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# Rapid Evidence Review: Supporting young people who are not in employment, education or training to achieve their goals: young people's thinking and behaviour

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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## Glossary

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Definition</b>
ACE	Adverse Childhood Experience
ALN	Additional Learning Needs
APS	Annual Population Survey
CfHI	Centre for Homelessness Impact
CfW	Communities for Work
CfW+	Communities for Work Plus
COM-B	Capabilities, Opportunity, Motivation – Behaviour
DBIS	Department for Business Innovation and Skills
DfE	Department for Education
EET	Employment, Education and/or Training
EPPI	Evidence for Policy & Practice Information
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IAG	Information and Guidance
JCP	Job Centre Plus
JGW+	Jobs Growth Wales Plus
JRF	Jospeh Rowntree Foundation
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LWI	Learning and Work Institute
MHCYP	Mental Health of Children and Young People
NAfW	National Assembly for Wales
NEET	Not in Education Training or Employment
NHS	National Health Service
PaCE	Parents Childcare and Employment
PHE	Public Health England
PHW	Public Health Wales
PLASC	Pupil Level Annual School Census
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
SFR	Statistical First Release
UK	United Kingdom
WBL	Work Based Learning
YEPF	Youth Engagement and Progression Framework

YPG	Young Persons Guarantee
YWT	Young Women's Trust

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Young Person's Guarantee (YPG) provides under 25s in Wales with the offer of support to gain a place in education or training, find a job or become self-employed. The aim of this review is to inform the development of the YPG and this first report aims to ensure that the YPG is tailored as much as possible to young people's needs by exploring the diverse and cross-cutting barriers that can hold young people back. It focuses upon the characteristics associated with a higher risk of disengaging from employment, education and training (EET) and considers how these characteristics can create barriers to engaging with EET. A second report focuses upon the evidence of what works in supporting young people who are not in employment, education and training (who are 'NEET') to overcome barriers and re-engage with EET.

### **The impacts of unemployment, economic inactivity and 'poor work' upon young people**

- 1.2. Unemployment and economic inactivity are associated with lower levels of well-being and poorer mental and physical health, the effects of which can persist through a lifetime (described as 'scarring') (Arulampalam et al., 2001). Similar negative impacts are associated with an early exit from education (Schuller, 2017)
- 1.3. The quality of education, training or employment also matters (Schuller, 2017; Taylor, 2017). Increasingly flexible labour markets, limited in-work training and the hollowing out of labour markets<sup>1</sup> has left many young people with low/no qualifications stuck in a cycle of poor work/no work (Scottish Government, 2021; Lloyd-Jones, 2005). Poor prior experiences of education or training (most notably school) discourage entry into further or higher education, meaning that some young people forego the opportunity to acquire the skills required to progress in the labour market (Welsh Government, 2022a).
- 1.4. There are particular concerns about some young people, such as those with physical or mental health difficulties and/or conditions like autism, who can struggle with the

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<sup>1</sup> The hollowing out of labour markets describes the loss of intermediate level jobs in sectors such as manufacturing alongside the expansion of low skilled and poorly paid jobs at the bottom of the wage distribution, such as jobs in social care and services, and highly skilled, highly paid jobs at the top of the wage distribution.

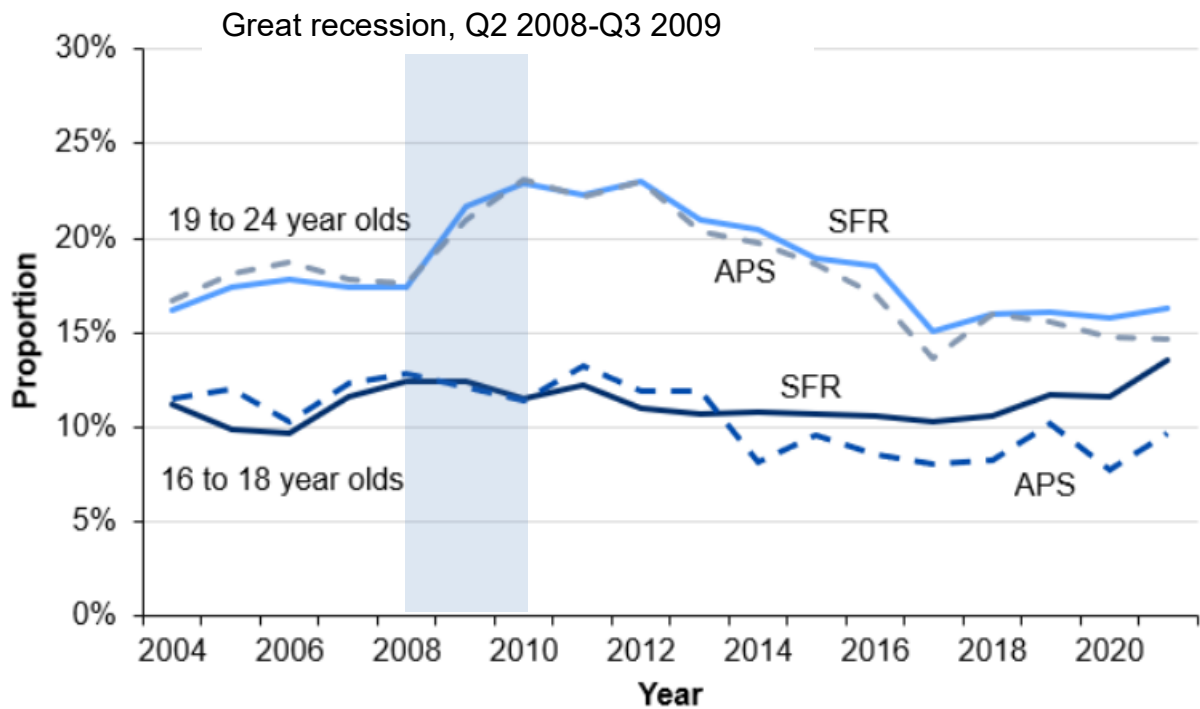


transition from school into EET and become increasingly socially and economically isolated. They are 'seldom heard' and often fearful of officialdom (including the conditionality associated with welfare), so may not present at Jobcentres, Careers Wales, or local authority services, and therefore are less likely to access employment support programmes. They can lose confidence and skills gained through education and, in some cases, become increasingly disabled as a result (Welsh Government, 2019).

### **Young people who are not in employment education or training and the economy**

- 1.5. Young people are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns (DBIS, 2015) and, as figure 1.1 illustrates, the percentage of young people aged 19-24 who are not in employment education or training (NEET) tends to increase when economic conditions worsen. Such increases occurred during the great recession (2008-2010) and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even when the economy is growing and close to full employment (as in 2004-05 (UK Parliament, 2015), the percentage of 19- to 24-year-olds who are NEET remains stubbornly high. The percentage of 16 to 18 year olds who are NEET is consistently lower (and less influenced by economic conditions) but stubbornly stable. Successive policy initiatives have struggled to lower this base rate by more than a few percentage points, although it could also be argued that, in the absence of policy initiatives such as the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF) (discussed below), rates would be higher.

**Chart 1.1. Young people not in employment, education or training, 2004-2021 (provisional)**



Source: Young people in Wales not in education, employment or training, 2004-2021, Welsh Government, 2022

SFR – Statistical First Release <sup>2</sup>; APS – Annual Population Survey <sup>3</sup>.

### The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

1.6. During the COVID-19 pandemic young people were at less risk of suffering severe physical illness but exposed to high risks of economic and social harms (Senedd, 2020) including:

- loss of opportunities, as they were more likely to work in sectors/roles affected by shutdowns (McCurdy, 2020) while those in education or training and, particularly,

<sup>2</sup> The Statistical First Release (SFR) is considered ‘the most robust estimate of young people who are NEET’. It is based upon education data (including schools - the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC); further education and work-based learning (WBL) - Lifelong Learning Wales Record and the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Open University data); population estimates and the Annual Population Survey (APS) (which is used to estimate the proportion of those not in education or training who are unemployed or inactive) (Welsh Government, 2020a).

<sup>3</sup> The APS is a combined survey of households in Great Britain and collects data on social and socio-economic variables, including individuals’ economic activity. It is not directly comparable with the SFR, and ‘changes between consecutive rolling year estimates should not be used’ (ibid).

work based learning (WBL) experienced significant disruption (Welsh Government, 2021b; Welsh Government, 2021e);

- loss of motivation, as people's lives were put on hold and they were told to stay at home, Jobcentre Plus (JCP) offices closed, job vacancies fell sharply, and welfare conditionality was suspended; and
- a decline in their capabilities, as mental health difficulties increased (PHW, 2022a).

1.7. The disruption to education and labour markets derailed some young people's transition to further EET and tended to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities linked to, for example, socio-economic deprivation and/or additional learning needs (ALN) (Geraghty and Lyons, 2021; Welsh Government, 2020b; IFS, 2020)<sup>4</sup>. The pandemic severed some people's links to school, college or WBL and the retreat to their homes during lockdown meant their comfort zones shrank. They missed out on opportunities to build their confidence, skills and resilience and the rise in mental health difficulties, such as anxiety, has made it harder for some to re-join their pre-pandemic pathway to further EET. The pandemic with its disruption of education and restriction of new job opportunities (as job vacancies fell so sharply during the initial lockdowns) may also have contributed to an increase in the percentage of post-16 learners continuing in learning (although early dropout rates also increased), and a decline in the number in sustained employment (Welsh Government, 2023c).

1.8. Although, as noted, unemployment and economic inactivity rose during the pandemic, unemployment did not rise as sharply as forecast, due to government interventions such as the furlough scheme (UK Parliament, 2021c). Since lockdowns ended, the labour market has rebounded but, although job vacancies have risen, employment in Wales remains below pre-pandemic levels and economic inactivity has risen (Welsh Government, 2021a). Looking forward, there is great deal of uncertainty about economic prospects and the risk of recession is still present (Bank of England, 2022), suggesting the numbers of young people aged 19-24 who are NEET may increase again.

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<sup>4</sup> Post-16 learner destination data highlights lower sustained destination rates for young people with SEN and those eligible for free school meals (Welsh Government, n.d.)

## **Policy Context**

1.9. The [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act](#) aims to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. It sets out seven national goals, including a more prosperous and more equal Wales. In support of these goals, [the 2022 Employability and Skills Plan](#) aims to bring together Welsh Government led employability programmes to deliver a new single operating model<sup>5</sup> from 2023. It also focuses upon:

- supporting young people by investing in and strengthening ‘the whole system approach to delivering the Young Persons Guarantee’ (YPG);
- reducing economic inequality and increasing participation in the skills system for disabled people and ethnic minority groups;
- supporting people with a long-term health condition into work; and
- promoting fair work for all.

### *The Young Persons Guarantee*

1.10. The YPG is the Welsh Government’s commitment to support young people to access EET (including self-employment) (Welsh Government, 2022a) to, for example, enhance young people’s:

- motivation and capability to search for and apply for jobs, via JCP, the Careers Wales website and Working Wales;
- capability to take up EET opportunities by developing the skills, knowledge and experience demanded by employers, through access to training via JGW+ and apprenticeships, or to start a business via Business Wales/Big Ideas Wales; and
- access to employment opportunities via wage incentives through ReAct+ (18+) and mentoring support, training and barriers funding via the Communities for Work Plus (CfW+).

### *The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework*

1.11. The YEPF aims to reduce the number of young people who are NEET through early identification and prevention. It was refocused in 2022 upon early identification of

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<sup>5</sup> this model aims to bring together existing programmes such as ReAct+, Community Employability Programmes and Jobs Growth Wales Plus.

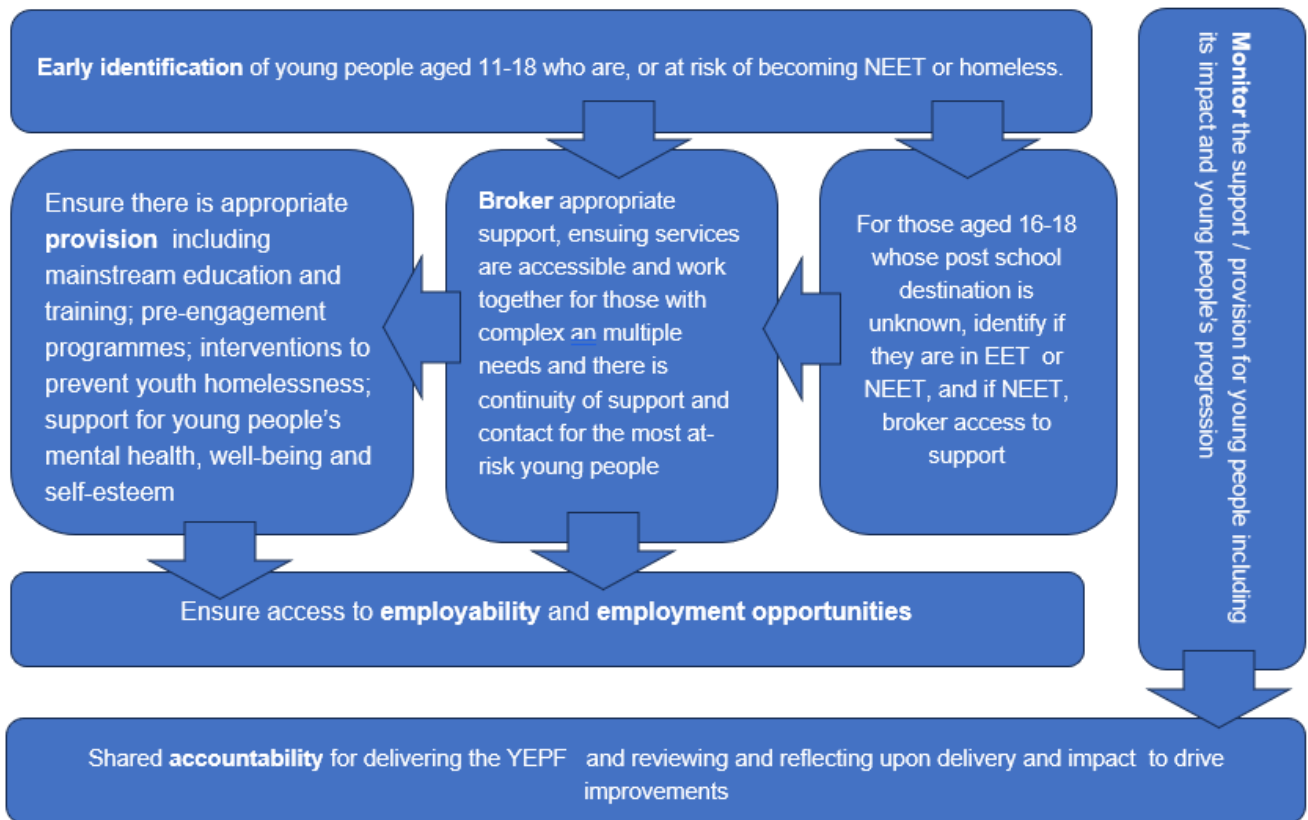
young people aged 11 to 18 (rather than those aged 16 to 25 as it was when initially launched in 2013) who are at risk of becoming NEET and/or homeless.<sup>6</sup> The YEPF and YPG therefore overlap for young people aged 16 to 18, to help provide a ‘safety net’ during the critical period when young people make transitions from, for example, school to college or to employment (Welsh Government, 2022b).

- 1.12. The YEPF has six core components: early identification, brokerage, monitoring progression, provision employability and employment opportunities, and accountability, illustrated by figure 1.1. below

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<sup>6</sup> Homelessness is included because of the overlap between risk factors for homelessness and the risk factors associated with an increased risk of being NEET.

**Figure 1.1. The key components of the YEPF**



Source: Figure created for the review

### **Aims and objectives of the research**

1.13. As outlined in the specification for this study:

‘It is essential that the Welsh Government understands the diverse and cross-cutting barriers that can prevent a young person who is economically inactive, but would like to work, from reaching their employment goals. Such work would be essential to inform future policy development on the rationale and effectiveness of the YPG and ensure it is tailored as much as possible to what our young people need. Timely and up-to-date evidence is needed to ensure the YPG can be most effective for young people with Protected Characteristics and/or face additional barriers to making the most of current employment support.’

1.14. The Rapid Evidence Review is structured in two stages. The objective of the first, stage, the focus of this report, is to identify ‘what are the cross-cutting barriers that young people who are economically inactive but want to pursue, and sustain,

education training and employment, face in the current climate?’ (including the current cost-of-living crisis and the impacts of the recent pandemic). The second stage is a synthesis of evidence on how government policy and initiatives can best meet these holistic needs and support people to meet, and sustain, their education and work-related goals.

### **This report**

1.15. Following this introductory section:

- section 2 outlines the approach and methodology;
- section 3 discusses the evidence about the characteristics of young people who are NEET – or more likely to be NEET;
- section 4 introduces the COM-B model of behavioural change to explore how the different characteristics discussed in section 3 can shape young people’s capabilities, opportunities and/or access to opportunities;
- section 5 discusses the importance of co-occurrence, the theory of intersectionality, which can be used to explore how different characteristics interact with each other; and
- section 6 outlines the study conclusion and implications for policy.

## 2. Methodology

- 2.1. As the main area of interest to the review (i.e. barriers) is a well-researched area, this was primarily a 'review of reviews' (Breckon, 2016). It focused upon reviews and research in Wales and the other UK nations undertaken in the last 15 years, complemented by a purposive review of selected studies and data. The priority groups identified during the scoping phase included "disabled people, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people and those with health conditions [who] continue to be significantly underrepresented in the labour market" (Welsh Government, 2022a, p.6). The search protocol and the strengths and limitations of the approach are discussed below.

### Search protocol

- 2.2. The search terms used were: Review OR Evidence AND "young people" AND Employment OR NEET OR Barriers.
- 2.3. The search terms were used to search Google.co.uk; Google Scholar and The Evidence for Policy & Practice Information (EPPI) centre. In addition the SITE search function was used to search specific websites including: gov.wales; gov.scot; gov.uk; and nidirect.gov.uk/ to include material published by the UK nations and also the Youth Futures Foundation website and Learning and Work Institute and Wales Centre for Public Policy websites. Details of the search results are included in the appendix.

### *Inclusion criteria*

- 2.4. Based upon a review of the title and abstract the review only included material that met the following inclusion criteria:
- was published in the last 15 years (i.e. since 2007); AND
  - was a literature review that focused:
    - upon the barriers that young people (16-25) who are NEET / at risk of becoming NEET face; OR
    - described the characteristics of young people who are NEET / at risk of becoming NEET (for example young mothers, disabled people) (as studies could discuss characteristics without discussing barriers); AND



- was focused upon young people in the UK (so we exclude, for example, EU studies that did not include the UK, on the basis that differences in the context between the UK and EU countries may mean findings are not transferable).

-

2.5. We did not include primary research studies (for example, interviews with young people) unless they:

- involved primary research to identify the barriers for ‘seldom heard’ groups, such as disabled young people who are NEET or young people with ALN or mental health difficulties who are NEET; AND
- involved primary research including young people in Wales; AND
- were published in the last ten years.

2.6. Given the breadth (and anticipated sensitivity) of research terms, once saturation was reached and searches were no longer generating new or relevant results, they were stopped.

#### *Purposive review of selected research and data*

2.7. The purposive review focused upon areas or issues of particular interest to the study, which might not be adequately covered in the existing literature (and therefore potentially missed in the review of reviews); this focused upon identifying:

- the experiences of seldom heard groups, such as young people with mental health difficulties; young people from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups, young people with ALN or other impairments and/or physical or mental health conditions and those with caring responsibilities (including young carers);
- evidence about the impact of and/or co-occurrence of different characteristics of interest to the study such as mental ill health and socioeconomic disadvantage<sup>7</sup>; and
- Welsh data or, where not available, UK or English data (as a proxy), about the size, composition and characteristics of different groups of young people who

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<sup>7</sup> the evidence on co-occurrence which was not limited to the literature around young people who were / at risk of becoming NEET. This included some older literature, such as Lloyd-Jones (2005), of particular relevance to the Welsh context or considered core to understanding key concepts, such as Bourdieu (1984) (on cultural capital) and Jones (2005) (on young people’s thinking and behaviour).

are NEET and the barriers they face. This included data from the YPG National Conversation (Welsh Government, 2023a).

2.8. This was used to identify:

- the characteristics and identities associated with a higher risk of being NEET (such as being disabled);
- the extent to which these intersect with other barriers or risk factors (such as having low or no qualifications); and
- their impact; for example, how being disabled and having low qualifications impacts upon young people’s capabilities, motivations and access to opportunities and upon their behaviours.

#### *Evaluating the quality, coverage and relevance of the data*

2.9. In order to ensure the desk-based review did not include studies whose findings may not be valid (i.e. inaccurate) the quality of studies was assessed to consider both:

- internal validity (i.e. whether the study findings are accurate or, for example, the data accurately describes the population of interest); and
- external validity (i.e. whether the study findings can be generalised to other contexts).

2.10. The review assessed the ‘trustworthiness’ of qualitative research by considering its ‘credibility’<sup>8</sup>, ‘dependability’<sup>9</sup>, ‘confirmability’<sup>10</sup> and ‘transferability’<sup>11</sup> (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and the ‘validity and reliability of quantitative research data’<sup>12</sup> (Bryman, 2016).

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<sup>8</sup> Credibility relies on how well the data describes the object of study and, for example, that respondents’ views and interpretations would match those of researchers and is analogous to the concept of internal validity. It encompasses confidence that the results are accurate, that they are believable and, for example, they make sense and are coherent. Credibility can be built through the use of approaches such as triangulation, the likely strength of the research methods (e.g. prolonged engagement can build credibility) and discussing and confirming findings with others.

<sup>9</sup> Dependability is similar to the concept of reliability and describes how likely it is that findings would be repeated. Transparency in how research was conducted can give confidence that findings are dependable.

<sup>10</sup> Confirmability describes the extent to which it is likely that findings are neutral or unbiased and would be corroborated or confirmed by other researchers. Clearly demonstrating how findings are drawn from the data can help build trust in its confirmability.

<sup>11</sup> Transferability is similar to the concept of external validity and describes how likely it is that findings can be generalised – or transferred to other contexts. An assessment of the potential transferability of findings can be supported by rich or ‘thick’ descriptions of the context and generative mechanisms, so that their likelihood of operating in different contexts can be considered.

<sup>12</sup> For example, by considering sample sizes and characteristics (where relevant) to consider possible biases in the sample and the measures used (see e.g. UK Parliament, 2020).

## **The strengths and weakness of the evidential base**

- 2.11. The evidence included in the review is fairly broad, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data generated using different methods (including ethnographic studies, rich qualitative research, quantitative analysis of secondary data, systematic review and meta-analysis, evidence reviews, and evaluative research).
- 2.12. The findings from different studies are generally consistent, providing greater confidence in their validity, although there are areas of dispute over, for example, the salience, and even existence, of low aspirations (Watkins, 2019).
- 2.13. The findings from other parts of the UK are similar to those from studies in Wales (see e.g. Watkins, 2019; UK Parliament, 2021a), providing greater confidence in their transferability. There is some discussion (in the literature reviewed) of the impact of the great recession (2008-09), but while the severity was greater than previous recessions, its impact upon young people does not appear especially atypical. There is also some discussion (in the most recent literature) about the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which indicates some key changes in the context compared to earlier periods; in particular:
- the relative economic impacts upon young people were greater than in previous recessions, as younger workers were more likely to work in the sectors that were hardest hit by the pandemic and policy responses like the series of national and local lockdowns (see e.g. McCurdy, 2020);
  - there was substantial disruption of education and training during the pandemic, with WBL particularly badly affected, which slowed learners' progression (including, for example, their acquisition of essential and social and emotional skills) (see e.g. Estyn, 2022); and
  - young people's mental health is likely to have worsened, albeit in a context of longstanding concerns about declines in young people's mental health (PHW, 2022b).
- 2.14. This does not invalidate earlier research but may mean, for example, that earlier research does not fully represent (or capture) the impact of poor mental health upon young people, or the impact of periods of unemployment early in the life course, increasing the risk of 'scarring' effects, discussed in section 3.
- 2.15. The key gaps and weaknesses in the evidential base relate to:

- the difficulty in identifying groups of young people defined by multiple characteristics, given the gaps in the quantitative data;
- the lack of quantitative and, to a smaller degree, qualitative data on how different characteristics interact, increasing or decreasing a young person's likelihood of being NEET; and
- the lack of quantitative data on some characteristics associated with an increased risk of being NEET, particularly more subjective characteristics, such as a lack of motivation or loss of hope or expectation, which are not identified by key data sets such as the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

### **3. The characteristics of young people who are NEET**

#### **Introduction**

- 3.1. Quantitative and qualitative data (such as data generated through surveys and interviews with young people who are NEET) identifies a range of characteristics<sup>13</sup> associated with an increased risk that a young person will be NEET. Where Wales specific data is not available, UK or English data is used as a proxy.

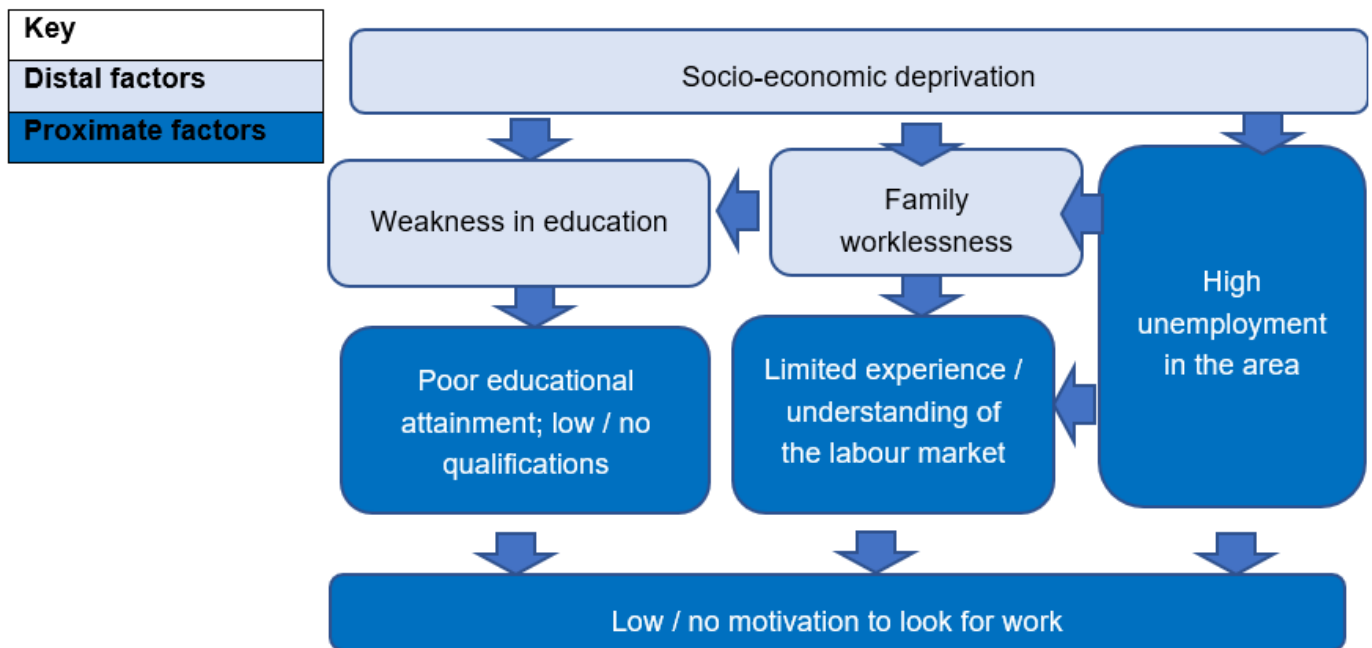
#### **Proximate and distal factors**

- 3.2. As figure 3.1. illustrates, some of these characteristics, such as living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), are 'distal' or underlying factors (or causes), which contribute to a young person's likelihood of being NEET. Other characteristics, such as low qualifications, are 'proximate', or more immediate, factors, which directly contribute to a young person's likelihood of being NEET and which are usually shaped by distal factors.

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<sup>13</sup> The report considers 'barriers' but focuses primarily upon the 'characteristics' of young people associated with a higher risk of becoming NEET (and uses this language throughout). This is arguably more than a semantic distinction, as barriers imply an obstacle to an action or an outcome. Sometimes this is clear; for example, where there are few employment opportunities or a young person experiences discrimination. However, the nature of the obstacle created by some of the characteristics identified by the research as associated with a higher risk of becoming NEET, such as coming from a workless household, are less obvious. Moreover, the language of barriers can be unhelpful when trying to understand why some young people overcome a 'barrier', such as having low qualifications or a caring responsibility, that other young people seemingly cannot overcome.

**Figure 3.1. Examples of distal and proximate factors which contribute to a young person’s likelihood of being NEET**



Source: Figure created for the review

3.3. As figure 3.1. illustrates, the boundaries between distal and proximate factors are not always clear cut. A factor such as high unemployment, can operate as both:

- a proximate (or immediate) factor that directly contributes to worklessness (as young people find it difficult to find work); and
- a distal factor, whose impact is transmitted through other factors, such as family worklessness (as family members are more likely to be out of work in areas of high unemployment), which can in turn impact upon educational attainment (and young people’s capabilities) and also mean that young people have limited experience and understanding of the labour market, which can in turn undermine young people’s motivation to look for work (Gregg, et al, 2017).

### **Socio-economic disadvantage and Adverse Childhood Experiences**

3.2. Growing up in a socio-disadvantaged area, growing up in a workless household and ACEs were the most commonly cited distal factors in the literature reviewed. These factors also frequently overlap (or co-occur) in the lives of young people who are NEET. Experiences of growing up in care, while less commonly identified, also has similar effects.

### *Socio-economic disadvantage*

3.3. Growing up in a socio-disadvantaged area and/or areas with high levels of unemployment were identified as risk factors in seven of the studies reviewed (Russell and Thompson, 2022; UK Parliament, 2021a; DfE, 2018; PHE, 2014; Britton et al., 2011; Welsh Government, 2013; IFS, 2009). Eligibility for free school meals has been used as proxy measure for this and is correlated with a higher risk of being NEET (Welsh Government, 2013); for example, analysis of matched data from the Welsh Government Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) and the Careers Wales Pupil Destinations Survey (2011) identified that:

- pupils that live in the most deprived areas were over five times more likely to become NEET than pupils living in the least deprived areas.
- pupils who are eligible for free school meals were almost three times more likely to become NEET than pupils who are not eligible (Welsh Government, 2013, p.24).

3.4. Learners from socio-economically disadvantaged areas can also struggle to access, sustain participation in, and achieve in post-16 education and training (Estyn, 2011).

3.5. Nevertheless, as Public Health England identify, ‘the majority, even of those living in poverty, in deprived neighbourhoods and in areas with high unemployment, do not become NEET, particularly if they are under the age of 18’ (PHE, 2014).

### *The impact of experience of socio-economic disadvantage and co-occurrence*

3.6. Living in a socio-economically disadvantaged area can limit young people’s access to employment opportunities (given weaknesses in local labour markets) and also the quality of education opportunities (given the association between deprivation and school quality) (see e.g. Estyn, 2014; LSE, 2004). Limited economic opportunities can also contribute to perceptions (real or misplaced) that young people would be better off on benefits than working, reducing their motivation (UK Parliament, 2021a) and learners from socio-economically disadvantaged households can struggle with the financial costs associated with participation in post-16 education and training (Estyn, 2011).

3.7. Socio-economic disadvantage is also often linked to other risk factors which can add to or compound the challenges young people face, such as:

- family worklessness and poor educational experiences (LWI, 2018b);
- choices about post-16 pathways, with, for example, lower rates of participation in higher education, amongst young people from socio-economically disadvantaged areas, such as areas with higher levels of deprivation, or with parents with lower levels of education or from lower socio-economic groups (HESA, 2023); and

- ill health and disability (IOHE, 2020).

### *Socio-economic class*

3.8. Socio-economic class is also highlighted by some studies; for example, the Learning and Work Institute report that:

‘More than three in four (76 per cent) of those in the highest socio-economic group (AB) said education had prepared them very or quite well for work, compared to just over half (56 per cent) of those in the lowest socio-economic group (DE)’ (LWI, 2018b, p.24).

3.9. Like socio-economic disadvantage, socio-economic class is a distal factor that can affect other risk factors such as access to Information and Guidance (IAG) about EET opportunities (given links between class and social capital and parental knowledge and experiences, discussed below) and which is associated with other factors, such as socio-economic disadvantage and low educational attainment (and therefore skills and qualifications) which can add to, or compound, the challenges young people face. It is also reasonable to infer that, given the links between class and cultural capital (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1984), socio-economic class can also affect young people’s capabilities.

### *Family worklessness*

3.10. Coming from a workless household was identified as a risk factor in seven studies (Welsh Government, 2013; MacMillan, 2011, Zuccotti and O’Reilly, 2019; PHE, 2014; Britton et al., 2011; DfE, 2018; PHE, 2014). One study (Welsh Government, 2013) also included having parent(s) who were in unskilled manual occupations as a risk factor.

### *The impact of family worklessness and the co-occurrence of risk factors*

3.11. The link between family worklessness and the risk of being NEET is not clear (in the literature reviewed). Macmillan (2011) attributes the link to the impact upon cognition and educational attainment and the inter-generational acquisition of social and emotional skills or ‘personality traits such as extroversion and agreeableness’. PHE (2014) report that some evidence shows that lack of parental ability to provide IAG about employment is more of a factor than (lack of) parental expectations or worklessness *per se*. Family worklessness is also associated with other risk factors, such as negative experiences of education and socio-economic disadvantage. However, there is little evidence (in the literature reviewed<sup>14</sup>) that cultural factors, such as intergenerational transmission of a culture of worklessness, are significant (DfE, 2018).

3.12. The importance of these other factors is supported by one study (using an intersectional approach) which identifies that while ‘on average, young people with workless parents

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<sup>14</sup> This does however feature in, for example, literature discussing welfare dependency (e.g. Murry, 1989).



have a higher likelihood of becoming NEET compared to individuals from households with at least one employed parent, this does not apply universally to all ethnic minority groups, nor equally to young men and women' (Zuccotti and O'Reilly, 2019, p.351); for example, the study identifies that:

'Indian, Bangladeshi and African young men who lived in workless households when aged 14 are doing better than their white British counterparts: on average, they have around 20 per cent points less chance of being NEET. A similar finding exists for Bangladeshi women, who are around 15 per cent points less likely to be NEET compared to their young white British counterparts' (Zuccotti and O'Reilly, 2019, p.364).

- 3.13. The study identifies that it is the intersection of different factors, such as ethnicity, gender and parental employment status, that influences outcomes. The study suggests that this may be linked to 'attitudinal and aspirational disposition of ethnic minorities' and also the strength of social networks but, given the study design focused upon outcomes, it does not untangle or explore the mechanisms through which these interactions shaped outcomes (Zuccotti and O'Reilly, 2019).

#### *Adverse Childhood Experiences*

- 3.14. ACEs such as bullying or abuse were identified in six of the studies reviewed (Tayfur et al., 2021; LWI, 2018a; Holmes et al., 2021; UK Parliament, 2021a; Russell and Thompson, 2022; DfE, 2018) and, as outlined below, are identified as distal factors that contribute to many other risk factors such as mental ill health and behavioural problems.

#### **Care experienced young people**

- 3.15. Experiences of care (looked after children) are identified as a risk factor in four studies (Welsh Government, 2013; PHE, 2014; UK Parliament, 2021a; NIACRO, 2015). For example, analysis of matched data from the Welsh Government PLASC and the Careers Wales Pupil Destinations Survey (2011) identified that pupils in care were around four times more likely to become NEET than other pupils (Welsh Government, 2013, p.24).

#### *The impact of experiences of care and the co-occurrence of risk factors*

- 3.16. Experiences of care are distal factors which can impact upon young people's social and emotional development, their education (and therefore acquisition of qualifications and skills) and their mental health (risk factors discussed above). It is also associated with a wide range of other risk factors including low aspirations, negative experience for school, poor quality educational provision (including weakness in support for ALN), low educational attainment, ACEs, placement instability and the low educational achievements of foster carers, narrow social networks, difficulties transitioning from foster care to

independent living and the failures of corporate parenting, which can add to or compound the challenges young people face (NAfW, 2015; UK Parliament, 2021a; NaFW, 2018).

### **Homelessness**

- 3.17. Homelessness was identified as a risk factor in three of the studies reviewed (DBIS, 2013; Welsh Government, 2013, PHE, 2014). As Public Health England (2014) identify, ‘for those who have inadequate housing [or] are homeless... it is often much harder to find the physical and economic resources required to access the labour market or to re-engage with education’ (ibid., p.25). This can also limit young people’s capability to search for work and their motivation and access to opportunities (as employers can be reluctant to interview or employ people who are homeless). Homelessness is also linked to other risk factors, such as an increased risk of mental health problems and/or substance misuse (see e.g. CHI, 2022).

### **Experiences of education and training**

- 3.18. Poor quality education and training, and less commonly, following a vocational pathway, are the other main distal factors identified in the literature reviewed. As outlined below, negative experiences of, and disengagement from, education are also associated with other distal factors such as social-economic disadvantage and ACE.

#### *Negative experiences of, and disengagement from, education*

- 3.19. Negative experience of schools are identified as a risk factor in seven studies (Welsh Government, 2013, PHE, 2014; Russell and Thompson, 2022; LWI 2021; DBIS, 2018; DfE, 2018); for example, PHE (2014) report that a ‘particular risk factor seems to be those who had poor school attendance or who were excluded. (ibid., p.13). Similarly, the YPG National Conversation (Welsh Government, 2023a) reports the accounts of a number of young people who felt school had “failed” them, and who consequently felt unprepared for the transition from school to (further or higher) EET.
- 3.20. Negative experiences are also described as ‘disengagement’ from school in the literature reviewed (Welsh Government, 2013). This is a distal factor, linked to other risk factors, including family characteristics, socio-economic position and the quality of schools, which are discussed in this section. Analysis of matched data from the Welsh Government PLASC and the Careers Wales Pupil Destinations Survey (2011) identified that:
- pupils with an attendance rate of 50 per cent or less are around 15 times more likely to become NEET than pupils with an attendance rate of 90 per cent or more; and

- pupils with an unauthorised absence rate of above 30 per cent are almost 11 times more likely to become NEET than pupils with an unauthorised absence rate of 10 per cent or less (Welsh Government, 2013, p.25).

3.21. The disruptive impact of the pandemic upon young people's education was also cited in some studies (see e.g. LWI 2021;).

*The impact of disengagement from education*

3.22. Disengagement from education before the age of 16 does not directly explain why young people are NEET (it is a distal factor) and two key transmission mechanisms are indicated by the literature. Disengagement contributes to:

- lower educational attainment (and therefore lower qualifications and skills, which can in turn limit access to EET opportunities); and
- young people's attitudes toward the relevance and benefits of further learning in the future (meaning they have more negative views and are less likely to engage in post-16 education or training).

*The effectiveness of, and experiences of, education and training*

3.23. Weakness in education and training provision are identified in three studies<sup>15</sup> (UK Parliament, 2021a; PHE, 2014; DfE, 2018). As outlined, this is a distal factor that was often linked to the impact upon young people's engagement with school, their skills and qualifications, social and emotional wellbeing and resilience and aspirations and knowledge of post-16 education and training opportunities and pathways. Weakness in education and training provision (including IAG) are also linked to the difficulties some young people experience in navigating the transition from education to employment (LWI, 2019a).

3.24. Attending alternative education, such as a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), is identified as a particular risk factor for an individual's likelihood of being NEET (UK Parliament, 2021a), albeit one correlated with many other risk factors, such as ALN, behavioural problems, experience of care, disengagement from school and poor educational attainment (and therefore low qualifications and skills), which can add to or compound the challenges young people face (NaFW, 2019).

3.25. While most studies focus upon experience of school, some research (included in the review) also considers post-16 education and training. This literature identifies some weaknesses (LWI, 2019a) including research highlighting the disruption of post-16

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<sup>15</sup> This can be characterised as 'ineffective' provision that fails to achieve goals, such as ensuring high levels of educational achievement and/or preparing learners for transitions onward to further (or higher) EET.

education and training caused by the pandemic (PHW, 2021a) but also strengths, such as greater access to support in post-16 education and training (LWI, 2021).

### *Vocational pathways*

- 3.26. Following a vocational pathway, such as completing a trade apprenticeship, was identified as a risk factor for women (but not men) in two of the studies reviewed (Holmes et al., 2021; McMillian, 2011) in the sense that female young people who followed a vocational pathway were exposed to a higher risk of being NEET compared to those following an academic pathway. McMillian (2011) suggests that ‘this could relate to different sorts of vocational qualifications followed by men and women, as well as unobserved differences for those following apprenticeships compared to those that do not’ (ibid., p.398).

### **No or low qualifications**

- 3.27. Having low or no qualifications was identified as a risk factor in ten of the studies reviewed: Russell and Thompson, 2022; DBIS, 2013; LWI, 2021; UK Parliament, 2021a; Britton et al., 2011; NIACRO, 2015; Welsh Government, 2013; Princes Trust, 2022; Holmes et al., 2021; PHE, 2014). Two studies draw upon the LFS and one (Holmes et al., 2021) includes a regression analysis that establishes there is a statistically significant relationship between low or no qualifications and a young person’s likelihood of being NEET. However, importantly, the authors also note that ‘the effect of qualifications on NEET status is not likely to be causal’ as those who leave education early will tend to have lower qualifications, rather than low qualifications being the reason they are not in education. They describe this as ‘reverse causality’ (ibid., p 398). This is an important point that helps explain lower rates of participation in education amongst those with lower qualifications. However, this does not necessarily explain why young people who leave education early and do not gain qualifications, do not enter employment or training (as leaving education early does not automatically block participation in employment or training). It also does not feature in other research<sup>16</sup> which identifies that an individual’s qualifications (and the skills and knowledge they represent) can shape young people’s:
- capability to take up and/or access to EET opportunities (e.g. where a particular qualification is required for entry or particular skills or knowledge are required to complete a job or course); and/or

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<sup>16</sup> There is, for example, a substantial body of evidence that identifies that level of qualifications is a strong predictor of whether someone will engage in post-16 education or training (see e.g. (LWI, 2019b), and that higher levels of qualifications and skills are associated with higher rates of employment (WWCFLEG, 2022).

- young people's attitudes toward post-16 education and training (an issue discussed further below) and therefore their motivations to take up post-16 education and training opportunities.

3.28. Holmes et al., (2021) also identify a relationship between level of qualifications and an individual's likelihood of being NEET, particularly for women, with 'those with higher qualifications than GCSEs [equivalent to a Level 2 qualification] less likely to be NEET.' However, they also identify that 'the difference between A-Levels and degree is small' and that 'for women there is no reduction in NEET risks for those with A-Levels and those with a degree once health and family variables are included.' This is because levels of education are also associated with the likelihood of starting a family before the age of 30. Those with lower levels of education are more likely to start a family at a younger age, and as result, women who typically bear much of the caring responsibility for young children, are more likely to be economic inactive for a period of time, while they care for young children (ibid., pp. 397-398).

3.29. Equally, it is important to note that the NEET population is not overwhelmingly composed of low-attaining young people, particularly when older age groups are included. As the statistics below illustrate, data identified that almost 80 per cent of young people who were NEET had qualifications and around 40 per cent had qualifications at level 2 or above (Welsh Government, 2012). In Wales, data from 2012 identified that:

- 21 per cent of 16 to 18 year olds who were NEET had no qualifications (compared with 8 per cent of the population as a whole); and
- for 19 to 24 year olds, 26 per cent of those who were NEET had no qualifications (compared with 9 per cent of the population as a whole (Welsh Government, 2012).

3.30. Moreover, it is estimated that 10 per cent of young people who are NEET in the UK are graduates and are often missed in qualitative research (Russell and Thompson, 2022). However, it is also worth noting, as Britton et al., (2011) identify, that 'there is a significant group of individuals with good qualifications and from more affluent family backgrounds that are NEET, particularly at 18, who return to education suggesting a group of young people are taking breaks in between education phases' (ibid., p.2).

#### *Co-occurrence with other characteristics*

3.31. Low or no qualifications are often clustered with other risk factors associated with a higher risk of being 'NEET' such as socio-economic disadvantage, disabilities and/or ALN; some ethnicities, most notably Gypsy Traveller and Roma, young people whose first language is other than English, and young people who attend education provision which has

weaknesses (Britton et al., 2011; Welsh Government, 2013; Holmes et al., 2021; UK Parliament, 2021a; Estyn, 2012; NIACRO, 2015).

### **Low or no skills**

#### *Essential and Employability skills*

- 3.32. Six studies identify the lack of essential (or 'basic') and/or work related (or 'soft') skills as a risk factor, typically linking this to distal factors such as negative experience of education and/or a lack of work experience (Prince's Trust, 2022; NAFW, 2015; Simmons et al., 2014; DBIS, 2013; Welsh Government, 2013; Goldman-Mellor et al., 2015). The challenge that young people stuck in cycles of poor work / no work (also described as 'churning') can face in acquiring skills and experience that would help the progress is also identified (Simmons et al., 2014) and is explored in the literature around the scarring effects of unemployment, discussed below. Nevertheless, if qualifications are used as a proxy for skills, the discussion of qualifications suggests the NEET population is not overwhelmingly composed of low skilled or unskilled young people (as noted, many young people who are NEET do have qualifications)<sup>17</sup>.

#### *Weak social and emotional skills and/or resilience*

- 3.33. Weak social and emotional skills and/or resilience<sup>18</sup> (a related but distinct concept) were identified as risk factors in two of the studies reviewed (PHE, 2014, Welsh Government, 2013). More broadly a lack of 'life skills' was identified by young people during consultations to inform the refresh of the YEPF (LWI, 2021). The literature reviewed links this to negative experiences of schools, and conversely how effective schools can build social and emotional wellbeing and resilience (PHE, 2014). It is also reasonable to infer that, like low skills, limited work experience can also contribute to a lack of life skills. Weak social and emotional skills are also linked to other distal risk factors, such as ACEs like suffering abuse or experiencing parental separation or parental alcohol or drug abuse, which are also associated with socio-economic disadvantage (PHW, 2015; PHW, 2016).

#### *The impact of low skills*

- 3.34. Like qualifications, skills can shape young people's capability to take up and/or access EET opportunities, their access to opportunities (where particular skills are required) and/or attitudes toward EET opportunities.

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<sup>17</sup> This judgment depends on what metric of low skills is used. If, for example, a level 3 qualification or above is used, the number of low or non-skilled young people who are NEET would be much higher. Moreover, levels of qualifications may not be a good guide to levels of social and emotional skills, which can be very important for employers (e.g. for customer facing roles).

<sup>18</sup> Resilience describes the capability to cope with adversity (e.g. by adapting and responding to challenges).

## **Disability, Additional Learning Needs and/or ill health**

- 3.35. Disability, ALN<sup>19</sup> and/or ill health were identified as risk factors in five of the studies reviewed (Welsh Government, 2013; Russell and Thompson, 2022; PHW, 2014; UK Parliament, 2021a; UK Parliament, 2021b); for example:
- in Wales, almost one in five (18.7 per cent) disabled people aged 16 to 18 are NEET, rising to almost four in ten (38.6 per cent) of disabled people aged 19 to 24 (Welsh Government, 2022);
  - in England, in 2021, nearly a quarter of all 16 to 24 NEETs were inactive due to being 'long term or temporarily sick'. This has increased from 2012 when this was one in ten (UK Government, 2022); and
  - analysis of matched data from the Welsh Government PLASC and the Careers Wales Pupil Destinations Survey (2011) identified that pupils whose additional needs were supported at School Action Plus were almost five times more likely to become NEET than pupils without ALN (Welsh Government, 2013, p.24).

### *Mental ill health*

- 3.36. Mental health was identified as a risk factor in nine of the studies reviewed. (PHE, 2014; Russell and Thompson, 2022; DBIS, 2013; Welsh Government, 2013; Garipey et al., 2021; Holmes et al., 2021; UK Parliament, 2021b; YWT, 2017; Goldman-Mellor et al., 2015). Over the last 15 years there has been a rapid increase in self-reported mental ill health, and around one in six (17.4 per cent) of 17 to 19 years in England now have a probable mental health disorder<sup>20</sup> (NHS Digital, 2021). Poor mental health has been identified as having a larger effect on the chance of being NEET than other health conditions, particularly for young men. The increase in the number of young men, in particular, who have mental health difficulties has been marked and has offset the decline in the number of young women who were economically inactive due to home or caring responsibilities (Holmes et al., 2021; UK Parliament, 2021a; Tayfur et al., 2021). English data (based upon analysis of the LFS) identifies that the proportion of the 16 to 24 NEET population with a mental health condition has almost tripled from 7.7 per cent in 2012 to 21.3 per cent in 2021 (UK Government, 2022).

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<sup>19</sup> ALN - defined as learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for a child to learn compared to children of the same age. Some young people may have ALN because of a medical condition or disability, while other young people may have ALN without a disability.

<sup>20</sup> The Welsh Government is committed to the social model of disability, which defines people as disabled by the barriers created by society, not their impairment. Where possible, language in this report has been adapted to align with the social model of disability. However, on occasion, the report references data that was collected using an approach aligned with the definition of disability in the Equality Act (2010), which is informed by the medical model of disability (such as data on those with a probable mental health disorder).



- 3.37. There is some evidence that the pandemic has contributed to increases in mental ill health amongst young people aged 16 to 24. However, the impact differs across different groups of young people with, for example, groups such as young carers, those with pre-existing mental health conditions, or LGBTQ+ young people at higher risk (PHW, 2022a). Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that increases in young people experiencing poor mental health predated the pandemic (Senedd, 2022).

#### *Co-occurrence*

- 3.38. Disability and mental ill health are associated with each other. For example, analysis of English LFS data identifies that over six in ten (61 per cent) of young people who are NEET who report a long-term health problem or disability experience mental health problems to some degree. In comparison, less than four in ten (39.2 per cent) of young people who report a long-term health problem or disability, but who are in EET, experience mental health problems to some degree (Princes Trust, 2022). Mental ill health is also associated with other factors, such as socio-economic disadvantage (IOHE, 2020), ACE (PHW, 2015) and experiences of care (LWI, 2018a).

#### *The impact upon young people*

- 3.39. An impairment, ALN and/or ill health can limit young people's access to opportunities, for example, where young people experience discrimination<sup>21</sup> (meaning they are disabled), the impairment limits their capabilities and/or either of these factors impacts upon their motivation. However, it is worth noting that the relationship between health and EET is complex and bidirectional, as participation in EET is also associated with better health (see e.g. What Works Wellbeing, 2017a; Holmes et al., 2021; Schuller, 2017).

#### **Low aspirations, lack of hope and/or knowledge of education, training and employment pathways**

- 3.40. The YPG National Conversation (Welsh Government, 2023a) identified that 'Many [young people] claimed they did not know what to do next, having completed school or college.' (p31, *ibid.*) and that around a third of those surveyed lacked clear aspirations<sup>22</sup>. This also featured in the literature reviewed: low aspirations, lack of confidence, hope or expectation of employment, and/or weak knowledge or understanding of EET pathways (which are all distinct factors) were identified in nine of the studies reviewed (Welsh Government, 2013; UK Parliament, 2021a; Lloyd-Jones, 2005; Watkins, 2019; PHE, 2014; Welsh Government, 2013; LWI, 2021; Murphy et al., 2022; Douglas, 2021).

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<sup>21</sup> People are more likely to hold negative attitudes towards working with or for people with mental health impairments, compared to those with physical impairments (NatCen, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Participants were asked what education, training or job goals, if any, they had for the next 12 months and '19% said none/nothing/ they didn't have any'; ' and '12% said they didn't know/ couldn't remember': (p. 10 Welsh Government, 2023a).



- 3.41. Each of these characteristics was reported to demotivate young people<sup>23</sup> and weak knowledge of pathways was reported to limit young people's capabilities and, therefore, their access to EET opportunities<sup>24</sup> (DBIS, 2013). The YPG National Conversation (Welsh Government, 2023a) also identifies that many of the young people consulted were 'not very aware' of the support available<sup>25</sup>, and it is reasonable to infer that by not taking up support, they were forgoing opportunities to build their capabilities, increase their access to opportunities and/or strengthen their motivation.
- 3.42. A lack of hope can be linked to the loss of self-efficacy (loss of belief in the ability to re-engage with EET) and leave people feeling defeated, with little belief that anyone can help them (Watkins, 2019). This loss of hope can also be linked to the perceptions that the barriers a person faces (for example, situational barriers such as caring responsibilities or weaknesses in local labour markets) cannot be overcome (Lloyd-Jones, 2005). A fear of the potential impacts of re-engaging with EET is also highlighted in some literature. It is most common in the literature around post-16 education and training which, for example, discusses 'dispositional' barriers to learning, often linked to negative experiences of school, which can leave people lacking in confidence and/or fearful of returning to learn. It is less common in the literature around dis-engagement from employment but fears of the (negative) impact of work that is poorly paid, insecure and low skilled (so called 'poor work') upon people's mental health<sup>26</sup>, upon their incomes (most commonly the belief that they would be better off on benefits<sup>27</sup>), and social networks (and the desire not 'to leave family and friends behind') do feature (see e.g. UK Parliament, 2021a; Lloyd-Jones, 2005). The precariousness of some young people's lives can also foster a fear that any change in their life, such as starting a job, could upset and disrupt fragile existing arrangements (for care, housing and finances/budgeting) and this can discourage and demotivate young

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<sup>23</sup> For example, specificity in aspirations and an understanding of the education and training pathways required to realise them, was highlighted as a key motivating factor for engagement with education and training (DBIS, 2013). Similarly a lack of confidence or hope about the prospects of finding work was reported to demotivate young people (Simmons et al., 2014). It was noted that this assessment could be 'rational', given the challenges young people who wanted to work, but felt they could not, could face (ibid.).

<sup>24</sup> For example, UK Parliament (2021a) report that they 'heard that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be well informed of the career pathways open to them' and that 'patchy provision advice means young people often rely on information from informal networks' (ibid.). A reliance upon informal networks was seen as a particular problem for those with weak bridging social capital (Simmons et al., 2014). Good quality, independent IAG was therefore seen as 'essential in supporting young people to identify and access appropriate education and training' (ibid.).

<sup>25</sup> Survey responses (as part of the YPG National Conversation) suggests that a lack of knowledge is only one factor, and that other barriers include a lack of confidence in seeking support, perceptions of stigma, and/or a lack of belief in support services (Welsh Government, 2023a).

<sup>26</sup> Research suggests that work is generally good for people. However it identifies that 'good' work (work that is, for example, secure, offers opportunities to develop skills and make social connections and take on responsibilities, is much better for people's wellbeing than 'poor' work What Works Wellbeing, 2017). Moreover, there is evidence that poor work characterised by, for example, discrimination, inequality, excessive workloads, limited autonomy and insecurity can damage people's mental health (WHO, 2022).

<sup>27</sup> The introduction of Universal Credit was designed to eliminate this risk, but the perception remains.

people. Coping strategies, such as rationalising disengagement from EET as a consequence of structural constraint (e.g. 'there are no jobs locally so there is no point looking') can similarly demotivate people from trying (see e.g. Lloyd-Jones, 2005; Jones, 2005).

- 3.43. It is notable that some of the literature disputes whether low aspirations are a common characteristic, noting that many young people have high aspirations; the problems they face are not knowing or understanding how, or being capable of, and/or having the opportunity to realise those aspirations (see Watkins (2019) and UK Parliament, (2021a) for a discussion of the significance of young people's aspirations).
- 3.44. Finally, loneliness and social isolation are also factors identified in some studies, as they limit young people's access to information about opportunities (Simmons et al., 2014) as well as increasing the risk of experiencing other adverse factors, such as poor mental health. As the YPG National Conversation (Welsh Government, 2023a) identifies, those young people without supportive peers or relatives, were more dependent upon professionals in support services for advice, support and encouragement.

#### *Co-occurrence*

- 3.45. Each of these characteristics was often linked to other distal risk factors (discussed below) such as family worklessness, growing up in a socio-disadvantaged areas and/or areas with high levels of unemployment and/or weakness in information, advice and guidance (see e.g. Holmes et al., 2021; UK Parliament, 2021a; Watkins, 2019; Welsh Government, 2013).

#### **Behavioural problems**

- 3.46. Characteristics such as 'disruptive, delinquent or externalizing behaviours' were identified as risk factors in four of the studies reviewed (Tayfur et al., 2021; Russell and Thompson, 2022; UK Parliament, 2022; Department for Education, 2018). Young offenders and/or those supervised by a youth offending team are seen as a particularly vulnerable group. (PHE, 2014; Tayfur et al., 2021; UK Parliament, 2021a). The links between these characteristics and young people's likelihood of being NEET were not always clearly drawn (in the literature reviewed) but it is reasonable to infer that young people with behavioural difficulties, including offending behaviour, may be discriminated against, limiting their access to opportunities.
- 3.47. Behavioural problems, including offending behaviour, are also often clustered with other risk factors such as ALN and/or other impairments, negative experiences of school, poor mental health, weak essential skills and limited access to information, advice and guidance (UK Parliament, 2021a). These can be considered both distal factors that

contribute to the offending behaviour and also in some cases (such as ALN, an impairment or ill health) as proximate factors, that limit young people's capabilities and/or motivation, which can add to or compound the challenges young people with behavioural problems can experience.

### **Substance misuse**

- 3.48. Substance misuse was identified as a risk factor in five of the studies reviewed (PHE, 2014; DBIS, 2013; LWI, 2018b; Henderson et al., 2017; Tayfur et al., 2021). The links between substance misuse and young people's likelihood of being NEET were not always clearly drawn in the literature reviewed for this study, and can also depend upon the type and frequency of substance misuse (Henderson et al., 2017). Nevertheless, it is reasonable to infer that substance misuse can impact upon young people's capabilities (to sustain engagement with EET) and/or motivations and, if known or visible, may be a cause for discrimination, limiting access to opportunities.
- 3.49. Like behavioural problems, substance misuse is often clustered with other risk factors, such as ACE and poor mental health (PHW, 2015; Scottish Government, 2022) which can be considered both as distal factors that contribute to the behaviour and also, in some cases (such as mental health), as proximate factors that limit young people's capabilities and/or motivation. There is also evidence that substance misuse can compound other difficulties, such as mental ill health (Henderson et al., 2017).

### **Caring responsibilities**

- 3.50. Caring responsibilities are identified as a risk factor in 12 studies (Welsh Government, 2013; Princes Trust, 2022; PHE, 2014; UK Parliament, 2021a; Russell and Thompson, 2022; DBIS, 2013; NAW, 2015; Holmes et al., 2021; YWT, 2017; Tayfur et al., 2021; Carers Trust, 2014; LWI, 2018). As an example, Holmes et al., (2021) identify that 'being a parent increases NEET risks for women of all ages and particularly for younger women.' Caring responsibilities can limit access to opportunities and, historically, more women than men have been NEET, in large part due to the number of women who were inactive because they were looking after their family or home. However, this number has declined as more women delay the age at which they have children (Holmes et al., 2021; UK Parliament, 2021a).

### *Co-occurrence with other characteristics*

- 3.51. Child care responsibilities (which can limit access to EET opportunities) are gendered (typically falling primarily upon young women, rather than young men) and amongst young women who are NEET, this is often compounded by other factors, such as young women's isolation within their households and communities, low self-confidence, low self-

esteem and mental health issues and other challenges such as lack of transport, the emotional strain of 'leaving' children and difficulties associated with finding and paying for suitable childcare<sup>28</sup>, which can all add to, or compound, the challenges young people face (YWT, 2017).

- 3.52. Young carers<sup>29</sup> are identified as a particularly vulnerable group<sup>30</sup> (Welsh Government, 2013), in large part because their caring responsibilities not only limit when and where they can participate in EET and can expose them to (unlawful) discrimination, but also because being a carer is associated with many other risk factors, including:
- the emotional stress associated with being a young carer, which can impact upon mental health and also motivation, as young carers may be more vulnerable to pessimistic thinking and be 'present-orientated' in their thinking, finding it difficult to think ahead or plan for their futures and/or reluctant to relinquish their caring responsibilities to others (and leave behind the person/people they care for) (LWI, 2018a); and
  - negative experience of school, linked to lower levels of educational attainment<sup>31</sup> (LWI, 2018a).

### **Difficulties with transport and rurality**

- 3.53. The inaccessibility, reliability and/or cost of transport is occasionally mentioned in the research reviewed (see e.g. UK Parliament, 2021a; Russell and Thompson, 2022; Lloyd-Jones, 2005)<sup>32</sup>. It was also the barrier to ETE most commonly identified by young people surveyed as part of the national conversation (Welsh Government 2023a). This issue is sometimes part of a broader discussion (in the literature reviewed for this study) of challenges in rural areas, such as weakness in digital infrastructure, difficulties accessing childcare and weakness in local labour markets (PPIW, 2016), which are all factors that limit access to employment opportunities.

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<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, the evaluation of Parents Childcare and Employment (PaCE) identifies that for adults, the nature of childcare barriers is 'nuanced', as there is often a lack of knowledge of what childcare is available, how much it would cost, how it could work, and what financial support might be available (Welsh Government, 2023b)

<sup>29</sup> Young carers are those aged under 18 who care for a relative with a disability, illness, mental health condition, or drug or alcohol problem.

<sup>30</sup> One in five young people in Wales are young carers. Four per cent of young carers in Wales spend 50 hours a week or more on caring responsibilities (Welsh Government, 2021c).

<sup>31</sup> Overall, the proportion of young people in full time education is lower amongst young carers (45 per cent in carers, compared to 54 per cent in non-carers), and this difference is greater in those living in more deprived areas (PHW, 2021b).

<sup>32</sup> For example, Lloyd-Jones (2005) identifies that in a post-industrial urban setting, young people were told to focus upon local EET opportunities that did not involve travel. Young people also reported being unable to access work on out of town industrial estates unless they had the social network contacts to share lifts, as factories used social networks to recruit staff because this enabled shared travel.

## **Employer and education and training provider attitudes and behaviours**

- 3.54. Discriminatory employer attitudes (e.g. on the grounds of young people's gender or ethnicity) were reported in four studies (UK Parliament, 2021a; NAFW, 2015; JRF, 2016; JRF, 2013).
- 3.55. Employer attitudes could limit both access to employment opportunities and young people's motivation to search for and apply for employment opportunities. There is little discussion of discriminatory attitudes amongst education and training providers although it is notable that, as outlined in the discussion of ethnicity, rates of participation in, for example, WBL, are generally lower amongst Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups (Welsh Government, 2021d). This does not necessarily imply overt discrimination, such as racism (although this may still be a factor), but it does imply that WBL providers have struggled to engage Black, Asian and ethnic minority young people.
- 3.56. In addition to discriminatory practices, employer behaviours, such as increasingly complex recruitment processes, were reported to limit access to opportunities for some young people, such as those with poor essential skills, those who are digitally excluded and/or have limited experience of recruitment processes (NAFW, 2015). As outlined below, periods of unemployment or difficulties such as poor mental health can also act as 'negative signals; that put off prospective employers' (McQuaid, 2015).
- 3.57. Employer practices and employment opportunities also shape young people's motivation and therefore behaviour and, for example, as one study identifies:
- 'The most important considerations for NEET young people when choosing jobs is flexibility in hours, location and pay level. Flexibility in hours is particularly important for young people with a physical or mental health problem. Most young people have aspirations for their future careers, with very few not wanting to find work over the next three to five years. Young people are most likely to say that they plan to find a job that is flexible and fits with their life and responsibilities, that is well-paid, or is in an area that interests them' (Princes Trust, 2022, p.7).
- 3.58. Qualitative research in Wales supports this but may suggest a greater openness on the part of young people, reporting that 'some young people in this study would settle for any kind of employment although arrangements like fixed hours were preferable to zero-hours contracts' (PHW, 2021a). Concerns around the quality of employment opportunities in Wales (see e.g. Fair Work Commission, 2019) are therefore relevant here.

## **Movement in and out of education, training or employment**

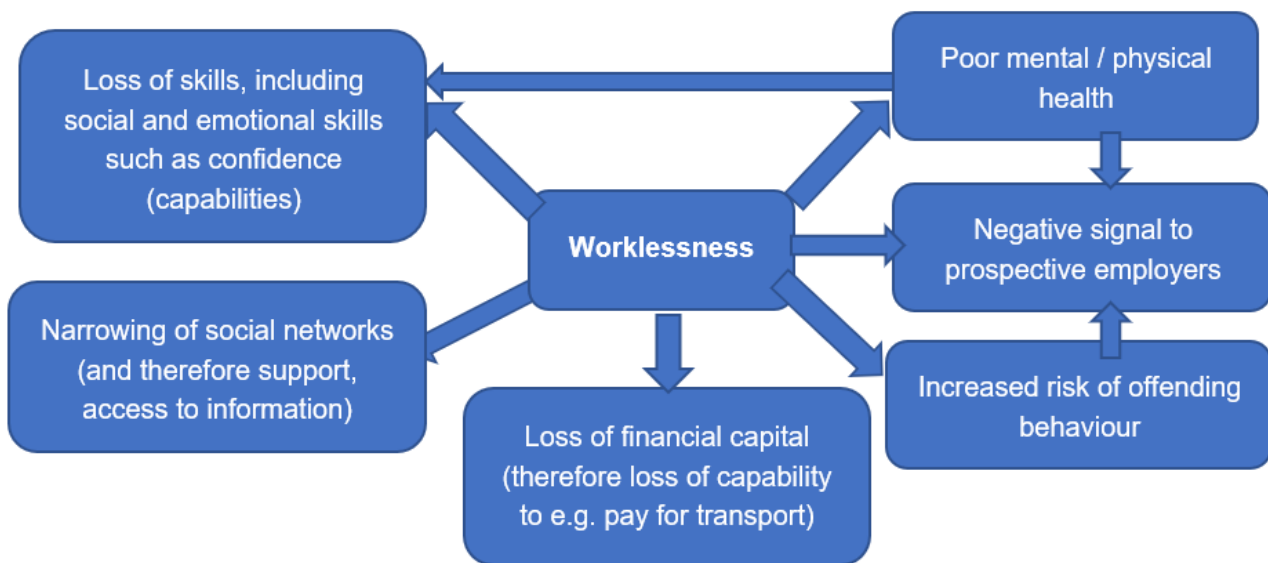
- 3.59. Young people who are NEET at a point in time can, and often do, re-engage with EET at a later point. Research distinguishes between those young people:
- who are ‘cyclical, in transition or open to learning: young people who are likely to re-engage in education, training and the workforce in the short term, tending to have higher attainment and a more positive attitude to exploiting opportunity’;
  - ‘floating, “at risk” or undecided: young people who may be dissatisfied with available opportunities or are most vulnerable to economic downturn’ including ‘those young people who find themselves lacking direction and/or motivation and move in and out of the NEET group’; and
  - ‘core or sustained: young people experiencing longer-term disengagement in education, training and the labour market, and linked to a wider pattern of poor attainment and experience’ (Welsh Government, 2013, p.7).
- 3.60. The type, severity and complexity of combinations of characteristics are likely to be important factors in determining which group young people fall into; for example, as outlined above, while many young people grow up in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, most will be in EET. In contrast, a far higher proportion of those young people with no qualifications are likely to be NEET. As outlined below, the co-occurrence of multiple factors can increase the complexity and severity of barriers to re-engaging with EET that young people face.

### *Scarring effects*

- 3.61. Participation in EET is associated with a range of benefits. Conversely, as figure 3.2. illustrates, worklessness is associated with a range of negative impacts (including the loss of opportunities to acquire skills and qualifications). These can entrench worklessness by making re-engagement with EET more difficult. This has been described as ‘scarring’ (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; McQuaid, 2015). It means that the longer a young person is out of work, the lower their likelihood of re-engaging with employment and, for example, Britton et al., (2011) identify that ‘destination outcomes for NEETs one year later are consistently poor; around half of the unemployed or inactive remain so, and relatively few return to education, particularly for 17 and 18 year olds’ (ibid., p.2).
- 3.62. It is notable that some characteristics, such as disability, appear to increase the risk while others, such as having high levels of qualifications, reduce the risks of remaining NEET (ONS, 2021). This is supported by Britton et al., (2011) who identify those young people who move out of the NEET category one year on tend to ‘have better qualifications and

are from better socio-economic backgrounds than those who stay.’ While both are contributory factors, the study identifies that qualifications are the most important factor.

**Figure 3.2. The negative impacts of worklessness**



Source: Figure created for the review, drawing upon data from Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; What Works Wellbeing, 2018

3.63. Some of these effects, such as poor physical and mental health, the narrowing of social networks, and the loss of opportunities to develop skills, are also associated with disengagement from education or training (see e.g. Fujiwara, 2012; PHE, 2014; Schuller, 2017). Some young people such as those with neurodevelopmental disorders who struggle to make a transition from school to post-16 EET can retreat to their bedroom, losing skills as a consequence (Welsh Government, 2019).

#### *The impact of the current context*

3.64. The prevalence of different characteristics changes over time; for example, the number of young people with low or no qualifications has been declining. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the prevalence of mental health difficulties which has, in turn, demotivated some young people and, as outlined above, is likely to have reduced their capabilities, motivation and/or access to employment opportunities. The current economic slowdown is likely to reduce employment opportunities and therefore, motivation to search for work but may also increase the motivation of young people aged 16 to 18 to stay on in education<sup>33</sup>. The impact of the cost of living crisis is less clear; for example, cuts in real incomes may help motivate young people to seek employment but may also add to the

<sup>33</sup> Young people are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns and the percentage of young people aged 19 to 24 who are NEET tends to increase when economic conditions worsen. Conversely, young people aged 16 to 17 are more likely to remain in education or training during recessions but, as one study identifies, it appears that ‘barriers to staying in education may be higher for 18 to 21 year olds’ (DBIS, 2015).

stresses and strains of daily life, which can reduce people's mental bandwidth<sup>34</sup> and therefore their capability to effectively search for work.

### **The impact of different factors**

- 3.65. Many of the characteristics associated with an increased risk of being NEET, such as having a mental health disorder or having low or no qualifications, are common and around a fifth of young people have these characteristics<sup>35</sup>. However, as table 3.1 illustrates, not all young people with these characteristics will be NEET; for example, the number of young people in Wales with low or no qualifications or a mental health disorder is much larger than the number of young people with low or no qualifications or a mental health disorder who are NEET<sup>36</sup>. It should be noted that table 3.1. uses data from a range of different sources (listed below), collected using different methods, and covering different time periods and populations, and should therefore be treated as indicative estimates and direct comparisons between the number of young people with each characteristic and (where available) the number of young people who are NEET with each characteristic, should not be made. Further details on sources and the methodology are provided in the appendix.

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<sup>34</sup> The concept is derived from the work of Shafir and Mullainathan (2013), who highlighted the demands that poverty places upon people's mental energy and capacity, identifying that scarcity means that the poor are more likely to make mistakes and bad decisions than those with higher incomes.

<sup>35</sup> Data from the Mental Health of Children and Young People Survey in England, identifies that 22 per cent of young people aged 17 to 24 had a probable mental disorder (*NHS Digital, 2022*) and it is reasonable to infer that rates in Wales be similar. In 2022, 17.6 per cent of young people had qualifications below level 2 (*StatsWales, 2022b*).

<sup>36</sup> Gender is not included in the chart, because the rates at which men and women are NEET have been converging. Ethnicity is not included, because the proportion of young people who are NEET varies across different ethnic groups, so while a higher proportion of White young people are NEET than young people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups combined, some research finds that the proportion of young people from Pakistani or Bangladeshi background who are NEET is higher than other groups (*Princes Trust, 2022*).



**Table 3.1. The estimated total number of young people aged 16-24 with selected characteristics associated with an increased risk of being NEET, and the estimated number<sup>37</sup> of young people who are NEET with these characteristics (where data is available)**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Estimated number of young people with this characteristic (rounded to the nearest 000)</b>	<b>Estimated number of young people who are NEET with this characteristic (rounded to the nearest 000)</b>
Aged 16-24 who had an ALN in secondary school	76,000	N/A
Aged 16-24 who are lonely	75,000	N/A
Aged 16-24 who have a probable mental health disorder	74,000	11,000
Aged 16-24 who are caring for others	74,000	N/A
Aged 16-24 who report using any drug in the last year	63,000	N/A
Aged 16-24 and disabled	52,000	18,000
Aged 16-18 with no qualifications at level 2 or above	15,000	9,000
Aged 19-24 with no qualifications at level 2 or above	23,000	20,000
Aged 16-18 with no qualifications	9,000	3,000
Aged 19-24, with no qualifications	12,000	10,000
<b>Young people (aged 16-24)</b>	<b>337,000</b>	<b>52,000</b>

Sources:

Number of young people who are NEET: ONS (Mid-Year Population Estimates & Annual Population Survey), HESA, Welsh Government Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR), Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), StatsWales 2023a

Loneliness: National Survey of Wales, Wales Centre for Public Policy, 2021

Mental Health Disorders: Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP) [in England] survey, NHS Digital, 2022

Labour Force Survey (England) UK Government, 2022

<sup>37</sup> Estimates were calculated by applying percentages derived from other studies about, for example, the proportion of young people who are NEET who have no qualifications, to the total number of young people who were NEET in 2022.

Caring for others: National Survey of Wales, Welsh Government, 2021c

Drug use: Crime Survey for England and Wales, ONS, 2022

No / Low qualifications: APS, unpublished Welsh Government Analysis of APS; Welsh Government, 2022c; Welsh Government, 2012

Additional Learning Needs (ALN): PLASC, StatsWales 2023b

Disability: APS, StatsWales, 2022, Welsh Government, 2022e

- 3.66. As table 3.1 illustrates, some characteristics, such as being disabled or having no qualifications, are more closely correlated with a young person's risk of being NEET (research or statistics suggest that around 40 per cent of young people who are NEET are either disabled and/or have low qualifications). However, chart 3.1 also illustrates how gaps in the data mean that this analysis is only possible for some of the characteristics associated with an increased risk of being NEET.

### **The characteristics of young people accessing Communities for Work**

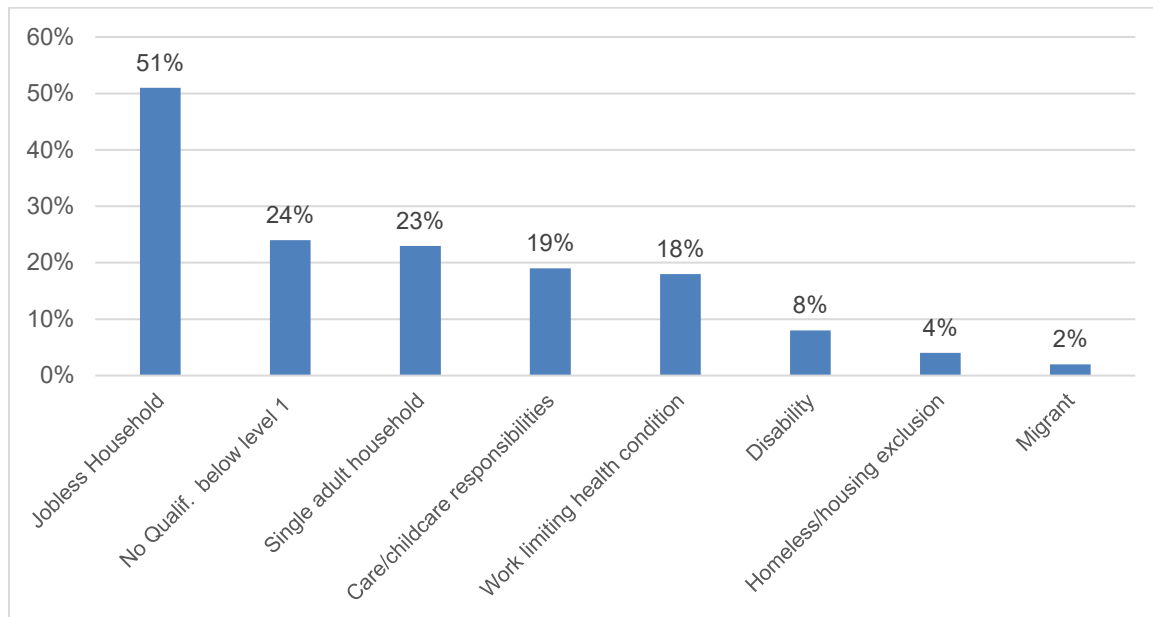
- 3.53. Given the gaps in the data outlined above, data on young people aged 16 to 24 who were NEET and who were also accessing the Communities for Work (CfW) programme was analysed. This effectively provided data on a large sample of young people who were NEET (n=14,589) who chose to engage with an employment support programme in the period May 2015 to February 2022. The characteristics of young people who were NEET but who (a) chose not to engage with an employment support programme in the period or (b) chose to engage with another employment support programme in the period, will differ.
- 3.54. Chart 3.2 illustrates the prevalence of different characteristics associated with a risk of being NEET reported by CfW participants<sup>38</sup>. It shows that by far the most common characteristic is that of coming from a jobless household. Although, as this may be correlated with other characteristics, this does not mean that it is the most important or powerful characteristic; as charts 3.1 and 3.2 show, factors such as having low or no qualifications are less common within this group than stereotypes of young people who are NEET might suggest<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Coming from a single person household is included as a rough proxy for isolation and lack of support.

<sup>39</sup> The next stage of the review will also include analysis of the characteristics of young people who, despite the support of an employment support programme (i.e. CfW), do not re-engage with EET.

**Chart 3.2. The percentage of CfW participants aged 16-24 reporting different characteristics associated with a higher risk of being NEET**

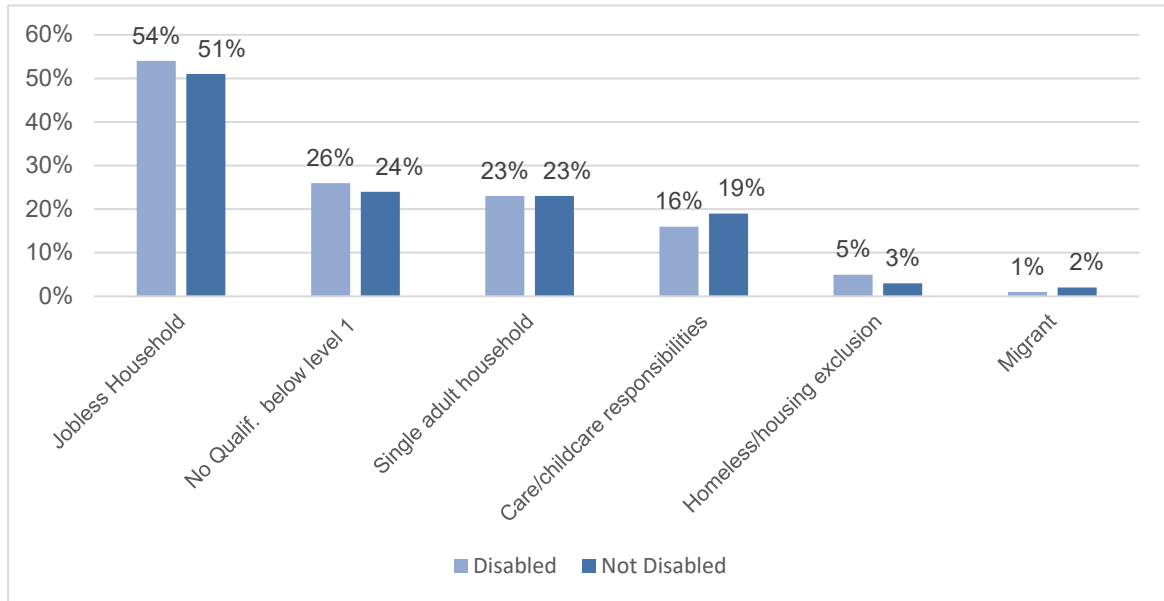


N= 14,589. Source: Welsh Government

3.55. Because many young people face more than one barrier, the totals in chart 3.2 add to up more than 100 per cent. Indeed, 72 per cent of young people have one or more characteristics associated with a higher risk of being NEET and around 40 per cent of young people engaged with CfW reported two or more characteristics<sup>40</sup>. As chart 3.3 illustrates, amongst disabled young people engaged with CfW (n=1,169), over half (54 per cent) were from jobless households and just over a quarter (26 per cent) also had no or low qualifications (below level 1).

<sup>40</sup> These calculations exclude work limiting health conditions, given the overlap between this and disability (and many young people who are disabled would also have a work limiting health condition).

**Chart 3.3. The percentage of disabled CfW participants and non disabled CfW participants, reporting different characteristics associated with an increased likelihood of being NEET**



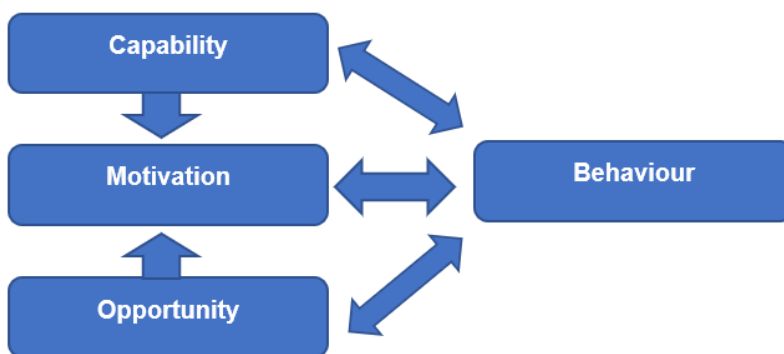
N= 14,589. Source: Welsh Government

3.56. What is also striking about chart 3.3 is how similar the characteristics of disabled young people accessing CfW are to the characteristics of young people who are not disabled.

## 4. The COM-B model of behavioural change

- 4.1. A behaviour, such as effectively searching for work and applying for jobs, requires:
- the ability - or **capability** – to perform the behaviour (e.g. having the skills and knowledge required);
  - the intention – or **motivation** – to perform the behaviour; and
  - the absence of environment constraint (e.g. not facing barriers such as childcare) **or** conversely, having the **opportunity** – to perform the behaviour (Michie et al., 2011).
- 4.2. These three factors form the basis of the COM-B model. As figure 4.1 illustrates, these factors are linked so that, for example, having confidence in the ability to successfully perform a behaviour such as searching for work and the opportunity to do so, can increase a young person’s motivation to search for work. Conversely, limited opportunities (e.g. due to caring responsibilities or digital exclusion) or limited capability (e.g. due to ill health or limited experience and understanding of the labour market), can undermine motivation.

**Figure 4.1. The COM-B Framework**



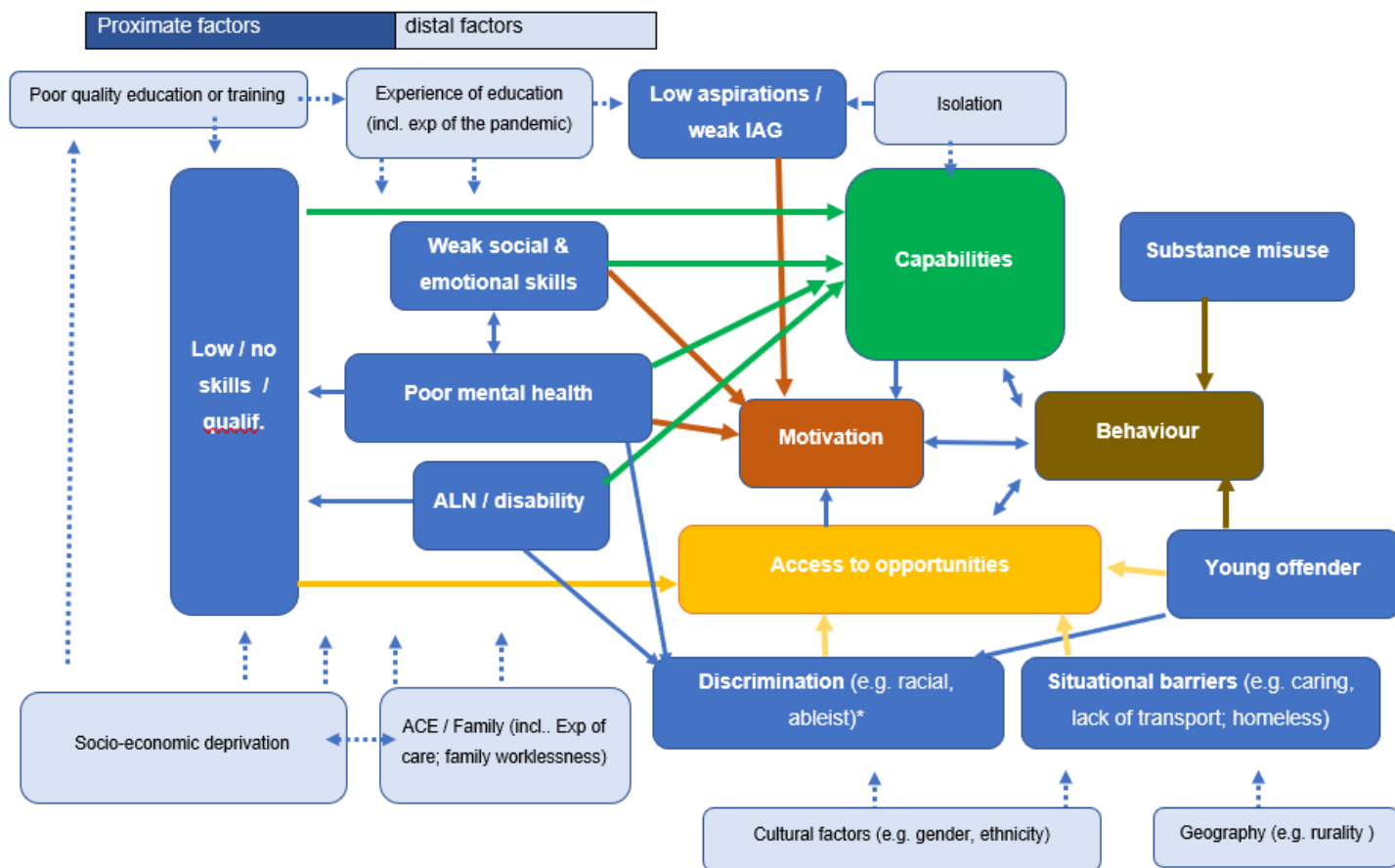
Source: Michie et al., 2011

*Mapping the relationship between different characteristics associated with an increased risk of a young person being NEET*

- 4.3. In order to explore and better understand how and why proximate characteristics, such as low or no qualifications or limited experience and understanding of the labour market, increase the risk that a young person is NEET, these factors were mapped against the COM-B model. Figure 4.2 illustrates the main distal and proximate factors identified by the review and how each of these factors increases the risk that a young person is NEET, by limiting young people’s capability, opportunity and/or motivation to engage in behaviour such as job search activity. This exemplifies how the reasons why young people are economically inactive (not actively seeking employment) can be due to a lack of motivation

but may also reflect a lack of capability and/or opportunity (meaning young people may want to work but feel they cannot, so are not actively looking for work).

**Figure 4.2. Conceptual map of characteristics associated with an increased risk of a young person being NEET**



Source: figure created for the review

\*'Ableist' describes policies, behaviours, rules, etc. that result in unfair or harmful treatment of disabled people, which can constrain access to education, training or employment opportunities.

Acronyms:

ACE – Adverse Childhood Experiences

ALN – Additional Learning Needs

IAG – information Advice and Guidance

## Potential limitations of the COM-B Framework

- 4.4. Although conceptually useful, it is worth noting that the classification of individual characteristics can be difficult precisely because, as the model identifies, they are often inter-related; for example, low levels of confidence can be considered both a dimension of capability and also a cause of low levels of motivation. It is also worth noting that some assets, such as social, financial or cultural capital, that may be important factors in enabling young people's agency, do not necessarily fit that easily within the framework. Capability is in many ways analogous with human capital (and therefore fits easily) but social, financial and cultural capital can be considered both as aspects of an individual's capability to act and also, in relation to social and financial capital, as external factors that structure access to opportunities (so do not fit so easily).
- 4.5. Moreover, although the framework is about understanding human agency, it is notable that concepts such as preferences, aspirations, values, norms, beliefs and attitudes are not explicitly articulated, but instead sit under 'motivation'. Much qualitative research in this field focuses upon this subjective dimension - how young people think about and feel about EET and how this is shaped by their own experiences - positive or negative - of EET and by the communities and cultures they live in. This is not absent but must all sit under 'motivation' in the COM-B model.
- 4.6. It is also notable (and a possible omission) that support does not feature in the model and research suggests that support from, for example, a trusted adult, can help build motivation, improve access to opportunities and, in some cases, develop young people's capabilities (Jones, 2005). Indeed, this is a key feature of many policy initiatives, such as the YEPF, intended to help young people re-engage with EET or reduce their risk of becoming NEET.
- 4.7. In addition, although the model recognises that behaviour can shape motivation, capability and/or opportunity, as section 3 outlines, it not simply behaviour (and choices such as job search activity) but also the outcomes of behaviour and structural constraints, such as employment opportunities, which shape further outcomes, such as dis/engagement in EET, which in turn can shape capabilities, motivations and outcomes (as the example of the potentially 'scarring' effects of unemployment illustrates).



- 4.8. The language of the framework may also be somewhat off-putting and alternatives such as aspiration (rather than motivation) and ability (rather than capability), might be preferable in communicating results. Although there is loss of precision here and while, for example, aspiration is linked to motivation it is not synonymous with it (see Watkins, 2019).
- 4.9. Finally, because, as noted, it is not always possible to directly link characteristics (such as ethnicity) to people's capabilities, opportunities or motivations, there may be challenges in using quantitative data on young people's characteristics to identify different groups of young people defined by their motivations, capabilities or opportunities. Although, there are examples of this (see for example OECD, 2016).

## 5. Intersectionality and co-occurrence

- 5.1. As section 3 illustrates, different aspects of a young person's identity, such as their ethnicity, gender, disability and social class, can intersect to create different and sometimes distinct experiences of discrimination or privilege; for example, racism can compound discrimination linked to sexism and mean Black, Asian and minority ethnic women can be 'doubly disadvantaged'. This is described as 'intersectionality' and, although the literature review identified little research specifically looking at intersectionality in relation to young people who are NEET, there is research that examines how different characteristics can intersect and increase a young person's risk of becoming NEET (e.g. statistical analysis using regression analysis, such as Britton et al., (2011).
- 5.2. This is an important area of research and may be a growing area of interest. The qualitative and quantitative evidence included in this review, including but not limited to, the CfW data discussed in section 3, suggests that young people often have multiple co-occurring characteristics associated with an increasing risk of being NEET. They may, for example, have low or no skills, a mental health condition and/or be disabled (as illustrated by chart 3.3).
- 5.3. A key tenet of intersectionality is that the impact of these different factors is not simply 'additive' (with disadvantage the result of adding different barriers) because factors can interact and may compound or exacerbate each other<sup>41</sup> (Scottish Government, 2022a). Therefore, the experiences of young people who are disabled and have a mental health condition can be quite different to those who are either solely disabled or solely suffering from a mental health condition. As figure 4.2 illustrates, the COM-B framework can be used to help explore and better understand this and illustrate how impairments and mental health conditions can:
- expose young people to discrimination (limiting their access to opportunities);
  - constrain young people's capabilities; and
  - as a result, demotivate them from seeking work (so they become economically inactive).

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<sup>41</sup> For example the discrimination experienced by a Muslim women may be exacerbated by Islamic dress, which makes her more visible and therefore more likely to experience discrimination.

- 5.4. This in turn highlights the importance of person-centred, rather than siloed, approaches to addressing worklessness (and, for example, the potential weaknesses of strategies such as welfare conditionality that only address a single issue, such as lack of motivation).
- 5.5. However, while the evidence suggests that some social identities are associated with the risk of discrimination, as section 3 illustrates, the causes of disadvantage in EET are not only rooted in social identity. Characteristics such as weak essential skills can, in part, be considered a social construct<sup>42</sup> and employers and education and training settings may be said to ‘discriminate’ against those with weak essential skills (limiting access to opportunities). However, this is a different type of ‘discrimination’ that is generally not seen as unjust compared to that rooted in, for example, racism, ableism or sexism. Moreover, unlike social identities such as ethnicity or gender, characteristics such as weak essential skills or poor mental health can directly constrain young people’s capabilities.
- 5.6. Intersectionality remains a contested term and it is important that, if used, it does not lead to too narrow a focus upon personal identity as the most important factor in understanding young people’s position in society<sup>43</sup>, which risks essentialising young people (i.e. defining them through one or more markers of identity). More broadly, a focus upon discrimination and barriers can cast young people as passive victims of structural constraint, denying them any sense of agency (and their ability to act and to try to overcome barriers) (Parker, 2010).
- 5.7. As figure 5.1 illustrates, many of the characteristics discussed in section 3 are related and also can result from worklessness or disengagement from education or training, creating a vicious cycle and ‘scarring’ effects, which make re-engagement more difficult. The relationships between different factors can therefore be bidirectional, in which a factor such as poor mental health can be both cause and consequence of disengagement from EET, or unidirectional, where it is either cause or consequence. Situational barriers, such as lack of access to transport, can mean people feel trapped, with no or limited choices, engendering a sense of hopelessness. Conversely, while a sense of hopelessness might reduce motivation to overcome

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<sup>42</sup> A skill is not just the technical ability to do something but also a marker of the abilities that society values, and therefore ‘skill’ is considered a social construct.

<sup>43</sup> For example, while there are differences in the proportion of men and women, disabled and non-disabled people and those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and from White backgrounds in EET, it is unlikely that discrimination based upon these different identities is the only factor that determines these observed differences.

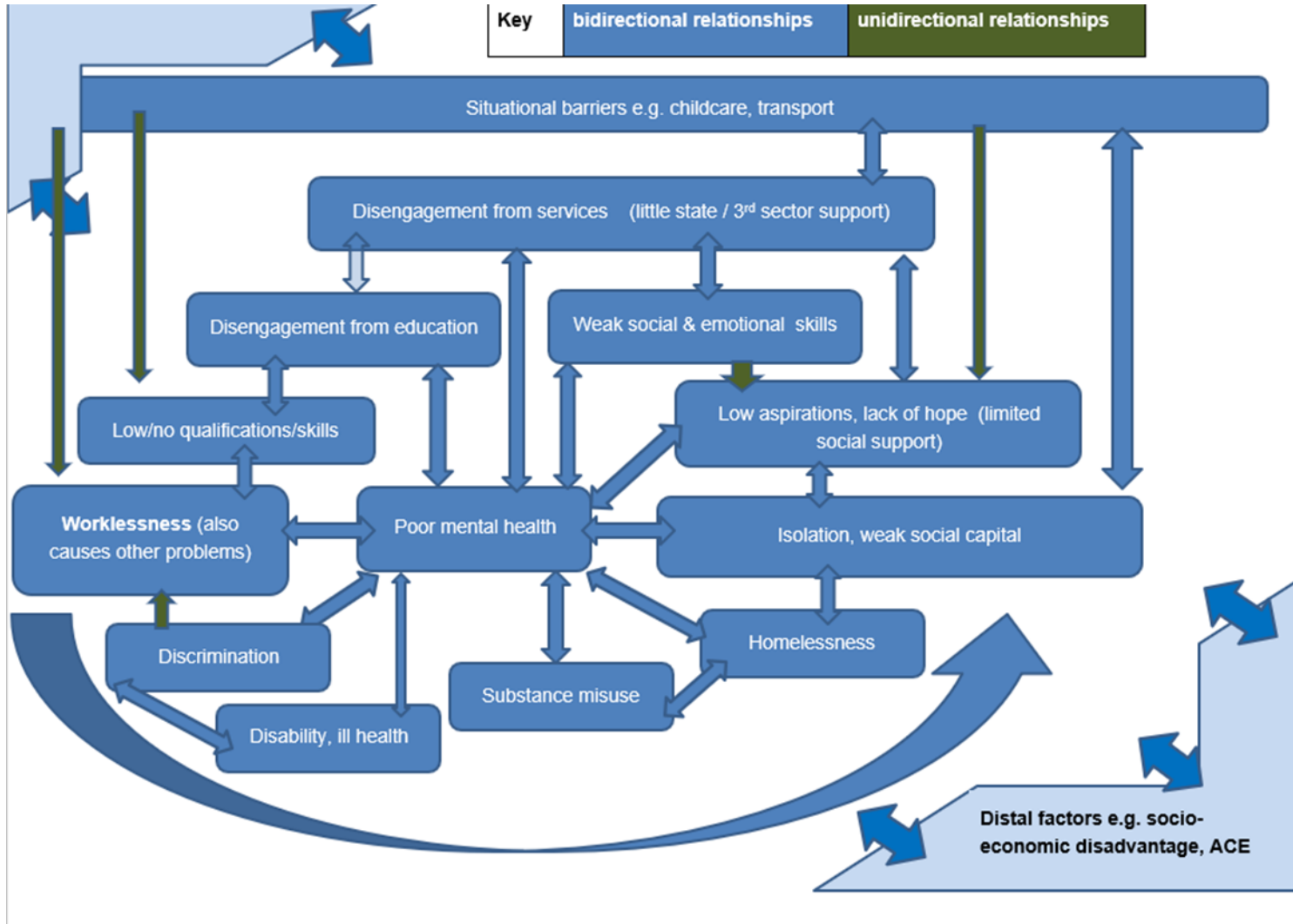
situational barriers, it would not generally be considered the cause of those situational barriers (meaning it is unidirectional). The relationship between disengagement from services and isolation and situational barriers, such as childcare or lack of transport, is more complex, as situational barriers can easily be understood as potential barriers to engaging with services, but a failure to engage with services such as Flying Start (and forgoing access to formal childcare) or social isolation (and therefore difficulties accessing informal childcare), could also be thought of as part of the reason why a young person might experience childcare as a barrier<sup>44</sup>.

- 5.8. As figure 5.1 also illustrates, many of these factors are linked to distal factors such as experience of socio-economic disadvantage and/or ACEs.

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<sup>44</sup> Discrimination is also complicated as, if a social model of disability is used, it can be considered a cause of disability and also a consequence of the underlying impairment and social attitudes and structures. If employers' negative attitudes toward people with lengthy periods of unemployment were considered 'discrimination', worklessness could also be considered a potential cause of discrimination.

Figure 5.1. Links between different factors



Source: Figure created for the review

## 6. Conclusions

- 6.1. Understanding why young people are NEET and how this is likely to change as the context changes (e.g. in the wake of the pandemic and the current economic crisis) is crucial to informing support to encourage and enable them to re-engage with EET.

### *The evidential base*

- 6.2. The findings from different studies discussed in section 3 are generally consistent, and highlight the diverse and cross-cutting characteristics associated with a higher risk of becoming NEET. However, as outlined in sections two and three, there are gaps in the quantitative data which make it difficult to, for example, quantify the size of different groups of young people with different characteristics, or identify the extent to which different characteristics overlap.
- 6.3. The numbers of young people with different characteristics associated with a higher risk of becoming NEET has changed over time. For example, there has been an increase in the numbers of young people with mental health difficulties (NHS Digital, 2021) and a decline in the young women who are economically inactive due to caring responsibilities (Holmes et al., 2021). However, the types of characteristics associated with a higher risk of becoming NEET appear to have remained fairly stable over the last 15 years (which was the period covered by the review)
- 6.4. This also applies to the pandemic. The socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, and policy responses like lockdowns, upon young people, were unprecedented (and therefore not captured in research before 2020). However, while the scale of their impacts upon access to EET opportunities and upon young people's mental health, was unprecedented (see e.g. McCurdy, 2020, Estyn, 2022 and PHW, 2022b) it was not unusual for young people in earlier periods to have experienced problems accessing employment opportunities (e.g. during recessions) (see e.g. DBIS, 2015) or have been held back by mental health difficulties (see e.g. PHE, 2014). The disruption to education and training was a more singular experience (Estyn, 2022), but equally it was not uncommon for some young people to struggle to access quality education and training opportunities in earlier periods (see e.g. PHE, 2014). Therefore it could be argued that the difference again related to the scale of impact, rather than being a fundamentally different type of impact, at least in its more proximate effect, such as weak skills and qualifications.

### *Key messages from the evidence reviewed*

- 6.5. As figure 4.2 illustrates, the reasons why young people are NEET are complex, but not so complicated that they should impede action or understanding and a model like COM-B can be helpful in understanding why some young people are NEET, while most are not.
- 6.6. As the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data discussed in section 3 illustrates, despite the gaps in data it is clear that:
- most young people, including many of those with factors associated with a higher risk of being NEET, such as having low qualifications or a mental health disorder, are in EET;
  - some groups of young people, such as disabled young people, experience much higher risks of becoming NEET, suggesting current policies are failing these groups in particular;
  - young people who are NEET have diverse characteristics, suggesting what works for some may not work for others, although there are often characteristics, such as having low qualifications and skills or coming from a workless household, that cut across different groups and some characteristics, such as caring responsibilities, are more common with particular groups (e.g. young women); and
  - young people who are NEET often have multiple characteristics that increase their risk of being NEET, suggesting the number of factors and interactions between different factors are likely to be important. It is possible that the strain of trying to deal with multiple challenges consumes young people's mental bandwidth, reducing their capability and motivation<sup>45</sup> and/or creating 'tipping points' which overwhelm them<sup>46</sup>, and they become economically inactive.
- 6.7. However, care is needed, as factors such as having low or no qualifications or skills can be both a cause and also a consequence of disengagement from EET: young people who leave education early are likely to have lower qualifications and fewer

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<sup>45</sup> For example, by making them feel they cannot, as they do not have the time or energy (lack of capability), which demotivates them, or by discouraging them from behaviours such as looking for work, which they fear may add to the stresses and strains of day-to-day life, also demotivating them.

<sup>46</sup> In this case, while it might be possible for an individual to overcome an individual challenge or barrier, the combination of barriers becomes too much for a young person to overcome (by limiting their capability and/or access to opportunities). They feel that it is not worth trying to overcome these barriers, further demotivating them.

skills but are also less likely to re-engage with post-16 education or training.

Therefore, the experience of being NEET can exacerbate the difficulties a young person faces through, for example, the forgone opportunities to develop skills and gain qualifications and increased risk of experiencing mental health difficulties, which can make re-engagement with EET in the future more difficult (a phenomenon described as 'scarring'). As a result of their disengagement from EET they may, therefore, also have more characteristics associated with an increased risk of being NEET, compared to those young people who are in EET.

- 6.8. Therefore, there is no 'defining' characteristic, or even a set of characteristics, that means a young person will be NEET. Instead, there are a series of risk factors, some of which it appears can have a more powerful impact than others and which can interact with each other, further increasing the risk that a young person will be NEET by limiting their motivation, capability and/or access to opportunities. Unfortunately, it is difficult to identify groups of young people defined by multiple characteristics, given the gaps in the quantitative data.
- 6.9. Nevertheless, focusing upon the experiences of different groups of young people defined by a single characteristic can still be useful; for example, it can:
- help highlight the types of intervention likely to be required (e.g. access to education or training to enable young people to develop their skills and acquire qualifications);
  - inform planning for provision, by providing an indication of the numbers of young people likely to have a certain characteristic (and therefore also potential support needs), and also of trends (such as increasing numbers of young people with mental health difficulties); and
  - highlight potential weakness in policy or practice, for example where outcomes for a group are particularly poor.
- 7.6. It is notable, for example, that the increases in the numbers of young people, and in particular young men, with mental health difficulties, has offset declines in the numbers of young women who are economically inactive due to caring responsibilities. This means that little progress has been made in reducing the proportion of young people who are NEET since the 2000s (Holmes et al., 2021) . This does not mean that mental health is the only problem these young people face and that addressing that would solve their problems. As outlined in section 5, many



other characteristics that could also hold them back by limiting their capabilities, motivation and/or access to opportunities, often co-occur with poor mental health.

*Potential implications for policy*

- 6.10. Although the next stage of the review will focus upon identifying ‘what works’, this analysis of how and why some young people are NEET suggests some potential implications for policy.
- 6.11. The interconnected nature of many characteristics means that narrow strategies that only focus upon one factor, such as building young people’s motivation, while necessary, may not be sufficient to support their re-engagement with EET. Therefore, it is likely that more holistic and person-centred approaches will be more effective than those focused upon a single issue or with a rigid support offer. This may also mean that a focus upon targets and outcomes may create perverse incentives for providers to focus upon those with the fewest barriers.
- 6.12. The diversity of young people’s characteristics means that a good understanding of each young person’s motivation, capabilities and access to opportunities is likely to be important. This may require formal assessments, such as the Wales Essential Skills Test, and more informal assessments based upon relationships of trust and time, which encourage young people to discuss and share the challenges they face. The evidence about what works will be explored further in the next stage of the research.
- 6.13. Despite the diversity of factors at play, actions such as personal support to help build young people’s motivation to find work and their capability to search for work effectively by enhancing their understanding of employers’ recruitment practices and expectations can potentially help different groups of young people, even when the reasons why they are demotivated or discouraged differ.
- 6.14. As well as understanding the risk factors, understanding the ‘protective’ factors that can mitigate their effects is likely to be important; these include:
  - access to support, including that from family, friends and services;
  - strong capabilities, including social and emotional skills, such as self-efficacy and self-motivation, intelligence and skills;
  - access to opportunities, such as high-quality education and training; and
  - strong motivation (including, for example, clarity about EET goals).

6.15. Finally, evidence from longitudinal studies suggests that the impact of distal factors such as socio-economic disadvantage upon cognitive development is measurable from as early as 22 months and that this is predictive of proximate factors, such as poor educational qualifications at age 26 (Feinstein, 2003). A long-term strategy focused upon early intervention to address the risk factors and help prevent young people becoming NEET and experiencing scarring effects is therefore warranted, while also supporting young people who are NEET now to re-engage with EET.

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## Appendix A: Detail of Searches

**Table A1. Detail of searches and results**

Source	Search term	No. Items reviewed	No. Items included
Google	Review OR Evidence AND “young people” AND Employment OR NEET OR Barriers	40	6
Google	Review OR evidence AND barriers AND “young people” AND employment OR Education OR training OR NEET	30	3
Google	Barriers AND NEET AND systematic research	30	2
Google	EEPI Centre AND Review OR evidence AND barriers AND “young people” AND employment OR Education OR training OR NEET	20	0
Google	JSTOR AND Review OR evidence AND barriers AND “young people” AND employment OR Education OR training OR NEET	30	3
Google	Site search Wales wales.gov followed by google WELSH GOVERNMENT AND NEET OR youth AND employment	40	6
Site search – Scottish government	NEET followed by Youth Employment	25	0
Google	Scottish government AND NEET	30	0
Google	Scottish Government AND Youth AND employment	30	0

SITE SEARCH UK GOV	NEET	70	2
GOV.UK SITE SEARCH	YOUTH EMPLOYMENT	30	0
NI direct website (NI government)	NEET	20	0
NI direct website (NI government)	Youth Employment	20	0
Learning and Work Institute site search	NEET and then Youth Employment	12	1
Welsh centre for public policy site search	NEET , then youth employment, then youth unemployment	5	0
Google Scholar	Review OR Evidence AND “young people” AND Employment OR NEET OR Barriers	100	3
Google	UK AND NEET AND physical disability AND research OR systematic review OR evidence OR evaluation		
Google	UK AND NEET AND physical disability AND research OR systematic review OR evidence OR evaluation	40	0
Google	UK AND NEET AND intersectional AND research OR evaluation OR evidence OR systematic review	50	5

Google	UK AND NEET AND women AND research OR evaluation OR evidence OR systematic review	40	2
Google	UK AND NEET AND BAME OR ethnicity AND research OR evaluation OR evidence OR systematic review	30	0
Google	UK AND NEET AND RURAL AND research OR evaluation OR evidence OR systematic review	20	0
Google	UK AND NEET AND disability AND Research OR evidence OR review OR evaluation	30	3
Google	UK AND NEET AND mental health AND Research OR evidence OR review OR evaluation	50	8

**Appendix B. Sources and methodological note on the calculations used to create table 3.1.**

Table A2. shows the total number of young people and the total numbers of young people who were NEET, aged 16-18 and 19-24, at the end of 2021

**Table A2. Numbers of young people**

Young people aged 16-18 who are NEET at end 2021 (SFR data)	14,200
Young people aged 19-24 who are NEET at end 2021 (SFR data)	37,800
<b>Total (Young people aged 16-24 who are NEET) at end 2021</b>	<b>52,000</b>
<i>Young people aged 16-24 at the end of 2021</i>	336,500
<i>Young people aged 16-18 at mid year 2021</i>	104,000
<i>Young people aged 19-24 at mid year 2021</i>	221,100

Sources: [Estimated 16-24 year olds not in education, training or employment by economic activity and age groups](#); [National level population estimates by year, age and UK country](#)

As table A2 shows, an estimate of the number of young people with selected characteristics, was calculated by using numbers or percentages derived from other sources, and then rounding the figures up or down to the nearest thousand (as these are rough estimates).

As table A3 shows, where we can, we estimate the number of young people who are NEET with selected characteristics, by using numbers or percentages derived from other studies, and then rounding the figures up or down to the nearest thousand.

**Table A3. Estimated number of young people with selected characteristics**

Characteristics	Source	% of YP with this characteristic	No. of YP with this characteristic (rounded to nearest 000)	Notes (e.g. age range, dates)	Calculation
Loneliness	National Survey of Wales, <a href="#">Wales Centre for Public Policy, 2021</a> , Table 1: Levels of loneliness, by age group	22.3	75,000	age 16-24	$336,500 \times 0.223$
Mental Health	Mental Health Disorders: Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP) [in England] survey, <a href="#">NHS Digital, 2022</a> , Table 1.1: Mental health of child or young person1 by age and sex, 2022, probable mental disorder	22	74,000	Age 17-24 year, England [not Wales]	$336,500 \times 0.22$
Caring for others	Caring ( <a href="#">National Survey for Wales: April 2019 to March 2020</a> ) Chart 1, proportion of people who are cares by age group and year 2016-19 - 2019-20	22	74,000	2019-20	$336,500 \times 0.22$
Drug use	<a href="#">Drug misuse in England and Wales: year ending June 2022</a> , Figure 1: Class	18.6	63,000	14-24 year olds, Jun 2022, England and Wales data	$336,500 \times 0.186$

	A drug use in the last year has decreased				
Aged 16-18, No qualifications at level 2 or above	Welsh Government Analysis of Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics	14.6	15,000	2022 data	$104,000 \times 0.146$
Aged 16-18, No qualifications at level 3 or above	Welsh Government Analysis of Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics	65.7	68,000	2022 data	$104,000 \times 0.657$
Aged 19-24, No qualifications at level 2 or above	Welsh Government Analysis of Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics	10.2	23,000	2022 data	$221,100 \times 0.102$
Aged 19-24, No qualifications at level 3 or above	Welsh Government Analysis of Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics	29	64,000	2022 data	$221,100 \times 0.29$
No qualifications aged 16-18	Welsh Government Analysis of Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics	8.7	9,000	2022 data	$104,000 \times 0.087$

No qualifications aged 19-24	Welsh Government Analysis of Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics	5.5	12,000	2022 data	$221,100 \times 0.055$
ALN	<a href="#">Stats Wales: The proportion of young people who had an ALN in secondary school</a>	22.5	76,000	Calculated over the period 2016-2022	$336,500 \times 0.225$
Disability	<a href="#">Stats Wales, Disability by Age and Sex</a>	15.4	52,000	16-24 year olds who are disabled	$336,500 \times 0.154$

**Table 3 Estimated number of young people who are NEET with selected characteristics**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>% of YP who are NEET with this characteristic</b>	<b>No. of YP who are NEET with this characteristic (rounded to nearest 000)</b>	<b>Calculation</b>
Mental Health	<a href="#">NEET age 16 to 24</a> , table 6	20.3	11,000	52,000*0.203
Aged 16-18, No qualifications at level 2 or above	<a href="#">Further analysis of data related to Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)</a> ,	60	9,000*	14,200*0.60
Aged 19-24, No qualifications at level 2 or above	<a href="#">Further analysis of data related to Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)</a> ,	54	20,000*	37,800*0.54
Aged 16-18, No qualifications	<a href="#">Further analysis of data related to Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)</a> ,	21	3,000*	14,200*0.21



Aged 19-24, No qualifications	<a href="#">Further analysis of data related to Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET),</a>	26	10,000*	37,800*0.26
Disabled, 16-18	<a href="#">Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): April 2021 to June 2022, Chart 5</a>	18.7	3,000	14,200*0.187
Disabled, 19-24	<a href="#">Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): April 2021 to June 2022, aged 19-24, Chart 5</a>	38.6	15,000	37,800*0.386

\* Note: these estimates are based upon an analysis of data from 2010. As levels of qualifications in the general population have risen since 2010 it is likely that these figures over-estimate the percentage of young people who are NEET who have low qualifications. Although the rate of young people aged 16-18 with no qualifications has not changed very much, there has been a large fall in the number of young people aged 19-24 with no qualifications. For example in 2010, 9 per cent of 19-24 year olds had no qualifications, compared to 5.5. per cent of 19-24 year olds in 2022.