

The Social Inclusion of Rural NEETs in the EU and the UK

The [Youth and European Social Work Forum](#) (YES Forum) is a network aiming to promote social participation among all young people in Europe. One of the main goals of the YES Forum is to involve young people affected by exclusion and stigmatisation, giving them the opportunity to share their perspectives and be heard. The [Together Trust](#) is a charity based in the North West of England and delivers individual care, support, and education to almost 3000 children and adults yearly. The vision of Together Trust is a society where people thrive because they are valued within their communities.

Who are NEETs

In 2023, more than one in ten (11.2%) young people (aged 15 to 29) were excluded from the labour market and education in Europe. Young people that are not employed, not in school, and not in vocational training ([Not in Education, Employment, or Training](#)) are defined as NEETs. They [are at higher risk of becoming socially excluded](#) – individuals with income below the poverty-line and due to a skills gap are unable to improve their economic situation¹. Some specific groups of young people are more likely to be out of work, education, or training than their peers. Relevant factors include geographical location and socioeconomic status. Research by Youth Future Foundation on the overlap between marginalisation and the likelihood of young people becoming NEETs also identified a range of other relevant factors. These factors include young people that; have a disability or special education need, are often absent from school, are being excluded, have low academic attainment, have low parental involvement in education, have caring responsibilities after the age of 16, are living in a single parent household, have a physical or mental health condition, lived in social housing while growing up, and lived in a household where either parent was unemployed². One of the most significant factors identified was that [young people with experience of the care system were three and a half times more likely to be NEET than their peers](#)³. Another significant observation is that

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/youth-not-in-employment-education-or-training-neet.html#:~:text=This%20indicator%20presents%20the%20share%20of%20young%20people%20who%20are>

² <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/OVERLA2.pdf>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/articles/cz55mjj4rlgo#:~:text=%E2%80%8B%E2%80%8BThe%20post%2DCovid,economically%20inactive%20in%20the%20UK>

young women are more likely to be NEET than young men, and that this gender gap increases in relation to age⁴.

NEETs in the European Union

The EU aims to reduce the NEET rate (15-29-year-olds) to 9% by 2030. To address the challenges facing young European workers and improve the employment prospects of NEETs, the EU has launched various political and financial initiatives in recent years (one of these is ALMA: Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve)⁵.

Reducing the NEET rate is also one of the goals of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (EPSR), an initiative launched by the European Commission in 2017. The Pillar is “our guide for a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive, and provides opportunities for all”⁶. Twenty principles aim to strengthen the social rights of EU citizens in the areas of equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. In the context of youth, [the fourth principle "Active support for employment"](#) is particularly important, as it explicitly highlights the right of young people to qualified education, apprenticeships, internships, or job offers within four months of becoming unemployed or completing education⁷.

The implementation of these social rights in practice is not only a joint responsibility of EU institutions and member states but also part of the responsibility of social actors, such as civil society organisations, who play a crucial role in the implementation process. [Members of the YES Forum contribute on multiple levels - locally, nationally, regionally, and on a European level - to reducing the NEET rate](#), improving vocational and continuing education offers, and thus supporting the concrete implementation of the first chapter of the European Pillar of Social Rights, namely Chapter 1 "Equal Opportunities and Access to the Labour Market".

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#To_what_extent_are_young_adults_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training.3F_The_transition_from_education_to_work

⁵ Further information on the ALMA initiative is available on the European Commission's website <https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/how-to-make-alma-work>

⁶ Further information on the European Pillar of Social Rights is available on the European Commission's website <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1606&langId=en>

⁷ Further information on the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights is available on the European Commission's website <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1601&langId=en>

NEETs in the United Kingdom

One in eight young people in the UK who are aged 16-24 are not currently in education, employment, or training (NEET). This amounts to 872,000 young people who are not engaged in the labour market or enrolled in training or educational courses. Three years ago, the UK NEET rate was 9.5%, not too far from the EU wide target of 9%. Yet as of 2024, the UK NEET rate stands at around 12.2%, and is higher in England than in Scotland and Wales⁸. The new Labour government has called this “unacceptable” and says it “requires immediate action”⁹. Several policy solutions are being discussed at the national level - including a new national jobs and careers service to tackle youth unemployment, a new Youth Guarantee to ensure access to training, and investment in apprenticeships and back-to-work support. In 2016 the government introduced what it referred to as a ‘Care Leaver Covenant’, a voluntary promise that private, public, and voluntary organisations can take to commit to providing additional support and opportunities for those leaving care¹⁰. Every year the number of organisations pledging their support grows, and currently the website boasts over 2000 active opportunities for care leavers tailored to helping them into work or training.

Beyond the government, there are many not-for-profit organisations in the UK campaigning for specific policy measures which they believe would lower the NEET rate. Others offer specific programmes for young people designed to build their confidence, provide skills training, build their connections, and connect them with potential employers. [At Together Trust, connecting the young people we support with meaningful employment, education and training opportunities is a priority.](#) For young people with disabilities who attend our specialist education schools, we have a partnership with Sodexo to provide ‘supported internships’ to assist them with gaining paid employment and gaining long-term life skills. Key to the success of supported internships is our student’s ability to access specialised therapeutic input and occupational therapy. Further to this, openness on the part of the employer to making small accessibility adaptations, and to working closely with the student and our school team is required and actively encouraged. We also campaign for improved employment, education, and training support for young people with disabilities as they are leaving education. We believe that [supported internship schemes should be more inclusive](#) (extended to include a broader cohort of children), and that young people should have access to an

⁸<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/august2024#:~:text=An%20estimated%2012.2%25%20of%20all,points%20on%20the%20previous%20quarter.>

⁹<https://www.bbc.com/articles/cz55mjj4rlgo#:~:text=%E2%80%8B%E2%80%8BThe%20post%2DCovid,economically%20inactive%20in%20the%20UK>

¹⁰ <https://mycovenant.org.uk/about/>

independent advocate to assist them with finding post-16 opportunities. These changes would also create a more equal playing field for young people without active parental involvement.

Digital Inclusion of NEETs in Rural Areas of the Danube Countries

An important contribution to reduce the NEET rate in Europe and to support the implementation of the EPSR made through transnational projects. YES Forum in partnership with 13 organisations from the Danube region has recently started the implementation of a new project for NEETs. Funded by the Interreg Danube Programme¹¹, the “Back on Track” project¹² addresses the challenges of young people without work or education in the Danube region in response to their alarming situation. In 2021, 13.1% of young people (aged 15 to 29) across the EU were classified as NEETs. While countries like Austria and Germany (age group 15-29) have already achieved the target NEET rate of under 9%, countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina (21%) and Bulgaria (17%) recorded very high NEET rates in 2021¹³.

This is a major concern, especially in rural regions. The situation negatively impacts the well-being and standard of living of young people and posed a threat to the social and economic sustainability of rural areas. Back on Track aims to [promote the integration of NEETs in rural areas into society, education, and the labour market in the Danube region](#). By implementing tailored distance learning and mentoring programmes, NEETs in rural areas experience improved digital inclusion, leading to increased resilience, intellectual potential, and human capital. Moreover, their quality of life significantly improves through increased virtual mobility, paving the way for them to (re)connect with society.

This project provides an insight into the work of the YES Forum and shows that transnational projects can raise greater awareness of the concerns of NEETs. By leveraging digital integration and mobility, innovative approaches are deployed to engage a wide network of stakeholders capable of supporting and motivating NEETs in the rural regions of Southern and Eastern Europe. Enhanced social and professional integration empowers these young people to build a positive outlook for their future.

¹¹ Further information on the Danube Region Programme is available on the website of the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism <https://wm.baden-wuerttemberg.de/de/wirtschaft/wirtschaftsfoerderung/foerderpolitik-der-eu/europaeische-territoriale-zusammenarbeit-interreg/donauraum>

¹² [Back on Track project website](#)

¹³ European Commission, Fewer young people neither in employment nor in training <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/DDN-20230526-3>

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