

OXFORDSHIRE PARTNERSHIP - 25 NOVEMBER 2009

BRIEFING ON YOUNG PEOPLE NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING (NEET) IN OXFORDSHIRE

Introduction

The number of young people in Oxfordshire who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is too high. These young people are in grave danger of being trapped in a downward cycle of dependency and deprivation. As a Partnership, we are not meeting our LAA target and do not compare well with other similar areas.

In the spirit of corporate social responsibility the County Council asks Oxfordshire Partnership members to consider what further action the partnership and individual organisations can take to engage these young people rapidly in education, employment and training.

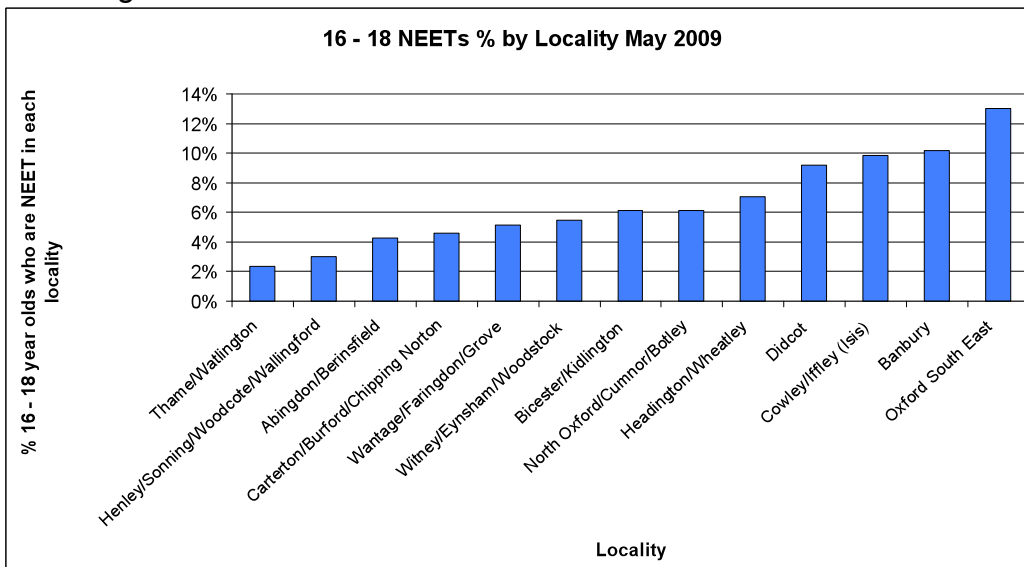
Key facts

- Oxfordshire has a Local Area Agreement Target (NI 117 increase 16 - 18s in education / training / employment) of no more than 4% NEET in 2009/10.
- There are about 1,000 young people (June 2009) aged 16 – 18 who are not in education, employment or training. This has risen by over 50% compared with 2008 figures and is about 6.8% of the cohort. We are therefore currently not meeting our target.
- 5.4% of economically active people aged 18 – 24 are claiming Job Seekers' Allowance (August 2009) and can therefore be assumed to be NEET.
- In total we estimate there are approximately 3,600 NEETs aged 16-24 in Oxfordshire.
- Oxfordshire compares relatively poorly with its statistical neighbours. In August 2009 7.1% of Oxfordshire's 16-18 year olds were NEET, compared with an average of 6.8% in statistical neighbours (e.g. 7.0% in Cambridgeshire, 4.9% in Gloucestershire, 5.9% in Buckinghamshire and 13.1% in Bracknell Forest). The national figure for the same period is 8.7%.

Distribution

There is wide variation between areas and groups of young people.

Approximately one quarter of the 16 – 18 NEETs are in Banbury and South East Oxford, over 40% of care leavers and young people who have offended are NEET and nearly 80% of teenage mothers.



Existing Work

There is a significant amount of existing work taking place across Oxfordshire Partnership members that involves:

- Targeting hotspots (places, groups);
- Engaging early (preventative approach);
- Working in partnership to try to engage the local business community;
- Administering the Future Jobs Fund (government funded scheme administered by the county council looking to create 60 jobs in Oxfordshire for NEETs at no cost to the employer);
- The ‘Connexions’ service that provides support and advice to young people.

Discussion of options for future action

1) Making a difference

I believe there is an urgent need to identify:

- (a) what basic skills training is likely to be a pre-requisite to finding employment opportunities for these young people and how it can be provided effectively;
- (b) whether employers across the county can be persuaded of their Corporate Social Responsibility to provide apprenticeships, internships or other work opportunities for NEETs;
- (c) what more can be done to join up the considerable efforts across the county to address the issue of NEETs and create a more coherent approach;
- (d) what obstacles exist to more effective work to reduce the number of NEETs and how those obstacles can be overcome.

I am not looking for the county council to provide significantly more resource in addressing this issue but I do believe there is an issue of leadership in improving the life chances of some 3,600 young people in Oxfordshire.

2) Bridging the skills gap

We know that many young people in this NEET group previously went into less-skilled work and are likely to need support in fundamental skills, including literacy, numeracy, ITC skills and inter-personal skills. It is the role of our FE colleges, among others, to provide skills to this age group. I have discussed the matter at a board meeting of the Oxford & Cherwell Valley College (where I am a governor). There is a complication around the funding mechanism which means that colleges are not remunerated above a pre-determined quota but the board expressed a willingness to consider taking more young people on if they were in the NEET category.

Securing some basic skills training is likely to be a pre-condition before prospective employers might be persuaded to take on some NEETs and there would be a need to identify suitable candidates and matching them with appropriate training and potential employers. These young people may benefit from a mixed package of part-time college developing skills and part-time work.

3) Terminology

The term NEETs (along with NILs (‘Not in Learning’)) has negative connotations. It may be administratively convenient for administrators and bureaucrats to categorise young people in this way but it can do little for their self esteem. I would suggest renaming them “Young People with Potential”.

4) Potential employers

Most public sector organisations in Oxfordshire contract with a range of private sector businesses. The total spend almost certainly runs into billions pa. I believe there would be merit in promoting the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility among these businesses with a view to persuading them of the merit of offering apprenticeships, internships or other work opportunities to appropriate NEETs.

5) The opportunities for volunteering

I am also struck by the huge opportunity for some form of voluntary work that Young People with Potential in Oxfordshire could offer. I suspect there are many obstacles to engaging them in voluntary work including health and safety, CRB checking for some jobs, benefit rules etc etc. Despite the probable obstacles, there must be merit in exploring the possibility of engaging some of these young people in voluntary work? The recent '**Vtalent**' programme is proving to be very successful and could be expanded to include more young people.

6) Neets summit

I am willing to host a 'NEETs summit' to ensure a joined up approach is taken to tackling this issue; to promoting the plight of these young people; to engaging colleges in the skills agenda and in talking to potential employers about apprenticeships, internships or other work opportunities and to voluntary sector organisations about volunteering opportunities. We are already actively promoting the Future Jobs Fund and believe there may be an opportunity to expand this considerably if we can galvanise interest and action in joining up what is needed to help these Young People with Potential.

Oxfordshire partnership members are asked to consider the points raised in this paper and agree future action.

Cllr Keith R Mitchell CBE
Leader, Oxfordshire County Council

Note on the Future Jobs Fund:

In Oxfordshire over the next 6 months we are aiming to recruit 60 eligible young people for range of vacancies which demonstrate community benefit. Half of these are likely to be within the public sector. Candidates will undergo two weeks of pre-employment training prior to starting work.

For more details or to submit a job opportunity to this initiative, please contact Bekkie Scales on 01865 816020 or email bekkie.scales@oxfordshire.gov.uk