

Delivering NEET policy packages? A decade of NEET policy in England

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Abstract

This article explores the way in which government policy shapes the lives of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). In particular it examines how the concept of NEETs is set within a specific infrastructure and discourse for managing and supporting young people. The article provides a brief history of the NEET concept and NEET initiatives, before moving on to scrutinise the policies of the Coalition Government. A key distinction is made between those policies and practices that seek to prevent young people becoming NEET from those that seek to re-engage those who are NEET. It is argued that the Coalition has drawn on a similar active labour market toolkit to the previous Labour administration, but that this has been implemented with fewer resources and less co-ordination. It concludes that there is little reason to believe that Coalition policy will be any more successful than that of the previous government, and some reason to be concerned that it will lead to young people becoming more entrenched within NEET.

Keywords: NEET; employment policy; education; training; Coalition Government

Introduction

The number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is a global concern. The International Labour Organisation (2013) has raised questions about a 'generation at risk', whilst in England, a House of Lords (2014) select committee has warned of a 'scarred generation'. The current Coalition Government's response has been the introduction of policy initiatives like the Youth Contract, raising the participation in learning age (RPA) accompanied by publications such as Building Engagement, Building Futures (HM Government 2011a). Given the continuing, high levels of NEETs (Department for Education 2014), the success of these and previous NEET policies is questionable. Although there has been research into the Coalition's discourse of worklessness and dependency (Wiggan 2012) and educational policy (Brooks 2013), the government's treatment of NEET young people has been subject to much less scrutiny. This article will therefore explore how the Coalition has sought both to prevent young people from becoming NEET, and to manage and support those who are already NEET.

Characterising NEETness

The concept of NEET superseded that of youth unemployment when the entitlement of 16–18 year olds to unemployment benefits was removed in 1988 (Simmons and Thompson 2011). During the 'nineties' and the 'noughties' discussion of NEET was generally accepted as meaning a discussion of young people aged between 16 and 18, or up to the age of 24 if they had learning difficulties or disabilities. This has since changed with broad categorisations of NEET including all youth up to the age of 24

(HM Government 2011a). However, young people within this category are very heterogeneous (Furlong 2006; Pemberton 2008) and use of the term NEET is simultaneously widely adopted and widely condemned for its imprecision. Spielhofer et al. (2009) have segmented the NEET population by their preparedness to reengage in learning. Nudzor (2010) however notes that the key characteristic for this group is one of the absence of educational pathways, employment and training opportunities. In addition, issues that are associated with NEET status transcend individuals' relationship with labour and learning markets and are also related to wider aspects of their life such as their domestic and housing contexts (Cieslik and Simpson 2013).

NEET young people's response to their NEET status is influenced by a number of factors including their peer groups (Gunter and Watt 2009) and family, the levels of local labour market supply and demand (Pemberton 2008), their experiences of poverty (Bynner and Parsons 2002), education and attainment of qualifications, their locality, their role as carers, and their status with respect to ethnicity, disability, homelessness, offending and substance abuse (McDonald and Shildrick 2010). The experience of being NEET is similarly diverse. Young people rarely are continuously NEET but often experience a sequence of engagements interspersed with periods as NEET (Hutchinson, Korzeniewski, and Moore 2011). Without knowing about the length and characteristics of these phases in and out of education, employment and training, it is difficult to deliver effective policy and remedies to provide young people with progression pathways (Maguire and Rennison 2005). The outcomes and long-term implications of being NEET, such as social exclusion and long-term unemployment (Kieselbach 2003; Yates and Payne 2006), seem to be better understood than the routes into and out of NEET status.

This is problematic because of the high proportions of young people who are NEET, with some talking of a 'lost generation of young people' (Bivand 2012). Data on the numbers of young people who are NEET and their proportion within their age cohort is available on a quarterly basis from the Office for National Statistics (2015) and, for England, are provided in Graph 1. The data reveals that the proportions of 16–24 year olds classified as NEET have fluctuations within a range from 12.3% in 2004 to a high of 17.0% in 2011; but in absolute numbers this is 119,501 in 2004 and 93,890 in 2011 so the higher proportion is partly an effect of the falling numbers of young people in the population. Nevertheless, there was an initial growth in NEET proportions following the 2008/2009 recession which then began to decline again from 2011. Secondly, the graph shows that the proportion of 16 and 17 year olds who are NEET declines relative to the overall age cohort. Following the implementation of the policy raising the participation age, there are fewer people in this age category (58,582 in total in the final quarter of 2014). Consequently, most NEET young people are in the older age category.

This suggests that NEET status is not primarily a problem of transition from school, but rather a more long-term problem about engagement with and attachment to learning and labour markets. Thirdly, the graph demonstrates the seasonality of the issue. As young people complete their courses at the end of the academic year, there is an annual peak during the summer quarter whilst they seek and secure employment or further training.

Graph 1 here

Graph 1. People who were NEET as a percentage of people in the relevant group population: seasonally adjusted data and non-seasonally adjusted data. 2003Q4–2014Q4.

Source: Office for National Statistics (2015), figure generated from accompanying data tables in spreadsheet format.

Raising the participation age – raising the age of NEETness

There has been a trend of gradual extension of youth transitions resulting from the lengthening compulsory periods in education, the widening of participation in post-compulsory education (Roberts 2012) and a declining youth labour market. This trend is not universally welcomed, the International Labour Organisation (2013), for example, warn of the creation of dual pathways for the ‘over-educated’ and the under-skilled. Wolf’s (2011, 20) observations that ‘employers value the skills learnt in employment and the workplace, as well as those acquired in classrooms’ and that ‘many of today’s teenagers, like those of preceding generations, do not want to remain in academic programmes; they want to be in work’ suggest that employers and young people might prefer employment to be a more realistic option earlier. Nevertheless, the drive to raise the overall level of skills in the work place in England has been enacted through the policy of Raising the Participation Age (RPA), which was developed by Labour under the 2008 Education and Skills Act (Corney 2009) and maintained by the Coalition Government. RPA requires young people to stay in education, training or employment with training up until the age of 18. Consequently, policy conceptions of the type of young people who can be categorised as NEET will change and might have to be extended.

The changing characteristics of the NEET group are likely to have further effects. Arguably, enforcing longer participation may also increase the number of those who disengage (Furlong et al. 2012). Given the problems youth face in finding jobs (Holliswood, Egdell, and McQuaid 2012; Tunstall et al. 2012) and the pressure to enhance literacy and numeracy requirements for vocational routes (Nuffield 2009; Wolf 2011), there is the possibility that the number of youths who are disaffected with education and cannot find employment will increase or that the NEET group will become more entrenched in their NEET status. Maguire, Spielhofer, and Golden (2012) have already highlighted that the focus on post-16 education and training has led to a diminished understanding of young people who have jobs without training. Under RPA, numbers in this group are likely to continue to shrink as employers are expected to either provide training for their young workforce or face the threat of prosecution. These factors highlight the importance of the support that exists to encourage young people to stay engaged with learning and the labour market, and raise questions about how ‘older young people’ are able to access this support particularly if they no longer have a direct connection with an educational institution. The age of a young person who is categorised in policy as NEET is significant because it is likely to influence individuals’ access and entitlement to services and support.

The headline figures of youth disengagement can therefore obscure a range of factors to which policy needs to attend if it is to redress the situation. Most critically, NEET is experienced differently by different age groups and by young people from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. It is rarely a continuous state but rather

characterised by single or successive periods of engagement and disengagement. Finally, the NEET issue is stubborn, remaining a concern during periods of economic growth or stability as well as decline. Policy responses and their enactment therefore need to be capable of being nuanced to meet the needs of a range of young people, flexible enough to address the issues that arise within the annual cycle, and stable – because data show that there will always be a proportion of young people who experience NEET in their post-education years.

Departmental responsibility for NEET prevention and NEET management

Policy responses to NEET usually have either or both of the following two aims. Firstly, to prevent young people who are currently moving through the education system from becoming NEET. This often includes assumptions that those who are potentially NEET can be identified and support directed in a way that will reduce the likelihood of a NEET outcome. Strategies employed here include the following: attempting to raise the attainment of young people within school to make them more attractive to employers; increasing the participation age because more time in education is anticipated to correlate with increased skill levels; aspiration raising; the creation of pathways from school to further and higher education; career education and guidance; enhancing support infrastructures for young people with social and health issues; and increasing individualised support for those most vulnerable.

The second aim was to manage or reduce the size of the existing NEET population through a range of engagement and transition support strategies. An important question for NEET management strategies is how far they create sustainable outcomes with progression pathways and how far they serve to temporarily divert NEET young people. Strategies employed here include the following: maintaining contact with individuals after they have left education; building their employability skills; career advice and guidance; the creation of learning opportunities designed for the NEET cohort such as apprenticeships or traineeships, basic skills programmes; and volunteering and intermediate labour markets.

An important distinction within strategies to both prevent and manage NEET is that between supply-side and demand-side solutions. The supply side focuses on the young people themselves to increase their qualifications, improve attitudes and enhance their employability skills. Demand-side interventions seek to shape employer demand either through financial or other incentives or by shaping employer perceptions. A particular challenge for government is to align supply- and demand-side approaches, which requires integration of several government departments as transitioning young people typically pass through the domains of several government departments. Firstly, the process of transition is the point at which control over the education system currently moves from the Department for Education (DFE) to the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS). Secondly, concerns about long-term economic inactivity lead the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to maintain a watchful eye on the cohort and at times to offer various kinds of services and incentives to this group such as the Youth Contract. Thirdly, the management of NEET and of the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) sits with local government and therefore ultimately engages the involvement of the Department for Communities and Local Government. Add into this, the fact that NEET young people operate within the same economy as the rest of the population and often have complex health, housing, legal and cultural needs (Cieslik and Simpson 2013) and it becomes clear that NEET is complex not only in socio-economic terms but in political and

governmental terms, too. With almost every department of government engaged in making policy that impact on young people who are NEET, it is perhaps unsurprising that achieving a clear and coherent response to the issue is demanding.

Moreover, responsibilities within government departments change as successive governments seek to enact their policy priorities through restructuring government departments, and for example in 1995, the DFE was expanded to become the Department for Education and Employment and it was restructured in 2001 to become Department for Education and Skills, changed again in 2007 to the Department for Children, Schools and Families and then again in 2010 back to the DFE. In each of these changes, the Department's responsibilities and priorities as they relate to NEET young people have shifted. Additional complexity is introduced as different governments introduce, reshape and remove administrative and democratic layers from the political system. Local authorities have traditionally had a major role in the prevention and management of youth unemployment/ NEET, but this is also an area that the Regional Development Agencies were involved in and latterly has been an area that the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have sought to influence not least as they become the managing agents for European Social Funds.

This governmental and administrative complexity typically results in NEET prevention being dealt with separately from NEET management with the former being seen as essentially an educational concern and the latter as either a labour market issue or an issue relating to social inclusion and social control. This is problematic because a focus on one or the other fails to address the often fundamental issues that result in NEET status. A brief review of how the issue of NEET was handled by the previous Labour government shows that a more holistic approach is possible. The next section also allows for comparison with the approach of the Coalition Government and enables an analysis as to the extent of continuity and change within the overall approach to NEET.

NEET under the last labour government

Under Labour, NEET was conceptualised largely as part of a broader skills agenda underpinned by beliefs that economic growth was fuelled by higher level skills and that educational opportunities should be available irrespective of family background. The focus on education thus represented an attempt to wed utilitarian economic policy aims to an increase in social justice (Dean 2004). In the context of NEET, education was seen as a mechanism to tackle social exclusion by raising skills and moving individuals out of welfare and into work (McDonald and Shildrick 2010).

Under the Labour government, young people who chose to leave education, were unable to remain within it or who were forced to leave were conceived of as troubling outliers who needed to be supported through a diverse range of policy instruments. These instruments included seeking to increase the relevance of the curriculum, launching an integrated youth support service (Connexions), developing a range of work-related learning opportunities including E2E/Foundation learning, launching the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), increasing the conditionality of benefits in initiatives such as New Deal for Young People (NDYP) and ultimately raising the participation in learning age.

Central to the policy of the Labour government in this area was the development of Connexions as an agency that could shape young people's engagement with local labour and learning markets (Sheehy, Kumrai, and Woodhead 2011). The Connexions

service represented a £450 million investment in youth support; 47 different Connexions companies were established between 2001 and 2003 (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2004). The Connexions service was tasked with providing both a universal careers service to all young people offering independent and impartial advice, and a service to support vulnerable young people to prevent them from becoming NEET. The Connexions service Planning Guidance (2001–2002) indicated that

A key success measure is the extent to which it [the Connexions service] reduces the number of young people aged 16–19 not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs) ... Increased participation levels will, in turn, help Connexions play an active role in delivering cross-Whitehall initiatives such as the national learning targets, the teenage pregnancy strategy and drugs strategy. (Connexions service National Unit 2001)

Given their dedicated funding, their requirement to work in partnership with other local agencies and their policy focus, Connexions became known as the organisation responsible for NEETs. Connexions played three crucial roles in relation to the engagement of young people who were either NEET or in danger of becoming NEET. Firstly, the service provided young people with impartial information, advice and guidance that could inform their engagement in learning and labour markets. This role was undertaken with both those young people who were judged to be in danger of becoming NEET, whilst they were in education and with those who were currently NEET. Secondly, Connexions provided a visible point of re-engagement for NEET young people who wished to find out about jobs and training. The Connexions brand was well known with many services maintaining a high street presence. Finally, because Connexions services were measured on their ability to reduce NEET numbers they played an active advocacy role on behalf of young people. Connexions services provided an interface between young people, employment and the wide range of new learning opportunities which were developed by New Labour. The service at least partially covered the dual aims of prevention and management.

Much of Connexions work was undertaken in schools where Personal Advisers were providing career advice and transitional support for vulnerable young people to preempt NEET outcomes. Although ostensibly offering a universal service for all young people, Connexions' roots in the Social Exclusion Unit determined its focus as working with those who were or were in danger of becoming socially excluded.

A range of criticisms has been made about the effectiveness of the Connexions service, the clarity of its objectives and the way in which a new professional role (the Personal Adviser) was grafted on to existing professionalisms (Watts 2001; Artaraz 2008; Milburn 2009). It is also notable that Connexions experienced challenges relating to both funding constraints (Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2010) and the organisations' wide and shifting remit (Sheehy, Kumrai, and Woodhead 2011). Not least of these challenges was the transfer of responsibility for Connexions to Local Authorities outlined in the Youth Matters green paper and effected by 2008 to create a range of different delivery models across England (Watts and McGowan 2007).

The management of young people who were classed as NEET was supported by a range of training initiatives such as those developed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) which developed Entry to Employment (E2E); a programme that was designed to provide opportunities for young people aged 16 and over who were not yet ready or able to take up a Modern Apprenticeship, further education or move

directly into employment. E2E was later remodelled to become Foundation Learning which had a greater emphasis on accredited and formal learning. E2E and Foundation Learning sought to achieve employability amongst young people, and some positive outcomes of these schemes (with some inconclusive findings) were reported in evaluation reports (Allan et al. 2011). Alongside these programmes ran efforts to create jobs through social enterprise schemes or intermediate labour market initiatives, an expansion of apprenticeships, and job support initiatives such as the Future Jobs Fund which ran from 2009 and, promisingly, was reported to generate positive outcomes for 43% of participants (Fishwick, Lane, and Gardiner 2011). Even before the general election brought in the Coalition Government, the LSC was dismantled and its functions allocated to the Skills Funding Agency (overseen by BIS) and the Young People's Learning Agency (overseen by DCSF).

In addition to the support and learning opportunities provided by Connexions and the LSC, the Labour government's portfolio of policies also included workfareist interventions that had elements of conditionality. The NDYP attempted to enforce entry into 'reasonable employment' with the threat of benefit withdrawal for 18 to 24 year olds who had been unemployed for longer than six months. Although the NDYP provided some important introductions to the labour market (Dorsett 2006), it did not work for all (Finn 2003) and was criticised amongst other things for 'parking' young people outside the unemployment statistics without necessarily providing them with long-term opportunities in employment.

As this brief summary of Labour's NEET policy demonstrates, this has been a policy area subject to serial evolutions of practice and priority characterised by the regular introduction of new initiatives. When combined with the divided government responsibility for the agenda, this made enactment of policy challenging for agencies and professionals who were constantly reshaping their ways of working and their partner relationships with other agencies. However, it is also notable that under Labour's regionalisation agenda, there were institutions that could take on the task of policy coordination, notably the Regional Development Agencies, working alongside the government offices for the regions, which were able to strategically manage and coordinate funding streams (notably through cofinancing arrangements to secure European Social Fund investments); and regional and supra-local infrastructure such as the Connexions service (managed by LSCs), Aimhigher and Education Business Partnerships. As the next section of this article will argue, much of this infrastructure has been removed under the Coalition Government.

NEET policy under the Coalition Government

The Coalition has identified youth unemployment as a concern but not one of its highest priorities. When the Coalition was forged, the section of the Coalition agreement (HM Government 2010) dealing with Jobs and Welfare was brief (342 words out of a 15,521 word document) and broadly picked up themes related to the Work Programme that originated from the Conservative manifesto. These were predominantly focused on the supply side of the labour market and included encouraging young people to stay in education and training, devolving financial responsibility for their learning to the individual and reviewing training provision to ensure it focussed on employability. Demand-side initiatives were also encouraged, most notably through the rapid expansion of apprenticeship opportunities.

In the early months of the Coalition Government, there was a concerted effort to dismantle much of the infrastructure of government created by the previous labour

administrations. This 'bonfire of the quango's' (The Guardian 2012) saw the rapid dissolution of the RDAs. Alongside this some of the key programmes fostered under the previous government either were withdrawn or had their funding cut; these included the EMA, and the effective Future Jobs Fund (Fishwick, Lane, and Gardiner 2011) alongside withdrawal of funding for Connexions organisations, Aimhigher partnerships, and Education Business Partnerships (Hooley and Watts 2011; Watts 2012). At the same time local authority funding allocations, previously used to support voluntary groups and wider youth support activities, were also being cut. One estimate is that the children, young people and families voluntary and community sector will lose a total of almost £405 million in statutory funding between 2011/2012 and 2015/2016 (Davies and Evans 2012). Whilst cuts were undertaken under the auspices of austerity and fiscal restraint, it created a vacuum into which employer-led LEPs and commercial contracts for national programmes (such as the Work Programme) could be introduced. It could be speculated that the vacuum was deliberately introduced to allow youth policy to be re-orientated towards the needs of employers and private sector providers of services and away from local authorities.

The issue of NEET young people was addressed in three key policy papers. The first *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* (HM Government 2011b), outlined the importance of social mobility to the government. In essence, it sought to create a narrative based around a 'life cycle approach', to yoke together fairly diverse government policies including *Sure Start*, school reforms and *Universal Credit*. It is notable that the section of the lifecycle concerned with NEET (called transition years) includes no new initiatives beyond those developed by the previous government (namely a *Participation Strategy* (RPA), apprenticeships and access to higher education) and that the government was in the process of cutting the *Connexions* and *Aimhigher* programmes that had been designed to support these agendas.

The second policy paper came from the Prime Minister's Office. Called *Supporting Youth Employment* (HM Government 2011b) it focuses on 16–24 year olds and was quickly followed in September 2011 by *Building Engagement, Building Futures* (HM Government 2011a), which also focuses on 16–24 and provides the response to how DfE, DWP and BIS would help to support youth employment. Some complementary material can be found in *Positive for Youth* (HM Government 2011c) which describes the policies being pursued by seven different government departments (focused on 13–19 and published in December 2011). It is important to note the use of the age of 24 as the boundary of 'youth' in these documents and to recognise that the concept of NEET is effectively being stretched upwards.

The documents produced by the Coalition Government locate the policy aims of government in relation to NEET as being to increase the participation of 16–24 year olds in EET as part of broader policies to improve 'social mobility and stimulate economic growth' (HM Government 2011a, 2). It is worth noting here that social mobility is frequently described in narrow and utilitarian terms as the ability to access higher education and develop the skills required for the economy, with the former unlikely to be an option for many young people who are NEET. HM Government (2011a, 2011d) set out five priorities for the government to pursue in relation to prevention and management for NEET young people:

- (1) Raising educational attainment in school and beyond so that that young people have the skills they need to compete in a global economy.

- (2) Helping local partners to provide effective and coordinated services that support all young people, including the most vulnerable, aim at full participation for 16–17 year olds by 2015.
- (3) Encouraging and incentivising employers to inspire and recruit young people by offering more high-quality apprenticeships and work experience places.
- (4) Ensuring that work pays and giving young people the personalised support they need to find it, through Universal Credit, the Work Programme and Get Britain Working measures.
- (5) Instituting a new Youth Contract worth almost £1 billion over the next three years to help get young people learning or earning.

The Youth Contract was announced as the Coalition Government's flagship policy on NEET and youth unemployment (Department for Work and Pensions 2014) and builds on and operationalises many of the ideas set out in Building Engagement, Building Futures (HM Government 2011a). The form of the contract has changed with amendments to the employer subsidy element announced in 2014 (Mirza-Davies 2014). The Deputy Prime Minister described youth unemployment as 'a ticking time bomb for the economy and our society as a whole' (Clegg 2012) and was strongly associated with the development of the Youth Contract. Although the Youth Contract is rooted in the DWP, it is an initiative of the office of the Deputy Prime Minister and operates cross-departmentally including involvement from DFE and BIS. The Youth Contract was launched in April 2012 and is primarily for the 18–24 age group although there is also a 16–18 Youth Contract. Key elements are the promotion of apprenticeships, incentives for employers to train and employ young people, and initiatives to help young people to develop employability skills through work placements. The use of employer subsidies (Hamersma 2008), work experience (Holliswood, Egdell, and McQuaid 2012) and various kinds of intermediate labour markets (Ali 2011) are well-established approaches for tackling youth unemployment and were key features of Labour government policy in this area (Tonge 1999). Similarly, it would be difficult to see apprenticeships or the Youth Contract's NEET support programmes as offering new interventions. Building Engagement, Building Futures therefore draws from a similar set of NEET prevention and management strategies to those enacted under Labour.

Young people who are NEET can also access the Work Programme after a referral from Jobcentre Plus. The Work Programme is designed to provide flexible support to people to take them off benefits and into work. Delivered by private sector 'prime contractors', the programme has a number of target groups including Jobseekers aged 18–24 who have been claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) for nine months, and Jobseekers with significant disadvantage (for example young people previously not in education, employment or training) who can volunteer to be referred after three months on JSA. The support can range from counselling to work trials, placements and paying for qualifications or equipment. The contractors claim funding from DWP only after a jobseeker has been placed in employment that has lasted for three or six months. Payment for results is a radical approach introduced by the Coalition Government on a scale hitherto unrealised. The government's evaluation of the scheme points to the challenges of introducing such radical change (Foster et al. 2014), whilst other commentators suggest that it has done nothing to address the profound structural issues that prevent some young people from accessing the labour market (Rees, Whitworth, and Carter 2014). Whilst many of the measures enacted by

Labour and Coalition Governments utilise a similar toolkit, the way in which they are enacted are quite different. The loss of regional governance that supported sub-regional and local infrastructures has created a situation where a new localism is developing alongside centralisation. The successors of the LSC demonstrate this centralising tendency. When the LSC was disbanded, its successor organisations the Skills Funding Agency and the Young People's Learning Agency were established. The former still exists to oversee funding for adult learning – generally meaning those over 19 years of age. The latter, however, was short-lived and replaced by the Education Funding Agency (EFA) which has a remit that includes provision for capital and revenue spend for young people from the age of three. EFA funding, alongside other (albeit diminishing) resources from the European Union continue to be used to support re-engagement and re-skilling projects for young people who become NEET.

Concurrently, the Coalition Government has been ideologically committed to localism as observed by Lowndes and Pratchett (2012). Whilst this can allow for a more responsive and flexible service, it can also result in a 'postcode lottery' of support available, as can be seen in the post-Connexions landscape of provisions for youth (House of Commons Education Committee 2013; Hooley, Matheson, and Watts 2014; Langley, Hooley, and Bertuchi 2014). In practice, this has meant that local authorities have seen a significant shift in the way their duty to support young people who are NEET has been enacted. In fact, the responsibilities of local authorities regarding their duty to support young people who are NEET have changed little between governments being focussed on the identification of need by tracking young people using the National Client Caseload Information System, alongside preventative interventions in schools and the provision of sufficient interventions to re-engage those who are actually NEET at the earliest opportunity (Department for Education 2014). Their operational context under the Coalition Government is, however, very different. In essence, local councils are being asked to take a strategic role at a time of fiscal constraint, job loss and the loss of a wider infrastructure related to NEET (most notably, Connexions). This has meant that LAs face a serious challenge regarding the extent to which they can operationalise the government's NEET policy.

The tensions between local authority led and managed interventions and those of centrally commissioned services was reported in the early evaluation of the Youth Contract (Newton et al. 2014). Local authority led pilots developed different delivery structures (involving partnership working with colleges and grant or commissioned support from local youth organisations) compared with more direct delivery from the prime providers. As with the Work Programme, the payment by results model proved challenging as most impacts were soft impacts on confidence or ambition, whereas payment was for sustained engagement in education or employment. Despite the different operational structures, all engagement strategies focussed on establishing 'key worker' relationships with young people who were NEET or at risk of becoming NEET. Key workers would broker routes back into education. Interesting though, in only one of the delivery areas was a career guidance approach used. The parallels between the role of the Youth Contract key work and the Connexions personal adviser are clear but the former stop short of providing support that is unambiguously impartial. Opportunity providers were involved in the brokering relationship but this was predominantly for college or training places – in only one area were efforts made to bring employers into contact with potential young employees (Newton 2014, 76).

This illustrates one of the main ironies in the Coalition's localisation agenda which is that whilst policy describes solutions as being essentially local, local agencies are poorly resourced and frequently frozen out of decisions about the contracting of services, which are often done at a national level by central government departments such as DWP or their agencies such as the YPLA who manage the Work Programme and the Youth Contract, respectively. The Government (HM Treasury 2013) has reaffirmed local authority responsibility to support young people into education and training in its response to Lord Heseltine's (2012) report *No Stone Unturned*. But whilst it states that (non-ringfenced) central grants will be available, it also says that a role is being considered for LEPs rather than local authorities themselves in the allocation of funds, and indeed LEPs have subsequently been given the responsibility of building strategies and implementation plans for the disbursement of both ESF and ERDF funds with the associated draw down of match funding from government and government agencies. Consequently LAs have accountability for the impact of programmes over which they have little direct responsibility. The Local Government Association (2012) has campaigned strongly to gain influence in the contracting and management of these kinds of programmes.

In the meantime, the local repercussions of these policy changes are significant. There has been widespread concern over the loss of Connexions Personal Advisers with their skills in working with vulnerable young people and their local professional networks (Hooley and Watts 2011; Langley, Hooley, and Bertuchi 2014). There is no clear overview of how many of the Connexions personnel remain as part of the support structures for young people, but it is evident that there have been redundancies and that there are considerable differences in the way that local authorities have managed the change often influenced by the pattern of delivery that had been established in their area (McGowan, Watts, and Andrews 2011). In some areas former PAs have moved into LA multi-agency teams and are developing new ways of working in a 'Team Around the Child' approach to support services for vulnerable children and their families (O'Loughlin and O'Loughlin 2012), whilst others are employed by the 'prime contractors' to deliver the Work Programme.

The trend for national direction and commissioning of locally delivered contracts is clear, but policy moves to shift both resources and local discretion back to areas is also evident. The Cabinet Office sponsored City Deals, for example, are funding packages awarded to cities to deliver against plans prepared by local authorities, business leaders and other stakeholders that often include a skills element and support for young people within them. Meanwhile, the Heyward Review re-emphasised the importance of local solutions to youth unemployment (Wilson 2013). The underlying intention here is to re-engage business to support demand-side provision by clearer articulation of their skills needs leading to more relevant training and learning opportunities, and more apprenticeship and work placement opportunities.

The consequences of these changes will impact upon young people who remain only loosely connected to the labour market, whilst they are still aged 17 or 18 and who were excluded from the Heyward Review (Wilson 2013). Statutory guidance makes it clear that whilst local authorities have a role to manage and target support and provision and to track young people's activities, the duty to engage is actually on the young person and not the local authority or learning provider.

Discussion and conclusions

There is much in the Coalition policy platform that is recognisable as New Labour policy, including the focus on education and skills, support for the vulnerable, apprenticeships and benefits conditionality. Compared to Labour, the Coalition has reinforced the attempt to locate responsibility firstly with the individuals, secondly with the businesses and local government structures with which they interact and only in the last resort with the national state. As young people who are classified as NEET get older and as policy responds to that phenomenon, we see policy emphasis moving between government departments. The big policy shifts that are driving change are largely outside the frame of NEET policy and include the considerable energy that has been invested in school reform and in the introduction of the Work Programme. What remains between these two bigger initiatives are largely continuations of existing policies. It is possible therefore to conclude that the differences between how NEET has been discussed by the former Labour governments and the current Coalition Government are relatively small. Both focus on supply-side deficiencies and both are developed in the context of social mobility, skills and employability. The question remains whether under the Coalition this economic utilitarianism has crowded out the social justice aspects of welfare to work policies.

Russell, Simmons, and Thompson (2011) argued that government strategies under Labour were heavily focused on individual supply-side solutions to the 'problem' of NEET young people and were unwilling to consider the role of the demand side of the labour market. This supply-side focus has been continued under the Coalition Government through policies which view an exit from NEET status as primarily an individual rather than a social good. This conception justifies the decision to remove public funding from programmes such as the EMA and Connexions and to squarely place the responsibility for their NEET status with young people themselves. Research into NEETs' perspective suggests, however, that the expectation of proactive and rational decision-making and behaviour cannot be taken for granted amongst youths attempting to navigate through education, employment and training (Cieslik and Simpson 2013).

Nonetheless, although the Coalition has used similar rhetorical justification to its predecessor and worked within a similar active labour market policy framework, there have been important differences in the way such policies have been enacted. Responsibility for addressing NEET now largely resides with the underpowered LAs, with some strategic coordination from the emergent Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) which, despite a democratic deficit that has gone largely unchallenged, at least in part represent business sectors and wider stakeholders. For example, the LEPs have been significant players in the negotiations of City Deal packages for some of the major cities outside London, which includes funding to address youth unemployment (LEP Network 2013). However, such examples serve to demonstrate the way in which funding has been centralised, with localities now required to bid on a project basis.

The resources for programmes to address NEET have been routinely divorced from the localities and collected under the centrally contracted arrangements such as the Youth Contract. This in turn raises important questions about how the scale of the Youth Contract compares with previous youth initiatives in this area. There has certainly been concern that the Youth Contract could not provide young people in England with the kind of support that equivalent European governments are providing their young people through the Youth Guarantee. This has led the House of Lords to call on government to redirect funding away from the Youth Contract towards a

Youth Guarantee (House of Lords 2014). Given the overall politics of austerity, there is a distinct suspicion that the relabeling and rearranging of older policies is an attempt to mask a reduction in funding and support. The divorcing of responsibility for NEET (which resides in the Local Authorities) from the programmes which are proposed as responses to it suggests that the attempts to create cross-departmental strategies have not been successful and that there is hollowness in the Government's rhetoric of localism.

Such criticisms could be deflected if there was anything new in the organisation and integration of the pieces of the Youth Contract or the Work Programme that would make them more likely to be effective than prior initiatives. The initial analysis undertaken in this article seems to suggest that this is not the case and that the picture of less coordination and less resourcing may result in a less effective preventative system for NEET young people. Management of young NEETs increasingly focuses on those aged 18 years plus, and they are primarily supported through the workfareist approaches sponsored by DWP and the deficit support model captured by the Cabinet Office's Youth Contract. Interventions for those who are in their 17th and 18th year are the responsibility of a local authority, who are also responsible for tracking and monitoring numbers of disengaged young people. The question of whether this is sufficient, and more broadly questions about the scale, organisation and effectiveness of new provision are critical areas for future research in this area. More importantly, answers to these questions are required if any fundamental difference is to be made to the lives of young people who are NEET.

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