

UNDERSTANDING NEETS - EVIDENCE TO ADDRESS THE CRISIS

Executive Summary

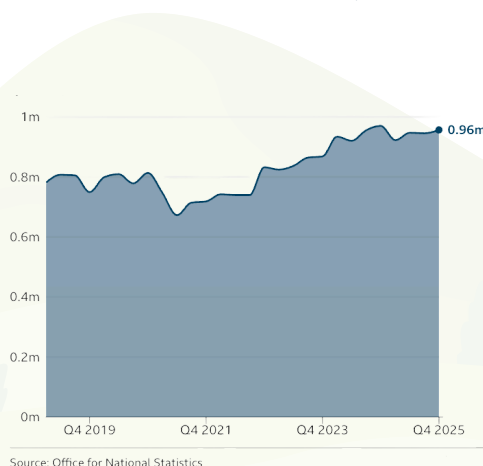
An estimated **946,000** young people aged 16–24 in the UK were **not in education, employment or training (NEET)** by late 2025. There is also a gender split with young men now making up the majority, with 78,000 more male NEETs than females. This is seen nationally and in Surrey.

This is both an economic and social challenge as time spent outside education or work is linked to lower lifetime earnings, poorer mental health and greater pressure on public services.

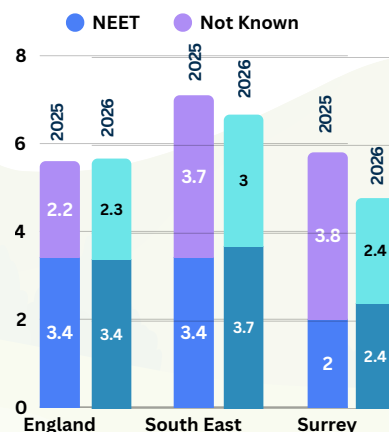
Our Surrey case study shows that **NEET is not limited to deprived urban areas**. Even in one of England's wealthiest counties, hidden deprivation, high living costs and fragmented services are driving disengagement. If these challenges exist in Surrey, they are likely to be even more acute elsewhere.

The evidence is clear: **young people do not suddenly become NEET at 16**, risks often emerge in childhood and intensify over time. Policy must move from late crisis response to earlier prevention, joined-up support and clearer pathways into education, employment and training.

NEETS NATIONALLY, 16-24



AGGREGATE JAN 2025 V. 2026 (%)



Policy Context

Our research mapped out fragmentation in the existing system, as despite almost one million young people aged 16–24 being disengaged from education, employment or training across the UK, **differing definitions and data collection methods** make comparison and targeted action difficult.

Consistent with existing evidence, we found that disengagement is linked to structural factors including poverty, low parental support, unmet special educational needs, poor mental health, school exclusion and unstable family circumstances. These disadvantages often accumulate throughout childhood and continue to impact young people later in life, with the **highest NEET rates closely overlapping with neighbourhoods experiencing deprivation**, demonstrating that many remain excluded from opportunities despite Surrey's overall prosperity.

The economic case for action is strong: supporting one person who remains disengaged from education, employment or training can cost up to **£340,000** over their lifetime. Evidence from early intervention models, including the Heckman Curve, shows that investment in children and young people at earlier stages delivers the highest returns, reducing later costs in welfare, health, justice and unemployment.

Research Findings

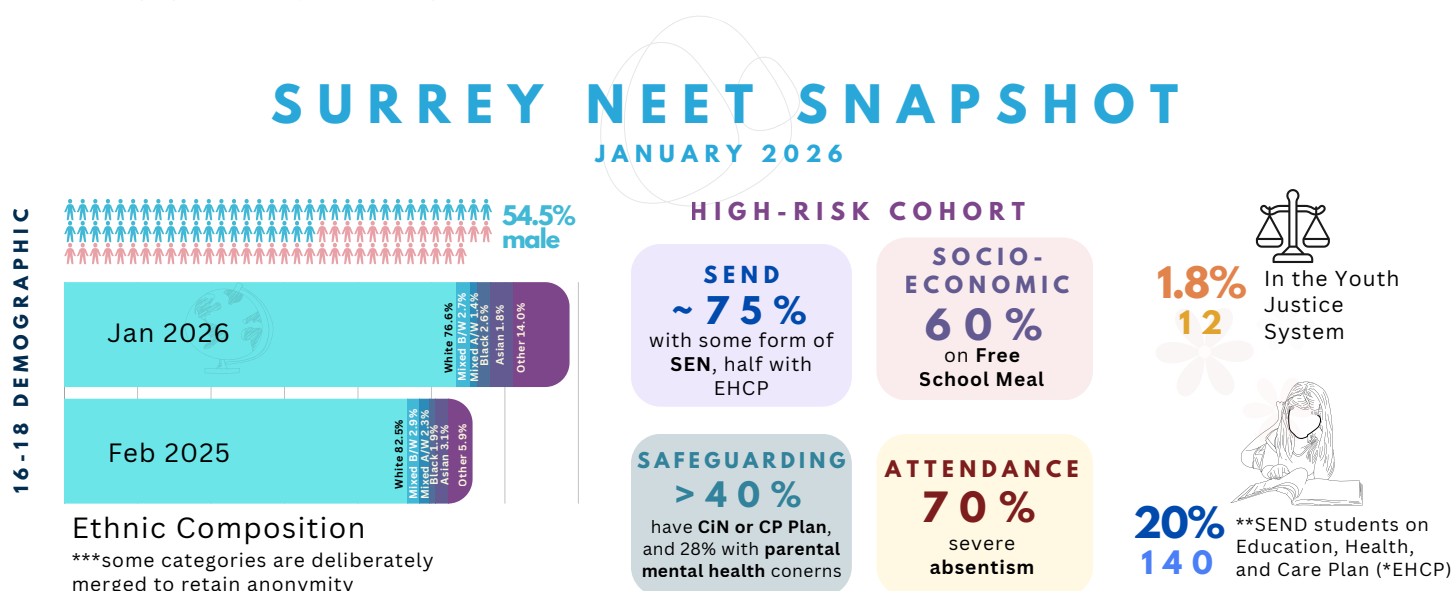
Over 18 months, our research combined an exploratory review of the NEET crisis in Surrey with evidence from conferences, stakeholder meetings across the charity, voluntary and local government sectors, and engagement with young people.

Our findings show that NEET is not a single category. It includes young people seeking work, experiencing mental health challenges, caring responsibilities, parenthood, care experience, or disengagement following exclusion. Policy responses must reflect these diverse circumstances.

We found that **fragmented systems, short-term funding, poor data sharing and overlapping initiatives** can leave young people unsupported or unknown to services from as young as early as **age 4**. Stronger coordination between education, health, social care, employers and community organisations is essential to prevent young people falling through gaps in support.

A February 2025 Surrey snapshot found that many young people recorded as NEET faced multiple barriers, including lower attainment, Free School Meal eligibility, social worker involvement and Education, Health and Care Plans. However, **80% were actively seeking education or employment**, demonstrating that these factors are risks rather than causes and that many vulnerable young people remain unseen.

Feedback from young people and stakeholders also highlighted that deficit-based labels such as “NEET” can reinforce stigma and lower confidence. A strengths-based alternative, such as **REET (Reintegrating into Education, Employment or Training)**, could better promote hope, progression and engagement by focusing on potential rather than deficit.



Key Takeaways

- Young people can begin disengaging from education **as early as age 4**, not only at 16, making early intervention and prevention more effective and less costly.
- NEET is an administrative label, not a reflection of aspiration or ability, and many young people with clear needs are missing from official data as ‘unknown’ or waiting for support.
- Surrey demonstrates that **youth disengagement is a national structural issue**, not only a challenge in traditionally deprived regions.

Policy Implications & Recommendations

- 💡 Adopt a clearer UK-wide framework for measuring youth disengagement, using strengths-based language focused on reintegration and progression.
- 💡 Prioritise early intervention from primary school onward, including alternative pathways attendance, wellbeing, SEND and family support.
- 💡 Create shared local data systems and stronger accountability so no young person falls through gaps.
- 💡 Position Surrey as a pilot area for integrated NEET prevention and re-engagement, building on its strong evidence base and established Community of Practice.

Source: DfE (2025, 2026), ONS (2026), Surrey County Council, n=672

*EHCP: Education, health and care plan

**SEND: Special educational needs and disabilities

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

