

NEET Trends Analysis (Q1 2026): What is driving the NEET rate?

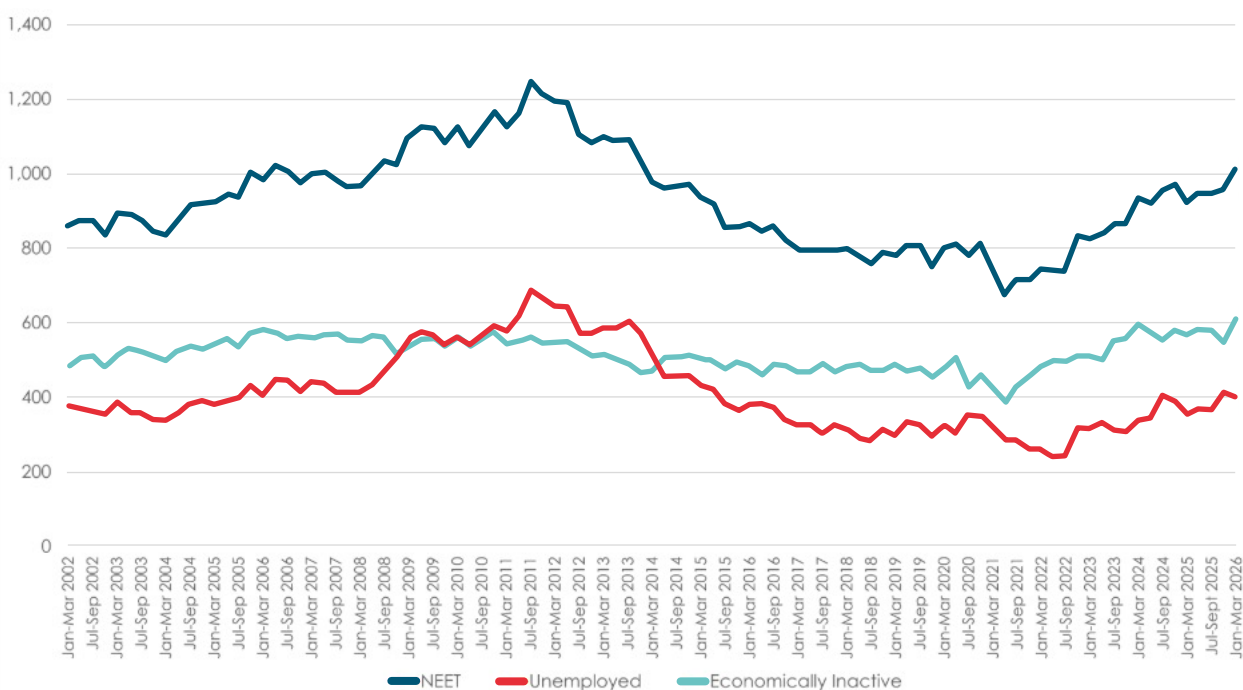
January to March 2026

The latest data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows that around 1 in 7 (13.5%) young people aged 16 to 24 are not in education, employment or training (NEET). That means around 1,012,000 young people are not earning or learning – the first time the seasonally adjusted NEET estimate has reached one million since 2013.

The rise in the NEET rate is driven by increases in both unemployment and economic inactivity. The additional 89,000 NEET young people from the past year are evenly distributed across unemployment and economic inactivity (around 45,000 and 44,000 respectively).

Figure 1: NEET levels reach one million for the first time since 2013

Trends in NEET levels in thousands by economic activity status, ages 16 to 24, seasonally adjusted, 2002 to 2026, UK



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

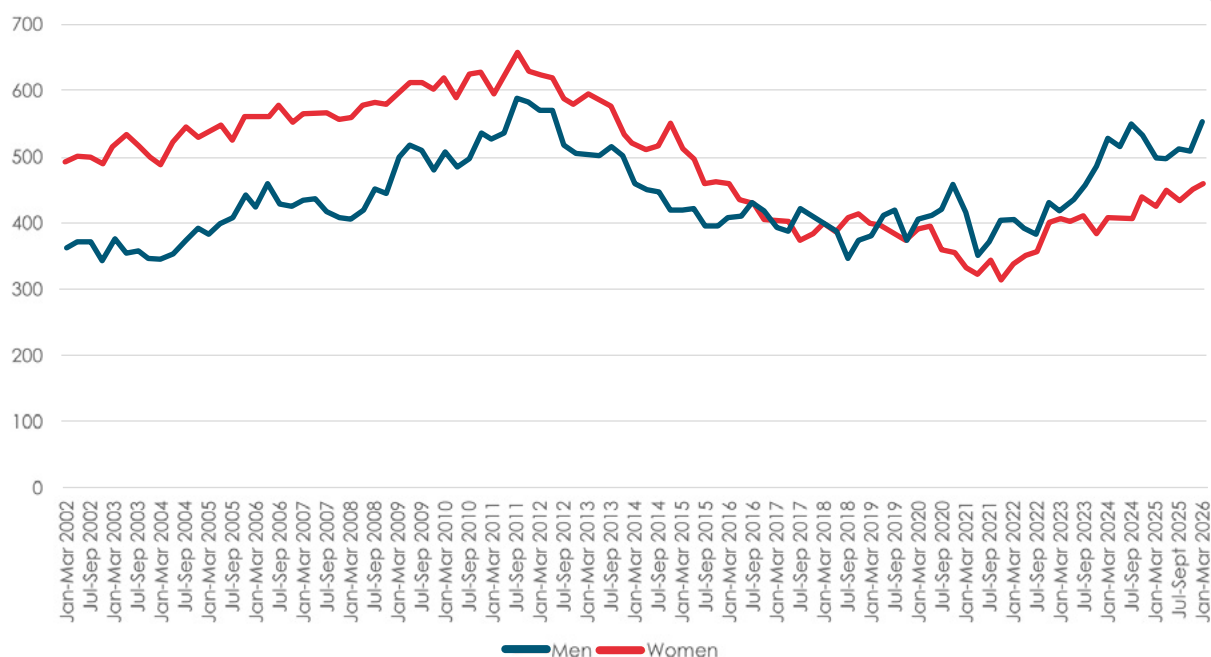
This edition of our quarterly NEET Trends Analysis looks beyond the headline figure to shed light on the characteristics of the NEET population and the drivers of the increase in the NEET rate.



Characteristics of the NEET population

Figure 2: NEET levels have risen for young men and women, with a steeper rise for men

Trends in NEET levels in thousands by sex, ages 16 to 24, seasonally adjusted, 2002 to 2026, UK

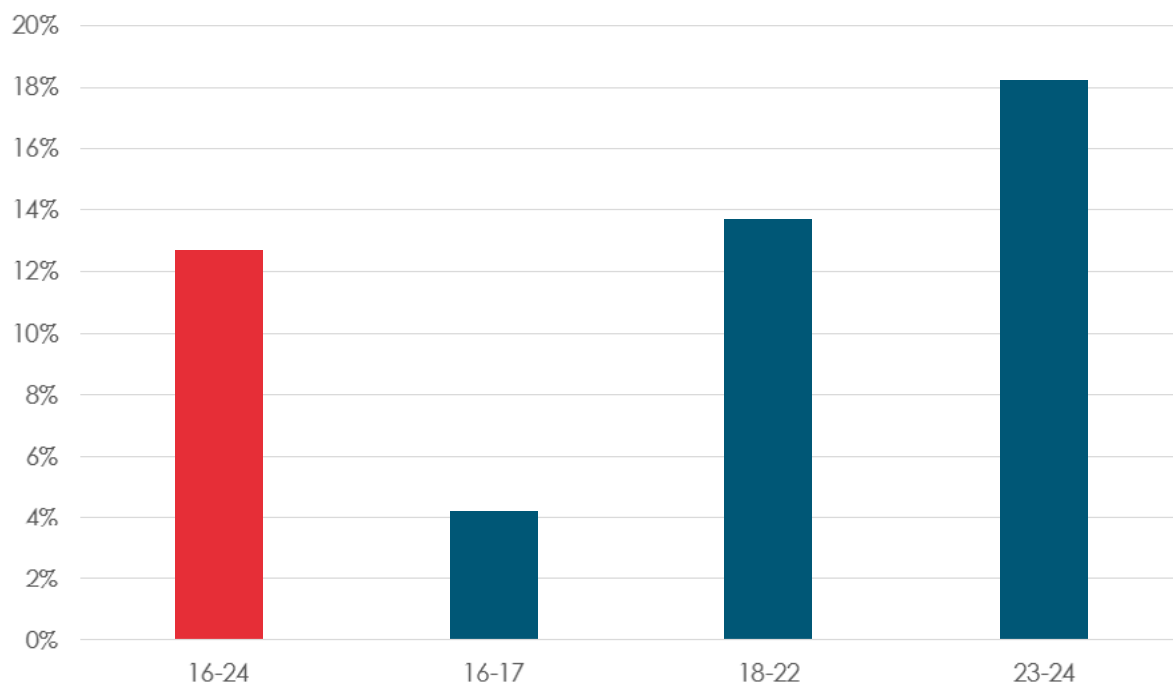


Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Until 2016, more young women than men were NEET. Following a period of similar levels for both sexes, since 2021 the rise in NEET levels has been sharper for men (+202,000) than for women (+137,000).

Figure 3: The NEET rate is highest for 23-24 year olds

Proportion of young people who are NEET by age group, non-seasonally adjusted, ages 16 to 24, January to March 2026, UK



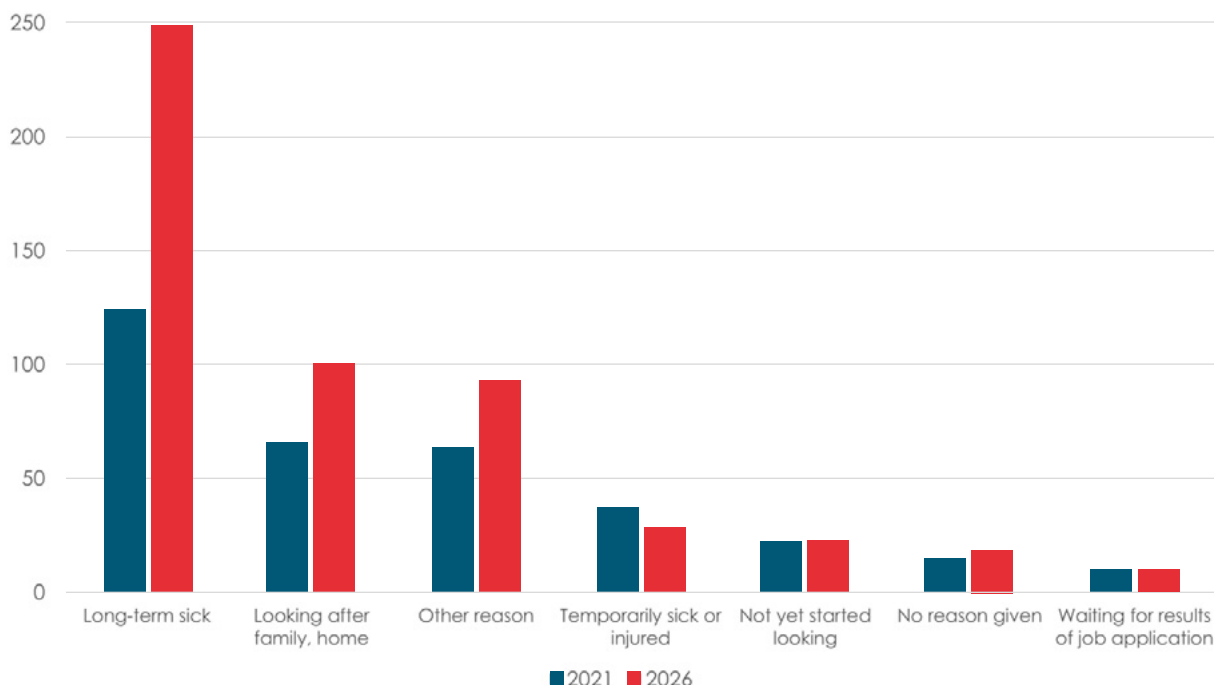
Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

The NEET rate among young people varies depending on their age grouping. Young people aged 16-17 have the lowest NEET rate, at 4.2%. This proportion increases with age, with young people aged 23-24 having the highest rates – 18.2% of this age group are neither learning nor earning.

What's driving increases in economic inactivity?

Figure 4: A quarter of a million young people are NEET and economically inactive through long-term sickness

Trends in economic inactivity levels among NEETs by reason, in thousands, ages 16 to 24, January to March 2021 and 2026, UK



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Note: Respondents who cited "does not need or want employment" and "believes no jobs available" as their reason for economic inactivity have been removed due to low sample counts ($n < 3$), as per ONS guidelines.

Rising numbers of young people are economically inactive because of physical and mental health conditions.

The number of NEET young people who are economically inactive because of long-term sickness doubled between 2021 and 2026. A quarter of a million (249,000) young people are economically inactive because of long-term health conditions. This includes increases in these young people's main health condition (from 2021 to 2026) in the following categories:

- Neurodevelopmental conditions (+55,000, from 40,000 to 95,000)
- Physical or other health conditions (+40,000, from 33,000 to 73,000)
- Mental health conditions (+26,000, from 48,000 to 74,000)

These figures mean neurodevelopmental conditions are now the most commonly reported main health condition among young people who are NEET and economically inactive because of long-term sickness, accounting for 39.3% of cases.

Mental health conditions account for 30.5% of this group, while physical or other health conditions account for 30.2%.



What's driving increases in unemployment?

Figure 5: The number of unemployed people per vacancy has more than doubled since 2022

The number of unemployed people per vacancy, aged 16 and over, seasonally adjusted, 2002 to 2026, UK



Source: Vacancy Survey and the Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

Unemployment rates have risen for all age groups, but the sectors and roles that traditionally employ a lot of young people have been particularly affected. The number of NEET young people who are unemployed (actively seeking but unable to find work) has increased substantially over the past year.

Across the labour market, there are currently 2.5 unemployed people per vacancy. This ratio has risen from around one-to-one in 2022, indicating a substantial increase in competition for jobs by workers of all ages. Young people, with less work experience and – in some cases – lower qualifications may be at a particular disadvantage.

At the same time, employment has fallen faster in industries that traditionally employ large numbers of young people, such as retail, leisure and hospitality.¹ Entry-level roles have been particularly affected.² Entry-level vacancies have fallen 1.6 times more sharply than total vacancies in the last 12 months (12.8% compared 8.1%).³

As a result, many unemployed young people are searching for work in a labour market that has become progressively more competitive since the UK's recovery from the pandemic.



1. Department for Work and Pensions, 2026: [Young people and work: interim report](#).

2. Ibid.

3. Jyoti et al, Work Foundation and Lancaster University, 2026: [Starting out: boosting youth employment in local labour markets](#).



Figure 6: Six in ten NEET young people have never had a job

Percentage of the NEET youth population who have never had a job*, by age group and economic status, ages 16 to 24, January to March 2026, UK

Age Group	Proportion of young people who never had a job		
	NEET	NEET Unemployed	NEET Economically Inactive
16-24	62.4%	51.8%	69.6%
16-17	92.6%	78.2%	98.6%
18-22	66.3%	56.0%	74.3%
23-24	49.1%	37.7%	55.5%

Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

***Note:** The EVERWORK variable within the Labour Force Survey asks respondents: "Have you ever (in your life) had paid work, apart from casual or holiday work (or the job you are waiting to begin)? Please include self-employment or a government scheme."

62% of all NEET young people have never had a job that wasn't casual or holiday work. For those aged 23-24, by which time the majority have completed their education and training, the figure still stands at just under half.⁴

Seven in ten (70%) economically inactive NEET young people have never had a job, compared with around half (52%) of NEET young people who are unemployed.

Therefore, many NEET young people have not had the opportunity to build up workplace skills, knowledge and understanding. This matters when many employers prioritise relevant work experience in their recruitment.⁵ Pathways into entry level roles, support for the transition from school to work, and access to a wide range of technical and professional training are all needed to improve their prospects.

It is important to note then that in the context of a progressively more competitive labour market around six in ten NEET young people have never had a paid job that was not holiday or casual work.

However, we do also know that casual and holiday work is part of the labour market experience of young people, so we should be cautious about implying they have never worked at all on the basis of this variable alone.

4. 33% of all NEET young people are 23-24 years old; 60% are 18-22 years old and 7% are 16-17.

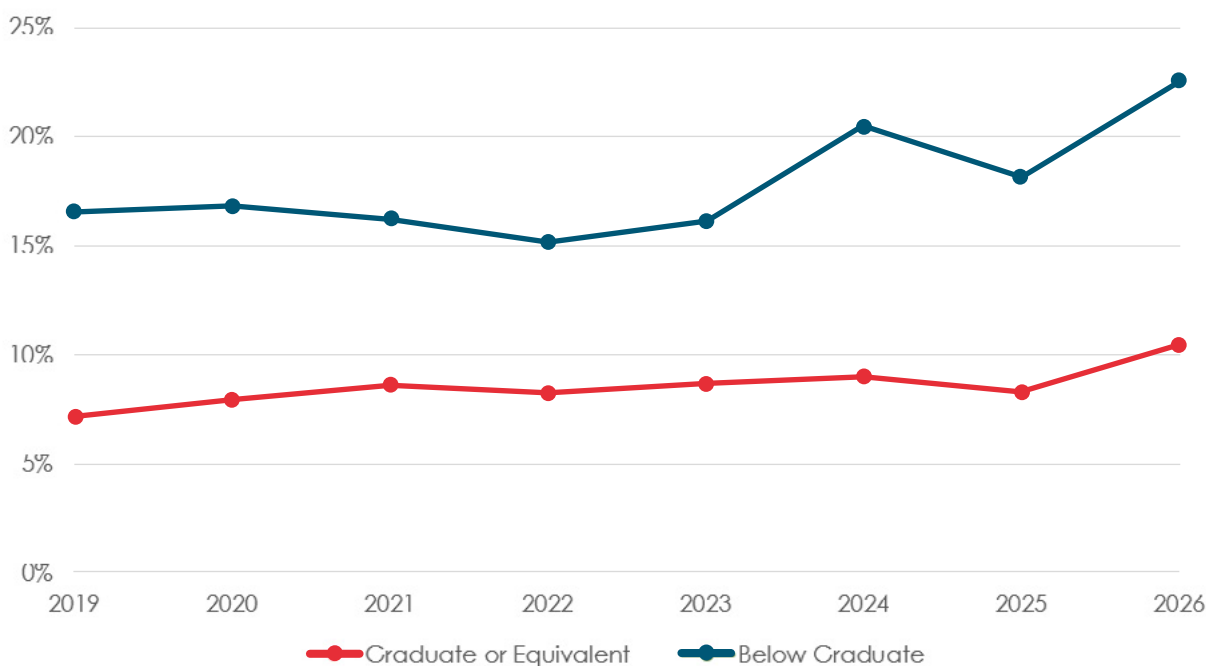
5. IFF Research, Department for Education and Skills England, 2026: [Employer Skills Survey: Full UK research report](#).

NEET rates for graduates

Recent media coverage has raised concerns about rising rates of unemployment and NEET among young people with degrees. However, our analysis suggests that the rise in NEET rates since 2021 has not been disproportionately driven by graduates, particularly when you consider those aged 22-24.

Figure 7: Non-graduates have a higher NEET rate than graduates

NEET rates by highest qualification level, ages 22 to 24, January to March 2019 to 2026, UK



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

The NEET rate among young people with a degree has remained consistently lower than the rate for those with education below degree level. Among young people aged 22-24, the NEET rate for graduates is around 10.4%, which is around half of the NEET rate for non-graduates of the same age (22.5%). Since 2021, the NEET rate for graduates has increased by 1.8 percentage points, whereas the non-graduate NEET rate has more than triple the rate of increase (6.3 percentage point increase). Additionally, among NEET young people aged 22-24, non-graduates make up the majority of the population (76.5%), with around a quarter being a graduate.

While graduates face challenges in the labour market, the available evidence suggests that the NEET challenge is not primarily a graduate issue. Instead, non-graduates aged 22-24 have around double the NEET rate than their counterparts.



Conclusion

As the number of NEET young people passes one million, it's time for urgent and ambitious reform.

Our analysis demonstrates that this must tackle both economic inactivity and unemployment. With double the number of young people economically inactive because of long-term sickness since 2021, better integration of employment and health interventions should be a high priority. This includes personalised and tailored support for the most vulnerable young people who get locked out of opportunities to earn and learn because of health and disability barriers.

Further, unemployed young people are navigating a weakening labour market with fractured transition support and reduced entry level pathways. The expanded Youth Guarantee and recent apprenticeship reforms have marked a welcome and positive start at strengthening transition support to work for unemployed young people. With further investment, a more ambitious offer would support more young people to achieve the all-important level 2 qualification, strengthen vocational pathways and address skills gaps by designing a system responsive to local skills needs.

Definitions

- **Unemployed:** Individuals who are not in employment and have been actively seeking work.
- **Economically Inactive:** Individuals who are not in employment and have not been actively seeking work. Note: In this report, all analysis on economic inactivity excludes those who are in education or training.
- **Main health problem:** The variable in the LFS asks respondents what their main reported health problem is. "Mental health" includes those reporting depression, bad nerves or anxiety, and mental illness, phobias, or panic disorders. "Neurodevelopmental" includes those reporting autism, autism spectrum condition or Asperger syndrome, and severe or specific learning difficulties. "Physical or Other" includes all other health conditions, covering a range of physical health conditions and the response option of other health problems or disabilities.

The Youth Futures Foundation NEET Trends Analysis is a regular series providing insight into the characteristics of the NEET population, economic conditions and trends contributing to the NEET rate.

See previous publications here: **NEET Trends Analysis**

