

15 February 2024

Post-16 Employment and Skills Service and Strategy

Ward(s): Boroughwide

Portfolios: Councillor Statham - Education and Skills

1. Aim

To update Members on the work of the Post-16 Employment and Skills Services and to update on the forthcoming Walsall Skills Strategy.

2. Recommendations

Members to review the current service offer and to consider future targeting of the services to specific key groups and future resourcing of new services.

3. Report detail

Raising the Participation Age (RPA) legislation requires all young people in England to continue in education or training until at least their 18th birthday. Local authorities have a statutory duty to 'assist, encourage, support and enable' young people aged 13-19 (and young adults with a learning difficulty and/or disability up to the age of 25) to participate in education or training. Local authorities are also required to ensure sufficient education places are available to meet the needs of this population in their area. Local Authority retain responsibility for providing targeted support for vulnerable young people and to provide regular statistical returns on participation including data on those Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET) to Department for Education. To complement these statutory duties, local authorities voluntarily provide employment and skills support which are typically reliant on external grant and resources to sustain services.

3.1 Background

In England, in 2000, 13.7% of young people aged 18-24 were NEET and in 2023, that figure still stands at 13.8%. Since 2000 and prior to the 2020 pandemic, significant progress had been made to reduce young unemployment, but current figures suggest the rates are rising again. This phenomenon is not without consequences with strong evidence that being NEET or unemployed while young has a scarring effect on young people's outcomes hence increasing their likelihood of unemployment or low wages later on in life, of developing poor physical or mental health, and risks of gaining a criminal record.

Rising youth unemployment is a national issue, in the West Midlands region it is especially stark. Across the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) latest figures show in November 2023 there were 23,885 young people aged 18-24 claiming unemployment-related benefits, and regional youth claimant rate (8.5%)

is much higher than the UK average (5.0%), with particularly high rates of youth unemployment in Wolverhampton (10.9%), Birmingham (9.4%), Walsall (9.2%).

	Youth Claimant count (Nov23)	Youth claimant rate (Nov23)	% change since pre-pandemic (Mar20)	% change since Nov22	% change since Oct23
UK	277,590	5.0%	16.6%	8.1%	1.3%
WM 7 Met	23,885	8.4%	24.0%	9.9%	-0.6%
Birmingham	12,155	9.4%	33.5%	12.7%	1.7%
Coventry	2,215	5.2%	44.3%	9.9%	-0.4%
Dudley	1840	7.8%	5.1%	8.6%	2.2%
Sandwell	2,740	9.6%	29.6%	12.3%	2.0%
Solihull	840	5.6%	1.8%	11.3%	5.0%
Walsall	2,060	9.2%	7.6%	11.4%	-2.6%
Wolverhampton	2,330	10.9%	22.0%	12.6%	0.9%

Spending time unemployed under the age of 23 has been linked to lower wages even twenty years on, and those who are NEET between the ages of 18-19 are 20% more likely to be unemployed even ten years later. This indicates that the effects of time spent neither learning nor earning are a prospective restraint on an individual's potential across the span of their working life. Troublingly, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly more likely than their better-off peers to be NEET, with clear consequences for long term social mobility.

In addition, recent increases in economic inactivity have been driven largely by young people, many of whom are inactive because of health-related reasons. The picture is even more stark for young people in our most deprived wards, and furthermore for those with particular characteristics, including care leavers, young offenders, young people with disabilities and some ethnic minorities.

On skills levels, 16,400 of the working age population have no qualifications in Walsall requiring 5,693 to be upskilled to meet regional averages. At a higher level, only 27.2% or 46,900 of Walsall residents possess a NVQ Level 4+.

3.2 Employment and Skills Service

The strategic objective of the service is to work collaboratively with the WMCA, local authorities, employers, partners and training providers to address these challenges through continuous review and development of solutions. Locally, our role is to ensure that every Walsall resident aged 16+ has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential. The service provides access to devolved local skills provisions, good quality jobs and progression to sustainable careers. To achieve this, we aim to understand and help address the barriers faced by our residents through signposting to key specialist services ie health, housing, debt, counselling.

Our support is predominantly focused on those who are NEET, providing good quality careers information and advice to help improve current skills levels and better connect people to the labour market in order to increase their potential to access employment opportunities. Our main aim is to provide employability support to all residents regardless of their personal characteristics or employment status, however some grant programmes may limit support to specific groups.

3.3 Walsall Works

Launched in 2012, the programme name (Walsall Works) provides the brand recognition required to engage residents, employers, partners and providers. Our offer is inclusive and extends to economically inactive people who are currently not working, unemployed benefit claimants who are actively seeking employment or those who are employed in low waged jobs or those with an aspiration through developing workplace skills. We work with local employers to understand the demands of the local labour market and bring forward local employment opportunities to our residents of all ages. Our free job brokerage service matches current job vacancies to participants registered on our programmes.

Qualified Advisors will support people to improve employability but also their key skills ie communication, timekeeping, presentation, problem solving, team working as well as improving CVs, job searching and assisting with registration to courses. We host job vacancies on our website www.walsallworks.com, through weekly jobs bulletin and on all social media platforms, and these also helps to promote our outreach services. Jobs fairs and group sessions are delivered weekly and provide a valuable opportunity for participants to meet employers and training providers. Walsall Works host an series of events across the borough as well as focussed events to market pre-employment, apprenticeships and placements.

We have robust relationships with our further education and independent training providers so that we can actively market the plethora of training budget devolved and available in the borough and provisions across the wider region.

During 2023, Walsall Works secured 665 positive outcomes for participants, ranging from employment, apprenticeships, part or full time training, self-employment and work placements. Of these, 83 positive outcomes were secured for young people aged 16-18 and 142 positive outcomes for those 19-24 years.

3.4 Careers Information Advice and Guidance (CIAG)

Schools will make their own arrangements to provide impartial CIAG, but through a traded services we are currently delivering this in all Special Schools, the Ladder and SEED School. We also hold an annual contract with Virtual School to support vulnerable young people in education establishments in and outside the borough. The overall aim is to ensure that every child has a known progression pathway.

3.5 NEETs Prevention

Walsall Works offers supports to NEET young people and bridges the gap between services offered in education, post 16 providers, youth clubs, charities and careers services. Post Black Country Impact funding, we have maintained close partnership with key services in order to source referrals of our most vulnerable young people from the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, Care Leavers Team, Transitional Leaving Care Team, Early Help Team, SEND Team (including those with ECHP's), Youth Justice Service, Under 25's Street, Police Partnership and Family Hubs. We also receive referrals of young people at risk of becoming NEET from education providers and local authority services ie children missing education, home school elected services, early help services, young carers.

The service is delivered face to face on a one-to-one basis from various settings in our co-location venues below, established in 20 locations across the borough. Advisors will meet young people regularly to create clear action plans focussing on tackling barriers that may prevent progression into training, education, apprenticeship, job placements or employment opportunities.



An employer engagement officer works closely with Advisors to better understand participant aspirations and career goals, in order to bring forward relevant opportunities. In this academic year, we have attended two secondary school careers events to raise awareness of our service and the labour market. We also continue to promote our offer through various forums represented by education ie Post 16 Group, SEND Group, Walsall Learning Alliance, WASH, Early Help..

3.6 Special Education Needs

To improve our intelligence gathering we collect information from participants which allows us to analysis our service users, improve services and triage new participants to ensure they get the most appropriate and relevant support from us. The data below outlines the number of young people aged 16-25 who have disclosed they have a health barrier, learning difficulty or physical disability. This data does not account for those who choose not to disclose this personal information, but does include those who have a current ECHP in place.

Learning Difficulty / Disability	2023	2022
Asperger's Syndrome	4	3
Autism Spectrum Disorder	14	19
Disability Affecting Mobility	3	6
Dyslexia/Dyscalculia	14	9
EHCP (Educational Health Care Plan)	15	1
Hearing Impairment	1	2
Learning Difficulty	11	11
Mental Health Difficulty	22	36
Other Physical Disability	2	7
Yes (But Prefer Not To Say)	4	7
Social and Emotional Difficulties	5	6
Visual Impairments	1	1
Totals	96	108

3.7 NEETs Tracking

The management of our Client Caseload Information System (CCIS) is contracted to Prospects Services (Shaw Trust) who tracks the status of young people in year 11 to 13 for statistical returns to DfE. Prospects provide the local authority with real time information to identify those who are not participating in education or those without destinations. Prospects collect the data but do not provide any local follow up to re-engage those who have become NEET or who are ‘Not Known’ to mainstream education. There is a heavy reliance on the Employment and Skills Team to make contact with these young people and to engage them in our services. Considerable work has been undertaken this past year to improve data sharing agreements, to ensure that the tracking of our most vulnerable young people is accurate in order to closely identify those who are NEET.

Further improvements to the tracking systems include the use of private emails, phone numbers, home addresses so that we may use all communication methods to ascertain the current status of young people and provide the most accurate NEETs figures to DfE. We have used this information to write to parents and to conduct home visits. We can also use the emails to better communicate our offer, events and other support services.

December 2023 figures (latest full month reporting) are showing significant improvements from the start of the academic year, with NEET figures of 1.7% and Not Knows at 5.3%. The Not Knowns being a difficult subset to validate, but significant work is ongoing to make contact, including email and postal campaigns as well as visits to last known addresses of these young people in order to understand where they are and what they are currently doing in terms of education, training or employment.

Current December 23 Stats - RPA				
Year 12	Year 13	Combined	Target	
95.8%	88.8%	92.3%	94.9%	
Current December 23 Stats - NEET				
Year 12	Year 13	TOTAL	Current %	Target
53	81	134	1.7%	1.7%
Current December 23 Stats - Not Known				
Year 12	Year 13	TOTAL	Current %	Target
82	332	414	5.3%	5.4%

3.8 Careers Enterprise Company (CEC)

The CEC is the national body for careers education in England, delivering support to schools and colleges to deliver modern, 21st century careers education. Careers Hubs bring together schools, colleges, employers, and apprenticeship providers in a local area. Their goal is to work together and help schools and colleges improve how they prepare young people for their best next steps following education.

All WM Local Authorities, with the exception of Walsall, have now transitioned the responsibility for leading and managing a team of Enterprise Coordinators to continue the facilitation of high-quality careers and enterprise education for 11–18-year-olds. This is more effective delivery enables better alignment to local economic and skills priorities and will improve career outcomes and achieve

sustainable change at a local and national level. It ensures careers service delivery is consistently of a high quality, aligning to the Gatsby Benchmarks and performance requirements set in a grant agreement with CEC.

CEC Co-ordinators will provide support to schools to delivering CIAG against the 8 Gatsby Benchmarks identified as the core priorities within a good quality careers and enterprise programme in schools. These are:

- Stable careers programme
- Learning from career and labour market information
- Addressing the needs of each pupil
- Linking curriculum learning to careers
- Encounters with employers
- Experiences of workplaces
- Encounters with further and higher education
- Personal guidance

A report has been prepared for CMT to consider the transfer of funding to the local authority to manage and steer the work of 1.5 FTE CEC Co-ordinators and in the meantime these staff are regularly meeting with the Employment and Skills Team to improve collaboration, update on progress of schools and share action plans.

3.9 Skills Strategy

The West Midlands Employment and Skills Strategy will be launched in February 2024 by the Mayor of WM Midlands, creating a timely opportunity for Walsall to review its local employment and skills priorities to ensure better alignment to both local and regional aims. The Walsall Skills Strategy, led by members of the Walsall Employment and Skills Board, will provide a clear overview and strategic plan with partners to agree focus areas and developing solutions to key skills challenges. The strategy will recognise the role of learning, skills and good work practices in supporting individuals to create economic growth and will highlight how devolution enables us to create a more integrated and impactful employment and skills system that delivers better outcomes for residents and businesses.

4. Financial information

The BC Impact terminated on 31 July 2023, resulting in reduction of staff and financial resources to target and support young people, which has created some challenges. Due to the uncertainty with long term funding, the Employment and Skills team received resignations from staff on short term contracts and from staff whose posts could no longer be funded despite securing grant funding through Commonwealth Games Legacy and Shared Prosperity Funding. The quota of staff in the service reduced from 35 FTE's to 25 FTE's and business cases were submitted to senior officers to recommend retention of the current team structure and to consider the need to mainstream the services, so that there is no further risk with losing qualified staff due to fixed term employment contracts.

Less reliance on short term grant funding, will significantly help to mitigate the risks of young people aged 16+ becoming long term NEET and provide a continuation of much needed employability services within the local authority. Therefore, there is a need to plan and review staffing structures to support the continuation of the LA's statutory duties to support vulnerable young people with SEND, those in care

and young offenders. A reduction in resources for this provision could have an impact on the levels of 'not known' and NEET young people, and potentially on the levels of youth unemployment.

The team have secured £800,000 grant funding through the Commonwealth Games Legacy Funding (CWG) for two years which has four delivery strands, which one focussing specifically on the reduction of NEETS aged 16-19. £600,000 grant funding has also been earmarked through Shared Prosperity (SPF) People and Skills pillar for one year from April 2024. We continue to have dialogue with the WMCA on a fully funded universal employment support service delivered by local authorities in the region.

The transition of CEC Co-ordinators will release some CEC grant funding to partially cover the costs of 1.5 FTE's, which has to be match funded through the local authorities and for two years this is being committed through the CWG funding.

There is a legal contract in place with Prospects Services for a 2+1+1 year contract, which we are part way through and the cost for this service is approximately £50,000 per year which is being met through mainstream funding. Withdrawal of this level of tracking and monitoring could be a risk to meeting our minimum statutory requirements and reporting on destination outcomes. This service provides early identification and referral for support for our vulnerable young people at risk of becoming long term NEET.

5. Reducing Inequalities

The service offer is inclusive to all and provides a positive impact on all demographics and socio-economic groups ie age, gender, ethnicity, status, geographies base in our communities. The service is essential support for young people to remain in education and training and evidence shows as health inequalities are affected by poor education.

6. Decide

Members to consider how the services outlined could be resourced and sustained. Members to identify when and how often they wish to receive reports.

7. Respond

The impact of funding reductions will be reported back to the Committee and will inform future planning for the staff structures.

8. Review

Report further progress on post 16 delivery to the Education Committee in 2022.

Author

Jane Kaur-Gill

Employment and Skills Manager

☎ 07983 612618

✉ jane.kaur-gill@walsall.gov.uk