

A NOTE FOR MOVEMENT TO WORK

Why the Netherlands keeps its NEET rate low

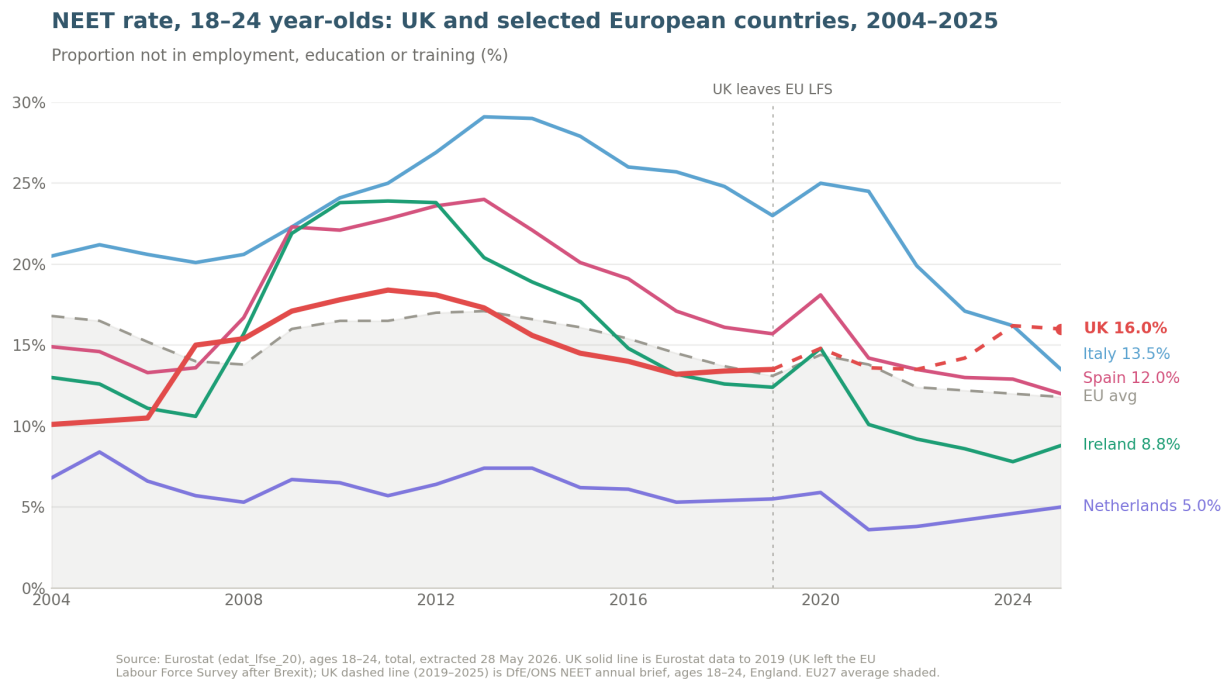
What the evidence shows and what the UK could realistically adopt.

The Netherlands is being cited constantly in UK youth employment debate, and the government has now built policy on it. This note sets out the features the evidence supports, where the causal claims stop, and which parts transfer.

In brief

- On 12 June the government announced almost 180 new Youth Hubs, rising to 360 by 2029, modelled on the Dutch Jongerenpunt and following a ministerial visit to Rotterdam. Every local area in Great Britain will get one.
- The Netherlands combines the EU's lowest NEET rate with three institutional features: a safety net for young people without a basic qualification, extended in January 2026 to age 27; a vocational route carrying around a third of young people, with employer involvement built in; and unusually common employment alongside study, at 74.3% of students against an EU average of 25.4%. The evidence shows these features coexist and plausibly reinforce one another; it does not isolate their separate effects.
- Student employment does not mechanically lower the Dutch NEET count, because a student is outside the NEET category whether or not they work. Its plausible contribution comes at the transition out of education: experience, employer contacts and a shorter route into sustained work.
- Cross-country evidence does not support mental health prevalence as a sufficient explanation for the UK-Netherlands gap. Similar reported levels coexist with very different outcomes.
- Accessible travel is an enabling condition rather than a demonstrated cause. Eligible full-time Dutch students receive free or discounted national public transport, while England raised its participation age to 18 without a travel entitlement. The UK response so far imports the Dutch front door. Sefton shows identification can already be done here, and its own destination data shows the gain does not survive the point where tracking stops at 17.

The gap



The trend chart should be read with care, because it joins two different UK series. Eurostat coverage ends in 2019, when the UK left the EU Labour Force Survey, and the figures from 2019 onward come from the Department for Education and cover England rather than the whole UK. [1] [2] The chart supports the broad conclusion that the UK position is comparatively weak and has recently deteriorated. It cannot support a precise post-2019 comparison against any individual European country.

The Dutch line is low, and it is stable. The persistence of the difference across the financial crisis, the eurozone crisis and the pandemic suggests it cannot be explained solely by short-term labour market conditions, though the chart alone does not say which of the features below is doing the work. The feature the UK debate most often misses comes third. For most Dutch young people, study and work are not alternatives.

One: a safety net that does not end at school

Dutch compulsory education runs until 18, or until a young person holds the startkwalificatie, a diploma at upper-secondary level or vocational (MBO) level 2. [3]

Since 1 January 2026 the institutional net extends further. Under the new *Wet van school naar duurzaam werk*, municipal Doorstroompunten, until this year the RMC function covering ages

16 to 23, are responsible for helping young people without a start qualification back into education or towards work up to the age of 27. Schools must guide students through the transition from a year before their diploma and, for qualifying students who leave, for up to a year afterwards, with a two-year duty for practical and special secondary schools. These are duties on institutions rather than obligations on the young person. [4]

In England, responsibility ends earlier and more abruptly. Milburn's interim report puts the cliff edge at 18. The NEET rate nearly trebles to 13%, statutory participation duties end, local authority tracking largely stops, and institutions release responsibility without anyone picking it up. Among 21-year-olds the rate reaches 20%. [5]

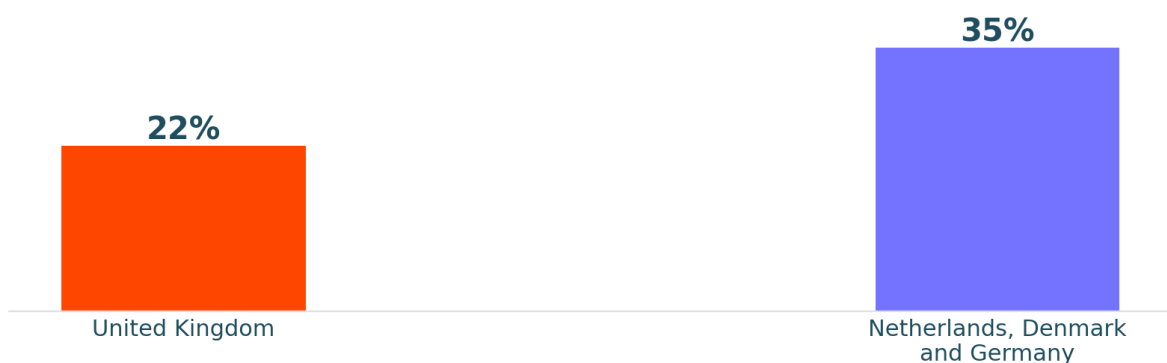
The Dutch net ran to 23 throughout the period the chart covers, five years past the point where the English one stops and across precisely the ages at which the English rate climbs. The extension to 27 is only seven months old, so it explains nothing on the chart. It lengthens an arrangement that was already doing the work.

Two: a vocational route that carries a third of young people

Around 35% of Dutch young people take technical and professional pathways, against 22% in the UK. Resolution Foundation reaches the same figures independently, comparing UK 18 to 21 year olds against a low-NEET group of the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany. [6] [7]

Share of 18-21 year-olds on vocational courses, 2024

The low-NEET comparator group sits over half again above the UK



Source: Resolution Foundation, Lost in transition (April 2026). The same 35% and 22% figures for the Netherlands and the UK appear in DWP's press release of 12 June 2026.

Those figures do not establish that vocational participation causes the difference in NEET rates. What they show is a system in which a far larger share of young people has an

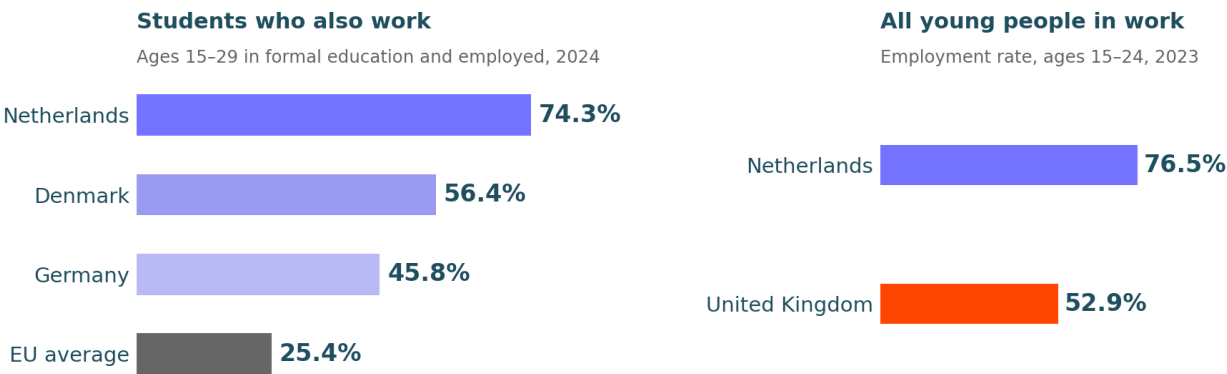
established route that is not predominantly academic. A young person who is not headed to university is still on a mainstream path with status and employers attached, not a fallback. Employer involvement in that route is institutional rather than voluntary, held through a national foundation that keeps employers and vocational providers working together as a standing arrangement across 35 labour market regions. [8]

Three: students work

Working while studying is normal in the Netherlands.

Work is normal alongside study in the Netherlands

The UK cannot appear in the left-hand comparison; the right-hand panel is a broader measure covering both countries



Sources: left, Eurostat, 25% of young people work and study at the same time (19 January 2026); the UK left the EU Labour Force Survey after Brexit and is not in this dataset. Right, Youth Futures Foundation and RAND, What works in reducing NEET rates: The Netherlands (November 2025). The two panels use different measures and are not directly comparable with each other.

Nearly three quarters of Dutch 15-29 year olds in formal education are also employed, against an EU average of a quarter. The Netherlands also has the lowest share of students outside the labour market altogether, at 18.7%. [9] [10] The UK is absent from that comparison because it left the EU Labour Force Survey, and the domestic substitutes are not equivalent. A census figure taken during lockdown understates student employment, while a higher education survey covers undergraduates only and excludes the school-age group. A broader, though differently defined, comparison is the overall youth employment rate, which was 76.5% in the Netherlands for 15-24 year olds in 2023 against 52.9% in the UK, a difference RAND says is partly explained by the normality of combining school and work. [8]

Student employment does not itself lower the NEET count, because a student is outside the NEET category whether or not they work. Its plausible contribution comes at the transition out of education. Young people leave already carrying work experience, employer contacts and a

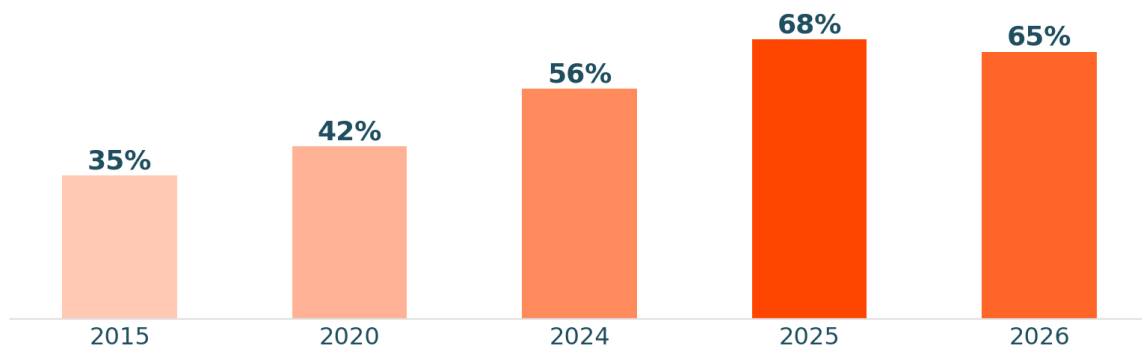


track record, which shortens the move into sustained employment. The evidence supports that as a mechanism worth taking seriously, not as a demonstrated causal effect.

The UK is moving in the same direction, though for different reasons. Term-time paid work among full-time undergraduates has risen from 35% in 2015 to 65% in 2026, having peaked at 68% the year before. [20]

UK full-time undergraduates in paid work during term time

Working while studying has gone from a minority activity to the norm in a decade



Source: Advance HE and HEPI, Student Academic Experience Survey, selected years. Around 10,000 full-time undergraduates surveyed annually. Figures for years not shown were not gathered for this note. Not comparable with the Eurostat measure of students in employment, which covers all formal education from age 15 rather than higher education alone.

That shift is driven by cost of living rather than by design, and it is not the same measure as the Eurostat comparison, since it covers higher education only. It does suggest the UK is acquiring a student work culture by accident, without the training investment or progression structure that would turn those hours into an advantage.

Underneath the Dutch pattern is a part-time economy of a size the UK does not have. 38.6% of all employed people in the Netherlands work part-time, the highest share in the EU and more than double the EU average of 17.1%. [11] In the third quarter of 2023, two thirds of secondary school pupils aged 15 and over held a job, mostly shelf-stacking, waiting and kitchen work in evenings and on Saturdays, averaging almost 11 hours a week. Higher education students averaged 19 hours. MBO students on the classroom-based BOL track averaged 17, while BBL students, who mostly work with a day a week at school, averaged 30. [26] Living with parents is also common and increasingly so. Of higher education students graduating in 2023, having started before 20 and taken five years, 79% still lived at home after their first year and 43% did throughout, a shift CBS and NIDI link to the 2015 student loan reform. [27] Student side jobs are a plausible contributor to the frequently quoted fact that more than half of Dutch young people have workplace experience by 19, though the available evidence does not say how

much of that experience comes from ordinary paid work rather than vocational placements. [6]

Mental health is not a sufficient explanation

Resolution Foundation's *Lost in transition* finds no cross-country relationship in developed economies between the mental health of young people and the share who are NEET. Dutch young people are only slightly less likely than UK young people to report anxiety disorders and rank second behind the UK on depressive symptoms, yet are far less likely to be NEET. UK 15 to 24 year olds have the highest rates of anxiety and depressive disorders in the OECD, at around double the non-UK OECD average. [7]

None of this diminishes mental health as a cause for particular young people, or as one contributor within the UK. What the cross-country evidence does not support is prevalence as a sufficient explanation for the gap between the two countries. Similar reported levels coexist with very different participation outcomes, which points at institutions and available pathways shaping how a condition translates into disengagement.

If the UK matched the Dutch NEET rate, 600,000 more young people would be earning or learning. [6] [7]

Getting there: an enabling condition

None of the features above helps a young person who cannot reach the college, the employer or the shift. The two countries differ substantially in what they provide here, though nothing measures travel's independent effect on NEET rates. It is an enabling condition rather than a fourth feature.

Dutch secondary schools are close. The average cycling distance to the nearest secondary school is 2.3km, and CBS is careful to note that the nearest school need not be the one attended. Noord-Beveland had the greatest average distance to the nearest secondary school, at 11.5km. [21] Cycling carries much of this travel. Dutch 12 to 17 year olds cycle more often and farther than any other age group. In 2020, a pandemic-suppressed year, they averaged 8.4 trips and 33km a week. CBS's 2023 data shows 1.5 journeys and 6.2km a day. [28] The network runs to roughly 153,500km of paths and roads where cycling is permitted, around 60% of it road space shared with motor traffic rather than segregated path. [29] This combination of short distances and cycling infrastructure makes independent travel to education and part-time work feasible for many Dutch teenagers without a timetable, a fare, or a parent being free. In some rural areas of England the same distance is a fast road without separation, so it is not a journey a sixteen-year-old makes alone, and every trip becomes either a lift or a bus.



This is eroding rather than fixed. Research published in May found only 56% of Dutch children now travel to school actively, with around one in four cycling daily, a finding the researchers described as shocking. [22]

Above the cycling threshold the Netherlands adds an entitlement for students. Eligible full-time MBO, HBO and university students can obtain the studentenreisproduct, which gives free national public transport during either the week or the weekend and discounted travel the rest of the time, and is available to MBO students before they turn 18. Part-time and BBL students are excluded, ordinary secondary school pupils are not covered, nationality and residence conditions apply, and it becomes a gift only on graduation within ten years, otherwise repayable. [23] England raised the participation age to 18 without attaching anything equivalent. Local authorities must publish an annual post-16 transport policy statement, but carry no requirement to provide free or subsidised travel, and the Public Accounts Committee heard that removing discretionary 16 to 19 transport was the main way councils cut costs, because it was the part they were permitted to remove. [24] Campaign for Better Transport estimates that around 350,000 young people in rural areas lost a school transport service between 2008 and its 2022 analysis. [25]

The Dutch entitlement follows students, so a young person who is already NEET does not qualify. The Dutch advantage in travel is preventive rather than remedial, and it stops helping at the point a young person most needs to reach a jobcentre or an interview.

The stated aim for the hub rollout is that no young person should be more than an hour from a Youth Hub by public transport. [18] A young person in a fenland village whose hourly bus takes an hour to reach the nearest town meets that standard, and still cannot take an evening shift, stay for anything that overruns, or reach an interview at short notice.

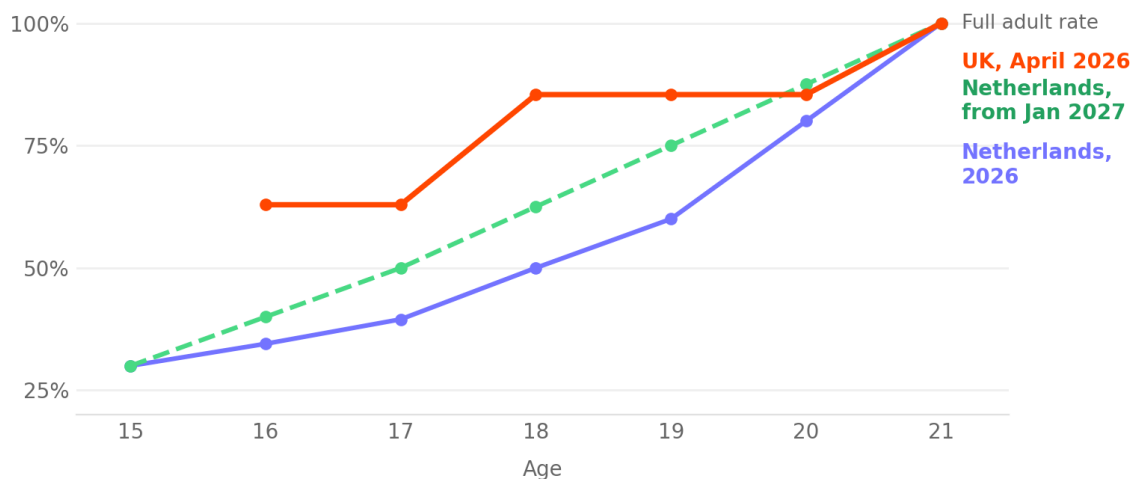
Youth pay is moving the other way

On rates to 30 June 2026, a Dutch 18-year-old was entitled to 50% of the adult minimum, €7.36 an hour against an adult rate of €14.71. A UK 18-year-old is entitled to £10.85 from April 2026, against an adult rate of £12.71. [12] [13] RAND names the age-graded youth minimum wage as a structural feature behind the high Dutch youth employment rate. [8]



Minimum wage entitlement by age, as a share of the adult rate

Both are narrowing the gap; the Dutch step in January 2027 is the larger move



Sources: Business.gov.nl (Dutch 2026 rates); Rijksoverheid, Hoger minimumjeugdloon vanaf 2027, 17 April 2026 (January 2027 changes); checkyourpay.campaign.gov.uk (UK rates from 1 April 2026, expressed against the £12.71 adult rate).

Both countries are now closing that gap, and the Dutch move is the larger. From 1 January 2027 the Netherlands raises 18-year-olds from 50% to 62.5%, 19-year-olds from 60% to 75%, and 20-year-olds from 80% to 87.5%, and abolishes the separate lower scale for BBL students, bringing them onto the standard age-based youth rates. [14]

Cheap labour for young people is a poor foundation to build on, and the evidence is moving away from it as an explanation in any case. The Netherlands is raising youth pay from a position of near-full youth employment. Resolution Foundation finds that almost all countries with lower NEET rates than ours get there through more education, not more work. [7]

What the UK is trying

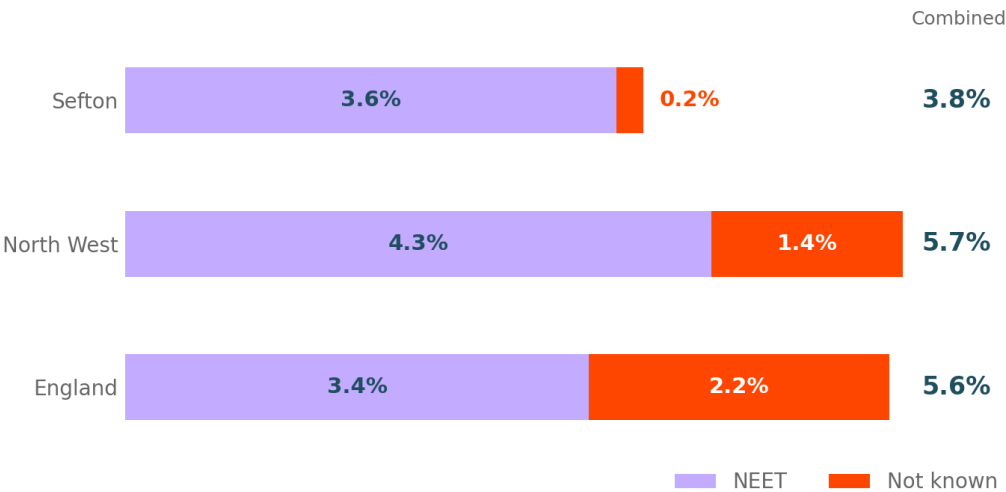
Youth Hubs predate the Dutch framing. There were 114 open in January 2026, and a further 20 opened between March and June. [15] What the Work and Pensions Secretary announced on 12 June, after visiting a Jongerenpunt in Rotterdam, was expansion. Locations were confirmed for another 178, taking the programme toward 360 hubs by 2029 and recasting it explicitly on the Dutch model. [6] They bring education, welfare and employment support into one place, put where young people already are.

Hubs import the Dutch front door, which addresses access. Of the features above, they touch the safety net most directly and the others barely at all.

Sefton, a metropolitan borough on Merseyside north of Liverpool, is held up as the national gold standard, most recently in BBC coverage this May of how the borough is bucking the youth unemployment trend. [31] It shows what the identification half can achieve within existing English arrangements, and where it stops. Working with Career Connect, the council holds a not-known figure of 0.2% against 2.2% for England and 1.4% for the North West, on a 16-17 cohort of around 6,075, and does it from a weaker starting position than average on attainment. [16] What it commissions is early intervention rather than post-16 identification, targeting young people from Year 9 onward who show risk factors. [17] Sefton is also one of the first-wave Youth Hub areas. [18]

16-17 year-olds NEET and not known, end 2024 / start 2025

Sefton's entire advantage is the not-known share, not the NEET share



Source: Department for Education, NEET Comparative LA Scorecard.

Its NEET-only rate is nevertheless marginally higher than England's, at 3.6% against 3.4%, and its advantage on the combined measure comes from knowing where young people are rather than from fewer of them being NEET. [16] That combined figure has been DfE's headline measure for this age group since 2016, adopted so that losing track of young people could not flatter a council's rate. On the government's own headline measure, Sefton's outperformance is real, and it is tracking outperformance.

Then the tracking stops, and the downstream data shows what stopping costs. DfE's destination measures follow leavers from Sefton's schools and colleges into the year after 16-18 study, at around 18 and 19, using linked administrative data on education, employment and benefits rather than council returns. In every cohort since 2016/17, the share sustaining a destination has been slightly below the England average, including for disadvantaged leavers. [30] The measure has its own destination-unknown category for young people the linked data cannot find anywhere, and for Sefton's level 2 leavers that stands at 13.5% against England's



6.9%. The council that loses track of almost nobody at 16 and 17 loses its level 2 leavers from view at twice the national rate a year later.

Sefton's tracking, like every English council's, covers the ages where education is still a cornerstone of young people's lives. At 18, where the rate trebles, no equivalent accountability exists anywhere in England, and Sefton's own numbers show that the capability does not survive the transition on its own. The invisibility problem is not solved in Sefton. It is postponed by two years, and the gold standard, followed downstream, is the national failure on a delay. You cannot help people you cannot find, and from 18, England stops looking.

In January to March 2026, 1.01 million 16 to 24 year olds were NEET, the first time above a million since 2013 and up by almost 250,000 since 2021. [6] [19] The Dutch features accumulated over decades. The qualification obligation arrived in 2007, the safety net extension this January, and youth pay rises next year. The UK has started with the component that is quickest to build. The Dutch record suggests the components worth having are the slower ones.

Glossary

NEET — not in education, employment or training. The Eurostat measure counts a young person as NEET only if they are neither working nor in education or training of any kind.

MBO (middelbaar beroepsonderwijs) — Dutch secondary vocational education, the main vocational route, levels 1 to 4. Level 2 is the threshold for the startkwalificatie.

HBO (hoger beroepsonderwijs) — Dutch higher professional education, degree-level applied study at universities of applied sciences.

BBL (beroepsbegeleidende leerweg) — the work-study track within MBO, combining three to four days a week of paid work with formal study; the closest Dutch equivalent to an apprenticeship.

Startkwalificatie — the Dutch basic qualification threshold: a diploma at MBO level 2 or above, or upper-secondary school (havo or vwo). Compulsory education runs until 18 or until it is obtained.

Kwalificatieplicht — the qualification obligation: the duty on 16 and 17 year olds to remain in education until they hold a startkwalificatie.

Doorstroompunt — the municipal body responsible for registering young people who leave education without a startkwalificatie and guiding them back to education or towards work. Known until 2026 as the RMC (Regionale Meld- en Coördinatiefunctie).

Wet van school naar duurzaam werk — the "from school to sustainable work" law, in force from 1 January 2026, which extended the Doorstroompunt remit from age 23 to 27.

Jongerenpunt — Dutch "youth point": the one-stop youth support centres on which the UK's Youth Hubs are modelled.

Studentenreisproduct — the student travel product: free or discounted national public transport for eligible full-time MBO, HBO and university students.

CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek) — Statistics Netherlands, the Dutch national statistics office.



DUO (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs) — the Dutch education executive agency, which administers student finance and the travel product.

Sources

Each checked against the live page.

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[26] CBS, Students worked 11 hours a week on average in Q3, 6 December 2023, from the Labour Force Survey via the Jeugdmonitor. Two thirds of secondary pupils aged 15+ in work; usual weekly hours of 10.9 (secondary), 18.7 (higher education), 22.5 (MBO overall), 17 (BOL) and 30 (BBL) in Q3 2023; top occupations and evening/Saturday working patterns. <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2023/49/students-worked-11-hours-a-week-on-average-in-q3>

[27] CBS and NIDI, Steeds meer studenten wonen hun hele studie thuis, February 2026. Of HBO/WO students who started before 20 and graduated in 2023 after five years, 79% lived with parents after the first year (63% for 2016 graduates) and 43% throughout (31% in 2016); CBS links the shift to the 2015 social loan system. Page in Dutch. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2026/06/steeds-meer-studenten-wonen-hun-hele-studie-thuis>

[28] CBS, The Netherlands in numbers 2022: How much do we cycle per week on average? (8.4 trips and 33km per week for 12-17 year olds in 2020), and the CBS cycling visualisation for the 2023 daily figures of 1.5 journeys and 6.2km. <https://longreads.cbs.nl/the-netherlands-in-numbers-2022/how-much-do-we-cycle-per-week-on-average/> and <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/visualisations/traffic-and-transport/traffic/cycling>

[29] CBS StatLine, road and cycle path length (dataset 85020NED), 153,500km of paths and roads where cycling is permitted in 2024; the roughly 60% shared with motor traffic is from CBS's longread Where can we ride our bikes? <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/85020NED/table> and <https://longreads.cbs.nl/the-netherlands-in-numbers-2024/where-can-we-ride-our-bikes/>

[30] Department for Education, 16-18 destination measures, 2023/24 release (2022/23 leavers followed into 2023/24), local authority and national underlying data. Sefton overall sustained destination 74.9% against England 78.9%; disadvantaged 64.1% against 67.5%; level 3 83.7% against 86.7%; level 2 54.8% against 68.3%, with destination unknown at 13.5% against 6.9%. Sefton below the England average in all seven cohorts from 2016/17. Figures attribute young people to where they studied rather than where they live. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/16-18-destination-measures/2023-24>

[31] BBC News, How a borough in Merseyside is bucking the UK's youth unemployment trend, May 2026. The coverage reports Sefton's combined NEET-and-not-known figure as its NEET rate; the distinction between the two measures is set out above. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd6p9yyg64vo>

Chart sources

NEET rate, 18-24. Sources [1] and [2]. The two UK segments are not directly comparable. EU27 average shaded.

Vocational participation. Source [7], corroborated by [6].

UK students in term-time work. Source [20].

Work while studying. Left panel from source [9]. Right panel from source [8]. The two panels use different measures and are not comparable with each other.

Sefton NEET and not known. Source [16]; service description from [17].

Minimum wage by age. Sources [12], [13] and [14]. UK percentages are the statutory rates expressed against the £12.71 adult rate.

