

across Leeds: Leeds Rhinos, Shine, John Charles Centre (JCC), and Yorkshire Cricket Club within weeks of funding approval. These venues were deliberately selected to avoid the institutional feel of school or college.

By delivering education in familiar, welcoming community spaces, SCL helped break down barriers for learners who had lost trust in traditional systems.

The programme in Leeds was delivered in 12-week cycles, two days per week, across five cohorts, engaging around 200 NEET young people. The curriculum was structured around two main pathways: Employability and Personal Development, and Labour Market Information (LMI) Skills.

Rather than forcing learners into GCSE resits, the curriculum focused on practical, workplace-relevant English and maths. This design allowed learners to build functional skills and confidence without the pressure of formal exams.

SCL's staff model in Leeds mirrored its West Midlands approach. Instead of recruiting conventional teachers, the organisation prioritised hiring professionals with real-life experience working with disengaged youth, people who could see past behaviours and focus on potential.

Each cohort benefited from wraparound support including behaviour mentors, access to ID and digital tools, free meals, enrichment activities, and consistent one-to-one mentoring.

Recruitment was driven through a mix of local authority referrals, digital campaigns, and outreach events at youth hubs.

SCL established strong relationships with the council's NEET teams and contributed to working groups and DfE progress reviews.

Despite challenges such as inconsistent referrals, funding limitations, and complex learner needs, the Leeds project showed clear evidence that ITPs like SCL can deliver targeted and impactful provision at pace.

Although GAP funding was confirmed as temporary, SCL has committed to continuing its work in Leeds by transitioning up to 60 learners into its core-funded programme from September 2025. While the original short-course model cannot be fully replicated under current funding rules, the organisation is adapting its year-long provision to retain the flexibility and engagement strategies that made the initial project so effective.



### Impact and the road ahead

SCL's work across both the West Midlands and Leeds highlights the unique contribution ITPs can make to the NEET challenge. By combining flexible delivery models with trauma-informed staffing and qualifications that are relevant to local employers, SCL has re-engaged hundreds of young people who were previously written off by the system.

Working alongside Gateway Qualifications, SCL delivers a wide range of courses in areas like business administration, health and social care, and customer service.

It is also preparing to launch a new Enterprise and Entrepreneurship qualification that reflects the aspirations of young people interested in starting their own ventures.

Looking ahead, SCL plans to expand its NEET offer into additional regions, including Manchester and London, and is opening a new construction site in Salford from September 2025. It is also advocating for policy changes that will allow ITPs greater flexibility in how they deliver short-course provision, and more funding parity with larger institutions.

As Stuart Allen, Chief Education Officer of SCL Group, puts it: "Some of our learners are only one poor decision away from prison, if not worse. But with the right support, they can achieve things they never thought possible."

SCL's approach shows that when NEET learners are met with empathy, structure, and opportunity, real transformation can occur.

## HOW ITPS CAN SUPPORT NEET LEARNERS

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## How Independent Training Providers can support NEET learners

### Gateway Qualifications, in partnership with Youth Employment UK and SCL Group

As the number of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) continues to rise, independent training providers (ITPs) across the UK are playing an important role in offering these learners much needed support.

Gateway Qualifications, along with its partners, are at the forefront of delivering flexible and personalised qualifications that support NEET learners to re-engage with learning, develop essential skills, and move onto further study, apprenticeships or the workforce.

Over 900,000 young people in the UK are estimated to be NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) (Office for National Statistics (ONS), May 2025)

#### The growing NEET challenge

Recent figures show an alarming rise in the number of NEET young people, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This demographic faces a unique set of challenges, which prevents them from accessing mainstream further education or training opportunities once they've left school. Many NEET learners enter the system with low confidence, high anxiety, and a history of disengagement from traditional education settings.

ITPs are uniquely positioned to offer tailored support to this group of young people. By offering alternative pathways, flexible qualifications, and inclusive support, ITPs can make a significant difference to the lives of NEET learners.

Gateway Qualifications provides the framework for this flexibility, allowing providers to create programmes that meet both the needs of learners, and local employers.



## Youth Employment UK: Amplifying voices

### Youth Employment UK: understanding and supporting NEET learners

Youth Employment UK plays an important role in supporting young people at risk of becoming NEET, or who have already slipped through the cracks of the education system, by helping to shape policy and practice based on the real experiences of young people.

Through their annual *Youth Voice Census*, they gather crucial insights into the barriers that prevent young people from engaging with education or employment.

The findings from the most recent Youth Voice Census reveal that secondary only to a lack of work experience, young people are worried that their own levels of anxiety will be their biggest barrier to accessing work.

There is a growing sense of hopelessness from disadvantaged groups, the perception being that there is little sense in trying to access opportunities because there are simply "no jobs available", with many feeling locked out of any jobs they do see because of a lack of skills or qualifications.

The research highlights the impact the cost-of-living crisis is having, which is particularly challenging for disadvantaged young people.

Many NEET learners come from lower-income households, and financial pressures often prevent them from accessing further education, even when they want to. These young people are also more likely to have additional responsibilities, such as being carers themselves, which further limits their ability to engage fully with FE courses or vocational training.

Youth Employment UK focuses on ensuring that young people are given a voice in shaping the support and services they receive. They work closely with providers and employers to ensure that young people's needs are considered when developing the curriculum, training, and associated support services.

By understanding the lived experiences, and real-world challenges these young people face, providers can create programmes that are practical and flexible, but also emotionally supportive, helping NEET learners to overcome multiple barriers.

Through its collaboration with Youth Employment UK, Gateway Qualifications will help to ensure that flexible qualifications are widely available.

These qualifications help learners build confidence, develop employability skills, and take steps towards re-engaging with education or entering the workforce.

Youth Employment UK continues to advocate for more tailored interventions that focus on the unique challenges faced by NEET learners, ensuring that education and training opportunities are truly accessible to all.



## SCL Education Group: Enriching the lives of NEET learners

### SCL Group: Supporting NEET learners through regional innovation

SCL Education Group is a leading national independent training provider that specialises in engaging some of the most hard-to-reach young people across the UK. Working in partnership with local authorities, the Department for Education, and awarding organisations like Gateway Qualifications, SCL has designed a responsive and innovative approach to support learners who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET).

This provision focuses on creating flexible programmes that remove barriers to learning and help young people develop the skills, confidence, and behaviours they need to progress. Many of these learners come from challenging backgrounds and have disengaged from traditional education settings. SCL's strength lies in its ability to offer safe, welcoming, and community-based environments that are very different from school or college.

### West Midlands: Laying the foundations

SCL's work with NEET learners began in the West Midlands, where it now operates five dedicated centres. These centres were established in response to a regional opportunity to deliver high-quality, bespoke 16–18 study programmes. Since launching in July 2023, SCL has seen a 74% increase in NEET enrolments compared to the previous academic year. Around 81% of learners at these centres come from postcodes in areas of deprivation.

Each centre serves approximately 60 learners, maintaining a small, community-focused feel that allows staff to build meaningful relationships and support individual needs. The programme includes both vocational and personal development components, with curriculum pathways aligned to local labour market demand. Learners are prepared for entry into sectors such as construction, health and social care, education, and customer service.

SCL's success in the West Midlands is built on a tailored approach that addresses the whole learner. In addition to delivering qualifications, the organisation places a strong emphasis on personal wellbeing and behaviour support. SCL recruits staff who are experienced in working with vulnerable young people: mentors, youth workers, and educators who understand trauma-informed practice. These staff members help learners overcome past experiences that may have affected their behaviour, confidence, or trust in education.

A key feature of the West Midlands programme is SCL's use of behaviour mentors and enrichment specialists. These professionals work closely with learners to identify and unpack behavioural issues rooted in adversity. The curriculum also includes a Tutorial Programme, which covers independent living, workplace readiness, and awareness of safeguarding issues, including how to recognise and avoid harmful relationships and exploitation such as county lines.

SCL's West Midlands centres reflect a model that can be adapted and scaled. The success of this initiative laid the groundwork for further expansion.

### Leeds NEET project: Scaling impact

In late 2024, Leeds City Council identified a serious sufficiency issue: a high number of NEET young people aged 16–24 and very limited provision to support them. SCL responded by working in partnership with the council and the Department for Education to co-develop a successful GAP funding bid. This resulted in the rapid launch of the Leeds NEET Project: "*Beyond Your Limits.*"

Building on its experience in the West Midlands, SCL mobilised four delivery sites

