Young people & progression in rural Suffolk:
A report for the Seckford Foundation
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Executive Summary
A growing bank of research evidence about Suffolk suggests it is a place of hidden need where great advantage sits alongside disadvantage and where inequality in life chances is increasing. By drawing on sophisticated statistical analysis and interviews with young people and professionals, the research examines the experiences of young people as they attempt to negotiate the transition from secondary education to higher education and employment.

It goes beyond what was previously known about progression for young people in rural Suffolk and focuses on what might practically be done given the current funding context. The research reveals that educational and income deprivation appear the largest barriers to progression. While accessibility for young people in rural areas remains an issue, those not experiencing deprivation are more able to surmount accessibility difficulties. The research also suggests that the resilience of Suffolk’s young people, and the county’s range of community and voluntary sector organisations point to ways forward in improving progression. While some young people in the county live with disadvantage, some appear to be developing a set of capabilities to cope with and surmount it.

The report suggests what Suffolk’s community and voluntary sector organisations might consider doing to build on/forte these capabilities. A key element of this is sharing some of the resources in the county that help advantaged young people with those disadvantaged.

This brief summary outlines the key findings of the research conducted by the University of Suffolk on behalf of the Seckford Foundation. To read the full report, including statistical evidence and qualitative research, please see www.seckford-foundation.org.uk
to the relative income and educational deprivation of the neighbourhoods in which young people live than accessibility. Tackling accessibility issues is unlikely to be the most effective means for increasing HE progression in rural neighbourhoods. Instead, a broader perspective on young people’s needs is required.

- This is not to suggest that accessibility is irrelevant. Indeed, young people with limited financial support referred to accessibility problems. The issue is how low income and limited family resources compound accessibility problems in rural neighbourhoods. Seeking more tailored intervention to support particular young people - rather than seeking changes to more universal public transport – appears the most effective approach.

- Youth unemployment and economic inactivity in Suffolk are lower than national rates this should not be equated with affluence and financial security. Suffolk also has an established history of low wages and a relatively high rate of manual and low skilled jobs. Disadvantaged young people in the research spoke about local job markets being largely comprised of low skilled, low paid and unstable jobs.

- As with progression to HE, employment for young people appears less influenced by accessibility and more closely related to income and educational deprivation in young people’s neighbourhoods.

- Some young people in the research suggested they had been discouraged by schools not addressing their learning needs and being too academically focused. Expectations for high grades at GCSE and A-levels and the prospect of accruing debt in higher education reportedly put some off from pursuing HE progression. A key theme was that school did not sufficiently prepare or support young people for entering employment.

- Education, income and accessibility issues were often combined and compounded disadvantage. Lack of qualifications alongside lack of accessible job opportunities represented a particular challenge. The need to cover transport and living costs meant some young people had to work long part-time hours which, in turn, put pressure on their academic studies.

- The research highlighted young people living complex lives. While attempting to negotiate progressions to employment and education, at the same time as overcoming rural accessibility issues, some also had to manage poverty, family caring responsibilities, homelessness and mental health issues. These complex and compounding challenges resulted in young people having restricted access to opportunities and a sense of being ‘spatially locked-in’ and disconnected.

- By examining the experiences of young people who were able to negotiate successful progressions, the research highlighted the importance of ‘connectivity’ and ‘capability’. Connectivity includes physical access to opportunities but it also includes other factors which mediate the distance between young people and opportunities. The research identifies these as including: education, qualifications and employment skills; contacts and networks; and knowledge and motivation.

- Capability is required to overcome barriers to connectivity. Insofar as connectivity relates to social capital (the quality and type of relationships between social networks), ‘capability’ relates to cultural capital (the personal, non-financial assets that mediate social mobility). Capability then is the leveraging of cultural capital in order to identify and use the resources and opportunities required to foster aspiration and access opportunity. Young people in the study often expressed aspiration and self-determination but also doubt and powerlessness.

- Capability was fostered by: family support (financially but also in terms of knowledge transfer, brokering contacts and emotional support); progression tutors in school; youth and community organisations; peer-to-peer support; and the development of personal skills, such as time management and securing a driving licence.

• 36 per cent of young people in Suffolk progress to higher education (HE) – comparable to rates regionally and nationally. However, when actual rates of participation are compared against expected rates the county does not appear to be fulfilling its potential. Over 20 per cent of rural wards in Suffolk are among the bottom 10 per cent in England in terms of the gap between expected and achieved rates of progression to HE.

• Disadvantage in rural areas is typically explained as a consequence of a lack of access to services and opportunities. However, our analysis finds that geographical accessibility is not in itself the most serious barrier to progression to higher education. In fact, rates of HE progression were higher in the most rural neighbourhoods than in other neighbourhoods. This reflects the fact that more rural neighbourhoods tend to be more affluent.

• Progression to HE is more strongly related to the relative income and educational deprivation of the neighbourhoods in which young people live than accessibility. Tackling accessibility issues is unlikely to be the most effective means for increasing HE progression in rural neighbourhoods. Instead, a broader perspective on young people’s needs is required.

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The research highlights the need for improved educational outcomes for children and young people in Suffolk, and measures to better tackle income deprivation. However, there are also more immediate and practical actions that should be explored. These actions avoid calling for substantial new resources in a period of austerity and instead focus on enhanced practice and more efficient use of existing community resources. Our recommendations are as follows:

1. Parish Councils and community organisations devise strategies to halt and reverse the trend of declining youth provision in rural areas, with an emphasis on making creative use of existing provision. This might include developing the county’s arts and sports infrastructure through better collaboration between public, private and commercial organisations.

2. Existing charities promote local employers and professionals giving talks in schools to broaden aspirations. Key business organisations might expand on the work of charities such as Speakers for Schools which already do this, adding their knowledge of Suffolk’s economy and existing concrete opportunities. This activity requires school-to-school co-ordination which might be informed and perhaps even spearheaded by Suffolk’s key business organisations including Chambers of Commerce, the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses and Suffolk Agricultural Association. Such organisations, along with schools and the voluntary sector, are important in sharing expertise and networks to help connect young people to jobs, training and careers knowledge.

3. Outreach activities by Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and other organisations should take account of the particular challenges facing young people in rural areas and develop best practice to support increased and sustained HEI participation rates among young people. The new Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach is a £9m regional consortium aiming to double the proportion of disadvantaged young people entering higher education by 2020. Such best practice would be instructive in its work.

4. There is a pressing need to develop an overarching and integrated apprenticeship and higher apprenticeship strategy for the county. This could be constructed through collaboration between employers organisations such as the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership, regional Higher Education institutions and voluntary sector initiatives such as the Seckford Springboard, Community Action Suffolk’s ‘Mind the Gap’ and Suffolk County Council’s Apprenticeship Suffolk programme.

5. Support should be made available to local community groups and Parish Councils to facilitate an audit of transport issues and options for bespoke and efficient alternatives. Again, overarching co-ordination of this planning will be key. Local community groups and Parish Councils could facilitate this audit with disadvantaged young people looking to access education and/or job opportunities in mind. This would expand/add to existing community transportation schemes in a context where the research notes infrequent and costly public transport appearing to further disadvantage young people in rural areas experiencing socioeconomic inequality.

6. There should be a review of currently available and new, possible micro-financing and affordable-credit schemes, with a focus on schemes to achieve the sustainable affordability of transport for young people and their families in rural Suffolk.

“Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much.”

HELEN KELLER