NEETs: the local and regional dimension

A commentary on the Milburn report

Around a million young people are not in education, employment or training ('NEETs'). The biggest problem is in Britain's older industrial areas, and it is in these places that efforts to create jobs and deliver apprenticeships need to be concentrated if the numbers are to be brought down.

The Milburn report

On 28 May the UK Government issued *Young People and Work*, the interim report of an inquiry led by former Secretary of State Alan Milburn into 'NEETs' – young people not in education, employment or training. The report is an important and formidable piece of work and attracted substantial media coverage.

As the report demonstrates, NEETs are a diverse group and there are multiple processes at work underpinning their numbers. The present note focuses on one of the key factors – place.

What does the report say about place?

The government's Labour Force Survey doesn't cover a big enough sample to pin down the share of young people who are NEET in each local authority across the country. The Department for Work and Pensions, which supplied much of the other data for the report, also has a habit of marginalising local and regional issues. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there's remarkably little in the 200-plus page report that addresses place. But what it does say is dynamite:

> *"The geography of where young people are most likely to be NEET maps onto the geography of labour market weakness with an almost perfect symmetry."*
> (para.45)

The report draws here on an index developed by the Youth Futures Foundation bringing together local data on indicators including child poverty, health and school outcomes. The data only covers England, but there is no reason to suppose that similar patterns don't apply in Scotland and Wales.

Older industrial areas

It's older industrial areas that face the greatest problem. Drilling down into the Foundation's NEET index, which covers more than 300 English local authorities:

- 18 of the 20 local authorities with the highest NEET risk index are older industrial areas. (The other two are seaside towns).

- 45 of the 50 local authorities with the highest risk index are in the North and Midlands. There's only two in the South East, and none in London.

- At the other end of the spectrum, only one local area in the North (York) is among the 20 with the lowest risk.

A full list of the worst 50 local authorities on the NEET index is included at the end of this note.

Regional clusters

Importantly, the index suggests that NEETs are a regional and/or sub-regional labour market problem rather than an issue confined just to a small number of deprived neighbourhoods. There are several substantial clusters of adjacent local authorities that all fall into the worst 50 on the at-risk index:

NORTH EAST
Redcar & Cleveland, Middlesbrough, Stockton on Tees, Hartlepool, Darlington, County Durham, Sunderland, South Tyneside, Gateshead

YORKSHIRE
Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham, Wakefield

LANCASHIRE
Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Hyndburn

MERSEYSIDE
Liverpool, Knowsley, St Helens, Halton, Wirral

EAST MIDLANDS
Bolsover, Mansfield, Ashfield

WEST MIDLANDS
Walsall, Wolverhampton, Sandwell, Birmingham

Policy implications

What these observations suggest is that any policies intended to reduce NEET numbers need to include a strong geographical element. More specifically, they need to target Britain's older industrial areas.

In practice that probably means two things:

1. There needs to be a focus on growing the number of jobs, especially 'good jobs', in Britain's older industrial areas, which for years have lived under the shadow of the destruction or erosion of their original economic base.

2. The apprenticeship system needs to be re-jigged to offer opportunities for young people in these places to train and to take up the job opportunities that are created.

National Secretariat
Industrial Communities Alliance
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50 ENGLISH LOCAL AUTHORITIES RANKING HIGHEST ON THE ‘AT RISK NEET’ INDEX
(Ranked from the highest)

Middlesbrough
Blackpool
Redcar and Cleveland
Knowsley
Hartlepool
Great Yarmouth
Stoke on Trent
Sunderland
Halton
Doncaster
Kingston upon Hull
Burnley
Rotherham
St Helens
North East Lincolnshire
Rochdale
South Tyneside
Barnsley
Tameside
Liverpool
Bradford
East Lindsey
Hastings
Mansfield
Walsall
Sandwell
Darlington
Torbay
Wolverhampton
Hyndburn
Oldham
Gateshead
Telford and Wrekin
Thanet
Wakefield
Tendring
Wirral
County Durham
Salford
Blackburn with Darwen
Stockton on Tees
Ashfield
Nuneaton and Bedworth
Bolsover
Boston
Ipswich
Tamworth
Barrow in Furness
Birmingham
Nottingham

Source: Youth Futures Foundation, NEET dashboard