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# young people's aspirations in rural areas

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# Introduction

## Background and aims

Youth unemployment is a serious issue. The recent economic downturn and subsequent substantial reduction in public spending has had a negative impact on young people in the labour market. In rural areas, young people face distinct issues that can have a negative impact on their employment. Youth unemployment in rural areas is often believed to be caused by the low aspirations of young people themselves, their families and local communities. These are also linked to low educational achievements and post-16 participation rates in education. Low aspirations among young people and the wider community may be one of the key factors underlying this higher than average proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The LG Group commissioned the NFER to research young people's aspirations in three rural local authorities (LAs): Suffolk, Lincolnshire and Cumbria. The aim was to explore the influence and impact of low aspirations. This report presents the findings from this research, which comprised a rapid review of literature and case-study visits to the three areas. The study had five aims.

- It explored the extent to which young people have low aspirations in terms of their personal goals, and the main factors influencing these low aspirations.
- It looked at whether or not low aspirations impact on youth unemployment and the effect of low educational achievement.
- It examined other factors that may impact on levels of employment and educational achievement.
- It investigated what rural LAs are already doing to overcome low aspirations, youth unemployment and a lack of value attached to education.

- It explored what rural LAs could do in the current economic climate to help young people develop their aspirations and improve their employment chances.

## Research methods

The research methodology adopted for this study consisted of two interrelated phases.

### Phase 1

The project started with a rapid evidence review to identify research and other evidence relating to low aspirations and youth unemployment in rural areas in England. The main focus was on identifying existing evidence about the main factors that have an impact. This phase also explored the concept of aspirations in order to inform the data collection phases of the research and the design of the research instruments.

### Phase 2

This focused on qualitative research in Suffolk, Lincolnshire and Cumbria and included interviews with young people, parents, employers and other key stakeholders. Across the three areas, there were:

- visits to six schools (two in each area), which according to local contacts served a predominantly rural community of young people
- one-to-one or paired interviews with 37 young people in year 10
- telephone interviews with nine parents from across the three areas
- telephone interviews with nine employers from across the three areas

- face-to-face or telephone interviews with 111 other key stakeholders including, for example, Connexions area managers, careers teachers and LA staff.

The interviews with young people were the key focus of the case studies. The stakeholder interviews provided valuable contextual data that was used to triangulate and validate young people's views and experiences.

They also provided an external view of young people's aspirations in light of their realistic education, training or employment options and other influences on young people's choices. Interviews with the stakeholders were also used to explore current strategies and to look at what else could be done to raise the aspirations of young people in the three rural areas.



# 1 Findings from the rapid review

## 1.1 What is meant by youth aspirations?

The term *aspirations* describes a complex concept and can be used in many different ways in academic and policy discourse. It is useful to consider these definitions before exploring aspirations in rural settings. Usually, it is used to refer to the career and educational ambitions of young people, but it can also be used to refer to more general life ambitions, such as wanting to start a family or live in a particular area (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). The term is also sometimes prefixed with the qualifiers *low*, *realistic* and *high*. Thus, *low aspirations* is usually used to refer to goals and targets that are not ambitious, while the term *high aspirations* denotes the opposite. The term *realistic aspirations* is more ambiguous as it can be interpreted positively, reflecting goals and targets that are suited to an individual's opportunities or circumstances. It can also be interpreted more negatively as denoting relatively modest ambitions in contrast to high aspirations. The term *realistic aspirations* is also sometimes contrasted with *ideal* or *idealistic* aspirations, that are used to refer to individuals' ideal outcomes or goals regardless of their current circumstances, abilities or settings.

These different uses of the term illustrate the concept's complexity. Despite its widespread usage, a recent academic article has highlighted:

*The lack of rigorous thought about what exactly aspirations are, where they come from, what affects them and whether they actually make a difference to educational and occupational outcomes.*

St.Clair and Benjamin (2010, p.2)

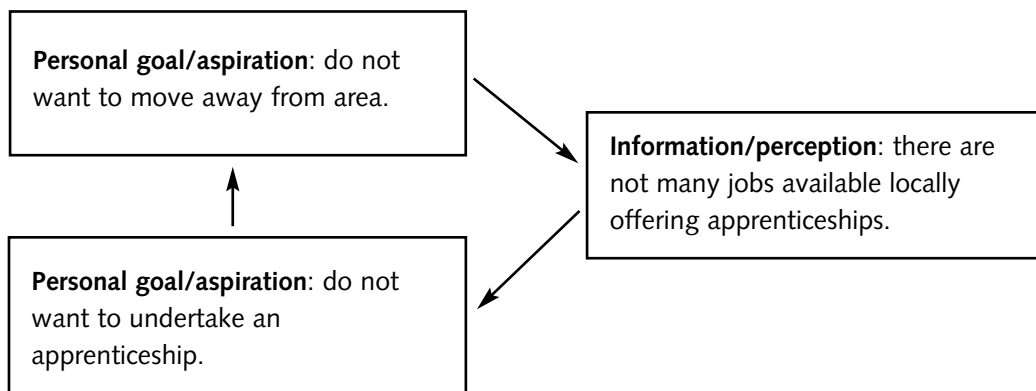
This article also argues that individual personal goals and ambitions should not be seen in isolation from the social and personal context in which they are formed. In other words, aspirations cannot be viewed as personal attributes entirely under an individual's control. Rather, they are situated within and affected by particular opportunities, constraints and circumstances. Thus, it is argued:

*High aspirations for an individual with particular life circumstances may be considered low aspirations for another individual with different circumstances.*

Gutman and Akerman (2008, p.3)

For the purposes of this research study, we suggest that the concept of *youth aspirations* is, therefore, understood as referring to individual career and educational goals situated in and influenced by structural, cultural and personal factors. As argued by St.Clair and Benjamin (2010), there is a continuous 'dynamic loop' shaping and reshaping an individual's aspirations. This means that aspirations are not static and will change over a young person's lifetime (Gottfredson, 2002).

**Figure 1.1 Dynamic aspirations loop**



Such a dynamic process is illustrated in Figure 1.1. It follows the example of a young person considering applying for an apprenticeship, and how this person's aspirations are shaped as a result of the opportunities available locally. Thus, a young person who does not want to move away from their local area, on finding out that there are only limited opportunities locally, decides not to pursue an apprenticeship. This model also applies to post-18 aspirations. Young people eligible for higher education may not want to move away and decide not to pursue this route because there is a lack of locally available jobs requiring a university degree.

These examples show the way information or perceptions about opportunities can shape young people's aspirations. However, there are many other ways in which youth aspirations in rural areas can be shaped or influenced by other structural, cultural and personal factors. These are explored in section 1.2.

## 1.2 How far, if at all, do youth aspirations differ among young people in rural areas?

This section summarises the evidence relating to attainment and participation in learning, and the factors that can have an impact on the aspirations of young people in rural areas. Most of the evidence considered for this review relates to structural factors, such as transport and opportunities. However, there is less evidence relating to cultural and personal factors.

### **In general, both attainment and post-16 participation are reported to be higher in rural areas compared with urban areas**

Research suggests that the attainment of learners in rural areas is slightly higher than in urban areas. The average attainment in rural areas at key stage 3 is significantly higher by two points compared to urban areas. At key stage 4 there is a difference of 35 points between young people in urban and rural areas, with the latter achieving more points on average, although this difference is not significant (NatCen, 2009).

Much of this apparent difference can be accounted for by parental social class, mother's highest level of qualification, lower area deprivation and higher prior attainment at key stage 2. The implication is that the indirect factors that characterise rural and urban areas (such as the lower levels of deprivation associated with rural areas) may be responsible for the difference in attainment, rather than the difference being a direct result of being in a rural or urban location. However, while this suggests that rural areas, in general, are not associated with lower levels of attainment at key stage 3 and 4, it is not to say that there are not sub-areas within a rural area where attainment is below average.

Perhaps partly reflecting the attainment levels in rural areas, participation in education and training post-16 is reported to be slightly higher in rural areas than in urban areas (Dickerson and McIntosh, 2009). However, there are differences between rural areas. For example, in Suffolk, where 42 per cent of the population live in wards defined as rural (Experian and Ipsos MORI, 2010), evidence suggests that:

- attainment at key stage 4 (defined as achieving 5 A\* GCSEs, including English and Mathematics) is slightly below the national average (49 per cent compared with 51 per cent)
- participation post-16 is lower than the average for England (79 per cent compared with 83 per cent)
- participation post-16 is also slightly lower or similar to Suffolk's statistical neighbours: Gloucestershire (81 per cent), Somerset (80 per cent) and Lincolnshire (79 per cent).

This suggests that, while rural areas are associated with higher levels of attainment and participation, this is not simply related to the rurality of an area, as not all rural areas have higher attainment and participation rates. Rather, higher levels of attainment and participation may be related to other characteristics associated with the different areas, such as a higher level of socio-economic status in rural locations. Therefore, while levels of overall attainment and participation are higher in rural areas, this is not the case for all rural locations.

### **1.3 What are the specific factors that may impact on aspirations in rural areas?**

As explained in section 1.1, aspirations can be influenced by structural, cultural and personal factors; and these factors continually shape and reshape young people's aspirations as they grow older. This section explores the structural, cultural and personal factors in rural locations, and the ways in which these impact on young people's aspirations.

#### **What structural factors may impact on young people's aspirations in rural areas?**

##### **Transport and distances between providers can impact on a young person's post-16 study choice**

A number of studies (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2010; Storey and Brannen, 2000; ECOTEC, 2006) suggest the factors that influence the belief that there is a lack of choice for learners once they leave compulsory education. These factors include long distances between education and training providers, and a lack of convenient public transport in rural areas (that is, transport that is accessible and provided at an appropriate time to access learning opportunities).

A large-scale quantitative study into barriers to participation (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2010) found that young people living in rural areas are significantly more likely to report transport as a barrier or constraint to participation in education post-16, than those living in more urban locations. Similarly, a quantitative study undertaken for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Storey and Brannen, 2000) found that over 40 per cent of young people aged 15 to 16 in rural locations said transport issues influence their decisions about post-16 education. This issue was also highlighted in qualitative research undertaken by ECOTEC (2006). It found that transport issues, distance and time involved to travel to providers limit young people's ability to access training and employment.

Rural communities are often more dispersed with fewer learning opportunities due to smaller schools and learning institutions. The Commission for Rural Communities (2006) found that small schools in rural

locations have to limit their curriculum, resulting in less choice for learners. Furthermore, its research shows that the majority of post-16 education centres are in urban locations, with the consequent requirement for young people in rural areas to travel to learn.

Together, these factors suggest that young people have a limited choice in terms of the provider and types of courses available to them. This may impact on a young person's decisions after year 11, as discussed in section 2. Indeed, a qualitative study undertaken in Suffolk found that nine per cent of those leaving school are refused an offer of learning or are not ready for learning at the present time, which is nearly twice the national average (Experian and Ipsos MORI, 2010). Moreover, the importance of ensuring that the opportunities available meet the needs and interests of young people is illustrated by Spielhofer *et al.* (2009). They show that one reason for a young person leaving education or training and becoming NEET was because the course was not what they wanted to study.

##### **Transport barriers may affect young people's independence**

Difficulties in accessing public transport and being unable to travel independently can influence young people's decisions. If the only option is to rely on parents for transport, young people sometimes choose to study away from home and establish their independence. Qualitative research by ECOTEC (2006) found that being able to drive and being independent were often deciding factors in whether young people were able to remain living in a rural area and achieve their aspirations, move away from or decide not to pursue their aspirations.

##### **Limited employment opportunities may impact on young people's aspirations**

Research by ECOTEC (2006) found that limited employment choices in rural areas are a significant factor that young people feel influences their aspirations. A lack of employment choice and opportunities is a particular issue for those looking for apprenticeships. This is because larger employers are more likely to offer work-based learning opportunities than smaller employers. However, as the rural economy is generally made up of small employers with a very

small number of large employers, apprenticeships can be harder to secure than in urban areas. This may reduce young people's belief that they can achieve their aspirations in the local environment and may, therefore, either encourage them to migrate to a different, more urban location, or may make them pursue less ambitious aspirations.

It may also be the case that a lack of part-time work and work experience opportunities limits the experience and personal development of rural young people. This lack of experience can become a particular issue when young people start looking for full-time work because they do not have the appropriate skills and experience expected by employers (ECOTEC, 2006).

### **Lower wages in rural areas may impact on young people's choice to participate in higher education**

There is some evidence to suggest that there may be a relationship between lower wages in rural areas and young people not moving away from home to study. Qualitative research undertaken in the rural West Midlands (ECOTEC, 2006) looked at both post-16 and post-18 aspirations and found that young people who have made the decision that they will want to work in their local communities in the future, are less likely to be thinking about going to university or moving away to study. The implication is that young people who want to stay in their home area are aware of their lower earning potential and do not want to build up debt at university or by moving away to study. The researchers commented:

*Some young people, particularly those committed to returning to work in their local rural economy, were realistic about the salaries they were likely to earn and had a strong sense of accountability and prudence which impacted upon their further and higher educational choices.*

ECOTEC (2006, p.95)

Furthermore, it would seem that for those for whom higher education is an option, a lack of local graduate-level jobs discourages them from studying at university (Experian and Ipsos MORI, 2010).

## **What cultural factors may impact on young people's aspirations in rural areas?**

### **Parents can influence young people's aspirations**

In both rural and urban areas, parents are a key influence on their children's aspirations (Cabinet Office, 2008). However, it appears that parental influence may have a more negative impact on attainment and progression in rural areas. Quantitative research undertaken by NatCen (2009) found that students in rural areas whose mothers had low levels of qualifications, made less progress in school compared with similar students in urban locations, with the difference being most significant at key stage 4 (NatCen, 2009).

### **Neighbourhood characteristics may impact on aspirations**

Evidence suggests that young people in certain neighbourhoods are less likely to develop either ambitious or achievable aspirations (Cabinet Office, 2008). The study reported that young people in certain neighbourhoods achieved significantly lower at key stage 4 than would be expected given their level of area deprivation. Analysis of these neighbourhoods suggested that they tended to be in rural locations with close-knit social networks, stable populations and poor transport links. East Anglia is an example of an area where these types of communities exist (Cabinet Office, 2008). As noted previously, lack of good transport links, and having a more limited range of social influences due to being a member of a small and stable community, may lead to lower aspirations.

## **What personal factors may impact on young people's aspirations in rural areas?**

### **Females have higher aspirations than males**

There is evidence to suggest that females generally have higher aspirations than males (Cabinet Office, 2008). In rural areas, a qualitative study by ECOTEC (2006) found that females are more likely to want to

move away from an area to fulfil their aspirations, and more likely to want to go to university than males.

### **Ethnicity can impact on aspirations**

Research has shown that across England, white males are more likely to have lower aspirations than any other groups (Cabinet Office, 2008). However, in rural locations, quantitative evidence suggests that Black African learners make less progress in rural areas than in urban areas at key stage 3. At key stage 4, the same is true for Indian learners (NatCen, 2009).

In summary, the evidence from the literature indicates that young people living and learning in rural areas have higher than average attainment. However, this overall analysis could mask neighbourhoods where attainment is lower than would be expected. Indeed, the literature on progression post-16 shows that while progression overall was higher in rural areas than was the case nationally, in particular areas progression rates were lower. The evidence suggests that this may relate to young people living in small, stable communities where there are limited transport links and a smaller range of role models who may have higher aspirations.

## 2 Professionals', parents' and employers' views of the opportunities and influences on young people's aspirations in rural areas

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the views of parents, employers and other stakeholders on the education and employment opportunities for young people in rural areas, and their perception of the main influences on young people's aspirations. It draws on interviews conducted in the three case-study areas with adults who had different perspectives on young people's aspirations. Interviews were conducted with:

- nine parents of young people considering their options for their future
- six teachers including those with responsibility for careers education and guidance
- five other professionals with roles supporting young people in making their choices, for example, Connexions area managers, personal advisers and Aimhigher coordinators
- nine employer representatives from organisations that recruited young people and / or provided work experience.

(See Chapter 3 for further details of the case-study areas and interviews.)

Their views provide a context and wider perspective in which to situate the aspirations of young people discussed in detail in Chapter 3. It is worth noting that, in general, the views of adults do not differ notably between the different areas. Indeed, there appear to be more differences within areas (for example, in more rural and less rural sub-areas) than between areas. Nevertheless, where any area differences do emerge from the analysis, these are reported.

### 2.2 What education, training and employment opportunities are there in the three areas?

In exploring the aspirations of young people in rural areas, it is important to explore the context in which they are considering their options and making choices about their future. The interviews with parents, employers and other key stakeholders reveal two key points.

- There are some features of the local labour market and education opportunities that are considered to be specific to rural areas.
- The current challenging economy has implications for employment and education opportunities and young people's aspirations.

The general view is that there are a range of opportunities available for further education and training at colleges and in school sixth forms. However, as is discussed further in section 2.3, parents said that colleges are often located some distance away from home, for example, a 30- or 45-minute drive by car. Consequently, young people sometimes have to travel a considerable distance to access a course only offered by one college. The accessibility of a full range of courses to all young people is also raised by some of the professionals. Teachers and LA officers, in particular, highlighted the challenge of transport and its associated cost. Three interviewees (one in each LA area) commented that the cessation of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), that supported rural young people with their transport costs, exacerbates this problem further. The interviewees do not identify anything planned to replace EMA.

Professionals and parents said that the employment opportunities for young people in rural areas are varied. Seven of the parents interviewed in Suffolk and Cumbria considered opportunities to be fairly poor and cited factory closures and the limited range of sectors in rural areas as their reasons for this view. In addition, competition for jobs is considerable and many

employers are only seeking recruits with previous experience. Associated with this is reduced opportunities to gain work experience through summer and Saturday jobs. As one parent observed, young people 'need to get a foot on the ladder and there are just not even these opportunities now'.

The professionals interviewed are more optimistic and gave examples of unskilled, skilled and professional opportunities available locally. However, they noted that there is not a wide variety of occupations and industries in their rural areas, and this constrains the opportunities for young people to aspire to. For example, although there are some large employers, such as the oil and energy industries, interviewees in all three areas noted that there is a lack of large employers. Two interviewees in Cumbria and Lincolnshire also highlighted the dearth of culture and media businesses, limiting the opportunities for young people to pursue jobs in these sectors. In Lincolnshire, in particular, an absence of heavy industry, manufacturing and high-tech companies is noted by three interviewees, and the same number stated that service-sector employers are limited. One interviewee in Lincolnshire attributed the lack of sizeable businesses in the area to the absence of an infrastructure and, specifically, a motorway.

The current challenging economic climate, including the recession and reduced public spending, are felt by parents and professionals to have exacerbated the challenge for young people considering employment in rural areas. However, employers expressed a slightly different view.

Parents highlighted reductions in employment in the private sector (seven parents) and the public sector (four parents) as evidence of the impact of the economic climate on local opportunities. Five of the parents said the current conditions will have a negative impact on young people's aspirations as they are aware of these circumstances indirectly through the media and directly through family experience of redundancy. As one parent, whose son planned to get an apprenticeship at 16, observed of local young people: 'They don't believe they'll get a job.' One effect is said to be young people increasingly continuing in education, although parents are uncertain of the effect of the loss of EMA on participation rates in the future.

Similarly, professionals said that the current climate is challenging for young people and cited public-sector reductions and private-sector firm closures as particular factors. In particular, three interviewees said that there are now even fewer apprenticeships available and one cited a recent example of 100 applicants for two apprenticeship places. Nevertheless, two teachers (in different areas) said that the recession had yet to impact on their areas: 'In boom times we don't have a great expansion and in a recession we don't get such a retraction.' The implication may be that if fewer new businesses are created in boom times, there are fewer new businesses to be affected during times of recession.

The perspective of employers interviewed was also more optimistic. Six of the employers across the three areas said the current recession had not affected their businesses significantly. Indeed, two had expanded over the previous two years. As the interviewees were selected because they were involved in recruiting young people or providing work experience placements, they cannot be said to be representative of employers more generally in the areas. Indeed, the employers interviewed are generally conscious that some other employers are encountering more challenging circumstances, not recruiting and making redundancies. Perhaps as a consequence, the employers who were less affected said that they were receiving more applications for jobs than had been the case previously.

Overall, the views of the parents, employers and other stakeholders suggest that there are constraints on the opportunities that young people can aspire to in rural areas and, as four interviewees across the three areas observe, this lack of variety leads some young people to move out of an area.

## **2.3 What are the main influences on young people's aspirations and how do these differ for those living in rural areas?**

### **The influence of parents**

There was a widespread consensus that young people's parents and, to some extent, siblings and wider family members, are a key influence that can contribute to raising aspirations. For example, some parents

employed in blue collar jobs see education as a way out for their children, and encourage them to apply themselves at school and gain the qualifications they consider necessary to progress and do better than they have done. In addition, their support for their children in pursuing an aspiration, practically and emotionally, is seen as instrumental. It was also observed that parents who have lived elsewhere and moved into a rural area tend to have higher aspirations for their children and are more aware of the range of available opportunities.

More frequently, however, professionals and employers believe that parents could, albeit unwittingly, inhibit the aspirations of their children and to some extent this is felt to be particularly the case among parents in rural areas. The interviewees identify the following aspects of parents' roles as particularly influential.

### **Parental attitudes**

Parents are described as having a tendency to be cautious, to be averse to debt, particularly debt associated with continuing to higher education. Consequently, they advise their children to get a sound job and continue in the traditional occupations available locally, even where these job opportunities are in decline.

### **Parental engagement with their child's education**

Some parents are said to lack engagement with their children's education and this is reflected in their low attendance at parents' evenings and limited support with homework.

### **Parents' own experience of education**

Where parents had not progressed to further or higher education or had not achieved qualifications, this sometimes was said to lower their children's aspirations. In particular, it sometimes led children not to see the need for qualifications, as they perceived their parents as having done well without them.

### **Parents' understanding of current education and employment**

While it appears that there were some parents for whom education and ambitious aspirations were not important, there were also those who were unconsciously limiting their children's aspirations because they were unaware of their potential and of how best to support them in the current education and employment cultures. As one employer observed:

*The currency has changed so that A levels are often a minimum and a degree so much more common. Local families may not be aware of the way things have moved forward, they can be a little behind the times in what young people now need to do because of how different it was for them. [What is needed is] raising awareness [with parents] that the job market is now much more competitive than previously and that their youngster needs to be as informed as possible or they've got no chance.*

Employer

The nine parents interviewed all said their children want to continue in some form of learning post-16: one intending to pursue an apprenticeship and the remaining eight are considering A levels. In the longer term, five intend to progress to university while four plan to go into employment, such as apprenticeships and the forces.

Although this suggests that these young people are aspiring to further and higher education, and skilled and professional employment, it is apparent that there are some potential barriers that either could prevent them from achieving this or need to be overcome. It is also evident that parents are expecting to provide support to enable their children to achieve their aspirations. This is summed up by one parent: 'We'll make it work for him anyway.'

The nature of the support that parents said they would need to provide includes:

- support with revision and examination preparation in order to help their child to achieve as well as they could, so that they could pursue their aspiration
- support with researching courses and completing application forms



- practical support with 'subsidising' the transport provided post-16 with lifts or being the sole source of transport.

In addition to such practical support, parents described how their attitude and approach to life is also influential. They outline how they encourage their children to pursue things they enjoy, or to feel that they can 'go out and get it' and achieve their aim.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the influence of parents on young people's aspirations and decisions is widely acknowledged and does not only relate to those in rural areas. However, the study may suggest that in rural areas this influence may be even greater because young people have less access to wider influences as they tend to be located in small communities.

This was reflected in the views of several interviewees who highlight the important influence of role models on young people's aspirations. It was observed that young people living in rural areas have smaller social groups and therefore influences, and they are considered by some interviewees to have less awareness of the potential options they could pursue. In particular, it was noted that there is a tendency for young people with higher aspirations to 'brain drain' away from the area. This has the effect that other young people still at school only have limited exposure to successful role models from similar backgrounds who have achieved their aspirations.

In addition, the range of types of employers in rural areas is said to be more limited than in urban areas and this, again, reduces the awareness of young people of the range of possible careers they could pursue. The absence of role models could also increase the media's influence on some young people with unrealistic aspirations. To address this, strategies are being adopted in some schools, including, for example, Aimhigher and visits from employers, to increase young people's access to role models and employers. This is discussed in Chapter 4.

Such strategies are generally implemented through schools, which are widely regarded as having a significant role in helping young people to pursue realistic and suitable aspirations. Schools, of course, aim to ensure that young people reach their educational potential and gain the qualifications required to fulfil their aspirations. The general view is

that young people in rural areas are as motivated and engaged with their education as other young people. The support provided by schools and their professional partners, such as Connexions advisors, can assist in broadening horizons and providing guidance for young people. It is noted that the quality of such support provided by schools can affect the aspirations of students. In particular, some of the employers observe a difference in the preparedness of the young people they interviewed for work experience. They attributed these differences to schools' approaches to preparing pupils. In addition, one employer considered that some school-employer activities, such as enterprise days and careers events, would benefit from being refreshed or modified to increase their impact.

## **The influence of structural factors**

While the influence of parents, role models and schools are regarded as relevant in both rural and other areas, there are other influences that emerge as being more specific to rural areas. These include the following structural factors.

### **Available opportunities**

As was discussed in section 2.2, all three rural areas are regarded as presenting fewer opportunities in terms of employment, education and training than more urban areas. The employer profile is said to consist largely of small and medium-sized enterprises with fewer opportunities to recruit young people and develop them. Industries such as manufacturing and some agricultural enterprises are said to be in decline.

In some sub-areas, particularly coastal areas, employment is said to be largely seasonal. Young people are not always aware of this reality and, for example, were reported to expect to leave school at 16 and 'walk into a job' or to 'think that 50 per cent [of school leavers] will go into jobs but actually it is about six per cent'.

Lack of education and training opportunities in all areas are reported to limit young people's aspirations. So some 'settle' for a course because it is easily accessible rather than being their first choice. This is evident in the views of parents who demonstrated how, in guiding their child to make their choice, the

availability of their preferred course is a key consideration. Four parents were seeking the best way to ensure that their child could travel to colleges some distance away as they offered the most appropriate course. While for these interviewees this was a possibility, it may be that for other young people parents would not be in a position to support their child with travel. Two parents, who had previously lived in more urban locations, contrasted the greater availability and proximity of a range of appropriate courses to their child's experience in a rural area.

## Transport

The range of opportunities that is available to young people is intrinsically related to the accessibility and timeliness of public transport. This is widely regarded as one of the main barriers to young people's aspirations in rural areas and many interviewees cited examples of infrequent bus services and the cost of transport as an issue. The impact of this is that young people 'end up staying local and doing a course they don't want to do', as one teacher expressed it. An employer explained:

*You see them getting really disheartened when they get through to the second stage of the interviews, and they think they are in with a chance, and you ask them how they are going to get here and they say: 'Oh, aren't you going to pick me up?'*

Employer

Parents seek to overcome this barrier by planning to fund or provide transport, including providing their child with a moped. Three parents acknowledge that there is a risk that transport difficulties could prevent their child from progressing down their preferred route. To illustrate, one explained how her daughter, now in year 12, had 'ended up doing hairdressing' instead of her first preference of an art course. The parent said: 'There wasn't a good art course available locally'. Consequently, she was not able to pursue that option.

## Cost

Associated with the influence of transport on young people's aspirations in rural areas is the cost of travel. Some interviewees reported that the imminent cessation of the EMA constrains the extent to which

young people in rural areas can afford the transport necessary to access education or training. This is a particular concern for parents. In the short term, two parents said their children may not be able to attend their chosen college when the EMA and free transport ceased, if there is not an alternative. In the longer term, three parents expressed their concern over the increase in the cost of attending university and are considering how to address this so that their children can fulfil their potential. As one parent said:

*I'd hate for her to end up in something dead-end because I couldn't find the money to get her to what she actually wanted. It's not a barrier, it's just something we'll have to talk about. It may be that I end up taking out a loan – it would have to be worked out but she will go on if that's what she wants to do.*

Parent

## The influence of attitudinal and cultural factors

In addition to these structural factors, interviewees identified attitudinal and cultural factors that influence rural young people's aspirations.

## Attachment to the area

In some cases, young people reported that they prefer to remain in the area where they have always lived. Indeed, in some rural areas, many generations of a family have lived in the same village. This is sometimes considered to be an active choice, as young people value their communities, relationships and the rural environment. Nevertheless, interviewees also questioned how far it reflects an insular culture and is related to lack of awareness of other areas or lack of networks away from the areas which would 'make it harder' for a 16 to 19 year old to move away.

## Work ethic

There is no consensus among interviewees regarding the work ethic of young people in rural areas. Some interviewees reported that they are more likely to have a strong work ethic, having been brought up in a culture where hard work is valued. Moreover, some interviewees reflected that young people from rural

areas are more determined than their more urban counterparts as they have to overcome more barriers, such as transport limitations, in order to fulfil their ambition. However, it was also felt that for some young people in rural areas the desire to work and earn money as soon as possible could lead some of them to aim for employment that gave immediate returns, such as 'stacking shelves' rather than a longer-term strategy of remaining in training or education.

## **Farming culture**

For those young people from farming backgrounds, interviewees reported that they often plan to progress into farming immediately after school. Indeed, one teacher said that pupils are under some pressure from parents to do so and have often already been involved in working with their parents or other family members while still at school. It is worth noting that young people from farming communities include those whose parents or grandparents are farm owners and those whose relatives are farm workers. The aspirations of such young people differ between continuing in a family business and engaging in a skilled or semi-skilled occupation. It is evident that the farming industry continues to be important across the three areas, as it has been historically. However, there are differences in the views of interviewees regarding the messages that young people receive about farming as an opportunity. The pessimistic view that some young people are said to be gleaned from their parents is that 'there's no money in farming any more'. At the same time, there is another more optimistic view that farms have increasingly diversified and there is now more opportunity, and, potentially, a greater need to gain qualifications than has previously been the case. Within the rural communities, therefore, it appears that young people's farming aspirations need to be examined in this context and seen as a valid opportunity and ambitious aspiration for some.

## **2.4 Are young people in rural areas less ambitious than their peers in other areas?**

In the main, the parents interviewed considered young people in rural areas to be as ambitious as those in other areas. They cited examples of young people they know who have progressed to higher education and

professional occupations. They also spoke of the wide range of choices that their child's peers are considering and their motivation to do well. Nevertheless, one parent stated that this was 'down to the individual' and explained that even though her son had progressed to university, one of his peers was a 'village boy' and has remained local and gained a trade.

The three parents who said young people in rural areas are less ambitious attribute this to their lack of awareness of opportunities, difficulty of travelling and the lack of encouragement and support from schools. It is worth noting that the parents interviewed tend to have a perception that high aspiration means attending university, and tend to focus on this goal rather than shorter-term goals of post-16 education when discussing the ambitions of young people.

Overall, many of the professionals interviewed indicated that they cannot distinguish between the aspirations of young people from rural areas and those from urban ones, and cannot generalise about whether rural young people had low aspirations. However, the evidence indicates that, despite this contention, there are some distinct characteristics of rural areas that have a role in influencing, and potentially constraining, young people's aspirations. The extent to which these can be addressed will be explored in Chapter 4.

## **2.5 Summary**

Overall, the views of professionals, parents and employers have shown that there are some structural constraints that impact on young people's aspirations. The extent to which young people in rural areas are able to aspire to a full range of further education or training opportunities is constrained by the lack of a full range of courses locally. This is compounded by an absence of available and affordable transport enabling them to access their desired course elsewhere. Employment opportunities are said to be less varied than in more urban areas, with some particular industries and larger employers not represented in the local employment markets. Moreover, while there is a perception that the current economic climate and public spending cuts have resulted in closures and redundancies, it is also evident that some rural employers are more optimistic and continued to recruit and, indeed, train young people.

Parents' influence is widely regarded as the most significant impact on young people's aspirations. While some parents are said to raise aspirations and support their children, there is a widespread view that the attitudes of some parents towards employment and debt, a lack of engagement with their child's education and their own experiences of education can inhibit their children's aspirations. In addition, some parents are said to lack knowledge and understanding of the currency of qualifications and the requirements of

employers in the current employment market. Consequently, they are unable to advise their children in the best way.

Although the influence of parents is important, it is also evident that the interrelated structural issues of availability, transport and cost are critical. In addition, in rural communities, young people are also said to be influenced by their attachment to the area and community, the farming sector and the rural work ethic.

## 3 Aspirations of young people in rural areas

### 3.1 Characteristics of the young people interviewed

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 37 pupils in year 10 across six schools and three LAs (two schools in each LA). The schools were purposefully selected as those serving a rural catchment area and each school was asked to identify pupils in the following categories:

- pupils who were lower achievers
- pupils who were higher achievers but who were unlikely to go onto higher education
- pupils who were unlikely to do very well at GCSE but who could do better ('under-achievers').

Table 3.1 is an overview of the main characteristics of the pupils interviewed in the six schools.

The classification of pupils' area and quality of transport is based on their responses to a set of closed questions at the beginning of the interview, while their aspirations are determined on the basis of a series of open questions. Their expected attainment is based on their teachers' assessment of how well they will do at GCSE:

- **high:** 5 GCSEs at grades A\*-C or more
- **medium:** some but less than 5 GCSEs at grades A\*-C and some at grades D-G
- **low:** mainly GCSEs at grades D-G, or none.

Table 3.1 shows that interviews were conducted with a good cross-section of pupils across the three local authorities, with quite varied levels of attainment and aspirations.

**Table 3.1 Characteristics of pupils interviewed**

Characteristic		Suffolk	Lincolnshire	Cumbria	Total
Gender	Male	6	5	6	17
	Female	9	6	5	20
Area	Small town	5	0	5	10
	Suburbs	2	4	1	7
	Village	6	6	4	16
	Countryside	2	1	1	4
Teachers' assessment of expected attainment	High	3	4	3	10
	Medium	7	3	5	15
	Low	5	4	3	12
Perceived quality of transport in area	Very good/good	7	4	7	18
	Average	6	3	3	12
	Very bad/bad	2	4	1	7
Aspirations	University/higher-level job	3	2	2	7
	A Levels and maybe university	1	3	3	7
	College or apprenticeship	10	5	4	19
	Job without training	0	1	1	2
	Other/undecided	1	0	1	2

### 3.2 What factors do young people consider when developing their aspirations?

Most of the 37 pupils interviewed across the three areas expressed fairly realistic aspirations, aligned with their expected attainment, and are able to document how they had decided on what they want to do after year 11 as well as further ahead. Many talk about how they changed their minds based on an assessment and growing awareness of their own abilities, characteristics, personal preferences, opportunities available to them locally and other considerations. This reflects the concept of a dynamic aspirations loop as presented in Figure 1.1, shaping and reshaping an individual's aspirations.

In particular, the research suggests young people's decisions about what to do after year 11 are often influenced by some or all of the following personal and structural key factors.

- Self-perception: What am I good at? What skills and attributes do I have? What do I like to do?
- Entry requirements: What do I need to do to get there? What qualifications do I need? What else do I need to demonstrate to get there?
- Availability: Is what I want to do available locally or elsewhere? What are my chances of success of achieving it (being recruited or accepted on a course)?
- Key influences: Who has told me/shown me the options open to me, including family, friends, professionals and other contacts?
- Cultural capital: Do I already know how to access my chosen route because I am familiar with it through my family or wider community? To what extent is my chosen option in line with what my parents, friends, and relatives are doing or have done? Is it a big departure?
- Personal circumstances: Do I have other commitments such as being a carer or parent? What do my parents do? Can I work or take over the family business?
- Personal preferences: What are my values? Is it important to me to stay close to my family? Is it important to get a job with high earnings?
- Logistics: What are the logistics of doing my choice? How much does it cost to do? How far away is it? How will I get there?

These factors are considered to varying degrees and answered in different ways by the young people interviewed. Those with the most clearly articulated and planned aspirations are most likely to have considered all or most of these factors, while others base their decisions on only some of the questions.

In particular, most young people had made an assessment of their own skills, qualities and abilities. They frequently referred to key influences, personal preferences and the experiences of parents and relatives (cultural capital). However, some had not yet started to consider other important aspects such as entry requirements, availability and how their personal circumstances could affect their choices.

The implications of these issues and the extent to which they affect aspirations are explored in the following sections of this report. In particular, they will consider the ways in which pupils' aspirations were influenced by these and other factors associated with young people's decision-making process. These include the influence of:

- expected attainment at GCSEs
- attitudes towards school and qualifications
- family, friends and other contacts, including professional support staff
- logistical factors, such as access to transport and the cost of learning
- personal values and beliefs (linked to living in a rural community).

### 3.3 How does young people's expected attainment affect their aspirations?

Pupils' aspirations of what they wanted to do after leaving school (either at the end of year 11 or beyond) are closely associated with predicted attainment at GCSE. Thus, of the 37 pupils in year 10 interviewed:

- nine of the ten pupils with predicted high attainment expect to continue in learning post-16 and go on to university
- twelve pupils with predicted low attainment hope to continue in work-based learning or complete a vocationally relevant qualification at a college
- fifteen pupils with predicted medium attainment have more varied aspirations including five hoping to stay on at school and possibly go on to higher education; eight hoping to go to college or complete an apprenticeship; and two hoping to get a job without training.

This raises the question of what makes some young people with medium or lower levels of attainment have higher aspirations than some of their peers with similar predicted levels of attainment? Similarly, why do some have lower aspirations than might be expected given their abilities? And are some more likely to over- or under-achieve because of higher or lower aspirations?

### 3.4 How do young people's attitudes towards school and qualifications shape their aspirations?

As can be expected, there appears to be a close correlation between attitudes towards school and the importance of achieving qualifications, and future aspirations. Those who enjoy school and recognise the value of qualifications are generally also more likely to want to continue in education or training post-16, while those with less positive experiences and views of schools are less likely to do so. This reflects the findings of previous research by the NFER (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009) that found that young people who do not participate in education or training post-16 are more likely to have had negative experiences of school and faced issues such as bullying and exclusion. As

discussed in section 3.5, pupils are often influenced by the educational background and experiences of their parents and other members of their family.

### 3.5 In what ways do the views of family, friends and other contacts, including professional support staff, influence young people's aspirations?

Interviews with young people suggest that they are more often influenced by the views and opinions of family, friends and other contacts, than by professional support staff such as Connexions personal advisors or careers teachers. Reflecting the views of professionals in Chapter 2, the impact of parents seems to be particularly important, even though young people themselves are not always aware of this influence.

During the interviews, the young people were given nine cards with examples of different factors they might consider when thinking about what they want to do in the future in terms of education or work. These were:

- qualifications: how well you do at school
- confidence: whether you think you can do it
- skills: having the skills/talent needed to do it
- lifestyle: being able to live the way you want to
- available opportunities: whether what you want to do is available locally
- transport: being able to get there easily
- location: continue living in this area
- parents: what your parents want you to do
- friends: what your friends are doing.

The young people were asked to put these cards in order of importance when thinking about what they want to do in the future starting with the most important consideration. Almost all put parents and friends at the bottom of their lists. As one interviewee said:

*It's not really important what your parents and friends think you should do because when you're older you can't rely on your parents and your friends – it's more important what you want to do.*

Young person

However, while young people themselves did not consider that they were particularly influenced by their parents, in discussing their thoughts about their future choices, during the interview, the influence of their parents was apparent. More specifically, pupils often referred to:

- what jobs their parents are doing and how this influences their own decisions
- what advice their parents have given them about different education, training and employment options
- the education and training of their parents and how this has impacted on their parents' employment or earnings outcomes.

Overall, the evidence confirms the views of the other stakeholders (see Chapter 2) that parents, relatives and others can raise as well as lower young people's aspirations. While personal contact with individuals who have aspired and successfully achieved their aims can broaden horizons and raise aspirations, young people are similarly influenced by those whose aspirations have not been realised. This is illustrated in Box 1.

### Box 1

Marcus is 15 years old and lives just outside a small town. He is expected to get more than 10 GCSEs at grades A\*-C, but said that he is unlikely to go to university and prefers to do an apprenticeship or go to college and get a job afterwards. He explained that his uncle went to university 'for four years studying marine biology and now he's nearly 30 and there are no jobs. He's back living with his parents and doesn't know what to do'. In contrast, his mother did not attend university and has 'now got a full-time job as a manager earning £40-50,000 a year'.

The term *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1977) is often used to capture the way young people benefit from their parents' educational and social background. Thus, as recognised by the Aimhigher strategy, pupils are more likely to feel comfortable attending higher education if their parents or other family members have done this. This concept is strongly supported by interviewees' comments. It included, for example, one girl whose parents had not attended higher education, but whose sister had moved to London to attend university and was now considering following a similar route:

*My sister is doing pretty well at the moment. She took her chance and went to London. If I compare her with my dad, for example, he didn't go to university – I think he went to college – and now he's just a mechanic and he's not badly paid but I think my sister is doing better.*

Young person

But the research shows that even those without such cultural capital can widen their horizons and raise their aspirations via contact with positive role models and positive experiences, as noted in Chapter 2. When looking at the responses of young people with medium or lower expected attainment at GCSE, in particular, those expressing more ambitious aspirations often referred to such external contacts when discussing their thoughts and decisions. This is illustrated in Box 2.

### Box 2

Mary is 15 years old and lives in a small town, having previously lived in a larger town in the same LA. Her teacher said that she does not expect her to achieve five GCSEs at grades A\*-C, although it was possible if she put in a lot of effort. Mary likes children and said that she has always wanted to work with them in some way. However, earlier this year, she made a definite decision to become a teacher or teaching assistant with children with disabilities as a result of doing a Health & Social Care (OCR Nationals at Level 2) course as part of her year 10 options. The experience of doing this course and discussing her options with the course tutor made her determined:



*I've discussed it with Miss X, my Health & Social teacher and she's been really helpful and she's given me a confidence boost: 'You can really do it, I can just imagine you.' And she's just made me want to do it even more.*

She said this plan has made her more determined to do well in her GCSEs.

Other ways in which some pupils widen their horizons and raise their aspirations include work experience or part-time work; in some cases, this motivated them to achieve a particular career objective or gave them an insight into the importance of doing well at school to get a good job. Talking to or having contact with relatives or friends who have done something ambitious, such as moving away to pursue a particular career or learning route, also widens horizons.

However, as noted, very few of the 37 young people interviewed said that they discuss their future choices with professional support staff including careers professionals. Many of them have not yet considered seeking such help, while others said that they would probably only do so in year 11. One girl in Suffolk, who was considering many different options, including becoming a tattoo artist and working with horses, wanted to speak to someone from Connexions, but had been told that this was not available to her:

*I've tried to go to Connexions but I was talking to our deputy head and he said that now they are only really focusing on children with special needs and helping them and they're quite swamped at the moment, so there's nothing really there for me.*

Young person

This meant that most of the pupils interviewed as part of this research were able to articulate quite clear plans based on an assessment of their own skills, qualities, likes, dislikes and what parents, relatives and friends have told them. However, they often lack awareness of the finer details needed to make a decision, including the education, training and employment opportunities actually available locally, and the entry requirements required for specific courses.

For some, it seems that making a career choice is a simple process of choosing a particular route or job. In fact, the interview extract with two pupils in Box 3 illustrates how schools are sometimes seen as oversimplifying the actual process of achieving aspirations.

### **Box 3: Extract of an interview with two pupils**

Q: Have you talked to anybody about what you might do after year 11?

S1: *Yes in [career] lessons – we've talked to her a bit about it: future job, college, university. She's quite useful. She makes life seem easy.*

S2: *Yes, she just says if you want to get a good job then you should carry on with school and not give up.*

Q: When you say: 'She makes life seem easy' do you mean that in a positive way?

S1: *Yes it's positive but when we get older, we're going to realise that really life isn't that easy. She makes it seem easy – go to school, get qualifications, get the job you want. It's what we have to do, but she misses out all the fine points, or doesn't go into enough detail. Like moving into a house, I don't know anything about that – what do you have to do? Do you get a loan?*

S2: *I don't even know how to get a job – I don't even know how to get one.*

S1: *Yes you don't just go up and ask do you? I don't know. It's almost like she assumes that we know what to do, but really we don't.*

This discussion illustrates the importance of expert advice and practical guidance when helping young people to consider the obstacles to achieving particular career objectives and how these can be overcome.

### 3.6 How do logistical considerations, including access to transport, influence young people's aspirations?

As reported in Chapter 2, transport is widely regarded as a key constraint on young people's aspirations in rural areas. Furthermore, a previous quantitative survey of 16 and 17 year olds by the NFER (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2010) shows that young people living in rural areas, and those who rate the public transport facilities in their areas as bad or very bad, are significantly more likely to report transport as a barrier or constraint to accessing post-16 learning than other young people (see Chapter 1), as would be expected.

Even though all three case-study local authorities are described as rural, several of the young people interviewed live in small market towns, particularly in Suffolk and Cumbria. This often means that these young people have better access to public transport than is the case for those living in villages or the open countryside. This was often reflected in their assessment of the quality of public transport facilities that they could use to access post-16 learning. Overall, 12 of the 20 living in a village or the open countryside described the transport facilities they can use to access post-16 learning as average, bad or very bad, compared with six of the 17 living in a small town or the suburbs of a small town. The comments of one girl, who lives in the Cumbrian countryside not far from a small village, is typical: '[It is] bad, because I'd have to get a car to town to be able to get a bus to go to college.'

It is worth noting that pupils' assessments of the quality of the transport facilities available to them was often fairly subjective. Thus, a girl living in the open countryside in Suffolk rated the transport facilities as 'very good' and commented: 'There's no bus where I live, but if my parents give me a lift into the next village, there's a regular bus service.' Similarly, some of those living in more urban settings (in small towns or suburbs of such towns), provided negative ratings based on quite different criteria from those living in more rural parts of the same local authority. This included one girl in Suffolk who had access to regular buses but rated the transport facilities as 'bad' due to the cost of using them to access post-16 learning:

*It's not very good because we've got this card which makes it cheaper and they're going to get rid of it by the end of April and sixth formers have to pay something like £100 per term to get on the bus each term which I think is a bit over-expensive.*

Young person

However, very few of the interviewees across the three areas, including some of those living in the most rural settings, identified access to transport as one of the main barriers to moving on to post-16 learning. This is reflected in the results of the ordering exercise (of the cards with examples of different factors). Thus, for most, transport is not ranked as one of their top three considerations when thinking about what they will do in the future in terms of education and work. Instead, it is most often ranked as the fifth important consideration, above parents and friends, but below other considerations such as qualifications, confidence and skills. Even though two pupils living in a village ranked transport as the most important consideration, the majority of their peers do not see it as one of the most important factors.

This may suggest that those in year 10 may not be aware of the practicalities and difficulties of using local transport facilities to access post-16 learning. Furthermore, it may reflect the view expressed by parents in Chapter 2 that they will endeavour to support their children to overcome this constraint.

In contrast, young people's awareness of the cost of study and their attitude towards debt appear to have a noticeable impact on their aspirations. During interviews, young people were presented with two scenarios involving fictional but realistic characters whose decisions had been affected by the fear or reality of debt (see Box 4). Overall, comments in response to both scenarios suggest that fear of debt can lower young people's aspirations, in particular in relation to attending higher education.

#### Box 4

##### Scenario 1

Peter lives in a small village about one hour away from [large town]. He stayed at school until he was 18 and achieved 3 A Levels – he did not want to go to university because he did not want

to get into debt and so he got a job as assistant manager in a mobile phone shop in [large town] while still living at home. He quit the job after six months because it took too long to get there and he did not want to move to [large town]. He now works part time in a local chip shop.

## Scenario 2

Samantha lives in the same village as Peter. She always dreamed to open her own hairdressing salon. So, after leaving school at 16 she went to college in [local town] to do a hairdressing course. She had to take a loan to buy a car and also borrowed some money from her parents for other expenses. Samantha finished the course but cannot afford to start her own salon, so she is working as a hairdressing assistant and is trying to repay her loan.

Interviewees' responses to these two scenarios reveal quite contrasting levels of awareness of the cost of studying and also attitudes towards debt. Most young people believed that Peter in the first scenario had not acted wisely, although many agree that he should not have gone to university and got into debt. One interviewee said: 'Instead of quitting his job he should have moved there. It's not that far away, so if he wanted to come back for visits he could have done so easily.' Others contended that he should work part time while studying to keep his level of debt to a minimum. In contrast, those young people who themselves intend to go to university were most likely to argue that completing a university course is a good investment as it would increase their earning power and enable them to repay their loan.

However, several pupils were aware of the changes in tuition fees introduced recently and expressed concerns about them. This included one girl, who is expected to achieve at least 5 GCSEs at grades A\*-C and hopes to go to university. She responded to Scenario 1 in the following way:

*I think [Peter] could have gone to university if there was something he really wanted to do. But I think in the current economic situation debt is a real worry.*

Young person

Asked whether it might stop her attending university, she replied:

*It might do. The worry is definitely there when you think about it. I think I probably could handle it if I end up getting a good enough job that paid well enough I'd be all right over a certain amount of time.*

Young person

Only a minority of interviewees were able to sympathise with Peter and could imagine acting like he did:

*He wasn't very happy in his job and there's no point doing something if you're not happy and it's better doing something that you like. It's not always just about money. And if he likes working in a chip shop, then good for him.*

Young person

In contrast, most pupils agreed with Samantha's actions in Scenario 2, although some queried her decision to get into debt to buy a car. Instead, they felt she should have relied on public transport or her parents' help to get to and from college. Most believed that her current role enabled her to gain experience in her chosen occupation while repaying her loan. As one boy said:

*I think the ambition is good – to have something in mind and to try and do that. She's working as a hairdressing assistant so it's close to what she wants to do. So if she can get the experience from that and then possibly when she's paid off her loan she can still do what she wants in the future.*

Young person

However, a minority of pupils thought that she had acted irresponsibly by getting into debt. Instead, she should have got a job after leaving school and saved up before going to college to avoid having to borrow any money.

Overall, therefore, young people's responses to these scenarios illustrate that the attitude of some towards debt is a key influencing factor in relation to aspirations. This could discourage them from taking what may be seen as more risky options, including starting their own business or going to university.

### 3.7 How do young people's personal preferences and values shape their aspirations?

Most of the young people interviewed are aiming to pursue a career that will maximise their earnings. However, some express alternative views based on their attachment to a place and a rural way of life. This is illustrated in Box 5.

#### Box 5

Clare is 14 years old and lives in a very small village, 15 minutes from the nearest village with a shop and with very bad public transport links: 'I've got to get a taxi to school, it's that bad'. She likes the area where she lives: 'There's nothing to do but it's nice because of the peace and quiet, but it's annoying that you have to travel a long way to get to a shop.' Her teacher said that she is expected to achieve at least five GCSEs at grades A\*-C, although she was concerned that Clare did not want to eventually progress to university. Clare really likes horses and is considering an animal management or small animal care course at a local equestrian training centre because she does not want to move away from the area: 'I like it where I live – I like knowing people and if I moved I wouldn't know anybody. I mean it would be good for education and that but I've got my family and friends.'

She can see the value of qualifications, having seen her father and uncle struggle to find work with no or very few qualifications. However, she said that she resented being pressurised by her school to do well at GCSEs: 'They shouldn't put pressure on you, saying you need to get these grades, because at the end of the day it's your life and they're only doing it to make themselves look good.'

The vignette in Box 5 shows how some young people living in rural areas may have lower aspirations as a result of lifestyle choices, such as not wanting to move away from an area, as well as structural barriers such

as restricted transport links. Other personal factors associated with lowering, or at least affecting, pupils' aspirations in the three rural areas visited as part of the research included:

- career choices: preferring to pursue a more rural career such as farming
- personal values: valuing the enjoyment of a particular occupation over the monetary gain associated with higher income jobs.

The active choice to remain in a rural setting and occupation is reflected in another example of a boy who was expected to achieve ten or more GCSEs at grades A-G at the end of key stage 4, and was also doing a Young Apprenticeship in Motor Vehicle Maintenance and Repair at a local college. He recognised that completing an apprenticeship or attending college is likely to increase his future earnings. However, he prefers to work with his grandfather on his farm even though his mother was said to be 'not that keen because she thinks I won't earn any money'. He said: 'I'm not bothered about that – for me it's the enjoyment', which reflects a particular lifestyle choice of living and working in a rural setting.

### 3.8 Summary

The evidence from the case studies confirms much of the literature explored in Chapter 1. It indicates that, as in urban areas, attainment is the most important influence on young people's aspirations. However, other important factors include the views of parents and relatives, and the experiences and influences of other role models. At the same time, the research suggests that very few young people in the sample had sought help from professional support staff when shaping their aspirations – this meant that their decisions were not informed by other important key criteria such as the availability of particular courses in the area or entry requirements to them.

Other important factors affecting young people's aspirations included attitudes towards debt and an attachment to a rural way of life, which, in some cases, were found to be inhibiting more ambitious aspirations for some young people in the study. Finally, even though many of those living in particularly rural parts of the three LAs rate transport facilities as not good,

very few young people in year 10 see this as a barrier to achieving their ambitions. This could be the result of a lack of insight into the reality of travelling to earn or learn, or because many are able to rely on their parents to help them overcome such barriers.

## 4 What strategies could be adopted to raise young people's aspirations?

### 4.1 Introduction

The need to ensure that young people are supported to have aspirations that are appropriate and realistic was recognised in the three case-study areas. This chapter examines the actions already being undertaken in these areas and suggests further actions that could help young people in rural areas to aspire to achieve their full potential. In addition to presenting the views of teachers, employers, parents and other stakeholders, this chapter suggests some potential approaches in response to the issues emerging from the research.

### 4.2 What are the areas already doing to raise aspirations of young people?

The interviews with teachers and other stakeholders reveal a range of mechanisms that have been adopted. Most often these focus on raising aspirations to progress to higher education, and less frequently on raising awareness of alternative or more ambitious employment and training routes. These include national initiatives, such as Aimhigher as well as more locally developed approaches. Otherwise, the range of approaches included direct activities and more indirect approaches to adapt the prevailing culture and ethos, as discussed below.

#### Targeted activities aimed at raising aspirations

Across the three areas, various direct activities to raise aspirations are taking place. Aimhigher was the primary strategy mentioned to support the raising of aspirations towards higher education. Typical Aimhigher activities included visits to universities, and extended visits where young people stay in university halls of residence and meet undergraduates from similar backgrounds as those from the rural areas acting as 'ambassadors' to encourage others to follow their lead. Parents of young people who have participated in such activities generally report that their child is aiming to progress to

higher education. Across the three areas there was, however, some uncertainty at the time of the interviews about the future of strategies to raise aspirations as Aimhigher funding was ceasing soon and interviewees were uncertain about the alternative. This is illustrated by the comment of a headteacher who observed: 'apparently, according to the government, any university that charges £9,000 fees has to do something for schools – but not necessarily for my school'.

In addition to Aimhigher, interviewees gave examples of other direct activities that they undertook with young people to raise their aspirations. Similar to the Aimhigher activities, these tended to entail broadening young people's horizons by 'getting out of school' and participating in careers events or undertaking 'tasters' with employers. The aim of these activities, as one teacher expressed it, was 'all about raising aspirations and opening minds really'.

#### Changing the culture/ethos

In addition to activities, two interviewees in Cumbria mentioned that one component of raising aspirations was through building the culture of aspiring in the school. This was summed up by one headteacher in the following way: 'keep telling them [students] that they're able to do it, keep pushing them, be positive, by offering them all sorts of opportunities'.

#### Providing a wide range of opportunities

Interviewees in all three areas said young people's aspirations are raised by the provision of a broad range of opportunities. Examples they cited include ensuring the curriculum is broad and providing both academic and vocational options as well as the provision of i-GCSEs.

## Developing employability skills

Assisting young people to be able to aspire by ensuring that they have the necessary skills was a further approach identified by an interviewee in Suffolk. The school had introduced an employability charter in partnership with local employers, which comprised a portfolio, moderated by employers, in which young people provided evidence of how they had demonstrated a range of employability skills while at school.

### 4.3 What more could be done to raise the aspirations of young people in rural areas?

Interviewees identified a wide range of other possible activities and actions that can be considered. While not all are specific to rural areas, and could be more generally relevant, some seek to specifically address the rural-related issues discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. These include the lack of awareness among young people in small communities of the full range of opportunities available to them post-16, difficulties with transport and accessing opportunities, and the absence of a range of employment opportunities to which to aspire.

## Broaden horizons

A number of strategies identified related to broadening the horizons of young people. Reflecting the existing activities discussed above, this included raising awareness of higher education, business and industry. For example, the notion of taking young people to universities to experience the higher education environment first hand was endorsed by interviewees, including parents whose children had benefited from this through Aimhigher. Similarly, expanding relevant opportunities to visit local and regional businesses and industries was recommended. This included ensuring that work experience was tailored to the young people's existing interests. Some respondents recommended implementing an annual 'take your child to work' day. Other ways of involving businesses more closely will be discussed in more detail below.

## Provide role models

Interviews with parents and young people show the importance of the views and experiences of family members, friends and peers, as well as other positive role models. Providing access to such role models is particularly important for young people with less cultural capital. An employer in Suffolk suggests using employees as mentors providing support and guidance. A parent in the same area sees a need for 'a mentor – somebody who they can look up to and respect' and especially for those who do not have access to such positive role models in their families or communities.

## Further develop and enhance links between schools and business

Although involving businesses in schools' activities is common, particularly through work experience, there is a view that this could be further enhanced. Five of the parents interviewed felt that relevant and high-quality work experience is one of the best mechanisms for raising aspirations. They did not feel that this has always been available for their children. For example, one explained that her child has only been able to observe during work experience and it is more important to have hands-on experience.

Ensuring that employer events, such as careers days or visits to employers, are interactive was also identified as a way of enhancing such activities further. Employers and teachers commented on the need for opportunities that are 'more fun and less serious and formal' and enabled young people to interact with employers and ask questions. The involvement of employers in schools is also felt by employers themselves to be an effective way of generating interest in their industry and for young people to see that aspiring to a particular role is about developing skills, as well as earning money.

By engaging directly with young people, some employers felt that they could:

- reinforce what school teachers are telling young people about the world of work and the skills and qualifications needed to succeed in employment

- engage with young people in year 9 who are considering their key stage 4 options and inform their decisions
- clearly identify the possibilities and salaries available in their industry
- influence young people's attitudes and, for example, 'generate an interest in the trades'
- highlight jobs with higher skill levels in the local area and provide details of available employment opportunities locally
- encourage young people to apply for jobs.

As one employer explained:

*I am just so amazed here in [town] I don't get people ringing in or turning up and asking what opportunities we have. If a young person has a strong work ethic, I would tell them to go and knock on doors, to write in applying, and to be prepared to start at the bottom and work up. No point having aspirations if you are not prepared to work to achieve them.*

Employer

While employers feel that they could make a contribution, they highlighted the need for school staff to 'be open' to engaging them and supporting such activities.

### **Further develop entrepreneurial and employability skills**

Interviews with young people conducted as part of this research suggested that many are reluctant to risk starting their own businesses, often as a result of the fear of debt but also because they do not have the confidence to do so.

In Suffolk, a one-year entrepreneurial programme has been established to address this. It involves employers and local colleges working in partnership to develop the business skills of 16 year olds. This kind of strategy was endorsed by some of the parents interviewed. Two parents in Suffolk and Cumbria, for example, felt that more could be done to develop the employability skills of their children while at school to better prepare them to progress after school and achieve their ambitions.

### **Involve and support parents more**

As discussed in previous chapters, parents are a significant influence on their children's aspirations and choices. However, it is also evident that they are not always fully aware of the range of options that could be potentially available to their children, or how best to access these. Involving parents more in raising awareness of local businesses was highlighted by an employer in Suffolk. A teacher in the same area emphasised the importance of engaging with parents:

*We can sow the seeds but more needs to be done to raise parents' aspirations for their children as the biggest influence on our children will be their home situation: both to raise expectations, but also to make them more realistic.*

Teacher

### **Improve access to opportunities**

Reflecting the transport limitations in the three rural areas, action to improve transport facilities, and thereby improve access to a wider range of opportunities, was widely identified by interviewees across the three areas as a means of supporting young people to raise their aspirations. Indeed, four of the parents interviewed identified provision of transport as one of the key means of enhancing aspirations. If young people were more able to access a full range of post-16 provision they would be in a better position to consider a wider range of opportunities, it was said. However, recent policy changes, including ending EMA support and subsidised transport, were said by one interviewee to be 'going in the wrong direction'. One Lincolnshire employer said that government grants were needed to improve transport, while another in Cumbria reported that a local scheme that loaned young people scooters, and provided necessary training, appeared to be working well in her area.

While improving transport was the most commonly mentioned method of improving access, some interviewees suggested, or had already taken steps towards, bringing the opportunities closer to the young people in rural areas. For example, one teacher in Suffolk explained how they had established a relationship with a training provider who visited the school to test the students as potential trainees, thus saving them from travelling a considerable distance to



the test centre. In addition, a teacher in Cumbria was exploring using an outreach service to offer additional courses on her school site.

### **Make structural changes**

In addition to activities and actions that could be adopted at a local level, interviewees identified a range of structural changes that they considered would help to address the challenge of raising the aspirations of young people in rural areas.

### **Regeneration or redevelopment of the area**

Investing in new housing would lead to an increase in young people and an increase in funding for schools. These would incentivise employers to move to an area. Major investment in redevelopment would provide more employment.

### **Reducing the legal barriers**

Employing young people or providing work experience opportunities for them requires legal barriers to be removed, including health and safety requirements.

### **Providing increased funding**

Funding is required in recognition of the additional costs associated with travel in rural areas. Schools also require funding for activities that were previously undertaken by education business partnerships (EBPs), such as work experience risk assessments, as these will need to be performed by schools because EBP funding has been reduced.

Underpinning many of these structural changes is a desire to increase the availability and accessibility of a broad range of education, training and employment opportunities for all young people living in rural areas.

## **4.4 Summary**

It is evident that activities and actions to raise aspirations among young people in rural areas are already underway across all three of the case-study areas and that these could be further developed and enhanced. The key principles of what is required to raise aspirations appear to be:

- broadening horizons through a wide range of experiences offering different opportunities
- providing opportunities to meet role models from similar backgrounds
- ensuring education providers and employers work closely together to improve young people's awareness of local opportunities and how to access them
- actively involving parents in their children's education and informing them of opportunities
- building an aspirational culture and ethos.

Such action needs to be supported and underpinned by an infrastructure that ensures that there is a wide range of opportunities available – in education and training and in employment – and that the transport infrastructure facilitates young people accessing these opportunities. As well as the infrastructure, the environment in which young people are considering their futures needs to be dynamic and optimistic and convey the message, where appropriate, that there are businesses that are growing in rural areas that want to recruit appropriately skilled and motivated staff.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter presents the study's main conclusions. It explores the extent to which young people have low aspirations and what influences their aspirations. Where relevant, recommendations for action are highlighted. Finally, the chapter concludes by exploring the similarities and differences between the three case-study areas: Suffolk, Cumbria and Lincolnshire.

### 5.1 Do young people in rural areas have low aspirations?

Very few of the 37 young people in year 10 have particularly low aspirations. In fact, most have fairly realistic aspirations based on an assessment of their own abilities, characteristics, personal preferences, opportunities available to them locally and other considerations. Only a minority appear to have aspirations that are lower than expected given their predicted attainment at GCSE. This includes some pupils who have decided not to move away and wanted to pursue careers in their local, rural economy.

While it is not possible to generalise about the extent to which low aspirations are or are not widespread in the three case-study areas, the view of the professionals, parents and employers is that the young people they encountered in rural areas are generally ambitious. Where this was not the case, it is said to be associated with a lack of awareness of opportunities, low expectations from the school and difficulties associated with transport. In some cases, low aspirations are also associated with low parental expectations and a focus on financial independence at an early age.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the concept of high aspirations should not just be associated with the aim of attending higher education. Rather, it relates to each individual's abilities, interests and personal circumstances. This is particularly important for those young people who may inherit family farms (these are distinct from those who plan to work on a farm). For such individuals, a high aspiration may be to acquire qualifications in accounting or agricultural skills to

make the family business a real success rather than simply attending university.

#### Recommendation

The information, advice and guidance provided to young people in rural areas should be tailored to young people's particular personal circumstances rather than based on an assumption that higher education is the best route for all. Young people need to be well informed and guided to consider a range of options in order to make informed choices and decisions about their post-16 route.

The study supports the model of the dynamic aspirations loop (St.Clair and Benjamin, 2010), which suggests that a young person's aspirations are not static but are continuously shaped and modified in response to new experiences or perceptions. Thus, most of the pupils interviewed were able to document ways in which their aspirations had changed as a result of, for example, speaking to a particular person or taking part in an activity. It is very likely, therefore, that many of those interviewed will change their aspirations once they start considering their options more seriously either in year 11 or when they pursue particular post-16 destinations.

However, although the aspirations of the young people interviewed had changed over time, there was no evidence that they are lowering their aspirations in light of their abilities or the availability of options. While not all the young people had fully considered the detail and practicalities of their aims at the time of the interviews, and they may revise their thinking further in light of these considerations in future, a systematic picture of young people revising their aspirations downwards is not apparent among these young people.

## 5.2 What influences young people's aspirations and what could help raise them?

### Transport

Interviews with parents, employers and stakeholders suggest that the cost and availability of transport to access post-16 education, training and employment is a significant barrier for many young people in rural areas. Indeed, those pupils living in the more rural parts of the three areas are more likely to indicate that transport to post-16 options is not very good. However, very few pupils see the cost and availability of transport as a major issue when thinking about what they will do in the future. As argued in Chapter 3, this suggests that pupils in year 10 may not yet be aware of the practicalities and difficulties of using local transport facilities or that they rely on their parents to help them overcome this constraint.

#### Recommendation

Further research could explore the extent to which transport affects young people's choices in rural areas after they complete year 11, in order to establish whether it changes their aspirations once they realise the practicalities of using transport to access post-16 learning.

Elected members may wish to consider at a local level how transport infrastructure impacts on the future aspirations of their young people population and seek possible solutions to overcome these issues.

### Parents

Parents emerge as one of the most significant influences on young people's aspirations, both in terms of supporting and, in some cases, inhibiting the pursuit of high aspirations. Young people often do not consider their parents as a major influence, but it was evident that they consult them directly and are often influenced indirectly by their parents' experiences of education and employment. Most young people in year 10 said that they have experienced generic careers education

and guidance. However, they rarely access tailored individual advice and guidance from professionals such as Connexions personal advisers, even though they are already making very concrete plans and decisions about their future.

#### Recommendation

Schools need to explore how to provide professional guidance, including input from employers and other agencies, to young people at an earlier stage in their school career and not to wait till they reach year 11. This might include providing some such support in year 9 before they make their key stage 4 option choices so they do not limit their future options at this early stage of their education.

Elected members may wish to contribute at the local level, working alongside local authority employees in offering input related to their current or previous employment outside of their role within the cabinet.

The evidence also showed that parents, who were the main source of support, may not always be aware of the most recent employment practices and opportunities as well as the qualifications required to pursue particular post-16 options. In addition, some parents are cautious, averse to the risk of debt and have a tendency to recommend their child pursue a familiar and trusted route. The prevailing view among stakeholders and employers is that it would be valuable to engage with parents and give them support and information.

#### Recommendation

There is a need to find creative ways to engage with parents and provide them with appropriate advice and information that dispels false myths and assumptions. This could include providing case-study examples of local young people who have aspired and achieved their aims, as well as

practical information on how to research and apply for courses or employment, so that parents are well informed and can better support their children.

## Positive role models

The research shows that young people with parents, friends and relatives who have continued to higher education or pursued ambitious careers are more likely to feel comfortable doing the same. However, even young people from families with less 'cultural capital' (whose parents and relatives had not pursued ambitious careers) have sometimes been inspired to follow aspirational targets as a result of contact with individuals who they knew had achieved their aspirations. This included, for example, employers met during work experience placements or staff at youth clubs.

Access to role models, or ambassadors, who come from similar backgrounds or areas as they do, but who have aspired to a wide range of roles in different sectors in higher education and in industry, can broaden young people's reference points and compensate for a possible lack of cultural capital for young people in small communities.

## Recommendation

There is a need to provide young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds with opportunities to come into contact with a variety of role models, including employers and other positive ambassadors, including perhaps local cabinet members. This should include individuals from similar backgrounds and rural areas as the young people, who have worked towards their aspirations and achieved their aims.

## Employers

The perception among parents in the three areas is that employment opportunities are limited and declining as a result of private-sector closures and reductions in public-sector spending. However, some of the employers interviewed provide a more optimistic

perspective. Indeed, some businesses are said to be expanding and continue to recruit and train young people, although it can be difficult to recruit young people with the right skills and qualities.

Schools are generally involved in making links with businesses through, for example, careers events and work experience placements in year 10. However, many of the employers interviewed said that such links could be further enhanced and they welcome greater involvement in supporting young people to aspire to a range of roles. This could include interactive events that enable young people to meet employers and discuss working in their sector.

## Recommendation

Schools and LAs need to target the employers that are most likely to recruit young people in the short and medium term, and seek their active participation in school-business links. They should also consider the extent to which innovative approaches, such as interactive technologies, could be used to minimise the time required by staff, students and employers to participate in such events.

## Attitudes towards risk

Interviews with young people and their parents suggest that some pupils are inhibited from pursuing more ambitious aspirations, including attending higher education, as a result of not wanting to get into debt. In some cases, this is associated with a strong work ethic and an emphasis on financial independence. However, it means that some young people are not considering starting their own business as a result of not wanting to get into debt. It is also worth noting that even though several interviewees are aware of the cessation of EMA and the rise in tuition fees, it is not yet clear the extent to which these changes have impacted on young people's aspirations.

## Recommendation

Young people and their parents need more guidance on the impact of the changes in funding post-16 learning, the costs associated with higher education, and what support is available for young people from low-income families. Schools and employers should work together to provide young people with a better insight into the risks and benefits associated with starting their own businesses and how they can be better equipped to do this.

### 5.3 Do the issues differ across the three areas?

The three case-study areas were selected because they have similar rural locations, and the young people in each area are facing similar issues. Consequently, it is not surprising that there are more similarities than differences between the areas with regards to the issues affecting young people's aspirations, the influences on these and the possible actions that could be taken to ensure they had appropriate and realistic aspirations. However, two noticeable differences emerged between the areas : Lincolnshire was said to have a less varied range of employment sectors, and it has a grammar school system, which is a key factor

associated with young people's aspirations, in contrast with the other two areas, which have comprehensive systems.

While inter-area differences do not emerge strongly in the research, there are indications of differences within the areas that were considered to affect the opportunities for young people and their aspirations. More specifically, the proximity of post-16 education providers and access to more frequent public transport means that young people in towns and suburbs encounter fewer challenges and are better able to access a range of options than their peers in villages and the countryside within the same LAs. Those who live near to or are able to access large employers, such as energy and oil suppliers, potentially have more awareness of and easier access to these specific opportunities. Similarly, those in coastal areas and tourist centres have greater access to opportunities in the hospitality and care sectors, although they are also affected by the seasonal nature of such employment.

Overall, the broad similarity of the views and attitudes of young people, employers, professionals and parents across the three areas indicates that they face similar issues. This suggests that further contact could be beneficial between these and other rural areas to discuss what works best in raising aspirations.

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The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by the NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at [www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/)



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This report examines how effective practice examples that have been through the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes' (C4EO) validation process have been, or could be, replicated and sustained. A set of [online guidelines](#) was produced as part of this research.

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/LRSV01>



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## Local authority progress in tackling child poverty

In 2010, the *Child Poverty Act* placed new duties on local government to tackle child poverty. This report assesses the progress being made by local authorities in this area. It presents the findings from in-depth telephone interviews with child poverty partnership members across nine case-study areas.

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/LGCP01>

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Youth unemployment is a serious issue affecting rural areas. One possible cause is believed to be low aspirations among young people, their families and the local community.

The LG Group commissioned the NFER to research young people's aspirations in three rural local authorities: Suffolk, Lincolnshire and Cumbria. The aim was to explore the influence and impact of low aspirations.

Based on a rapid review of literature and case-study visits to the three areas, this report covers:

- findings from the rapid review
- the views of parents, professionals and employers on available opportunities and influences on young people's aspirations
- the aspirations of young people in rural areas
- strategies for raising young people's aspirations
- conclusions and recommendations.