

Interviews with NEET young people

10.1 Sampling issues

We were able to conduct interviews with 20 young people who were NEET. It is important to stress that although there was a balance between youngsters living in Kings Lynn, and those living in more rural areas, the sample was not representative of the NEET population in West Norfolk in other respects. The interviews were obtained by visiting the Connexions Centre in Kings Lynn, and "satellite" centres in the Western Area, the sample was thus confined to young people who were engaged with the Connexions service. It did not include any of the exceptionally challenging NEET young people described in the previous section, and it did not prove possible to interview youngsters who were pregnant or young parents. Although there were courses such as "Beyond the bump" which had been successful in engaging some youngsters, PAs acknowledged that not all young parents wanted to engage with Connexions, and some just wanted to be "left alone": "You can try to get them engaged but the ones I've talked to just want to be left alone and just get on with it". Short "thumbnail" biographies of the young people we interviewed form the most substantial part of this section. The stories will not come as a great surprise to those who are immersed in work with NEET issues full time, but the testimony may well challenge the perhaps narrow and stereotypical views of NEET young people which some student teachers and NQTs (and possibly more experienced teachers) hold.

10.2 Points arising out of the interviews with NEET young people

A sample of 20 interviews clearly does not constitute a dataset that will yield statistically significant data, but there are nonetheless some patterns which either corroborate or question data from other sources, whether it be teachers, LEA and Connexions personnel whose testimony is provided in other sections, or in other recent studies of NEET young people (see, for example, Connexions Norfolk, 2008, Gartshore, 2009, Cambridgeshire LSC, 2008, Nuffield, 2006, NFER, 2009, Tunnard *et al.*, 2008). We feel that probably the most important potential benefit which might arise from the dissemination of the NEET "stories" which are told in Section 10.11 is a better understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the factors

that influence NEET outcomes on the part of new teachers and others who are starting to work with NEET or potentially NEET young people.

10.3 Why young people drop out of education, employment and training

A study of the case studies in Section 10.11 to some extent confirms the findings of Yorke and Longden (2004) in their international study of retention issues post 16. The study suggested that there are generally four broad reasons why students leave post-compulsory academic and training programmes:

- Flawed decision making in initial choices.
- Events that impact on students' lives outside the institution.
- Students' experiences of the programme and the institution.
- Failure to cope with the academic demands of programmes.

Whilst most of the stories told in Section 10.11 would fit some of the above criteria, there were also cultural and attitudinal factors which seemed to be in some ways contributory to students' decisions to drop out of courses or refuse to consider further education and training. Several of the interviewees reported that their parents did not give them strong encouragement to stay in education. A majority of respondents had not enjoyed school and their overall experiences in education up to the age of 16 had been negative. Sometimes this was the result of bullying, sometimes the result of difficult or negative relationships with teachers, boredom, or frustration, disappointment and lack of esteem deriving from the realisation that they were not "good successful learners". Almost without exception, they talked of D to G grades as a "fail" in terms of their qualifications, and they did not find it easy to identify ways in which they had done well or developed at school. However, it would be wrong to assume that all or most of the NEET young people we talked to were "anti-education" or that they were poor learners. Some of them were desperately keen to move on or to get back into education or training. Some of them were obviously capable, intelligent and resourceful and we got the impression that they would make very good students or employees given the right opportunity. There were also some who were not strong

academically, and who one could imagine becoming quite de-motivated in a system which places a great deal of emphasis on academic qualifications.

10.4 Difficulties in getting jobs or places on courses

Almost without exception, the young people we talked to were unhappy about not being in education, employment and training. Some of them did not aspire to anything beyond a job without training and in some cases “any job”, but only one of the NEET young people we talked to seemed relatively content and unconcerned about not having any job or course. Although not all of the respondents were working with equal focus, drive and determination to get on courses or get into employment, all but one wanted to do some sort of job or get on some sort of course. Evidence from the Connexions’ PAs we interviewed (see Section 9) suggested that given their circumstances, attributes and qualifications, it was proving difficult for some of them to get into work or training, given current circumstances in the area.

10.5 Information, advice and guidance

Several of the respondents felt that they had not received good advice, either in terms of choosing courses or of being aware of the full range of possible ways forward that might be possible for them. (We are aware that this was their perception and that it is possible that not all of them were receptive to attempts at IAG). Several interviewees acknowledged that they had not made the most of their opportunities at school, and that having wanted to leave school at 16 and “just get a job”, they now looked back quite wistfully and regretfully, and wished that they could go back and “have another chance”. Some had clearly under-estimated the difficulties involved in getting even unskilled jobs, and one facet of IAG might be to point out to students this reality more forcefully at an earlier stage (again, it is possible that schools are doing this and some students are not listening). There would appear to be the potential for some of the young people we talked to, to go back into schools and talk about some of their experiences to pupils who might be at risk of disengagement through inertia and complacency. It is worth noting that almost all the youngsters

we interviewed spoke very positively about how helpful Connexions' PAs had been.

10.6 Work experience

Very few respondents spoke positively about their pre-16 work experience (although one had used it to get later part time employment). For most of them it had been 'OK', but not particularly interesting or challenging. We are aware that we were not talking to a representative sample of the young people who go out to do work experience at KS4, and that there may be many pupils who are motivated and enthused by it, but this did not seem to be the case for this group. Neither was the experience of work placement so unpleasant or harrowing that they felt impelled to work harder at school in order to avoid the fate of such work. Some suggested that it was "a bit of a change", but that it was ultimately a bit of a disappointment. We are aware that it must be extremely difficult to arrange high quality and appropriate work experience for whole cohorts of students, but it is an area where schools need to continue to work hard to get placements that will have a positive influence on students' disposition to do well and make the most of their opportunities in education.

10.7 Quietly disaffected and disengaged students

Not all the young people we talked to had been "in trouble" at school, either in terms of behaviour or attendance. Some of them appeared to have "drifted" in terms of their overall progress and development whilst at school. Earlier research involving Norfolk pupils suggested that there are significant numbers of pupils in Norfolk who are, in Oakley's terms, "RHINOs" (Really here in name only), who are not driven and proactive in terms of thinking about their future prospects (Oakley, 2002). Many schools appear to be making a major effort to improve the "curriculum offer" for such students, and to provide guidance and advice at an earlier stage (see Section 12), but this is another area which is perhaps "work in progress". Rightly or wrongly, some of the students felt that if they were not in the A-C "ballpark", they were not the school's first priority.

10.8 Teachers and PAs make a difference

Although many of the young people interviewed reported predominantly negative experiences of being in school, the majority of them made the point that some teachers and tutors had been more helpful than others. In many cases this was not described in terms of subject knowledge or pedagogical expertise, but in terms of their interactions with students: being made to feel welcome, “the feeling that the teacher did care about how you were getting on and was as bothered about you as the kids who were doing really well”. Praise for Connexions’ PAs was also reported in similar terms, but there was also the dimension of taking time and trouble and obviously “putting themselves out” to be of practical help.

Given the testimony from other sources about the importance of developing good working relationships between teachers and learners, this seemed to be an important point for schools to consider in terms of how to improve NEET outcomes. Most schools and colleges have some teachers who are exceptionally talented in terms of their interactions with students, and their ability to build and sustain a positive, inclusive and collaborative working atmosphere in their classrooms. What are the most effective ways of disseminating such skills?

10.9 Travel

In terms of feedback from sources other than the NEET young people we interviewed, there were differing views on the extent to which rurality and transport issues influenced NEET outcomes. More than one LEA source pointed out that where provision was of high quality, students were prepared to regularly undertake very long and convoluted journeys in order to complete the course. But there were also respondents who suggested that the limited transport services in rural areas did sometimes deter students and inclined them to look for courses closer to home which might not be as appropriate. Both PAs and tutors reported that it was not just a question of time and inconvenience, and that sometimes NEET at risk young people sometimes lacked the social confidence to travel to new and unfamiliar places. In the words of one teacher, “People who don’t really know our kids think they are quite tough and streetwise, but actually a lot of them don’t even go into Norwich... they tend to hang

about on the estate and just go between the estate and school". Some of the tutors running courses for NEET youngsters said that part of it was about building up their social confidence in terms of being willing to take bus journeys and new experiences in their stride.

At least three students had withdrawn from courses citing "once a day each way" bus services as at least part of the reason for doing so. However, in two cases, this was exacerbated by without-notice cancellations of teaching sessions, which left them hanging about with nothing to do until the evening bus home. There was a roughly even split between those youngsters who felt that they would have to "bite the bullet" and travel to Kings Lynn or Norwich to make the best of their chances, and those who either through lack of confidence or lack of energy and commitment said that they would not consider work or training outside the local area (see Section 10.11 for further details). It remains to be seen whether the idea of equipping young people with mopeds will improve learning and employment mobility in the county.

10.10 Success criteria

Noyes and Turner (2009) make the point that in recent years, explanations of under-achievement by young people have moved away from focusing on the shortcomings of students and their families and towards the shortcomings of the educational system in providing for learners with differing needs. It is important not to see any deficit in employment and training take-up as an indictment of the services provided for young people. In the 1970s nearly 40% of 16 year olds left school without any qualifications (Aldrich, 2004), and Norfolk has been successful in reducing NEET numbers over the past two years. Nearly all schools are working hard to improve the quality and appropriateness of the curriculum for young people, and there is evidence from this and other reports on NEET issues that there is much good and improving practice. As Section 9 indicates, schools, colleges and Children's Services have to deal with exceptionally difficult young people for whom it is not easy to find training or employment. As well as talking about problem areas, teachers and PAs mentioned several instances of spectacular success, where students with severe difficulties had ended up going on to university in spite of formidable obstacles, because of sensitive and effective support

from a range of sources. However, we feel that it is important that success in NEET issues is not seen just in terms of getting young people into full time courses or employment. Many of the positive things reported in Section 10.11 and elsewhere in this report relate to the beneficial effects of part time courses or part time employment, and incremental gains in students' autonomy, self-esteem and ability to establish positive relationships with others. None of the NEET young people we interviewed had as yet made the transition to full time work or full time employment, but most of them had made significant progress in some of these areas because of the skilful intervention and support of the professionals they were working with.

10.11 "Everyone has a story"

The following thumbnail biographies of young people who were interviewed provide an indication of how multifaceted the NEET population is and how complex are the factors influencing their situation. It should be remembered that the stories presented here do not represent a comprehensive cross sample of the NEET population (see Section 10.1).

Carla

Carla lives in a small market town in West Norfolk. She was enrolled on an FE course but dropped out due to a combination of transport difficulties and the frustrations of travelling in to the college to find that on several occasions, lectures had been cancelled. Together with a friend who also ended up withdrawing from the course, they then had to wait for the evening bus to take them back home. Her parents and family all became very disillusioned with the situation. Because of this, her younger sister had refused to consider going on to FE ("A real shame... She's a bright girl") and has opted instead to work at a "job without training" vegetable packing depot in her home village. The whole family are very disenchanted with FE in general.

Susan

Susan is a 19 year old female who had attended a West Norfolk High School. She left at 16 with poor qualifications, no maths and English GCSE. She had not enjoyed school and was pleased to leave but now (said with a smile on her face and rather sheepishly) said that she would be

pleased to go back... work had not been as pleasant or easy as she had expected.

She had been employed at local burger company but hated it and felt that she had been very badly treated. She had got into restaurant work with some basic training which was much better but had then been laid off because they were cutting back on staff... "The job had been going OK, it was just that they were getting rid of staff and I was one of the latest arrivals and at the bottom of the pile".

She had attended West Anglia College for a year and a half, finished her first year course which was based on Sport but she had then found the second year course too hard, felt she couldn't do it, and dropped out.

She is living with her boyfriend who is also unemployed. She wanted to be a carer in the longer term and would be interested in getting back into college if she could find the right course, but her first priority was to get a job and things were such that any job would be good, but it was not easy to get one at the moment.

She did not feel that she had had good advice and guidance at school but she said that the staff at Connexions had been really helpful since she had left college.

Donald

Donald has popped into Connexions today hoping to see his usual PA to discuss his CV. Unfortunately, she is not in today and Donald appears somewhat disappointed. He's well presented in casual dress and seems to have made a real effort. He has a rucksack to which he keeps pointing, informing me his paperwork is in it.

Donald left school aged 16 and is now 18. He was not academically successful at school having achieved no GCSE passes at grade C. His time at school was unhappy. Donald says he has no real memories of what it was like but tells me almost immediately that he was bullied there. He looks away as he says it, clearly upset by the memories. I ask if the teachers supported him. "No", he says. Nobody took it seriously. As a result he started "skiving" some lessons and he ended up being suspended

for a while. He did however sit his examinations – five he thinks – he tries to list them but can't recall them all – and as for the grades – "G's" he thinks.

When Donald left school at 16 he knew what he wanted to do. He had applied for a training course to enable him to eventually become a RAF engineer. He does that part time now as reserve. He now wants to be a full time engineer with the RAF. He has discovered, with the help of the Connexions services, that if he completes an apprenticeship in engineering and continues with his RAF reserve duties (to include one tour of duty) he will be able to apply to be with the RAF full time. There's a clear plan but he now needs the guidance from his PA about his CV. He'll be back on Tuesday to see her. He also comes into the office regularly to use the computers as there's no access at home. Donald is banned from the library for not paying fines for overdue books – he said he had just forgotten to take things back. When we talk more about the Connexions office, from the way he points to information on the tables it's obvious that this is someone who knows what services to expect here. He is quietly appreciative. The information given to him about apprenticeships is his passport to the job he wants.

I ask about support whilst at school when he was thinking about his future and what to do after school. He's not initially forthcoming. He can't recall any guidance from teachers. He's had no contact with staff since leaving and is not in touch with any of his peers. When prompted he recalls that Connexions staff were present at school on a weekly basis. He recalls them taking groups of pupils to factories to familiarise them with work places. No other places were visited he tells me. Nothing else of significance comes to mind. I ask him if he had contact with Connexions staff during the summer after he left school – "no", he says. He looks surprised by the question – I get the impression that he felt quite independent at that stage - having been accepted to do the training course he was not in need of support.

How does Donald see his future? He's going to become an RAF engineer. There's nothing else that he is focussed on. The support from Connexions staff leads him to believe he can do it and he's going for it.

Karen

Karen is 16 and went to a local high school. She has come into Connexions today to find out more about possibilities available to her as she recently left school. She left earlier in May but has 4-5 exams coming up, (she's taking maths, English, health and social care and IT) and is hoping to be successful. Her teachers have predicted 'G' grades but she tells me she already has a pass in IT. I ask what she will need to get into college as she wants to do health and social care at Wisbech College. She thinks she "probably" needs to pass health and social care, English and maths.

As we talk Karen reveals that she had meetings with a Connexions' PA at school. The PA gave her information about college – practical elements such as what time she needed to get up and go to college. She also was able to talk to the PA about her "problems"; "I used to get a lot of stick at school but she was there and I could talk to her". Karen has known the PA since the start of year 11 and stressed "She was really nice". Karen is here today because she was "meant go to Wisbech College" but they haven't offered her a place. She might try the college (COWA) where she would want to follow the same course - health and social work.

I ask what back-up plans she has if she doesn't get into college. Her father who arrived a few minutes ago and who is now sitting in on the interview says he has received a letter this morning saying benefits for her will cease if she is not at college. He goes on to say, "Whatever it is she has to get into college otherwise there will be no benefits for her. All my benefits for her will cease – it's different for her. Her sister has a disability and once she comes into Connexions for her help her allowances will continue".

Karen now tells me that the last two years at school have been "hell, total utter hell... The bullying has been incredible – very bad". I asked if Karen got help from the teachers. She says when she told the head of year he said "stop tittle tattling and go away"..... "and they used to wonder why I used to get in trouble and skive all the lessons. I only used to go to IT and health and social work because of my teacher. I love her to pieces. When I skived I used to go to her class and do work and stuff and – that's why I got a pass [in IT]". Her health and social work teacher was "nice" too and she thinks she should get a pass there too.

I ask if she is in touch with students from school. She is - but they have all got places at college (dad tells me) and she doesn't want to be the "left one out". I ask again why she is here and what help the office can give. She tells me they will help her with "filling the stuff out and that and sending things away because I am dyslexic".

Dad interjects and tells me Karen has a statement for learning disability and feels that she did not get much support for this.

I ask Karen why she has chosen the course she did and why she wants to work in an old people's home. She feels she gets on with them.

I ask if she did any work experience. She didn't go because she felt that the teacher who was organising it "picked on her". One day she told her to "shove it" and she wasn't then allowed to go - "she just used to 'pick and pick and pick".

I ask if she knows what the course is about, she seems to know it's "the basics" which, when I probe further, I realise she's just got information about from the PA she just spoke to. She didn't have it before.

She worked out her next steps with the PA and will be coming in to get help in making applications to get into college. I ask if she has a computer at home but she doesn't. She thinks she'll use the one here. "What's the best thing about the service she's been offered today?" "They talk to you and listen to you and they don't think you're 'a waste of space'". She compares this with the teacher at school who advised her on careers and work experience - "she used to look at you like just another person that ain't gonna do anything with their life". Where does she want to be in a few years time? If she gets on the course working in an old people's home "probably". (Her dad jokes she can look after him). I ask what will happen if she doesn't get on the course and what she expects from Connexions. "Jobs other places I can go to and that". She seems willing to do almost anything.

Mother adds she wanted to work with animals but she can't get on the course - I ask if it's because of the reading and writing but Karen goes back to the bullying - her sister was doing a course there and she was also

bullied there so she quit. The girl who was doing the bullying would have been on the same course.

I mention jobs again and she reveals she is already looking after an elderly person for 3-4 hours per day. She enjoys doing the "cleaning up after her" and "listening to all her stories... That's why I love old people they can tell you so much things.. She's a feisty old lady – she's like a mum. You can just talk to her. They tell you stuff". I ask if that was good for learning as opposed to school. Yes – school was too "complicated" and "then you sit there with her and you talk to her about the war and it seems so easy". I ask about school again and what she means by "complicated". "They teach things you don't want to know about, you're stuck in a classroom and it gets boring after a while". She would have liked to have done more practical things. The old lady makes things funny for Karen – "she's always got to use a swear word – she's funny". I ask if there are any other jobs she would do – anything she says "to get the money". She reflects and says the problem with working with old people is that you get "connected to them... if anything happens to her then..." She has nothing but praise for the staff in the office. She values the opportunity she has had in school to talk to a PA – to get things "off her chest". If she sees her on the street she says "hello" to her.

Brandon

(He was very eager to talk to me as it seemed he thought I would be able to 'solve' his problems. The momentary flicker of hope in his eyes - soon diminished - said far more than any of his verbal responses to the questions. He was polite but very wary – it was interesting that he read the ethics form very carefully, laboriously pointing to each word with the pen, before signing. He needed prompting and encouragement to respond to the questions).

Brandon is 17 and is currently unemployed and feeling very despondent about his employment prospects. He would like to be a mechanic as he has learnt a great deal about car maintenance from his cousin (when he talked about banger racing, he became more enthusiastic). He enjoyed school as "it was a laugh" and he could "see his mates" but missed all his GCSE exams as he had to go away (he would not say more about this). He said he didn't mind at the time but now regrets having no qualifications

and “ending up with nothing” and being “bored and lonely”. He said he had received advice from Connexions, including a one-to-one meeting, which helped to some extent (he looked around nervously at this point – I got the feeling that he visited the centre regularly as “a safe place” and did not want to criticise Connections in any way). He said he often used the internet to look for jobs and courses. When I asked about his future plans, Brandon said he would like to train first and then become a mechanic in the local area. When I suggested he might eventually have his own small business, he looked astonished that anyone should think of him in this way. He said that his Mum wanted him to get a job and earn some money as soon as possible. After I had thanked him, he seemed reluctant to leave (perhaps still thinking that “the woman from the university” could do something about his situation?).

Rachel

(This 17 year-old young person, currently attending a school sixth form but considering leaving, came in with her mother. They had an appointment with one of the advisers. She may enter the 'NEET' pool but for very different reasons from the other interviewees).

Rachel is passionate about horses and wants to teach horse riding. She enjoys the practical subjects in school and achieved satisfactory grades for all GCSEs and NVQs taken at the end of year 11. Connexions came to the school and advised her to go to college – the dilemma is that there are no suitable courses offered locally. She would like to leave school and work to earn money for training elsewhere. She makes very good use of the internet to search for courses and possible jobs. The parent said that she only wanted her daughter to be happy but was getting worried about the lack of opportunities available – “it is not enough to have visits from Connexions”, she said, “what is needed is someone to push and encourage the pupils – we were fortunate as there was a designated person at the school with a responsibility for careers who really put some of the suggestions, such as day release opportunities, into practice”.

Linsey

(This 20 year-old came in a state of anxiety and anger – she was very willing to talk to me).

Linsey said that she had always wanted to be a hairdresser "as everyone said it was interesting" but she found the course too difficult and left after a few months. When I asked if it was the written work that was causing problems, she said that the practical work was too demanding. She hated school and couldn't wait to get a job but did leave with some qualifications (including maths and English). When she discovered there were no jobs available she became "very upset and angry". She has just started a business retail and administration course but walked out (perhaps temporarily?) following an argument with her tutor. "My tutor hates me and is always saying my work is not good enough", she said. Linsey said that as she has had the same advisor from Connexions from the age of 14 (because of her "learning difficulties"), she feels supported. When asked what her Mum wanted her to do, she said "go to college and learn how to behave myself". She makes good use of the internet either in college or in the Centre. Her ambition is to run her own underwear shop in KL – when asked why, she promptly and seriously replied, "because there is no good underwear shop in the town".

Michelle

Michelle is 16, due to be 17 in August. She is interested in a career in the fashion industry, but didn't feel that the advice given in school helped her find out much about it. She left school with most of her GCSEs at grade D, including maths and English. She obtained one E, and a grade B for drama. Her school was in Wisbech, with around 800 pupils on roll. She believed travel was necessary to access post-16 training and education.

Through her time at school she also took up paid work, first in a chip shop earning £2.50 an hour. She also took later work at the clothes shop 'Burtons', and at the sandwich bar 'Subway'. Eventually, in July 2008, she took up work in 'Dorothy Perkins'. The impetus for this came from the work experience framework provided by her school, though Michelle stated she sought and secured this post herself with respect to her particular interest in fashion. The post developed from a work experience placement to paid work as the opportunity to cover maternity leave arose. With regard to paid work, Michelle made it clear that earning money was important to her, and alluded to her mother not having much money. Earning money, she said, was important also to her own independence, and she enjoyed the placement sufficiently to want to continue the work.

Michelle felt the advice she received about the fashion industry was limited. Most of what she knew she found out herself. Her older sister is studying fashion-buying at university in Manchester, and Michelle had some awareness of what that course entails. She knew work in the field of fashion might entail travel, and this seemed a source of interest for her, though she accepted in the short term that she would have to work in retail locally. The type of shop she might work in was important to her – she was happy to work in 'Dorothy Perkins' and 'Peacocks', but remarked with regard to 'New Look' "I have my standards". She gleaned further knowledge of the industry from magazines and the web, and had sought information via the internet to support her composition of a curriculum vitae. She had no access to a computer or the web at home, so did this via Connexions facilities.

She stated that she had "hated school" but indicated that at the time of options (year 9) had felt some enthusiasm for subjects, particularly French. The actual experience of this and other subjects at GCSE had caused her some disappointment. She acknowledged what she called her own "anger issues" which made this phase of schooling challenging for her. She had found both her parents supportive. In general, she had found options and careers guidance limited. She was unaware what courses might be available in the eastern region, and had not heard of the Notschool e-learning course, though felt it might be of interest. Her attitude to qualifications was ambivalent "I'm intelligent, not dumb", and contended that she had been able to do all the work presented to her in her varied employment, including tasks requiring numeracy and literacy.

(My own impressions were of an articulate, confident and intelligent young woman. In my time at the Connexions centre and after my interview with her, I noted her focus at a computer workstation for at least an hour as she worked on preparing a CV).

Jenny

Jenny is 19. At 15 she left school two months prior to the standard point of exit due to becoming pregnant, and although predicted a number of A grades at GCSE, actually attained E, F and G grades across the subjects. Her situation was made more difficult given that she fell out with her

father and step-mother, and had to move away to live with her mother. Initially she claimed Income Support but later obtained work in a care home, having for quite some time intended to do so for her employment. This work was also interrupted, first as she suffered a violent partner, forcing her to move again. Recently settled in a new area with a new partner, she embarked on searching for work again but fell pregnant a second time. She now continues studying to support retaking her GCSEs. Her partner works nightshifts, so the couple have some flexibility with regard to childcare. She reported a positive experience of school, and hopes to complete study for her English and Maths GCSEs in the near future.

Jenny maintains an interest in working in care, and understands the challenges of the role. Her initial interest in this area arose from caring for her grandmother. She has aspirations to be a senior care manager, and is clearly aware of a career path that would take her to such a role.

Lee

Lee is 17, currently homeless and unemployed. Lee enjoyed his time at school. He left at the end of Year 11 having successfully completed a day release carpentry and plastering course at the College of West Anglia, alongside his GCSEs, of which he passed English, maths and Science. His successful completion of the day release course entitled him to a guaranteed place at COWA to embark on a carpentry diploma.

Lee completed the first three months of the diploma course, but was "kicked out". He was asked to leave due to poor attendance. He "felt gutted" by this because his poor attendance was due to him "being homeless". Despite being given several warnings, he did not feel that anyone understood his situation.

After leaving college Lee started working full time for his grandad, plastering. However, this only lasted two weeks and his grandad sacked him. The main problem for Lee was that he found the demands of working full time "really hard", especially having to get up at 06:30 every day.

Being jobless meant that Lee claimed Income Support for ten weeks and lived at his girlfriend's home. Income Support has now stopped and he has

to apply for Job Seekers' Allowance, but he won't get any money for five weeks. He is trying to get into a hostel, and this is his immediate priority. He feels very frustrated as he knows what he wants to do, but does not feel there is any support for him. He does have access to the internet, but has not as yet thought about using it to try and find a job. Lee wants to go back to college to get qualified, but he feels that his chances are slim, having been asked to leave. In the meantime, there is a chance that his girlfriend's grandad may be able to temporarily employ him as a dry liner.

Kelly

Kelly is 16. She was attending the Connexions Centre with her mother, and was looking for work. At the time of the interview, Kelly was feeling very confident that she was beginning to get herself sorted.

Kelly completed Year 10 of her GCSEs in Cornwall, and moved to Norfolk in August 2007. However, she was not able to obtain a place in any school to complete her Year 11 studies. Then she became pregnant. She sought help from Action for Children and says that Connexions "have been fantastic", helping her to obtain places on a variety of courses: "Bump to Babies" and "Beyond the Bump", to help her prepare for motherhood. She has also completed a "Time for Change" course, Adult Literacy course and is about to undertake a numeracy course to help her prepare for College. She continues to have regular contact with her Connexions' key worker.

Kelly wants to be a beauty therapist and has actively sought voluntary work experience in a beauty salon to "get a feel for the job". She has applied to COWA for the Beauty Therapy Level 2 course and is waiting to hear whether she has a place to start in September. She is going to apply to The Prince's Trust for a grant if she gets a place. Kelly's ambition is to be a mobile beauty therapist, travelling to people's houses (but she needs to learn to drive). When reflecting on her story so far, Kelly feels that things have worked out for the best because if she had got into school to finish her GCSEs, she wouldn't have got pregnant, so would not have her baby, who is the "best thing in my life".

Richard

Richard is 17 and had planned to get a job with a firm run by a friend of his father, a gardening nursery business, as a general labourer, shifting

soil, loading pallets; a job without training but he seemed to have been happy with this prospect. He was keen to leave school and start earning money, his father had made arrangements for the job so he did not feel that he needed to look round for jobs or worry about qualifications. He sat GCSEs and got a C in Resistant Materials and Es in maths and English. He did have an interview with Connexions but was not particularly interested as he thought he had a job lined up, and his parents were keen for him to take up the job, "Best to get real experience in a real job". He did the job for a month but then got laid off "due to the recession and stuff". He is now looking for a new job, and any job rather than a job with training. He is doing a few hours putting up marquees and likes this work and would be keen to do more but the supply of work is not regular – this work was again arranged through family contacts. The marquee work is "good but not many hours" and only pays £3 an hour. All his family are keen for him to get regular work and he is currently looking around for general labouring work, in construction or "even in agriculture", but "there is not much around". When asked what he thinks he might be doing in a few years time he is not sure and says he does not really know.

William

Age 17, said that he had to go to college because his GCSE grades "weren't that good", so he went to the sixth form college to do Business and Leisure and Tourism and re-sit English and maths GCSE. He then struggled to make progress in his courses and was eventually advised to leave the college because he was not making any progress in any of his courses: "I had to drop Travel and Tourism, because of the course work, I sort of struggled with it, and... I dropped maths, because, well some other reason that I had to do it, I can't really remember, so I had to drop them two, and then like I passed the Business, and then... like... that was a re-take year again, so I had to do Business, Travel and Tourism, and English and maths again, because I couldn't go on to another, because that was Level 2, but I couldn't go on to Level 3 because they wouldn't, the Director said to me, 'I don't think you'll be able to do it...', so he said, 'you can do a re-take year', and that didn't really work out, so then, then they asked me to leave and now I'm here... because it was just a re-take year I, I done everything really at the same time and done everything twice and that, and I sort of got bored with it, so I didn't really try as much as I did in the first year". Unlike many of the students we talked to, he said he had quite

enjoyed school: "Yeah, I, I got on quite well at school and that, and that was good fun. I quite liked high school, I still wish I was there" (laughs).

William had worked in a factory for a while, "but then I got made redundant, because of the recession they just couldn't, it hit the factory really hard, so they had to make me redundant". He was considering travelling to Norwich or Kings Lynn "because, erm, there's quite a lot of good courses up there, but I have to think about that, because at the minute I'm not really too bothered if I go there or not, so, but if there's like, when this course ends then I'll really have to think about it, if I don't get a job, so.... I'm not really too sure to be honest with you, I've just applied to this Prince's Trust thing as well, that's another option, or I've just applied for a job as well, down in town, so it's either a job or education again. I mean you can get a job at MacDonalds... if you're good you can get made a manager, you know, stuff like that".

(Richard comes across as an extremely likeable and articulate young man. His failure to get a level 2 qualification in maths had been a particular problem in terms of his progress and on the day of this interview, he failed his ALAN test by one mark. His tutor said that he was a very likeable and nice person, but that he had at times been in trouble at school, and had had to cope with an exceptionally difficult home situation, which he had done in a very cheerful and resilient way.)

Alex

Alex is 20 and cheerfully admits that he had been "booted out" of the local college "not for misbehaving and stuff, just for not turning up most of the time, sort of sitting at home, skiving". He said that he had not enjoyed being at school and that this was what was behind staying off with increasing frequency as he went through the school. He told me that when he left school at 16 he just wanted to get a job, any job, not bothered about training or prospects, he thought it would be better and more enjoyable than staying on at school. "I've done bricklaying courses at school, because that was like one day a week going to college, and the rest of the week going to school, or something like that, or one day a week at college and not going to school (laughs). Yeah, I got a certificate for it, Level 1 in bricklaying, so, but now you need GCSEs like, so it's a never-ending circle".

He had held down a job at a local supermarket for nearly two years "but that kind of fizzled out... you know, when you do something for a long time, it gets boring". He admitted that he had not been laid off because of the economic situation or because the supermarket was cutting back on staff, and acknowledged that it was because he had not been a model or even reliable employee. He was now unemployed and was trying to find a job "but I can't find one, can't find one nowhere... everything I tried. It's just like, with my employment record....."

Alex lived in a hostel and said that he had found the one day a week course helpful, "Yeah it's helpful, I've actually, I was one mark off passing my test, which I was quite gutted about, so hopefully I'll pass this time". He said the course was better than just hanging about at the hostel and said that everyone in the group got on. Like many others in the group, he was full of praise for the teacher, "Yeah, she's good...if I'd had her at school I'd have been alright... I've got better English and maths now than what I had and they help me sort my CV out, help me find a job". He said that he would travel to Norwich or Kings Lynn if he could find the right course. "Yeah, I mean the Job Centre know I've been attending this course and like it'll do you some good, you know, help you find a job, and I'm taking the help instead of throwing it back in peoples' faces... Yeah, and if you'd have said to me, like if I was sat here at 16 and you said to me, 'is the course any good', I would have said 'no it's a load of c**p', but now I need the help so I'm taking it". He said that he would prefer an apprenticeship, but that any job would do.

Margaret

Margaret was 18 and had gone to an 11-16 school in North Norfolk and then done an E2E course at college before moving to West Norfolk. She had taken several GCSEs and got some pass grades but had not got grade Cs in maths and English. She had completed the course but then found that there wasn't a course that suited her. She had always wanted to become a mechanic and was trying to get onto some sort of course that would enable her to accomplish that. She lived in a hostel in West Norfolk. She was trying to get a place on the Prince's Trust course: "my friend has just come off it and loved it". She was also considering going to a college course in Norwich: "like you do mechanics for two and half days, and you

do your English and your maths the other two and half days". I asked if it would bother her having to go to Norwich to do the course: "I'd rather it was local because then you haven't got to worry too much, have you, about getting there, but I'll still do it, it's what I want to do and it's better than nothing really".

She had recently tried a mechanics' course elsewhere in the county but it had not worked out. This seemed to be partly about the journey, and partly that the course wasn't quite what she wanted: "It just wasn't what I wanted to do, like I want to be a mechanic on cars, like... peds... and I didn't... I was like, no, I'd learnt everything really quick and I was like... I want to be on cars, so... It was still quite a distance to travel, because I had to be there like, I was supposed to be there at like 9 I think, and then finish at 5, and it was just, then you had to like, I had to walk all the way from, do you know where Tesco's is? From there all the way in to the town, and then get my bus, and then come all the way home and it was just too much".

Like all the others on this one day a week course, she spoke very positively about the course and the tutor: "I love this, I think it's great... Yeah, I've been here every week, apart from that one week when I done that work (the mechanics' course). I get on really well with X (the tutor), and everyone else. I started new here but I've got good friends here now. I'd love a job, but at the moment in my life I think I'd just rather do a course, do something easy-going now... I'd like to get a job, but not yet, if that makes any sense?"

(The tutor described her as having been a pleasure to work with: "It's sad that these kids have got so much inside them, and yet, the thing is you're in a hostel... trying to get some qualifications, if she gets a job she can't afford the cost of the hostel, because the prices go up so much, she's in a Catch 22. If she gets a job, or if she takes.. she might have to go to Norwich or Kings Lynn, if she goes to Norwich or Kings Lynn then she has to join a hostel in Norwich or Kings Lynn, if she joins a hostel in Norwich or Kings Lynn she's actually really... at risk... within about 3 months... because they are so rough, and we know that from everywhere else, and the key workers, and she's a very attractive, very petite lovely little lady, and it wouldn't be hard for her to actually go... one way or the other, isn't

that sad... and she wants to be a mechanic, or a hairdresser... and she's just, you know, and it's not fair is it?" She felt that although Margaret was "blaming" the transport and the level of the recent mechanics course as the reason for not continuing with it, there were perhaps issues about how she "took to" the people running the course after the rather protective and familiar atmosphere of the one day course where she got on well with the other students and knew the tutor well).

Clive

Clive is 19, went to the local high school and sixth form college and is currently unemployed, living at home, and attending a one day a week course for NEET youngsters aimed at helping them to improve their qualifications, develop their confidence and chances of getting into work or college courses. His grades were 'not very good' when he left school. He lives at home with his parents. Like several of the young people we interviewed he had not really enjoyed school, but neither had he enjoyed work experience, so he was not sure what he wanted to do at 16. He did not demonstrate the antipathy to school which some interviewees displayed, he just shrugged his shoulders and said that a lot of the time it was boring. In the end he stayed on at the college to do BTECH courses in Business and Leisure and Tourism. He passed the Business course but failed the Leisure and Tourism course "because I didn't hand in the work". He stayed on a second year in order to finish the work but still did not manage to pass the course so "after the two years at college, that was it, I left and I came here" (the one day a week course).

He said that he just wanted to get a job, and that any job would do. He said that an apprenticeship would be good but seemed to feel that there was not much chance of him getting one. He felt that there were "not many around", and that he would not be well placed anyway given his situation and record at school and college. "Just get me a job... any job". I asked him if there were any courses or jobs in Kings Lynn or Norwich which might appeal but he said "I don't fancy the travel". He said that he would quite like a course on "something like being an electrician" if such a thing were to be possible locally. As with the other students on the one day course, he was positive about the course, "Yeah, it's fine". When I asked him what he thought he would do when the course ended (in four weeks time), he said, "I've no idea, I haven't planned that far ahead".

Stanley

Stanley is 17 and went to school outside the area. He left school at 16 without GCSE grade Cs in maths and English and with Fs and Gs in other subjects. He had a job for a month "helping out" but this was only temporary, and so he had started to come to the Wednesday course because he wasn't sure what else to do. Like several of the other youngsters at the course, he had not really enjoyed school and had looked forward to leaving but was now having second thoughts: "When I was at school I wanted to quit but then when I left school I wanted to go back".

He would have liked to have carried on in the job, even though it was not really a job with prospects or training "It was just to get a bike and then a car". He had been on the course for two weeks and was looking for a job. He was quite sure he did not want a college course and wanted "any sort of job... like shift work in a factory... as long as it is not an apprenticeship". When I asked him why he didn't want an apprenticeship, he said that it was because he thought that apprenticeships did not pay a good wage ("It's s*** money" were his actual words). When I asked if he would consider going to Norwich or Kings Lynn to get a job he was not keen, citing his own transport as an issue: "I wouldn't go to Norwich or Kings Lynn at the moment because my transport is not that reliable but when my new bike is on the road... I'll sort of have more... it's a bigger bike and it's quicker and that, so I can get places quicker and easier".

He said that he was doing the course to improve his grades and said it was "OK... well, it's alright... you work at your own pace".

Kevin

Kevin is 17 and went to a high school in North Norfolk. He had not enjoyed school, and although he had not enjoyed his work experience, he was sure he wanted to just leave education and get a job. He admitted that his grades were poor and he had not got maths or English GCSE grade Cs. He had been looking for a job for about a year but nothing had come up, "It's just hard to get one". When I asked him what he had done he said, "Just this course, that's it really". He said that he liked coming to the course, he had made friends here and "they all got on". He thought he had got

something out of the course but found it hard to say exactly what, other than that he liked coming and had friends – and got on well with the tutor. “It’s like school, but it’s better sort of thing... you can just like get on with it without... like in school the teacher just told us to write everything down, but here you can actually get on and do your own sort of work.. and I get on with people OK here”. When I asked what he hoped to move on to when the course ended he said that he really wanted a job, but that he might be going on an E2E course.

Elena

Elena spoke fluent English, albeit with a European accent, and came across as an intelligent, capable and very socially accomplished person. She was 17 years old, from Eastern Europe, and had lived and gone to school in Ireland from the ages of 11-16 and attended a girls’ Catholic school, had enjoyed it, and was very positive generally about education and school. Moved with family to England at 16 but was too old to register for high school but had gained maths and English Level 1 qualifications over the summer.

She registered for an Art and Design course at COWA starting in September 2008. She had really enjoyed it and spoke very positively about the course, the college, her teachers and her peers, “I loved the course... You learn something every day... it was just great. I was very happy and very pleased with the quality of the course and the helpfulness of the tutors and the people on the course”. She did the course for 2 months but then had to pull out because of major family problems. She was no longer living with her father and was now living in a hostel. Finance was the major reason for withdrawal... “I was getting £30 a week to go to college but this was not enough to live on and so left college and have been trying to get a job. This isn’t easy because of the credit crunch plus most of the jobs ask for NVQs and level 2 qualifications and experience from previous employment, but I haven’t got either of those things and I can’t get Level 2 qualifications because I can’t afford to go to college”.

Although she was receiving £30 EMA, this was not enough to cover her accommodation and living costs so she left the course and was looking for any form of employment. This had not proved easy and although she

spoke good English, the lack of a Level 2 qualification in English was restricting her in her choice of applications. She appeared to be resigned to looking for jobs without training as her accommodation bills of £50 a week were becoming difficult to meet. Although she was extremely polite and helpful (one got the impression she would make a very good employee and one who would be very quick to learn), she felt that "the system" did discriminate against people in her position. Her long term aspiration was to get back into education once she had sorted out her short term financial pressures but it had not proved easy to find even a low level job without training. At present she is looking for any job that will bring in some money to enable her to pay her bills.