

# **What Do Young People in Knowsley Think?**

**A report on a series of discussion groups with  
young people in Knowsley**

**Rt Hon George Howarth MP**

**November 2012**

## **Foreword**

We're living in tough times. And they have been made tougher still by the Government's economic failure. But it's crucial young people don't bear the brunt of this. This Government is making families with children pay more than double what the banks are to reduce the deficit. That can't be right.

Instead, both Government and society as a whole need to support young people to make the most of their potential. And it shouldn't matter where you live or what school you go to, all young people should be able to follow their dreams and have the chance to succeed.

That's why I welcome this report from George Howarth. It's so important that politicians listen to the opinions of young people like these students in Knowsley – and I'm grateful to them for sharing their views.

What is clear is that young people want to succeed but too often they feel there are barriers in the way that will stop them achieving. And it's the job of good government to help remove these barriers. This should be a priority for all political parties – and I pay tribute to MPs like George in fighting to push it to the top of the agenda.

Labour is committed to tackling these issues and making sure that, even in tough times, we support social mobility and back our young people.

**Rt Hon Ed Miliband MP**  
**Leader of the Opposition**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this project was to gain an understanding of the aspirations and ambitions of young people in Knowsley. With the economy struggling, and unemployment rising, areas such as Knowsley are experiencing extremely difficult times. Youth unemployment is particularly high and there is much comment in the media about a 'lost generation' and the challenges facing young people in trying to find employment.

Knowsley is a deprived area where educational attainment is low. Since 1997, GCSE results have improved significantly, narrowing the gap with the rest of the country however they are still low overall, particularly in English and Maths. The schools in Knowsley (Centres for Learning) continue to work hard to try and improve these results.

The link between poverty and educational attainment has been well established, although perhaps not fully understood. There are some very clear statistics. The highest early achievers from deprived backgrounds are overtaken by lower achieving children from advantaged backgrounds by age seven. The gap widens further during secondary education and persists into Higher Education; a pupil from a non-deprived background is more than twice as likely to go on to study at university as their deprived peers<sup>1</sup>. 34% of disadvantaged pupils<sup>2</sup> achieved A-C in both English and Maths GCSE compared with 62.9% of other pupils<sup>3</sup>.

Knowsley, as one of the poorest areas of the country, falls within the pattern of these statistics. In the year 2009-2010, Knowsley was one of 11 boroughs in the country where no students made it to Oxford or Cambridge and only 90 students made it to a Russell Group University (compared with 1,930 in Surrey)<sup>4</sup>.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to gain a snapshot of young people in the age range 14-24 in Knowsley. The focus was on how the young people feel about their own lives, their ambitions and aspirations, and the opportunities open to them. We also wanted to get an idea of what they thought about Knowsley as a place to live and the facilities and cultural opportunities it offers them.

---

<sup>1</sup> Department for Education – 'Deprivation – what you need to know'

<sup>2</sup> Disadvantaged defined as known to be eligible for a free school meal or looked after by the Local Authority

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education

<sup>4</sup> House of Commons Library, Deposited paper DEP2011-1657

## Profile of Knowsley

### Population

Knowsley Borough had an estimated population of 145,900 in 2011. About 46,600 people were aged 24 and under, 32% of the population. For England as a whole, about 30.7% of people were aged 24 and under in mid-2010.

### Education in Knowsley – GCSE Results

75% of pupils in Knowsley Local Authority achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A\* to C in 2011, compared to 80% of pupils in maintained schools in England. There has been a large improvement in achievement on this measure since 1997 and the gap between Knowsley and the England average has narrowed: 24% of pupils in Knowsley and 43% of pupils in England achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A\* to C in 1997.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1: GCSE and equivalent results, Knowsley Local Authority : 1997-2011<sup>a</sup>**

	1997 <sup>b</sup>	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<i>% of pupils gaining 5 or more A*-C grades</i>								
Knowsley LA	24%	44%	49%	51%	58%	64%	68%	75%
England	43%	56%	59%	61%	65%	70%	75%	80%
<i>% of pupils gaining 5 or more A*-C grades including English and mathematics</i>								
Knowsley LA	15%	26%	26%	27%	30%	34%	38%	41%
England	33%	45%	46%	46%	48%	50%	54%	59%

#### Notes

(a) Results for Knowsley local authority are for maintained schools only. England results are for all schools (including independent schools, hospital schools, PRUs and pupils in alternative provision).

(b) 1997 results are for pupils aged 15 at the start of the academic year. 2005-2011 results are for pupils at the end of Key Stage 4.

#### Sources

[DfE, In your area \(data for 2005-2011\)](#)

[Deposited paper DEP2010-1502 \(1997 data\)](#)

[HC Deb 28 Feb 2011 C271w \(1997 data\)](#)

DfEE, *GCSE/GNVQ and GCE A/AS Examination Results 1996/97 – England*

Source: House of Commons Library

<sup>5</sup> Figures for 2005-2011 are for pupils at the end of Key Stage 4. Figures for 1997 are for pupils aged 15 at start of academic year.

Sources: 1997 figures are from Deposited Paper [DEP2010-1502](#). Data for 2005-2011 are from DfE, [In Your Area](#).

The proportion of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at A\* to C including English and mathematics has also increased, although achievement on this measure for pupils in Knowsley has persisted at about 20% points lower than the England average. 37% of pupils at the end of KS4 in Knowsley and 59% of pupils in England achieved five or more A\* to C grades including English and Mathematics in 2011. In 1997, 13% of pupils in Knowsley and 33% of pupils in England achieved this threshold.<sup>6</sup>

### Qualifications

About one in seven people (14%) in Knowsley aged 16-64 had a qualification at NVQ Level 4 or above (e.g. HND, Degree or Higher Degree level qualifications) in 2011. One in five (20%) had no qualifications.

### Wages

In 2011, the median gross weekly pay for full-time workers resident in Knowsley was £431 per week which is equivalent to an annual salary of about £22,484. This is below the averages in the North West region and the UK.

<b>Wages for full-time workers, 2011</b>		
	<b>Median gross weekly pay</b>	<b>Estimated annual equivalent</b>
Knowsley	431	22,484
Knowsley LA	440	22,922
North West	460	23,986
United Kingdom	501	26,108

Source: ASHE via ONS Nomis database  
Based on place of residence

Source: House of Commons Library

### Benefits

There were 25,910 people of working-age in Knowsley Local Authority claiming one or more key DWP benefits at February 2012, 26.9% of the population aged 16 to 64. This is a higher rate than for the North West region and Britain as a whole.

<sup>6</sup> 1997 figures are for pupils aged 15 at start of academic year. Sources: DEP2010-1502; DfE, *In Your Area*

## **Methodology**

A series of small discussion groups were arranged through local schools, a local skills academy and a local youth centre. Seven discussion groups were held with young people aged between 14 and 24, and 80 students participated in total. The discussion was facilitated by a third party (usually a teacher), with George Howarth and a member of staff present.

The research focused on four main questions:

- **What do they want to achieve in their lives? (This would include personal as well as career goals)**
- **What do they see as being their barriers to them achieving their goals?**
- **Do they feel positive about the future?**
- **How do they spend their free time?**

## **Limitations of this study**

The aim of this study was to collect qualitative data – an impression of how young people think and feel. The sample is statistically small and therefore difficult to base conclusions firmly on the numbers.

It was also a challenge to achieve an exact balance of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic group. The students were selected to take part by the schools themselves so it is possible we spoke to the more motivated students.

Finally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, it does not include those young people who are completely disengaged from learning and the local community. These young people are, by definition, hard to include in a project such as this.

## **Key findings**

### **Q1. What do you want to achieve in your life?**

#### **Aspirations**

Young people in Knowsley are ambitious with clearly defined ideas about their goals in life. Only a small number (11 out of 80 students) could not say what their goals were. A frequently mentioned ambition was to achieve good grades and it was often connected to a specific career ambition. This demonstrates that the young people not only have aspirations but are also aware that they need to do well at school and in exams to achieve this. A lack of aspiration is often associated with young people living in deprived areas but this was not evident amongst the young people we spoke to. Lack of aspiration is also often linked to poor educational outcomes. This issue was looked at by a recent JRF study examining the role of aspirations, attitudes and behaviour in closing the educational attainment gap<sup>7</sup>. It concluded that there was not a clear causal relationship between aspiration, attitudes and behaviour and children's educational outcomes (albeit that more research was needed in this area). It also commented that poorer children and their parents generally have high aspirations and positive attitudes to education already, and that attempting to raise these further misses the point that 'high aspirations alone are not enough'. It pointed to other interventions such as supporting parental involvement in children's education and encouraging extra-curricular activities and mentoring, as potentially having more of an impact on educational attainment.

The students we spoke to were not lacking in aspiration but they were not very confident about achieving their aspirations. There appeared to be a gap between the ambitions of the young people and their belief in achieving these. There also seems to be a lack of knowledge and confidence that they could access the right support and advice to help them achieve their goals.

#### **Career Ambitions**

The most frequently mentioned goal was to have a career in a profession (teachers, doctors, lawyers), but setting up their own business was mentioned, as were careers in the creative industries and performing arts as well as more traditional skilled manual jobs. It was notable that there was a very wide range of careers mentioned (34 different jobs/career paths), and some were very specific (Forensic Psychologist, paediatrician, property developer). This suggests that there is good awareness of

---

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation : The role of Aspirations, attitudes and Behaviour in Closing the Educational Attainment Gap by Charlotte Carter-Wall (Transform Education) and Grahame Whitfield (Joseph Rowntree Foundation) April 2012

the range of careers and paths the young people may choose to take, although not necessarily an awareness of how to achieve this.

### **Moving Away**

One of the most repeated answers to the question of goals in life was to travel/work abroad or move away from Knowsley. A significant proportion of the students mentioned this as a specific goal but it was also a theme mentioned by others. There was a strong perception that in order to achieve their goals, they would have to move away from Knowsley. In a recently published report, the education and training organisation Ambitious Minds published a league table of the best and worst places to live if you are a teenager. The report brought together a number of weighted indicators that measured educational attainment, youth unemployment, and affordability of housing. Knowsley was bottom of the table as the worst place to live if you are a teenager<sup>8</sup>. Although this study demonstrates the problems that face young people growing up in a deprived area, studies and reports such as this perhaps only work to reinforce the unfairly negative perceptions of places like Knowsley.

### **Gender Bias in Choice of Career**

There was also a gender bias towards certain careers/goals. The female students were more likely to want careers in stereotypically female occupations such as nursing/childcare or the creative industries. The male students were more likely to mention manual /trade occupations and ambitions to be a sportsman. There was an equal split amongst those mentioning professional careers.

## **Q2. What are the barriers to achieving your goals?**

### **Lack of Financial Support and Lack of Jobs**

The young people are aware of barriers that may confront them. The most frequently mentioned barrier was financial support, and the cost of going to university, which would mean that they would not get the education and qualifications they needed to achieve their goals.

Achieving good grades was also mentioned by many students as a possible barrier. The students understood the need to get good grades and do well at school exams to achieve their goals. Many, particularly those who had stated that they wanted to go into the professions, also said that they recognised that achieving this would be

---

<sup>8</sup> 'Frustration of Aspiration: Being a Teenager in England Today', Ambitious Minds, July 2012



difficult because of the need to get high grades and because there was a high level of competition to get these jobs.

A lack of jobs was also identified by many students as a barrier. They were aware of the current economic problems, and that getting a job may be difficult given the current economic climate.

***“Some people in Knowsley have no chance but to join the army – there are no jobs”***

***“Since January – I have applied for 300 jobs”***

***“We’re underselling ourselves by going for some jobs, but would just like a job”***

### **Barriers Related to Poverty**

The need to get good grades, the cost of going to university and the difficulty of getting a job, are perhaps responses you might expect from young people living in a deprived area, especially in an economic downturn. However, there were also some more unexpected responses to this question. A high number of students mentioned ‘distractions’ (either at school or at home). ‘Personal problems’ were also mentioned by some students as a reason why they might not achieve their goals.

***‘Myself - need to give it all or won’t get it, other stuff gets in the way.***

***‘It will be better away from home – less distractions and more focus on goals’***

***‘If I stay at home, the environment is not conducive to achieving goals’***

Negative perceptions of Liverpool were also mentioned, and the idea that growing up in Knowsley was itself a barrier. There were a number of comments about the need to get away from Knowsley if they wanted to succeed. As noted in Section 1, a large proportion wanted to move away from Knowsley – either abroad or within the UK.

*'Where I live. If I stayed in Liverpool, don't think I would get to where I want to be, would end up settling – not enough opportunities.'*

*'Liverpool is a bit rough, reputation of area, perception of people, trouble could lead to not getting good grades'.*

*"Local area is not as bad as it's made out to be, University is good – places and kids are not that good. Don't want to go to Oxbridge – want something stable rather than attempt to go for higher and fail"*

*"Society may not believe in you"*

*"Life is hard"*

All of these factors suggest that there are additional difficulties that they are dealing with, which mean that they cannot focus on achieving their goals. These all have a link to poverty and the experience of growing up in a deprived area. Whether cultural or actual, there is a feeling that because they live where they do, someone or something will prevent them from being successful.

For young people growing up in poor households, poverty presents daily challenges which make it hard for young people to progress and develop. The young people we spoke to were not explicit about the practical problems they faced but they referred to it being hard to study at home and school because there are distractions and indicated that their home environments were not conducive to focusing on study and achieving.

The recent Save the Children survey into poverty in the UK demonstrated some of the impacts on young people of living in a poor household. The survey showed that 15% had to go without new shoes, 14% are denied a warm winter coat and 23% are missing out on school trips because their parents could not afford them. Nearly 30% of parents say they cannot afford to have their children's friends around for tea and 10% cannot celebrate birthdays.<sup>9</sup>

### **Q3. Do you feel positive about the future?**

Over half of the respondents said that they were positive for future (68%). This figure is around the same level reported by City and Guilds in a recent study on young people's attitudes<sup>10</sup>. They found that 61% of 7-11 year olds, 66% of 14-16 year

---

<sup>9</sup> Save the Children Survey of Poverty in the UK 2012

<sup>10</sup> City and Guilds Report – Ways into Work : Views of Children and Young People on Education and Employment

olds and 71 % of 16-18 year olds felt optimistic or very optimistic about their chances of success in life.

However, in our study, 32% said no or don't know/didn't answer. Also, of those that did have a positive view of the future, their answers were generally qualified by a comment highlighting the possible difficulties they may face or expressed some doubt about whether they were feeling positive. This fits with what we learnt from the students when discussing the barriers facing them, which seemed very apparent to them and strongly felt.

***“Wouldn't feel positive staying in the UK”***

There was also a strong gender bias on this question. The female students were much more positive about the future than the male students.

#### **Q4. How do you spend your free time?**

Some students did belong to sports clubs and engaged in other extra-curricular activities but many felt there was not the variety of sports/activities available. Despite Knowsley having excellent leisure facilities, the young people did not seem to use these very much.

The students only occasionally visited the cinema and only a few had been to the theatre. Some students were involved in musical activities but generally access to cultural opportunities was lacking. Cost seemed to be the main factor in preventing them from going to the cinema or theatre or using the local sports facilities available.

The students felt that there were no facilities that they could get to easily. Access to and the cost of transport seemed to be a big barrier to using Knowsley's leisure facilities. There was also a lack of knowledge about some of the facilities that do exist. Some students commented that their parents could not afford to pay for any additional activities or they did not want to ask their parents for money.

Many students said that they were not interested in attending youth clubs. Some associated these with gangs of young people and found them intimidating. However they would like more places to 'hang out with their friends'. It was suggested that there should be a MacDonaldis – not because they wanted to eat there - but because they wanted somewhere to sit and chat with their friends.

***“A cafe just for kids, designed with stuff for kids”***

## **Further comments**

The group discussions often strayed onto different topics which revealed interesting attitudes towards and experiences of growing up in Knowsley.

In a discussion about how they spend their free time, some students made comments about the police and reported that they were made to feel like criminals and that they felt there was an expectation amongst the police that they would commit a crime. This seemed to reinforce the negative perceptions of Knowsley as a place to live, and of their own chances of succeeding in life. There may be some work the police could do to help address this concern.

***“Police are pathetic – they will stop a group of three young people and tell them to walk in a two and a one so they’re not a ‘group’”***

***“Media portrayal of area and young people is not good. Need to counteract”***

One of the focus groups was held in the ‘Our Place’ centre, a youth centre which offers an extensive range of facilities and advice and information services for young people. The groups were a broad range of local young people – some were in education or training, some were working and some were unemployed. There were some particularly interesting comments from this discussion:

- Immigration was raised as an issue here. Some of the young people felt that immigrants were taking jobs away from them.
- Most of the young people wanted to live or work abroad.
- Young people attending the centre help to run it by participating in a forum. However, they felt that their views were not listened to by local councillors.

## **Conclusions**

Young people in Knowsley, despite the social and economic disadvantages they face, are no less ambitious than young people elsewhere in the country. However, they are acutely aware of the barriers that confront them in achieving their ambitions which results in a less positive view of the future.

They also see where they come from as a significant obstacle because of the negative perceptions of the area, and the reality of comparatively low educational attainment. There is some justification for this as exam results continue to be a problem. The Local Authority and the Centres for Learning are working hard to address that problem, and are developing radical proposals for the future of education in Knowsley.

Finally, although there are cultural and leisure opportunities and activities for young people in Knowsley, they were often unaware of them or felt they were unaffordable or too difficult to get to. This study showed that for young people living in a deprived area such as Knowsley, accessing leisure and cultural opportunities is harder because parents are often unable to afford even relatively cheap activities. Parents struggling with the demands of living on a low income are also less likely to be aware of the opportunities available for their children, and less able to direct them to activities which would help their development.

## **Recommendations**

There is considerable scope to provide additional support in order to level the playing field for young people in deprived areas such as Knowsley, and young people elsewhere. One idea currently being discussed with Knowsley Council is to establish a new resource – either as part of the Council or as a separate social enterprise – to work in partnership with existing projects and agencies to link young people with the leisure, cultural and educational opportunities that already exist. The aim would be to provide a signposting service to young people to help them broaden their range of experience to better prepare and support them to achieve their potential. The objectives would include:

- Create a social media link and a database with young people in Knowsley in order to provide ongoing information about opportunities that exist for educational support, sporting and leisure and cultural opportunities, and other relevant schemes, projects, and organisations;
- To develop active partnerships with other statutory and voluntary agencies in Knowsley with a view to promoting the services they offer and signposting young people to potential sources of help and assistance; and
- To develop individual relationships with young people and parents in order to enhance their levels of educational achievement, by developing bespoke

programmes including one-to-one tutoring, mentoring and enabling access to appropriate cultural, leisure and out of school training activities.

These ideas is currently being explored in Knowsley and we hope it will provide a sustainable source of support for young people in the area. The challenges of trying to break the cycle of poverty and create social mobility are areas which many policy-makers have grappled with. As a snapshot of the thoughts and feeling of young people in one of the most deprived areas of the country we hope it demonstrates that although difficult young people in these areas are just as ambitious to achieve and make something of their lives. In these difficult economic times creating social mobility and tackling the barriers poverty creates, must remain a priority for policy-makers.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all of the young people who participated in the focus groups, their input was invaluable and this project would not have been possible without their open, honest participation.

The staff and volunteers at the various Centres for Learning in Knowsley, Knowsley Community College, Knowsley Skills Academy and Our Place Centre.

Particular thanks to go to: Claire Aspinall, Mike Cassidy, Cath Fitzsimmons, Lt Col. (ret.) Tony Hollingsworth, Gavin Hoslett, Amanda Ward & Carole Williams.

Grateful thanks also go to Anna, Kate, Jayne and Julie from my office for their help and support, without which it would have not been possible to carry out this work.

## Appendix 1

### Data collected from Focus Groups

Q2	What do you want to achieve in your life?	Total Number
1	Sportsperson	3
2	Own business	2
3	Skilled profession	34
4	Achieve good grades/Go to university	22
5	Travel/Work abroad/Move away from Knowsley	9
6	Have a family	3
7	Join the Armed Forces	5
8	Creative industry/Performing Arts	10
9	Manual Trade	3
10	Other	12
11	Don't know	10
12	Didn't answer	1
		<b>114</b>

\*Respondents could list more than one achievement

Q2	What do you want to achieve in your life?		Male Total Number	Female Total number
	1	Sportsperson	3	0
	2	Own business	1	1
	3	Skilled profession	12	22
	4	Achieve good grades/Go to university	9	13
	5	Travel/Work abroad/Move away from Knowsley	3	6
	6	Have a family	1	2
	7	Join the Armed Forces	2	3
	8	Creative industry/Performing Arts	3	7
	9	Manual Trade	3	0
	10	Other	8	4
	11	Don't know	8	2
	12	Didn't answer	1	0
			<b>54</b>	<b>60</b>

\*Respondents could list more than one achievement



Q3	What do students see as barriers to them achieving their goals?		Total Number
	1	Not achieving good grades	15
	2	No barriers + none (16)	8
	3	Lack of jobs	11
	4	Financial reasons/Cost of living away & going to university	16
	5	Lack of confidence	3
	6	Negative perception of Liverpool from other people	1
	7	Competitiveness of chosen career	3
	8	Difficulty leaving family & friends	2
	9	Distractions (at school or home)	10
	10	Potential to choose different path/Change mind	2
	11	Personal problems/Unexpected occurrences	3
	12	Lack of knowledge of job opportunities	2
	13	Other	16
	14	Don't know	1
	15	Didn't answer	8
			<b>101</b>

\*Respondents could list more than one achievement

Q3	What do students see as barriers to them achieving their goals?		Male Total Number	Female Total Number
	1	Not achieving good grades	8	7
	2	No barriers + none (16)	5	3
	3	Lack of jobs	4	7
	4	Financial reasons/Cost of living away & going to university	8	8
	5	Lack of confidence	0	3
	6	Negative perception of Liverpool from other people	1	0
	7	Competitiveness of chosen career	2	1
	8	Difficulty leaving family & friends	0	2
	9	Distractions (at school or home)	3	7
	10	Potential to choose different path/Change mind	1	1
	11	Personal problems/Unexpected occurrences	1	2
	12	Lack of knowledge of job opportunities	1	1
	13	Other	11	5
	14	Don't know	1	0
	15	Didn't answer	4	4
			<b>50</b>	<b>51</b>

\*Respondents could list more than one achievement

Do students feel positive about the future?		Total Number
1	Yes	54
2	No	15
3	Don't know	1
4	Didn't answer	10
		<b>80</b>

Do students feel positive about the future?		Male Total Number	Female Total Number
1	Yes	16	28
2	No	3	1
3	Don't know	1	0
4	Didn't answer	5	5
		<b>25</b>	<b>34</b>

Gender		Total Number
1	Male	40
2	Female	40
3	Didn't answer	0
		<b>80</b>

Which institution do you attend?		Total Number
1	All Saints	15
2	Halewood CFL	8
3	Huyton Arts CFL	12
4	KCC - Kirkby Campus	10
5	Knowsley Park	10
6	KSA	4
7	Our Place	21
		<b>80</b>