

RAISING AND REALISING ASPIRATIONS

For Children and Young People in the North East



REGIONAL CONFERENCE 30TH JANUARY 2009
CONFERENCE REPORT

Introduction

On January 30 the Stadium of Light hosted a conference, "Raising and Realising Aspirations" which was funded by the Government Office for the North East.

I was pleased to be invited to Chair the conference. It brought together professionals from all areas of the Children's Workforce. Our task was to consider the issue of "aspiration", its importance in the lives of children and young people, and the role that all of us working with children and young people can play in helping them to develop their aspirations and to realise them.

The organisers could not have imagined with what enthusiasm people from around the region would embrace this opportunity. Originally planned for an audience of approximately one hundred delegates, the conference ultimately was attended by around 200 people and there was a waiting list for places!

They, like me, were very keen to hear the thoughts and views of our expert speakers. The keynote speech, delivered by Baroness Morris of Yardley, was wide ranging and touched on the significance of home and the wider social and cultural environment, on school, on the impact of central policy, and on the region's capacity for response. We received the results of extensive research from John Vorhaus, Director of London University's Centre for Research on the Wider benefits of Learning. We gained insights into plans for future action around Inspiring Communities from Naomi Eisenstadt, Director of the Cabinet's Social Exclusion Task Force. Importantly, through the agency of Laura Wright and Neil Burke of the Youth Advisory Board, we heard about the support that young people themselves would like to see adults offer to young people.

The cases our speakers put to us, the questions they raised and the challenges they presented, were interesting, thought provoking and irresistible.

We began to get a sense of the very good work already happening in the North East through the workshops run on the day by colleagues from around the region. Sue Stirling's "Think Tank" session also helped us to think about what we should be doing now and in the future and what we should be lobbying for others to do.

At the end of our day together, everyone agreed that we want and need to keep this important work going.

The first thing we promised to do was to produce a report of the Conference for delegates to capture all of the important things that happened. And here it is.

There is also now a section of the GONE website dedicated to this work. You can find it at <http://www.gos.gov.uk/gone/cyp/changeformchildren/aspirations/?a=42496>

Other work has already started to take forward some of the ideas and you should expect some information in the near future about that. Keep an eye on the website.

Keith Moore
Deputy Director Children's Services, Sunderland City Council

Summary of Estelle Morris's Keynote Speech

Estelle Morris opened her speech by saying that the title of the conference had made her think, 'In all of her years delivering speeches, there had not been many that had the word "aspirations" in the title, "attainment" – yes, "expectations" – yes, because they had been strong strands in what the Government has been doing over the last 5 years. She posed a question – "What does the change in language imply?" – a change in direction, perhaps.'

She pointed to a "change of tack" on the part of the Government and referred to "a quiet revolution" which Gordon Brown is effecting saying that the agenda now for children, young people and families is different from that of the period 1997-2003, and that it's a difference that matters – we need to recognise it or we may miss some important chances.

In its first term, she said, the Labour Government had placed hope in raising attainment and in communicating high expectations. It placed pressure on schools because the agenda was that "schools can do it". Qualifications were seen as the passport to progression, a good job, individual choice and huge funding was put behind this agenda between 1997 and 2002. For those not in schools, youth services, early years' services, teenage pregnancy services etc, there was not so much financial support because they were seen as "bolt ons". The focus of funding resource and ministerial time was schools.

This allocation of resource and political capital was unique to Britain. It should have transformed the world.

It kick started a change in culture; schools, along with families, are one of the most important agents of change. But the seismic change has not happened. The statistics show improvement but in the north east we still see high low employment and high worklessness rates, high levels of deprivation, high levels of child poverty, lower than average attainment at level 3. Compare this with levels of investment. Funding has been piled in and with each strategy things did get better but the gap didn't close. The debate about social mobility has not been engaged in since the 1970's and 1980's. By 2003 the problem had not been solved. But this was a key moment. Where did the shift in policy come from?

At this point there was a realisation that schools cannot do the whole job themselves and may not be able to crack the problem of social mobility.

The North East has some of the best teachers and schools, it has tight knit families and supportive communities, and it has a lot of political power and influence. The region has emotional resilience. We can list many good things. But the expectation has not been delivered. So what does the outcome mean?



Are children not doing well because of their teachers? Have adults here not got the level of ability?

What today is about is taking the issue on to the next step. In this context “aspiration” becomes crucial. “Attainment” and “expectation” take us to 2003...but if we need to look underneath we explore aspiration.

Aspiration is about me, my place, my family, community, social life, world...about my dreams....

Expectation is what others think about you....aspiration is about you....

So what’s happened in the last few years? The agenda for breaking the cycle becomes bigger, broader. What’s to be done becomes bigger. We can add community, family, and what needs to be done at different stages of life.

The introduction of the Every Child Matters agenda in 2003 was the first time that multi disciplinary working was promoted. It was a genuine invitation for multi agency working. We don’t any longer believe that the change needed can be produced by rearranging the deck chairs. This change is more fundamental. It is about how we let a whole community grow. We begin to look at what the statistics tell us....what is peculiar to the North East region and, if the analysis is right, what is the explanation?

We could make four observations.

First, no matter how good schools are, the social capital matters and that’s about self esteem, language development, what happens outside school, parents, experiences...

Second, the information about the options that are available links to social capital. This happens automatically in some families but not in all [anecdote re the young black woman working in Sainsbury’s, studying law, looking for a more job related work placement used to illustrate the point that even for achieving young people the social capital matters and

continues to matter throughout life]

Third, the group with the least social capital are white working class young people, especially boys. One shift has been that parents have higher expectations for daughters.

Fourth, there may be strong families and strong communities but their influence isn’t all positive – they can produce more inward looking communities and people and perhaps a regional character that is too closeted. Strong bonds can be a limitation preventing the shift from “bonding” to “bridging”. We can guess that more children in the North East want to be near mum and dad. If we look at statistics relating to graduates, we find that in the North East more young people choose to study at local universities than in any other region and, after graduation, more [70%] stay here. So even at University level, the bonding is not “break free bonding”. However, people here are as bright and able as those anywhere, parents want the best for their children, we have five universities, and many other attributes – country, seaside, everything – yet we remain at the bottom of the economic tables....and at the top of the poverty tables.

It seems that “aspiration” gives us the next phase to work to. We need to reorganise how we do our jobs. The pressure is on to work with families, with communities and with neighbourhoods. All of these become the key to prosperity in the region and a way out of poverty. And there is so much to win. We’re brilliantly positioned. Everything we’ve been asked to do we have done something with. This is a “can do” culture.



Neil Burke and Laura Wright - Youth Advisory Board

On the 30th January 2009 we were asked to attend a conference titled "Raising Aspirations". The reason we became involved in the conference was through our roles as coordinators of the 14-19 Youth Advisory Board. We were asked to do a presentation to those who attended to explain the project and the work we had done around the 14-19 Reforms. Throughout our work young people spoke of experiences that directly linked education to their aspirations. Many experiences highlighted how young people's aspirations can suffer or be damaged through certain aspects of education. We discussed in our presentation the role of key people in young people's lives and how they can have a positive and negative affect upon their aspiration.

The presentation was met with many professionals in attendance agreeing with the views of the Youth Advisory Board. We were delighted to see that many people were interested in looking deeper into our findings and asking about the possibility of working the Youth Advisory Board in the future. As the day went on we learned that a lot of the people in attendance shared the same views of us around young people's aspirations and how we can help young people in achieving them. One of the key aspects which we thought was constantly discussed was how young people rely so much on people such as parents and teachers when seeking Information, Advice

and Guidance and how these are so influential to young people. In relation to young people's aspirations, we think these people are pivotal in ensuring young people realise their potential and that they encourage young people to try and achieve their aspirations. A lot of attendee's talked of how young people can have very low aspirations and not realise their own aspirations or potential as they are not given the right support from these influential figures.

At the end of the day everyone participated in the "think tank" activity which we thought was very interesting. One of the main points which kept appearing was the need for young people to be listened to and consulted more often and involved in such events. From the conference we feel a positive way forward would be for a young person's conference to take place but instead of adults doing all of the preparation and presenting we think there would be a stronger impact if young people planned and delivered on the conference. This also coincided with our work with the Youth Advisory Board as the aim of that project is also to get young people's voices and opinions heard more often and taken into account when decisions are being made Overall we feel from our own experiences and from speaking to people on the day that the conference was a huge success and now needs building on to continue and develop the good work.



Bite-size seminars

The seminars took place over two sessions at the Raising and Realising Aspirations Conference. They were designed to provide an opportunity for partners to discuss the raising and realising of aspirations within the context of a number of strands of work and research currently underway across the North East. The seminar subjects were:

Early Years: Raising the aspirations of young children and their parents: experience of 0-7 pilots in North Tyneside and Sunderland.

Presented by Rachel Putz, Phil Hayden, Sunderland City Council and Gill Close, North Tyneside Council the workshop outlined the 0 – 7 partnership pilot and its aims. The workshop looked at how the pilot in Sunderland and North Tyneside is looking at improving parental engagement in the learning for young children aged 0 to 7 years to improve outcomes for young children.

Primary to secondary transition: Inspire – Primary Project in Newcastle upon Tyne

Ann Graham and Tracy Harris from Newcastle Connexions discussed a project based around the transition from primary to secondary called Inspire with the aim of inspiring young people and raising aspirations around the world of work.



F.E. transition to H.E.

Sue Wallis, Director of Curriculum, City of Sunderland College facilitated the session which explored the ways in which City of Sunderland College has used a wide range of strategies including a unique model of collaboration with schools, capital development, curriculum expansion and learner support to engage young people in further education, to help them develop their ambitions and understand and pursue their options.

Teenage parents: What works for vulnerable young people?

Malcolm Stone, Barnardos NE and Norman Nur, Young Dad's worker, Newcastle & Young People from the Newcastle Teenage Pregnancy Support Service facilitated a participatory seminar sharing recent research findings from the North East, identifying elements of good practice for improving outcomes for young parents and those at risk of teenage pregnancy.

Disengaged young people: Just4Youth – a model for raising the aspirations of young people

- Kevin Franks and Laura Wright from Just4Youth, based in West Middlesbrough presented and discussed a model of youth engagement which is having positive effects on the aspirations of young people in Tees Valley. At the heart of the model is the concept of young people assisting other young people to raise and realise their aspirations. Building on the Young Advisors model, developed for New Deal areas, the Just4Youth programme includes the employment of young people, extensive training and peer mentoring.

Disengaged young people: Life Routes Project

Sophie Wood Life Routes Programme Manager National Children's Bureau and Gaynor Clarke Regional Co coordinator Life Routes NE introduced this seminar looking at the importance of life skill acquisition for young people including how to ensure young people are aware of how their skills develop. They also looked at how the Life Routes programme matches Government policy for young people and the value of the Life Routes accreditation.



Key themes emerging from the seminars were:

- There should be a focus on parents as partners
- The need for flexible service delivery i.e. the use of twilight sessions
- The value of pre-work in primary schools to support the transition to secondary
- The need to raise the self esteem of parents
- The need for positive role models for parents
- The challenge of sustaining projects such as these when funding is scarce
- The perceptions of children's capabilities may be linked to the school/neighbourhood they come from
- Parental involvement is crucial – there is a need to challenge their expectations when those expectations are low
- Early intervention is important – Connexions would like to work with younger children but cannot, however the introduction of IYSS may help
- Projects such as these succeed because people with good ideas and commitment work outside of / in spite of their organisational boundaries
- More work to monitor the progress of students who take part in the project would build the case for effectiveness and future funding
- That Higher Education may not always be the right choice for a young person, or not yet the right choice for the young person. The critical thing is to ensure that it is presented as an option and that clear routes to HE are also presented to young people
- Realising aspirations requires retention in learning – support is required at key transition phases but also must feature as a continuum in young people's learning
- Parents must be involved in the educational journey being considered or undertaken by their children – this needs to happen at all stages – pre-school, primary and secondary – and may take a variety of forms
- Making the engagement with parents can, in some cases, resurrect their aspirations for educational attainment and lead to their direct engagement in learning
- For young people who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities there may need to be special emphasis within their learning programmes, perhaps through targeted enrichment, to ensure they are aware of their options and how to form and realise their personal goals
- The need for professionals to change their view of a change of direction on the part of a young person – i.e. not a failure but a success in realising something isn't appropriate and making a positive choice to change – critical thing is to find ways to enable the change without too much loss of ground
- Using case studies to help young people see the breadth of possibilities and seeing how other

young people have achieved their ambitions

- Services require a vision to involve young people in service delivery
- Positive attitudes of staff towards the young person are essential
- Young people have a range of needs that require support across a range of agencies – share the responsibility to support the young person
- Confidentiality and flexibility of services are important
- Hang on to hopes and aspirations of the young people at all times.
- Never give up, persist, support and find ways to engage and work around any problems.
- Challenge stereotypes – don't put young person in a 'box'. Meet the needs of individuals
- The process is as significant and as important as the intended outputs & outcomes
- Commissioning implications. Commitment & investment can take a lot of time. There are no quick fixes, recognise it may be a long journey.



Post script

The steering group who arranged this conference on raising and realising aspirations was an informal partnership involving Government Office for the North East, the Learning and Skills Council, the Regional Youth Work Unit, the Regional Teenage Pregnancy Coordinator and Sunderland University.

This informal partnership met over a number of months because of a shared commitment to promote debate and action across agencies and professions on the aspirations of children and young people in the North East. We also shared a passion that the issue of raising and realising aspirations is crucial to improving outcomes for young people and the level of attendance at the conference indicated that these issues were important to many professionals in the region.

Having considered all the comments and feedback from the conference the steering group has agreed this pledge and will work with others:

1. To support a conference for young people by young people on raising and realising aspirations.
2. To explore how issues of aspirations we included in initial training of the children's workforce and how young people might influence this.
3. To explore how raising aspirations is addressed in the personal health and social education curriculum and how young people might influence this.
4. To explore how to raise the aspirations of parents for their children.
5. To encourage regional interest in the inspiring communities programme.
6. To explore the possibility of research into North East culture and identity and its impact on young people.

We hope you will also pledge to do something to contribute to raising and realising aspirations in your day-to-day work. We would welcome your sharing any initiatives you are undertaking and encourage you to complete the case study template, which would then be posted on the Raising and realising aspirations section of our website. If you go to the [case study page](#) you will see a number of examples of existing practice, along with the presentations from the conference and the case study template to download.

There was clearly considerable energy and commitment for raising and realising aspirations generated at the conference and we hope the momentum for change will be maintained. To this end, we are proposing to run a series of seminars over the coming year, focused on specific aspects of raising aspirations as a cross-cutting theme.



