

# NEXT STEPS FOR NEETS

**FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION**

/ NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING /



**CENTRE** *for*  
**BRITAIN** &  
**EUROPE**

UNIVERSITY OF SURREY



## **NEXT STEPS FOR NEETS: INSIGHT TO ACTION**

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# FOREWORD

PETER CLUFF

HIGH SHERIFF OF SURREY 2025-2026



The Next Steps for NEETs II: From Insight to Action meeting brought together key stakeholders and reaffirmed the strength of Surrey's commitment to supporting young people in crisis and offering them a new lease of life. I would like to sincerely thank all attendees for contributing to this vital conversation and for playing a part in the next steps toward building meaningful partnerships to address the NEET crisis.

This second meeting was exceptionally helpful in focusing our minds on two key areas: developing the concept and application of the Community of Practice (CoP), and thinking comparatively and practically about current and future local pilot projects that open the door to genuine cross-stakeholder commitment, offering a steadily improving range of opportunities to young people, at that crucial pre-NEET stage.

The development of a CoP is a crucial step in driving forward research, knowledge-sharing, and collaborative solutions. It will play a key role in bridging gaps across sectors and shaping coordinated, long-term responses to the crisis faced by many young people in Surrey.

Equally important is the benefit of local pilot projects that indicate and test new opportunities within communities across Surrey. By starting small, staying local and making each initiative count, the foundation for growing scalable impact is created and can be built across Surrey.

I look forward to the continued, highly energised dialogue across all our stakeholders, and to seeing how we come together in the weeks and months ahead to support both the CoP and developing local initiatives. My thanks once again to Professor Amelia Hadfield and the entire Centre for Britain and Europe team for their leadership in advancing this agenda and for convening this important discussion.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'P Cluff', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Peter Cluff

**High Sheriff of Surrey**  
2025 - 2026

# FOREWORD

**PROFESSOR AMELIA HADFIELD**  
**DIRECTOR OF THE CENTRE FOR BRITAIN AND EUROPE**



It has been a privilege on behalf of the Centre for Britain and Europe to continue to work with the High Sheriff, Peter Cluff, and a wonderful range of truly committed stakeholders from across Surrey, in pursuit of the preventative strategies that are now becoming clearer as a result of our ongoing work and collaboration. As this second – more extended – rapporteur report demonstrates, establishing a genuinely cross-stakeholder Community of Practice (CoP) for young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) can significantly enhance the effectiveness of the actors directly involved in the NEET ‘ecosystem’, the ‘goodness of fit’ of the emerging ideas and projects, the modes by which they can be implemented, given the right resources, and the ongoing urgent need for such support initiatives more broadly.

As we have witnessed throughout this Shrieval year, by bringing together diverse stakeholders—including educators, employers, youth workers, policymakers, community organisations, and the young people themselves—the emergent idea of a CoP is increasingly likely to foster collaborative problem-solving, knowledge sharing, and a true richness when it comes to innovation. But coming together has also illustrated a lot of the challenges that exist in systemic, time-based, resource-based, and cross-project ways. I remain confident that a CoP approach ensures that intervention-based approaches are not designed in silos but instead reflect a holistic understanding of the challenges, how to work with them, and produce short, medium and long-term opportunities to tackle the wide range of issues that NEETs in Surrey face. As we’ve seen, each stakeholder contributes unique insights and resources, helping to tailor support systems that are more inclusive, practical, and grounded in real-world needs.

What is central to the CoP is a truly participatory approach, a ‘jump in’ approach, that arises from the energy and collegiality demonstrated by each of our partners, in each of our events, but also boosts the relevance and accessibility of programs which we believe will ultimately build trust and engagement among young people. Let’s continue to work together to come together, and grow together as a group - based on all the emergent ‘next steps’ below, and ongoing efforts amongst many in our numbers to seek the resources so desperately needed to reduce the risk of young people falling through the cracks. My thanks as well to the insights and institutional support afforded by Professor Ying Zhou, from The Future of Work Institute, who so adroitly helped to launch this second stakeholder engagement meeting, as well as funding generously provided by the Faculty of Arts, Business and Social Sciences at the University of Surrey.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Am Hadfield', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Amelia Hadfield  
Founder and Director  
**Centre for Britain and Europe**

# FOREWORD

PROFESSOR YING ZHOU

DIRECTOR OF FUTURE OF WORK RESEARCH CENTRE



The Future of Work Research Centre pursues ground-breaking interdisciplinary research to understand the changing nature of work and employment relationships, the forces that support these changes, and their impact on organisational effectiveness and human wellbeing.

The centre's research is anchored in the belief that work is a distinctively human endeavour through which individuals live meaningful and fulfilling lives as they strive to build prosperous, fair and inclusive societies.

Our mission is to generate rigorous and actionable knowledge to create learning-oriented work environments that facilitate employee flourishing and enhance organisational effectiveness and societal wellbeing.

Ying Zhou

Professor Ying Zhou  
Director

**Future of Work Research Centre**

# CBE RESEARCH TEAM

**AMELIA  
HADFIELD**



Amelia joined the University of Surrey in 2019 as Head of the Department of Politics and founded the Centre for Britain and Europe in 2020, which became a Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence the next year. She expanded the Centre into key research areas and built strong connections with local government and regional businesses. Amelia is the Associate Vice-President of External Engagement.

**MAYA  
CHEW**



Maya leads operational strategy at the CBE, including programme management, data analytics, and marketing initiatives. Her PhD research explores ageing experiences among the LGBTQ+ community in the Global South. She previously worked in international education and public diplomacy at the US government-funded Fulbright Programme and NY-based edtech startups across Asia.

**NIVEDITA  
CHATTERJEE**



Nivedita (Nivi) is a postdoctoral researcher and associate lecturer at the University of Surrey. Her work explores digital communication, collective action, and how AI and social media shape experiences, especially for parents, vulnerable communities, and those on the margins. She has worked with women, youth, and survivors of sexual abuse, and also serves as Communication Officer for ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association) and Representative for YECREA (Young scholars' network of ECREA).

**MEGAN  
WARD**



Megan is a graduate of the Politics and International Relations department at the University of Surrey. She previously served as a Research Assistant for the Centre for the Study of Global Power Competition, where she compiled a global database of National Security Strategies for researchers and policymakers. Her interests broadly relate to European influence and relationships with external threats, with a particular interest in humanitarian strategy and coordination.

# CBE RESEARCH

## THE CENTRE FOR BRITAIN AND EUROPE (CBE)

The Centre for Britain and Europe (CBE) is a groundbreaking public-policy research institute based at the University of Surrey in Guildford, England. It was founded in 2019 by Professor Amelia Hadfield and is comprised of a multitude of academics, policy practitioners, and professional staff. In its research wing, it has produced many high-quality academic outputs, hosted conferences, and involved extensively with publicly funded research, Horizon Europe projects, and provided commentary to news outlets and briefs to the UK parliament.

To further cooperation with the private and public sectors, the Centre also comprises CBE Global, which leads public-impact projects in areas of sustainability, economic regeneration, socioeconomic policy, and security and foreign relations. Some of our stakeholders include local governments, Surrey County Council (SCC) and the Surrey High Sheriff, international businesses such as MHA, Gordon Murray, and interdisciplinary institutions such as the UN Affiliated CIFAL Centre on Sustainability and Centre of Excellence on Ageing (CEA). CBE Global also counts partners across Europe in Brussels and works frequently with Members of Parliament and think tanks in the UK and EU.

The Centre is among Surrey's most important institutions in bridging gaps between academics, government, practitioners, and the public. CBE continues to open its doors to collaboration, welcoming engagement opportunities with partners on research, policy, and impact-driven projects.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report captures the key insights, discussions, and actionable next steps emerging from the Next Steps for NEETs II: From Insight to Action meeting, convened on the 16<sup>th</sup> of July 2025, to address the growing challenges faced by young people in Surrey not in education, employment, or training (NEET). It builds on the momentum of the earlier May Conference to forge a sustainable and inclusive way forward.

At the heart of the conversation was how to create and foster a Community of Practice (CoP), a permanent, collaborative body that unites stakeholders across sectors and develops strategic, trauma-informed, and locally led responses. Participants agreed that the CoP must be simple in structure, grounded in current realities, and legitimised through strong leadership and shared purpose. Importantly, it must embed the youth voice, secure long-term resources, and involve both educators and employers in a meaningful partnership.


The meeting also highlighted the importance of community-rooted pilot projects, particularly in areas such as North Leatherhead, where initiatives are already demonstrating success in connecting young people with employers and mentors. However, challenges remain, especially around engaging larger businesses and ensuring sustainable investment in youth futures.

A recurring theme was the importance of reframing language, moving away from deficit-based terms like “NEET” in favour of empowering alternatives that build confidence and reflect potential. This was echoed by the discussion that every young person’s story is different, so to ensure no one is left behind, aligning with the Community Vision for Surrey by 2030 (Surrey County Council, 2019). Alongside this, the report calls for trauma-informed system design, centralised mapping of opportunities, and greater visibility for grassroots organisations.

## Key Proposals

- Development of a new, inclusive term to replace "NEET"
- Formation of a cross-sector NEETs Steering Group, with youth representation
- Launch of a formalised Leatherhead-based pilot project
- Scalable community-led pilot framework across Surrey
- Creation of a centralised opportunities platform for referrals and access
- Stronger employer engagement with clear commitments
- Exploration of trauma-trigger research to reshape referral processes
- Consistent embedding of lived experience and youth voice

The remainder of this report looks in more detail at the two overarching projects that cover the majority of these key outcomes. First, the CoP proposal, and second, the creation and implementation of local pilot projects that can be scaled up across key parts of Surrey. Within each of these reports, two overarching themes (CoP, and Local Pilot Projects), four sub-themes are utilised:



**Context and Analysis:** this provides a scholarly dimension and incorporates some of the most recent research on the NEETs topic. This first subtheme draws on and deepens the observations from the CBE's March report, alongside other relevant outputs, providing enhanced awareness of how workable NEET-related endeavours can be realistically undertaken at a local level.

**Case Studies:** these snapshots provide current and potential real-world examples for the proposed CoP [Surrey Cultural Community, and Yorkshire's EDT] and two relating to local pilot projects initiated by Leatherhead and Move Different, as well as additional suggestions drawn from a recent Royal Holloway University of London report.

**Discussion Points on the Day:** following the traditional rapporteur approach, each of the overarching topics and conversation points which took place during the event itself is reflected here, from the whole group, and the break-out discussions, as well as the final whole group session.

**Next Steps and Recommendations:** encompassing the growing consensus reached in the final whole group session, this final segment reflects possible but workable next steps to establish the Community of Practice, while for local pilot projects, next steps entail the basic requirements needed at ground level to make these work: either replicating current examples, or considering future options.









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# PART I

## FOREGROUNDING COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

### CONTEXT: NEETS IN SURREY

Nationally, the UK has seen a sharp rise in young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET). By late 2024, an estimated 987,000 16–24-year-olds were classified as NEET – a 42% increase from three years prior. Young men make up a growing majority, with 97,000 more male NEETs than females (ONS, 2025).

Historically, Surrey maintained some of the lowest NEET and 'Unknown' rates in the country. Between 2016 and 2020, these figures declined steadily. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this trend, contributing to mass furloughs and long-term youth unemployment. By 2023, Department for Education (DfE) figures showed a 15.2% rise in NEET/Unknown rates compared to a decade earlier – mostly from the 'Unknown' category. Data issues related to software changes and apprenticeship coding errors in 2022 complicate the interpretation of these figures (DfE, 2025).

As of January 2025, the DfE reports Surrey's NEET/Unknown rate at 8.4%, down from 2023, though still elevated. This decline may reflect better data accuracy rather than a true reduction in NEET numbers. In fact, the challenges since 2020 highlight persistent gaps in identifying and supporting at-risk youth.

Between 2024 and early 2025, the Centre of Britain and Europe charted an overview of the NEETs crisis in Surrey. The analysis highlights the complex, interlinked factors associated with NEET status, including economic disadvantage, health, disability, educational attainment, and youth justice involvement, layered across Surrey's geographical landscape. While these factors are not direct causes, they consistently shape the pathways through which young people move into at-risk, 'NEET', or 'Unknown' categories, often remaining there without timely intervention.

Key findings point to higher NEET concentrations in areas facing multiple forms of deprivation, such as Guildford, Woking, Camberley, Ewell, and parts of the Gatwick Diamond. These areas require targeted policy responses that address both structural and individual barriers – including expanded access to vocational education, mental health support, SEND services, and youth justice diversion programmes (Hadfield et al., 2025). Preliminary key recommendations include: the need for cross-sector collaboration as intervention strategies will depend on coordinated action between schools, local authorities, employers, and social services; Strengthening community-based initiatives, mentoring programmes, and financial aid for low-income families will also be vital; and improved data systems and joined-up service delivery will be essential to track risk, tailor support, and reduce long-term disengagement. These findings set the stage for the next section of this report, which draws on stakeholder interviews to explore lived realities and practical responses across Surrey.





## COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: FROM GOODWILL GROUPS TO INSTITUTIONALISED INNOVATION

A Community of Practice, or CoP, is a group of stakeholders all of whom share a specific concern relating to a particular issue or topic, and who decide to convene as an informal or formal group regularly, in order to deepen their understanding and interact routinely in order to identify potential solutions. Deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis, a CoP has three core elements (Etienne Wenger, 1998).

- **Domain:** A shared area of interest or challenge (e.g., social youth exclusion)
- **Community:** A group of stakeholders committed to learning and collaboration
- **Practice:** The actual methods, tools, and insights they share and refine together

From the perspective of NEETS in Surrey, the emergent group of stakeholders includes four main stakeholder groups:

- **Universities:** contribute research, innovation, and evidence-based knowledge: in this respect, the University of Surrey, led by the Centre for Britain and Europe.
- **Public sector bodies** bringing policy, community access, and systemic perspective: including the High Sheriff, Surrey County Council, representatives from primary and secondary education, and Surrey Policy.
- **Voluntary sector organisations:** bring expertise, cross-stakeholder support, interactive and integrative real-world experience, such as Surrey Youth Focus, and Enablists.
- **Private sector organisations:** offer real-world experience, scalability, and investment, with notable works by Wates, and KBR.

From our perspective, when aligned, these four groups form a powerful collaborative platform, grounded in shared learning pursuant to mutual problem-solving interest. As recent conferences and stakeholders have already demonstrated, CoPs are more important than ever, with their ability to (a) break down silos between research and practice, particularly in terms of data-sharing, pilot studies and real world examples of engagement (b) fostering continuous, increasingly institutionalised, even permanent interaction; (c) enabling more sustainable, informed, and context-sensitive solutions specific to Surrey.



# SURREY NEET SNAPSHOT

FEBRUARY 2025

## 16-18 DEMOGRAPHIC

Predominantly **white, male** youth recorded as NEET



### Ethnic Composition

\*some categories are deliberately merged to retain anonymity



**45%** on Free School Meal

## VULNERABLE YOUTHS

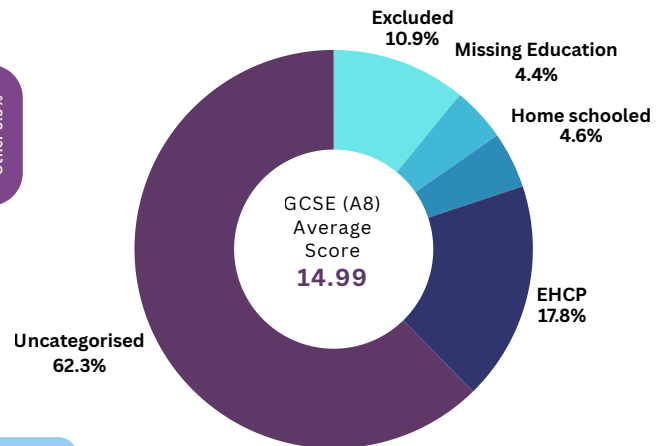
**6%**  
have had an episode  
of sexual  
exploitation

**3.6%**  
in the youth  
justice system

**101**  
receive EHCP\* as  
SEND\*\* students

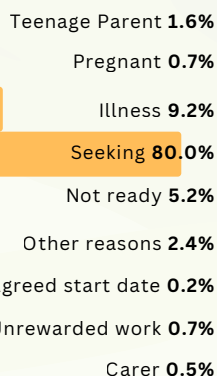
## EDUCATION

**14.99** average score out of 90, NEET  
perform below GCSE Attainment 8  
average score of 50.2 in Surrey



**80%** are currently seeking  
further employment  
or education

### NEET CATEGORY



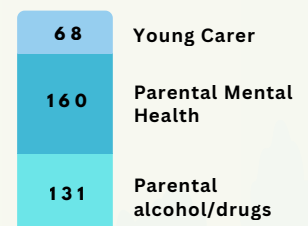
**208** early interventions via  
Early Help (EH) Plan, and  
**232** social care referrals

### YOUTH WITH SOCIAL WORKER



**27%** have parents with  
health challenges,  
increasing likelihood  
of *young carer* status

### FAMILY



Source: Hadfield et al. (2025). n=574.

\*EHCP: Education, health and care plan

\*\*SEND: Special educational needs and disabilities

\*\*\* Some NEET individuals may appear in multiple NEET category



## THE SURREY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE (CoP)

In May 2025, the CBE co-hosted the Next Steps for NEETs Conference with the High Sheriff of Surrey, Peter Cluff, to delve deeper into understanding NEETs from various Surrey stakeholders, including alternative pathway providers, charities, Surrey Police and the Surrey County Council. A key outcome was the shared endorsement of a coordinated, cross-sector response, leading to the creation of the Surrey Community of Practice (CoP).

This initiative emerged in direct response to persistent challenges within the current system, where critical gaps in communication and coordination between services have led to fragmented support and missed opportunities for early intervention (Hadfield et al., 2025, p.45). The CoP aims to bridge these divides by fostering close collaboration between key stakeholders across statutory and voluntary sectors. Rather than offering reactive solutions after a young person becomes NEET, the CoP is designed to prevent disengagement from occurring in the first place, tackling the root causes and helping to reverse the rising NEET trend in Surrey.

Thøgersen (2024, p.665) supports this interagency approach, highlighting that professionals from different sectors contribute distinct organisational resources, perspectives, and networks. This diversity strengthens the collective ability to offer tailored, multifaceted support to young people.

However, enhancing or expanding existing services alone is not sufficient. What is urgently needed is improved coordination and a centralised strategy for NEET prevention and re-engagement (Hadfield et al., 2025, p. 47). The CoP aims to deliver this by creating a shared framework for early identification, intervention, and support, mapping clear pathways back into education, employment, or training.

By integrating the expertise of diverse professionals, the CoP fosters a shared knowledge base and cultivates joint accountability for outcomes, something that siloed working cannot achieve (Green and Johnson, 2015, p.1). This collaborative model also allows for collective goal setting, the tracking of milestones, and the measurement of impact. In doing so, it ensures transparency, builds trust, and enables a clear line of progression that centres the needs of young people while promoting cooperation across sectors.

*Images: CBE's May 2025 NEETs Conference at the University of Surrey*





## CoP CASE STUDY 1: SURREY CULTURAL PARTNERSHIP

[www.surreyculturalpartnership.com](http://www.surreyculturalpartnership.com)

The Surrey Cultural Partnership (SCP) offers a compelling example of a permanent, self-sustaining Community of Practice.


Initiated by the Lord Lieutenant and Deputy Lieutenants, the SCP began as a fine arts-focused collective that co-created the Surrey Cultural Strategy, later adopted by SCC. Their vision is that 2034 Surrey will be recognised as a confident, vibrant county that celebrates its rich cultural heritage and the creativity that shapes individual and community prosperity. Their 2024 focus follows two strategic objectives: to strengthen the county's creative ecology and to attract new investment (Surrey Cultural Partnership, 2024a).

By securing and distributing funding on behalf of SCC, the SCP has evolved into a fully autonomous and self-organised body. Now recognised as a key stakeholder in the cultural sector, they've also attracted private donors, further cementing their sustainability. Their recent commissioned report found that national funders have overlooked Surrey and fallen behind when compared with neighbouring counties.

For example, Arts Council England's (ACE) spend per capita in Surrey is just £6.22, the lowest level of ACE investment among neighbouring Kent, Sussex, Hampshire, and Buckinghamshire (Surrey Cultural Partnership, 2024b, p.4). In terms of National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) investment, Surrey hosts only 6 NPOs, compared to 21 in Kent, 28 in Sussex, and 23 in Hampshire, despite having relatively similar population sizes. This underinvestment highlights the urgent need for greater advocacy and funding equity for the county's cultural sector.

This also displayed the potential for the arts and culture sector in Surrey and the need to come together to develop a new fund. The SCP is transitioning into a Community Interest Company (CIC), a move that will enhance its independence, broaden its charitable impact across the county, and enable the formation of thematic sub-groups (e.g. leadership development, sector-specific collaboration).

**Key Takeaway:** From the perspective of the proposed NEETs CoP, the SCP exemplifies how a Community of Practice can mature from the initial convening of stakeholders into a strategic, resilient, and influential force within the local ecosystem. There are, of course, key differences to note. Unlike established models like the SCP, our NEETs Community of Practice is rooted in prevention, focused on the actions we can take now to reduce future risk. Central to this approach is embedding the lived experience voice of young people who have been NEET, ensuring their insights shape the Community of Practice and drive meaningful, future-focused change.



**“Surrey Cultural Partnership is a collective of people from culture, heritage, local government, business, education, health and criminal justice working together to ensure that everyone in Surrey has the opportunity to participate in, engage with and contribute to extraordinary cultural activity, whoever they are and wherever they live.”**

**-Surrey Cultural Partnership**

## CoP CASE STUDY 2: EDT FUTURE

[www.edt.org](http://www.edt.org)


The Education Development Trust (EDT) is an international not-for-profit organisation working to increase the life chances of individuals around the world by improving education and skills outcomes. EDT's *Future Forward* programme delivered a series of Communities of Practice (CoP) events that brought together operational staff, stakeholders, and young people to strengthen support for young people across West Yorkshire.

The Future Forward programme partnered with grassroots organisations, with Education Development Trust leading the Future Forward programme as part of the West Yorkshire UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). The eligibility for the programme included young people aged 16-24, who were residents in West Yorkshire, including Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield, Kirklees and Calderdale, who possess the right to live and work in the UK with a National Insurance number. A total of 301 young people were supported with the programme.

The Future Forward programme contained 6 pilot projects, aiming to develop and support the needs of every young person. The pilots included work experience, mental health awareness and financial support, all of which, partnered with local authorities and employers. The impact of the project was measured by a questionnaire that demonstrated a 95% success rate in recommending the programme to others and having developed new skills.

The Future Forward CoP allowed for cross-sector collaboration and dialogue between those with lived experience, frontline practitioners and strategic partners. To document the progress made by the CoP, feedback and data were collected after meetings to show the direction in participant confidence, with 75% of attendees reporting a significant improvement in their understanding of the challenges young people face.

The insights gathered from these CoP sessions directly informed and shaped strategic decisions and solutions, ensuring that the programme can apply to these young people, with the help of real-world, authentic NEET experience.



**“By embedding Communities of Practice into its core approach, we built a more connected, resilient, and effective support system – one that is better aligned to the needs and aspirations of the young people it serves.”**

**- Future Forward Programme**





## DISCUSSION POINTS OF THE DAY

A central theme of the meeting was the need to embed the emerging NEETs work into a structure with permanence, consistency, and legacy. While initiatives often rely on time-limited funding or individual champions, participants stressed the importance of building something that can outlast changes in personnel and political cycles. As the High Sheriff noted, "High Sheriffs annually come and go, but Lord and Deputy Lieutenants do not", prompting a proposal to formally involve such longstanding civic figures in the CoP to help root it in Surrey's institutional fabric.

Participants agreed that for the CoP to succeed, it must be grafted onto a foundation that reflects a shared and sustained commitment to young people. A suggestion was made to establish a formal **NEETs Steering Group**, drawing together stakeholders who have been part of the recent convenings (including the May Conference and July meeting). This group could be organised across employment, education, and training sectors to ensure broad and balanced representation.

**Trust-building** emerged as another critical discussion point. Many young people who are NEET have experienced fragmented, inconsistent support due to frequent re-referrals and movement between services. This has led to a deep erosion of trust in systems and adults. Participants emphasised the need for genuine, locally rooted opportunities that offer continuity and stability.

There was strong agreement that more research is needed to understand how system interactions can retraumatise young people. Specifically, a deeper dive into trauma-trigger mechanisms could help uncover the emotional toll of repeatedly retelling difficult personal experiences during referrals. A **trauma-informed approach**, designed with empathy and sensitivity, was widely seen as essential to ensuring that support services do not cause further harm.

The importance of **co-designing** with, not just for, young people was echoed throughout the day. Contributions from the Community Foundation for Surrey reinforced the value of co-designing the CoP using the eight foundational principles outlined in the following section. These include shared values, mutual learning, and structures for knowledge exchange. Participants agreed that embedding lived experience throughout the CoP's design will help ensure it remains grounded, responsive, and relevant.

The Surrey Youth Focus representative stressed the need for the CoP to deliver both **collective and individual impact**: a shared vision must drive the community forward, but outcomes must also translate into tangible, personal wins. This dual focus, on systems and stories, was seen as vital to keeping stakeholders engaged and demonstrating value across sectors.

Finally, a representative from SATRO underscored the need to move **beyond "off-the-shelf"** options. The CoP must recognise and respond to the specific needs of individuals, not simply funnel young people through pre-defined pathways. Flexibility, creativity, and personalisation will be key to unlocking better outcomes.



## COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS

As the group moved towards clarifying the concept of the Community of Practice, a uniquely helpful 8-part overview of the contents of a CoP that had been circulated amongst a few of the members was recalled:



**Keep the structure simple and focused:** A clear, straightforward approach allows the CoP to support others effectively and help partners carry out their roles with ease.



**Build on what already exists:** Start with a clear understanding of current services and systems in the county, what's working, what isn't, and where the gaps are.



**Ensure leadership, recognition and legitimacy:** The Community of Practice should be seen as credible and valued by local leaders to strengthen its influence and long-term sustainability.



**Involve young people directly in the process:** Young people must have a voice in the Community of Practice, helping to design solutions and shape decisions that affect their futures.



**Secure resources, both funding and in-kind support:** Successful delivery requires investment, including financial backing, time, staff capacity, and shared assets.



**Make schools and colleges central to the Community of Practice:** Education providers are essential collaborators and must be fully involved in shaping and delivering the work.



**Bring businesses to the table with clear commitments:** Employers must be active partners, offering meaningful opportunities for young people with progression opportunities, even if just for learning or exposure.



**Stay aware of local government changes:** The Community of Practice must remain flexible and responsive to shifts in local authority structures, priorities, or funding.



## NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Two overarching goals emerged as central to Surrey's NEET CoP:

**Creating a One-Stop Shop for NEET Stakeholders:** Operating as a Community of Practice, the overarching goal is the **establishment and development of an executive forum representing senior Surrey-based NEET-related stakeholders with the primary aim of connecting and institutionalising stakeholders** across *academic, public, voluntary, and private sectors*, incorporating the critical dimensions of *research, data, analysis, business, training, skills, education, employment*, and beyond, in a routinised, structured, and above all materially useful way.

**Establishing a One-Stop-Shop for NEETs in Surrey:** Operating as a Community of Practice, the second goal is to subsequently streamline all available information on each and all these critical dimensions among executive CoP members, with a view to greatly improving the preventative conditions and tools necessary to tackle the challenge of NEETs in Surrey. In doing so, the increasingly interconnected NEET structures – driven by the CoP – will be able to build an integrated offer for young people, by aligning efforts across four key pillars:

**Data-Drive Cross-Stakeholder Data Sharing:** Enable deep and broad engagement through shared data, insights, and research. Such engagement across sectors will connect data, helping to identify unknown or at-risk NEET groups. This is important given the interlinked relationship between children's social care and rates of exclusion from education (Hood et al., 2024, p. 678). This foundational step was kick-started by the data-sharing discussions (Working Group 1) at the May event and must now expand across the CoP.

### **Portals and Programmes – Map and Connect Existing Offers:**

consider working collaboratively to identify and map existing online portals, as well as large and small NEET-related programmes. Avoiding the risk of redundancy or obsolescence, this exercise could produce a light-touch directory, not duplicating what already exists, but collating major, trusted services and their various portals and programmes.

- The CBE (as Secretariat) can lead this task by compiling information provided by the Steering Group.
- This directory can serve as a “single source of truth” and complement existing triage points like SCC and the Chambers of Commerce.

**Mentorship – Develop a Clear ‘Front Door’:** building on ‘mapping and gapping’ of portals and programmes above, set about identifying what is missing within the context of preventative NEET options, and focus on the opportunities of mentorship in education, in employment and in training structures, including the possibility of a new online ‘Front Door’ forum, which could provide a visible and accessible mentorship gateway for young people, supporting navigation, referrals, and personalised guidance.

**Strategy – Support Localised Pilot Projects:** identifying, supporting and spreading cross-county projects—either new pilots or existing initiatives—that begin small, remain locally led, and scale based on proven community impact (e.g. the North Leatherhead pilot). These should involve providers with deep knowledge of local needs.







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# PART II

## LOCAL PROJECTS AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

### CONTEXT

The future trajectories of young people are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, many of which lie beyond their control. Research indicates that low parental involvement in education, combined with socioeconomic disadvantage, significantly contributes to educational exclusion and disengagement (Tejerina-Arreal et al., 2020, p.218). The closure of children's centres from 2010 onwards also left many families without access to essential educational resources and parental support during critical early years (Hadfield et al., 2025, p. 41).

In Surrey, areas with the highest percentages of young people falling into the NEET category, including Camberley (4.75%), West Ewell (4.57%), and Park Barn (4.57%), closely overlap with neighbourhoods experiencing the greatest deprivation (Hadfield et al., 2025, p.30). Addressing these structural inequalities through accessible, community-based opportunities is essential to easing transitions and fostering long-term engagement among young people.

There are many options available for communities and whole counties to take in bridging the gap, through grassroots work, for families that are not actively engaging in education initiatives. The pilot project, Future Forward, in West Yorkshire, supported 301 socially excluded young people by focusing on both personal development and workplace skills. By the end of the programme, 95% reported gaining new skills and would recommend it to others (EDT, 2019). This example highlights the value of targeted pilot projects in areas with high numbers of NEET and unknown young people, with potential for wider county application.

In Leatherhead, the The Links Centre 2030 (TLC2030) initiative illustrates the power of cross-sector collaboration, bringing together local businesses, educators, and community organisations to re-engage young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). However, elsewhere in Surrey, opportunities for positive reinforcement remain scarce. Parsons (2005, p.206) argues that a prevailing "culture of punitiveness" legitimises low welfare investment, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion that expands the ranks of at-risk youth and normalises punitive responses. Without sustained, meaningful investment, under-resourced communities are left to confront escalating challenges with insufficient support.

### NEET or ...?

The term NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) carries negative connotations, particularly due to its deficit-based framing. As such, discussions are currently underway to adopt a more positive and inclusive term that better reflects the potential and lived experiences of the young people it describes. For clarity and consistency, the term NEET will be used throughout this report in line with current definitions and while a revised term is being developed. However, the report concludes with a set of recommendations, including the development of a revised, strengths-based definition.





Two other projects are worth mentioning, to provide additional context and analysis for progressive case study construction:

### **THE ROYAL HOLLOWAY EMPOWERING MENTORING AND ROLE MODELLING**

The Royal Holloway University of London (RHUL) Empowering Employment Journeys project exemplifies a strategic, forward-thinking pilot that embeds a Community of Practice model within a university setting. Initiated through a collaboration between RHUL, and regional career hubs, the Active Voices project builds upon an existing peer mentoring scheme to create a more intentional bridge between mentoring and career readiness. The vision is to cultivate a learning culture in which peer mentoring is not just a support mechanism but a vital pipeline for developing real-world employability skills.

Through targeted training and skill-sharing, student mentors are equipped with career-focused competencies, including communication, leadership, and teamwork, which they, in turn, pass on to their mentees. This cascade approach enhances the experience and growth of both mentors and mentees, fostering a resilient ecosystem of peer-led development.

While still in its pilot phase, the project has already shown promise as a scalable and sustainable model. It aligns institutional support with sector-wide goals of improving youth employability and promotes a self-sustaining culture of mutual skill-building. Long-term ambitions include formalising the model as a replicable toolkit for use across higher education institutions, potentially leading to a cross-institutional mentoring network.



## ACTIVE VOICES: DEVELOPING ORACY SKILLS IN YOUNG PEOPLE

The Active Voices project offers a transformative model for embedding overlooked yet essential skills into employability strategies for young people. Developed in partnership between Royal Holloway, University of London and Voice 21, a leading national charity championing oracy in education, the Active Voices project addresses the critical gap in speaking and listening skills in further education (FE). The vision is to make oracy a recognised pillar of workplace readiness, embedded deeply into FE learning environments.

The initiative focuses on co-creating an oracy toolkit designed specifically for FE students. The toolkit, informed by both educational research and employer feedback, supports students in developing communication competencies needed for interviews, collaboration, presentations, and leadership in the workplace.

This collaborative pilot represents an important shift: from seeing oracy as a soft skill to recognising it as a core employability attribute. As the project evolves, there are plans to develop communities of practice among FE educators to continuously refine, adapt, and embed the toolkit, ensuring relevance across sectors and regions. The Active Voices project lays the groundwork for a national conversation around the role of oracy in career development and lifelong learning.





## CASE STUDIES

The following section highlights the ongoing and prospective local pilot projects relating to NEETs drawn from TLC2030, Surrey Youth Focus, Move Different, and the Surrey Chambers of Commerce.

### CASE 1: LEATHERHEAD PILOT PROJECT

[tlc2030.org](http://tlc2030.org)

TLC2030's pilot projects in Leatherhead collaborated with local horticulture and construction companies to bring related programmes to young people, to encourage them to (re)enter education, employment or training. TLC2030 described how the area has become a testing ground for a more community-based, business-engaged response to NEET challenges.

A comparable pilot, Future Forward in West Yorkshire, supported 301 socially excluded young people by focusing on both personal development and workplace skills. By the end of the programme, 95% reported gaining new skills and would recommend it to others (EDT, 2019). These examples highlight the value of targeted pilot projects in areas with high numbers of NEET and unknown young people, with potential for wider county application.

In Leatherhead, the TLC2030 initiative has successfully brought together businesses, educators, and community groups to support young people outside of education or employment. Pilots like Leatherhead are vital to be applied to the concentrated areas in Surrey with the highest number of NEETs. Examples were shared of proactive employer engagement, such as 13 KBR employees volunteering their evenings to support events and mentoring sessions. These efforts demonstrate what's possible when businesses commit not just funds, but time, people, and visibility.



## CASE 2: ACCESS TO MENTORING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK OF BEING NEET

[surreyyouthfocus.org.uk](http://surreyyouthfocus.org.uk)

An independent charity representing children and young people in Surrey, they serve around 85 member organisations, including youth clubs, national groups, and sports teams. Additionally, they represent and advocate for the voluntary sector in influencing decision-makers; networking and brokering collaboration among charities and statutory bodies; and supporting workforce development through learning opportunities. The first of this project's two sub-awardees, the role of Surrey Youth Focus, will be to deliver strategic oversight, coordination and delivery of WG2's online mentorship front door project. For the proposed Strengthening Surrey project, the CEO of Surrey Youth Focus, Cate Newnes-Smith, is the key partner lead.

Mentorship is a challenging structure, and not as easily accessible to pre-NEETS as it could be. As Cate Newnes-Smith, CEO of Surrey Youth Focus, outlines, "a solution is needed to make it easier to identify and access suitable mentoring opportunities for a young person – possibly through a single front door for mentoring, with organisations and individuals able to refer a young person into the 'front door' organisation, who then refer them out again."

With their strong background in strategic change initiatives and extensive knowledge of Surrey, improving outcomes for children and young people through multi-agency working, Surrey Youth Focus will deliver a series of workshops with stakeholders including Surrey Police and the CBE to help understand the range of barriers young people face in accessing mentoring and how we can build new models to collectively address these, building on existing capabilities where appropriate, with the possibility of a new software system if needed.





### CASE STUDY 3: THE 'MOVE DIFFERENT' ECOSYSTEM APPROACH

Move Different is a Community Interest Company (CIC), founded in 2025 by Leah Boxell, with a mission to transform the experience of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) young people by simplifying access to support, reducing traumatisation, and building human-centred pathways to services.

**The Challenge:** One of the core challenges facing our youth and young people today is the fragmented and overwhelming nature of support services. While numerous organisations exist to help, they often operate in silos, each with its own referral processes, intake forms, and procedures, plus there is no accountability. As a result, these young people are forced to retell traumatic personal stories every time they engage with a new provider. This lack of joined-up service delivery places an immense burden on the individual, who must navigate complex systems alone, determine what help is available, rebuild trust with each new professional, and manage their emotional wellbeing simultaneously. Many young people disengage before accessing meaningful support, not due to a lack of will, but due to system failure.

**The Solution - A Trauma-Informed Ecosystem Approach:** In response to this systemic gap, Leah Boxell founded a CIC in 2025 with a clear purpose: to create an integrated ecosystem for these youths and young people. This model ensures dignity, simplicity, and trust are placed at the centre of service access.

#### Key Components of the Ecosystem

- **Way Finders:** Peer support guides with lived experience who walk alongside individuals, helping them access appropriate services without needing to relive trauma. Way Finders are not service providers, but trusted navigators.
- **Consent-Based Data Sharing:** With appropriate permissions, service providers can access core information about a young person's needs and journey, reducing duplication and ensuring continuity of care.
- **Flexible Communication Channels:** Support is delivered through WhatsApp, telephone calls, and the development of an Ecosystem App meeting young people where they are, on their terms.
- **Human-Led Triage:** Instead of overwhelming intake forms, triage is conducted conversationally and compassionately. Every young person receives personalised support depending on their level of need.
- **Judgement-Free Environment:** Services are delivered in a way that centres dignity and respect. Individuals are never reduced to their past experiences.

#### Outreach & Engagement Strategy:

- **Peer Outreach & Trusted Messengers:** These youths and young people are more likely to respond to people they relate to. The CIC trains and deploys former NEETs and lived experience advisors to conduct outreach and build trust.
- **Partnerships with Gatekeepers:** Collaborations with youth workers, refuge services, and grassroots organisations enable early identification and warm referrals.
- **Workshops & Community Events:** Local workshops help the young people explore opportunities without pressure, stigma, or bureaucratic hurdles.
- **Social Media Campaigns:** Online content is crafted in the language and tone that our youths and young people connect with which is authentic, relatable, and real.



## CASE STUDY 4: LOCAL SKILLS IMPROVEMENT PLAN (LSIP)

[www.surrey-chambers.co.uk](http://www.surrey-chambers.co.uk)



To tackle ongoing recruitment challenges, Surrey Chambers of Commerce, in partnership with the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), hosted an event to help employers tap into underutilised talent pools. The session introduced employers to diverse candidate groups such as neurodiverse individuals, returners from care duties, early retirees, people with disabilities, ex-military personnel, prison leavers, and refugees.

Attendees heard powerful personal stories from individuals in these groups, demonstrating how, with the right support, they've become valued and successful employees. The event also highlighted training opportunities for staff development – including apprenticeships, T Levels, Skills Bootcamps, and free online or numeracy training.

To extend impact, the Chambers launched a dedicated webpage with resources, case studies and ran a social media campaign to raise awareness and challenge misconceptions. The success of this initiative has inspired plans for future events to continue connecting businesses with untapped local talent.





## DISCUSSION POINTS OF THE DAY

### North Leatherhead Pilot Project

The discussion frequently returned to Leatherhead as a focal point for innovation, challenge, and opportunity. TLC2030 described how the area has become a testing ground for a more community-based, business-engaged response to NEET challenges.

TLC2030 shared that KBR set a strong example for employer engagement, with 13 staff volunteering for mentoring at the June Leatherhead convening. This highlights the impact of businesses offering time and visibility, not just funding. However, TLC2030 emphasised the remaining **gap between corporate responsibility and local need**, with a multi-million pound profit-making company declining modest youth funding requests, such as £12,000 for a project in North Leatherhead.

The district council ward also faces structural disadvantages. TLC2030 noted that the town lacks a parish council, meaning fewer local mechanisms exist for applying for funding or representing **youth-focused initiatives**. Nonetheless, this limitation has become an opportunity: the pilot project has leaned heavily on community willpower and collaborative effort.

TLC2030 emphasised the urgency of using the original March report (Unseen Surrey: An Exploratory Overview of the NEET Crisis) to act quickly, not just to document issues but to **implement scalable solutions**. The Leatherhead experience shows that localised pilot projects, driven by community passion and business partnership, can offer a blueprint for targeted, high-impact intervention.

### Community Pilot Projects

Beyond Leatherhead, the wider discussion explored how **community-led pilot projects** can be leveraged more effectively to engage young people at risk of disengagement. Multiple speakers, including representatives from Skillway, Surrey County Council, and Enablists, emphasised the importance of supporting small, locally informed initiatives that begin modestly, remain adaptable, and scale based on demonstrated impact.

Participants agreed that smaller charities and grassroots organisations often offer more tailored and responsive environments than larger institutions. It was highlighted how Skillway creates a sense of pride and identity by helping young people achieve practical skills certifications. **“The environment matters,”**. “One student told us: ‘school smells different to this place’”, when exploring a new option at a mechanical workshop, underscoring how physical and cultural space shapes engagement.

It was raised that SCC can play a vital role in triaging and directing young people, but that they need a centralised **map of opportunities** to do so effectively. Many attendees recommended the development of a light-touch, dynamic database of programmes and services across sectors, so that referrals can be targeted and timely. This would also enable smaller organisations to be seen and valued alongside larger providers.



Community projects were also discussed as spaces where lived experience can be embedded, not just as a token gesture, but as an integral design principle. Collecting a wide range of **lived-experience case studies** was advocated for, to inform future strategy, outreach, and build confidence in young people to tell their own story and relate to something familiar. This echoes the recurring comment that every story is different; young people experience a wide range of trauma, but one story or mentor who has lived something similar has the potential to inspire hope and change the path for a young person.

Importantly, these pilot projects must address hidden groups, including those in home education or living outside of known systems. There was strong consensus that more attention needs to be paid to the **“unknown NEETs”**, those not currently captured by referrals, attendance records, or service data. Questions were also raised about the reasons behind their invisibility, suggesting stigma, fear, or cultural norms may be significant barriers.

Finally, the group acknowledged that the term NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) carries negative connotations, particularly due to its deficit-based framing. As such, discussions are currently underway to adopt a more positive and inclusive term that better reflects the potential and lived experiences of the young people it describes. For clarity and consistency, the term NEET will be used throughout this report in line with current definitions and while a revised term is being developed. However, the report concludes with a set of recommendations, including the development of a revised, strengths-based definition.

*Image: CBE and community stakeholders at the May 2025 NEETs Conference, University of Surrey*





## INSIGHT TO ACTION: NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



**Reframing Language Around Young People:** Change language that holds negative connotations, utilising empowering language will motivate young people and increase their confidence.



**Avoiding Oversimplified Assumptions:** Directly correlating being eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) with being NEET can overlook vulnerable young people who fall outside of these criteria.



**Developing a Centralised Opportunities Platform:** A comprehensive database that maps the opportunities available to young people would benefit both the young people and local authorities to make direct referrals to both grassroots and larger providers.



**Engaging Larger Employers in Youth Opportunities:** Larger businesses in Surrey play a crucial role in offering opportunities to young people, expanding and breaking down barriers to meaningful work experience, even on a voluntary basis.



**Encouraging Investment in Pilot Projects:** There is a need for greater willingness to invest in young people from companies that are significantly profiting, we need to hold these companies accountable.



**Celebrating Success and Building Confidence:** Showcasing relatable success stories from young people or adults with similar backgrounds will make opportunities feel more accessible and encourage greater engagement from young people.



**Creating Safe Spaces for Young People to Grow:** Utilising a Front Door Mentorship Portal that will create opportunities for young people to (re)engage with education, employment or training. Using new, transformative technologies, like the Move Different application, to allow for young people to relate, understand their position, and accept assistance.



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# NEXT STEPS FOR NEETS

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION



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