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NEET prevention: effective careers education and guidance in England's schools



Rachael Fitzpatrick and Grace Cox, Education Development Trust (EDT)

Hannah Olle, independent researcher

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Executive summary

This report brings together qualitative evidence from practitioners delivering school-based careers education, information, advice, and guidance across England, alongside learning from EDT's wider portfolio of programmes concerned with preventing and reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). It examines how careers guidance works in practice, particularly for young people at risk of poor post-16 outcomes, and considers the relational, programme-level, and system conditions needed for effective delivery.

The findings position careers guidance as more than a mechanism for choosing courses or occupations. For young people experiencing anxiety, persistent absence, low confidence, disrupted education, or other overlapping barriers, it can help rebuild engagement, strengthen their sense of direction, and reconnect present learning with future possibilities. Its preventative value is greatest when support begins early, is integrated into a wider careers journey, and continues through key transitions, rather than being concentrated in a single appointment near the end of compulsory education.

What enables effective delivery?

The evidence identifies several mutually reinforcing features of effective careers guidance:

- **Trusted, person-centred relationships**

Effective guidance starts with genuine listening and a focus on the young person's interests, circumstances, and readiness to engage. Advisers need the interpersonal skill, professional curiosity, and flexibility to adapt the pace, format, and content of support, particularly for young people who are anxious, disengaged, or wary of formal services. EDT programmes such as Dorset Marvels demonstrate the value of repeated, flexible contact and trauma-informed practice for young people experiencing emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) or elective home education (EHE).

- **Impartial, informed guidance that broadens horizons**

Advisers play an important role in addressing gaps and misconceptions about technical, vocational, and academic routes. Their independence enables them to explore a breadth of pathways with young people and develop realistic, personalised action plans. EDT's Inspiring Careers Programme combines qualified advisers, individual guidance, and systematic quality assurance, while West London Careers Hub (delivered by EDT) supports schools to embed careers education across improvement planning and strengthen parity between academic and technical routes.

- **Accessible and flexible provision**

A standardised delivery model is unlikely to meet the needs of all learners. Effective approaches include: adapting language, pace, and resources; using visual and practical activities; offering telephone, online, community-based, or off-site support; and maintaining contact when a young person does not initially engage. Flexibility is especially important for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), English as an additional language, low attendance, or anxiety associated with school environments.

- **Inclusive work experience and employer encounters**

EDT's programme evidence indicates that meaningful work-related learning can build confidence, motivation, workplace understanding, and future orientation. Equalex and Get Ahead Work Experience (programme now ended) used a scaffolded journey that includes preparation, individually matched opportunities, and structured reflection. Inclusive delivery depends on addressing practical barriers, making appropriate adjustments, and supporting employers to work successfully with young people who have additional needs.

- **Strong partnerships around the young person**

Careers guidance is most effective when advisers work closely with careers leaders, teachers, pastoral teams, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), families, employers, and external services. EDT programmes demonstrate varied approaches to parental engagement, including evening and online sessions, accessible careers information, informal family activities, and direct contact. Wider multi-agency relationships enable more joined-up support and smoother transitions between education, training, employment, and specialist services.

Emerging pressures and unmet needs

The report identifies a changing and increasingly complex set of needs within schools. These include persistent absence and disengagement from mainstream education, post-COVID-19 pandemic anxiety, transport barriers, young carers, children in need, middle-attaining students whose needs can be overlooked, and refugees and newly arrived migrant students navigating unfamiliar education and employment systems. Practitioners rarely encounter these barriers in isolation. Mental health, SEND, family circumstances, poverty, caring responsibilities, language, geography, and disrupted educational experiences frequently overlap.

This complexity has three important implications:

- Risk should not be understood solely through fixed categories. Early identification needs to combine data with professional judgement and avoid deficit-based labelling.
- Careers guidance needs to connect more closely with attendance, pastoral, SEND, mental health, and social care support.

- Students whose circumstances prevent them from accessing conventional school-based provision require proactive outreach and alternative routes into guidance.

EDT programme evidence shows how these principles can be translated into practice. Dorset Marvels (delivered as part of the Inspiring Careers programme) provides flexible, relationship-based support to young people experiencing disrupted participation. Future Forward (April 2024 to March 2025) combined personalised guidance with support addressing transport, housing, confidence, and basic skills. Meanwhile, Solent Get on Track (2021) demonstrated the value of sustained, community-based support during difficult post-16 transitions.

Structural constraints

The quality and intensity of provision remain strongly shaped by commissioning and resourcing. Schools purchase differing amounts of adviser time, creating variation in access, continuity, and follow-up. Short appointments and one-off interventions may meet minimum requirements but are poorly suited to young people with complex or overlapping needs. Advisers also have limited visibility of longer-term destinations, restricting their ability to understand impact and improve provision.

Employer relationships face similar constraints. Developing suitable placements, preparing employers and young people, arranging adjustments, and sustaining referral routes require time. Evidence from Get Ahead indicates that short contracts can limit the development of employer partnerships, particularly with smaller employers that may need additional support or financial assistance to host placements.

Implications for policy and practice

The combined evidence points to the need to move from a minimum entitlement model towards an integrated and preventative approach. This means:

- commissioning for continuity, repeated contact, and flexible delivery
- beginning careers learning early and sustaining it through key transitions
- embedding careers guidance as a whole-school responsibility
- linking guidance more closely with attendance, SEND, pastoral, and wellbeing support
- investing in advisers' relational, inclusive, and trauma-informed capabilities
- treating inclusive work experience as part of a scaffolded careers journey
- supporting employers to provide accessible, meaningful opportunities
- strengthening parental, multi-agency, and community partnerships
- improving information-sharing and longer-term destination tracking

- recognising incremental progress in confidence, engagement, and readiness alongside destination outcomes.

Overall, the report finds that effective careers guidance depends less on isolated interventions than on creating the relational, organisational, and systemic conditions through which young people can engage, understand their options, and act on them. EDT's programme evidence demonstrates particular strengths in person-centred guidance, flexible outreach, inclusive parental engagement, supported work experience, and sustained assistance for young people facing complex barriers. These capabilities provide a strong foundation for strengthening preventative approaches to NEET risk across schools and local systems.

Introduction

High-quality, school-based careers education, information, advice, and guidance is a core component of an effective education system. It supports young people to understand the opportunities available to them, make informed choices, and progress successfully into further education, training, or employment. In England, careers guidance is positioned as both an educational and social policy tool, contributing to engagement, progression, and social mobility. In England, maintained schools and academies have a statutory duty to secure independent careers guidance for pupils from Year 7 onwards, while the Gatsby Benchmarks provide the nationally recognised framework for developing coherent, high-quality careers provision (Ofsted, 2023; Department for Education, 2025a; Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2024).

Effective careers guidance is more than a one-off exchange of information. The evidence points to relational, person-centred, and responsive practice, in which guidance is tailored to young people's individual needs and circumstances. One-to-one guidance delivered by qualified careers advisers is associated with improvements in self-awareness, self-esteem, career planning and decision-making. Its effectiveness is strengthened by the development of a positive working relationship between adviser and young person, and by integration within a wider programme of careers support (Everitt et al., 2018). Trust-based relationships, professional expertise, impartiality, and sufficient time to understand the individual are therefore central to effective delivery.

Careers guidance is also increasingly understood as part of a broader preventative response to the risk of young people becoming NEET. Early recognition of emerging risk, personalised and sustained support, trusted relationships, high-quality guidance, and holistic multi-agency working as core components of effective NEET prevention are all key components of effective practice. Risk of disengagement should not be understood as a fixed characteristic of an

individual young person. Factors such as low attainment, negative school experiences, SEND, socioeconomic disadvantage and poor mental health can overlap and interact with wider conditions in education, training and local labour markets, shaping young people's opportunities and transitions (Hunt et al., 2021; Russell and Thompson, 2022).

This evidence strengthens the case for approaches that combine universal careers provision with additional, targeted support for young people facing barriers to progression. Early identification should draw on a broad range of indicators and the professional judgement of staff who know the young person, while avoiding labels that lower expectations or reinforce deficit-based assumptions. Careers guidance can contribute to preventing disengagement when it is integrated with wider attendance, pastoral, SEND and wellbeing support, and when emerging risks are identified and addressed before disengagement becomes entrenched (Hunt et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2026).

This emphasis on early identification has been reinforced by Alan Milburn's Young People and Work Review, which recommends a stronger preventative role for schools, including mandatory use of Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI) tools in primary and secondary schools, and transition and participation plans for pupils at risk through persistent absence or exclusion (Milburn, 2026). The Review argues that intervention should begin before a young person becomes NEET, strengthening the case for careers guidance to form part of a wider early identification and support system, rather than being concentrated at the point of post-16 transition.

Longitudinal evidence indicates that young people's career-related thinking during secondary education, including career certainty, ambition, alignment between educational plans and occupational aspirations, and instrumental motivation towards school, is associated with more positive employment outcomes in adulthood, although relationships vary across indicators and groups. These findings reinforce the importance of helping young people develop informed and realistic career thinking and engage in career exploration as part of their preparation for transitions from education to employment (Covacevich et al., 2021). Meaningful encounters with employers and workplaces can broaden awareness of occupations, help young people connect education with future opportunities, and compensate, in part, for unequal access to information and professional networks. The wider evidence therefore supports beginning careers learning early and providing repeated opportunities for guidance and work-related learning, rather than relying on isolated interventions near the point of transition (Hunt et al., 2021; Holt-White, Montecute and Tibbs, 2022).

Evidence from EDT's programmes illustrates how these principles can be translated into practice. Programmes combine qualified and impartial guidance with trusted relationships, personalised action planning, parental engagement, employer encounters, and practical support during transitions. Some provide repeated and flexible contact for young people

experiencing low attendance, EBSA, or disrupted education. Others use a scaffolded work experience journey, including preparation, individually matched workplace opportunities, and structured reflection. Across EDT's youth careers programmes, progress is often understood as non-linear and measured through changes in confidence, engagement, readiness, and clarity as well as eventual education, employment, or training destinations.

However, the literature and programme evidence also identifies persistent structural constraints. Careers provision is shaped by school budgets, the amount of adviser time commissioned, staff capacity, and the availability of suitable local education, training, and employment opportunities. Short appointments and one-off interventions limit continuity and follow-up, particularly for young people with complex or overlapping needs. Fragmented services, inconsistent information-sharing, inadequate transport, short-term programme funding, and limited post-16 tracking can further undermine otherwise effective support (Ofsted, 2023; Department for Education, 2025b).

These constraints are especially significant in the context of rising youth NEET rates and changing patterns of need. In the final quarter of 2025, approximately one in seven young men (14.0%) and one in eight young women (12.7%) aged 16 to 24 in England were not in education, employment or training (NEET). Rates varied considerably by age, from 4.0% among 16–17-year-olds to 16.0% among 18–24-year-olds (Department for Education, 2026a). Mental health difficulties and economic inactivity have also become increasingly prominent within the NEET population. These patterns reinforce the need for differentiated responses that recognise both individual circumstances and the systems and local conditions shaping young people's opportunities.

Against this background, this study examines how school-based careers guidance is designed and delivered in real-world settings, particularly for young people at risk of poor post-16 outcomes. It explores the relational and professional practices that enable engagement, the adaptations used to support diverse needs, the role of schools, families, employers, and wider services, and the structural conditions that affect continuity and reach. By combining practitioner perspectives with learning from EDT's wider work supporting NEET young people, the report considers how school-based careers guidance can contribute not only to informed decision-making at transition points, but also to earlier engagement, prevention, and more equitable pathways into education, training, and employment.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative synthesis design, bringing together three complementary evidence sources: practitioner interviews, a rapid review of recent literature on youth NEET

prevention and reduction, and a structured review of EDT programme evidence. Combining these sources enabled the study to examine careers guidance from three perspectives:

1. how practitioners experience delivery in schools
2. what the wider evidence identifies as effective practice
3. how these principles are applied across EDT's careers and youth NEET programmes.

Practitioner interviews

The primary research comprised interviews with ten individuals working across school-based careers programmes in England. Participants represented a range of roles, programme types, and delivery contexts, and were selected to provide variation in professional responsibilities, organisational settings, and the groups of young people supported. All interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format. Topic guides were adapted slightly to reflect participants' roles and responsibilities, while retaining a common focus on:

- practitioners' professional backgrounds and approaches
- the skills and practices enabling effective guidance
- adaptations made for different learners
- engagement with schools, families, employers, and other services
- emerging groups requiring additional support
- commissioning, capacity, and other structural constraints
- opportunities to strengthen programme design and delivery.

The semi-structured approach allowed participants to describe delivery models and experiences in detail, while enabling common themes to be examined across interviews. The interviews provided contextual insight into how careers guidance is designed and delivered for young people at risk of poor post-16 outcomes, including those at risk of becoming NEET, students with SEND or English as an additional language, and learners experiencing poor attendance, anxiety, or disengagement. They also highlighted how delivery is shaped by young people's circumstances, communication needs, and readiness to engage.

Rapid review of the literature

The interview findings were considered alongside EDT's rapid review of evidence on effective youth NEET prevention and reduction. The review examined the core components of systems and programmes that support young people towards positive education, employment, or training outcomes. Searches were undertaken using Scopus, Web of Science, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Google Scholar, supplemented by internet and

citation searches for relevant grey literature. The main search combined terms relating to NEET status with 'programme', 'intervention', 'prevention', 're-engagement' and 'reduction', and was subsequently expanded to include post-16 transition and education, employment, or training outcomes.

The review applied inclusion criteria covering English language empirical literature published between 2021 and 2026 and focused on young people aged 16 to 24. Following deduplication and assessment of abstracts for relevance, 30 papers were included and organised thematically around NEET prevention, NEET reduction, and the contextual factors shaping delivery. The evidence base was more extensive for NEET reduction than for prevention, and this difference was considered when interpreting the findings.

The review identified recurring elements associated with effective prevention, including early identification, multicomponent personalised support, trusted professional relationships, holistic multi-agency working, inclusive parental engagement, and high-quality impartial careers guidance. It also highlighted the value of early and repeated careers learning, employer encounters, and work-related experiences. For young people already NEET, the evidence placed additional emphasis on sustained personalised support, community-based outreach, practical assistance, employer partnerships, and continued support after entry into education, training or employment.

Review of EDT programme evidence

The study also drew on a structured review and codification of evidence from 11 EDT youth NEET programmes. Programme data were drawn from EDT's internal programme evidence and six consultancy interviews with programme leads. The programmes were analysed through framework analysis and mapped against the core components identified in the rapid review. This enabled the study to examine where EDT's delivery experience supported the wider evidence base, identify distinctive programme capabilities, and highlight areas for further development.

The portfolio included programmes focused on both NEET prevention and reduction, encompassing:

- school-based personal guidance and Careers Hub activity;
- targeted support for young people at risk of becoming NEET;
- provision for young people experiencing EBSA, EHE, or disrupted participation;
- inclusive work experience and employer encounters;
- post-16 transition support;
- community-based guidance for young people already NEET; and

- programmes addressing practical barriers such as transport, housing, confidence, and basic skills.

Evidence was reviewed on programme aims, target groups, delivery mechanisms, referral routes, underpinning principles, reported outcomes, systemic constraints, and promising practice. Particular attention was given to how programmes operationalised person-centred guidance, relational practice, sustained support, parental engagement, employer partnerships, inclusive work experience, and multi-agency collaboration.

Analysis and synthesis

Findings from the three evidence strands were analysed thematically and brought together iteratively. The interview evidence provided insight into practitioners' experiences of delivery; the literature review supplied the wider evidence and policy framing; and the programme review illustrated how relevant principles had been implemented across EDT programmes. Areas of convergence were used to identify recurring features of effective practice, while differences and gaps informed the discussion of emerging needs, structural constraints, and priorities for future research and programme development.

The synthesis focused on three overarching questions:

1. What relational and professional practices enable young people to engage meaningfully with careers guidance?
2. How can delivery be adapted for young people facing additional or overlapping barriers to progression?
3. What organisational and systemic conditions enable or constrain sustained, equitable careers support?

The analysis treated NEET risk as arising from an interaction between individual circumstances and wider structural conditions, rather than as a fixed characteristic of particular young people. It therefore considered not only learners' circumstances but also school systems, commissioning arrangements, local education and labour-market opportunities, transport, service coordination, and programme resourcing.

Scope and limitation

The interview sample was purposive and relatively small, and the findings should therefore be understood as a detailed exploration of practitioner and programme experience rather than as representative of all careers provision across England. The interviews were also concentrated on practitioners and programme delivery; they did not directly collect the perspectives of students, families, employers, or school leaders.

The programme evidence varied in scope, design, and the outcomes available, limiting direct comparison between programmes. The analysis therefore focused primarily on delivery mechanisms, capabilities, and transferable learning rather than ranking individual programmes or attributing outcomes to particular activities. The literature review was rapid rather than systematic and identified a larger body of evidence on reducing established NEET status than on preventing it. Findings about prevention should consequently be interpreted as an emerging evidence base alongside EDT's programme learning.

Key findings

Enablers of successful delivery

This section outlines the key findings from interviews on the factors that enable successful delivery of careers education and guidance in schools.

Background and experience of practitioners

Advisers consistently described how their prior professional experience shaped both their confidence and their approach to careers guidance. Many interviewees had previously worked in roles such as youth work, NEET prevention, teaching, or as careers leads, and emphasised that these backgrounds were central to how they engaged young people in guidance conversations. One adviser explained how combining careers guidance with youth work experience allowed them to balance structure with informality: "[My approach] uses the structured careers guidance structure for interviewing, but at the same time, because I also work as a youth worker, I tend to use that form of conversation with the young person as well."

Practitioners viewed this mix of experience as particularly important when working with students who were disengaged, anxious, or uncertain. Advisers felt that their wider professional backgrounds helped them read emotional cues, adjust their communication style, and respond flexibly to individual needs while still maintaining a clear focus on guidance outcomes. This was seen as enhancing advisers' credibility with students and enabling more meaningful conversations, especially with those who might struggle to engage with more formal or transactional approaches.

While interviewees recognised the importance of formal qualifications, they emphasised that effective delivery depended on more than accreditation alone. What mattered in practice was the combination of training with experience of working directly with young people in complex school contexts. This perspective aligns with national expectations that careers guidance should be delivered by appropriately trained professionals, who may be employed within the school or commissioned externally (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014; Department for Education, 2023).

Practitioner skills and practice

Beyond background and experience, interviewees consistently emphasised the importance of how advisers work with students in practice. Effective careers guidance was described as hinging on person-centred, empathetic approaches, underpinned by strong interpersonal skills. Practitioners highlighted listening, empathy, adaptability, and trust-building as essential to helping young people feel comfortable and taken seriously, particularly those with complex

needs. As one practitioner noted, the role requires “a well-rounded set of skills about understanding, firstly, how to work with young people; secondly, how to work with the school; and thirdly, having access to reputable resources [...] appropriate to the specific young person’s needs.”

Engagement emerged as a central feature of good practice, rather than a separate activity. Practitioners described working hard to “meet students where they are”, using informal ice-breakers, humour, and patient questioning to draw out quieter or hesitant young people. In some cases, particularly where young people were persistently absent from school or found school environments highly intimidating, support was delivered flexibly to enable engagement, with delivery arrangements determined in accordance with programme safeguarding procedures. One adviser described how a very shy student was eventually “laughing and joking with the careers adviser” after a long, rapport-building conversation in a more relaxed environment. Interviewees agreed that once trust was established, students became more active participants: asking questions, articulating aspirations, and being more receptive to advice.

Practitioners also emphasised the importance of professional curiosity – knowing when to probe, when to challenge gently, and when to slow conversations down. This responsiveness was seen as particularly important for students experiencing anxiety or disengagement, where readiness to talk about future plans could not be assumed. Without engagement, advisers felt that even well-planned programmes had limited effect; with it, guidance conversations could move beyond surface-level information towards more realistic and meaningful decision-making. EDT's experience on Dorset Marvels demonstrates how relational approaches can support young people with EBSA and EHE. Advisers provide repeated, flexible contact and community-based support, recognising that trusted relationships are often a prerequisite for discussing future pathways and post-16 destinations.

These accounts are consistent with wider evidence that highlights the importance of trust, agency, and personalised interaction in careers guidance. Ofsted’s review of specialist settings found that close, trusting relationships helped young people with additional needs engage in meaningful careers guidance (Ofsted, 2024), while research on personal guidance emphasises the value of a strong “working alliance” between adviser and student (Everitt et al., 2018). However, the interviews make clear that engagement is not an optional enhancement but a precondition for impact, achieved through skilled, adaptive practice rather than standardised delivery.

Enabling informed, realistic choices

Interviewees consistently highlighted their role in helping students make well-informed and realistic decisions about post-16 pathways. Advisers described how easily assumptions can

arise about what young people know, particularly around technical and vocational options. As one adviser reflected: "It's so easy in our job [...] to think, 'well, everybody knows what I know.' Of course, you know what a T-level is and a BTEC is. And then when you're sitting with somebody who literally has no clue that that kind of thing exists, all they can think is, 'well, I have to go to sixth form and do A levels.'"

Practitioners saw it as essential to broaden horizons beyond default or 'obvious' routes, while gently challenging misconceptions or unrealistic expectations. Advisers gave examples of students aiming for highly competitive courses without contingency plans, or dismissing vocational pathways due to stigma or misinformation. In response, advisers described probing students' reasoning, sharing up-to-date labour market information, clarifying entry requirements, and introducing alternative routes that better aligned with individuals' interests, attainment, and circumstances. One practitioner emphasised the importance of "questioning unrealistic expectations and giving the participant options", enabling students to move forward with choices grounded in accurate understanding rather than assumption.

This work was not framed simply as information-giving. Advisers also spoke about reinforcing students' sense of self-belief and motivation, particularly for those who were disengaged or lacked confidence. As one adviser put it, part of the role was communicating to students that "you're worth going to your lessons, you're worth getting your grades". In this way, enabling informed choice was closely tied to sustaining engagement and helping students see education as meaningful in relation to their future goals. Through West London Careers Hub, EDT has supported schools to strengthen awareness of technical and vocational pathways and improve performance against the Gatsby Benchmarks. Similarly, EDT's Inspiring Careers Programme provides impartial one-to-one guidance that helps young people explore a broad range of options rather than defaulting to familiar academic routes.

Policy and inspection evidence supports the importance of this advisory role. A 2023 Ofsted review found that most schools promoted both academic and technical pathways, but where guidance was biased towards academic routes this was commonly linked to weaknesses in strategic planning. Inspectors also reported that some teachers had limited knowledge of technical pathways, particularly T levels (Ofsted, 2023). This helps explain why interviewees valued independent careers advisers, whose professional expertise can support impartial exploration of education, training and employment pathways and help address gaps or biases in students' understanding. Evidence reviewed by the Careers & Enterprise Company also indicates that personal guidance is associated with improvements in personal effectiveness, including self-awareness and self-esteem, alongside career planning and decision-making skills (Everitt et al., 2018). Our interviews underline that informed choice is achieved through dialogue, challenge, and reassurance, not simply access to information, making it a key mechanism through which careers guidance supports positive transitions.

Recent evidence from the Young People and Work Review reinforces the importance of this function. Among young people who were NEET, only 35% reported that school had helped them gain the qualifications they needed for the future, 29% that it had helped them develop the skills they needed, 16% that it had prepared them to be successful at work, and 11% that it had helped them get a job (Milburn, 2026). The Review also heard concerns that university could still be presented as the default marker of success, despite young people valuing apprenticeship and other routes into employment. This strengthens the case for impartial guidance that helps students understand the full range of academic, technical, and vocational pathways, and how these connect to employment.

Inclusive work experience

Programme and practitioner evidence identifies inclusive work experience as an important mechanism for increasing young people's engagement with education, broadening their understanding of career pathways and supporting progression towards education, employment, or training. Across Equalex and Get Ahead Work Experience, workplace experiences were intended not only to expose young people to occupations, but also to build confidence, motivation, employability skills, and understanding of workplace expectations. This is particularly important for young people at risk of becoming NEET who may have had limited access to workplaces and professional networks.

A consistent feature of EDT's approach is the use of a structured work experience journey rather than a standalone placement. Young people are prepared through activities such as completing applications, contacting or meeting employers, understanding workplace expectations, identifying skills, and planning travel. Placements are followed by structured reflection to help participants recognise what they have learned and translate the experience into future education and career goals. Equalex begins this process from Year 7 and scaffolds encounters over time, while Get Ahead combined individual action planning and preparation with a placement matched to the young person's interests and post-placement support.

The broader literature supports this emphasis on sustained and meaningful encounters. School-mediated work experience, careers talks, and exposure to different employment fields can broaden awareness of available pathways, particularly for young people who cannot access such opportunities through their own networks. The evidence also supports beginning careers education early and providing repeated opportunities rather than relying on one-off interventions (Hunt et al., 2021; Holt-White, Montecute, and Tibbs, 2022).

The Young People and Work Review provides further evidence of the importance of access to early workplace experience. Among young people who were NEET and wanted to work, lack of experience was the most commonly reported barrier, cited by 53% (Milburn, 2026). When asked what might have prevented them from becoming NEET, 36% identified help to find

work experience or placements (Milburn, 2026). These findings reinforce the importance of work experience not as an isolated activity, but as part of a wider careers journey that enables young people to gain experience, understand workplace expectations, and translate encounters with employers into realistic next steps.

Programme evidence also highlights that access alone does not make work experience inclusive. Opportunities need to reflect individual interests, circumstances, and support needs. EDT programmes have used flexible approaches for young people with SEND and EBSA, including supported group placements, tailored activities and non-traditional formats. One Equalex example involved developing an online DJing placement for a young person with SEND, while work with a local library created a range of supported placements for students from a special school. Travel bursaries and other practical support have also helped address financial barriers.

Inclusive work experience therefore depends on the wider support surrounding the placement. Careers professionals, schools, families, and employers need to work together to prepare the young person, make appropriate adjustments, and respond where confidence or readiness develops gradually. EDT's evidence suggests that this scaffolded and personalised approach can help young people understand the relevance of their education, develop work-readiness attributes, and establish a clearer sense of direction.

Accessible adaptations for diverse needs

Interviewees consistently emphasised that effective careers guidance depends on adapting delivery to meet diverse learner needs, particularly for students with SEND and those with English as an additional language (EAL). Advisers described the importance of stripping guidance "right back" to its essentials so that students could engage meaningfully: "for a lot of our SEND and EAL learners, we strip things right back, use more visuals, and keep the language as simple as possible so they can engage with it." Another adviser highlighted how adjustments to pace and clarity helped students connect with content: "the pace is slower, the language is clearer, and they can see what the job actually looks like."

Practitioners gave detailed examples of the practical adaptations they used in both one-to-one and group settings. These included card-based activities to explore skills and interests, simplified action plans written in plain language, sentence scaffolding and strengths tables to support structured thinking, and sensory adjustments such as coloured paper for dyslexic learners. Advisers also referred to the use of visual resources, including carefully selected videos with clear narration and strong visuals, to support understanding for SEND and EAL learners. One adviser described developing a card game that allowed SEND students to communicate their skills without needing to speak, while another noted how visual resources enabled students to grasp career concepts that would otherwise be inaccessible through text alone.

Several interviewees also described drawing on approaches such as motivational interviewing and trauma-informed practice, particularly when working with young people affected by anxiety or at risk of becoming NEET. These approaches were used to build trust, reduce pressure, and support students' confidence and self-efficacy. Across all examples, advisers stressed that adjustments were tailored to individual students, rather than applied uniformly. As one interviewee put it, the guiding principle was "not to assume one approach fits all learners."

This emphasis on personalised and inclusive delivery aligns with national policy expectations. Statutory guidance emphasises that careers programmes should address the individual needs of pupils, with additional support tailored to those facing disadvantage or barriers to progression (Department for Education, 2026c). Similarly, Ofsted's review of careers guidance in specialist settings highlighted the importance of highly personalised approaches that respond to learners' individual needs, interests and aspirations (Ofsted, 2024). While that review focused on specialist contexts, the practitioner accounts in this study demonstrate how the same principles are applied in mainstream schools. The interviews show that accessibility is achieved through active adaptation in practice, enabling students with additional needs or barriers to engage fully and benefit from careers guidance.

Flexible delivery for at-risk students

Several EDT programmes have operationalised flexible delivery through community-based meetings, digital engagement, walk-and-talk sessions, and sustained contact beyond conventional programme timelines. This flexibility is particularly important for young people with low attendance, anxiety, or disrupted educational experiences. Interviewees consistently described flexibility in delivery as a crucial enabler when working with students who were least likely to engage through standard school-based approaches. Advisers emphasised that effective guidance often required adapting provision around individual circumstances: "it is about fitting around the need of the student." Practitioners noted that young people with very low attendance, high anxiety, or complex home situations frequently struggled to engage with conventional, in-school careers appointments.

In response, advisers described using a range of flexible delivery approaches to reduce barriers to engagement. These included arranging sessions outside normal school hours, delivering guidance virtually or by phone, and meeting students in informal or off-site settings (with appropriate permissions) to create a calmer, less intimidating environment. One adviser described how meeting a student and their parent in a neutral community location led to a breakthrough in communication that was unlikely to have occurred within the school setting. Such adaptations were seen as particularly important for students who associated school with stress or negative experiences.

Interviewees framed flexibility not as an optional enhancement, but as a practical necessity for reaching those most at risk of disengagement. They stressed that persistence and responsiveness – continuing to offer support in different formats rather than withdrawing it after non-attendance – were key to maintaining contact with vulnerable young people. By adjusting where, when, and how guidance was delivered, advisers felt they were better able to sustain engagement and ensure that students were not excluded from support simply because they could not access standard provision.

This emphasis on flexible delivery aligns with wider recognition that 'one-size-fits-all' approaches are ineffective for young people at risk of becoming NEET. While formal research on flexible careers delivery remains limited, broader NEET prevention guidance emphasises the importance of early, proactive outreach to those disengaging from education (Department for Education, 2023). The interviews in this study illustrate how such principles are enacted in practice. They suggest that flexibility and persistence in delivery – tailoring the format of guidance to the student rather than expecting the student to fit the system – are essential complements to skilled, relational careers practice.

The importance of collaboration

Collaboration with schools

Interviewees consistently described collaboration with schools as central to the organisation and effectiveness of careers guidance. Advisers emphasised that the quality of partnership varied by school context, staff capacity, and how far careers education was embedded within whole-school processes. Interviewees referred to working with careers leaders, SENCOs, sixth form managers, teachers, and pastoral staff to coordinate appointments, share information about students' needs, and adapt delivery accordingly.

Strong collaboration was most evident where careers guidance was integrated into the life of the school rather than treated as a discrete or add-on activity. One interviewee described how, in two schools they worked in, this integration translated into practical support: "It works really well because they've got careers leads that are really on it. And they're both schools that have worked quite hard at getting careers into the curriculum. And so therefore, teachers are on board with handing out slips in the morning or reminding students in the morning, all of that stuff that makes [a] huge difference." In these settings, advisers felt better able to access students consistently and respond flexibly to emerging needs.

By contrast, interviewees noted that collaboration could be more challenging where careers delivery was arranged remotely or where careers lacked visibility or priority within the school. In these contexts, relationship-building took longer and coordination was more difficult, limiting opportunities to tailor provision or sustain engagement.

Inspection and policy evidence reinforces the importance of this whole-school approach. Ofsted's review highlighted the importance of close collaboration between senior leaders, careers leaders, teachers and careers specialists, finding that effective communication and coordinated working helped ensure that pupils received appropriate careers information, advice and guidance (Ofsted, 2023). This aligns with current statutory guidance, which emphasises a whole-school approach to careers education, including embedding career-related learning across curriculum subjects and supporting teachers to make connections between their subjects and future career pathways (Department for Education, 2026c). The interviews add practical insight into how this collaboration operates day-to-day and why it matters for delivery.

Parent and guardian involvement

Interviewees described parents and guardians as an important influence on how careers guidance was received and acted upon by students. Supportive families were seen as reinforcing guidance and helping young people engage more confidently with decision-making. As one interviewee noted, "When they are supportive, obviously that can be a massive boost. They'll come along to our webinars [and] they'll be able to help support their young people through the process because they've been through job application processes."

At the same time, advisers described situations in which parental expectations strongly shaped students' aspirations, particularly where families prioritised specific academic routes. In these cases, parental influence could limit the options students felt able to consider. Interviewees described careers guidance as providing a neutral space where students could reflect on these expectations, explore alternative pathways, and consider choices that better aligned with their own interests and circumstances, while navigating parental views sensitively.

Some interviewees noted that engaging parents was not always straightforward and could require indirect approaches, for example through community organisations or local services, particularly where families were harder to reach. EDT programmes have used a range of approaches to engage parents and carers who may have limited familiarity with post-16 pathways. These include online and evening sessions, careers publications such as the Inspiring Careers Programme's Choices magazine, informal family activities, and support for parents to access careers guidance themselves. Programme experience suggests that reducing barriers to parental participation can help families engage more confidently in young people's educational and career decisions.

These practitioner accounts align with wider evidence that parents and carers are important influences on young people's career thinking, although their involvement in school careers programmes varies considerably (Ofsted, 2023). Research also indicates that some parents and carers lack confidence in their understanding of education, training and employment pathways, highlighting the importance of accessible information and structured opportunities

to support their involvement in career conversations with their children (Barnes et al., 2020). The interviews emphasise the need to engage parents as partners while carefully managing expectations so that guidance broadens, rather than constrains, students' choices.

Wider multi-agency and community links

A smaller number of interviewees referred to collaboration beyond schools and families, including links with social workers, colleges, training providers, employers, and other EDT staff. These partnerships were described as supporting both individual guidance sessions and wider activities such as careers fairs, workshops, carousel days[1], and parents' evenings.

Where such links existed, advisers felt better able to provide joined-up support, particularly for students with complex needs or those at risk of disengagement. Access to external partners was seen as extending what careers guidance could offer, both in terms of practical opportunities and coordinated support.

National guidance emphasises that preventing young people from becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) requires coordinated working between schools, local authorities, post-16 providers and other local partners. It highlights the importance of effective information-sharing, early identification of risk and joint approaches to supporting young people's participation and transitions (Department for Education, 2025b). Ofsted's review of careers guidance also identifies evidence that meaningful encounters with employers can broaden young people's understanding of career opportunities and contribute to positive future outcomes (Ofsted, 2023). The interviews illustrate how these partnerships operate in practice, enabling more coherent and responsive careers guidance for young people facing multiple barriers.

Engaging with employers

Employer engagement is another key element of effective, collaborative delivery. Employer engagement supports access to placements, workplace encounters, job trials, labour market information, and employment opportunities. Practitioners use these relationships to broaden young people's horizons, develop their understanding of workplace expectations, and connect education to future possibilities.

Different programmes illustrate complementary models. Equalex works with employers to develop placements matched to young people's interests and to fill gaps where suitable opportunities are not readily available. Get Ahead Work Experience combined education-provider referrals, Careers Hub coordination, and employer partnerships to create two- to five-day placements for young people at risk of becoming NEET or leaving education early.

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[1] Carousel days are events where pupils rotate through a series of short careers-related activities, workshops or employer encounters.

Reach Your Potential employed a three-stage model comprising employer exposure, employer experience, and personalised employment or training support.

Evidence from evaluations of programmes supporting young people at risk of disengagement highlights the value of established employer relationships in providing access to workplace experiences, positive role models and opportunities to explore different occupations (Williams et al., 2024; Owen, Knight and Hill, 2024). Such experiences can help young people recognise their interests and strengths, broaden their understanding of possible career pathways and develop aspirations for the future. Meaningful encounters with employers across a range of occupational sectors may be particularly valuable for disadvantaged young people who have limited access to professional networks and career-related opportunities through their families or communities (Hunt et al., 2021; Holt-White, Montacute and Tibbs, 2022).

Evidence from EDT programmes further indicates that effective employer engagement involves supporting employers as well as sourcing opportunities. Get Ahead provided employers with guidance on effective placements, positive student management, safeguarding and safety. Equalex supported employers to understand additional needs and identify accessible activities. In this programme, careers professionals acted as intermediaries between education settings, young people, and employers, sharing relevant information and helping arrange accommodations.

This support is especially important where employers are working with young people who have SEND, mental health needs, disrupted educational experiences, or low confidence. Wider research by the Education Development Trust, in partnership with ERSA, highlights the importance of employer partnerships that not only create employment opportunities but also promote greater understanding of the barriers and complex circumstances faced by disadvantaged young people (Foulkes, Winnard and Farnhill-Bain, 2023). Similarly, an evaluation of the PLIAS Step Up programme identified employer engagement as an important element of support, while highlighting how limited staff capacity could constrain the development of effective partnerships (Campbell et al., 2025).

EDT Programme evidence also shows that employer partnerships require sustained investment. The Get Ahead review found that a one-year contract was insufficient to establish employer relationships and referral routes, and identified the potential value of grants or subsidies to help small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) meet the additional costs of supervising placements. More broadly, developing employer confidence, sourcing opportunities that match individual interests, and creating inclusive workplace environments take time. Short-term funding can therefore undermine precisely the relationship-building needed to produce meaningful and equitable opportunities.

Overall, employer engagement is most effective when treated as a strategic partnership rather than a transactional placement process. Programme and practitioner evidence indicates that strong employer relationships, combined with skilled brokerage and

personalised guidance, can extend access to workplace learning for young people who might otherwise be excluded and help translate employer encounters into realistic progression plans.

Emerging priority groups in schools

Interviewees identified a range of subgroups of young people who face barriers to engaging with standard careers guidance. These included students who are disengaged from mainstream education, those struggling with post-COVID-19 pandemic anxiety and mental health challenges, participants facing transport or geographical barriers, some young men influenced by anti-school online narratives, students with significant caring responsibilities, and refugees or newly arrived migrants adjusting to a new system. While each group has unique needs, they often overlap: for example, a student who is persistently absent might also have underlying anxiety or caring duties; a refugee student might face both language barriers and mental health challenges from traumatic experiences. This section summarises these emerging subgroups as described by practitioners, and connects their observations to relevant UK evidence and policy where available.

Disengagement from mainstream education

Interviewees expressed strong concern about young people disengaged from mainstream education, describing them as among the least likely to receive consistent careers support or structured preparation for post-16 pathways. Advisers spoke about students with persistent absence or school refusal, often linked to unmet SEND needs, mental health difficulties, or wider failures of mainstream provision. One interviewee highlighted particular concern about those who become electively home educated as a result of these pressures: “The ones who home ed because there's a problem with getting into school and being in school because the provision isn't the right provision for them. Those are the ones that I would be concerned about, because they are less likely to either receive any kind of education and gain any qualifications or to have any sort of input as to what their world could look like… What are the options out there?”

Practitioners described multiple pathways into disengagement. Some students gradually “fell out” of school through persistent absence, while others cycled through alternative provision (such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs)) or spent long periods out of education altogether. Interviewees stressed that EHE was often reactive rather than chosen, reflecting mainstream systems’ inability to meet need. As a result, these young people were frequently invisible to school-based careers systems, receiving little or no guidance, or only fragmented input.

Advisers also highlighted students who remained on roll but were effectively disengaged. These students were physically or emotionally absent, particularly in Years 10 and 11, due to anxiety, school refusal, or behavioural issues. These groups were described as especially hard

to reach through standard school-based careers programmes, with disengagement seen as a growing post-COVID-19 pandemic concern. EDT's Dorset Marvels programme has developed specialist approaches for young people experiencing EBSA and EHE, including early referral, community-based support, and flexible progression planning. Programme learning highlights the importance of intervention before disengagement becomes entrenched and demonstrates the value of recognising a broad range of successful post-16 destinations, including volunteering and supported employment pathways.

National evidence reflects the scale of the issue. Persistent absence increased sharply following the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting 22.5% of pupils in England during the 2021/22 academic year, approximately double the pre-pandemic rate (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023). Mental health difficulties, unmet special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and wider socioeconomic disadvantage have been identified as significant barriers to school attendance (Centre for Mental Health, 2024). Elective home education has also increased, although improvements in data collection may partly account for this rise (Department for Education, 2026b). These developments highlight the importance of identifying young people at risk of disengagement and providing coordinated, targeted support to help sustain participation in education and support successful post-16 transitions (Department for Education, 2025b).

The Young People and Work Review similarly emphasises that detachment can be visible before a young person formally becomes NEET. Among NEET respondents, 18% reported having left school, college, or training early, while 21% reported leaving or losing a job; 31% said that more support at school or college, including mental health, SEND, or pastoral support, might have prevented them from becoming NEET (Milburn, 2026). The Review argues that these transition points create opportunities for earlier action while institutions are still in contact with the young person. This supports a preventative approach in which emerging disengagement triggers coordinated support rather than intervention beginning only after participation has broken down.

The practitioner accounts in this study reinforce these risks, identifying disengaged learners – particularly those outside mainstream schooling – as a priority group requiring proactive, alternative approaches to careers guidance if they are not to slip through the cracks.

Post-COVID-19 pandemic anxiety and mental health barriers

Interviewees consistently reported a marked increase in anxiety and mental health difficulties among students following the COVID-19 pandemic, describing this as a significant and growing challenge for careers guidance. Advisers noted that anxiety, low confidence, and depression were now far more common than before, with some referring to this as “a massive issue” in their day-to-day work. They also emphasised that mental health difficulties were not

always immediately visible, making it harder for careers staff to identify who might be struggling and to judge when students were ready to engage.

In more severe cases, interviewees described students experiencing school-based anxiety, where fear or previous negative experiences led to avoidance of school altogether. One adviser explained the impact this had on careers conversations: "What we've got now is a growing number of kids with school-based anxiety… I've personally worked with one child for six months now… and we've never discussed what she wants to do because we're not there yet." This illustrates how, for some students, careers guidance cannot progress until more immediate wellbeing needs are addressed.

Interviewees also observed that anxiety often overlapped with other factors, including special educational needs and what some described as "school-based trauma". These overlapping challenges were seen to slow the pace of engagement and extend the time required to build trust. Practitioners emphasised the importance of patience, repeated low-pressure contact, and trauma-informed approaches, recognising that readiness to talk about future plans varies and cannot be assumed.

National evidence highlights the scale of these challenges. NHS Digital (2022) reported a substantial increase in the prevalence of probable mental disorders among children and young people between 2017 and 2022, while the Centre for Mental Health (2024) identified rising persistent absence alongside mental health difficulties, unmet support needs and wider socioeconomic barriers. Ofsted's (2024) review of careers guidance in specialist settings similarly found that anxiety about transitions and additional support needs could present challenges for learners, highlighting the importance of personalised approaches to building confidence and preparing young people for their next steps. The practitioner accounts in this study highlight how these trends play out in careers guidance practice. They point to the need for flexible, individually paced approaches and close alignment with pastoral and mental health support, so that students experiencing anxiety can access guidance when they are ready.

Refugees and newly arrived migrant students

Practitioner and programme evidence suggests that refugees and newly arrived migrant students are likely to benefit from the same person-centred, relational, and flexible approaches that support other young people facing barriers to progression. These students may need help to understand unfamiliar qualifications, post-16 pathways, and labour market opportunities, alongside adjustments to language, pace, and communication. Effective guidance should therefore begin with the young person's interests, aspirations, prior experiences, and current understanding, rather than assuming familiarity with the English education and careers system.

The Find Your Future programme combined individual guidance with careers fairs, assemblies, career carousels, and experiential activities intended to build understanding of local sectors and pathways. The Inspiring Careers Programme similarly uses one-to-one guidance to explore labour market information and the advantages and disadvantages of different options, culminating in an individual action plan. These approaches can help students who are new to the country develop a clearer understanding of how local education, training, and employment pathways operate.

The programme evidence also demonstrates the importance of engaging parents and carers. Some families may have limited knowledge of further education, technical pathways, and the English labour market, particularly where they are new to the country. EDT programmes have responded through online and evening sessions, careers materials for families, informal events, and direct contact from advisers. The Inspiring Careers Programme's Choices magazine was identified as helpful amongst practitioners in broadening awareness of contemporary pathways among parents with limited experience of further education or who were new to the country. Find Your Future also used informal family activities and offered parents access to careers support for themselves.

This aligns with evidence that parents and carers are important influences on young people's career decisions, although some have limited knowledge of the range of post-16 education, training and employment pathways available (Barnes et al., 2020; Holt-White, Montacute and Tibbs, 2022). Research highlights the value of accessible, non-threatening opportunities for parental engagement, including clear information, direct communication and support offered before key transition points, to help families develop the knowledge and confidence needed to support young people's choices (Hunt et al., 2021; Barnes et al., 2020).

Taken together, the evidence points to the value of culturally responsive and linguistically accessible careers guidance that involves families while preserving the young person's agency. For refugees and newly arrived migrant students, effective provision should explain pathways clearly, avoid assumptions about prior knowledge, connect students with local opportunities, and provide sufficient continuity for understanding and confidence to develop over time.

Online anti-system influences

A smaller number of interviewees raised concerns about the influence of anti-system and extremist narratives encountered through social media, particularly among some young male students. Advisers described how these narratives shaped young people's expectations about work, success, and formal education, often promoting ideas of quick financial gain and rejection of mainstream pathways. One interviewee expressed concern about the cumulative effect of this exposure: "I have this concern about this upcoming rising movement of very right-wing young men… you're speaking to these young lads and they're like, 'I just want to flip houses and I just want residual income and I don't want to buy into the matrix'. They're

regurgitating all this stuff that they're hearing from social media... They're the kind of movements that can build and build and become a real issue."

Practitioners suggested that these narratives could undermine trust in education and employment systems, and contribute to unrealistic or poorly informed expectations about career pathways. Advisers described encountering students who were dismissive of qualifications or structured progression routes, influenced instead by online content that framed formal education and employment as unnecessary or exploitative. This presented challenges for careers guidance, particularly where students were resistant to discussing conventional options or disengaged from school-based support.

Wider commentary and emerging research indicate growing concern about the influence of online influencer culture on young people's attitudes, particularly among boys and young men. UK media and policy discussions have highlighted the reach of online figures promoting misogynistic and restrictive ideas about masculinity, raising concerns about their influence on young people's beliefs and expectations (The Guardian, 2024; The Independent, 2025). Survey evidence also suggests that engagement with so-called 'masculinity influencers' is relatively widespread among young men (Mussen, 2025). Although evidence of the direct impact of such influences on educational engagement and career decision-making remains limited, the practitioner accounts in this study suggest that careers guidance may have a role in challenging misinformation, encouraging critical reflection and helping young people explore realistic and diverse future pathways.

Transport limitations

Interviewees highlighted transport constraints as a significant barrier shaping young people's post-16 options in some local contexts, particularly in rural areas. One adviser described how limited public transport restricted students' choices beyond the local sixth form: "The nearest college is about a 40-minute bus ride away. Can be an hour. Transport really is something that, if young people don't want to stay in the sixth form here, they know they have to travel to get somewhere else. And similarly with apprenticeships. If they want to look for an apprenticeship, they're going to have to go outside of the town realistically."

Practitioners emphasised that these constraints were not simply logistical but had a direct impact on the range of options students felt able to consider. Where travel times were long, costly, or unreliable, advisers noted that young people were more likely to default to nearby provision, even if it was not the best fit for their interests or aspirations. Apprenticeships were described as particularly affected, as opportunities were often located outside the immediate area and required regular travel that was not always feasible for students.

National evidence reflects these challenges. Transport arrangements for 16–19-year-olds vary between local authorities in England, with no universal entitlement to free or subsidised travel (Hubble and Lewis, 2021). Research by the Social Mobility Commission highlights substantial

geographical inequalities in educational and employment opportunities, particularly in some coastal and remote rural areas where limited transport connectivity and weaker local labour markets can restrict young people's opportunities (Social Mobility Commission, 2017). Research by UWE Bristol and Sustrans similarly identified transport availability and cost as the two main barriers to young people's mobility, with participants reporting that inaccessible or unaffordable transport prevented them from pursuing opportunities such as work experience and employment (Chatterjee et al., 2023). The interviewees' accounts illustrate how these structural constraints operate in practice, underscoring the importance of recognising transport as a key factor in ensuring equitable access to careers guidance and post-16 pathways.

Overlooked middle-attaining students

One interviewee identified students in the "middle zone" as an overlooked group within schools. These are young people who are neither high-attaining nor formally identified as needing targeted support. These students were described as being at risk of being assumed to be "doing fine" and therefore receiving less attention or fewer opportunities. As the interviewee explained: "There are the ones that fall down the parts in the middle. I'd like to change it so that they all get pretty much a fair share of everything. I think sometimes [the] kids [in the middle] have been forgotten and they think they're doing all right. [We] just leave them alone and they're not [always doing alright]…We take our eye off them, and that's when sometimes things go a little bit wrong."

Interviewees suggested that, without deliberate attention, these students may miss out on guidance, enrichment activities, or wider exposure to post-16 options, despite representing a large proportion of the school population. The issue was not framed as a lack of need, but as a lack of recognition, with assumptions about progress masking emerging uncertainties or missed opportunities.

These practitioner observations align with wider UK evidence. A House of Lords Select Committee (2016) identified a large, often overlooked group of young people who do not follow traditional academic pathways, arguing that education and skills policy had insufficiently addressed their needs. Similarly, Hodgson and Spours (2014) highlighted how middle attainers have historically received limited policy attention, with implications for their participation, progression and transitions into post-16 education and training. Research by GL Assessment (2017) further cautions that labelling pupils as 'average' can conceal significant differences in their abilities, learning needs and potential, highlighting the importance of identifying and responding to individual needs rather than relying on broad attainment categories. Together, this evidence reinforces interviewees' concerns that explicit planning and coordination are needed to ensure middle-attaining students have equitable access to careers guidance and are not unintentionally left behind during key transition points.

Young carers

Although no school-based interviewee explicitly mentioned young carers, an Area Manager from adult careers services did raise this group as a concern. She noted that many young people with heavy caring responsibilities eventually enter adult careers programmes (alongside groups like care leavers), often with significant unmet needs from their school years. This practitioner explained that such clients have typically required “a different journey or a different level of care before they even get to somebody like me”, implying that more robust support during secondary school might have eased their transition.

National statistics highlight the scale of educational disadvantage experienced by young carers. The latest Department for Education school census recorded approximately 89,800 pupils in England as known young carers in 2025/26, an increase from approximately 64,500 in 2024/25 (Department for Education, 2026). However, these figures should be interpreted cautiously, as the Department notes that increases may partly reflect improvements in identification and recording practices rather than a corresponding rise in the prevalence of caring responsibilities. Indeed, the fact that 56% of schools recorded no young carers in 2025/26 suggests that some pupils with caring responsibilities may remain unidentified.

Evidence also demonstrates substantial inequalities in school attendance and attainment. Carers Trust (2025) reported that 38% of identified young carers were persistently absent during the 2023/24 academic year, compared with 20% of pupils not identified as young carers. Among secondary school pupils, the difference was particularly pronounced, with persistent absence affecting 45% of young carers compared with 25% of their peers. Attainment data for 2024/25 similarly showed that only 51% of young carers achieved GCSE grades 4 or above in both English and mathematics, compared with 65% of pupils without recorded caring responsibilities (Carers Trust, 2025). These findings indicate that young carers experience significant educational inequalities at important stages of their progression through school.

Earlier research provides further insight into the experiences underlying these inequalities. *The Lives of Young Carers in England* (Clay et al., 2016) highlights how caring responsibilities can affect young people's educational experiences, wellbeing and opportunities for social participation. Such responsibilities may also reduce the time and capacity available for exploring future education, training and employment options. Similarly, The Children's Society (2013) identified associations between caring responsibilities, lower educational attainment and an increased likelihood of being not in education, employment or training (NEET). Although these findings do not establish that caring responsibilities inevitably lead to poorer post-16 outcomes, they suggest that young carers may face additional barriers when preparing for and navigating educational and employment transitions.

Recognising these challenges, policy and advocacy initiatives have increasingly emphasised the importance of early identification and targeted support within schools. Carers Trust (2024) has highlighted the need to improve staff awareness, provide appropriate training and establish clear responsibility for identifying and supporting young carers. The *Young Carers in Schools* initiative, developed by Carers Trust and The Children's Society, similarly promotes designated staff roles and whole-school approaches to recognising caring responsibilities and responding to pupils' needs. Within careers guidance, these findings highlight the importance of considering how caring responsibilities may affect young people's attendance, attainment, confidence and capacity to explore future pathways. Early, personalised and coordinated support may therefore be particularly important in ensuring that young carers can make informed post-16 choices and access opportunities that reflect both their aspirations and their individual circumstances.

Children in need

Although not explicitly identified by interviewees, a further group recognised in national policy as experiencing heightened vulnerability comprises children in need (CIN). In England, this is a statutory designation under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, referring to children whose health or development is unlikely to be maintained without additional support, whose development is likely to be significantly impaired without such support, or who are disabled. The wider population of children known to children's social care includes those receiving support under child in need plans, children subject to child protection plans and looked-after children. The latter are children in the care of a local authority, including those accommodated by the authority or subject to a care order (Department for Education, 2022).

Concerns about the educational vulnerability of these groups are reinforced by the Children's Commissioner's (2022) investigation into children missing from education. The report identified weaknesses in the identification and monitoring of children who were absent from, or no longer attending, school, including some whose needs had not been adequately met within mainstream education. It emphasised the importance of earlier identification, improved information sharing and coordinated support to prevent vulnerable children from becoming less visible to education and other services.

Longitudinal evidence also demonstrates substantial inequalities in post-16 outcomes. A Department for Education (2022) study examining more than 620,000 young people who completed their GCSEs in 2010/11 found that those with a history of involvement with children's social care experienced considerably poorer educational and employment outcomes than the overall cohort. Across the eight years following secondary school, 66% of those classified as children in need had out-of-work benefits recorded as their main activity at least once, compared with 21% of all young people. Furthermore, 21% had at least one year in which neither education nor employment was recorded as their main activity, compared with 4% of the overall cohort. They were also less likely to have employment recorded as their

main activity at any point during the period (45% compared with 76%) and had lower rates of participation in higher education (Department for Education, 2022).

These findings are particularly relevant to children receiving support from a social worker who are not looked after by the local authority. Although they may experience complex family circumstances, safeguarding concerns and educational disadvantage, they do not necessarily receive the same dedicated educational and transition support arrangements available to looked-after children. Similarly, they may not qualify for the additional provision associated with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), unless they independently meet the relevant criteria. This highlights the importance of recognising children in need who are not looked after as a potentially overlooked group within careers guidance. Early identification, personalised guidance and coordinated working between schools, careers professionals and children's social care services may help ensure that their aspirations and post-16 transition needs are not overlooked.

Structural challenges

Alongside examples of effective practice, interviewees identified a set of structural constraints that shaped what careers guidance could realistically achieve in school settings. These constraints were described as systemic rather than individual, influencing consistency, continuity, and reach.

School-led constraints

Interviewees emphasised that the scale and consistency of careers guidance depended heavily on the number of days schools purchased. Contracts varied widely, with provision often limited to one or two days per week and, in some cases, only a small number of days per year. This constrained continuity and reduced opportunities for follow-up. Advisers also noted that how schools organised the day affected scheduling, access to students, and flexibility, with careers guidance sometimes fitted around other priorities rather than embedded within core activity. School budgets were seen as central in shaping which year groups or students were prioritised, and in some cases engagement with careers guidance extended little beyond meeting minimum requirements.

This variability reflects longstanding concerns about the organisation and resourcing of careers guidance in England. Following the transfer of statutory responsibility to schools in 2012, the House of Commons Education Committee (2013) raised concerns about the consistency, quality and availability of provision, particularly as schools had been given additional responsibilities without corresponding funding. The Committee also questioned whether schools possessed the capacity and expertise required to provide effective, independent careers guidance. More recent inspection evidence suggests that resource constraints have continued to affect provision. Ofsted (2023) identified limited staff time,

staffing shortages, staff turnover and funding pressures as barriers to delivering comprehensive careers programmes, with these challenges sometimes restricting the range of activities available to pupils, particularly those in Key Stage 3.

Careers guidance undervalued

Interviewees also described careers guidance as frequently undervalued or misunderstood within schools and the wider community. Advisers noted a lack of shared understanding about what careers guidance involves and argued for greater recognition of its importance. As one interviewee reflected, “People do not understand what careers guidance is… that message could be better conveyed and there could be more importance given to careers guidance. I think that would only be a positive thing.” Another emphasised the need for collective ownership: “Raise the profile of careers education and importance and make it a whole school approach so that it is not just down to the career leader, but it is down to every single person in that school, teachers, all the way from headteacher downwards so that it's coming through subject and curriculum.”

These views align with longstanding policy concerns about the consistency and quality of careers education and guidance in England. The Gatsby Benchmarks established the importance of a stable, structured careers programme, embedded within the wider school environment and supported by senior leadership (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014). This emphasis has been reinforced through subsequent policy developments, including the updated Gatsby Benchmarks and current statutory guidance, which expect schools to adopt a strategic, whole-school approach to careers provision, with clear leadership responsibilities and programmes tailored to pupils’ needs (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2024; Department for Education, 2026c). Nevertheless, Ofsted’s (2023) independent review identified continuing variation in the planning and delivery of careers guidance, with differences in leadership, staff expertise and available resources affecting the consistency and quality of provision across the schools visited.

Short appointments and limited follow-up

Interviewees described school-commissioned careers guidance as commonly limited to a single, short appointment, often around 30 minutes. While advisers recognised the statutory requirement for at least one interview by age 16 and another by age 18, they stressed that this model was insufficient for students with greater needs, including those experiencing anxiety, those with SEND, or those at risk of becoming NEET. Limited time and capacity reduced opportunities for follow-up, even where advisers judged it necessary.

Research highlights the importance of preparing young people for personal guidance interviews and providing follow-up support to help them implement the decisions and action plans developed during these sessions (Everitt et al., 2018). Evidence from the Young People and Work Review suggests that continuity is particularly important around transitions out of

education. NEET respondents were less likely than their peers to report receiving help towards work, education, or training from families, education providers, and friends, and only 4% said they could rely on a teacher or tutor when they needed help, compared with 21% of young people who were not NEET (Milburn, 2026). Young people also described the end of education as an abrupt loss of contact and support. These findings reinforce the importance of follow-up and effective handovers, particularly where a young person's intended destination is uncertain or fragile.

However, inspection evidence suggests that practical constraints can make this continuity of support difficult to achieve. Ofsted (2023) identified limited staff time, staffing shortages and funding pressures as barriers to the delivery of comprehensive careers programmes, with some schools experiencing difficulties providing sufficient access to specialist careers advisers and personalised guidance. These findings suggest that, although preparation and follow-up are recognised components of effective careers guidance, schools may face challenges in delivering such support consistently.

Limited visibility of longer-term outcomes

Finally, practitioners described limited access to destination data, reducing their ability to assess how guidance influenced post-16 decisions or to learn from patterns over time. This constrained both evaluation and service improvement.

While there is broad agreement that outcome tracking is important, schools and providers continue to face practical and data-sharing barriers. Although aggregate destination measures are published nationally, they are not easily linked to specific careers interventions. As a result, opportunities to refine provision based on longer-term impact remain limited.

Taken together, these structural challenges underline how commissioning models, status within schools, and system-level data limitations shape what careers guidance can deliver in practice, often constraining the ability to provide sustained, equitable support to those who need it most.

Recommendations for policy and practice

This study highlights several areas where further development could strengthen the design, delivery, and impact of school-based careers guidance. These are set out below as implications for future research, policy, and practice.

Implications for future research

The identification of emerging and under-recognised groups within schools points to a need for more targeted research on how careers guidance reaches students whose needs fall outside existing eligibility criteria or short-term interventions. Further research could examine how different delivery environments – such as in-school guidance compared with more flexible or off-site approaches – affect students' readiness to engage, particularly for those at risk of becoming NEET.

There is also scope to explore how workforce and caseload models, shaped largely by school-led commissioning, influence continuity, intensity, and outcomes. Variability in adviser presence across schools raises questions about the conditions needed for sustained engagement and early intervention. Future studies could examine whether role specialisation – for example, dedicated capacity for young people at higher risk of disengagement – improves consistency and effectiveness.

Implications for policy

At a system level, the findings reinforce the need to align policy expectations with delivery realities. Short-term commissioning and minimum-entitlement models limit the ability of careers guidance to respond to complex and overlapping needs. Policymakers may wish to consider how funding, accountability, and data-sharing arrangements could better support continuity, targeted follow-up and earlier intervention, particularly for vulnerable groups.

The findings also point to the importance of raising the status of careers guidance as a core component of education rather than a peripheral service. Clearer expectations around whole-school responsibility, collaboration with wider services, and access to longer-term outcomes data would strengthen schools' ability to plan and evaluate provision.

Implications for practice

For practice, the findings underscore the importance of flexible, person-centred delivery that can adapt to different school contexts and student needs. Effective careers guidance relies on strong collaboration with schools, families, and external partners, and on advisers having the time and professional capacity to build trust with students who may be reluctant or anxious.

The study also highlights the need for ongoing workforce development, particularly as advisers are increasingly expected to respond to mental health challenges, disengagement and complex life circumstances within limited time on site. Together, these findings suggest an opportunity for EDT to continue strengthening evidence-informed programme design, support preventative approaches to NEET risk, and inform workforce and commissioning decisions that better reflect the realities of careers guidance delivery in schools.

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