

What is the effectiveness of interventions to support the mental and emotional health and wellbeing of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET)? A Rapid Review

August 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is a Rapid Review?

Our Rapid Reviews (RR) use a variation of the systematic review approach, abbreviating or omitting some components to generate the evidence to inform stakeholders promptly whilst maintaining attention to bias.

Who is this Rapid Review for?

The research question was suggested by Hywel Dda University Health Board to inform the development of support services for young people who are **Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)** in the west of Wales. It is intended to help support strategic planning and service design to address the complex needs of NEET youth to promote their long-term mental and emotional wellbeing.

Background / Aim of Rapid Review

Mental health problems among young people have continued to rise over the last decade. Emotional and mental wellbeing of children and young people is a key strategic priority for Welsh Government and local Health Boards. The Welsh Government have made several commitments to support children and young people's mental health through initiatives such as the 'whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing'. There are also support services available in higher education and in many workplace environments. However, while approaches to maintain or enhance mental health and wellbeing within these settings are extremely valuable, it is important to understand what alternative community-based supportive measures or interventions are effective for young people who may not be able to access these services. It is estimated that 13.4% of all young people (aged 16-24) are considered NEET across the UK. Young people who are NEET have also been found to have a higher incidence of mental health problems than young people who are not NEET. As such, the aim of this rapid review is to identify the effectiveness of interventions to support mental and emotional health and wellbeing in young people who are NEET.

Results of the Rapid Review

Recency of the evidence base

- The literature searches were conducted in June 2025. Included studies were published between 2013 and 2025.

Extent of the evidence base

- Nine primary studies were included in the rapid review: one randomised controlled trial; two non-randomised controlled studies, and six uncontrolled before and after studies (three of which were mixed methods).
- Included studies were conducted in a range of countries (only two were conducted in the UK).
- Studies investigated psychological interventions (n=3), nature-based interventions (n=2), animal assisted interventions (n=2), social prescribing interventions (n=1), and holistic coaching interventions (n=1).
- Most of the studies were deemed to be of low quality and did not include a separate control group. Only one psychological intervention study was considered as moderate quality.

Key findings and certainty of the evidence

- The psychological interventions were found to improve psychological, social and occupational functioning, and led to positive behaviour changes in socially withdrawn youths. They were also found to reduce difficulties in emotion regulation in at-risk youths who had dropped out of school, and reduced the psychological distress of young people who are unemployed (but this was impacted by participants baseline levels of wellbeing and mindfulness).

- The nature-based interventions (assessed in two UK studies) were found to improve social, emotional and behavioural functioning, as well as social connection and mental wellbeing in young people who are NEET. Evidence suggests that nature-based interventions may be more effective at reducing depression and anxiety, and increasing resilience in those who meet the criteria for depression and anxiety prior to the intervention, compared to those who do not.
- The animal assisted interventions were found to improve social behaviour, and participant abilities in disengaged or socially withdrawn youths. Mixed results were found for their impact on self-esteem.
- The social prescribing intervention was found to improve mental wellbeing and psychological distress in young people who are NEET.
- The holistic coaching intervention was found to improve participants sense of wellbeing; anxiety; access to peer support resources; knowledge of and access to services; and connection to learning and earning opportunities in young people who are NEET. Mixed findings were reported for a sense of support; ability to handle stress; and asking for help when upset and feeling overwhelmed.
- Participants were generally accepting of the interventions, highlighting factors that they found particularly helpful such as the relationship with those delivering the intervention; the emotional and physical support they received; having a place to share and discuss emotions; and being able to engage with animals or nature.
- Overall, there is evidence to suggest a range of interventions can be used to support young people who are NEET. However, our confidence in the evidence is limited as the majority of outcomes were only evaluated by a single study.

Policy and Practice Implications

- While the evidence base identified was limited in number and quality, the findings may help to inform the development and delivery of interventions in young people who are NEET.
- The interventions were generally well accepted by participants.
- All interventions identified were resource intensive, requiring the availability of specific locations such as the nature or animal-assisted interventions or requiring qualified staff, which may impact the applicability of the interventions.
- One study highlighted some of the challenges of delivering a social prescribing intervention including funding, time to deliver the interventions and offer support, and suitable training for those delivering the intervention.

Research Implications and Evidence Gaps

- Although findings show promise, given the limited evidence base, a robust evaluation should be considered when developing and implementing an intervention for young people who are NEET.
- There was a paucity of high-quality evidence, particularly UK based.
- Young people who are NEET may have different and complex needs. Further robust studies assessing long term effects are needed to determine how best to support this population.

Economic considerations

- Future economic evaluations assessing interventions to support the mental and emotional health and wellbeing of young people who are NEET should consider the economic impacts of intervention delivery, direct healthcare use and wider spillover effects concerning entry to employment, education or training facilitated by the scheme. Evaluations should consider both National Health Service (NHS) and wider societal perspectives to capture all outcomes associated with re-entering employment, education or training.
- Young people who are NEET possess economic potential if they are to transition to employment, education or training. Integrating one young person who is NEET into the workforce could increase UK Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by over £74,000 per year*.

*figures inflated to 2025 prices using Bank of England Inflation Calculator:
<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>