



Comprehensive support to tackle complex needs

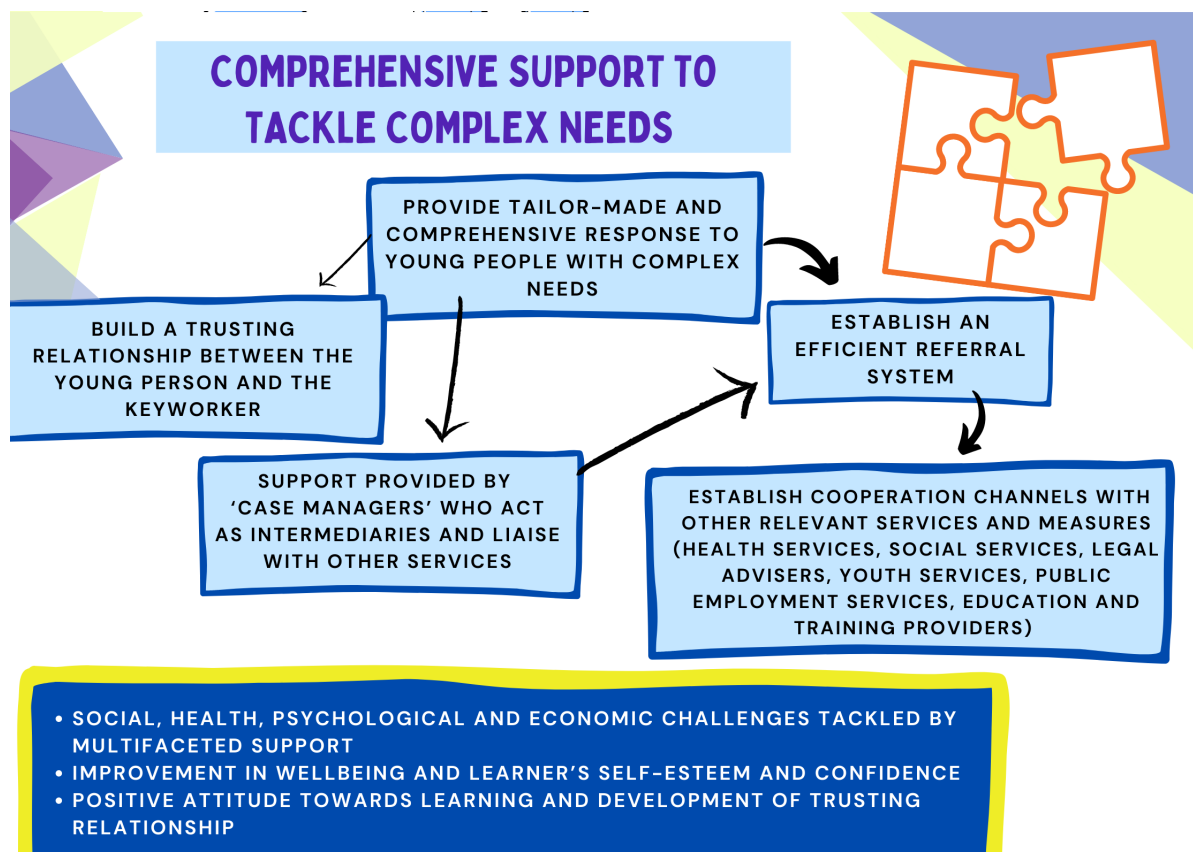
Problem statement

Addressed problem: Complex needs and challenges faced by young people

Education is often only one of multiple challenges in the lives of young people. Early leavers and those at risk of leaving education and training frequently face additional difficulties, such as health issues, psychosocial challenges, legal, or housing problems, geographic isolation, or economic disadvantage.

Most countries provide a range of specialised services to support citizens in these areas. However, identifying appropriate services, understanding available information, and navigating application procedures require a significant level of motivation, knowledge and capacity. For marginalised young people, these requirements can constitute substantial barriers.

In addition, marginalised young people often display low levels of trust in public authorities and are unlikely to proactively seek support from specialised services. As a result, efforts to (re)engage them in education and training are unlikely to succeed unless they are accompanied by coordinated measures that also address challenges in other areas of their lives.



Beneficiaries

- 📁 Learners at risk of early leaving from education and training
- 📁 Learners at transition points and/or uncertain about career aspirations
- 📁 Low-performing learners
- 📁 Migrants / refugees

A comprehensive and targeted approach to addressing learners' complex needs is relevant for all learners facing challenges across different areas of their lives and is particularly important for marginalised young people, who often experience multiple difficulties and have limited contact with support services.

Addressing the problem

Tips: How can learners' complex needs be addressed in a coordinated, targeted, and comprehensive way?

Learners cannot focus on their studies, or on their educational and professional plans, when they are preoccupied with other needs and obstacles, related to their identities, socioeconomic backgrounds, age, family obligations, and place of residence. At the same time, teachers and trainers often lack the resources and training to provide comprehensive support for each learner in difficulty, alongside their teaching responsibilities.

For this reason, an approach involving trained professionals who support learners and help them overcome challenges on a case-by-case basis would be most appropriate. The following tips serve as guidance for policy-makers and practitioners involved in the design and delivery of such measures. The information is based on Cedefop research into successful measures.

Tip 1: Understand what case management is and when to use it

Addressing learners' complex needs requires professional support, as one-size-fits-all approaches have limited efficiency. In cases where socioeconomic, ethnic, gender, age, language, and health barriers affect learners' capacity to fully benefit from their VET programmes, adopting a case management approach is a highly relevant choice.

Case management involves addressing, in parallel, the full range of challenges faced by the individual. The young person is typically in contact with a single professional (a 'key worker', e.g. counsellor, coach or mentor) or a small multidisciplinary team operating within the same setting. These case managers act as intermediaries, liaising with other services on behalf of the young person. They coordinate responses to deliver tailored, multifaceted support.

Case management and multifaceted support are often key features of second-chance measures, i.e. comprehensive interventions targeting young people who are highly disengaged from education and training. They can also be implemented by mainstream education and training providers, as well as by support services for early leavers.

Tip 2: Build a trusting relationship between the young person and the key worker (e.g. a counsellor, coach or mentor)

One-to-one contact and the development of a trusting relationship between the young person and the key worker are at the core of effective case management. Building such a relationship requires time and regular contact with the young person. The nature, frequency and duration of these interactions should be tailored to the individual's needs.

Support should be sustained until the young person's personal situation has stabilised. It can be provided alongside formal learning and may continue after the completion of education and training.

Tip 3: Provide adequate training for the key worker

Managing complex cases that require holistic and multidimensional support is a demanding task. For this reason, appropriate training is essential for key workers prior to engaging with young people in need of such support.

Key workers should possess relevant experience, professional competences, and transversal skills to address complex situations and provide support tailored to

individual needs within a case management approach. Ensuring these capacities is crucial for delivering high-quality services and achieving sustainable outcomes.

This is particularly important in the case of volunteer mentors (e.g. students or community volunteers), who may not regularly provide such support and therefore require additional preparation and guidance.

Tip 4: Establish cooperation channels with other relevant services and measures

The key worker plays a central role in coordinating the range of services required to address the young person's individual needs. This involves close cooperation with health services, social services, legal and debt advisers, youth services, public employment services, and education and training providers, among others.

Establishing formal cooperation arrangements, including clear referral protocols, can help ensure continuity of support and reduce the risk of young people 'slipping through the net'.

Referrals made by the key worker - who has an established relationship with the young person - are more likely to result in effective engagement with the referred service than referrals made by professionals with limited contact.

Tip 5: Enhance reach and improve the quality of services through the use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI)

Digital tools and AI can significantly enhance the delivery of support and social services to young people with complex needs. When used strategically, these technologies can help reach marginalised learners who might otherwise remain "invisible" to the system and face difficulties in accessing services. They can also support more personalised, responsive, and efficient provision of support.

To be effective, such measures should:

- Use digital tools (e.g. social media, digital platforms, outreach campaigns, instant messaging, and mobile-friendly applications) to engage with young people in accessible and cost-free ways;
- Enhance service quality through AI-supported personalisation, for example by analysing individual needs and suggesting tailored resources. AI can also help simplify complex administrative language or provide real-time translation of support materials into a learner's native language;
- Support the development of digital skills enabling young people to use online platforms for essential tasks (e.g. managing health information, applying for housing, or handling legal documentation securely); Strengthen coordination through integrated digital systems, facilitating effective communication and information-sharing between relevant services (e.g. health, social, education, and justice sectors).

Tip 6: Monitor and evaluate progress continuously

Effective case management requires ongoing monitoring of each young person's progress across different areas of their life. Key workers should:

- Track individual outcomes regularly, including personal well-being, engagement in learning, and access to services;
- Adjust support plans based on progress, emerging needs, or changes in circumstances;
- Collect feedback from the young person to ensure support remains relevant and responsive;
- Use data for service improvement, informing both institutional practices and broader policy development.

Continuous monitoring helps ensure that interventions remain tailored, effective, and sustainable, reducing the risk of disengagement or “slipping through the net”. It also provides valuable evidence for improving future case management practices. For more information on monitoring and evaluation see [here](#).

Expected outcomes

Outcomes of case management

Case management and multi-faceted support help address the social, health, psychological, and economic challenges faced by young people. These interventions are expected to improve overall well-being. Developing a trusting relationship with a key worker and providing individualised support can strengthen self-esteem, build self-confidence, and foster a positive attitude towards learning. Expected outcomes can be observed at three levels: individual, institutional, and system.



		
INDIVIDUAL	INSTITUTIONAL	SYSTEM
• Social, health, psychological, and economic challenges addressed • Improved well-being • Development of a positive self-image • Positive attitude towards learning and education • Reduced risk of drop-out • Increased accessibility to essential services through digital platforms and support for digital navigation	• Active use of referral systems between schools, second-chance providers, and other services • Reduced risk of early leaving among students supported by a key worker (e.g. a counsellor, coach or mentor) • Improved service efficiency through digital tools • Higher quality of support through AI-assisted personalisation	• Interconnected services are functioning effectively • Reduced rates of early leaving among at-risk students supported by a key worker • Increased rates of young people returning to mainstream education after receiving support • Higher rates of upper secondary qualification attainment among supported learners • Reduced risk of 'slipping through the net' due to digital tracking and continuous support for harder-to-reach young people

Related protective factors

 Health and well-being	 Inclusive environment
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Related resources

Good practices

 Good practice Youth Coaching Scheme	 Good practice Orienta4YEL
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Jugendcoaching

In Austria, the Youth Coaching Scheme offers high quality coaching and input from other services to ensure participants are provided with support to meet their individual needs.

 **Austria**

Supporting educational and social inclusion of young early leavers and those at risk of early leaving through mechanisms of orientation and tutorial action.

 **Germany**  **Portugal**  **Romania**

 **Spain**  **United Kingdom**

Tools

 **Tools**

PES practices for the outreach and activation of NEETs

The PES handbook offers national examples of how the public employment services work in partnership with youth outreach workers and other key services to engage and support young people at risk of early leaving.

 **EU level**

 **Tools**

SOS-Network: Social Inclusion of students/learners with special needs into mainstream VET and labour market

The SOS network is a practitioner's community which contributes to the social inclusiveness of disadvantaged learners or those with special needs. The website is a platform for teachers, trainers and other professionals from all over Europe who share good practices and experiences of inclusive education.

International

 **Tools**

DIDO - Dropping-in the dropouts toolkit

The DIDO toolkit contains practical tools aimed at preventing dropout in adult education.

 **Belgium**  **Denmark**  **Finland**

 **Netherlands**  **Portugal**

 **Switzerland**

Publications

Publications

Invest in Talent

In the Netherlands, the 'Invest in Talent' initiative provides practical advice on how to bring together partners from the worlds of employment, education, housing, coaching and mentoring to offer support to young people in dealing with the challenges they face in everyday life.

Read the initiative [flyer description](#).

 **Netherlands**

Publications

Prevention and Reduction of Poverty and Social Exclusion through Education, Vocational Training and Lifelong Learning

This European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Key Issues and Promising Practices Paper provides a grassroots assessment of the current state of play and new developments in the education field, from the perspective of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and from NGOs providing support, guidance and services to them.

Publications

Natives and immigrants enrolled in Spanish intermediate vocational education and training: a comparative study

Antoni Cerdà-Navarro, Francesca Salvà-Mut, Rubén Comas-Forgas & Mercè Morey-López

This article looks at the differences and similarities between Spanish-born and immigrant students enrolled in the first year of Intermediate Vocational Education (IVET) programmes in Spain.

 **Spain**

Publications

Recommendations on inclusive education

Based on the COFACE Disability S.H.I.F.T. guide for a meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities and their families. COFACE Families Europe is a pluralistic network of civil society associations representing the interests of all families.

According to article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), signed and adopted by the European Union and all its Member States, and of its General Comment No. 4, State parties must ensure the realisation of the right of persons with disabilities to education through an inclusive education system at all levels, including pre-schools, primary, secondary and tertiary education, vocational training and lifelong learning, extracurricular and social activities, and for all

students, including persons with disabilities.

 Publications

Pathways to School Success

Replacing the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving

This Council Recommendation aims to provide a framework which serves as a reference tool for national, regional and local policy makers and practitioners in education and training which can inspire a systemic policy response to ensure better educational outcomes for all learners.

 **EU level**

 Publications

AI to Support Neurodivergent Learners in Vocational Education and Training AI

OECD 2026 Report

Drawing on insights from over 50 stakeholder interviews, the report highlights the potential of these technologies to make VET more adaptive, accessible and inclusive.

 **EU level** **International**

 Publications

Local governance for inclusion

Pathways to school success - Policy brief

This policy brief examines the role of local authorities in supporting school success across the EU.

 **EU level**

 Publications

Authentic learner engagement

Pathways to school success - Policy brief

This policy brief focuses on learner engagement as a fundamental driver of school success, well-being, and democratic participation.

 **EU level**

 Publications

Child, Adolescent and Youth Mental Health in the 21st Century

OECD Report

This report highlights a decade-long decline in the mental health and well-being of young people (aged 10–24) across OECD member states,

showcasing that deteriorating youth mental health is a structural trend, present even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

International

Quick wins

★ Quick win

Create opportunities for informal interactions between students and VET provider staff

Creating opportunities for informal interactions between learners and staff can help build trust and create positive relationships.

 **Poland**  **Portugal**

★ Quick win

Quick and easy referral to support measures

Formal protocols for the referral of young people to specialist support services saves time for the VET provider, and facilitate a quicker response to the learners' needs.

 **Austria**  **Netherlands**

Source URL: <https://www26.cedefop.europa.eu/en/en/tools/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving/intervention-approaches/comprehensive-support-tackle-complex-needs>