

Nick Ferrari

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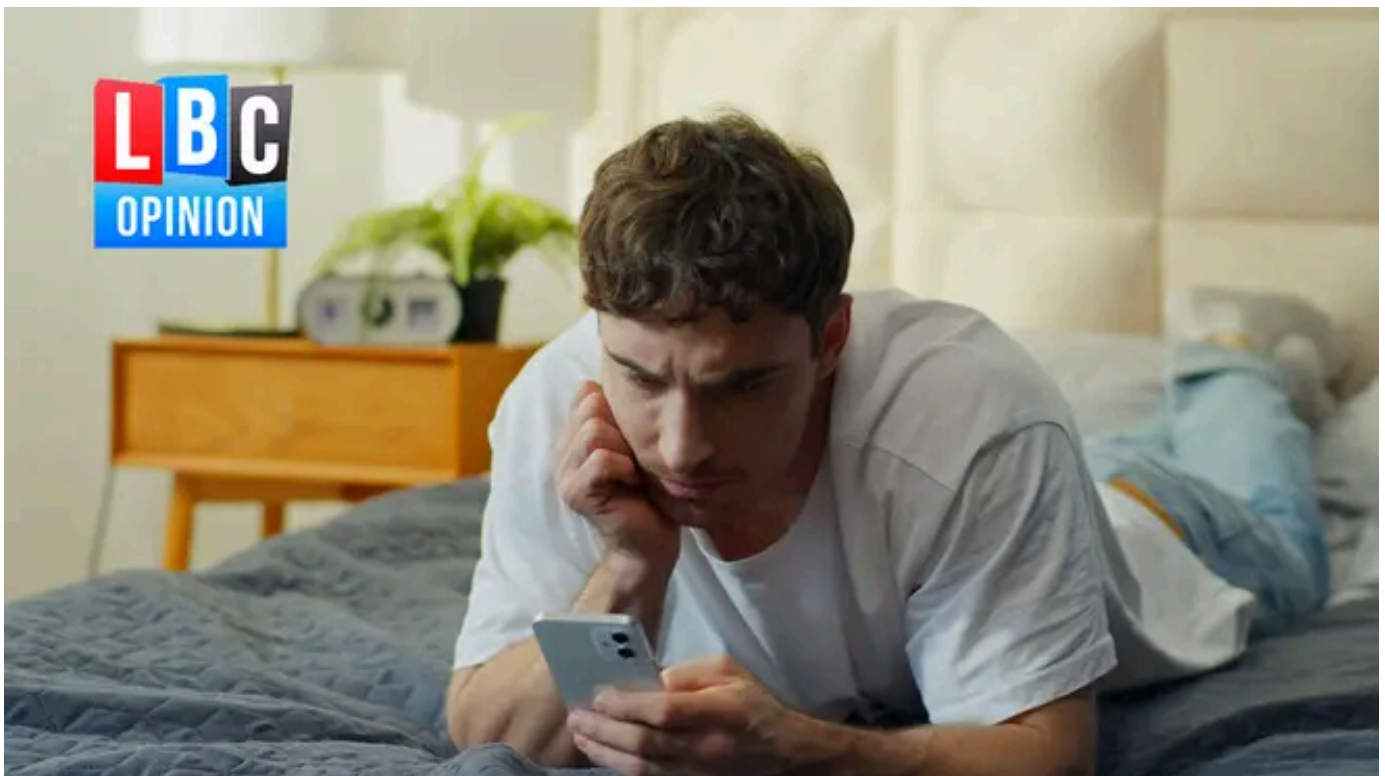
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# Young people aren't lazy - here's what we're missing about Neets

Loss of belief is what we're missing in the debate about NEET figures, writes Roger Wynne-Dyke

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Loss of belief is what we're missing in the debate about NEET figures, writes Roger Wynne-Dyke. *Picture: Alamy*



By Roger Wynne-Dyke

**When a young person says, "I don't know what to do with my life," what they often mean is something far more painful: "I'm not sure I believe I can."**

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That loss of belief is what we're missing in the debate about NEET figures.

[New data released today](#) shows that the number of young people classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training) is nearing the one million mark, rising to 957,000. It is a striking number, but we have to remember that behind it are a million individual stories of stalled confidence, fragile hope and uncertain futures.

I have spent the past 17 years working directly with young people from less advantaged backgrounds who are at risk of falling out of education and employment. What I see repeatedly is not a lack of ambition. It is a gradual erosion of self-belief.

Most young people do not start off thinking they cannot achieve anything. It creeps in.

One bad year at school. One teacher who writes you off. A subject that makes you feel incapable. Rejection after rejection from applications. Family pressure, which means you're worrying about money instead of coursework. By the time someone says they do not know what to do next, their confidence has already taken several quiet hits.

Ambition rarely disappears. It goes quiet. Even the young people who look disengaged often have dreams tucked away. They just do not know how to get from here to there. When the ladder feels broken, it is safer to step back than to climb and risk another fall. That's not laziness - it's just self-protection.

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advice, from apprenticeships to the fragile handover between school and work.

The cost is paid twice. First, by the young person, who loses income, confidence and direction. And later by the economy, which loses skills, energy and contribution.

But we also need to acknowledge the wider emotional climate shaping this generation; housing feels out of reach, the cost of living dominates family conversations, student debt looms, and entry-level jobs can feel insecure and underpaid. Online, there is a constant churn of climate anxiety and economic uncertainty. If adults appear worried about the future, why would a teenager feel calm and confident about theirs?

There is also a growing mismatch between aspiration and opportunity. The UK urgently needs engineers, scientists, energy experts and innovators in emerging fields. Yet the most visible and culturally celebrated career paths often sit elsewhere - finance, influencing, elite sport, gaming, and entertainment. There is nothing wrong with those ambitions. But when pathways into critical sectors feel opaque or inaccessible, and when young people cannot see anyone like them in those roles, motivation fades.

Beyond mindset, there are practical barriers that determine whether someone manages to stride forward or fall back. Some of these include: shortages of apprenticeships, long and complex recruitment processes, patchy careers guidance, inconsistent school support, long waiting lists for

It is not that young people are choosing nothing. Often, they choose not to try again until they feel more certain they will not fail again. Or they are waiting for someone to show them a path that feels real and achievable. Too often we teach young people to pass exams, not to fail, adapt and persist.

If we are serious about reversing rising NEET numbers, the response cannot simply be to reduce costs or tweak incentives. Entry-level jobs must feel like genuine pathways, not cheap labour. They need to build skills, offer progression and pay fairly.

At One Degree, we have seen what happens when belief is rebuilt alongside practical support. Since 2009, we have worked to mentor and empower students from less advantaged backgrounds who are at risk of becoming NEET. Through sustained one-to-one mentoring and a structured digital platform, we focus on restoring confidence as well as developing academic and employability skills.

That distinction matters. Re-engagement is not just about income. It is about identity, belonging and purpose. It is about flipping “I might not be able to” into “why not me?”

If nearly one million young people are on the sidelines, we should not rush to judge them. We should ask what signals we are sending, what ladders we have removed, and what support we have failed to provide.

Because in most cases, the ambition is still there. It is simply waiting for something, or someone, to help it speak up again.

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*Roger Wynne-Dyke is the CEO of mentoring charity [One Degree](#).*

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