



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

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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.

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# 1

## 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 and in complementary ways on those young people who are most in need of support.

### ***Supporting young people***

Undoubtedly, some young people are difficult to help. It is not hard to find examples of young people who appear to be obdurate or disruptive if one is looking out for them. A small minority can have a pernicious influence on the behaviours (but not necessarily the attitudes) of others around them. This may lead some young people to refuse help or spurn opportunities.

The burden of blame is too readily laid on the shoulders of young people. Too often we have heard practitioners say, 'even when we put something on for them, they won't come'. But rather than using this as an excuse to write off, some young people - should the nature, purpose and quality of that help be reappraised?

Fatalism can infect debates about what to do – as if problems are so engrained that they are insurmountable. This can result in energy and attention being directed elsewhere – to those young people who have a better chance of success.

Policies and practices to support young people claim to be based on concrete evidence rather than common-sense stereotypes or prejudices. But where is the concrete evidence to show that a significant proportion of young people

**Fatalism can infect debates about what to do – as if problems are so complex and engrained that they are insurmountable. This can result in energy and attention 'justifiably' being directed elsewhere.**

have low aspirations?<sup>1</sup> Have they been *asked* about this, would they be able or willing to *articulate* their views if they were asked, or has it just been *assumed*?

This report raises some challenging questions about how assumptions about young people's potential emerge and shows how commonly held principles about what constitutes 'success' seep into policy and practice and frame opportunities.

When statistics show that fewer young people from less advantaged backgrounds go to 'top universities' produce alarmist headlines about blockages to social mobility – does this tell us more about the people who write such stories than the young people who did not go?<sup>2</sup>

Too often it is the young person who is thought to be at fault, because they are presumed to lack aspiration and ambition. This report shows that there is scant evidence to back up that argument. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that most young people do not feel that they lack ability or that they are failing to fulfil their potential – irrespective of whether they are from a more or less advantaged background.

But this does not mean that everyone wants to achieve the same things. There are many ways of living a good life – if society allows that to happen by respecting people for their choices and contribution in any area of activity. Furthermore, it should be remembered that aspirations and ambitions change through the life course – the die is not cast by the age of 18 or 25. Potential may be realised, for good reason, much later by some than others.

This report has been written primarily for people in positions of influence to reconsider the way they frame policies and practices surrounding young people. But it also recognises that families and communities have a big part to play in the way that young people's lives turn out.

**If communities fail to believe in what they can achieve for themselves, even when against the odds, they will fail their children and young people.**

Affluent households and communities are particularly well served when it comes to the promotion of the interests of their children. This means that the odds can be stacked against young people from less advantaged communities and households.

Levelling the playing field is not easy. And it is understandable that people in less advantaged communities can be resentful about imbalances in access to resources of good quality education and employment. But we warn against cultural inertia – where communities adopt defeatist language and in so doing cement 'outsiders' beliefs about the difficulties of effecting change.

<sup>1</sup> There is great deal of evidence to show that the majority of young people's aspirations are secure, but that their attitudes about achieving their ambitions are strongly shaped by issues surrounding the socio-economic and place locations of their families. Negative assumptions about young people's lack of aspiration or separation from mainstream society were popularised by Charles Murray in the 1980s with his assertions about the existence of an 'underclass'. These assertions have been widely discredited in the academic literature. For more recent academic research findings see, for example: Kintrea, K, St Clair, K. and Houston, M. (2015) 'Shaped by place? Young people's aspirations in disadvantaged neighbourhoods', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(5), 666-684; Evans, C. (2016) 'Moving away or staying local? The role of locality in young people's 'spatial horizons' and career aspirations', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(4), 501-516; Campbell, L. and McKendrick, J. (2017) 'Beyond aspirations: deploying the capability approach to tackle under-representation in higher education of young people from deprived communities', *Studies in Contemporary Education*, 39(2), 120-127; Brown, G. (2011) 'Emotional geographies of young people's aspirations for adult life', *Children's Geographies*, 9(1), 7-22; Grant, T. (2017) 'The complexity of aspiration: the role of hope and habitus in shaping working-class young people's aspirations to higher education', *Children's Geographies*, 15(3), 289-303.

<sup>2</sup> There has been much debate in recent years on 'social mobility' in political circles in response to a growing concern that young people may not be able to match the successes of their parents, as is exemplified by the work of the Social Mobility Commission, see: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/662744/State\\_of\\_the\\_Nation\\_2017\\_-\\_Social\\_Mobility\\_in\\_Great\\_Britain.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf). While there has been much argument, most political commentators take it for granted that the only way is 'up' (which is not true because there are not enough opportunities for this to happen and there is a great deal of 'downward intergenerational social mobility') and secondly that, irrespective of a person's origins, 'long range' mobility is the most valuable indicator or progression (such as to be enrolled at a 'Russell Group' university and be propelled into a professional career). Such arguments can be socially destructive if it results in people who are not *able* to be socially mobile or do not *want* to be socially mobile are castigated because they are not prepared to 'reach high'. For recent critiques of these debates see: Lawler, S. and Payne, G. (2018) *Social Mobility for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: everyone a winner?* London: Routledge; and Payne, G. (2017) *The New Social Mobility*, Bristol: Policy Press.

We take a firm view on this, if communities fail to believe in what they can achieve for themselves, even when against the odds, they too are failing their children and young people.

### ***The scope and structure of the report***

The purpose of this report is to improve understanding about how young people in County Durham make successful transitions to adulthood. Unlike most research on such issues, this project was not confined to the study of a single domain of policy, just one practice intervention or to a discrete category of young people.

Instead, its purpose was to examine a wide range of policies and practices which affect all young people in County Durham. In so doing, it aims to assess the collective contribution of organisations and agencies from across the public, education, private and voluntary sectors.

There is a lot going on, so it is hardly surprising that people in the business of supporting young people to make successful life transitions cannot always see the wood for the trees. County Durham, as is the case elsewhere, is awash with statistical analyses, policies, strategies and practice interventions that are directed towards young people.

These have been generated by an enormous number of organisations including: the European Union, national government departments, political parties and think tanks; Durham County Council; health, police, probation, fire and ambulance services; schools, colleges and universities; private sector businesses; regional agencies concerned with business, transport, skills and economic regeneration; faith organisations; and, hundreds of national, regional and local charities and social enterprises which seek to support or promote the interests of young people in one way or another.

We do not intend to drown readers in detail – nor, indeed, to claim that we have complete command of all the intricacies. Instead, the purpose of the exercise is to provide some relatively simple statements on what we think is going on, why things happen as they do, and what the consequences are – particularly for those young people who haven't had the best start in life.

With less advantaged<sup>3</sup> young people in mind, we will then make some observations on what may need to happen if policy makers, strategists and practitioners are to achieve more than they currently do for the young people they need to support.

The report is divided into five parts.

- ***What's happening in County Durham?*** Provides a brief portrait of the county and overview of the current situation facing young people in relation to educational performance and employment outcomes. In addition, we provide a substantive analysis of the County Durham Student Voice survey to assess the extent to which young people's attitudes vary according to their relative level of affluence.
- ***What are successful life transitions?*** This section considers at an empirical and theoretical level, what is understood by a successful life transition, and how some young people's ability to achieve such transitions are limited.
- ***What support do young people get?*** In this section we outline the principal sources of support that are available to young people across

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<sup>3</sup> In this report, we have purposefully avoided using the term 'disadvantaged' which has accumulated pejorative undertones. To do so, as will be explained in more detail later in the report, encourages policy makers and practitioners to look at young people's lives in a polarised way. Except when referring specifically to terminology surrounding, for example, the indices of multiple deprivation, we instead adopt the terms 'more advantaged' and 'less advantaged' throughout the report.

the county. This is followed by a critical examination of the support provided and we explain why it may be distributed unevenly between more and less affluent young people.

- ***Working together in new ways.*** The purpose of this section is to show how relationships between organisations can be improved through a discussion of differing configurations of contractual, partnership, complementary and autonomous working.
- ***Putting ideas into action?*** The concluding section summarises the main findings from the previous sections and then offers some ideas for organisations supporting young people in County Durham to fuel further debate on what needs to be done.

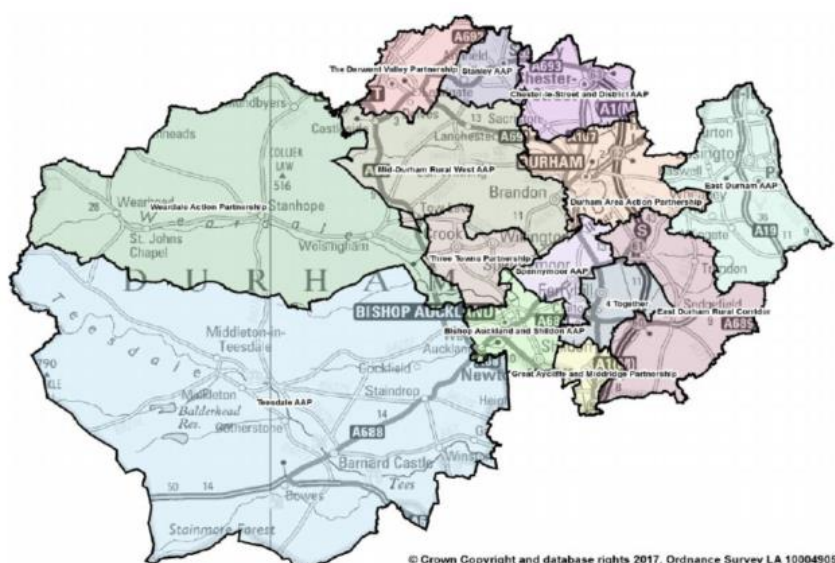


## Young people in County Durham

Spatially the area is varied, with predominantly rural areas to the west of the county while urban areas are situated mainly to the east. Many settlements in rural County Durham have industrial origins, predominantly as former pit villages. There are also many rural settlements with a stronger agricultural economic base.

Urban areas vary in their characteristics from older industrial towns dominated mainly by mining and heavy engineering to 'new towns' established as manufacturing areas in the mid-twentieth century. To the north of the county, urban areas have more residential characteristics, serving as a commuter belt for the metropolitan area of Tyneside. Durham City, at the heart of the county, by contrast, is dominated by service industries, public and health sector organisations and its university.

### Districts of County Durham<sup>5</sup>



Headline statistics for County Durham suggest broad similarity on many measures with UK averages. However, the county is quite varied in terms of the economic, social and spatial characteristics of its districts.

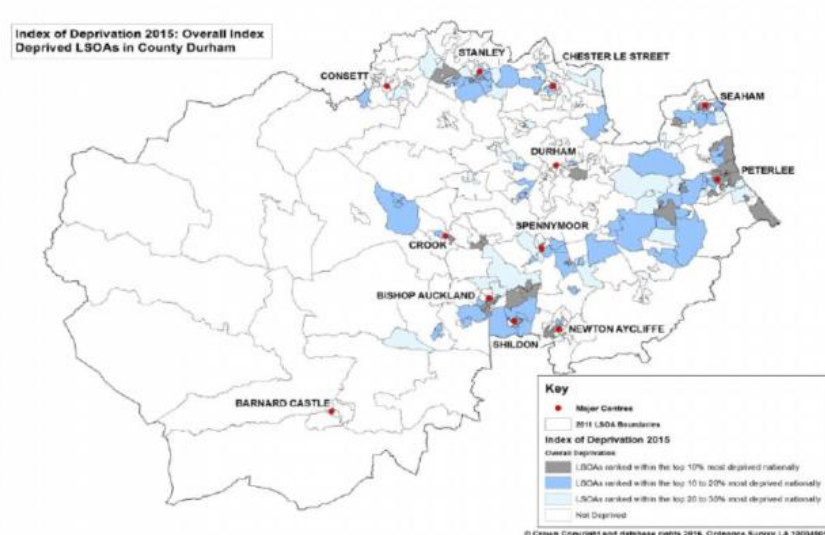
<sup>4</sup> Office of National Statistics:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

<sup>5</sup> These districts are defined as Area Action Partnerships in County Durham. Durham County Council (2017) *Statistical Profile of County Durham*, Durham: Durham County Council, p. 1. [http://www.countydurhampartnership.co.uk/media/22690/County-Durham-Profile-2017/pdf/County\\_Durham\\_Profile\\_2017.pdf](http://www.countydurhampartnership.co.uk/media/22690/County-Durham-Profile-2017/pdf/County_Durham_Profile_2017.pdf)

As Figure 2.2 indicates, there are concentrations of relatively deep economic deprivation in parts of County Durham – focused mainly in former mining and heavy industrial areas.

Figure 2.2 **Areas of social and economic deprivation in County Durham<sup>6</sup>**



Statistical overviews and detailed assessments of the situation of young people in County Durham are widely available and are regularly updated so it is not necessary here to produce a detailed review. However, it is useful to provide an outline of key indicators to assist in the interpretation of findings from the research project. Indicators are presented on educational participation and achievement, and employment.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Educational participation and achievement***

The proportion of children at the Early Years Foundation Stage achieving a good level of development in County Durham is 69% compared with 69.3% nationally and 68.4% for the county's nearest statistical neighbours.

For achievement of the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics, the gap between disadvantaged children and the county average is -16%, better than the national average of -22% or -23% of the nearest statistical neighbours.

Drawing upon Ofsted data, it is evident that 92% of primary schools in the county are rated as 'outstanding' or 'good'. However, only 65% of secondary schools achieved this ranking (compared with 79% nationally, and 67% of the county's nearest 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 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). Looked After Children have an Attainment 8

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> All data are sourced from County Durham Partnership Highlights Report, quarter one, 2017-18 unless otherwise specified.

score of 31.3, 17.9 points lower than the county average (although much better than the national average of 22.8).

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).

## Employment and job prospects

71.5% (n=231,600) of the working age population of County Durham were in employment in 2016-17, lower than the England and Wales average of 74.4%. 75.3% of working age males and 67.8% of working age females were employed. The proportion of the population working in the private sector (79%) is similar to that of England and Wales (78.6%).

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%). However, 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 such variations are disappointing and require action to rectify anomalies, it needs to be recognised that they are not *radical* differences.

Routes to vocational education have been facilitated to a greater extent by apprenticeships. 4.2% of the 16+ population in County Durham were educated to apprenticeship level, (North East: 4.7%, England & Wales: 3.6%).<sup>8</sup> The number of apprenticeship starts has increased substantially over the last decade from 2,550 in 2005/6 to 8,380 in 2015/16.<sup>9</sup>

As will be discussed later in the report, it is important not to confuse *correlations* between social and economic deprivation and personal destinations with notions of direct or irreversible *causation*. To do that can lead observers to assume that the conditions less affluent young people face can make them different from others in some fundamental way. This in turn can result in beliefs emerging that their needs and ways of meeting them are different too.

To position less affluent young people as one 'category' and affluent young people as another, as if they were 'poles apart', is inappropriate. It is better to recognise that they sit in different positions across a spectrum of indicators – rather than at either end of a fixed continuum.

To see less advantaged young people as 'different' must be challenged. A good way of doing this, is to look at how young people from more or less advantaged backgrounds view themselves.

To position less affluent young people as one 'category' and affluent young people as another, as if they were 'poles apart', is inappropriate. It is better to recognise that they sit in different positions across a spectrum of indicators – rather than at either end of a fixed continuum.

<sup>8</sup> County Durham 2017 Statistical Profile, p. 24: [http://www.countydurhampartnership.co.uk/media/22690/County-Durham-Profile-2017/pdf/County\\_Durham\\_Profile\\_2017.pdf](http://www.countydurhampartnership.co.uk/media/22690/County-Durham-Profile-2017/pdf/County_Durham_Profile_2017.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> FE Data Library: Apprenticeship Starts: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-apprenticeships#apprenticeship-starts-and-achievements> (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2018).

## ***The County Durham Student Voice Survey***

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 survey were re-analysed for this report to examine in more detail differences in the attitudes and expectations of young people who were from less advantaged backgrounds (as defined by entitlement to free school meals).<sup>10</sup>

The survey findings confirm the view that for the most part, 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.

To position less advantaged young people as being 'different' is therefore not appropriate, although their 'outcomes' do vary quite considerably in terms of credentials, further study and career destinations.

Teasing out what contributes to different life transitions and employment destinations is, therefore, a complex matter which involves investigation and analysis of structural, situational, relational and personal differences.

Re-analysis of the Student Voice Surveys help to show that there is much more 'similarity' than 'difference' between less advantaged young people (as defined by those who are eligible for free school meals) and young people from more affluent households.

### ***Subject choice***

Figure 2.3 shows which subject areas are most or least likely to be populated by young people from less affluent households. In subject areas above the red line, less advantaged students are under-represented, below the line they are over-represented. It is evident that young people from less advantaged households are more strongly represented in vocational areas of study.

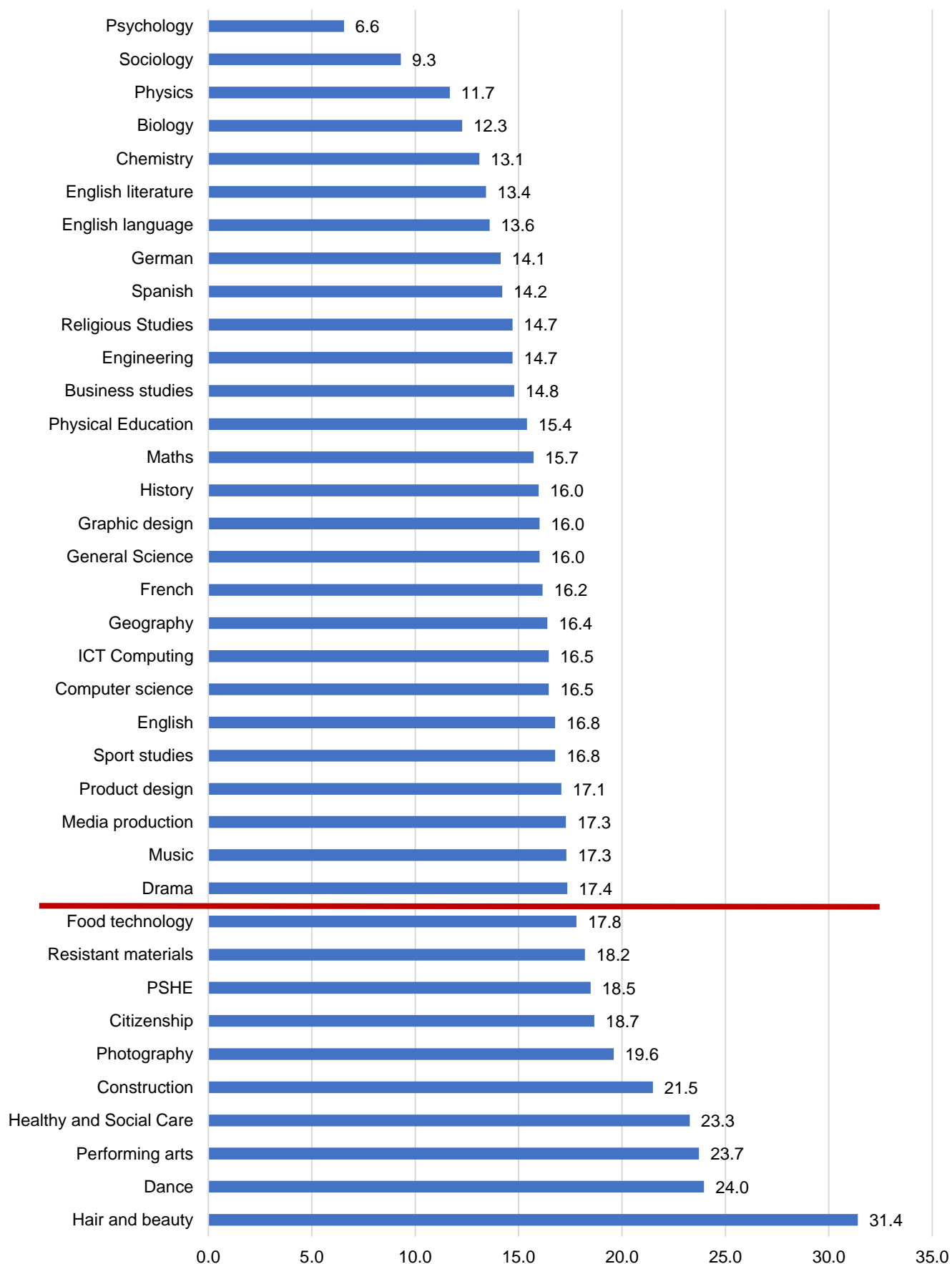
Interpretation of these data requires sensitivity. While it is shown to be the case that less advantaged young people are more likely to be enrolled in vocational courses this should not be regarded as an indication of under-achievement or low aspirations, but more likely to be associated with 'proximate ambitions' which are related to realistic expectations about employment destinations.

It cannot be known from these data what role schools and parents play in helping to shape or reflect ambitions through option choices. Much more detailed study would be needed to explore such factors than is possible here. However, in future Student Voice surveys, indications could be provided by asking students about those factors which influenced option choices.

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<sup>10</sup> We would like to thank Matthew Peart, Performance Analyst, Transformation and Partnerships, Durham County Council for assisting in the re-analysis by running additional tables.

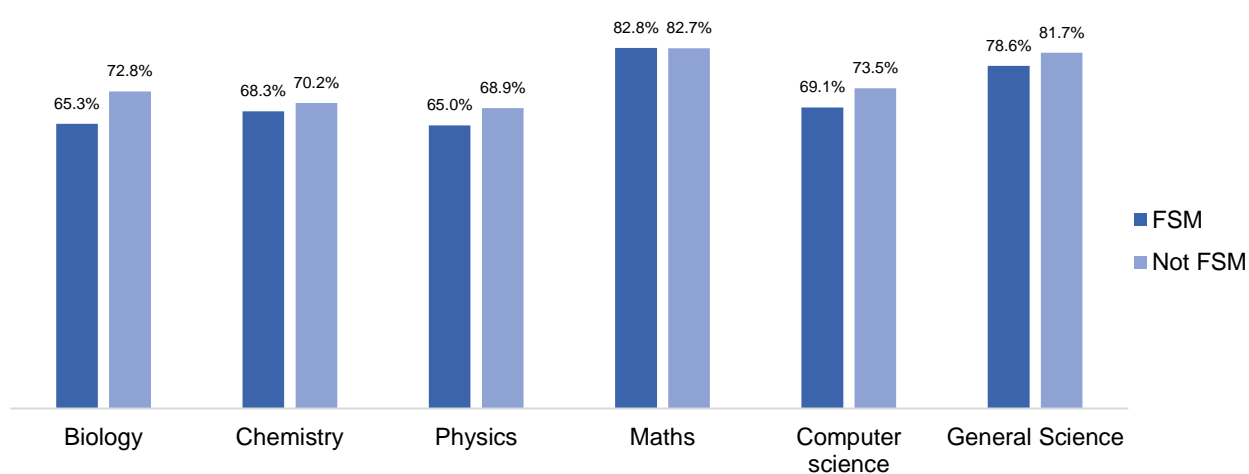
Figure 2.3 **Percentage of students eligible for free school meals in each subject discipline area**



Considering perceptions of progress in different subjects provides a useful indicator of young people's assessments of their strengths in relative terms. This is not to say that such perceptions of progress will necessarily match directly with outcomes in terms of educational credentials.

For purposes of clarity, the subject areas are presented thematically in the charts which follow. As Figure 2.3 illustrated, participation levels in STEM subjects are lower for less advantaged students. However, amongst those who are studying STEM subjects, as shown in Figure 2.4a, self-assessment of progress is similar – although less advantaged students consistently record slightly lower scores except in mathematics. The same pattern is reproduced for English and modern foreign language studies as shown in Figure 2.4b.

**Figure 2.4a Percentage of students who believe that they are performing well in STEM subjects**



**Figure 2.4b Percentage of students who believe that they are performing well in English and modern foreign languages**

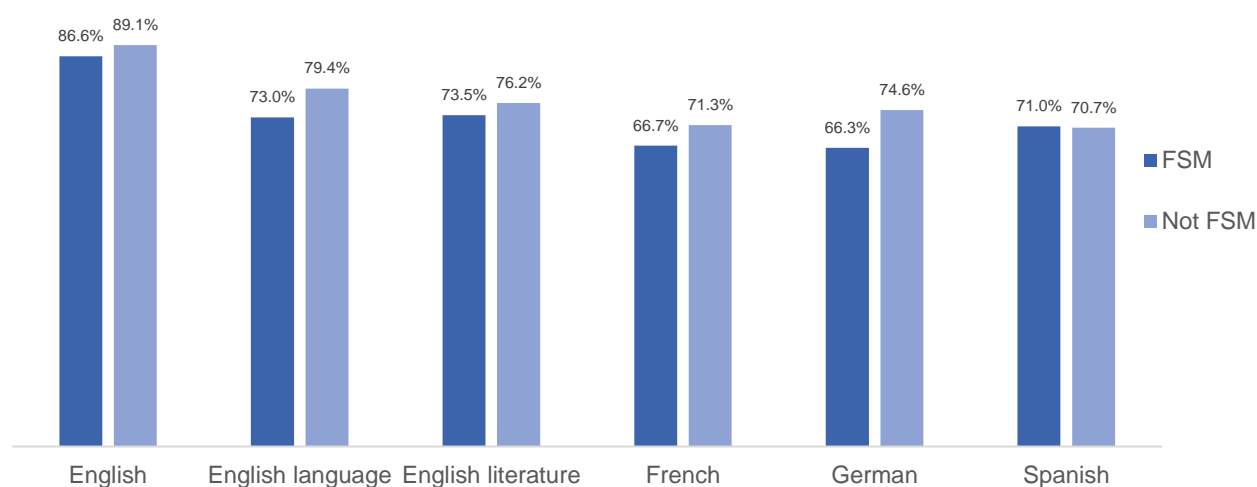


Figure 2.4c shows a higher level of divergence in perceptions of good progress in sport studies (only 72% of FSM students perceive themselves to be making good progress compared with 82% of other students). This pattern is not repeated to the same extent for Business Studies, Geography and History, although in all cases, FSM students feel that they are doing less well than their more affluent counterparts.

In arts subjects, as shown in Figure 2.4d, perceptions about progress are quite similar for more or less advantaged students, and indeed in music and performing arts, there are higher levels of confidence.

Figure 2.4c **Percentage of students who believe they are performing well in business studies, geography, history and sport studies**

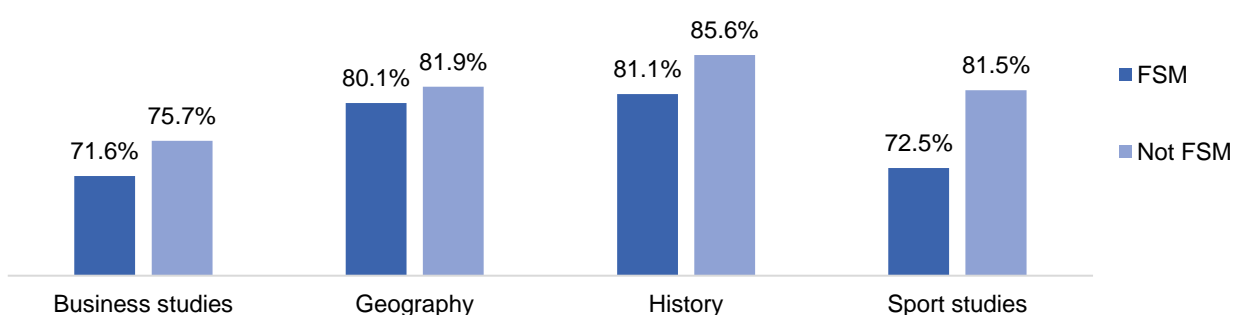


Figure 2.4d **Percentage of students who believe that they are performing well in arts subjects**

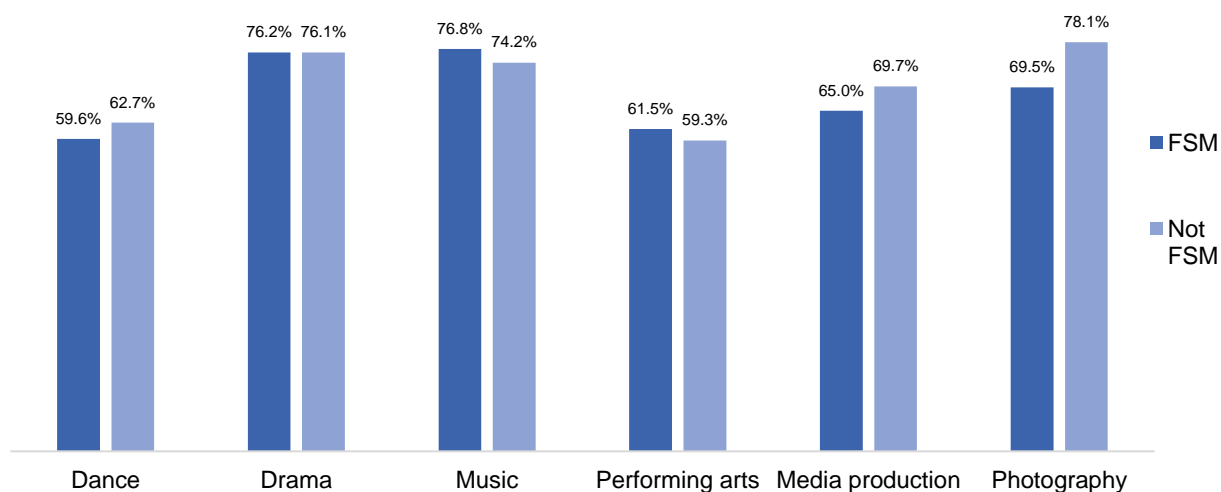


Figure 2.4e turns attention to vocational subjects where the population of less advantaged students tend to be greater. While differences in perceptions of progress are slight, FSM students are uniformly less confident: especially so in construction and health and beauty.

Figure 2.4e Percentage of students who believe they are performing well in vocational subjects

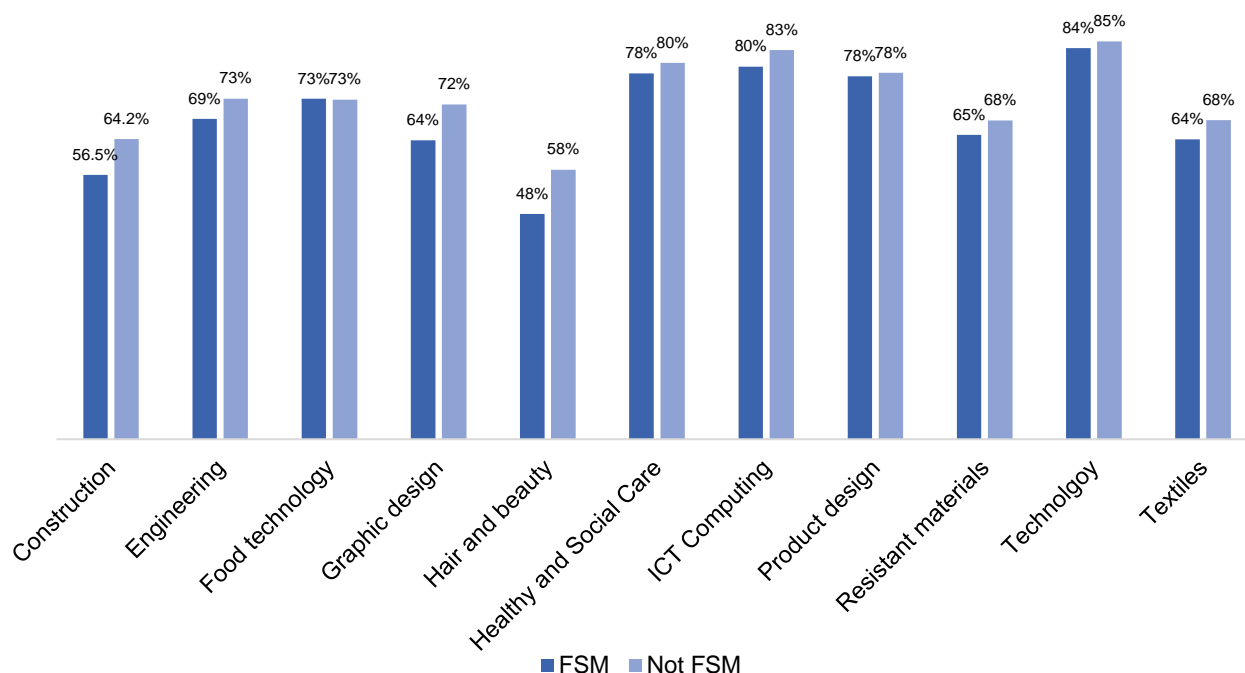
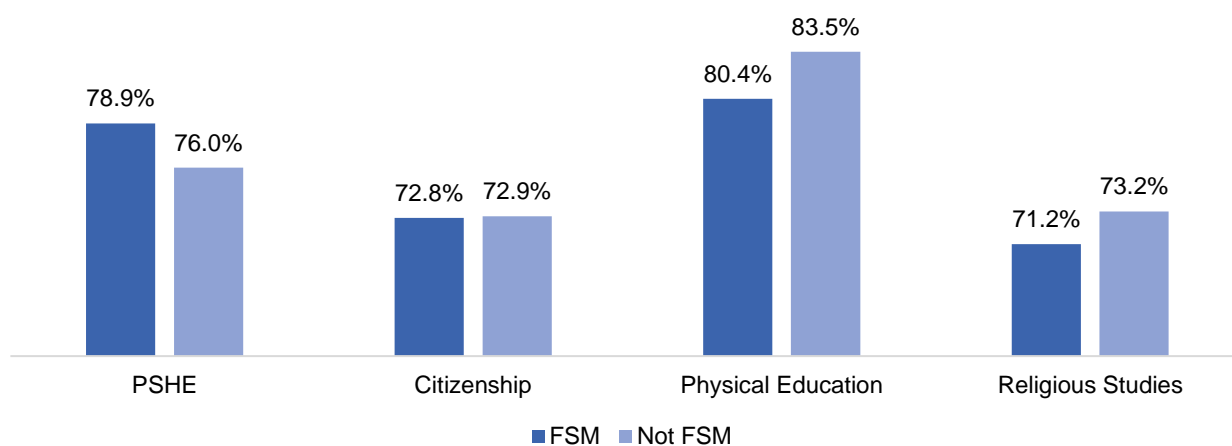


Figure 2.4f Percentage of students who believe that they are performing well in personal wellbeing subjects



Finally, Figure 2.4f considers subjects addressing issues surrounding personal, physical and moral wellbeing. These data produce some interesting insights. In relation to PSHE, students from less affluent backgrounds are a little more likely to believe that they are progressing well than more affluent students; this may be due exposure to ideas and information which may not be available to them elsewhere. The reverse is the case in physical education and religious studies however. In citizenship studies there are no discernible differences.



### Interactions with teachers

The above analysis shows that perceptions about progress are broadly similar (although FSM students are slightly more likely to feel that they are making less progress than their more affluent counterparts). To examine the issue further, it is useful to compare perceptions about positive learning or personal developmental work with teachers.

Table 2.1 presents data on the strength of confidence of FSM and non-FSM students against a series of statements. It is evident from these data that overall confidence in teachers is high, irrespective of the relative levels of affluence of students.

Percentage differences between FSM and non-FSM students are slight and are not patterned in a consistent way suggesting that there is no obvious 'across the board' relationship to be observed. However, there are divergences by area of support.

It is clear that FSM students are more likely to emphasise the importance of inspiration and encouragement and assistance with making progress. However, they are slightly less likely to think that teachers have high expectations of them, that their lessons are helping them progress or whether knowledge is being continually built. These differences are small but are nevertheless worth noting.

**Table 2.1 The contribution of teachers to educational experience** (Percentage of students who agree with each statement)

	Eligible for free school meals	Not eligible for free school meals	% difference
On the whole, do your teachers inspire you to do your best?	70%	65%	+5%
On the whole, do your teachers mark your class work regularly?	67%	62%	+5%
On the whole, do your teachers tell you what you need to do to improve?	88%	85%	+3%
On the whole, do your teachers regularly check that you understand what you are learning about in lessons?	75%	73%	+2%
In your lessons, do teachers help you to make good progress?	80%	78%	+2%
On the whole, do your teachers give you the opportunity to improve your work once it has been marked?	84%	83%	+1%
On the whole, do your teachers support you, or others in class, if help is needed during lessons?	84%	84%	0%
Do your teachers have high expectations of you? (i.e. expect you to do your best?)	74%	76%	-2%
Do your lessons help you to make progress over time?	82%	85%	-3%
On the whole, do your teachers let you know how you have done?	73%	75%	-3%
Do your lessons continually build on your knowledge?	68%	71%	-4%

### ***Support for students in personal and career development***

Table 2.2 examines the extent to which students feel that they are fully supported in their decisions about subject choices and career direction. It is clear from these data, with one exception, that against most statements FSM students feel less well supported, although percentage differences are quite small.

The only area where FSM students feel more confident than their more affluent counterparts is in the school's ability to equip them with the skills and knowledge they need.

The area of support where students, in general, are least confident is in knowing how to get an apprenticeship (about 38%). Confidence in understanding routes to A level study is, by contrast, much higher (75-77% of students). It is notable, however, that FSM students are the least confident about the quality of advice on transitions after completion of GCSEs (61%) when compared with students from more affluent backgrounds (66%).

**Table 2.2 Percentage of students who agree with statements on educational, personal and careers support.**

	Eligible for free school meals	Not eligible for free school meals	% difference
I feel that my school equips me with the skills and knowledge I need to be successful in the world of work	64%	61%	3%
I know how to get an apprenticeship	38%	39%	-1%
I know about the different routes that are available to me when I have done my GCSEs (e.g. qualifications, apprenticeships)	68%	70%	-2%
I am/was given the opportunity to visit the different education places that are available to me after my GCSEs/A-Levels (e.g. college, 6th form, university)	75%	77%	-2%
I am/was supported in the decisions I make at key transition points (e.g. choosing my options, choices after year 11)	58%	60%	-2%
I have been given the opportunity to hear from guest speakers about their careers	69%	71%	-2%
I know who to go to for help with career decisions and information	64%	67%	-3%
I am given impartial advice about career decisions	56%	59%	-3%
I feel/was informed about the different places I can go to continue to study after my GCSEs/A-Levels (e.g. college, 6th form, university)	61%	66%	-5%
Base N=	504	2,999	

Table 2.3 presents data on the percentage of students who agree with a series of statements on the value of their school experience. The statements fall into two sets, where FSM students are *more* or *less* likely to agree than students from more affluent backgrounds. The only area where FSM students are more positive than their more affluent counterparts is in their assessment of the school's ability to equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in the world of work.

Interpretation of this finding is complicated. As will be discussed in the next section, it is likely that less affluent young people will have more limited access to other positive sources of influence, support and information which can shape their ambitions. As a consequence, they may be less critical of the role of the school than more affluent young people who are, perhaps, in a better position to compare with other strong influences.

When more specific information is considered, more affluent young people show higher levels of confidence in their schools (although this should not be over-stated, the differences are relatively small). For example:

- 56% of young people entitled to FSM felt that they received impartial careers information compared with 59% of more affluent students.
- 61% of less affluent students felt that they got good advice on where they could continue study compared with 66% of their more affluent counterparts.

These are relatively crude distinctions as the category of 'more affluent' students is very wide indeed. The data could, therefore conceal much wider disparities.

Table 2.3 **Contribution of the school environment to personal wellbeing** (percentage of respondents agreeing with each statement)

	Eligible for free school meals	Not eligible for free school meals	% difference
<b>More positive responses from FSM students</b>			
My school helps me to see the benefits of voluntary work both for me and my community	56%	52%	4%
My school listens to me and values my opinion	58%	55%	3%
Form/tutor time is used constructively to support my learning	59%	56%	3%
Have you ever been discriminated against because of any of the following things: your gender, race, religion/belief, sexual orientation, or a disability you have?	15%	12%	3%
Support from my form tutor helps me to be successful in school	63%	61%	2%
My school is helping me to prepare for my life as a responsible citizen	68%	66%	2%
If a student uses discriminatory language or behaviour, teachers correct them and explain why this is wrong	70%	68%	2%
My school values and recognises my achievements	70%	69%	1%

Less positive responses from FSM students			
I have opportunity to contribute to the school community	62%	63%	-1%
I am learning about British values and what this looks like in everyday life	54%	54%	0%
I am helped by my school to develop the skills I need to work well with different people	73%	73%	0%
I am given the opportunity in school to talk about and express my own opinions about controversial issues (e.g. human rights, terrorism, world poverty)	62%	63%	-1%
I am helped to understand why it is important to be tolerant of those who are different from me	75%	77%	-2%
Are you given opportunity to develop your personal, social and employability skills?	43%	45%	-2%
I enjoy school	55%	58%	-3%
Attending school is important to me	71%	76%	-5%

### ***The school and neighbouring environment***

Enjoying and succeeding educationally is dependent to a large extent on feelings of security and wellbeing in and around the school environment. Table 2.4 presents data on the extent to which young people feel safe in these environments. It is evident that FSM students are generally less confident (74%) about their safety in lessons than other students (80%), although the proportion of all students feeling little sense of safety is quite low (6% FSM and 4% non-FSM).

Feelings of safety outside of lessons are lower for all students, but especially so for those with FSMs (66%). This may be compounded in the out of school environment where only 70% of FSM students feel safe.

Table 2.4 **Percentage of students who feel safe in and around the school environment**

	Do you feel safe when you are in your lessons?		Do you feel safe around school when not in lessons?		Do you feel safe outside of school?	
	Eligible for free school meals	Not eligible for free school meals	Eligible for free school meals	Not eligible for free school meals	Eligible for free school meals	Not eligible for free school meals
Yes	74%	80%	66%	73%	69%	75%
Sometimes	18%	14%	21%	17%	19%	15%
No	6%	4%	9%	7%	8%	6%
Don't know	2%	2%	4%	3%	4%	4%
N=	826	4,527	821	4,523	821	4,517

### Personal wellbeing

Table 2.5 shows that wellbeing scores for FSM students and more affluent students are the same at the extreme ends of the scale, but within its core FSM students are shown to be considerably less confident about their wellbeing.

The disparity in confidence levels in the mid-range is, potentially, a matter for concern. This will be discussed in the next section of the report where questions are raised about the limited access to resources amongst young people who are just above the level of affluence required to access, for example, free school meals.

These are families and households where money is tight and there is little room for manoeuvre in relation to out-of-school activities which may contribute to a sense of personal wellbeing and enhance their internal locus of control.

Table 2.5 Which best describes how you feel about your life as a whole?

	Eligible for free school meals	Not eligible for free school meals	% difference
Scale Point 1 (Very happy)	25%	25%	0%
Scale Point 2	18%	24%	-6%
Scale Point 3	19%	20%	-1%
Scale Point 4 (OK)	23%	19%	+4%
Scale Point 5	8%	6%	+2%
Scale Point 6	3%	3%	0%
Scale Point 7 (Very unhappy)	4%	4%	0%
N=	817	4,459	

Table 2.6 lends some support to this assertion. It is clear that young people from less affluent households have lower levels of access to out of school activities. Indeed, only 52% do so compared with 58% of more affluent young people. Again, this is a crude distinction and it may be the case the young people from the very affluent households have much more access to such activities than those from middling income households.

Table 2.6 **Percentage of students who agree that they join or would like to join in- and out-of-school activities**

	Eligible for free school meals	Not eligible for free school meals	% difference
When I am at school, I regularly take part in non-physical activities or clubs (e.g. drama club, choir singing)	22%	19%	+3%
Would you like to be able to take part in sport/other physical activities or organised activities/clubs outside of school?	23%	21%	+2%
Would you like to be able to take part in sport/other physical activities or non-physical activities/clubs at school?	25%	24%	+1%
When I am at school, I regularly take part in sport or other physical activities (in addition to PE lessons, e.g. lunch time or after school sports or dance clubs)?	57%	56%	+1%
When I am not at school, I regularly take part in organised activities / clubs (e.g. music lessons, cadets, scouts)	24%	24%	0%
When I am not at school, I regularly take part in sport or other physical activities (e.g. playing football, swimming, martial arts)	52%	58%	-6%

### ***Understanding data on self appraisal of confidence***

It needs to be borne in mind that the above analysis presents data on young people's 'perceptions' about their performance, interests and the extent to which they have been well served by their schools.

Perceptions are shaped by experience, so young people from different backgrounds may draw conclusions in different ways. Evidence from a large-scale study of young people's self perception of abilities and aspirations demonstrates that young people from more affluent families appear to be *less* positive than those from the least affluent backgrounds.

As shown in Figure 2.5, 64% of 16-24 year olds from the least affluent backgrounds strongly agree that they are effective communicators compared with just 44% of the most affluent young people. A similar pattern is observed against most factors associated with confidence and capability.

Perhaps the most telling difference relates to the ability to make decisions. 44% of less affluent young people strongly agree that they can do this, compared with just 31% of the most affluent.

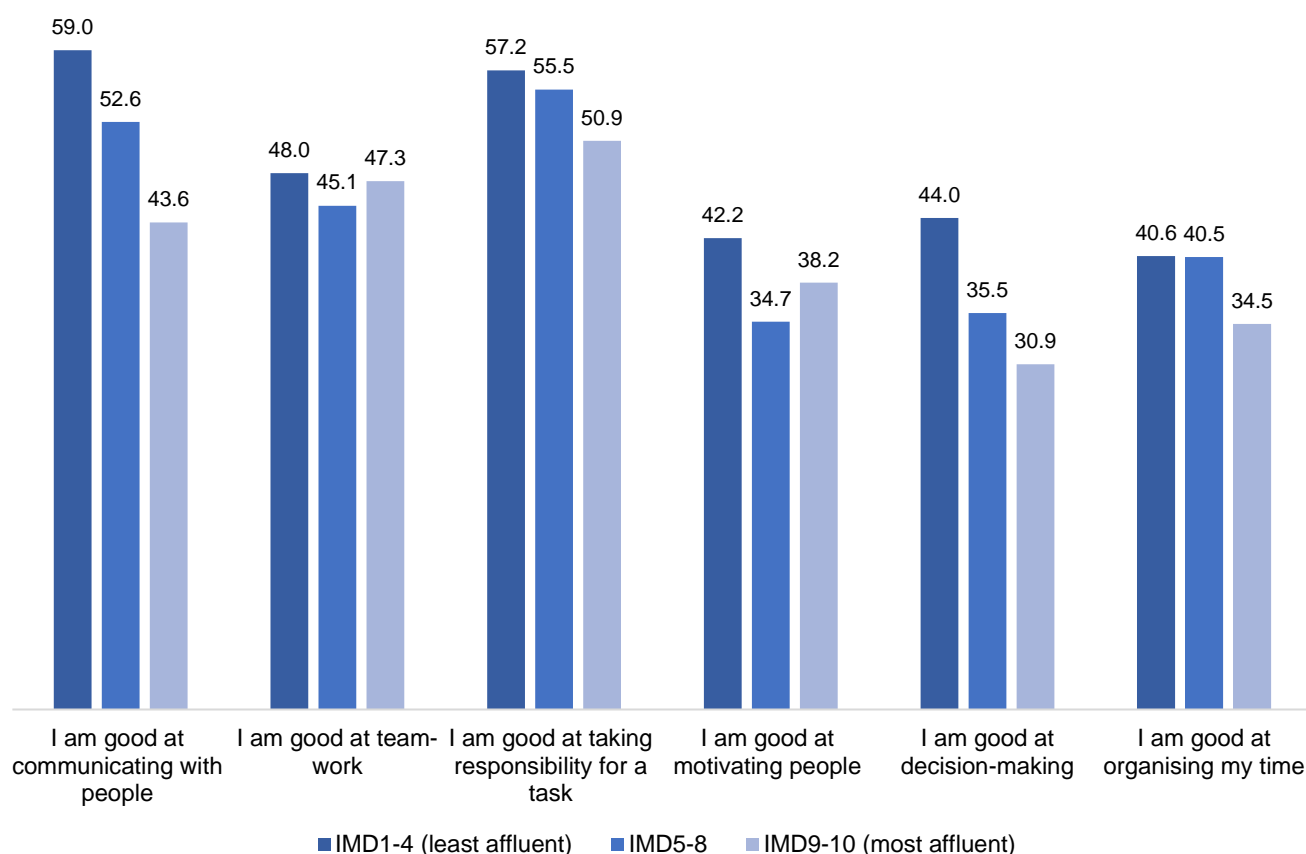
This finding, on the surface, may feel counter intuitive. Surely those young people, in whom the most intensive support is likely to have been invested would rate their confidence and ability more highly? But the reality is different. Young people who have had fewer opportunities to test their confidence and capabilities are more likely to give themselves a high score.

This makes sense (and this will be discussed in much more depth in the next section). Amongst the *most* affluent young people, who have been 'tested' continually in a range of ways, they find it much easier to assign a 'realistic' score on how they fare across several domains of capability and confidence.

In evaluation work on discrete confidence building programmes, this presents a problem which is hard to explain to organisations which have funded confidence building initiatives. A common outcome is that young people from the least well-off backgrounds give themselves similar or even lower scores on their confidence and capability at the end of programmes than they did at

its start. Not because their confidence has fallen – but because they now know how to make a fair judgement because they appreciate that some things are harder to do than they initially expected.

Figure 2.5 Percentage of 16-24 year olds who strongly agree with statements about confidence and capability at the start of the O<sub>2</sub> Think Big programme 2014 (n=2,750)



11

### Performance at school

The above analysis paints a complex picture. At face value, the evidence shows that young people share broadly similar attitudes (in that percentage differences are not 'dramatic') about their performance and educational experience irrespective of the relative affluence of their families. Additionally, some of the findings seem to be contradictory because they indicate that young people from less advantaged households report higher levels of confidence in some domains than their more affluent counterparts.

This has been explained on the basis that young people from more affluent households have had more *opportunities* to test their confidence and personal agency and can, therefore, make a better judgement. When these findings are set against the *actual* performance of students in schools in examinations – a different picture emerges. As shown in Table 2.7, it is

<sup>11</sup> Adapted from Chapman, T. and Dunkerley, E. (2014) *Opening Doors: an evaluation of the O2 Think Big Programme in the UK*, Durham: Policy&Practice, p. 80.

evident that on 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.



Table 2.7 **Performance of students in County Durham in mainstream secondary schools (2017)**

	Average Attainment 8 score per pupil	Percentage of pupils achieving the English Baccalaureate with strong passes (grades 9-5) in both English and maths and A*-C grades in the remaining elements	Percentage of pupils achieving the English Baccalaureate with standard passes (grades 9-4) in both English and maths and A*-C grades in the remaining elements	Percentage of pupils achieving strong passes (grades 9-5) in both English and mathematics GCSEs	Percentage of pupils achieving standard passes (grades 9-4) in both English and mathematics GCSEs	Percentage of pupils achieving 5+ A*-C/9-4 or equivalents including 9-4 in both English and mathematics GCSEs	Total students on roll	Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals
Quartile 1 (most affluent)	50.1	23.7	26.1	48.0	70.0	68.0	8,665	9.0
Quartile 2	47.0	21.6	27.4	34.3	63.1	61.7	6,603	15.5
Quartile 3	41.9	12.0	14.0	29.7	53.7	49.0	4,638	20.6
Quartile 4 (least affluent)	42.4	11.0	13.9	25.6	48.6	47.3	5,048	25.9
County Durham average	45.4	17.1	20.4	34.4	58.9	56.5	24,954	17.7

The analysis is based on data from 28 mainstream secondary schools in County Durham (Foundation Schools=2, Community School=11, Voluntary Aided School=2, Academy Converter – mainstream=11; Sponsored Academy=2) private schools and special schools are excluded as data are either not available or not comparable. Data were extracted on performance in 2016 and school census data and were then merged for analytical purposes. Schools were then ranked by the number of pupils currently eligible for free school meals and then divided into quartiles (7 schools in each). Data were extracted from this website address on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2018: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/download-data?currentstep=region&downloadYear=2016-2017&regiontype=la&la=840>

The final step in the analysis is to look at student self-assessment of their progress using the Student Voice Survey by the relative affluence of school and whether respondents are eligible for school meals. The results present a complex set of findings.

Figure 2.6(a) shows the percentage of students who assess their progress in reading as 'good'. In the least affluent schools, self-reported assessments on progress in reading are the highest, suggesting that students do not feel that they are under-performing (although we know that performance at exams in English is considerably lower than in the schools with a higher proportion of affluent students).

It is worth noting that students in the third quartile are the least likely to feel positive about their progress in reading, whether they are eligible for free school meals or not. This lends support to our general hypothesis that in those areas which are not the least affluent, but are proximate to them, may feel less well served by the education system.

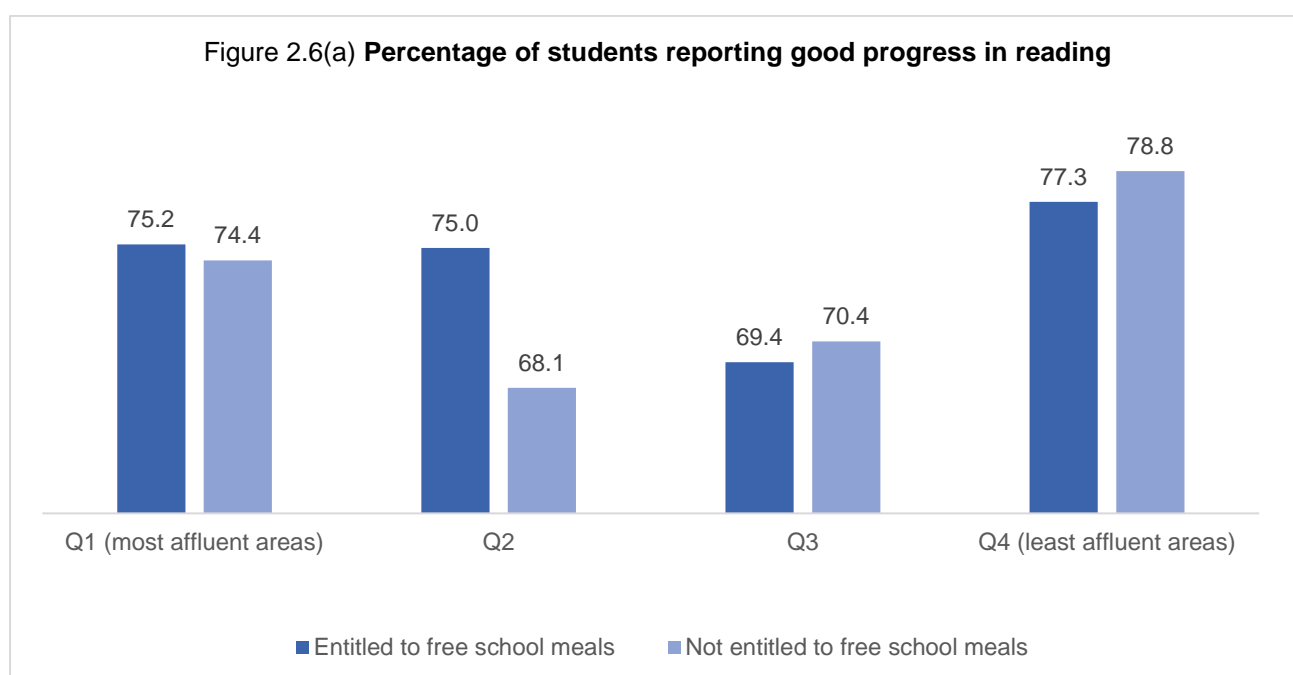
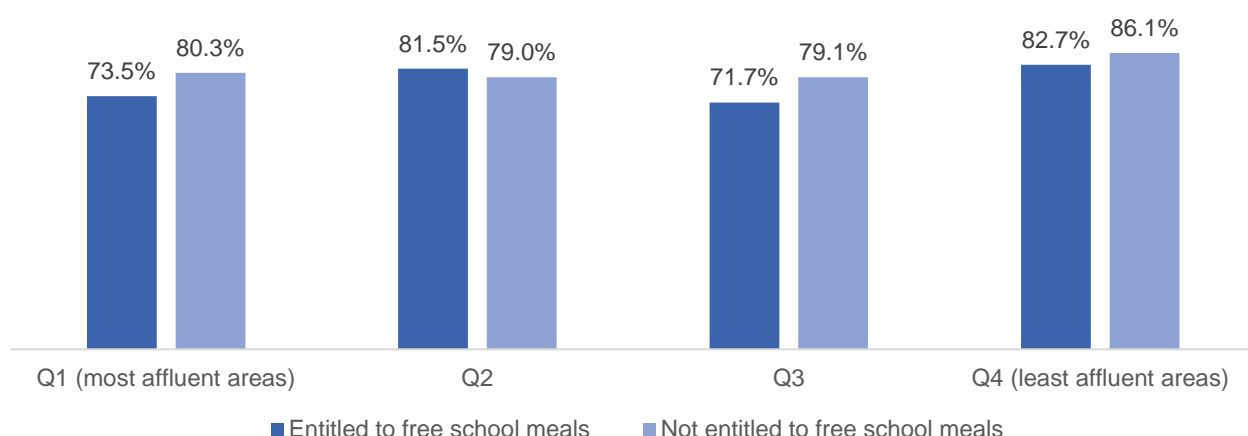


Figure 2.6(b) looks at self-assessment of progress in writing. In this figure, it is notable that differences are uniformly slight. Students from each quartile, whether they are eligible for free school meals or not, assess their performance in much the same way (with a slight uplift in the schools with the biggest proportion of students entitled to free school meals). When comparing these data with Figure 2.6 on actual performance, it is possible to state that some students are over-estimating their progress by a considerable margin.

Figure 2.6(b) Percentage of students reporting good progress in writing

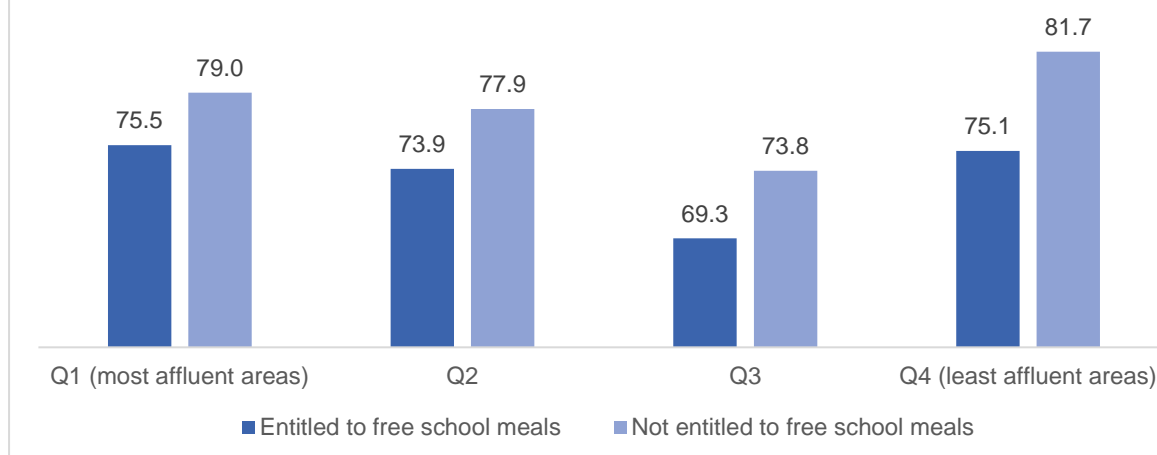


Finally, Figure 2.6(c) presents data on performance in numeracy. Self-assessment of numeracy differs from reading and writing because success or failure is much easier for students to discern – measures of performance are much more immediate and concrete. It might therefore be expected that there would be steady decline in confidence from the first quartile (with the lowest percentage of students eligible for free school meals) to the fourth quartile.

In fact, this hypothesis works well from quartile 1 to quartile 3. There is a steady decline in confidence about numeracy. And indeed, this is exacerbated amongst students who are entitled to free school meals. 79% of students in Quartile 1 who are not entitled to free school meals assess their numeracy skills as good compared with 76% of students who are entitled to free school meals. These percentages drop to 74% and 69% respectively in Quartile 3.

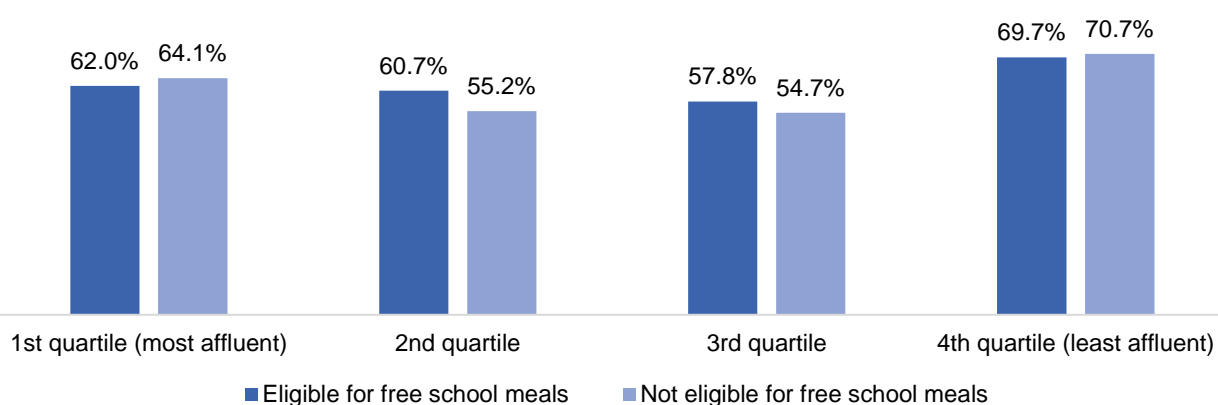
But in the schools in Quartile 4, which have the highest proportion of students who are entitled to free school meals, a dramatic difference emerges. Students not eligible for free school meals are the most confident about numeracy of all students (82%) and those who are entitled to free school meals are level pegging with students in the more affluent schools in Quartile 1 (75%).

Figure 2.6(c) Percentage of students reporting good progress in numeracy

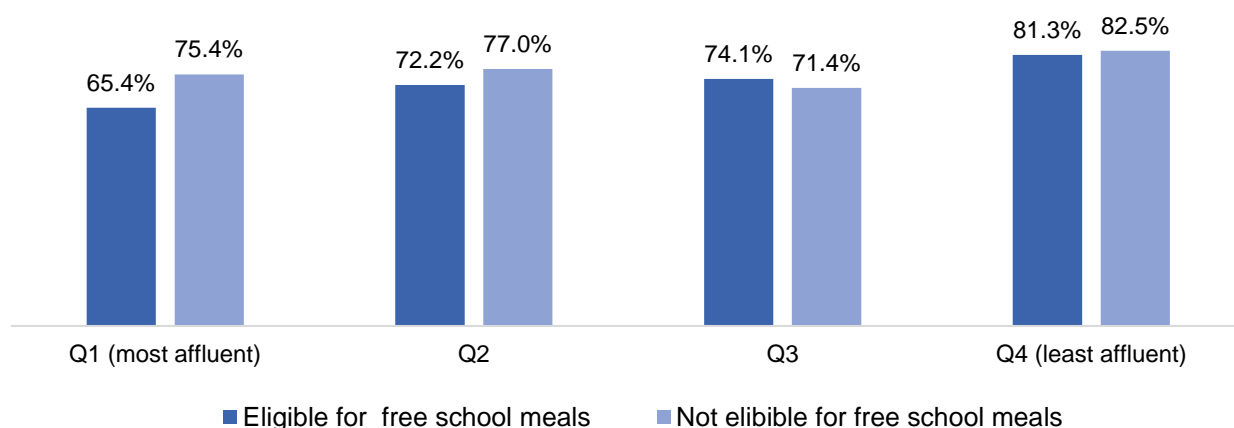


Finally, it is useful to examine the extent to which students feel that their schools prepare them for the world of work. As shown in Figure 2.7, students in the most affluent schools are slightly more confident than their counterparts in the second and third quartiles. However, students in the least affluent quartile are by far the most confident that they have been well prepared for the world of work. Similarly, Figure 2.8 shows that students in the least affluent schools are the most likely to believe that teachers have high expectations of them.

**Figure 2.7 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)**



**Figure 2.8 Do your teachers have high expectations of you? (percentage who agree)**



## Summary

The above analysis has produced some challenging findings which cannot easily 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 quite well satisfied by their experience of school life. There is no evidence to suggest that less affluent students feel diminished by their school experience.

**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 some of their parents, teachers, peers and communities have low expectations of them?

Some clues can be gleaned about what is going on by considering data on Attainment 8 levels and Ofsted school inspection reports. As Table 2.8 shows, Better quality school inspection reports tend to be clustered in the top two quartiles. The least effective schools are found mainly in the third quartile – which lends further evidence to explain why young people in these schools may feel less confident about themselves in some respects.

Table 2.8 County Durham secondary school performance data

	Most recent Ofsted school assessment*					Most recent Ofsted Attainment 8 appraisal**			
	Outstanding	Good	Require improvement	Inadequate	No data	Above average	Average	Below average	Well below average
Quartile 1 (lowest % students entitled free school meals)	2	3	1	0	1	4	0	2	1
Quartile 2	2	2	0	1	2	1	5	0	1
Quartile 3	0	2	5	0	0	2	1	1	3
Quartile 4 (highest % students entitled free school meals)	1	4	0	2	0	1	3	2	1

\*Ofsted inspection data downloaded, 29th March 2018: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=phase&region=840&geographic=la&phase=all&for=ofsted&datasetFilter=final&page=3>.

\*\*Ofsted Attainment 8 data downloaded 29<sup>th</sup> March 2018: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=phase&region=840&geographic=la&phase=secondary&for=secondary>.

It is somewhat ironic that while popular narratives proliferate about young people from less affluent areas lacking aspiration and confidence - the evidence indicates the opposite. Ironically, this suggests that negative narratives about young people are *manifesting* themselves in lower levels of performance.

If, as the above analysis shows, many of the less affluent young people in County Durham are less aware than they *should be* about their current levels of performance at school – something needs to be done about that.

It is somewhat ironic that in County Durham, popular narratives proliferate about young people from less affluent areas lacking aspiration and confidence. The above evidence indicates the opposite. This suggests, therefore, that these false and negative narratives about less affluent young people in the county are *manifesting* themselves in lower levels of performance.

The above analysis focuses on young people's school performance and their assessment of the extent to which they feel valued and are supported to realise their ambitions. It was not, however, the intention of the analysis to argue that schools are wholly responsible for young people's future destinations. Many other factors help to shape the outcomes of schooling, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

## 3

## What are successful life transitions?

This report aims to get a better understanding about how people who are in a position to help young people make successful life transitions approach the issue. It also asks whether underlying and shared assumptions or ‘narratives’ about young people’s life transitions which underpin approaches to policy and practice are valid.

The research aimed to explore the validity of commonly adopted narratives about young people’s ‘low aspirations’ or ‘failure’ to make successful life transitions. Assumptions, such as these, are deeply embedded culturally and are continually reinforced through political discourse, media and social interaction. Challenging such ideas is difficult because it requires the observer to step out of their own shoes and try to fit into those of others.

‘Deficit models’ position categories of people in terms of what they *lack* rather than what they *have*. People in positions of power and influence have a tendency (and often in the best of spirits) to devise policies and practices which may bring people up to scratch – i.e. ‘to be more like us’.

Trying to empathise with socially distant ‘others’ is challenging because it requires the observer to do two difficult things at the same time. Firstly, to try to peel away the pernicious influence of deeply engrained ideas or prejudices about how other people think and act. And secondly, the observer must turn the searchlight upon themselves and critically assess those factors make their own lives feel so different.

Power and influence play an important role in the equation. People who enjoy social, cultural or economic advantage over others tend, over time, to regard their beneficial position as being ‘normal’. Consequently, people who do not share such advantage can, all too easily, be regarded as ‘lacking’ something (such as money or property, certain types of skills or credentials, or attitudes, beliefs and social connections which are valued by people in positions of power and influence).<sup>12</sup>

‘Deficit models’ position categories of people in terms of what they *lack* and tend not to recognise what they *have*. And when ‘shortcomings’ have been identified, evidenced and analysed, people in positions of power have a tendency (and often in the best of spirits) to devise policies and practices which may bring people up to scratch – i.e. ‘to be more like us’.

But there are problems with this. Firstly, and crucially, the objectives set for people who become the *object* of attention from people in positions in power may not be able to make the journey to achieve ambitions set by others. The bar may be set too high for many, and further, social, economic and cultural barriers may have been erected to limit progression.

Secondly, many people from less socially advantaged communities may not *want* to make the journey for legitimate reasons. And further, it may be socially beneficial if they don’t, providing that their resource needs, personal attributes, social preferences and societal contributions are respected and valued by others.<sup>13</sup>

In the context of this study, it is therefore necessary critically to examine what have become conventionally recognised as ‘successful life transitions’ and look at the characteristics of those people who are most likely to achieve them. In so doing, it will become apparent that this is not a benign social

<sup>12</sup> We will return to this issue later when discussing in more detail the ownership of social, cultural and economic capital.

<sup>13</sup> See Reay, D. (2018) ‘The cruelty of success: individual success at the cost of collective failure’, in S. Lawler and G. Payne (eds.) *Social Mobility for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: everyone a winner?*, London: Routledge.

process which is, potentially, open to everyone – irrespective of their background or personal attributes. But rather, that many social processes are in operation which enhance or limit people's opportunities.

### **What counts as success?**

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 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 the legal 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.

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.

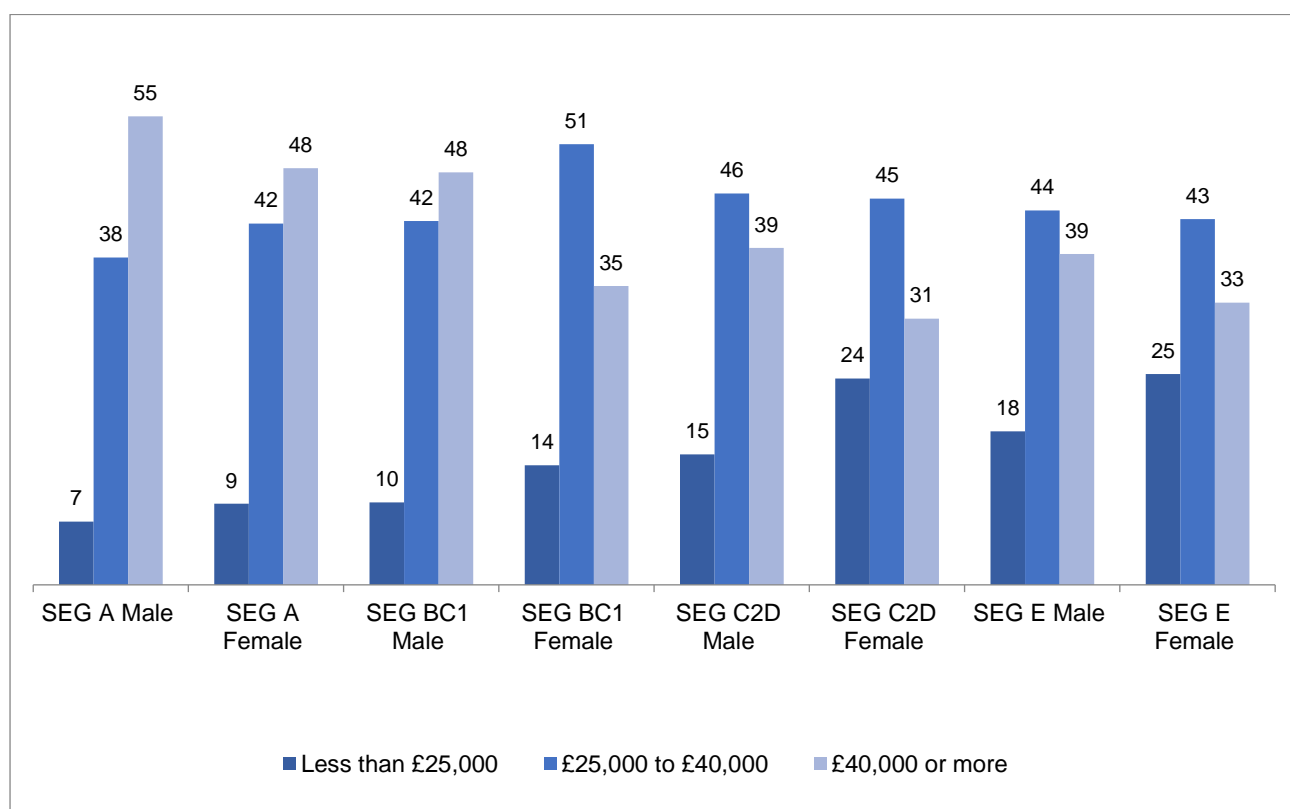
These are not just aspirations, however, they also represent in societal terms the foundations of citizenship. Of course, the quality of life people lead from different backgrounds may vary considerably in material terms – but that does not necessarily connect with the quality of life experience. There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

In a national study of 2,000 young people's life ambitions, undertaken in 2014, it was demonstrated that the level of income required to live a good life at the age of 30 varies considerably by socio economic groups (SEGs) and varies by gender. As shown in Figure 3.1, while 55% of males born into the most affluent families (SEG A) think that they need £40,000 a year to live a decent life at age 30, only 39% of males from the poorest families believe this to be the case. Indeed 25% of the males from the poorest households think that they can live well on less than £25,000 compared with just 7% of the males from the wealthiest households.

Fundamental aspirations may not differ very much, but expectations about the social and financial costs and risks of achieving them may vary substantially.

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.

Figure 3.1 **Salary needed to live a 'fulfilling life' at the age of 30 by gender and socio economic group**



Source: Chapman and Dunkerley, 2014, p. 190.

Often it is asserted that young people from less affluent areas lack aspiration and career ambition. Career ambitions held by young people vary to some extent according to their starting point in life. But there is not much evidence to suggest that young people's ambitions from poorer households are significantly lower than is the case in richer households.

On the contrary, research indicates that career ambitions are *too high*, and that there are too few places available in the labour market for young people to achieve them.<sup>14</sup> As Kintrea et al. argue:

***'...there is a lack of clarity about whether aspirations are fundamentally too low, especially among people from disadvantaged backgrounds, or are in fact rather high, but cannot be realised because of the various barriers erected by inequality'.<sup>15</sup>***

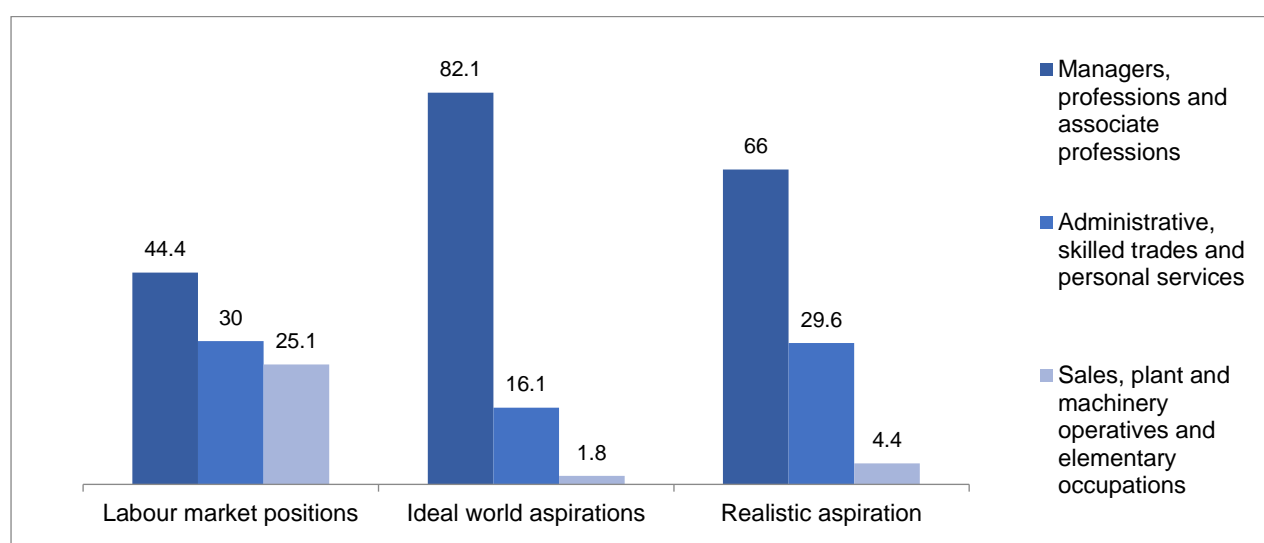
Table 3.1 shows that, at the age of fifteen, 82% of young people aspire 'in an ideal world' to obtain professional or managerial jobs, but only 66% believe that this is a realistic ambition. Attaining these goals is only possible for 42% of young people due to the availability of such work. Only 4% of 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.

<sup>14</sup> Payne, G. (2017) *The New Social Mobility*, Bristol: Policy Press.

<sup>15</sup> Kintrea, K., St Clair, R. and Houston, M. (2011:38) *The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attitudes and aspirations*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, p.11.



Figure 3.2 Young people's career ambitions compared to UK labour market at age 15



Source: Kintrea, et al. (2011: 38)

Aspirations appear to be fairly similar across the social classes at the age of fourteen in terms of believing in the importance of getting 'a job that leads somewhere', as Goodman and Gregg have shown, but the chances of realising these ambitions are shaped by structural, situational, relational and individual factors.<sup>16</sup>

As indicated in Table 3.1, young people from the lowest income households are much less likely to expect to apply for and gain entry to higher education when compared with young people from the most affluent households.

Behavioural attitudes also differ, with young people from the poorest households are more likely to have 'admitted' to truancy or anti-social behaviour than their more affluent counterparts. But differences in the percentages of young people who read for enjoyment regularly or wanting to get a job that leads somewhere are similar or the same.

Table 3.1 Attitudes and behaviour at age 14 (percentages)

	Household socio-economic profile		
	Lowest quintile	Middle quintile	Highest quintile
Wants to stay on in full-time education at 16	79	83	93
Likely to apply for higher education and likely to get in	49	57	77
Ever involved in anti-social behaviour	41	31	21
Ever played truant	24	14	8
Reads for enjoyment weekly	70	75	81
Get a job that leads somewhere is important	70	70	67

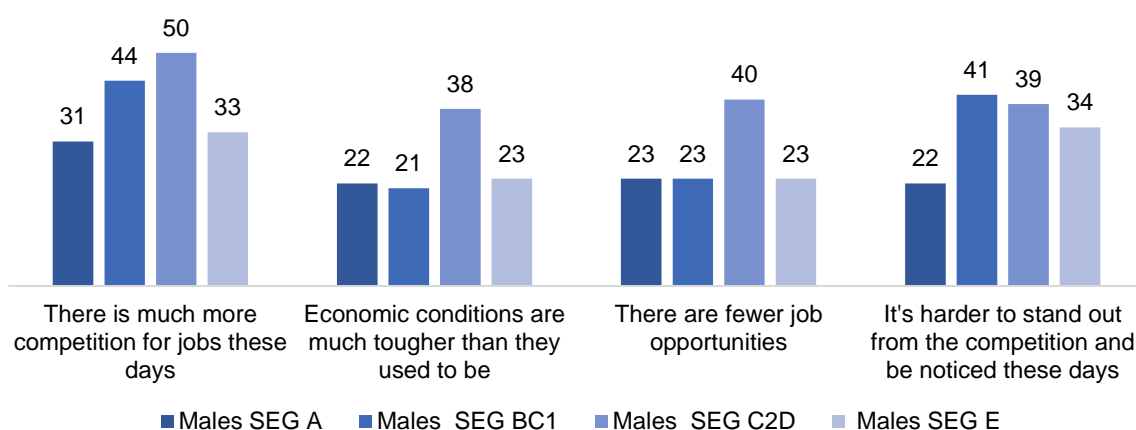
Source: adapted from Figure 5.3, Goodman and Gregg (2010: 39).

<sup>16</sup> Goodman, A. and Gregg, P. (eds.) (2010) *Poor children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Confidence about achieving aspirations and ambitions are shaped by young people's assessment of the opportunities that they believe are available to them. As Figures 3.3 and 3.4 demonstrate, young people's expectations vary considerably by socio economic group (SEG) and gender.

It is clear that males from the most and the least affluent backgrounds are less worried about competition for jobs, economic conditions and job opportunities. Males from the second least affluent socio-economic group (SEG C2D) are by far the least confident. Only 22% of the most affluent males strongly agree that it is getting harder to 'stand' out from the competition' compared with between 34-41% of young males from other backgrounds.

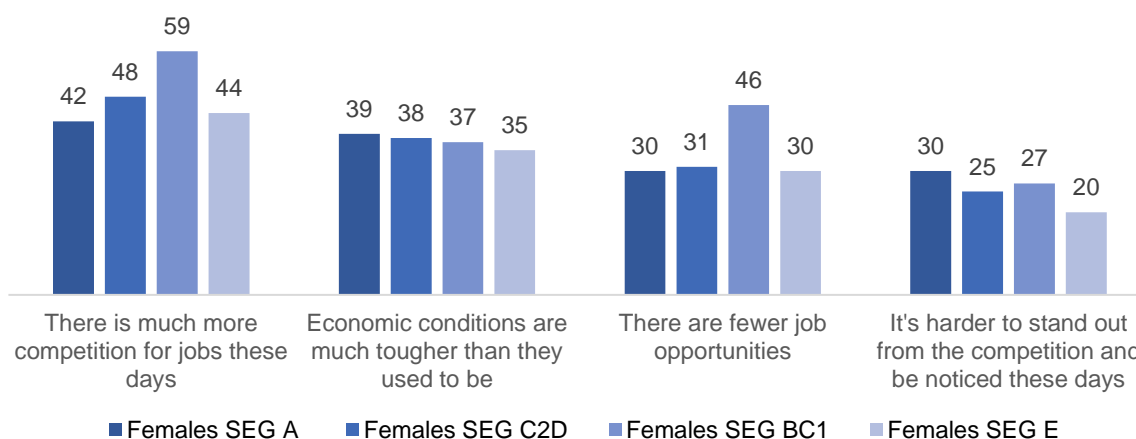
**Figure 3.3 Percentage of males who strongly agree with each statement on future opportunities by socio-economic group**



Source: adapted from Chapman and Dunkerley, 2014: 196

Amongst females, patterns differ. Young women from SEG C2D were also the most likely to agree that there is much more competition for jobs and fewer job opportunities for them now – although the percentages are higher than for males. In general terms, young women were less confident about economic and labour market conditions than males – but the variations by social economic groups were less strong.

**Figure 3.4 Percentage of females who strongly agree with each statement on future opportunities by socio-economic group**



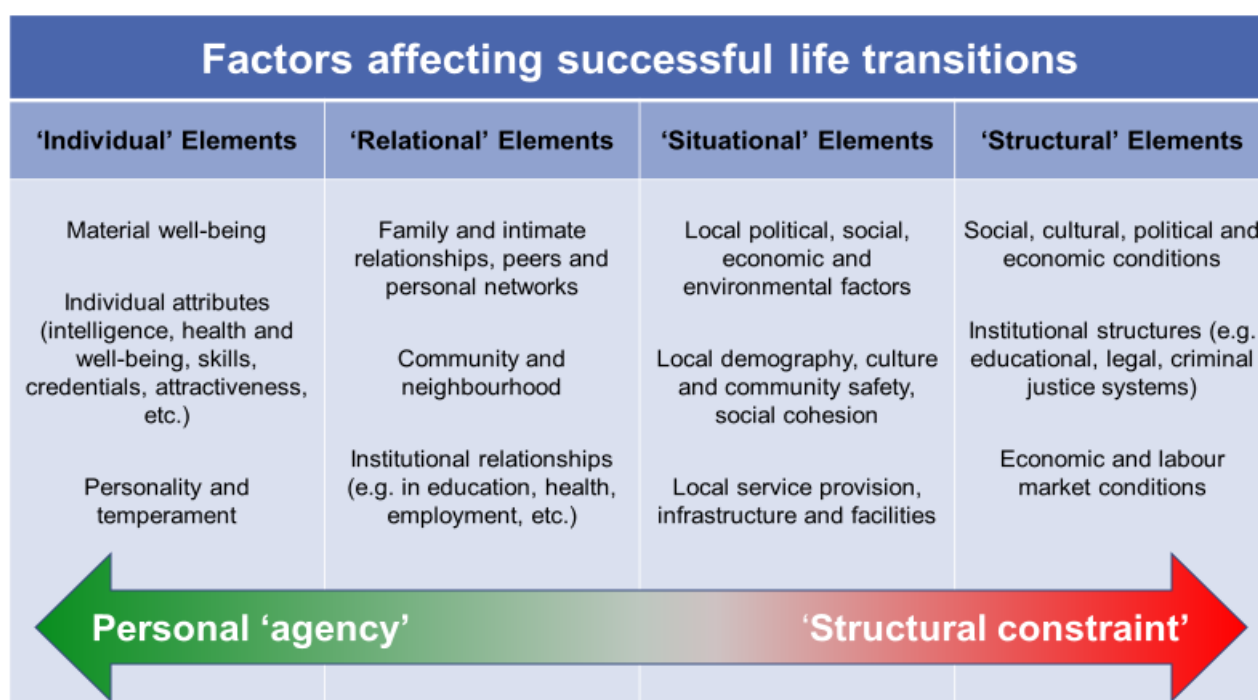
Source: adapted from Chapman and Dunkerley, 2014: 196

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.

Debates on this issue are often polarised between those which focus on social structural elements (such as institutional barriers or the availability of employment), to those which focus on the 'agency' of individuals (their strength of character, level of ambition etc.). Frustratingly, advocates of each argument rarely recognise that there are elements of truth on either side.

A better way of thinking about these sets of influences is to recognise the influence of interactions between *structural, situational, relational* and *personal* factors (see Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5 Interactions between structural, situational, relational and personal factors



The impact of these factors varies depending upon the ownership of 'assets' by individuals. The best way into this debate is briefly to rehearse well-known ideas surrounding social, economic and cultural capital.<sup>17</sup>

- **Cultural capital:** consists of ideas, education and skills which are underpinned by a set of values, passed down by parents and significant others through socialisation. Cultural capital is durable. Even when people's luck takes a turn for the worse and they become downwardly socially mobile, they can still pass on cultural capital to their children who may benefit (for example, by valuing education and understanding how the system works<sup>18</sup>). But it is not necessary to be 'middle class' to hold social capital – from the nineteenth

<sup>17</sup> These three terms originate from the writing of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1988) 'The forms of capital', in J.G. Richardson (ed.) (1988) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

<sup>18</sup> This is a well-known phenomenon first fully articulated as the 'sunken middle class' in Jackson and Marsden's (1962) *Education and the working class*, Harmondsworth, Penguin. Such analysis is bolstered by subsequent work by Bernstein who examined 'elaborated' and 'restrictive' language codes across social classes which ease or limit parents' ability to prepare children for formal education. Bernstein, B. (1971) *Class, Codes and Control: Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

century many working-class people, especially within non-conformist churches, the labour and trade union movement valued learning.

- **Economic capital:** refers to control over economic assets (*actual* savings, shares, commodities, cash and *potential* earnings, financial inheritance, etc.). Financial resources make life easier, more secure and safer. It allows people to invest in their own and their children's future and provides leverage when persuading offspring to make positive choices. The prospect (rather than the hope) that financial resources will arrive at some point, similarly, emboldens people's ambitions and helps them to take positive risks under their own volition.
- **Social capital:** consists of the resources gained by having access to influential social networks or relationships which give access to opportunities.<sup>19</sup> Social capital is 'productive' in the sense that it provides people with a resource which facilitates action; it is 'self-reinforcing' in that the ability to build successful relationships in one area of social life are transferable to others; and, it is 'cumulative' in the sense that once people have a stock of social capital, they can build more of it.

These three factors are all closely inter-connected, and for ease of explanation, the three terms will, in the remaining analysis, be summarised under the single term 'social capital'. It should be recognised, however, that the significance of social capital is contested.

There are two distinct schools of thought. One approach, championed by American sociologist, Robert Putnam, argues that providing society is structured in a meritocratic way – then anyone with the right attitude can rise through the social ranks.<sup>20</sup>

This interpretation of social capital tends to inform much of the political debate in the UK at present and particularly so in the Conservative party. As the current Prime Minister, Theresa May, stated following her initial election: 'When it comes to opportunity, we won't entrench the advantages of the fortunate few, we will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.'<sup>21</sup>

Laudable political sentiments such as these can come at a price, however, for those who do not aspire to long-range social mobility or do not have the opportunity to break out from their current situation due to intractable personal, social, economic or cultural constraints.

Indeed, the less optimistic point of view, presented by French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu<sup>22</sup>, considers that social capital is used *instrumentally* by individuals to create, sustain and monopolise their resource. People who are relatively advantaged recognise that there are finite opportunities for social mobility and so ensure that their offspring are well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that are available by loading them up with as much social capital as they can.

<sup>19</sup> See: Jochum, V. (2003) *Social Capital: beyond the theory*. National Council for Voluntary Organisation. See also Office of National Statistics (2001) *Social Capital: a review of the literature*, London: Office of National Statistics; Woolcock, M. (2001) 'The place of social capital in understanding social and economic outcomes', *Isuma*, 2(7): 11-17.

<sup>20</sup> Putnam, R. D. (1993) 'The prosperous community: social capital and public life', *American Prospect*, 4(13): 11-18; Putnam, R. D. (1995) 'Bowling Alone: America's declining social capital', *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1): 65-78; Putnam, R.D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community*, London: Simon and Schuster.

<sup>21</sup> BBC News, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36788782>.

<sup>22</sup> Bourdieu, P. (1988) 'The forms of capital', in J.G. Richardson (ed.) (1988) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Westport: Greenwood Press. Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

One of the ironies surrounding debates on social mobility is that people from the middle classes, who champion the idea of meritocracy, are very effective at maintaining inter-generational 'class stability'.

Building stocks of social capital is costly in economic, social, intellectual and emotional terms. But this may, too often, be overlooked. The next section examines what those costs are, who can meet them, and what advantages they can bring to their children.

### ***A good start in life***

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 and intra-generational 'class stability'.

For a period of time, and especially in the 1960s and 1970s things were different when there was a substantive rise in social mobility. This was partly due to widening access to higher education, but more substantially due to changes in the structure of the labour market where many more professional or semi-professional jobs were created.

Since the 1980s, class stability has been re-established as the growth of new professional or semi-professional occupations declined. This was accompanied by the collapse of heavy industries such as mining, steelmaking and shipbuilding which had, for generations, provided well paid, secure and highly skilled jobs mainly for working-class men.

The divide between 'lovely' and 'lousy' jobs has progressively widened over the last twenty years, has embedded disadvantage in material terms and may have further restricted opportunities for progression in careers.<sup>23</sup> Accessing the most lucrative, secure, interesting and satisfying work has become more difficult in recent decades.

Consequently, more affluent households have had to work harder to give their children a leading advantage. Some of these advantages come more easily to middle-class households because they have the social capital to ensure that their offspring go to private schools or the best state schools locally and thereafter 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 (sometimes known as 'residential sorting'). 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, therefore, that children from more affluent households in County Durham tend to perform better in terms of the attainment of formal qualifications, as was shown in Section 2 of this report.

### ***Investing in children's personal development***

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. This is such an *obvious* point that the mechanisms surrounding such investment is generally overlooked in political debates about improving the chances of children from less advantaged backgrounds.

<sup>23</sup> Standing, G. (2014) *The Precariat: the dangerous new class*, London: Bloomsbury; Stiglitz, J. (2012) *The Price of Inequality: how today's divided society endangers our future*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books; Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2010) *The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

It is, perhaps, ironic that the success of interventions aimed at improving the aspirations, confidence and resilience of less advantaged children and young people is *measured* in formal evaluations. In such research, 'theories of change' are often adopted, where 'causal relationships' between investment and impact are modelled.

At an institutional level, it is understandable that such cost-benefit analyses are highly sought after – because the expense of such programmes needs to be accounted for. But in an individual family it would be surprising (and probably a bit worrying) if investment was monitored quite so closely. To make a bigger point subsequently, it is worth taking a moment to reflect on how much money, time and emotional energy middle-class parents may invest in their children without necessarily producing 'tangible' outcomes.

Indeed, much of the investment could be misconstrued as calamitous failures in cost-benefit terms because children did not persevere in private piano lessons, Rock&Pop classes, karate, after-school Spanish, football and hockey clubs, in-school brass, dance and drama lessons and so on. In addition to this, there are expensive foreign school trips (about which offspring can apparently remember nothing on their return!), the purchase of revision guides that are never opened and acquisition of lever arch files that remain, pristine, on shelves.

Building social capital is an incremental process where children are exposed to a wide range of opportunities. It is not just about *accumulation* of experiences but learning to live with *risk* in a positive way.

But that is not the point. Building social capital is an incremental process where children are exposed to a wide range of opportunities about which they learn something but choose not to continue with. 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 children and 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'.<sup>24</sup>

The key point is that defining which of these many investments made a difference on a young person's journey to a successful future destination in life is very difficult to discern. Furthermore, the value of social capital can never be precisely calculated, nor can it be predicted when or how the value of these assets may be recognised or manifest themselves. Nevertheless, the cumulative value of experiences lay below the surface, providing a sense of security and confidence, a bit like having money in the bank.

The accumulation of personal assets is often profitably associated with the development of personal 'resilience'<sup>25</sup>. A strong sense of resilience on its own does not, however, necessarily indicate an inherent likelihood that people will behave in a socially constructive way. In fact, resilience can be a negative trait when used to *resist* good opportunities rather than accept them.

Young people tend to be socially conservatism at the group level and, especially when at secondary school age, tend to gravitate towards given attitudinal and behavioural norms. The cohesion of the social group is further

<sup>24</sup> An 'internal locus of control' signifies a person's ability to assess opportunities and risk effectively and take appropriate action to capitalise upon them. An externalised locus of control, by contrast, means that explanations for the perceived lack of opportunity or forms of risk aversion are transferred – to 'the system' for example, or to fate or luck. These ideas originate from the research of Rotter, J. (1966) 'Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement', *Psychological Monographs: General & Applied*, 80(1): 1–28.

<sup>25</sup> For a useful critical review of the literature on resilience, see Small, S. and Memmo, M. (2004) 'Contemporary models of youth development and problem prevention: toward an integration of terms, concepts and models', *Family Relations*, 55:1, 3–11.



A majority may accept conformity and 'go along with things' for a quiet life, even if privately it does not suit them. Only the courageous or socially naïve will resist – but they may face consequences – initially at least, although some may benefit in the longer term.

reinforced through comparison with the actual or imagined differences from 'other' young people in neighbouring areas and schools.

Whether in the relatively closed community of a former pit village or a private boarding school, closed communities produce pecking orders. Those members of the group who exert strong influence on appropriate attitudes and behaviours are difficult openly to resist. But this does not mean (apart from a small minority who may become entirely immersed in such a culture and absorb the attitudinal and behavioural dictates of the most influential figures) that everyone wholeheartedly accepts the dominant discourse.

What is more likely to happen is that a majority may 'go along with things' for a quiet life, even if privately it does not suit them. Only the courageous or socially naïve will resist – but they may face consequences – initially at least, although some may benefit in the longer term.

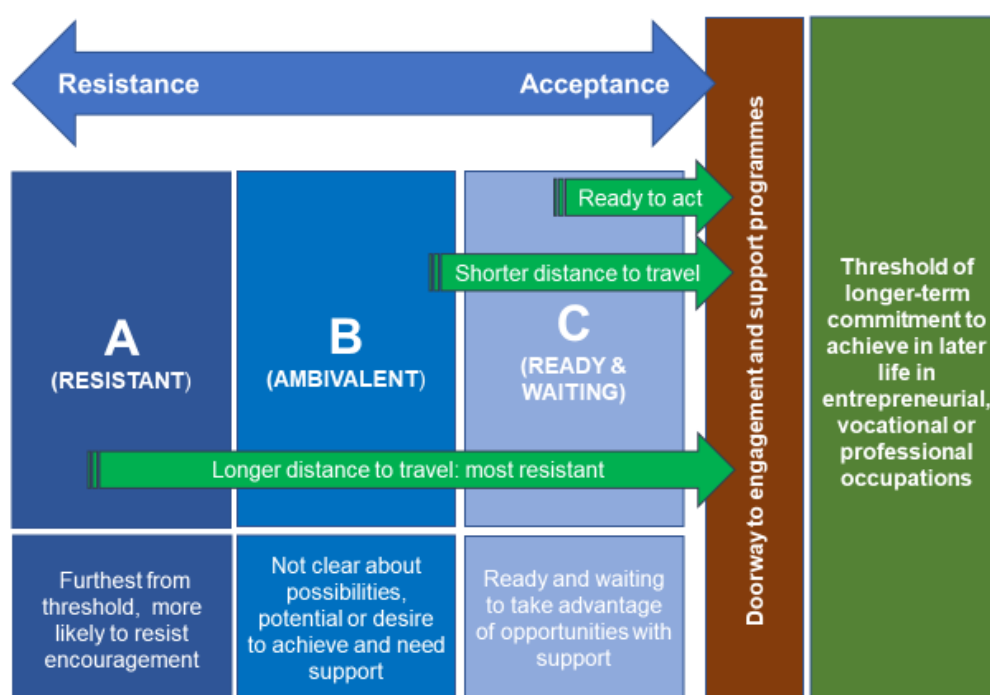
Amongst more affluent social groups, such cultures are more likely to embrace and encourage competition to achieve educational, cultural, recreational and sporting objectives – furthermore, they are likely to be supported and resourced by schools, charities and parents. Young people from less affluent or marginalised communities by contrast have shorter horizons and fewer resources over which to compete – so limiting their social reference to other social opportunities. Cultures can also emerge where resistance to 'authority' or the refusal to accept opportunities by influential members of the group carries social cache.

The attitudinal and behavioural manifestations of these social processes can be 'observed' by outsiders (such as teachers, careers advisors, employers and charity workers). But it is also easy for outsiders to make assumptions that everyone in the group is equally resistant or disinterested in taking up new opportunities.

**The visible cultural 'performance' of some young people in relatively closed communities can conceal what is going on underneath the surface. Their hopes and dreams, stimulated by any number of other influences, may be concealed from others for sound tactical reasons. And even when opportunities that come their way are attractive to them, without strong encouragement and support, they may not dare to take them up – further embedding the view of outsiders that there's little point in presenting the offer in the first place.**

Young people from less advantaged communities have, in short, a *longer road to travel* when making successful life transitions than young people from more affluent communities who are already loaded up with personal assets and a stronger internal locus of control. Figure 3.6 illustrates this point by recognising that potentiality to try new things can be enhanced or limited – depending upon personal circumstance.

Figure 3.6 Journeys across the threshold of change



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.

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.

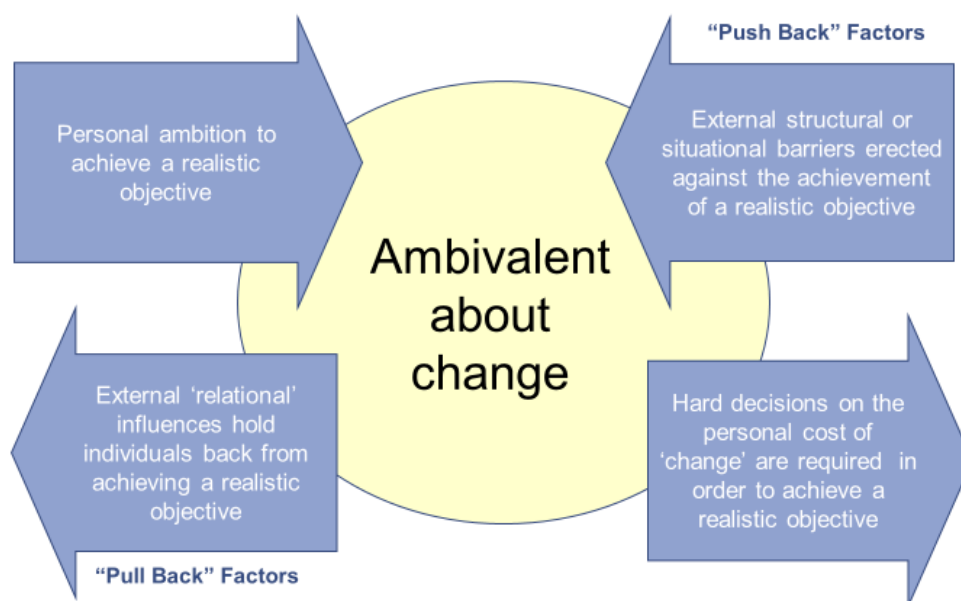
Many more young people in less advantaged areas are likely to occupy position B where ambivalence about change needs to be tackled. A relatively low internal locus of control coupled with the comfort of being able to blame external realities produces a cocktail of excuses not to take a chance and make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

As suggested in Figure 3.7, 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> While it is rarely possible at any moment in time to determine precisely, it is always necessary to consider the importance of temperament and other personality factors in decision making. To be told by a professional or significant other that 'you'll never make it' can bolster the determination of one person but dampen or demolish the ambition of another. It just depends.



Figure 3.7 Push-back and pull-back factors



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.

### Summary of key messages

To reiterate the key message from this analysis, young people from the most affluent households are more likely to have stocks of social capital and a positive sense of personal resilience to take on new challenges because they have been continually tested throughout their lives through a range of well-resourced and supported activities. They are easier to help for this reason.

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.

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.

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?

# 4

## What support do young people get?

The extent of support offered to young people in County Durham to make successful transitions to adult life is enormous. Indeed, it would not be possible fully to convey the breadth and depth of provision and the complexity of interactions between organisations and initiatives without completely losing sight of the purpose of this report.<sup>27</sup>

Rather than being distracted by a technical mapping exercise, it is better simply to recognise that a wide range of organisations from different sectors tackle the same kinds of issues from different standpoints as young people make transitions towards adulthood.

Figure 4.1 **Source of interventions to support young people's life transitions 2012** (excluding the NHS, schools, colleges and universities)

	Chester-Le-Street	Peterlee	Seaham	Consett	Durham City	Stanley	Bishop Auckland	Barnard Castle and Crook	Ferryhill	Newton Aycliffe	Total in County Durham
Durham County Council	4	4	5	6	10	7	5	11	7	2	61
VCS provision	4	9	8	6	20	6	4	4	5	4	70
Community sports	36	30	25	31	69	22	27	48	41	33	362
Uniformed youth provision	9	7	6	9	10	5	5	8	5	7	71
Faith groups	1	1	2	7	12	4	1	2	4	3	37
Arts groups	5	6	5	6	16	5	4	7	9	11	74
Junior clubs	3	5	4	5	8	7	3	2	1	0	38
Community buildings	6	11	9	7	17	7	8	34	17	7	123
Total in each area	68	73	64	77	162	63	57	116	89	67	836

There are two ways of looking at this situation. To take a broadly optimistic stance, it could be claimed that the whole effort of all these organisations is worth more than the sum of the parts. It is not hard to argue that schools, charities, faith groups, health organisations, local authorities, emergency services and businesses all have a stake in helping young people to thrive – making sure that happens is therefore a collective endeavour. And certainly, there are many positive interactions amongst such organisations – as will be explained in this section of the report.

<sup>27</sup> A mapping exercise was undertaken by Durham County Council in 2012 in each of its One Point areas, for example, which listed all provision then funded by the local authority, the third sector, community arts and sport organisations, uniformed youth organisations, faith groups, community buildings/centres, and so on. See Appendix 9: Youth Activities County Durham. While the findings from this scoping exercise are now out of date, it usefully illustrates the range of activity by organisations of different types.

Without being unduly pessimistic, the other point of view is that while these organisations and agencies may share a common desire that young people make successful life transitions, their own interests can get in the way of them working harmoniously to effect a more positive outcome. Rivalry amongst organisations about the best way to achieve good things and competition amongst them to pull together the resources successfully to do their work inevitably brings their interests into conflict.

Such competition over resources can produce some undesirable outcomes for young people. This means that even if organisations practice well internally, their external relationships with other organisations can often undermine the impact of their own efforts – and especially so when young people need to do more than one thing at a time or need to move on to the next stage in their transition to adulthood.

A good way of getting into this topic is to look critically at the way organisations engage in protective behaviours to defend their own interests. This can be defined succinctly as the practice of 'boundary maintenance' – that is, the use of protective mechanisms to preserve organisational advantage.<sup>28</sup> While this section explores some of the difficulties competition and boundary maintenance produce – we do not want readers to lose sight of the fact that there is also a good deal of cooperation amongst organisations in County Durham. In the concluding section of this report, we will return to the issue of how to encourage *more cooperation* and *more effective cooperation*.

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. Consequently, organisations often find it hard to contemplate the idea of sharing or yielding resources or holding back from competing for a bigger slice of the resource cake when opportunities arise.

Boundaries of many kinds can be drawn by organisations, and in tandem, this is often accompanied by the purposeful erection of *barriers* to make these boundaries impermeable. In the following discussion, we discuss four interrelated ways in which this can happen.

### ***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. This means that they are eager to score highly in meeting targets (and most especially so when such information is used for league tables of performance or is tied into funding) and put much energy into communicating their worth to those agencies which fund them now or may fund them in the future.

The imperative to demonstrate effectiveness, and preserve access to resources, can sometimes 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

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<sup>28</sup> There is a large literature on such processes in the context of partnership working. See, for example, Marchington, M. and Vincent, S. (2004) 'Analysing the influence of institutional, organisational and interpersonal forces shaping inter-organisational relations', *Journal of Management Studies*, 41:6, 1029-56; DiMaggio, P.J. and Powell, W.W. (1983) 'The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organisational fields', *American Sociological Review*, 35, 147-60; and, Lowndes, V. and Skelcher, C. (1998) 'The dynamics of multi-organisational partnerships: An analysis of changing modes of governance', *Public Administration*, 76: 313-333.

amongst those which are addressing very similar issues in similar ways, are hardened.

In the education sector, for example, we found many examples of educational institutions which worked very hard to distinguish themselves from other institutions in reputational terms. This is understandable because these organisations must maintain student numbers to remain financially viable.

Competition has become, arguably, endemic in the education sector as schools, colleges and universities vie with each other to achieve their enrolment targets. Furthermore, to meet their own or externally imposed performance targets, educational establishments must ensure that they recruit students of sufficient capability and motivation successfully to complete their studies.

Similarly, in the voluntary sector, where organisations and groups are in competition for grants and contracts to deliver services to young people, individual TSOs work hard to communicate the distinctiveness and effectiveness of their practice. We find that organisations which, broadly speaking, work in very similar ways with young people are often the most likely to be at odds with each other in relationship terms.

**Competition makes organisations become less trusting of each other – and 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.**

As is the case in the education sector, thinly veiled accusations that similar organisations working in proximate or the same locations were poaching young people from them are commonplace. There is little that can be done about this for as long as funding agencies push organisations into direct competition with each other to access finite financial resources. But we think it produces an additional consequence – that organisations become less trusting of each other – and 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.

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 their own 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.

It is not uncommon for colleges of further education to complain, for example, that at careers information days they find that their contribution is marginalised by feeder schools. This can happen in subtle ways (where young people are not dissuaded from a course of action but may not be made aware of the potential advantages they may gain by moving in that direction).

Secondly, it seems to be the case that 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.

In the third sector, for example, we find that some local organisations which lay claim to being very close to their communities find it hard to communicate to young people the advantages they may gain from moving on to another organisation (and especially so if they work in a different spatial area).

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 path ahead are too difficult to traverse, or worse, do not even let them know that a pathway exists.

Quite rightly, practice preferences are adhered to with pride by organisations, but there can be a downside to this. In our interviews, organisations were often openly disparaging about the quality of service delivered by other agencies or organisation which operated upstream or downstream from them. Common assertions included the failure of 'other' organisations to tackle issues 'they offer a helpline, write it down, and that's it' or, conversely, state that other organisations cannot or are not prepared to cater adequately for their constituency of young people.

Organisations sometimes distance themselves from others in practice terms and cast doubts on their effectiveness. For example, when youth organisations claim that other organisations, groups or agencies 'just hand out a few leaflets', 'all they do is a website', or that 'they are terrified to go down to the woods'.<sup>29</sup>

In some cases, organisations become aggrieved that proximate youth organisations have been doing quite well financially in comparative terms. Sometimes explanations for such disparities manifested themselves in conspiratorial terms – asserting that other organisations had too 'cosy' relationships with elected Members and public sector officers or that the organisation had 'pulled the wool over the eyes' of a charitable foundation.

Competition, in short, doesn't always bring the best out of people.

### ***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.

The ambition or imperative to work effectively to address issues may be established internally by the organisation (as in the case of a youth charity which wants to achieve a specific objective) or can be imposed externally (when, for example, government sets targets which must be achieved by education and public-sector organisations). 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.

A related problem is that the incumbents of such credentials may, consciously or otherwise be conceived to have lower levels of capability,

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<sup>29</sup> In our interviews with organisations working in several locations across County Durham, respondents referred to young people congregating in isolated out of town or village areas, often in woods, to engage in illicit drinking, substance misuse or sexual activity and that this often happened because there was nowhere else to go where they would not be 'moved on'.

motivation or aspiration (when the reality may be that the achievement of such an award, against the odds, may be regarded as something of triumph for them). The result can be that young people are either not encouraged or purposefully discouraged from taking the next step on their journey.

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, employability training and low quality work experience programmes from which they find it hard to escape. It has been recognised that this is, in part, a structural problem where transitions from institution to institution can be driven by risk of sanction by benefit agencies. Consequently, a major programme, DurhamWorks, is attempting to break out from this unsatisfactory cycle.<sup>30</sup>

Organisations need resources to maintain their capability and capacity to continue as entities. In a sustained period of austerity, this has been difficult for many organisations which work closely with young people. In County Durham, several organisations in the third sector have been unable, for example, to continue delivering services at the same level as was once the case and some organisations have closed.

Loss of financial resource and/or a sense that organisations have had to work much harder to stand still in financial terms has undoubtedly impacted on the confidence and resolve of some charities and less formal youth and community groups. We were told by several organisations that they were annoyed that they had lost core funding from the public sector, that they were 'sick of everything being short term' and that they were in constant 'survival mode' instead of being able to plan for the future.

These are all justifiable concerns at the level of the individual organisation which has suffered financial hardship recently. But there is some good evidence to show that, in the north of England as a whole, income has not fallen away more steeply for TSOs attending to the interests of young people when compared with other charities. As Table 4.2 shows, when the situation of charities of varying sizes is considered, some interesting differences emerge.

Larger charities catering for the needs of children and young people were more likely to have rising income (24%) than other large charities (20%) but were equally likely to have falling income (22-23%). The situation of medium and smaller children and young people charities, by contrast, varied little from other organisations. It should, nevertheless, be noted that small TSOs supporting children and young people were much less likely to have experienced significantly rising income (12%) compared with larger TSOs (24%).

<sup>30</sup> For more detail, see: <https://durhamworks.info/>.



Table 4.2 **Financial situation of TSOs of different sizes which serve the interests of children and young people** (North of England 2016)

	Small TSOs (income under £50,000)		Medium TSOs (income £50,001-£250,000)		Larger TSOs (income above £250,001)		All TSOs	
	TSOs serving children and young people	Other TSOs	TSOs serving children and young people	Other TSOs	TSOs serving children and young people	Other TSOs	TSOs serving children and young people	Other TSOs
TSOs with significantly rising income	11.7	12.1	17.9	17.6	23.6	19.7	16.0	14.9
TSOs with relatively stable income	74.3	74.1	58.7	60.3	53.1	58.3	65.4	67.8
TSOs with significantly falling income	14.1	13.8	23.4	22.1	23.3	22.0	18.6	17.3
N=	738	1,183	346	438	339	451	1,423	2,072

Due to smaller sample sizes, it is not feasible to use Third Sector Trends data to examine the situation in County Durham. It has, however, been possible to undertake analysis of the changing financial situation of children and young people charities operating in County Durham using Charity Commission data.

We have analysed the financial situation of 135 charities which are recorded on the register as operating in County Durham which state that they serve the interests of children and young people.<sup>31</sup> It is evident that there has been relatively little change over the last five years (2011-12 to 2015-16).

Overall, there has been a decline in children and young people charity income in the county of 1% since 2012-12 to £48.3m. However, when the situation of charities with rising or falling income is compared, some interesting evidence emerges. Amongst those charities which experienced declining finances, there was a fall of 40% in income compared with a 38% increase in income for those charities in a stronger financial position.

Table 4.3 **Financial wellbeing of charities supporting children and young people in County Durham**

	Total income first record*	Total income last record	Change in income between first and last record	Change as a percentage of last record
Charities with falling income (n=64)	£34,220,118	£24,886,225	-£9,333,893	-39.6%
Charities with rising income (n=70)	£14,501,745	£23,388,663	£8,886,918	+38.0%
All youth charities (n=134)	£48,721,863	£48,274,888	-£446,975	-0.9%

\*For some organisations there was incomplete financial data between 2011-16, in which case, the first or last recorded financial return data were used for the analysis.

<sup>31</sup> Public schools, university colleges and hospitals are excluded from the analysis.

Further analysis was undertaken on a sub-sample of 35 third sector organisations operating in County Durham which are primarily focused on youth issues (excluding schools and colleges) using Charity Commission charity finance data for the last five years. It is evident from Table 4.4 that income in the sample of youth charities has fallen over the last five years from £17.9m to £15.6m.

This finding should not come as a surprise, given that public sector investment in the youth sector (and the third sector in general) has fallen substantially since 2010.<sup>32</sup> Table 4.4 then compares the financial situation of charities with rising or falling income over the last five years. Amongst the 16 youth charities which had falling income over the period, collective income fell by 28%, while charities with rising income collectively experienced an overall increase of 37% in income.

Table 4.4 **Financial wellbeing of youth charities in County Durham**

	Total income first record	Total income last record	Change in income between first and last record	Change as a percentage of last record ( <i>all CPY charities in parentheses</i> )
Charities with falling income (n=16)	£12,848,561	£9,308,506	-£3,540,055	-27.5% (-39.6%)
Charities with rising income (n=19)	£4,528,626	£6,190,769	£1,662,143	36.7% (38.0%)
All youth charities (n=35)	£17,936,138	£15,561,519	-£2,374,619	-13.3% (-0.9%)

These data are used to bring debate into proportion. Many TSOs in County Durham have faced serious financial problems, while others have been experienced a substantive uplift in their resources.

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. Furthermore, 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 the overarching objectives such as:

- Promoting entrepreneurship, business growth and inward investment to increase the number and quality of jobs in the county.
- Enhancing the quality of educational and training provision to ensure that the county has a sufficiently motivated, skilled and agile workforce.
- Developing conducive conditions for the county to flourish, through investment in transport infrastructure, housing, amenity, community safety and natural environment.

<sup>32</sup> See NCVO Civil Society Almanac 2017: <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac17/income-data/>.



- Ensuring that the health and wellbeing of the county's population are well catered for and that policies are in place to prevent, remedy or alleviate conditions.
- Encourage the development of tolerance and cohesion and tackle those factors which produce, embed and reproduce social, cultural or economic inequalities.

To effect overarching priorities, responsibilities are allocated or assumed by a range of public, private and third sector organisations. In the public sector, accountability falls to specific institutions or departments within large institutions such as the Local Authority, NHS health trusts, Police, Fire and Ambulance authorities, and so on.

This usually involves the generation of a second, third or fourth level of policy and strategy which concentrate on more or less discrete issues. As policies become more focused on specificities, the more likely it is that teams of staff in the authorities, agencies or organisations which are tasked to deliver them cement boundaries around their activities.

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. That complexity can be compounded by the disciplinary ethos of professions which produces discrete practice preferences; and these differences can be exaggerated by competition amongst disciplines to access the resources to get their work done the best way they can.

The proliferation of claims and counter claims over resources of people, ideas and money is inevitable in big organisations (just as is the case amongst large and small organisations across sectors). All too easily, the imperative to achieve shared objectives can become a secondary priority to the retention or acquisition of resource within departments or organisations. Everyone knows this but talking about and accepting responsibility for the consequences is very difficult.

Specifically, there are many policies in County Durham which have been devised to address the interests of children and young people. They are owned by a range of organisations across sectors. And within larger public-sector organisations, responsibilities to attend to such policies are shared by many internal departments.

It is not necessary, and indeed may be counterproductive, to map or dissect these policies here, as that would distract attention from the principal purpose of the report – which is to find new ways of 'thinking about', 'talking about' and 'doing something about' improving interactions amongst organisations to enhance support for young people.<sup>33</sup>

While we do not intend to examine policy in detail, we cannot ignore the shift in emphasis by Durham County Council from 'universal youth work' provision to a more 'targeted' approach because this has produced a lot of political 'noise' in the interviews we have undertaken. Aligned with complaints about loss of funding in general, many organisations in all sectors (and especially those which are in a precarious financial situation) argue that support for young people, in policy circles, has been 'downgraded' in recent years.

**All too easily, the imperative to achieve shared objectives can become a secondary priority to the retention or acquisition of resource within departments or organisations. Everyone knows this but talking about and accepting responsibility for the consequences is very difficult.**

<sup>33</sup> In the process of this research, a major trawl of policies was undertaken to ensure that we understood what the key priorities, strategies and policies are in County Durham and who holds responsibility to attend to them. But this project was not designed to undertake a 'mapping exercise' on policy or, through a process of policy analysis, to dissect consistencies and inconsistencies within the broader strategic framework. This would be counterproductive as the publication of such analysis would be more likely to harden boundaries and barriers between providers than to soften them. We maintain that finding new ways of 'thinking about' underpinning narratives and relationships is more important.

The shift from a universal youth service to targeted support by Durham County Council in 2012 was often referred to critically by interviewees. Claims were often made that ‘generalised’ youth work brought many advantages especially (and perhaps ironically, as this suggests an argument for targeting provision) in hard pressed, marginalised or isolated communities. The efficacy of continuing with universal youth provision was, perhaps, hard to justify in a period of austerity. But an in-depth exploration of the ‘ideas’ underpinning the principle of targeted youth services has revealed some problems.

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).

Such claims may not be altogether true. *DurhamWorks*, for example, a major programme operating in County Durham which is funded primarily by the European Union specifically aims to connect the development of soft skills with the acquisition of formal educational or vocational credentials and tangible employment outcomes.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, critics of the shift in youth policy often argue that targeting has shifted the focus of policy interventions away from the ‘young person’ to ‘family-centred’ interventions. There is more than a grain of truth in such claims. 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’.

One of the drivers to do so is, undoubtedly, ‘funding led’ – by national government initiatives to tackle ‘troubled families’. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that in County Durham, practitioners have been doing a good job in this respect, through the use of integrated cross-departmental and cross-institutional provision in its ‘team around the family’ initiatives.

Some awkward questions remain, however, about the ‘principle’ of targeting. Firstly, 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? The location, character and intensity of social problems surrounding young people and families may change over time – but it is unlikely that they could ever be eradicated – so attending to these issues will always be a priority that cannot be avoided. In this sense it is not, strictly speaking, targeting – but a case of necessarily attending to an urgent issue.

Secondly, and consequentially, has the impetus to focus resources in a targeted way led to, or even justified 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? Several of our interviewees have asserted that the interests of those young people from hard-pressed but not ‘problem’ families are being neglected. Evidence in Section 2 of this report on school achievement lends further support to this argument and we think that this is an issue requiring more debate.

Targeting need is important, providing that the right people are targeted.

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<sup>34</sup> The DurhamWorks programme is currently being evaluated by York Consulting. That project has been running in parallel with the current research and has involved sharing and discussion of findings.

## ***Spatially driven boundaries and barriers***

County Durham has a large land mass and its social geography is varied. As shown in Section 2, there are some areas which are characterised by their affluence while others are amongst the poorest in the country. Many areas which suffer from multiple deprivation<sup>35</sup> in the county share some common characteristics.

Often these communities were largely reliant upon one employer, usually in coal mining or heavy engineering, and when those industries collapsed, the economic, cultural and social fabric of the area was badly damaged. Isolated areas generally have limited facilities, poorer public transport, fewer jobs. Often, nothing much can be done about these things and that can make problems feel intractable.

There are many such communities which have suffered a similar fate across in the UK. But what differentiates County Durham to some extent is that former mining communities were spatially isolated. Even before industries collapsed, such communities tended to be 'close knit'. This commonly used term captures a number of social processes surrounding the relative social isolation and introspection of industrial townships. While once dominant industries are gone, the cultural archaeology of such areas casts a long shadow - within and *beyond* these communities.

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 – as has been explained in previous chapters. In areas which are also spatially isolated, the effect of disadvantage can be aggravated. This is widely recognised by people in those communities which suffer multiple disadvantage and by policy makers and practitioners from outside these areas who wish to do something about it.

One of the problems that we have encountered in our work, however, is that commonly used arguments surrounding the 'double jeopardy' such isolated and less affluent areas suffer have become somewhat simplified. It troubles us that fatalistic arguments 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.<sup>36</sup>

But surely everyone would agree that just because something is *difficult*, it does not necessarily mean that *nothing can be done*? However, in our work, we have continually come across arguments which suggest the contrary to be the case. We now need to explain how this happens, what its consequences are, and what needs to be done about it.

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.

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<sup>35</sup> Details on how the Indices of Multiple Deprivation are determined can be found here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/465791/English\\_Indices\\_of\\_Deprivation\\_2015\\_-\\_Statistical\\_Release.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/465791/English_Indices_of_Deprivation_2015_-_Statistical_Release.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> The term 'cultural inertia' sounds negative – but this is not necessarily the case. Areas which have very vibrant economies and have positive attitudes about embracing opportunities and change continually reproduce their success because they have the 'momentum' to keep going. Negative cultural inertia is a process where places find good arguments to limit the possibility of moving forward. This does not mean that either positive or negative cultural inertia is permanent or inevitable. Places can and do turn themselves around when they have faced long periods of decline. For a more detailed explanation of these ideas, see Chapman, T. (2011) 'Smoke and Mirrors: The Influence of Cultural Inertia on Social and Economic Development in a Polycentric Urban Region', *Urban Studies*, 48(5), 037-1058.

It is common for people who run projects in isolated areas to say “we tried, but it didn’t work’. The danger is that the burden of responsibility for failure is placed on young people, rather than on the *failed project* which needs to be rethought

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* is a pernicious problem because it 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 by default. For example, it is common to hear people who run programmes or projects for young people in isolated areas to say that “we tried, but it didn’t work’. Actually, there’s nothing wrong with saying this. If something didn’t work, and it is understood why that was the case, then this is fine – don’t do it again. But 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.

We have also often heard the refrain, ‘we tried, we put things on for them, but they didn’t come’ as an excuse for not trying again. Surely, though, the big question should be – ‘why did they not come’? Was it social pressure from influential individuals in their peer group that dissuaded them? Did they not know that it was happening? Was the timing not right? Was something more interesting on offer elsewhere? Was it not attractive to them for some reason? Did it demand that they achieved more than they felt they were ready to at this stage? Should we go to get them, take it to them or *make them do it*?<sup>37</sup>

Some organisations make little effort to connect with young people from less affluent and spatially isolated or socially marginalised communities. There is a host of good reasons for not doing so such as the expense, the distance, the problems of accessing young people. Some explanations are subtle by, for example, assuming that ‘they’ would not want to do things our way, that ‘they’ may disturb the equilibrium for our staff or volunteers or other young people who are involved in what we do.

Communicating such arguments publicly could be socially discrediting for these organisations – and especially if they are charities which lay claim to be there to offer support to all young people. Consequently, we have encountered the arguments such as this: ‘if they wanted to come, of course we’d find a way of making that happen – we’d find the money and make sure that nobody else knew they couldn’t afford it.’

It is a poor argument to assert that ‘we’d do something, but we’re waiting for young people to beat a path to our door’ when an organisation is secure in the knowledge that this is unlikely ever to happen. It is a conceit for an organisation to imagine that they can meet the needs of everyone. Some approaches to practice undoubtedly will *attract* some young people but also *repel* others.

Such arguments are not limited to isolated communities, but their impact tends to be much stronger because there may be nothing much else going on in the area to support young people. Indeed, this lack of alternatives sits at the heart of the problem. If there are *too few* stepping stones available for young people to use to try out new things and move forward, the more likely that they will remain stuck on the one side of the river.

<sup>37</sup> Affluent households are particularly adept at ‘making their children do things’ as has been explained in Chapter 2 and will be discussed further in the conclusion. Pushing their children through such pain barriers may not be easy, can be expensive and is often unwelcome – and sometimes it may have negative results – but having a *wide range* of experiences, (some good, some indifferent, some bad) is crucial in building a strong internal locus of control.

What are the consequences for young people in less affluent and spatially isolated areas? The answer 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.

It goes without saying that more needs to be done – but this is difficult in a climate of austerity. In some places a lot is happening, in others not. Where big ideas have been generated and significant investment is being made, as is the case for example in Bishop Auckland, we can watch to see what difference this makes over time.<sup>38</sup> In other areas where there is an absence of major investment, and self-belief, vision and action can be somewhat lacking – so much so that even the good things that are going on can be overlooked – such is the burden of cultural inertia.

Negative stories about places and 'typical behaviours' can make them identifiable to its residents and outsiders. But we have to remember that places are *full of people and families* who, in private, make sense of their *own* lives in different ways. And young people, relatively new to the world, will necessarily see things their own way and frame their aspirations and ambitions accordingly. External or internal stigmatisation of whole communities is a bit daft when you think about it this way. So, the focus needs to shift.

## **Summary**

This chapter has shown that organisations draw boundaries around their work and can 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 so that they can work towards shared goals. The next chapter explores how this could happen.

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<sup>38</sup> The Auckland Castle Trust has been established to make long-term investment in Bishop Auckland involving substantive renovation of existing buildings and the development of new visitor attractions. The project includes substantive investment in young people in the local area through volunteering, apprenticeship and employability programmes. For more details, see: <http://www.aucklandcastle.org/>

# 5

## Working towards shared objectives

### ***Fresh thinking about good working relationships***

The previous section of this report shows that organisations from all sectors, which support young people inject a good deal of energy in defending their territory. It has been shown how they work hard to show that their approach to practice is efficacious and why it should be their organisation that is adequately funded.

People who lead organisations must attend to financial issues to ensure that they maintain the operational capacity and capability to work effectively. Perhaps, too often, organisational leaders feel that they are forcibly pitched into competition with each other or feel obliged to enter into marriages of convenience to secure scarce resources.

Certainly, these are 'pinch points' which can be charged with emotional energy and can be quite traumatic - consequently, they tend to stick in the mind. It is, therefore, not surprising that it has been quite hard for us to get people to talk *positively* about relationships with other organisations.

Pursuing this topic with some perseverance, however, we find that organisations rub along together fairly well. And when things are running more or less as normal, we can confirm that serving the interests of young people is in the fore of the minds of organisational leaders and practitioners in all sectors.

This section of this report aims to look at the issue of harmonious working relationships with fresh eyes. Rather than thinking about *formal partnership working* as a blanket remedy – we think that more serious questions need to be asked about what is understood by partnership, when it needs to happen, how partnerships are best configured for specific purposes, and what might reasonably be achieved by them?

### ***The partnership imperative***

During the period of Labour government between 1997-2010, a good deal of emphasis was placed on building partnerships to improve social outcomes. At high level Ministerial briefings, it was commonplace to hear advocates expounding the value of 'joined up working', 'joined up thinking' and breaking down 'silo mentalities'.

The Labour government funnelled enormous amounts of money into partnership working through a wide range of initiatives such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. But government investment in such initiatives came with expectations attached – such as the demand that local strategic partnerships were established in all local authority areas to include representatives from all sectors.

Initially, government was quite relaxed about assessing the impact of partnership working. The 25 year strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, for example, emphasised the importance of soft outcomes which could only be realised in the long term. Government was also amenable to the idea that ideas should be 'bottom up', emerging from communities according to their local needs rather than 'top down' from local or national government.



But that approach did not last long.<sup>39</sup> The government soon started to import 'performance management' strategies, which had been developed mainly in the health and education sectors, into all other areas of partnership driven social and community intervention.<sup>40</sup> Hundreds of targets were devised which had to be reported upon to justify government spending and, increasingly, they focused on short-term 'measurable' wins to the detriment of the long-term gains that were initially hoped for.

Assessments of how well those partnerships worked in achieving outcomes were often unflattering and the issue became something of a political football. And so, when Labour was replaced by a Coalition government in 2010 – the appetite for investing in state-funded formal partnership working more or less evaporated. A strong and sustained commitment to 'austerity measures' by successive governments since then has dramatically eroded the resource base of public sector bodies. This, in turn, had a knock-on effect for many third sector organisations.

In such a climate, it is hardly surprising that many organisations in the public sector and third sector have battened down their hatches to weather a long storm. Surviving is hard work – so many organisations may have become more introspective in their outlook – choosing partnership arrangements only when it really works for them.

Local authorities were relieved of their statutory duty to maintain local strategic partnerships shortly after the Coalition government took over from Labour.<sup>41</sup> Many withered or folded quite quickly when there was insufficient internal purpose or commitment to sustain them. Others (as is the case in County Durham) have survived – or perhaps 'more than survived' – because they encapsulate shared interest and have the internal momentum to keep going even in the face of austerity.

Underneath the overarching County Durham Partnership, there are five discrete partnership boards which address the following issues: economic development, health and wellbeing, children and young people, community safety, the environment.<sup>42</sup> Higher level strategic partnerships function to bring together organisations from across the private, public and third sectors to debate and construct feasible strategies to tackle challenges and capitalise upon new opportunities. By focusing on the 'big picture' they can help to cut across those issues which sometimes pitch organisations against each other and make sense of what needs to happen.

Below them are a range of thematically and spatially oriented partnerships – such as the Area Action Partnerships which are situated in districts. Their purpose is not merely to cascade edicts from above, but to respond to local needs purposefully whilst still aligning with higher level strategies for the county as a whole. Levels of engagement with thematic and area-based partnerships are strong – and the county has done well to sustain them – often against the odds

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<sup>39</sup> The strategy for neighbourhood renewal was outlined in this document: Cabinet Office (2001) *A new commitment to neighbourhood renewal: National strategy action plan*, London: HMSO. Useful critical commentaries on the investment in partnership working include: Harris, M., Cairnes, B. and Hutchinson, R. (2004) 'So many tiers, so many agendas, so many pots of money': the challenge of English regionalization for voluntary and community organization'. *Social Policy and Administration*, 38(3): 325-340; Kelly, J. (2007) Reforming public services in the UK: bringing in the third sector. *Public Administration*, 85(4), 1003-22; Milbourne, L. (2009) 'Remodelling the Third Sector: Advancing collaboration or competition in community based initiatives', *Journal of Social Policy*, 38 (2): 277-297; Powell, M. (2007) *Understanding the Mixed Economy of Welfare*, Bristol: Policy Press; and, Sinclair, S. (2011) 'Partnership or presence? Exploring the complexity of community planning', *Local Government Studies*, 37:1, 77-92.

<sup>40</sup> A raft of targets were defined and monitored in all areas of social and public policy. The achievement of targets, by definition, had to be measured. This gave greater credence to the government's commitment to pragmatism in its adoption of the 'what works' approach – which was underpinned by a relatively crude form of cost-benefit analysis.

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed account of these policy changes see: Sandford, M. (2013) *The Abolition of Regional Government*, London: House of Commons Library.

<sup>42</sup> More detail on the County Durham Partnership can be found here: <http://www.countydurhampartnership.co.uk/>

But it doesn't always work perfectly, and especially so if strategic debate is built on soft foundations. Debates on young people's successful transitions to adulthood is a case in point. As discussed in this report, a national fixation with young people's 'low aspirations' for nearly 20 years has skewed debate towards social interventions which may not always have made much of a positive difference to young people's lives – and indeed, may in some cases have made the situation worse.

At county and locality level, a commonly accepted and continually repeated belief that young people 'lack aspiration' has had damaging consequences for the way that organisations approach issues individually and collectively. It is time that the county had a proper conversation about this.

### ***Many hands make light work***

In our study of County Durham, we have come across 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 at close quarters, in confidential interviews, many organisations which have 'signed up' to partnership working are quick to share their misgivings. Technically speaking, most 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'. We have seen this 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.

While partnership is a 'warm word', evoking notions of shared interest, mission and cooperative behaviour – the reality can often be different.<sup>43</sup> The danger of making this observation is that a negative perspective on *all* partnership working might be assumed – but this is not our intention. Instead, we think it is important to draw analytical distinctions between partnership configurations and think about which of them may work best in specific circumstances.

### ***Rethinking the purpose of partnership***

We think it is useful to draw distinctions between four 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.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See Chapman, T., Mawson, J., Robinson, F. and Wistow, J. (2018) *How to work effectively with the third sector: a discussion paper for public sector organisations*, Durham: Institute for Local Governance.

<sup>44</sup> These categories are not mutually exclusive. Larger TSOs are likely to engage in *all* these kinds of relationships at any one time and will feel comfortable about doing so. These definitions of levels of partnership or complementary working were first developed in the context of a study of public, private and third sector organisations working in national and cross-national contexts. See Lindsey, I. and Chapman, T. (2017) *Enhancing the Contribution of Sport to the Sustainable Development Goals*, London: Commonwealth Books, 24-28.



- **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.<sup>45</sup> 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:

- **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.

- **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 we think that 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.

<sup>45</sup> See: <http://www.goodcareerguidance.org.uk/be-inspired>.

Individual organisations and agencies cannot achieve everything they want to for young people on their own. This report indicates that many organisations attend to the interests of constituencies of young people in different ways. But the ways organisations relate to each informally or formally cannot easily be mapped out - as if there were a structured and coherent web of patterned interactions. Nor could such a structure be imposed upon organisations because they all enjoy a measure of autonomy to do things their own way, and to compete for resources and/or to work with whom they choose.

### ***The strength of weak ties***<sup>46</sup>

The implicit incoherence of most inter-organisational relationships should not be regarded, of itself, 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.<sup>47</sup>

Funding bodies, policy makers and practitioners should learn how to value '**the strength of weak ties**' between organisations rather than trying to nail everything down strategically, structurally and procedurally.

**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).

Public sector organisations, for example, necessarily align to practice principles which are grounded in expectations about fairness in the distribution of services and rewards, and know that they can be called to account if they get things wrong. This does not mean, however, that when they work alongside or with third sector organisations that they can demand or expect them to work in the same way.

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?

<sup>46</sup> The term is borrowed from an article published in the early 1970s on social network theory which focused empirically on conflicts between highly coherent groups of individuals. While my usage of the term is somewhat different from that proposed by Mark Granovetter, the underlying principles are similar in that a distinction is drawn between the strong ties found in close-knit embedded relationships which can exclude others, and 'weak ties' across less close-knit acquaintance group relationships with diverse interests: '[i]f the innovativeness of central units is shackled by vested intellectual interests (or perspectives) then new ideas must emanate from the margins of the network.' (p.460). See Granovetter, M. (1977) 'The strength of weak ties', *American Journal of Sociology*,

<sup>47</sup> Bureaucratic rationality, as sociologist Max Weber pointed out more than a hundred years ago, can create systems which are neat, systematic, rational and even beautiful – but achieve very little. Weber, M. (1978) *Economy and Society: an outline of interpretive sociology*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, Volume 2.

# 6

## Putting ideas into action

This report has two purposes.

- Firstly, to explain why commonly used ‘narratives’ about young people’s aspirations and ambitions may be misleading or false and offer new ways of thinking about the social and personal processes surrounding life transitions.
- Secondly, and with this alternative perspective in mind, to think about how organisations can work together more effectively to support young people to make successful life transitions.

This concluding section begins by reviewing the principal conclusions reached about young people’s aspirations and ambitions and then offers some suggestions for policy makers and practitioners to help them reframe ideas about the way they support young people in County Durham.

### ***Unrecognised aspirations and thwarted ambitions***

There is no compelling evidence to show that young people in County Durham lack life aspirations or ambition as is commonly believed. Their ability to achieve them, however, is dependent upon many factors – some of which are beyond their control.

More advantaged young people experience enormous levels of investment in their personal development. Their families provide them with a home and community environment which is conducive to success in the formal education system. With the support of family and other social institutions, they are able to try out and experience many things and take positive risks without fear of consequence.

This helps them to develop a stronger internal locus of control, enables them to recognise where their strengths lie and to draw upon them in a confident and productive way. Affluent families can afford to provide a ‘safety net’ for young people when they take positive risks and are less likely to refer to ‘wasted money’, ‘effort’ or ‘time’ when things don’t work out as initially desired.

Less advantaged young people may face a dearth of opportunities, very limited investment in their development and are hampered by pre-conceived expectations by organisations which serve (or should serve) them. Failure is recognised much more readily when young people’s diet of opportunities is severely restricted and its cost can weigh heavily on young people and their families. Fear of failure and risk aversion can be established quickly in such circumstances and can reduce young people’s ability to identify or capitalise upon opportunities that are available to them.

Too much debate about the presumed lack of aspiration of less advantaged young people has produced a ‘deficit’ model which emphasises what they ‘lack’ rather than recognising what they *have* or *should* have. Observers continually use exceptional examples of failure, obduracy or disruptive behaviour to justify these notions, with the result that the interests of many capable and potentially willing young people are neglected. This report shows *conclusively* that less advantaged young people in County Durham are no

more likely to lack confidence in their own ability than their more affluent counterparts – so why are they being allowed to perform less well?

Flawed narratives about less advantaged young people's aspirations have skewed the focus of many interventions which were designed to help them. Too often it is felt that a single intervention is enough to compensate for comparative disadvantage and then if young people fail to succeed, they bear the burden of blame. It has been argued that this is unfair and that this has arisen because observers have not fully considered or attended to those factors which could help young people to secure successful life transitions.

### ***Thinking about what needs to be done?***

This report has shown that many young people in County Durham are doing less well than they should in achieving positive life transitions. The evidence shows up clearly in statistics about educational and training performance and employment destinations that this is the case. But the evidence also shows that County Durham is not, against most measures, far out of line with national averages – and indeed in some ways, the county is doing better than other areas.

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. Furthermore, supporting young people is not just an individual endeavour in County Durham. 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, of course, organisations which support young people *want* to do more. We find 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 some 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.

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.

Furthermore, if providers pander to funders' tendency to over ambition and thereby promise more than they can achieve – the problem intensifies. There is a risk that funders and delivery organisations end up feeling cross with each other, feeling that investment and effort has produced mediocre outcomes.

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

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.



a life-changing triumph. Funders and practitioners need to learn how to value that which *has* value.

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 predictable. 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*.

The danger of celebrating 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.

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.

As we have remarked several times in this report, the game is not all over at the age of 18. 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.

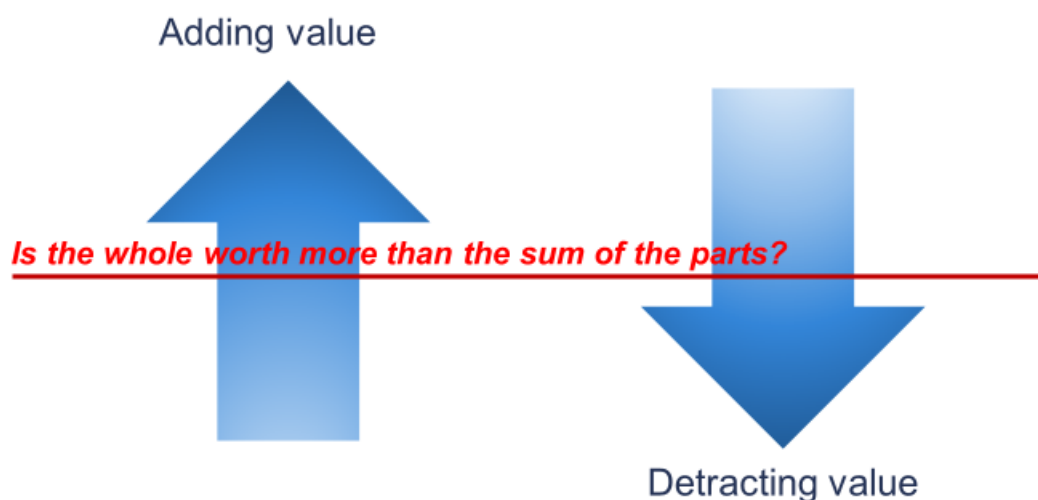
### ***Many hands make light work?***

Many young people in County Durham are not achieving as much as they should. It is not because they lack aspiration or confidence in their own ability. It is to do with factors that hold them back or push them back from achieving what they could. These factors are largely associated with their more limited opportunities when compared with those afforded to young people from more affluent backgrounds. Some of these factors, unfortunately, are also closely associated with the way that organisations, whose job it is to help young people, operate. These are issues that the county needs to think about, talk about and do something more about.

We have also argued that no one organisation can sort out the issues that hold young people back from achieving their aspirations and ambitions. This is because, in the process of developing a strong internal locus of control, young people need to be exposed to many experiences and influences which will impact upon them in unpredictable ways. It doesn't matter, we have argued, if young people lose interest in some things or flounder in others – providing that they build up stocks of social capital which help them to keep going in the next thing they try. If many seeds are sewn, the greater chance that some of them will grow.

Looking at County Durham, many organisations in the public sector, education sector, private sector and third sector have a stake in ensuring that young people make successful life transitions. If it is accepted that none of them can do everything on their own, *which we must*, then it is necessary to think about the value of all contributions in a collective sense. So this is a big question that the county needs to talk about: is the whole worth *more* than the value of the sum of the parts? And if not, what can be done about it?

It is not, unfortunately, going to be a simple yes/no answer because some of the collective activity may 'detract value' while other things may 'add value' (see Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 **Complex outcomes when organisations work towards the same objectives**

### ***Detracting value***

Organisations that support young people to make positive life transitions from all sectors tend to be ambitious to achieve great things. We do not want ambition to be thwarted. But we recognise that value can be detracted by competition between organisations over the claims about the value of what they want to do, the financial resources they need to do it, and over access to young people to work with. This competition can also be fuelled by the way that funding bodies allocate resources – and can also result in other negative outcomes such as the proliferation of interventions to achieve similar things for the same young people.

Funders and providers 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'. This report argues that 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.

If the desired outcomes of programmes are disproportionate 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 also 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.

### ***Adding value***

Many organisations, from across the public, education, private and third sectors work well together now. There are many good structures and partnerships which aid interaction and there is momentum in the system. But there is also room to build on what has been achieved already.

Working together to achieve common objectives is a good thing – providing that this is done sensibly. A 'community' of practice is just that – a group of organisations with similar interests pursuing similar objectives. 'Communion' can rarely, if ever, be achieved – and if this is the aim it usually involves heavy doses of discipline and constraint that can be counterproductive.

It is better when tasks are co-produced, where several organisations come together to achieve similar objectives but preserve their integrity in practice in complementary ways with the practices of others. It is rarely desirable to 'nail things down' too closely in strategic or procedural terms in such relationships because it is more likely to damage rather than elicit trust and reciprocity. When things are working well, it might be best to leave them as they are or merely put more effort and resource in to make more of it happen.

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.

So, 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.

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 stories often serve to 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 are under no illusions, we know 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

**It is hard to talk about 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.**

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 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 do this thing they want to do. It is hard to talk about 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.

We have said little in this report that is not already known, so nothing should have come as much of a surprise. 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. This is because it is in everyone’s interest that young people make successful life transitions.

By rearranging ideas in new ways, we hope this report might help people to set aside popular, 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.

## Appendix

### **Research scope and methodology**

This project was not constrained by conventional expectations surrounding evaluation research where the scope of the work is limited to the assessment of a specific intervention which had stated objectives. This has allowed the project to look at a wide range of activities in County Durham but without any pre-conceived ideas that they are, could or should be connected to each other.

Such activities include the work of education, public, private and third sector organisations which address a wide range of issues associated with supporting young people to make positive life transitions.

- **Economic development:** public sector bodies, enterprise partnerships, chamber of commerce, businesses, etc.
- **Education and training:** schools, colleges, universities and training companies/agencies, etc.
- **Health and wellbeing:** NHS foundation trusts, clinical commissioning groups, emergency services, third sector organisations, schools, etc.
- **Personal development:** educational establishments, third sector/faith organisations offering careers advice and guidance, skills and personal development, etc.
- **Local facilities for young people:** including transport, retail, leisure, libraries, youth centres, arts, sports and leisure initiatives etc.

This research was not approached from a definite 'point of view' representing any specific 'interest' in the work. Instead, we were free to engage in 'lateral thinking' about the aims of a variety of interventions and spot how they operated autonomously or connected with each other in positive ways.

While the research project was devised to consider, specifically, the situation of young people from less advantaged backgrounds – the work was not limited to these young people. Indeed, the use of comparative analysis was pivotal to the success of the project because it allowed us to look at how organisations and agencies with differing objectives developed strategic priorities to support constituencies of young people.

Having an unrestricted lens to explore the issues is advantageous because it is possible to consider others' viewpoints dispassionately in the first instance and then to draw our own conclusions on their collective contribution to the wellbeing of young people in the county.

To frame the research in a structured way, however, it was decided that the following areas of work should constitute the principal lines of enquiry.

- To assess the principal statistical indicators about young people in County Durham (to include issues surrounding personal and financial wellbeing, educational attainment in schools and access to further and higher education, employment and training destinations, etc.).
- To gain a broad overview of the policy environment and the associated strategic interventions by key public sector agencies and organisations (to include issues surrounding health and wellbeing, education, employability training, tackling worklessness, risky behaviours, etc.). The policy analysis was further supplemented with interviews and discussion with key stakeholders across the county.

- To examine in general terms, the range and depth of practice offered to support young people in the county (offered by, for example, faith organisations, third sector organisations, charitable foundations, public sector bodies, businesses, etc.). Interviews were undertaken with over 40 third sector organisations to achieve this objective.
- To determine the extent and the circumstances within which organisations choose to work together to address issues surrounding young people's life transitions (looking at contractual relationships, formal partnerships, complementary activities and autonomous working).
- To undertake a light touch assessment of support given to young people when making careers decisions (by looking at careers information and guidance, work experience, internships and apprenticeships. etc.). Additionally, in-depth interviews were undertaken with all further education colleges in the county together with four colleges in adjacent local authorities which serve young people in County Durham.
- Compare two areas in the east and west of the county which share similar demographic and economic characteristics to assess similarities and differences in the range, extent and quality of support offered to young people by organisations and agencies from all sectors. This work involved additional interviews with key stakeholders and organisations supporting young people.

The above work was not undertaken with a view to producing authoritative and technical reports on the scope, intensity and quality of services provided. Instead, much of the work was undertaken using desk research on published material, secondary analysis of existing data and primary observation, interviews and consultations with key stakeholders across the county.

In the analysis, however, we do not refer to direct examples of good practice and purposefully avoid the use of case studies. We do this, primarily, to allow the reader to reflect on their own experience and understanding to see if they think the points we make ring true. But we also have an ethical duty not to identify the sources of our evidence directly to protect the interests of those organisations and individuals we have spoken to.

## **Notes**



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The Institute for Local Governance is a North East Research and Knowledge Exchange Partnership established in 2009 comprising the North East Region's Universities, Local Authorities, Police and Fire and Rescue Services.

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