

Engaging Young People in Employment, Education or Training.

Priority Policy Actions from the Southwest

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Young people from Youth Connect South West, Mentoring Plus, Bath and North East Somerset Care Experienced Team, Kingsmead School, Bright Futures Somerset, Empire Fighting Chance, Careers and Enterprise Company Youth Advisory Group, Somerset Early Careers Team, Yeovil College, Wiltshire Council Voice and Participation Service, Trowbridge Futures. Social Mobility Business Partnership.



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Executive Summary

A coherent national strategy to address the rising numbers of young people not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) is essential to the government's missions to kickstart economic growth and break down the barriers that prevent access to opportunities to learn, earn and belong for key groups of young people.

Over 920,000 young people are NEET (YFF 2025). This scars individuals' lives (Ralston 2022) and has a hugely detrimental economic impact, costing the economy £104,300 for each young person who becomes NEET. Reducing the UK's NEET rate to match that of the Netherlands (the lowest rate in Europe) is an achievable ambition that could boost GDP by £69bn (Policy Connect 2025).

Current UK NEET reduction approaches are reactive rather than preventative. Access to support for those who experience difficulties with engagement in learning and earning is complicated by restrictive eligibility criteria across multiple underfunded services, compounding their sense of being forgotten and not cared about. When they do access support, it is frequently too little, too late and too piecemeal. Inadequate consideration of the broad range of factors impacting outcomes for young people impedes access to support for the wide range of young people who need it. A lack of strategic oversight at national level leads to conflicting policies, creating traps and gaps for young people.

The Research

This report draws on six-years' research into early school leaving, school wellbeing and NEET outcomes. It outlines recommendations developed through two subsequent [policy roundtables](#); one bringing together 50 local authority and third sector leaders in NEET prevention from 11 Southwest unitary authorities; another to hear from 43 young people from five Southwest authorities who were NEET or had lived experience of barriers to engagement.

Our [NEET risk framework](#) identifies five discrete risk domains leading to NEET. It also highlights how risks across these domains interconnect, creating barriers to engagement. This framework helps policymakers and practitioners to more manageably consider the full range of risk factors impacting outcomes and move beyond a focus on separate, individual risk factors.

Our findings highlight the importance of a trusting relationship with an adult practitioner as key to successful (re) engagement, and point to schools as a critical site for NEET prevention.

Crucially, support being available is insufficient to engage young people. It is their **feeling** cared for, understood and supported that is the mechanism for change. Proactive engagement with young people's voices and views across the system must therefore be at the heart of NEET prevention strategy.

The risk framework and [theory of change](#) emerging from our research can support the development of a strategic, coherent, system-wide NEET strategy by informing approaches to training, data sharing and the development of indicators and evaluation frameworks.

The Southwest

The Youth Guarantee Trailblazer pilots are an important opportunity for lasting change through fostering solutions grounded in detailed understanding of regional barriers, resources and skills needs. Our collaboration with partner organisations across the Southwest highlights systemic changes and regional priorities that must be addressed to maximise the impact of this opportunity and reduce NEET rates in the Southwest of England.

Although Southwest NEET rates (9.4%) are comparatively lower than some other regions, the South-West Mobility Commission highlights the region as having the worst educational outcomes for young people and the lowest social mobility of any region in England (Sim and Major 2022). Children from under-resourced backgrounds are comparatively further behind than any other region on key measures, including attendance and attainment from early years to higher-level education.

This underscores the need to adopt a holistic, long-term lens, recognising NEETHood as a cumulative process of disengagement impacted by multiple, interrelated barriers. Meaningful change requires a move away from short-term, precarious funding for NEET support, fragmented policies (Maguire 2021), arbitrary and contradictory age cut-offs (Gracey and Kelly 2010: 55) and siloed working (FEA 2024). Coordinated national policies prioritising joined up working and longer-term funding are essential to make regional solutions effective and sustainable.

The historical lack of attention to rurality in NEET policy (YFF 2023) negatively impacts the Southwest. The selection of the West of England Combined Mayoral Authority as a Trailblazer pilot builds scope for greater national engagement with the region's opportunity barriers and growth priorities. It will also furnish some valuable evidence for roll out to other areas. However, this combined authority is home to three of the region's eight cities. There is a risk that Southwest young people risk being left behind if the access, transport and skills needs of more rural authorities are not tackled.



The Recommendations

Our report contains two types of recommendation:

- recommendations for national policymakers
- recommendations for policymakers at Local and Mayoral Combined Authority levels in the Southwest¹

These are organised into four priority themes:

1. Build a coherent, joined-up system.
2. Remove the barriers to effective post-16 transitions for CYPs most vulnerable to NEET.
3. Recognise trusting relationships as the mechanism of change to achieve engagement in EET.
4. Focus on CYP's sense of belonging as a pathway to meaningful engagement in EET.

The Tackling NEET Toolkit

We signpost our [Tackling NEET](#) and [School Wellbeing Toolkits](#) which offer resources to support regional and national NEET prevention efforts. Co-developed with professionals using our research findings, these tools can be used and adapted to diverse settings supporting young people.

¹ Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol City, Cornwall, Devon, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, Dorset, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Somerset, Wiltshire, West of England Combined Authority

Research Base

Research Base NEET Study: Orienta4YEL

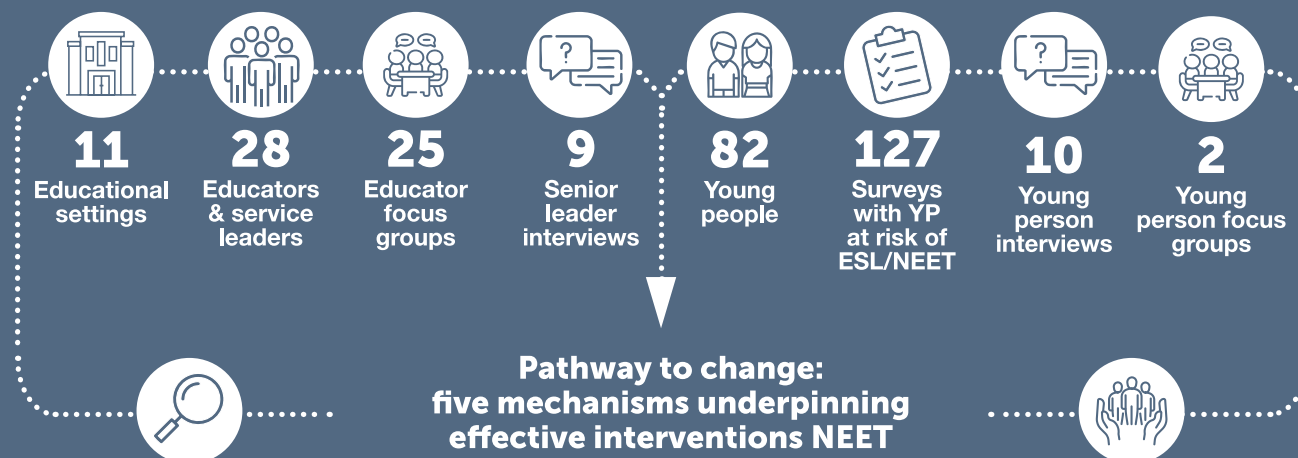
PHASE 1: UNDERSTAND THE RISKS



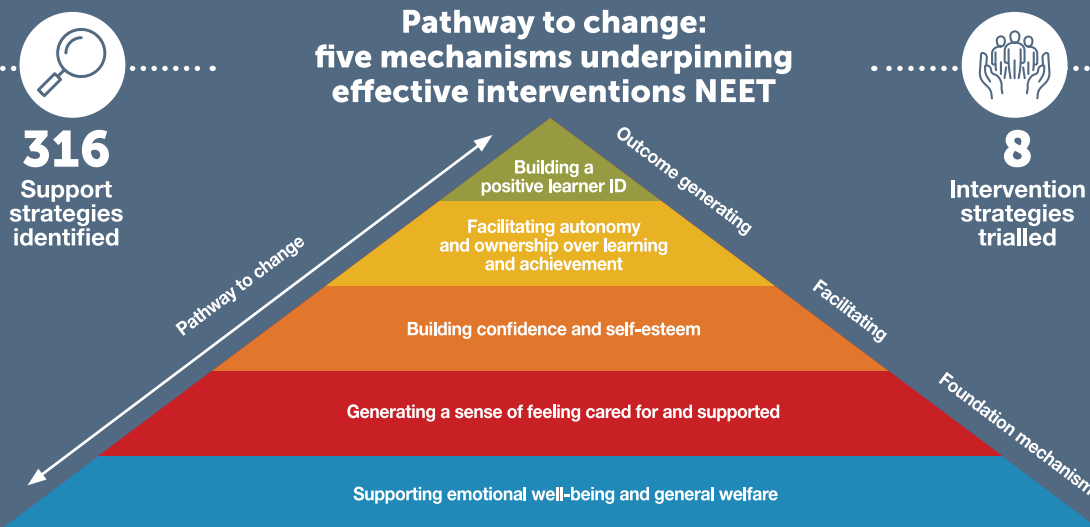
Holistic model of five categories of risks to ESL/NEET



PHASES 2 & 3: DESIGN, TRIAL & EVALUATE INTERVENTIONS



Pathway to change:
five mechanisms underpinning
effective interventions NEET



Top Structural Barriers (most discussed)

Educational Policies

e.g Raising participation age to 18; availability and funding of entry level/ level 1 and 2 qualifications; requirement for post-16 literacy and maths; government priority; exam pressure; performance targets; performance pressure on teachers.

Lack of funding/time

e.g School funding crisis impacting pastoral support and staffing levels; financial constraints on NEET projects (short term funding/ duration limitations/ age cutoffs and restrictions); cuts to/lack of youth services/ support services

Accessibility to education

e.g. Rurality and transport; availability of provision; distance to provision

Transition from school to VET

e.g. Unclear pathways; transition destination not sorted; flawed referral processes; restrictive option pathways

Alternative Provision in the region

e.g Lack of continuity; limited availability; not affordable for schools

Tracking mechanisms

e.g. Mechanisms to track EL/ destinations; Early identification mechanisms

Tackling NEET Toolkit

Research-informed training and resources.

www.connectedbelonging.co.uk



Intervention handbooks



Training videos



School support guide



Case studies



Planning tools

London-wide belonging study



32

London boroughs



38

Primary schools



25

Secondary schools



13

PRUS & APs



3472

Student surveys



145

Parent/carer surveys



179

Educator surveys



19

School leader interviews



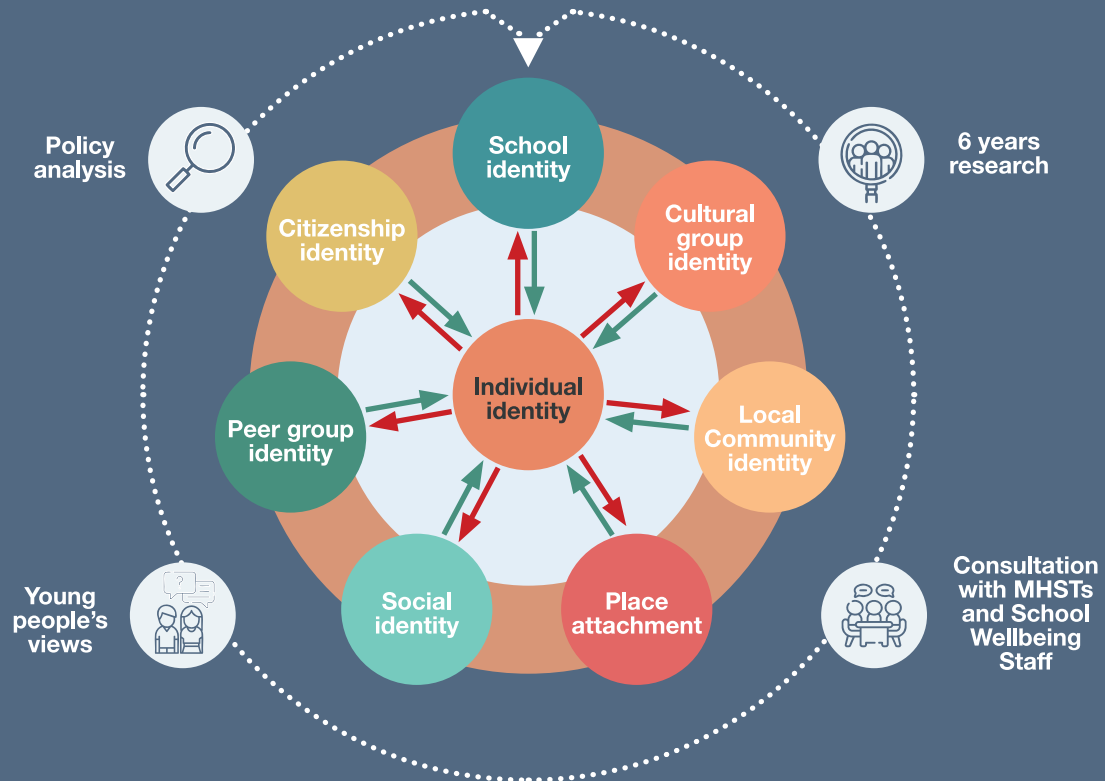
Report: Inclusion, Belonging and Safety in London's Schools : Full Report on Behalf of London's Violence

London's Inclusion Charter: Mayor of London's Violence Reduction Unit

Strategic Guides for Education Leaders

Connected Belonging

A relational and identity affirming approach to school wellbeing support



Policy Roundtables on NEET Prevention

University of Bath, 2025



PRIORITY 1:

Build a coherent, joined-up system



“ We need to build collaborative and effective partnerships through sustained long-term, localised funding that delivers and tracks outcomes and outputs for all our Young People. ”

PRIORITY 1: Build a coherent, joined-up system

Recommendations for National Policymakers

Develop a **coherent, joined-up strategy** for young people's engagement in education, employment and training which:

- is shared across government departments supporting young people (DWP, DfE, DHS, DCMS, CJS).
- recognises that NEET outcomes result from a cumulative process of disengagement impacted by multiple, interlinked risk factors and barriers.
- is preventative, identifying and supporting young people from at least Year 7.
- ensures consistent age cutoffs and entitlements across departments and services.
- is informed by CYPs' lived experience.

Build **flexible funding** mechanisms with longer time frames to ensure local government:

- have time to make evidence-led decisions,
- can plan for the longer term and reduce short-term approaches.
- engage effectively with stakeholders and respond to local need.

Encourage a focus on **sustaining engagement** by publishing guidance for local government on;

- the mechanisms underpinning effective engagement work.
- how to evaluate progression for those furthest from EET engagement outcomes.
- work with the FE sector to improve the effectiveness of monitoring with a focus on countering drop-out between Years 12/ 13.
- identifying a clear leadership responsibility in secondary schools for sustaining engagement and NEET prevention from Year 7.

Recommendations for Local and Regional Policymakers

Tackle siloed approaches to support by:

- identifying a lead professional to act as an advocate for young people and families receiving support from multiple agencies to coordinate support.
- developing robust data sharing protocols so professionals supporting young people can base support on a holistic view of their situation and collaborate effectively.
- support schools in earlier identification and intervention.
- establish local/regional NEET panels to share best practice, build knowledge of local landscape/need and support innovation.
- build more nuanced and consistent approaches to evaluating the impact of work to tackle disengagement across statutory services and external organisations.

Overview

Our fragmented national system for identifying, overcoming and preventing NEET outcomes leads to siloed working, uncoordinated support, arbitrary time limits and contradictory age cutoffs and entitlements. Precarious, short-term support is especially damaging for young people who face the most complex challenges. This is because consistency, reliability and rich knowledge of the individual's situation is key to building the trusting relationships and sense of identity needed for meaningful change. Effective responses to tackling the complex, interrelated challenges impacting outcomes for our most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people requires a sustained funding programme that is founded upon a long-term view and capacity for flexible response.



“ A Year 7 engagement position is needed to consider how young people communicate, their attention span, learning style, emotional intelligence, so the perspective isn't solely academic but about their ability to engage. ”

Young Professional

PRIORITY 1: Build a coherent, joined-up system

Research Findings

A holistic model of risks to NEET to support a coherent, joined-up system

Our study found over 150 different risk factors that play a role in NEET outcomes, but little guidance on how to think about these risks in considering how to address them.

We developed a model of risks to NEET (Brown et al 2021) which organises the multiple risks into five interlinked domains of risk. This model supports holistic consideration of the different individual, familial, social, contextual and systemic factors which impact NEET outcomes. A holistic response recognises that NEET outcomes result from the **interplay of structural factors** (e.g. policies, funding decisions, transport, infrastructure, national curriculum, **institutional factors** (e.g. school class sizes, behavioural policies, flexibility and inclusivity), **social relationship factors** (e.g. experiences of bullying, relationships with adults, peers, social skill development), **family circumstances** (e.g. material circumstances, cultural factors, caring responsibilities), and **personal challenges** (e.g. health and abilities including SEND, trauma, communication difficulties, mental health).

Because the risks across these five domains are highly interlinked but unique to each individual, it is vital that support is based on a holistic understanding of an individual young person's challenges.

Our research and collaboration with partner organisations working to address NEET has highlighted fragmentation in the forms of disengagement different parts of the system understand as being their priority focus. Early-school-leaving, emotionally based school avoidance, persistent absence, permanent exclusion, being NEET and economic inactivity are different forms of disengagement that young people need support to overcome. While many roles exist to support young people with these disengagement challenges at different

stages in their trajectories (e.g. DWP Job Coaches, Attendance Mentors, NEET Advocates, Case Workers), there is no shared, holistic understanding across these services of the risks to NEET or of the factors that make 1:1 support effective. A coherent strategy based on common understandings would support consistency of approaches, better support collaboration and could enhance efforts to address the cliff edges experienced by young people who experience engagement issues at key transition points.

Our risk model offers policymakers a basis for developing a coherent strategy for enhancing engagement and tackling NEET across the tiers of the system. It also supports holistic consideration of the individual's challenges across multiple support services. Adoption and development of the resources available in our Tackling NEET toolkit could help policymakers in the practical and strategic application of our findings².

Systemic barriers that lead to NEET outcomes

Systemic and structural risks were the most discussed category of risk in discussions with young people, educators and NEET service leaders (Brown et al 2022a).

The four systemic issues identified as most significant in NEET outcomes in our study were educational policies, funding arrangements, accessibility to education, and transition from school to vocational education and training). Stakeholders pinpointed policies requiring young people to remain in education and training until 18 and post-16 literacy and maths as key, particularly in the context of a lack of viable and accessible alternatives to academic study. The loss of EU funding, reliance on charitable funding, restrictions on the duration and longevity of support programmes and a lack of joined up provision to prevent NEET, with no specific team, department or funding to drive this agenda forwards were other key factors.



“ When you leave college, no one is there after. Colleges don't properly communicate to other organisations. ”

Young Person

PRIORITY 1: Build a coherent, joined-up system

A priority issue highlighted by roundtable participants was that calls to apply for funding for NEET support work arrive suddenly, with tight deadlines to respond and short timeframes by which funds must be spent. This means that projects must be developed and completed quickly rather than wisely, fuelling an emphasis on piecemeal interventions rather than considered, longer-term work.

Short-term funding can lead to instability of services, high turnover and emphasis on short durations of support with inflexible cutoffs. Piecemeal, short-term support is counterproductive for young people furthest from education, employment and training because it hampers the development of the relationships needed for impact.

A lack of funding was also highlighted by young people roundtable participants. Overstretched schools and services led to disengagement and prevented re-engagement through a lack of support being available. They called for a joined-up system in the form of 'better communication with families,' 'better joint working with schools/colleges and the job world' and the urgent need to create and signpost ways back in for those who have stopped attending, dropped out, disengaged or experienced interruptions due to health or crisis.

Effective support for engagement in education, employment and training

Our study identified five mechanisms underpinning effective NEET support interventions (Brown et al 2022b). These were consistent across different forms of intervention in different settings and contexts.

The first two mechanisms of support leading to meaningful change were '*supporting emotional wellbeing and general welfare*' and '*generating a sense of feeling cared for, understood and supported*.' These must be addressed before confidence can be built and work or learning goals engaged with. Our findings highlight how crucial individualised support is for young people to unpick complex challenges and navigate the system.

Where young people's sense of feeling supported or cared for has been damaged, for instance through being excluded from schooling, from not having their special educational needs diagnosed or met within education or being on waiting lists for mental health support for a long time, the foundational stages take longer to address. Where young people are in crisis, and their welfare needs are pressing, perhaps due to exploitation, county lines involvement or care placement breakdown for instance, the timeframe can be longer still.

Longer term, flexible funding to tackle NEET is essential to ensuring that young people have the time needed to establish the trusting relationship with a supporting adult that is necessary for them to engage with support. Young people furthest from NEET outcomes have usually experienced interactions with multiple professionals and will need longer to build the necessary trust. Flexibility of funding to ensure those furthest from engaging can access longer-term support from a consistent, trusted professional is vital.

2 Toolkits and approaches developed through our work are hosted and integrated at 4 Local Authorities; endorsed and hosted by the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC)



“ Better, more accessible mental health services are needed” NEET. ”

Young Person

PRIORITY 2:

Remove the barriers to effective post-16 transitions for CYPs most vulnerable to NEET outcomes



“ I dropped out of an apprenticeship post October half term, no course until September. If I had dropped out one week earlier, I could have transferred but instead I had to wait another year. That year really got me down. ”

Young Person NEET

Recommendations for National Policymakers

Remove the barriers to effective post-16 transitions for CYPs most vulnerable to NEET outcomes by implementing the following recommendations:

- recognise participation in apprenticeships as full-time educational provision so that that parents/carers can continue to access child benefits.
- make supported internships more widely accessible to students facing complex challenges that have impacted their educational attainment and engagement.
- use the Growth and Skills Levy funding more flexibly to cover apprenticeship and supported internship costs.
- extend the breadth of the post-16 curriculum to build accessible progression pathways for the 54.1% of students who did not reach the attainment benchmark of English and Maths at KS4.
- take action on the [2022 proposal to develop Non-GCSE/FSQ English and maths qualifications](#) to build greater flexibility in personalising literacy and numeracy support.
- review the allocation methodology for the [16 to 19 Discretionary Bursary fund](#) and drive collaboration between DfT and local government to develop flexible, fair funding to support youth access and participation by overcoming transport barriers.



Recommendations for Local and Regional Policymakers

- collaborate with FE providers to innovate in developing accessible, engaging post 16 progression pathways.
- increase capacity, availability, and choice of Level 1 and 2 post-16 courses, including more part-time options, mid-year entry points, roll-on/roll-off programmes, with flexible enrolment options and multiple start points across the year.
- ensure local/regional NEET panels work with local transport planning authorities to innovate in addressing transport barriers to accessing EET opportunities.

Two illustrative examples of collaborative innovation between local government and FE include:

- LAs working with FE institutions to mirror the flexibility of Supported Internships programmes and enable colleges to draw down place funding to enable provision of more educational placements for young people with EHCPs and expand the offer to SEND CYPs without an EHCP
- collaboration to secure funding for preventative initiatives such as employment focused part time college placements for young people at high risk of NEET outcomes from local schools.

Overview

A lack of accessible pathways is key to becoming and remaining NEET for young people who are lower attaining at Key Stage 4, and/or who experience non-standard transitions because of negative educational experiences, crises or turbulent lives. Once outside of the system, young people struggle to find accessible pathways back in.

Prioritising changes which ensure flexibility and choice will help maximise opportunities for young people to sustain engagement or re-engage with education and training. Moving beyond the currently siloed approaches to support, with highly restrictive eligibility requirements, is essential to address the diversity of challenges and reduce NEET levels. This would stimulate the development of innovative solutions to enable accessible next steps for lower attainers and those experiencing non-standard transitions.

Research Findings

Participants in our study identified problems with accessibility to education and transition from school to vocational education and training as the third and fourth most significant systemic barriers to address to reduce NEET levels. Their views suggest that the raising of the participation age to 18, alongside a lack of availability and funding for Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications leaves young people who do not achieve benchmark qualification levels at Key Stage 4 feeling trapped and hopeless. The requirement for Post 16 English and Maths to access FE and apprenticeships was a widely discussed deterrent, pushing young people to disengage and functioning as an obstacle to re-engagement within education settings.

Overcoming barriers to post-16 transition for CYPs from diverse disadvantaged groups

In terms of accessibility, key issues cited were:

- a lack of transport and affordable transport.
- the availability of and distance to provision.
- a lack of clear pathways and restrictive options in transitioning from school to vocational education or training.
- failed referral and transition processes.

These barriers disproportionately impact young people at greatest risk of NEET outcomes³. Roundtable participants pinpointed specific barriers negatively impacting the progression of CYPs who are socio-economically deprived, care-experienced, neurodivergent, refugees and asylum seekers, home-schooled or have a SEND diagnosis and an EHCP and those with suspected SEND who have no diagnosis and/or EHCP.

Transport issues

Transport was a significant barrier in our study. It may be particularly emphasised in our findings due to the rurality of Southwest where our data was collected. Transport barriers take multiple forms in negatively impacting transitions for young people more vulnerable to NEET outcomes.

While their peers who attain higher grades at GCSE can generally continue to access a choice of courses at their local sixth form, lower attainers often have no accessible post-16 options there. They face long bus journeys to a limited range of options, compounding their disadvantage.

A lack of public or local authority transport infrastructure particularly compromises engagement, independence and economic activity for young people living in rural areas who are from socio-economically deprived backgrounds; whose families do not own a car; who have physical disabilities, learning disabilities or mental health conditions that make public transport access not possible; who have undiagnosed additional needs or lack an EHCP, meaning they can't access travel training.

Even where public transport is available, many young people who are NEET have not developed the skills or confidence to use it. Access to travel training is patchy, accessible only to those with EHCPs and unlikely to be offered at mainstream. While the participation age was raised to 18, entitlement to transport post-16 was not altered. This disproportionately impacts young people with SEND and those who are socio-economically deprived.

Professionals and young people who attended our roundtable events called for greater flexibility and innovation here. They called for "funding for NEET young people to access their own transport options, a bike, e-bike, scooter, motorbike, to pay for Certificate of Basic Training and driving licences" and for "schools, colleges and councils to work together to provide affordable transport."



“ Some teachers only know about traditional routes; you can't be what you can't see. Why isn't there the same support for vocational education as there is for Uni? ”

Young Person

³ An ongoing evaluation as part of a Shared Prosperity funded project with Somerset Council is focusing on NEETs in Year 13 with no progression pathway: they are largely young people who have undiagnosed SEND, CLA, who were excluded or stopped attending school, have not achieved the qualification levels to enable progression and/or who are from socio-economically deprived backgrounds

PRIORITY 2: Remove the barriers to effective post-16 transitions for CYPs most vulnerable to NEET outcomes

Restrictive eligibility criteria for benefits and support services preventing progression options for young people from disadvantaged groups.

e.g. Young people having their benefits cut if participating in paid apprenticeships.

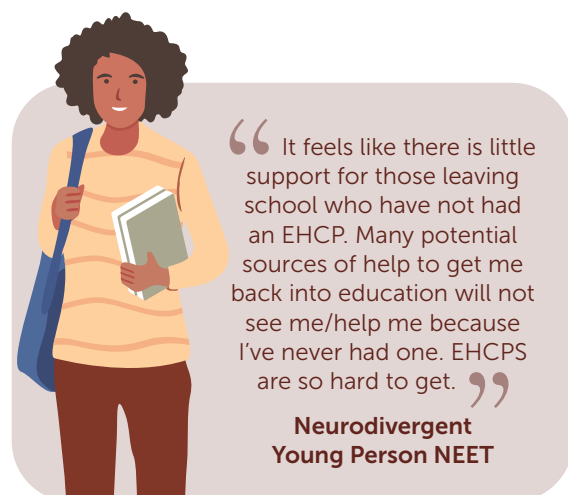
e.g. The requirement for an EHCP to access supported internships.

In the context of long waiting times for diagnosis of SEND and EHCP applications, tackling these barriers by widening access to supported internships would boost progression into employment opportunities.

Flexible use of the Growth and Skills Levy to cover apprenticeship and internship costs and recognising apprenticeships as full-time educational provision so that parents/carers of these young people can continue to access child benefits would support family welfare while promoting skills development.

e.g. Care-experienced young people in supported living losing access to housing benefit if working over a set number of hours.

For care-experienced young people, recognition that not all young people engaging in apprenticeships live in a family home, and ensuring that benefit entitlements to make this option viable is vital. In the context of the current housing crisis and unaffordable rent levels, reviewing and closing benefit loopholes that trap care-experienced young people and prevent them moving forwards is essential. We heard from Care Leavers having to choose between keeping their entitlement to housing benefit to be able to access the supported living accommodation they need on the one hand, and working full time on the other. Engaging with the lived experience and expertise of these groups and the services that support them to develop solutions to these restrictions is a priority for any meaningful government strategy to break down barriers to accessing opportunity.



The requirement for post-16 Maths and English to access FE and apprenticeships.

The flexibility to disapply or personalise literacy and numeracy support make supported internships an accessible progression option, but access to these is restricted to students with an EHCP. With long waiting times for a diagnosis and backlogs in applications for EHCPs, wider availability of this opportunity for young people without an EHCP could support progression for young people who would otherwise become NEET.

Post-16 English and maths requirements risk remaining a barrier to progression into FE and Vocational Education and Training for CYPs with and without an EHCP. DfE's recent changes to the 16 to 19 conditions of funding for English and maths risk further entrenching rather than addressing this barrier to access by reducing the time available for hours teaching the chosen course content which tends to be the key motivator of engagement.

Changes to national policy to mirror the flexibility of Supported Internships programme coupled with Local and Mayoral Authorities collaborating with FE settings to enable colleges to draw down place funding to provide educational placements for young people with EHCPs are two ways policy change could help tackle this barrier.

A lack of flexibility over entry points and requirements for FE.

Where transitions fail, or young people disengage, this often means a long wait to be able to enrol the next academic year. During this time, social isolation and mental health worsen and unhealthy patterns can take hold making re-engagement even more difficult. Changes to ensure young people who disengage can return easily to education or training without penalty or delay are essential.

Local, Combined and Mayoral authorities should collaborate with FE providers to ensure the availability of mid-year entry points, and roll-on-roll-off courses, to increase opportunities for re-engagement for young people who stop attending courses or experience crisis at transition points, with the result that they do not progress with their cohort. They should also innovate in securing funding for preventative initiatives such as employment focused part time college placements for young people at high risk of NEET outcomes from local schools. This could support young people with informed choices, providing a supported transition point to reduce the likelihood of disengagement.

PRIORITY 3:

**Recognise trusting relationships
as the mechanism of change to
achieve engagement in EET**



“ It needs a more holistic approach and trained staff to be in the role to ensure children are nurtured and build trust with professionals, learn emotional regulation and how to process thoughts and communicate. ”

NEET Professional

Recommendations for National Policymakers

Recognise trusting relationships as the mechanism of change to achieve engagement in EET by implementing the following recommendations:

- Rename the proposed 'Attendance Mentors' (Youth Guarantee) as 'Engagement Advocates' to signal a relational, supportive, longer-term ethos underpinning the role.
- Maximise the impact of investment in this work through recruitment and training that ensures it is carried out by staff with a clear understanding of the staff qualities and change mechanisms that lead to engagement.
- Expand the Youth Guarantee to fund access to 1:1 support for every NEET young person to continue until at least 3 months into a secured EET placement.
- Develop a shared system of relational support across the system (DfE, DHSC, DWP, DCMS, CJS) to drive consistent approaches
- Expand the focus on relationships (beyond romantic/sexual) and social and emotional skills in the KS3 and KS4 curriculum to address the relational barriers to EET.



“ Support through boxing has really helped me learn healthier ways to deal with things. Before I was getting kicked out of school. I don't want to sit and talk about my feelings but doing boxing helps me channel things. ”

**Young person,
Mentoring Organisation**

Recommendations for Local and Regional Policymakers

- Ensure that young people facing multiple disadvantage and those furthest from engagement have access to the necessary long-term, 1:1 support from a consistent practitioner to build trust, advocate for them and help them to navigate services.
- Promote restorative approaches and trauma-informed approaches to behaviour across settings and services.

Our study shows that feeling cared for and supported are essential to young people's engagement in education and training (Brown et al 2022b). Interactions and relationships at school shape young people's sense of who they are and what their futures might hold. Prioritising pastoral support and relational approaches across the education system is key to preventing disengagement and NEET outcomes.

Overview

Drives to raise attendance and academic attainment levels have alienated many young people and families, leading them to feel that schools and authorities neither care about nor understand them. Increases in persistent absence, exclusion, emotionally based school avoidance and Elective Home Education are being fuelled by a school system which feels unsupportive and hopeless for a significant number of young people, driving increases in NEET levels. A lack of professionals to build these crucial relationships with CYPs who are neither earning or learning further entrenches this sense of alienation and feeling forgotten.

Incentivising and equipping educators to prioritise relational approaches should focus on ensuring that schools and colleges have the time and staff needed for pastoral work; recognising and rewarding relational approaches in school and sharing good practice. System-wide training for staff who support disengaged and disadvantaged CYPs will help ensure that they benefit from a consistent, relational approach at whatever point in their journey they are.

Currently, relationships education is narrowly focused upon romantic/sexual relationships while social interactions and building and navigating friendships and collegial relationships are important conduits for inclusion in EET settings. Expanding statutory relationships education to support a wider range of relationships and ensuring it is delivered by qualified professional with a subject specialism, could support this aim.

For young people who have disengaged or experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), sustained access to a consistent professional for 1:1 support (mentors, key workers, PAs, job coaches or advocates) is essential to ensure that they have the time needed to build the necessary trusting relationship.

Research Findings

The Risks to NEET

The role of social relationships featured very strongly in students' own accounts of the reasons behind their disengagement and what worked in supporting them to re-engage (Brown 2022a). Describing why the 1:1 support from an adult had made an impact for them, young people highlighted the connection, or rapport they felt and the dependability and flexibility of the practitioner:

"Even when I was hard to get hold of, she didn't give up on me."

"She proper gets me."

"When I'm having a bad day they make time for a chat."

CYPs see social relationship and institutional factors as the most significant to NEET prevention. They highlight bullying, negative relationships with school staff and lack of support for their relationships and connections with peers as key factors in their disengagement. Not feeling cared about, experiencing school as a highly pressurised place where staff care more about their exam results than about them were often cited. Professionals describe similar issues but attribute these to structural factors. They see a policy-driven emphasis on measuring outcomes and funding cuts as negatively impacting on the time and resources available to adequately engage with and support CYPs.

Effective Support Strategies

Our study highlighted the qualities of professionals identified as making a difference in sustaining and supporting engagement. Of the 316 support strategies identified in our study, the one highlighted as being most significant refers to the qualities of the practitioner themselves.

Qualities include:

going the extra mile; flexibility; good communication between educator and YP; keeping promises; personal experience of YP's culture; personal experience of YP's particular challenge; reliability; knowing pupils well; intuition and responsiveness; apologising when wrong; being organised.

This echoes findings from other studies (IPPR 2025). Staff undertaking re-engagement and support work across the system need clarity and guidance on the qualities supporting effective engagement in preventing and tackling NEET outcomes.

A Theory of Change: How 1:1 support leads to re-engagement

We found five mechanisms that were common across a wide range of successful interventions for diverse groups of young people (Brown et al 2022b). Our Pathway to Change highlights these change mechanisms. It underlines the pivotal role of relational and identity building processes in supporting disengaged young people towards onward progression pathways.

Supporting young people's wellbeing and welfare and ensuring they feel cared for and supported are foundational for (re)engagement in EET. Developing a trusting relationship with a practitioner leads the young person to feel supported, building self-esteem and confidence. As self-esteem and confidence grow, work to build CYP's sense of autonomy allows them to feel hope, build aspiration and to engage with work and life goals.

The Youth Guarantee signals recognition of the vital role of personalised 1:1 support in promising 'attendance mentoring' for 10,000 'persistently absent young people'. But an emphasis on raising 'attendance' and 'attainment' is too narrow and risks missing the focus on relationship and connection which are critical to increasing levels of **engagement**.

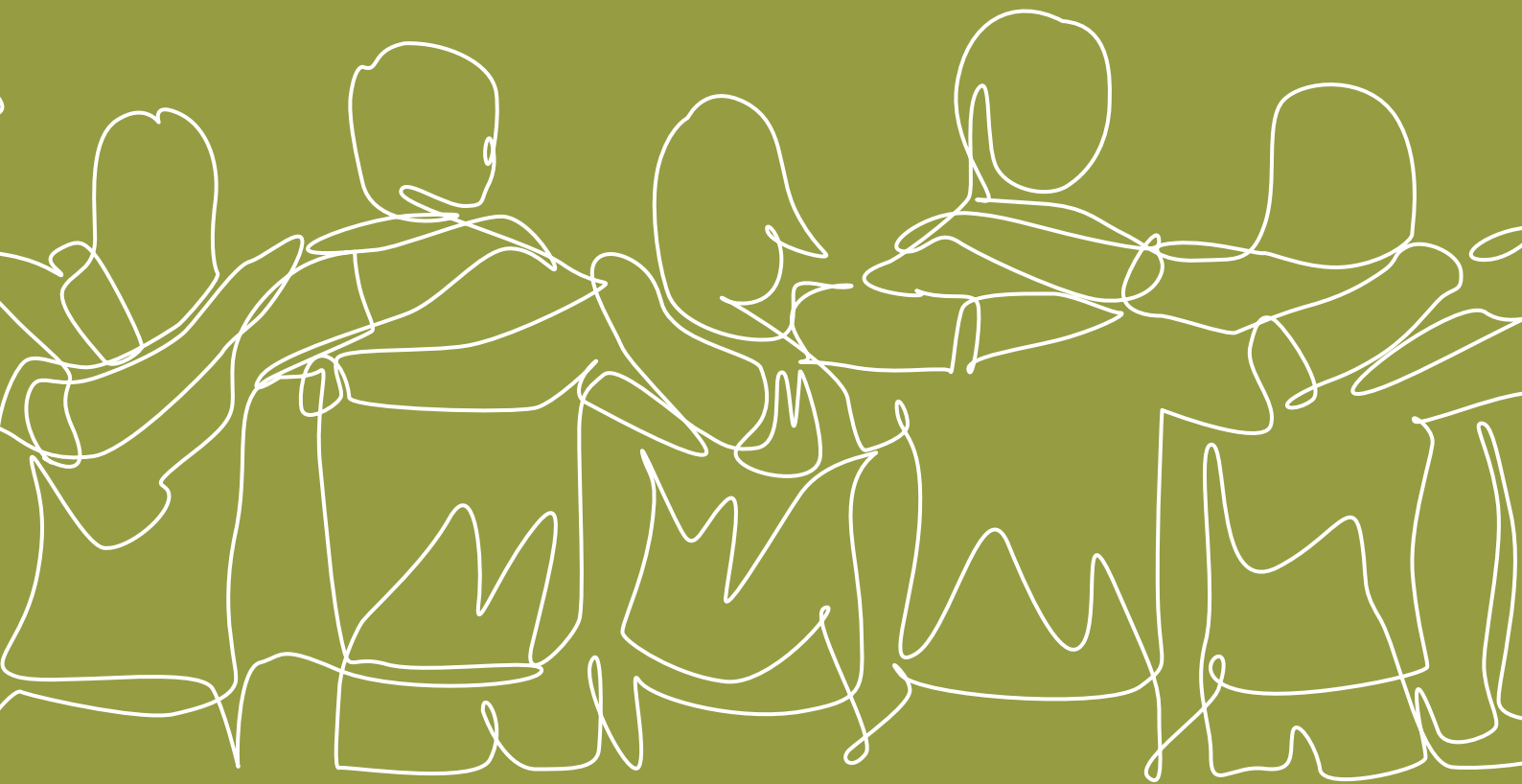
Language such as 'persistently absent young people' risks entrenching deficit views of young people's early school leaving. Renaming these practitioners 'Engagement Advocates' would better signal and foster the collaborative, broader, relational focus which is essential to achieving change. Rather than a short-term, limited focus on getting young people back into school, the role should involve consideration of the best next steps, suitable settings for them to engage with and how this could link to a pathway for onward progression for each individual. A job title that clarifies a broader notion of **engagement advocacy** would helpfully reframe these efforts by shifting the focus onto working alongside the young person towards longer term outcomes, beyond school attendance. This would generate a focus that is applicable to all NEET reduction work, including beyond school, supporting systemic coherence.



“ Punishments need to be productive and rehabilitative ”
NEET Young person

PRIORITY 4:

**Focus on CYP's sense of belonging
as a pathway to meaningful
engagement in EET**



“ One of the biggest responsibilities that we have as educators is to create environments where children have a sense of belonging, where their identity and how they wish to be seen is encouraged and supported. ”

Senior Leader, Multi Academy Trust

Recommendations for National Policymakers

Focus on CYP's sense of belonging as a pathway to meaningful engagement in EET by implementing the following recommendations:

- Include a definition of 'belonging' on the Ofsted inspection framework
- Allocate funding to develop school evaluation systems that routinely measure and monitor young people's views and sense of belonging.
- Drive a more inclusive school system that pays attention to young people's voices as a statutory measure of 'belonging' on the Ofsted inspection framework.
- Use the Curriculum Review to ensure that CYP's get the life and employability skills that they are calling for to prepare them for successful futures
- Introduce a statutory requirement for a minimum training provision requirement on PSHE within QTS to boost the quality and consistency of PSHE training

Recommendations for Local and Regional Policymakers

- Develop a local Belonging charter to drive inclusive, young person-centred approaches across educational settings and champion good practice.
- Enable schools to promote children's belonging through signposting evidence informed whole school approaches such as [Connected Belonging](#) (Brown et al 2024; 2025); the [London VRU's Inclusion Charter](#) and [Strategic Guides for Education Leaders](#)
- Challenge schools to review school uniform policies with a student voice panel. Consider whether a school uniform is the best way to foster inclusion and belonging in school.
- Promote PSHE education as an important area of Professional Development

Overview

As schools are the central conduit for establishing CYP's participation within wider society, inclusion and participation here is critical. While 'inclusion' focuses on what schools do, 'belonging' focuses on young people's feelings and experiences. Our research highlights that for young people 'feeling supported' is what matters in tackling NEET, not support being available. Systematic and ongoing attention to young people's perceptions and feelings is therefore key.

While 'inclusion' is widely interpreted as relating to the provision of adjustments for specific cohorts (e.g. SEND), 'belonging' encourages a focus on all students. Our research highlights the importance of a holistic, intersectional view of risk that acknowledges the complex interplay of multiple risk factors across different domains of young people's lives. A focus on belonging supports a broader, inclusive school culture and promotes the wellbeing, participation and inclusion of all students.



“ So many schools are too focused on grades and producing kids to a certain standard... they need to focus on the actual children NOT their actions. Ask them why they don't want to go to lesson, ask them why they're acting out, ask why they're vaping in the toilets or skipping lessons. The chances are it's stress. Either at home or from school. These kids NEED support. If you start there, everything else will be better, grades, attendance, their future and they will leave with a positive experience. ”

Previously electively home-schooled Young Person

PRIORITY 4: Focus on CYP's sense of belonging as a pathway to meaningful engagement in EET



“Discrimination is very prevalent in schools and colleges”
Young person

With a third of young people who are NEET reporting mental health challenges (Kings Trust 2021), supporting student wellbeing is an essential part of a coherent strategy to tackle NEET. Increases in persistent absence, exclusion, emotionally based school avoidance and Elective Home Education are fuelled by a school system which feels unsupportive and hopeless for a significant number of young people. Our research suggests that a lack of time, funding and resources leads to negative schooling experiences for young people NEET/at risk of NEET. Feeling that schools care more about their results than about them and that schools are not for people like them were commonly reported. Directing schools to focus on all students' sense of belonging would help balance the current focus on high performance with parallel focus on wellbeing and equity; identified as a vital 'trio' in evaluating secondary education in recent PISA findings (OECD 2025).

Research Findings

Our NEET study highlights that making sure young people feel cared for and supported is key to engagement and preventing NEET outcomes (Brown et al 2022b). This highlights the need for the adoption of more subjective measures to support efforts to tackle disengagement and NEET.

Young people highlight institutional factors and social relationship factors as most significant to their disengagement (Brown et al 2022a). Pressure around academic performance, behaviour management approaches, large class sizes and inflexibility or rigidity of the school environment were key issues. Rather than a school uniform creating a sense of belonging to the school, and masking socio-economic challenges, young people pointed to uniform as a barrier to belonging. CYPs told us that discomfort in formal items such as blazers and ties, sensory challenges and fears over the cost and damaging or losing of expensive items meant that uniform was a source of anxiety and stress. It fuelled negative interactions with staff who were perceived to choose to spend time policing clothing rather than connecting with them.

While friendships are a key motivator to come to school (Brown et al 2015), particularly for CYPs facing barriers to engagement, peer related challenges around bullying, navigating friendships, feeling different, judged and singled out and peer pressure were areas where they feel that they receive little support. These challenges damage CYPs sense of feeling like they belong, are valued and supported, and echo other recent findings about the significance of 'students' daily experiences in classrooms' (OECD 2025).

The inclusion of access to Mental Health support in schools in the Youth Guarantee is a welcomed acknowledgement of this priority area. However, [our research](#) identifies schools to be a source of wellbeing challenges, as well as being a site for intervention. Students reported that school support for wellbeing tended to promote a narrow definition of 'resilience' that was framed as a 'mindset' and the product of individual effort, often linked to how well children respond to academic-related failure, and their ability to push on through (Brown and Dixon 2020). Students found this approach unhelpful, with it adding to their anxiety and preventing them from reaching out to others for support.

Effective Support Strategies

Our wellbeing research (Brown et al 2025) highlights that young people want schools to offer a more collaborative approach to wellbeing support that recognises the importance of their relationships and connections to others. It highlights the need for a holistic understanding of wellbeing that recognises the impact of students' sense of connection and belonging across different areas of their lives: schools, family, peer group, local community and wider society. Nurturing CYP's belonging, both within school and beyond, helps them better connect their educational experiences to their wider lives and futures.



“Get rid of uniforms, they're too expensive, uncomfortable and students don't feel like themselves. Constant battles over uniforms really damage relationships.”
Young person

PRIORITY 4: Focus on CYP's sense of belonging as a pathway to meaningful engagement in EET



“ I left school not knowing anything about how to do a tax return, or what tax was. School should prepare us much better for life. ”

Care experienced young person



“ Delivery of an inclusive curriculum from at least KS3 that's based on stage not age and firmly embeds life and employability skills. ”

Professional

We used our research findings to develop 'Connected Belonging', a relational approach and toolkit for school wellbeing promotion. Our toolkit (www.connectedbelonging.co.uk) includes an audit and planning tool for school wellbeing and belonging intervention. The associated student survey measures students' sense of belonging across eight key domains and enables insights into the responses of different target groups of young people.

Our study of the factors impacting students' feelings of belonging at schools across London (Brown et al 2024) highlighted how central a sense of belonging is in leading to young people's inclusion. While for some students, feeling able to be themselves was key, for others fitting in was the most pressing issue. This highlights two key aspects of belonging that take on different levels of significance for different groups, but which are universally important to all students.

Four key strategies for a focus on belonging leading to meaningful inclusion and participation are:

- Students as active citizens: actions engaging young people in contributing to and shaping the school and broader community; relational approaches to conflict resolution and experiencing belonging through participation.
- Being adaptable and reflective: organisational and classroom approaches that promote professional curiosity and flexibility in understanding and supporting students' diverse needs.
- Beyond academic achievement: actions which look beyond formal learning to young people's broader development, including trips, experiences, social, emotional and relationship skills and young people's connections to the wider world.
- Embedding equity and diversity: initiatives celebrating uniqueness and diversity or challenging discrimination and prejudice whether through displays, curriculum design or policies and practices. (see [London's Inclusion Charter](#)).

Attempts to close the gap of opportunity by narrowing the focus to driving up academic attainment has harmed a sense of belonging for diverse CYPs.

A broader, more relevant curriculum with life, employability and relationship skills well embedded is key to supporting a sense of belonging for more young people. A focus on enrichment and opportunity and going beyond academic achievement to support identity and skill development for all young people will help young people sustain interest by making school a more relevant and enriching experience for all.



“ Schools have such narrow definitions of success. It shouldn't depend on grades, instead it should depend on dedication, interest, career options, attitude. ”

Young person

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Resources

- [Tackling NEET Toolkit](#)
- [Connected Belonging School Wellbeing Toolkit](#)
- [London's Inclusion Charter Strategic Guides for Education Leaders](#)



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