

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

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There are plenty of good things going on for young people in County Durham

Young people in County Durham are doing pretty well when compared with national averages or similar places in the UK.

We should not be defensive about our policies and practices – in the right locations things generally work very well.

There is no shortage of ambition in County Durham – policies are well thought out and practices are well planned and achieve what was intended

So we must not be glum today as if problems are ‘insurmountable’ – we need to leave the room feeling positive and able to make more of a difference

But we must recognise that support falls unevenly – some young people are awash with help but for others there is very little.

“Popular narratives” about successful life transitions

The terminology we use is often muddled – so we need to clarify what we mean by:

- **‘aspirations’ and ‘ambition’,**
- **‘attainment’ and ‘achievement’,**
- **‘attitudes’ and ‘behaviour’.**

And we have to remember that it’s not all up to young people – some things are beyond their control.

Factors affecting successful life transitions

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



Personal 'agency'

'Structural constraint'

What counts as “success” in life?

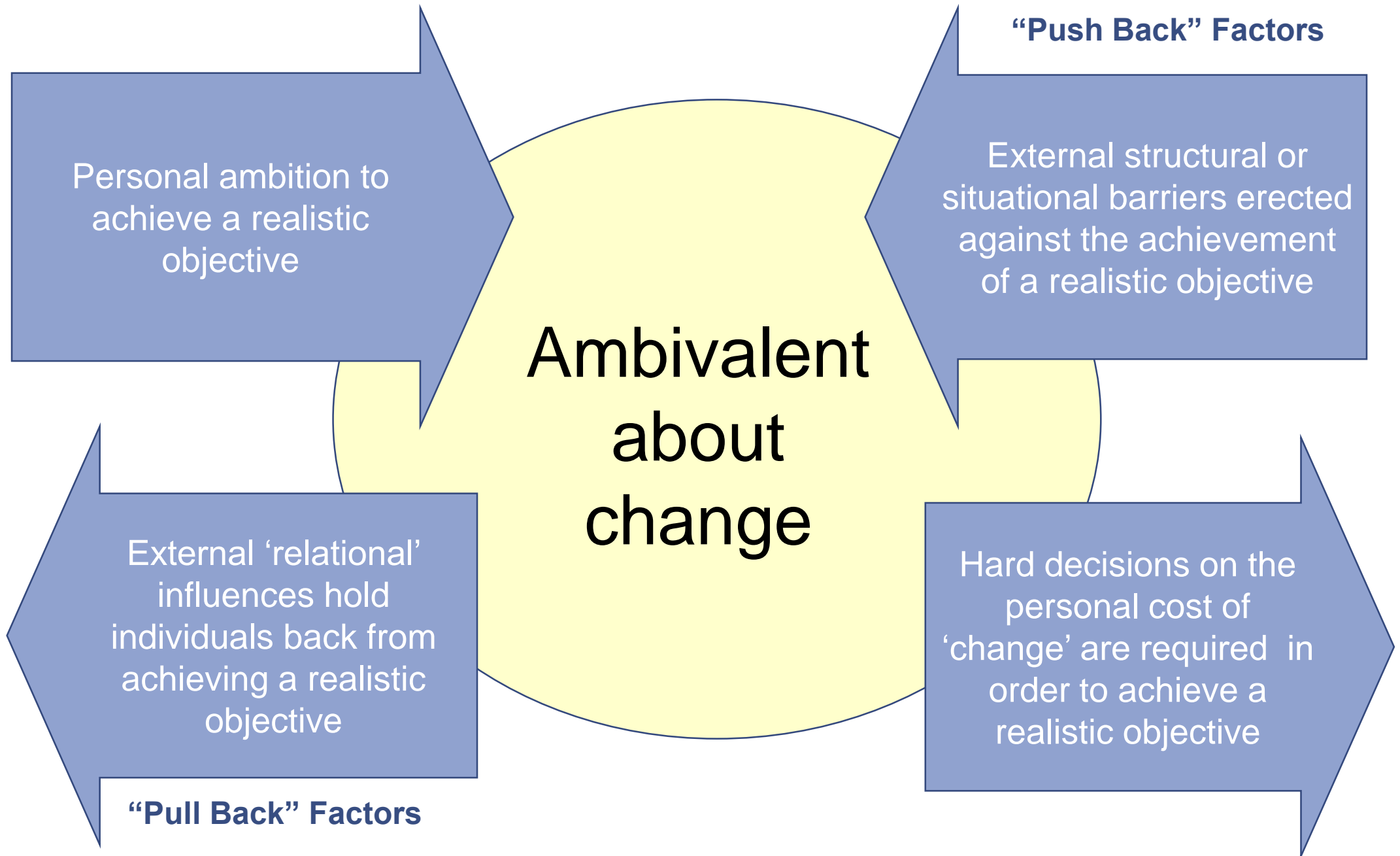
It is important not to ‘impose’ uniform judgements on what success means – such as going to a “top university”.

Young people from different ‘starting points’ do not necessarily share the same objectives.

People ‘change’ their ambitions over time – it’s not all over at 16, 18, 21 or 25.

Asking, expecting or demanding that young people make dramatic changes in their lives in order to be ‘successful’ can be unfair, unrealistic and often unattractive options.

Often young people are ‘ambivalent’ about choices – for good reason.

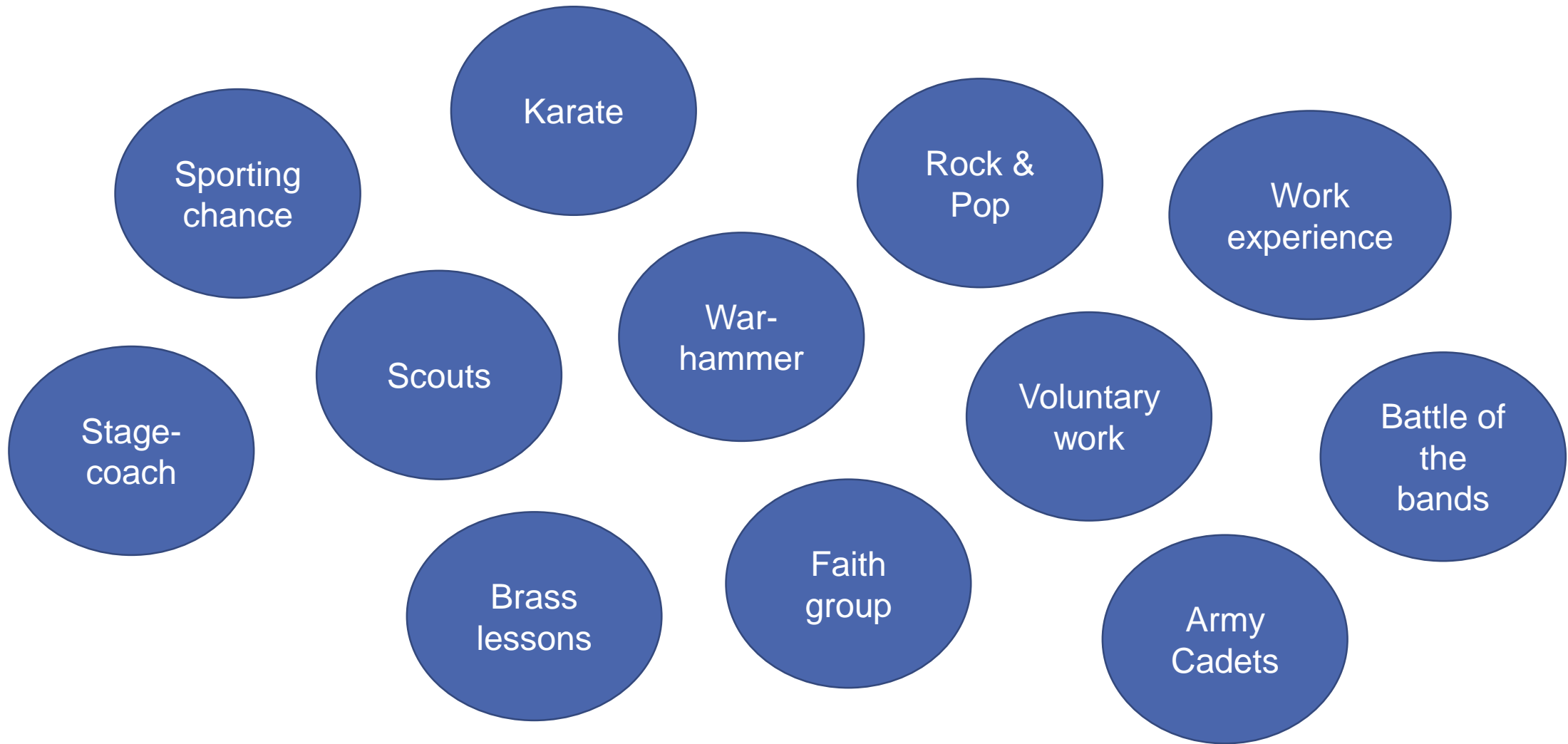


The importance of personal assets

- To be ‘successful’ in achieving their ambitions, young people need to have a strong ‘**internal locus of control**’ rather than relying only on ‘fate’ or ‘luck’.
- Young people with large stocks of ‘**social, cultural and economic capital**’ tend to be more successful in formal education and the job market.
- We know that ownership of social capital and a strong internal locus of control is empowering. So where do you get it from?
- **Success is, to a large extent, reliant on taking risks and managing failure – in more affluent households this is ‘learned’ through experience**

Supporting young people

Failing with style...?



A cost-benefit analysis of investment in social capital in 'affluent' households would signify more 'failure' than 'success'?

Less advantaged young people don't have so many opportunities

- With household money much tighter, cost benefit analysis is more strictly observed – ‘wasting’ money is a problem.
- When there is insufficient money, young people feel they cannot participate – and might not even ask.
- With lower stocks of social capital – it becomes easier for young people not to contemplate possibilities?
- Push and pull factors can dissuade young people from achieving (or seriously contemplating) what they want.

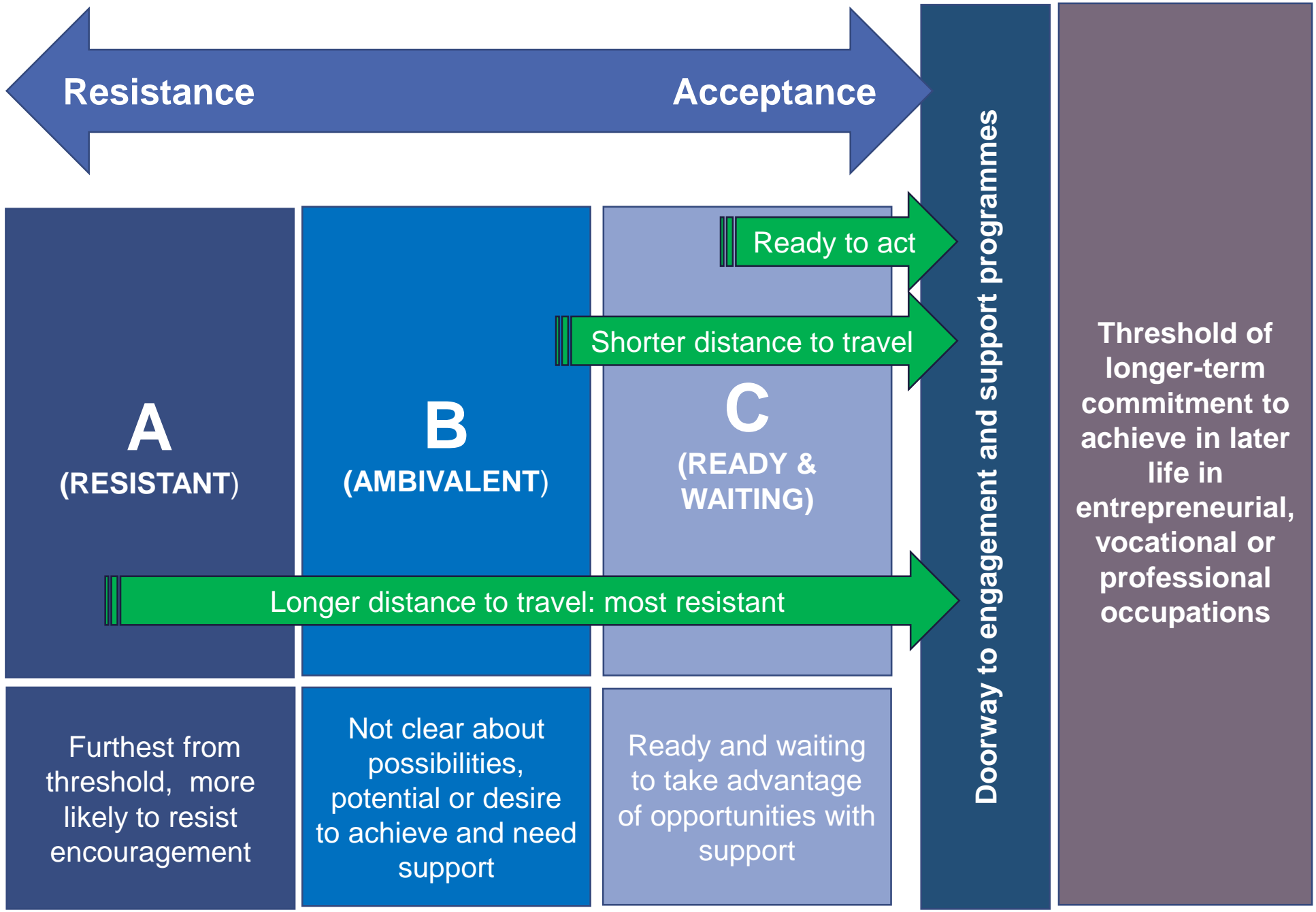
Often, too much store is set on the limited opportunities less advantaged young people do have – and if they do not ‘succeed’ they are held to account.

Stuck in the middle

- Ambivalence about change is increased if push-back and pull-back factors are strong.
- When observing young people it is too easy to misinterpret ambivalence as ‘disinterest’ or ‘low aspirations’.
- We don’t know what is going on in young people’s heads. They only offer us insights into what they feel they can reveal.
- Young people have only one way to go – forward – so they think about the future all the time – however ‘fantastical’ or ‘unambitious’ it may sound to outsiders.
- There’s nothing wrong with their aspirations, in most cases, it’s devising and effecting realistic ambitions that is the hard part.

Funders of interventions to help less advantaged young people must keep these points in focus if they are to succeed.

Making a difference through policy and practice



Doorways and thresholds

- Interventions that merely ‘attend’ to the interests of young people rarely seem to work very well.
- Getting young people through the door and sitting them down might be ‘countable’, but it might not count for much in terms of impact.
- Concentrating on the ‘most willing’ is tempting – but it can be at the expense of other capable people.
- Changing attitudes: building confidence, embracing change, taking positive risks – these are all hard things to do.
- Young people need to feel empowered to cross the threshold of change – but this is a difficult thing for practitioners to achieve in one project.

Many seeds must be sewn to guarantee a good harvest

Know the difference between 'attainment' and 'achievement'

- Journeys of change are harder for some than others - affluence makes the journey easier.
- For some young people, '**small steps**' forward represent '**giant leaps**' in cultural and progression terms.
- '**Critical moments**' that 'turn the lights on' are hard to predict by outsiders or even recognise by individuals until usefulness manifests itself.
- '**Gold standards**' of attainment (for example 5 strong GCSEs, A levels, university entry) to define success can be destructive in narrative terms if they are 'out of reach'.

**Organisations can't achieve
everything on their own**

Is the whole worth more than the sum of the parts?

- There are many good examples of ‘partnership working’ across the County, some responsive to political decisions & funding streams, while others are more ‘organic’.
- Providers are relatively **autonomous**, have their own values and missions and practice in preferred ways – this will not change.
- They tend to be in **competition** with each other in terms of values, resources and sometimes the supply of young people – this will not change either.
- This often results in ‘**barriers**’ growing between organisations

These organisational barriers are not helpful to young people

- **Practice barriers:** where organisations commit to their way of working.
- **Resource barriers:** where financial issues shape decisions about practice.
- **Policy barriers:** where young people who need support fall off the radar.
- **Spatial barriers:** where young people are 'encouraged' to lower their expectations.

Things to bear in mind in our discussions this afternoon when playing your part

- Understanding what 'proximate', 'realistic' and 'attractive' ambitions are for the young people you want to work with.
- Knowing who you want to support – few organisations can support all young people equally well – and if you want to extend to others - **welcome them well**
- Know the **limits** of what you can achieve – don't claim more than can be done.
- Learn about the work of other organisations which may do some things better than you and be prepared to bid **fond farewells** to the young people you could only help 'so far' along their road.

What we are going to do in the table discussions

(let's not talk about needing more money!)

First, we need to tune up our empathy. Think of a story from your young life about someone who 'helped' or 'hindered' you when making a decision about your future – and be willing to tell the person next to you on your table!).

Then talk about these questions:

- **What could you, or your organisation, do differently to help children or young people identify what they want to achieve in their lives?**
- **Once they have identified what they would like to achieve, what can you, or your organisation, do differently to support the children or young people to achieve these ambitions?**

Each table needs to present two ideas to increase 'complementary' working. The panel can then debate how to give more support to those young people who are not getting all the help they need now.



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