**Institute for Local Governance**

# Tackling barriers to young people's aspirations and ambition in County Durham

## (SUMMARY REPORT)

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## The Institute for Local Governance

The Institute for Local Governance (ILG) is a Research and Knowledge Exchange Partnership involving North East local authorities, universities, police and fire and rescue services, hosted by Durham University Business School. Founded in 2009 it serves as an intermediary 'bridging organisation' whose role is to source and secure the delivery of the research requirements of its public sector partners through the facilitation of processes of co-production between practitioners and North East university researchers.

Collaborative research with the ILG differs from conventional academic research. Partnerships between academics, policy makers and practitioners produce knowledge and understanding which is of practical use, but which produces rigorous evidence which can withstand conventional academic scrutiny. This is an iterative process which develops in a 'neutral space' where members of public sector institutions, third sector organisations, private businesses and universities can exchange ideas, learn from each other and produce innovative solutions. A cornerstone of the ILGs work is its ability to establish long-term productive and mutually beneficial relationships across all sectors to strengthen economy and society in the region.

ILG research topics are initiated, scoped and their purpose agreed with agencies and organisations across the region. Once a research brief has been confirmed, the ILG invites university suppliers to bid for the work through an internally organised and transparent partnership competition. The public sector partner concerned selects the successful university supplier(s). The focus of research interest is 'local governance' which embraces a wide range of policy areas, management, delivery mechanisms, and academic and professional disciplines.

Over the past decade it has secured the delivery of over 90 individual research projects involving several million Pounds by North East university academics (including 20 by ILG team members, where appropriate) in processes of collaboration and co-production with practice. It has initiated and funded the delivery of major North East region-wide studies in areas such as Scottish devolution, the impact of welfare reform, public expenditure cuts, mental health services for young people, child poverty, the impact of Brexit on rural development and supported the devolution agenda through consultation surveys and support to Combined Authorities.

In disseminating the findings, it has held over 190 workshops, seminars and conferences with over 5,300 academics and practitioners held in locations across the North East. A recent national ESRC and Local Government Association study identified the ILG as being a pioneering research and knowledge exchange intermediary.

**March 2019**

# Tackling barriers to young people's aspirations and ambitions in County Durham

## Introduction

Many young people in County Durham are not achieving as much as they should as they make their journey towards adulthood. While much support is lent to young people to achieve their potential, it falls unevenly – too often being focused upon those who already have many advantages.

Recognising that this was unacceptable, Durham County Council commissioned this research via the Institute for Local Governance in 2016 to start a debate in the County on how to achieve more for young people from less advantaged backgrounds.

There is widespread belief in the UK that young people from less-advantaged backgrounds are less likely to make successful transitions to adult life because they lack aspiration and ambition.

Over-simplified explanations such as these are readily backed up with examples, garnered from observation and experience, which serve to reinforce falsehoods. With sufficient repetition these falsehoods start to ring true.

To instigate discussion across all sectors, this report holds up a mirror to County Durham, and asks readers to look again at the situation of young people and challenge popular narratives about young people's presumed lack of aspiration and ambition.

Policy makers and practitioners are encouraged to consider critically the differences between 'aspiration' and 'ambition'; 'attitudes' and 'behaviours'; 'attainment' and 'achievement', and most crucially, ask questions about what constitutes 'success in life' for young people from different starting points.

By doing so, it is hoped that organisations in the education, public, private and voluntary sectors will be able to focus their resources individually or in complementary ways on those young people who are most in need of support.

## Young people in County Durham

There are wide disparities in young people's educational performance within County Durham. But the overall situation is not significantly different from national averages and in some areas, the county is doing better than its statistical neighbours.

Average Attainment 8 scores for the county at 49.2% is higher than the national level of 48.5 or regional level of 48.7. However, the gap between the average Attainment 8 score for disadvantaged pupils and the county average is currently -12.5, indicating that their performance is considerably lower.

That stated, disadvantaged pupils in the county are performing no less well than nationally (-12.3) and are doing better than the county's nearest statistical neighbours (-13.3). Similarly, average point scores at A level is 31.9 in County Durham, about the same as the national level (31.8) but higher than the regional score (30.6).

Transitions to work are however less impressive. Unemployment remains relatively high amongst young people in the county. In June 2017, 3.9% (n=2,010) of 18-24 year olds were claiming either Universal Credit or Job Seekers Allowance. This is considerably higher than the average in England (2.6%), but lower than the North East England average (4.6%).

The percentage of young people in apprenticeships is higher, at 9.1%, than the England average of 6.4% and regional average of 8.8% (March 2017).

The percentage of 16-17 year olds who were classified as not in education, employment or training (NEET) in June 2017 was 4.9%, compared with 4% regionally.

Amongst the most vulnerable groups of young people, care leavers (aged 17-21), 69.1% are in education, employment or training compared with a national average of 52% and 50% in the county's closest statistical neighbour.

The above summary of statistics indicates that young people from less affluent backgrounds are doing less well in attainment terms than their more affluent counterparts. While it is recognised that County Durham is not significantly different in statistical terms from national statistics, this is no reason for the county to sit on its laurels.

## How do school age young people feel that they are doing?

In 2017 Durham County Council undertook a Student Voice Survey in 97 (of 204) primary schools and 20 (of 33) secondary schools. Responses were received from 5,640 pupils in years 7,9,11 and 13.

Data from the secondary school survey were re-analysed to examine differences in the attitudes and expectations of young people who were from less advantaged backgrounds (as defined by entitlement to free school meals).

*Young people from less advantaged backgrounds feel that they are doing just as well at school as their more affluent counterparts. So why are their educational outcomes so very different?*

The data show that young people from less advantaged backgrounds share broadly similar experiences and opinions on most aspects of school life and that against most criteria their experiences do not diverge significantly from their more affluent counterparts.

To position less advantaged young people as being 'different' from more affluent young people is therefore not appropriate. That stated, educational 'outcomes' vary considerably in terms of credentials gained, further study and career destinations.

Figure 1 **'I feel that my school equips me with the skills and knowledge I need to be successful in the world of work'** (percentage who agree)
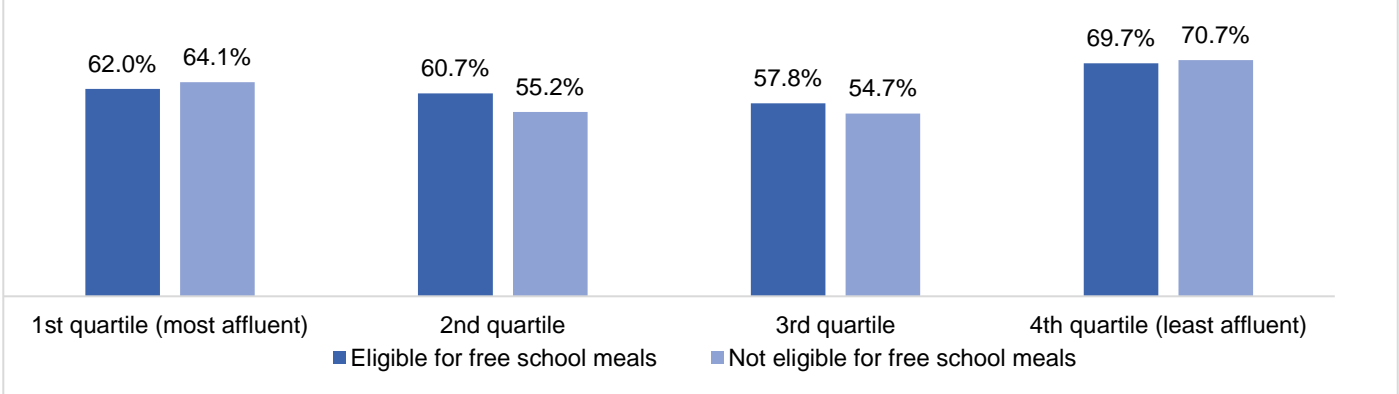


These differences manifest themselves in many ways. For example, at age 16+ subject choice varies. Less advantaged young people are more likely to be enrolled in vocational courses.

But this should not be regarded as an indication of under-achievement or low aspirations, but more likely to be associated with 'proximate ambitions' which are related to realistic expectations about employment destinations.

***Young people from less affluent backgrounds are less critical about the interactions with their school teachers than more advantaged young people: does this mean that they are, inadvertently, settling for less?***

At subject level there are few clearly discernible differences in young people's self appraisal of how well they are doing in their school subjects. In fact, young people at schools in the least affluent areas are *more* satisfied with their performance than those from schools in the most affluent areas. There are also some indications that young people from less affluent backgrounds may be 'less critical' of the interactions they have with their school teachers than more advantaged young people suggesting that they may, inadvertently, be 'settling for less'.

When actual performance levels are compared a different picture emerges. Against all measures, students from schools with a more affluent student cohort out-perform young people in schools with a bigger population of less affluent students.

- Using Attainment 8 statistics, the average score is 50.1 in the schools with more affluent students compared with 42.4 in schools which have more students who are eligible for free school meals.

- Twice as many students achieve the English Baccalaureate with strong passes in the most affluent quartile of schools (24%) compared with the least affluent quartile of schools (11%).

- 48% of students in the most affluent quartile of schools achieve strong passes in English and mathematics, compared with just 26% in the least affluent schools.

These data show that survey respondents in schools with a larger proportion of less affluent students may have been *over-estimating* their performance by a considerable margin.

It is also clear that students from schools with the largest proportion of less affluent pupils on their roll believe that they are being well-prepared for the world of work (see Figure 1). The same applies to their estimations of their teachers' expectations of them (see Figure 2).

The analysis has produced some challenging findings which cannot be ignored. There is a good aspect to the findings – young people across the county, irrespective of their level of affluence, tend to be pretty confident about their abilities and are generally satisfied by their experience of school life. There is no evidence to suggest that less affluent students feel diminished by their school experience.

Figure 2 **Do your teachers have high expectations of you?** (percentage who agree)
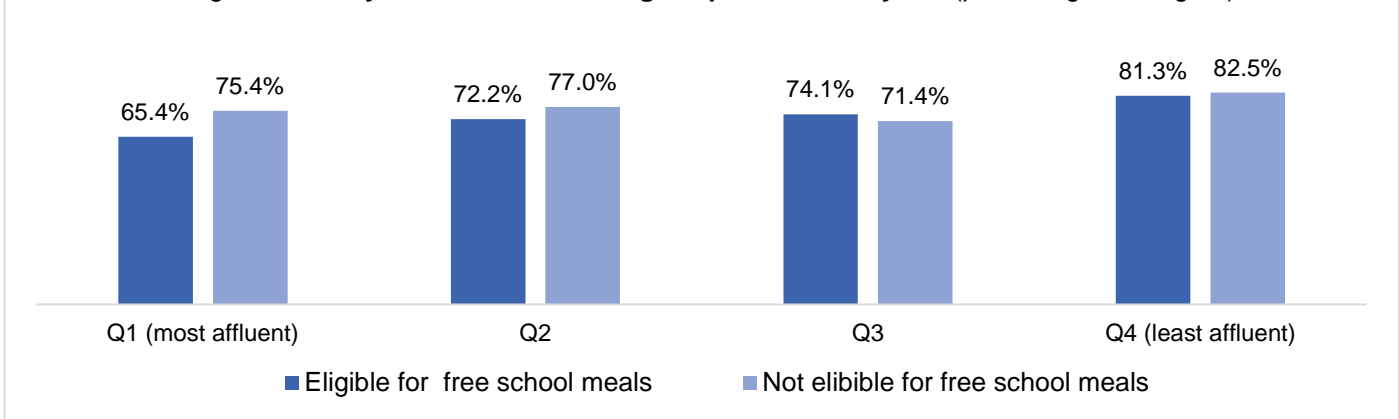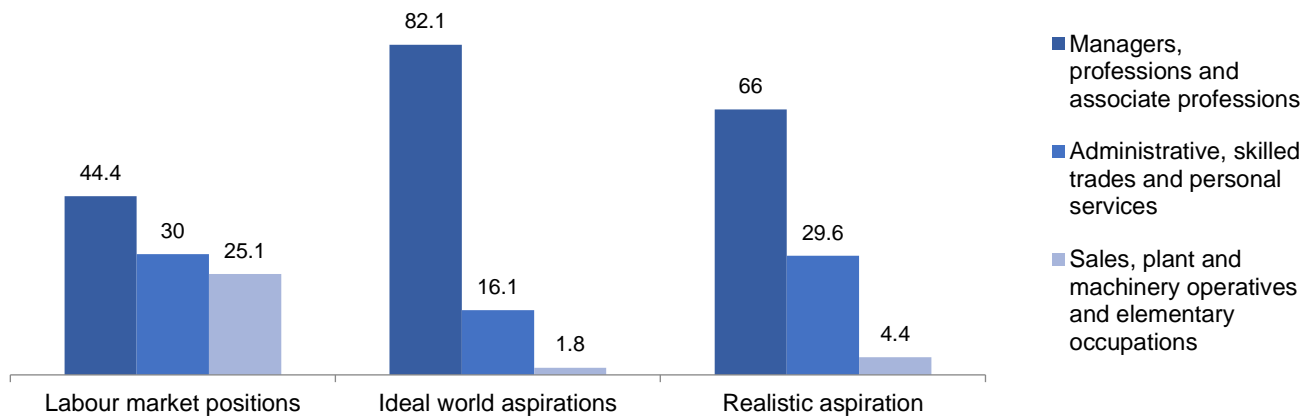
Figure 3 **Young people's career ambitions at age 15 compared with available job positions** (United Kingdom 2011)



Legend:
- Managers, professions and associate professions
- Administrative, skilled trades and personal services
- Sales, plant and machinery operatives and elementary occupations

Labour market positions: 44.4, 30, 25.1
Ideal world aspirations: 82.1, 16.1, 1.8
Realistic aspiration: 66, 29.6, 4.4

Why, then, is performance so much lower in those schools which have a higher proportion of students who are less affluent, as has been shown to be the case? Are many of these young people '*deluded'* about their perceived abilities?

If that is the case, then this raises serious questions about the quality of educational experience they are having. Why, we might ask, do they not *know* that they should be doing better? Is it, perhaps, because their communities, schools, teachers, peers or even their parents have low expectations of them?

*It is somewhat ironic that popular narratives proliferate about young people from less affluent areas lacking aspiration and confidence. The evidence indicates the opposite.*

This suggests that false and negative narratives about less affluent young people in the county are *manifesting* themselves in lower levels of performance. This is not to say that schools are wholly responsible for young people's situation. Many other factors help to shape the outcomes of schooling (see Figure 4).

## What are successful life transitions?

What constitutes a 'successful life transition' in terms of educational achievement and occupational destination depends, to a large extent, upon a person's starting point in life. If a young person has attended a high prestige public school and high-status university, it may be expected that they should be propelled into a job with professional status which will set them off on a successful career in, for example, the legal profession.

For a young person attending a low performing school in a less affluent area, a vocational course may be a more likely outcome and means that the point of entry into the labour market may be in a skilled trade such as floristry. Both represent successful destinations and may well meet the *current* career ambitions of the young people in question.

This is not to say that later in life, the lawyer may not pack in their profession and become a craft micro brewer and that the florist may take an access course, go to university and then become a solicitor. These things can, and often do happen. Life trajectories can be unpredictable and increasingly, people are embracing change and challenging notions of the desirability life-long careers.



Figure 4 **Factors affecting successful life transitions**

| 'Individual' Elements | 'Relational' Elements | 'Situational' Elements | 'Structural' Elements |
|---|---|---|---|
| Material well-being | Family and intimate relationships, peers and personal networks | Local political, social, economic and environmental factors | Social, cultural, political and economic conditions |
| Individual attributes (intelligence, health and well-being, skills, credentials, attractiveness, etc.) | Community and neighbourhood | Local demography, culture and community safety, social cohesion | Institutional structures (e.g. educational, legal, criminal justice systems) |
| Personality and temperament | Institutional relationships (e.g. in education, health, employment, etc.) | Local service provision, infrastructure and facilities | Economic and labour market conditions |

Personal 'agency' ⟵ ⟶ 'Structural constraint'

Figure 5   **Pathways to successful life transitions**
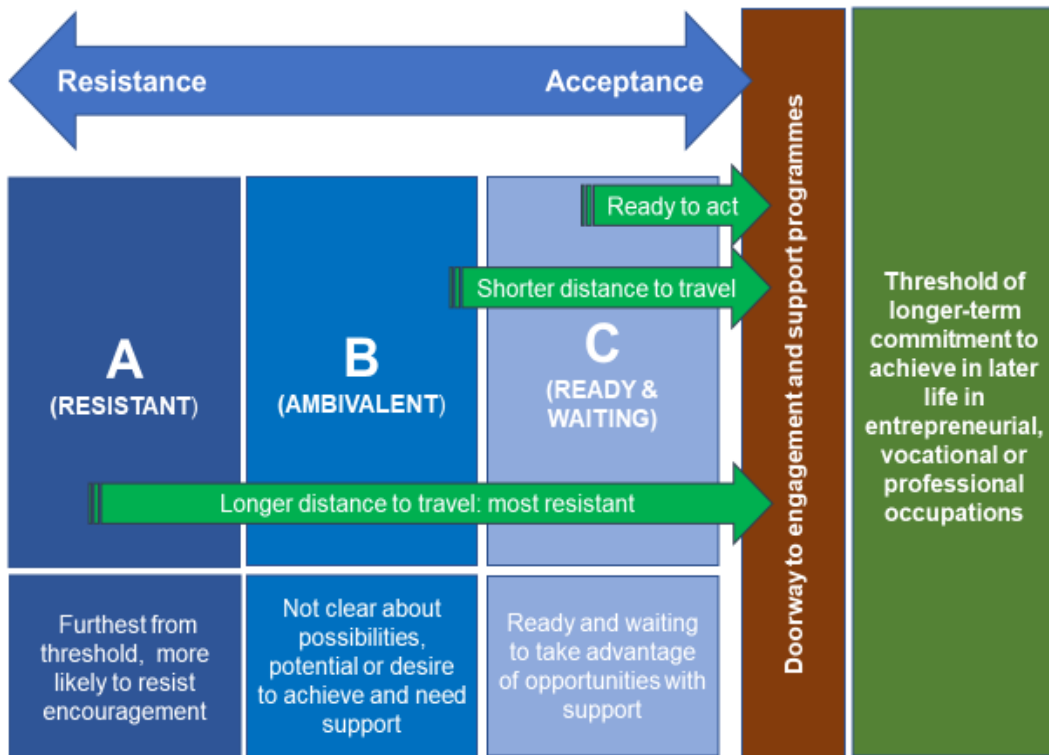


Life 'aspirations' are not the same as 'career ambitions' – although the two things are connected. There is very little evidence to show that life aspirations vary very much by social class background. Most people want the same things: a secure, well remunerated job which has good prospects for the future, a nice place to live in a safe community, a strong intimate relationship with someone they love, and enough money to be able to live well and plan for the future.

These are not just aspirations, however, they also represent in societal terms the foundations of citizenship. Of course, the quality of life people lead from different backgrounds may vary considerably in material terms – but that does not necessarily connect with the quality of life experience. There are many ways of living a good life.

Research shows that at the age of fifteen, 82% of young people aspire 'in an ideal world' to obtain professional or managerial jobs, but only 66% believe that this is a realistic ambition. Attaining these goals is only possible for 42% of young people due to the availability of such work. Only 4% of young people consider 'sales, plant and machinery operatives and elementary occupations' as a realistic ambition – but the reality is that 25% of them will end up in such work (see Figure 3).

*There is no convincing evidence to show that less affluent young people lack aspiration and career ambition. On the contrary, research indicates that career ambitions are high, but there are too few places available in the labour market for young people to achieve them.*

Actual opportunities and expectations about access to them are affected by the socio-economic status of young people. Socio economic status is a catch-all statistical indicator to demonstrate patterns of inequality – but does not fully explain the *mechanisms* that reproduce advantage or disadvantage. There are many sources of influence (as shown in Figure 4). The impact of these other factors varies depending upon the ownership of 'social capital' by individuals.

## *A good start in life*

More affluent households tend to ensure that they give their children a leading advantage and navigate their children successfully through the school system. This process does not come without effort or expense. Families often make costly moves to different parts of town to be within the catchment area of the best schools.

*One of the ironies surrounding debates on 'social mobility' is that well-meaning people from the middle classes, who champion the idea of meritocracy, are not generally socially mobile themselves. In fact, the middle classes are very effective at maintaining inter-generational 'class stability.'*

Furthermore, better-off parents know how to get the best from the system because they have confidence and fluency in the language, processes and protocols surrounding formal education. It is not surprising that children from more affluent households in County Durham tend to perform better in terms of the attainment of formal qualifications.

But formal education is not the only factor that contributes towards the maintenance of middle-class children's social class stability. Additionally, money and time is purposefully expended in children's emotional and personal development.

Figure 6 **Factors that affect ambitions**
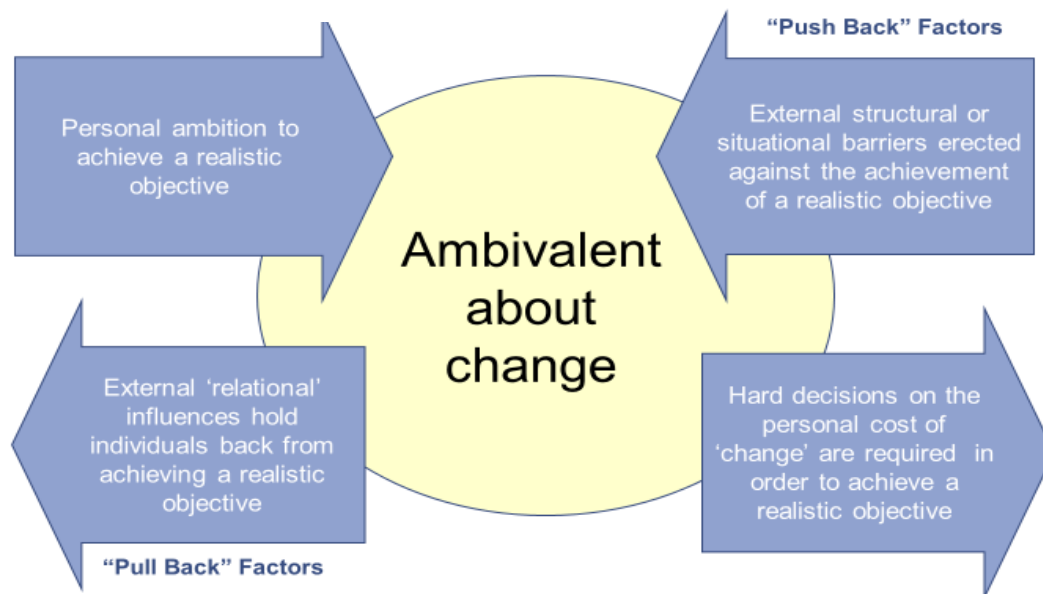


Building social capital is an incremental process where children are exposed to a wide range of opportunities. It is not just a matter of the *accumulation* of experiences, however, it is a question of learning to live with *risk* in a positive way. It is a process of trying new things out, standing up and being counted if something does catch the imagination (by, for example, participating in competitive sport or performing at a concert or play); or 'diplomatically' setting things aside and learning how to choose better opportunities.

Confidence is built through a wide variety of related or unrelated experiences. These experiences must be engaged with under young people's own volition - but where the social and personal cost of failure and disappointment is manageable. These are the kinds of factors which contribute to the growth of young people's internal 'locus of control'.

Young people from less advantaged families and communities have a *longer road to travel* when making successful life transitions than young people from more affluent communities who are already loaded up with social capital (see Figure 5).

Those young people in position C are the easiest to engage because they have already done the emotional work required to take a risk. In position A, by contrast, engagement of young people is very hard to achieve (although very few young people would be likely to be in this position) and would require fundamental support or be strongly challenged to tackle their resistance – and even then, often with mixed or disappointing results.

Many more young people in less advantaged areas are likely to occupy position B where ambivalence about change needs to be tackled. A relatively low internal locus of control coupled with the comfort of being able to blame external realities produces a cocktail of excuses not to take a chance and make a change.

Even when young people have personal ambitions to achieve a realistic objective, they can be suppressed if external barriers 'actually do' or are 'perceived to' block their way. Furthermore, 'relational' factors can conspire to hold young people back from taking positive risks - such as active discouragement from peers or family

members or low expectations of teachers or careers advisors.

Support is therefore needed, from one source or another, to bolster young people's courage to take the difficult personal decision required to achieve what they want. There are no standard solutions: young people must weigh up the opportunity costs of taking one or another course of action which is, in turn, shaped by their assessment of their chances of success and the impact of that success in other domains of their lives.

Less advantaged young people need more support and encouragement to compensate for the more limited investment in the development of their personal assets. If they are more difficult to engage, it is for good reason; but it does not mean that, under the surface, they do not have aspirations and ambitions. It is simply a case of taking more steps along a journey that more affluent young people have already made.

> *When devising policies, strategies and programmes to support young people from less affluent households, too often it is expected that one intervention will sort everything out. And if it fails to succeed, the young person is held to account.*

The steps to achieve successful life transitions are not generally organised in linear pathways. Opportunity structures, personal ambition, drive, luck and serendipity all have a part to play in the direction of travel people take. If young people from affluent families try and fail or just become disinterested in many things on that journey – it remains invisible to the outside world – in truth, it probably goes unnoticed even by themselves – they are 'failing with style' at many things but still moving forward and succeeding with others.

Who can predict which encounter or experience will really make a difference in shaping future ambitions – how could it be possible to predict the defining 'critical moment' that turned the lights on? Then why, when devising policies, strategies and programmes to support young people from less affluent households is it so often expected that one intervention will sort everything out in

one go. And then, if it fails to succeed, it is the young person who is held to account.

# Supporting young people

The extent of support offered to young people in County Durham to make successful transitions to adult life is enormous. The problem is that this support tends to be distributed unevenly.

Organisations which seek to support young people in making successful life transitions tend to be well meaning and ambitious about what they hope to achieve. But because they are often in competition over resources, barriers and boundaries of many kinds can be drawn by organisations which can undermine the opportunities of young people from less affluent households. Boundaries and barriers are created for many reasons including:

### Practice driven boundaries and barriers

Organisations serving the interests of young people are keen to maintain their reputation as viable and effective entities that achieve what they say they can do. The imperative to demonstrate effectiveness, and preserve access to resources, can distract organisations from their primary purpose – to support young people's successful life transitions. The outcome of such practice can manifest itself in some negative ways.

Organisations can become unduly concerned about the worthiness of their approach to practice, which may lead them to believe that they are the *only one* that can achieve certain objectives when this is self-evidently not true. A consequence is that the boundaries between organisations, and especially amongst those which are addressing very similar issues in similar ways, are hardened. Consequently they find it hard to work with each other in positive ways - even when there is no real risk of a detrimental impact on their core activities. Two examples will help to illustrate this argument.

> *Organisations can become unduly concerned about the worthiness of their approach to practice, which may lead them to believe that they are the only one that can achieve certain objectives when this is self-evidently not true.*

Firstly, at key transition points in young people's progression, some educational institutions tend to try to hold young people on certain tracks, rather than allow or encourage them to make informed decisions about their next steps. And so, when decisions are being made about whether to continue on an 'academic route' towards A levels and possibly to university, or to enter vocational training, young people can find that they are subject to quite strong pressures to move in one direction or another.

Secondly, organisations often find it difficult to 'refer' young people to other organisations even though it may benefit them. This may not always, or even usually, be underpinned by a well thought-through policy on the part

of an organisation. But it relates to a failure to appreciate what other organisations do well or to be empathetic about the value of alternative approaches to the delivery of support to young people.

Sometimes this is explained on the basis that the young people they support 'could not cope' with the way another organisation works, or conversely, that the other organisation would not 'understand the needs' of these young people sufficiently well to help them properly. The effect is to block the journeys of young people by giving the impression that the barriers on the path ahead are too difficult to traverse, or worse, do not even let them know that a pathway exists.

### Resource driven boundaries and barriers

All organisations which support the interests of young people must attend to their own financial wellbeing as entities – whether they are based in the education, public, private or third sectors – if they are to do their work successfully. A balancing act must be achieved to ensure that an organisation has the resource, capability and capacity to do its work so as to meet the needs of young people as beneficiaries.

Increasingly, funding is linked to the delivery of measurable outcomes, such as the achievement of academic or vocational qualifications. There is, consequently, a tendency for organisations to focus closely on the enrolment of young people who have a strong likelihood of succeeding – sometimes at the expense of those young people who may not yet have demonstrated their capability sufficiently to achieve such outcomes.

Programmes offered to young people who have a further distance to travel in terms of educational progression, often known as 'alternative' educational provision, stand outside of conventional structures of accreditation (such as GCSEs or NVQs). Consequently, the successful delivery of such programmes may count for little in reputational or financial terms for the organisations which provide them.

We are concerned that many young people in County Durham (as is the case in other areas) get caught up in a churn between low status accredited courses, employ-ability training and low quality work experience pro-grammes from which they find it hard to escape.

Resource issues will always be at the forefront of the minds of people who lead organisations in all sectors. The danger is that this preoccupation with money can distract attention away from an organisations core mission. Funders can inadvertently exacerbate the problem when they push organisations in directions which may not be in the best interests of young people.

### Policy driven boundaries and barriers

As is the case in all local authority areas, there are a lot of policies, strategies and action plans being generated, reviewed or are already in place. Such policies have breadth of vision and, as such, focus on overarching objectives such as health and wellbeing, employability skills and so on.

The big picture objectives may be clear and the overarching strategies which have been devised to achieve them may be coherent. But as they travel through to departments with responsibility for the delivery of specific aspects of these overarching policies, coherence can become clouded by complexity.

Targets, by definition, emphasise the importance of achieving measurable outcomes. Such outcomes may include raising the levels of performance of young people in formal educational qualifications, ensuring that fewer young people are not in employment, education or training for sustained periods of time, and so on. Concentrating resources on measurable outcomes may, many have argued, be to the detriment of 'soft outcomes' (such as the development of personal and social skills, confidence and the acquisition of a stronger internal locus of control, and so on).

A more fundamental problem is that targeting has shifted the focus of policy interventions away from the 'young person' to 'family-centred' interventions. The impetus to target discrete constituencies of young people and/or their families has tended to be driven by a need to tackle identifiable 'problems'.

> *Concentrating resources in a targeted way carries risks as it may limit investment in the potential of those young people who have not come onto the radar of public authorities as being in some sense problematic.*

Whether this amounts to the targeting of need or the necessity to deal with urgent problems is a point of contention. it may be asked, would those agencies which are tasked with tackling such social problems not have had to do this work in any case? There is a risk that the impetus to focus resources in a targeted way may have led to a diminution of investment in the potential of those families or young people who have not come onto the radar of the public authorities as being in some sense problematic?

Targeting need is important, providing that the right people are targeted. It is likely that many young people who need support and could benefit greatly from it are overlooked.

### *Spatially driven boundaries and barriers*

County Durham has a large land mass and its social geography is varied. Some areas are characterised by their affluence while others are amongst the poorest in the country. Many areas which suffer from multiple deprivation in the county share some common characteristics. Young people in less advantaged areas are less likely to achieve as much in life (or not, at least, as quickly) as their counterparts in more affluent areas. In areas which are also spatially isolated, the effect of disadvantage can be aggravated.

Arguments surrounding the 'double jeopardy' isolated and less affluent areas suffer have become somewhat simplified. It is troubling that 'fatalistic' accounts about an area's plight can be self-reinforcing and reproduce patterns of inequality. When 'cultural inertia' takes hold, it

becomes more difficult to challenge negative arguments and to tackle the underlying problems.

When areas, like individuals, suffer the consequences of long-term disadvantage, it is not surprising that they lose a strong 'internal locus of control' – that is, that they do not have the will and ability to have an impact on their own destiny. Instead, areas may adopt an 'external locus of control' where outside forces are 'blamed' for the current situation and until those outsiders 'do something about it' it is not possible to move forward.

> *It is troubling that 'fatalistic' accounts about an area's plight can be self-reinforcing and reproduce patterns of inequality. When 'cultural inertia' takes hold, it becomes more difficult to challenge negative arguments and to tackle the underlying problems.*

The internalisation and reproduction of largely negative attitudes about the opportunities for and life chances of young people within a community is a dangerous thing. It means that young people can be passively or actively discouraged from doing things that may help them in the future.

*Passive discouragement* may result in young people not being alerted to or warned off from possibilities. This might even be done in the best of spirits – 'not to get their hopes up' when it is felt that the likelihood is that they will fail due to 'external forces' beyond their control.

*Active discouragement* can happen when programmes or projects are not offered to young people in isolated areas; or when they are, they give up too easily because problems are deemed to be 'insurmountable'. The danger is that the burden of responsibility for failure is placed on young people, not on the failed method used by practitioners. And when that happens, the likelihood is increased that those offering such projects feel justified in 'washing their hands' with young people in that area.

The consequences for young people in less affluent and spatially isolated areas is self evident. There is too little going on and that produces and reproduces a range of problems which can, in turn, reinforce the view that these problems are endemic and insurmountable.

## Working together effectively

Organisations draw boundaries around their work and erect barriers to complementary working. To some extent, these tendencies are caused by factors largely beyond the control of organisations – such as the way funding organisations operate. It would be naïve to imagine that problems such as these will go away.

Some forms of boundary maintenance, however, are not driven by external factors and it would be beneficial if organisations took time to think about how they interact with each other so that they can work towards shared goals.

Organisations need to learn how to give young people '*fond farewells*' when it is time move on to the next stage – rather than hanging on to them too long, or worse, preparing them badly for or even warning them off from other opportunities.

As young people take steps in new directions they can find this daunting. It is imperative, therefore, that they are '*welcomed well*' by organisations which want to help them.

There are already many partnership groupings within and across the education, public, private and third sectors which support young people's journey towards adulthood. Many of them have endured over time and often seem to work quite well. Some partnerships seem, genuinely, to have been built upon a foundation of trust and reciprocity.

In an ideal world, partnerships (like friendships) should surely be self-generated, consensual, purposeful and self-disciplined entities. But many organisations which 'sign up' to partnership working have misgivings. Technically speaking, partnerships between autonomous organisations are 'voluntary' - but they don't always feel that way.

It is easy to become cynical about partnership working. Perhaps the most common, and in a sense the most damning criticism, is that organisations enter into partnerships because 'it's the only game in town'. This happens across all sectors where 'marriages of convenience' are the only way that organisations can access financial resources or put themselves in positions of influence that may benefit them in some way.

Partnership is a 'warm word', evoking notions of shared interest, mission and cooperative behaviour and is applied to many types of relationships. It is important to draw distinctions between different types of relationship to help charitable foundations, third sector organisations, private sector companies, public sector organisations and educational establishments think more clearly about what kind of roles they are expecting to play and what they might expect of others who participate in such relationships.

- ■ *Contractual relationships*: where funders purchase services from providers. In the field of supporting young people's life transitions, firm contractual relationships are stipulated by funders. Usually the expected achievements of such projects are defined in outcome frameworks which can be measured: such as the number of young people who complete an employability training programme, the percentage of young people who remain in employment after six months, and so on.

  Such contractual relationships are often described in partnership terms, but the reality is that they are not. In a contract, the buyer builds in clauses for recourse if the suppliers fail to deliver. This is not to argue that contractual relationships do not have personal elements – they do.

  Clients and contract delivery organisations work hard to build trust and maintain good day-to-day working relationships. And sometimes this can lead to other things happening such as co-production of another intervention but in a different relationship context.

- ■ *Formal partnership relationships*: where agencies from the same or different sectors work together in a formally constituted relationship to co-produce and deliver specific outcomes, usually on a time-limited basis. Such arrangements are different from simple contractual lets because demands are likely to have been made that partners inject resources of their own through 'match funding' or draw upon resources from their own or other programmes to meet specified objectives.

  In such formal partnerships there may well be a lead or prime partner which holds and distributes the core budget to other organisations or agencies and/or acts as the accountable body for the funder. Holding the purse strings is a powerful tool in shaping the way partnership arrangements manifest themselves. But it also brings responsibilities too – in for example ensuring that evaluation of the programme is effectively undertaken and taking responsibility for the mitigation of risks or rectification of failures.

  There is a danger that the motivation to enter into such partnerships is largely financially driven – rather than by shared interests to serve the needs of young people – and they can feel like marriages of convenience as a consequence.

- ■ *Complementary relationships*: where agencies and organisations from the same or different sectors work towards similar objectives but without formal contract or procedurally binding ties. Several partners may bring money to the table from a range of funding sources or their own reserves, but rarely, and for good reason, will they agree to 'pool' such resources.

  Because the terms of reference such partnerships are defined in less formal ways, they are less likely to be time limited and can allow for participating organisations to step in or step out during the life of the partnership.

  Amongst organisations which seek to support young people in their journey towards adulthood, there are many such arrangements in place. They can, for example, focus on the delivery of complementary services to ensure that young people gain *more* benefit than they would from a single intervention.

  Sometimes they establish common practice principles to ensure that all young people are well catered for even if by different practitioners. In careers education, for example, many educational establishments in the county have signed up to the achievement of common standards and practice principles. In the field of improving young people's employability, there are many complementary and often informal relationships which link together the efforts of schools and colleges, charities, the local authority and employers.

■ *Autonomous working*: where organisations or agencies work towards a social or economic outcome on their own – even if they share common values or objectives held by other organisations. These organisations can further be divided into two categories:

o *Good neighbours*: where organisations are empathetic towards and respectful of the contribution of other organisations and agencies and do not purposefully duplicate or undermine the efforts of others.

Generosity of spirit is required – but within limits, since some reciprocity is expected. In the field of supporting young people's successful life transitions, autonomous intervention is often encouraged by funding agencies who offer grants to, for example, schools, colleges and universities and third sector organisations.

There is a tendency, on the part of funders, to regard these interventions as stand-alone entities with specific outcomes in mind. The reality is that they constitute just a small part in a wider diet of interventions. On the ground, effective organisations consider the benefit their work on such programmes can bring in the *context* of other local interventions.

o *Poor neighbours*: where organisations conflict and/or compete, intentionally or otherwise and undermine the achievement of shared objectives which all parties claim to support. Often, in the field of helping young people to make successful life transitions, organisations claim that they are 'driven' into direct conflict with other organisations as they compete for funding to maintain their own programme.

Sometimes the impetus comes from external bodies – such as is the case with the National Citizen Service - which land in an area with little regard for local consequences. This may, for example, result in competition to recruit (or poach) young people to a programme or unnecessary duplication of existing provision – so producing argument and rancour about the quality or efficacy of other organisations' provision.

Good neighbours are usually empathetic about what is going on around them – but poor neighbours can be empathetic too – and use this purposefully to undermine the efforts of other providers.

These categories are not mutually exclusive. Larger organisations, and even some smaller ones, can and do engage in *all* of these kinds of contracts, partnership, complementary or autonomous working relationships at a moment in time – depending upon their interests and objectives. But organisations (whether they are situated in the education, public, private or third sector) need to keep these distinctions in mind when considering how they are thinking about the strengths of their current relationships or when they want to develop new ones.

Indeed, the implicit incoherence of most inter-organisational relationships should not be regarded as a problem. Instead, we argue that funding bodies, policy makers and practitioners should learn how to value '*the strength of weak ties*' between organisations and agencies rather than trying to nail everything down strategically, structurally and procedurally.

> *Talking, listening, watching, learning, understanding and then trying things out together are important aspects of building trust and reciprocity in partnerships – so why, then, build complex and rigid structures which undermine the prospect of this happening?*

Individual organisations and agencies cannot achieve everything they want to for young people on their own. Many organisations attend to the interests of constituencies of young people in different ways. It is not always necessary to nail things down procedurally or contractually.

Weak contractual or procedural ties between organisations can make relationships stronger and more productive because they are based on shared beliefs about what needs to be done, but without compromising the autonomy of individual organisations. As such they operate where trust and reciprocity are built into day-to-day interactions and they are more likely to be durable while remaining flexible in the sense that other organisations can step in and step out of informal arrangements if it suits them to do so.

Good relationships, in any aspect of social life, rely on trust and reciprocity – not compliance or constraint. Trust and reciprocity is built through interaction – by getting to know more about what someone else is doing, why, and how this makes a positive difference (even if such practices are quite different from, or even alien to those of their own organisation).

Empathic understanding is a difficult thing to achieve – but it is a good thing to aspire to. And to get that understanding, interaction is necessary. Talking, listening, watching, learning, understanding and then trying things out together are important aspects of building trust and reciprocity – as everyone knows – so why, then, build complex and rigid structures which undermine the prospect of this happening?

# Putting ideas into action

## Thinking about what needs to be done?

There are examples of effective practice to ameliorate the consequences of young people's personal, social and economic disadvantage by organisations in education, public, private and third sectors. But supporting young people is not an individual organisational endeavour in County Durham – it is a collective responsibility.

There are many productive partnership, collaborative and complementary arrangements in place which have built momentum over the years. These configurations of support are not failing or broken – but they could do better and there should be more of this happening.

And organisations which support young people *want* to do more: there is no shortage of ambition. But this can, in turn, cause some problems at an organisational level. Everyone is chasing after money, making claims that what they can do is the best way of doing things, and many are even competing over young people upon whom to implement their practice.

The outcome of this incessant competition can be negative for organisations and especially so for young people. It is not easy to do much about that because such organisations enjoy a measure of autonomy and can choose to do things their own way. But we must try to think of ways of alleviating that pressure where we can.

> *Outcome frameworks need to be realistic, proximate and achievable. If they are not, the likelihood is that inequalities in achievement will be compounded, not tackled.*

Funders of programmes which seek to assist young people who need support have a role to play in this process. Too often the ambition of funders to achieve change is poorly directed or its expectations are disproportionate. If funders routinely ask that more can be achieved than is practicable – we have a problem.

If the desired outcomes of programmes are disprop- ortionate and can only be met by the most capable (who might achieve them in any case without additional help of the intervention) this leaches support from those who need it most. Outcome frameworks need to be proximate and achievable. If they are not, the likelihood is that inequalities in achievement will be compounded, not tackled.

There is a tendency amongst some organisations to 'over claim' what they can achieve. When organisations win resources on the basis of a claim that they have 'universal' reach, but cannot or do not want to achieve this, they are *by default* doing young people who have the greatest need a disservice. Organisations need to be more honest about the limits of what they can do. And funders need to be more alert to claims about reach and ask for evidence that what is promised can be done.

We don't want organisations to stop being ambitious – but we do ask that objectives should be *realistic* and *proximate* so that young people can recognise that they have achieved tangible gains in their confidence and capability. Calls for 'transformational change' often cause more problems than they are worth if the bar is set too high. For some young people, a small step forward (which might look pitifully 'insignificant' to others) can represent a life-changing triumph. Funders and practitioners need to learn how to value that which *has* value.

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## Light bulb moments

The factors that cause transformational change, the 'light bulb moments' are often hard to identify – by the funder, the practitioner or, indeed, the young person. Often academics refer to 'critical moments' which cause change in people's lives. Sometimes these moments are immediate, transformative but can also be also shocking and debilitating. Immediacy is, arguably, more commonly associated with disasters than triumphs. Most triumphs are achieved after a slow burn.

For example, on the sports field, in the concert room or the examination hall – great achievements can be demonstrated that conceal all the work that was required to do them with what looks like relative ease. The background work can only be done if a generally supportive environment is available – such as having a quiet and conducive environment within which to work, having the right kit to do the job, having access to specialised tutoring and coaching, and so on. All these things are costly in emotional and financial terms.

The point is that the impact of 'light bulb moments', when a person's capability and potential is fully felt and leads to concerted effort to achieve something, are not necessarily immediate or predicable. Indeed, the utility of light bulb moments might not be recognised for months, years or even decades - when suddenly their relevance hits home. The point is that many seeds need to be sewn to guarantee a good harvest. Not just one. No one organisation can do it all – many hands are needed.

The final reason why calls for 'transformation' need to be made with care is that 'change' is hard on the body and on the mind. It disturbs the equilibrium with family, friends, intimate partners, neighbours and potentially, whole communities. Consequently, young people sometimes resist change if they feel that the potential benefit is far outweighed by the risk. This is why the middle classes put so much resource and effort into maintaining the equilibrium. So why do policy makers and practitioners routinely demand that less advantaged young people achieve something that they would not expect from their own children?

There are good reasons why young people from less advantaged communities resist elements of change. Sometimes this can be a good thing, pride and

association with people and place is surely something to be valued? But on other occasions, resistance to change needs to be challenged and additional help is needed to overcome those factors that *hold young people back* or *push them back* from achieving what *they want to do*.

> *Less advantaged young people may resist change if they feel that the benefit is outweighed by the risk. This is why the middle classes put so much effort into maintaining the equilibrium for their children so that risk is more easily managed.*

Of course, there are always exceptions. Some young people will progress towards their aim irrespective of personal or social cost. Often in the national political arena of Parliament and think tanks, high achievers are celebrated for having 'escaped' from their origins and are taken as grand examples of what could be achieved by others in their cadre if they had big enough ambitions and put in a bit more effort. Many national politicians from all parties currently love the idea of long-range social mobility, but the reality is that this is not a popular sport – not at least when people are very young.

The attendant danger of lionising long-range social mobility is that those who are 'left behind' are relegated to a second division – and this is used to further denigrate their security and social status by lowering wages, reducing the quality of work and limiting investment in their communities.

The game is not all over at the age of 18, 21 or 25. Many people recognise their attributes later in life and embrace change when they are ready. Irrespective of their starting point, this can happen, including people from the middle classes who were trammelled into careers they grew to hate at the expense of other ambitions they purposefully concealed from significant others.

People from less affluent backgrounds are more likely to be pushed back or pulled back from achieving their ambitions when they are young. Levelling the playing field is not easy– but that does not mean that all problems are insurmountable. We have argued that there is no simple solution that can be delivered by one party. Instead, we say that working collectively from many directions and in a variety of ways to attack problems will help – but rather than taking that as read – we now need to think about how we might go about that task in County Durham.

Funders and providers of services in County Durham need to be prepared to challenge themselves and each other about the aims, scope and location of interventions. This is not an easy thing to do. When funding bodies are situated outside of County Durham, they should be challenged too in well-constructed bids. But if such funders are not likely to be responsive to such challenges, then hard questions need to be asked – is this actually worth doing? And bravery needs to be marshalled to refuse opportunities that may benefit individual organisations but do little for young people.

When resources are limited, targeting those young people who are in the greatest need of support makes sense. But this raises big questions about 'need'. Targets have tended to skew interventions away from those who may benefit from support by focusing on 'acute' or 'urgent' issues that would have to be attended to in any case (and therefore it is not targeting as such). At present, many young people are under the radar of targets and as a consequence they are not getting proper attention and are not succeeding as well as they might.

## Talking it over

Many organisations in County Durham work comfortably with others for reasons that benefit young people and also serve their own organisational interests well. This is good practice providing that these interests are balanced. But there's not enough of it going on at the moment because organisations do not know enough about other good practice that is happening around them – or more worryingly, they are suspicious or disparaging of the practice of others.

The county needs to have an open-minded debate on what works well for young people of different circumstance and at different stages in their journey towards adulthood. This is important because it will help organisations to bid young people *fond farewells* when they are ready to move on to the next thing and ensure a *good welcome* when they arrive at a new location.

> *A problem with all this talk about low aspirations is that success stories often communicate a negative message – that what has been achieved has been 'against all odds' – when in fact that might not be the case.*

Most organisations can tell when they have genuinely made a difference to young people's lives and they are quite good at explaining this when asked. A problem with all this talk about low aspirations is that success stories often communicate a negative message – that what has been achieved has been 'against all odds' – when in fact that might not be the case.

This reproduces a notion that 'success' is something reserved only for a tiny minority. Indeed, such negativity sometimes takes hold in whole areas – where a presumption is made by several organisations working in an area that there are insurmountable problems which cannot be overcome.

We should be under no illusions about how hard it can be to help young people who are adept at resisting new things. But if resistance is what organisations encounter should they not then be asking, did we do the right thing, was it in the right place and time, should we have taken it to them, or brought them in to make them do it?

Organisations looking after the interests of more affluent young people have no compunction about asking such questions - so why should it be different for the less advantaged? Narratives about low aspirations can result in organisations collectively averting their attention from some areas on the 'justifiable' explanation that 'we tried, but nothing can be done'.

This negativity has to stop. There is *no* area in County Durham where young people do not, privately at least, feel confident about their abilities, and hold aspirations and ambitions. The problem is that pull-back and push-back factors dissuade them from raising their heads

above the parapet and making it known that they need help to take the risks to achieve what they want.

It is hard for young people to talk about their ambition when there is so much noise around to quell that discussion – and further, young people too often start to incorporate those negative messages into the way they talk about their own opportunities.

Collectively, organisations need to work harder to stop reproducing the narratives that limit the success of what they want to achieve for young people. Young people in County Durham do not lack aspiration – but they all have difficulty in framing and effecting ambitions – and need help with that. Some young people are awash with help while for others there is a dearth of support. So, it is no wonder that outcomes are different.

> *It is hard for young people to talk about their ambition when there is so much noise around to quell that discussion – sometimes it is easier to communicate negative messages when they talk about their own opportunities.*

We have said little in this report that is not already known. But what we 'know' can sometimes be knocked to one side by difficult day-to-day pressures. This can lead us to succumb to the temptation to reach for simple explanations. At root, policy makers and practitioners, from every sector, broadly agree about what they want to do for young people. It is in everyone's interest that young people make successful life transitions.

By rearranging ideas in new ways, we hope this report will help people to set aside popular and easy-to-use, but false narratives about young people's lack of aspirations and start to talk to each other more openly and freely. This, we hope, will help everyone to pursue their shared goals more effectively.

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**The full report is available at this web address**:

https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/research-news/building-employability-young-people-county-durham/

# Notes

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