrained by years of rising demand and limited resource. This report outlines what ASCL Council members believe education providers can reasonably be expected to deliver, provided the enabling conditions and support identified in this report are in place. Going beyond this will require significant additional investment in the staffing, capacity and services needed to support young people effectively. Without this investment, any new responsibilities risk diluting existing provision rather than strengthening it.

Ultimately, the objective should not simply be to reconnect young people after disengagement has occurred, but to create the conditions that propel participation in the first place.

Claire Green, Post-16 and Skills Specialist
Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
October 2026

*AI was used to review and improve human-generated content prior to publication, specifically cross-referencing and synthesising notes from ASCL Council focus groups.

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APPENDIX

WHAT EDUCATION CAN DELIVER AND WHAT IT CANNOT DELIVER ALONE

Education CAN deliver

- Strong attendance, engagement and belonging strategies
- High-quality teaching and learning
- A broad and relevant curriculum
- Academic, vocational and technical pathways
- Early identification of vulnerability and risk
- Trusted adult relationships and mentoring
- High-quality careers education, information, advice and guidance
- Support for successful transitions between phases of education
- Pastoral support and inclusive school cultures
- Targeted interventions for learners at risk of disengagement
- Collaboration with parents and carers
- Data-informed identification of risk (RONI approaches)
- Preparation for adulthood, employment and further learning
- Building aspiration, confidence and employability skills

Education CANNOT deliver alone

(requires wider government action)

- Employer encounters, work experience and workplace exposure
- Reduction in child poverty and family financial insecurity
- Affordable housing and housing stability
- Public transport infrastructure and affordability
- Labour market conditions and job availability
- Access to healthcare and specialist mental health services
- Reform of welfare and benefits systems
- Economic regeneration and regional economic development
- Employment rights, pay levels and job security
- Youth justice, social care and family support interventions
- Tackling inequalities linked to deprivation and place
- Addressing wider societal inequalities
- Creating sufficient high-quality opportunities for all young people
- Cross-agency data systems and information-sharing infrastructure
- Coordination of national policy across departments
- Resolution of complex SEND, health and care needs without adequate external support

ASCL Association of School and College Leaders

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a trade union and professional association for all school and college leaders. We are proud to support and represent over 25,000 school, college, and trust leaders of primary, secondary, specialist and post-16 education from across the UK. Our members are responsible for the education of more than four million children and young people, in both the state and independent sectors.

We work to shape national education policy, provide advice and support to our members and deliver first-class professional development.

We speak on behalf of members and act on behalf of children and young people.

Association of School and College Leaders
2nd Floor, Peat House, 1 Waterloo Way, Leicester LE1 6LP

0116 299 1122 | www.ascl.org.uk | info@ascl.org.uk