



Knowsley Young People's Commission

Unlocking the potential of young people in Knowsley

Young people in Knowsley are positive and aspirational but for a variety of reasons it appears this potential is difficult to unlock. They have demanded that we rethink our assumptions to reflect the realities and the ambitions of their lives today.

The proposals set out in this report offer a bold new approach to helping young people succeed in all aspects of their lives. The recommendations have the potential to create a new impetus and energy for young people in Knowsley to raise aspirations and achievement with unprecedented success.

This report is not about trying to fit young people into a 'box' or 'process' in order to achieve. Rather, it is about understanding and accepting the realities of growing up in the borough and designing an approach that truly gets behind young people.

A key principle of the work of the Knowsley Young People's Commission has been to listen to young people themselves and we have talked to and heard from hundreds throughout the borough. Every one of our conclusions and recommendations are rooted in what young people have told us.

And young people's messages to us were clear. They have high hopes and aspirations for their future but they need help from us all to get there – at home, in school and in the community. From new approaches to learning, to more say over what goes on locally; better access to new experiences, to more help to get ahead 'their' way, young people in Knowsley are indicating solutions.

This report aims to inform decision makers in Knowsley at a crucial time for services for young people.

What the Knowsley statistics tell us...

- ▶ 64.5% of 10–16 year olds grow up in 'hard pressed' families¹
- ▶ 58% of under 16s live in poverty²
- ▶ As many as 20% of young people are thought not to be in education, employment or training³
- ▶ Only 14.5% of people living in the borough are qualified to degree level or equivalent⁴
- ▶ 43 out of every 1,000 girls under 18 experience teenage pregnancy⁵
- ▶ Less than half the population have access to a car⁶

Young people in Knowsley represent both the present and the future. Their hopes and aspirations show us what the future could hold, and their values and beliefs give a sense of the world we could live in. This will be the next generation of neighbours, work colleagues and decision makers – and as they make up 14% of the local population, they are an important consideration for all of us.

The worst ward in Britain is Page Moss in Knowsley – where I was born and brought up. I went to school in Kirkby. Then, it was a place of hope, part of the tapestry of new towns and estates springing up in post-war Britain. Today, the perception has changed. At least for older generations who have seen the loss of vast industrial estates and manufacturing centres that paid their wages and offered a brighter future than the city slums from which many came.

For young people, unfettered by industrial strife, the future in Knowsley – as everywhere – appears as bright as their own burning aspirations. Despite a sense of pessimism in the older generations, these young people are no different than anywhere else. They are bright, ambitious, talented and simply want realistic opportunities to make their own way in the world.

Yet something else is going on. At the age of 12, educational attainment of young people in Knowsley sits alongside or above the national average.⁷ By 18 it is below; both individual ability and potential community social capital is being lost. The young people in Knowsley are young, gifted and held back.

This report sets out to change all that. Consulting with young people, families, communities and professionals, the Commission has sought to find new approaches to age old problems – presenting far reaching recommendations to improve and support key aspects of young people's lives.

The statistics set out in the report may often appear as daunting as they are uplifting, but I urge you to read them. The optimism of the young is infectious. I urge you to absorb it. Their hopes are inspiring. I challenge you to reward them.

Phil Redmond CBE
Chair of the Knowsley Young
People's Commission



What the recommendations say: Harnessing young people's potential

Our recommendations have sought to turn the world of services and support for young people in Knowsley 'inside out' – with a new starting point of young people themselves as leaders, shapers and, with support, deliverers of their own opportunities and support.

Inherent in the recommendations is a new focus on raising and delivering on young people's aspirations, with new approaches to capture and positively support the interests and realities of young people's lives.

It would be wrong to suggest that this could all be achieved at no cost. But we have been mindful of the current economic situation and firmly believe that with creativity, good leadership and genuine engagement with young people, the results can be achieved largely through refocusing and reprioritising resources rather than investing in large amounts of new spend.

We are advocating a stronger emphasis on help for young people early as problems develop, thus saving the more expensive cost of dealing with crisis. We hope that involving young people in shaping and delivering their own activities and support will build a self-sustaining infrastructure, improving effectiveness whilst building valuable skills and experience.

On every aspect, we believe these proposals offer the smarter approach that everyone is searching for, making this as valuable as a blueprint to other areas as it is to Knowsley itself.

Overcoming the negative narrative

Young people in Knowsley are growing up in a world vastly different to that of their parents and grandparents. Dramatic changes in the economic fortune of the borough led to the disappearance of the industry based jobs that could once have been taken for granted.

The move to a service based economy demands a new set of skills and qualifications that few have been able to keep up with. The high level of worklessness and underemployment that have resulted casts its long shadow in every aspect of young people's lives – from underachievement in education, to unemployment, involvement in risky behaviour and health concerns.

These changes also inform a dominant narrative that we often hear from the older generations, and in some cases professionals in the borough – a narrative of decline, failure and pessimism for the future. This narrative contrasts markedly with the views of young people themselves, but has a pervasive influence on all aspects of young people's lives. From the way that services are designed and delivered to the expectations and aspirations of young people themselves.

These factors have a powerful and often negative effect on young people at a time of crucial development in their lives when long lasting attitudes and capabilities are formed – limiting options and chances in life forever. The Knowsley Young People's Commission set out to change this: to understand what life is like for young people in Knowsley today, what their future holds and how we can best support them to fulfil their potential.

Some key themes have emerged from our research about young people in Knowsley to inform our thinking and underpin our recommendations:

- ▶ The vast majority of young people in Knowsley are positive and ambitious for their future, and their parents say they want to support them to achieve their goals.
- ▶ Positivity and aspiration is strongest in younger children and then appears to dissipate throughout the teenage years.
- ▶ However, many young people live in circumstances of significant disadvantage and this has a damaging and limiting effect on their life chances.
- ▶ Young people are growing up with the consequences of the rapid economic decline of the area and a subsequent dominant and widespread negative narrative of expectation and achievement from communities, and often professionals.
- ▶ A significant minority of young people and families engage in risky, anti-social and criminal behaviours which have an impact on the wider community.
- ▶ This affects how young people, parents and professionals view the communities in Knowsley.
- ▶ Parents want the best for their children but are not always able to effect change and offer the support needed to succeed.
- ▶ The sense of community in Knowsley is strong but professionals fear that this holds children back and limits ambition.
- ▶ The current focus of resources is on the 'challenging minority'. This tends to create a focus on the deficits of a few, rather than building the capacity of all young people.
- ▶ Many young people have entrepreneurial abilities but they struggle to channel these through the formal educational system.
- ▶ A significant proportion of young people see skills and talents beyond the purely academic as valuable, but the system appears not to give them credit for that.
- ▶ Those who work with young people in schools, youth clubs, specialist services and in the community have a key role to play in helping to lift and realise aspirations.

Our recommendations put a great emphasis on young people as champions and advocates for their own community, with the support in place to make things happen. Ensuring that others are able to accept the impact of this will be crucial.

Challenge 1

To build the aspiration and resilience of young people in Knowsley to raise expectations and help young people realise their dreams

Young people in Knowsley set out with high hopes of university, travel, good jobs and even fame which begin to fall away as they get older and the reality of their limited choices post-16 set in. Poor academic results and a lack of knowledge about the wider world restrict young people's options when school finishes, with some already becoming trapped with the consequences of their risky behaviour.

The Commission believes that raising aspiration and achievement is a top priority for young people in Knowsley, with an explicit challenge to young people to set sights high, backed up by a promise from the local authority and other bodies to help make this happen. The promise would be supported by all those who work with young people in schools, youth clubs and the community to reinforce a positive 'can do' spirit.

The Commission has recognised the importance of role models and champions in supporting this and wants to recruit members of the community and a Young People's Champion to advocate for young people in every aspect of their lives.

Building resilience will be key and we want to see a wide range of activities, including 'mental toughness' programmes, to support this – particularly targeted at those young people living in families who are 'just coping' and known to be particularly fragile. These activities will seek to build interests, skills and self confidence through both new evidence based approaches to learning, and practical, vocational and experiential routes to attainment that build on young people's interests and skills.

Focusing energies and investment in building aspirations demands an outlet for those aspirations to be fulfilled – thus a key challenge is how best to start building or shaping an environment in Knowsley in which these dreams and expectations may be met.

Challenge 2

To broaden the horizons of young people in Knowsley to open up opportunities and options for their future

Throughout our report we demonstrate the benefits but also the limitations of living in such a close knit community as Knowsley. Young people are clear that their family and community are important but also want to be able to consider branching out to study, travel and work outside their area. A lot of parents we spoke to want this too for their children but often feel unable to help them.

But there is also a feeling from a lot of parents that young people should be like them and it is no surprise therefore that with few options present when school ends, a lot of young people find themselves following that route.

The Commission was impressed by some of the initiatives to broaden horizons already underway in the borough and their positive impact on the way that young people view their futures. We want to build on these to give all young people a better understanding of what adult life might offer them.

We are therefore proposing a wide range of activities to extend young people's access to, and interest in, varied sports, arts, learning and employment options. This would build interests, skills and enjoyment of new experiences and tap into young people's interests in dance, non-traditional physical activities such as extreme sports, fashion and music – drawing on the region's rich cultural and sporting resources. Many of these activities could take place in and around Knowsley's new Centres for Learning.

We want young people to get an insight into higher education and employment options first hand through visits and placements. Ensuring that young people can get around and take part in activities safely will be essential and we want the police to build greater engagement with young people and to raise awareness of the negative impact of crime. We also want the local authority and travel companies to play their part, through subsidised travel and accessible routes. And we want to build on young people's extended family links and community involvement by considering a new young people's engagement scheme.

A key challenge will be to ensure that opportunities for young people exist both in and outside of Knowsley. And are young people and the wider community prepared to accept that moving out of the borough is OK?

The new school looks as though it has great facilities - I'm excited about going there. There will be lots of opportunities I think.

**WE HAVE STRONG COMMUNITY NETWORKS
BUT NOT THE KIND OF NETWORKS
THAT GIVE YOU THE KNOWLEDGE AND
CONFIDENCE TO GO OUT THERE AND
ACHIEVE SOMETHING.**

Challenge 3

To support young people to become agents of their own change

Raising aspiration, improving resilience and broadening horizons will be crucial in encouraging and supporting Knowsley young people to consider a wider set of goals.

But we also need to empower young people to be able to make this happen. Too many young people we talked to felt unable to change or influence the world around them, trapped by their circumstances and with few options to go forward. Enabling young people to become agents of change is therefore a central priority for the Commission.

We are recommending that schools, youth clubs and wider activities join forces with the local authority to help put young people in the driving seat. We have seen the impact of the positive experiences of Young Advisors and believe that there are major opportunities to use this, to help all young people develop their influencing and decision making skills and so improve their confidence in being able to effect change.

We have been impressed by the work already going on to consult with young people and are recommending that this is extended into a major programme of engagement to review, design, plan and co-deliver services for young people in the borough. This new young people led approach would be a major shift. It would tap into the wider move to localise services and increase community ownership by giving young people explicit responsibilities for their services through management structures and involvement in local boards.

We want young people to experience confidence and belief in their own abilities to make things happen and are recommending that small grants are made available through a new Community Youth Fund to support good ideas and activities.

A key challenge for the Knowsley community to consider will be: shouldn't young people simply be asked what they want and if they could actually run and manage things themselves?

We hope to start gigging next year, like just little gigs and then maybe move on and get bigger gigs, maybe do a festival. It would be my all time dream to do a major festival.

Challenge 4

To ensure that parents are able to offer positive support to young people

Everything we read and hear reaffirms the importance of the family and home environment as one of the strongest influencers of children's life chances. Young people in Knowsley have backed this up in all they have said to us.

We have sought to understand the route map to adult life of young people in Knowsley and the impact that low expectations of some parents, communities and those working with young people have on it. We must accept that a lot of families are only 'just coping' themselves and so have little capacity left to help their teenagers through these important yet challenging years. This is particularly the case for times of higher risk – transition to secondary school, ages 11–14 and then when leaving school. We have seen how support at these times can help young people avoid the dangers of risky behaviour and poor choices, and want to help parents support their children during this period as much as we can.

We are therefore recommending a major extension of support for parents as their children grow up. Better advice and support on qualification and employment options to help parents realise their own potential, help with parenting skills, and intensive parenting support when things go wrong.

We are recommending that this support be available in Centres for Learning, Children's Centres and in other local community buildings and estates. This will mean expanding on existing peer to peer support and training, with more intensive help extended to all those who need it in the borough – specifically the large number of parents who are 'just coping'. We hope that this means we can get in early before problems spiral out of control.

Our overriding need is to engage parents in developing a supportive road map for their children which acknowledges the historical context of Knowsley. Key challenges will be to encourage migration and employment as position options.

This thing about gang culture is mostly in the media. It is there in some places but it's no worse than it's ever been before.

Challenge 5

To harness the entrepreneurial skills of young people in Knowsley

Whilst some young people in Knowsley have struggled to improve their educational achievement and qualifications, their interest and abilities in enterprise is obvious.

The Commission was impressed by young people's appreciation of enterprise and of its creative application. However, we also believe that there are great opportunities to make better and more sustainable use of these skills and interests. This is particularly the case for more challenging young people – many of whom have shown us that they are still ambitious and prepared to work hard if they can find a path which suits them. That's why we are recommending nothing short of an enterprise renaissance to be led by young people in the borough.

We would like to see enterprise given a high priority from primary school onwards, with small grants and loans on offer through a 'Dragon's Den' of young people to get young people's great ideas up and running. We want the programme to be designed by young people – a Youth Entrepreneurship Group – and to tap into their interests, encouraging bright new ideas for business and creative ventures from IT support services and recycling to pop-up fashion shops.

A key challenge for all in Knowsley will be how to exploit opportunities in the local community and grow the specific entrepreneurial skills that local businesses and the local economy require, rather than for generalised national needs.

Challenge 6

To change the perception of young people and communities in Knowsley by showing new measures of success and achievement

The statistics of life in Knowsley paint an uncomfortable picture of widespread deprivation and deficit. As we have recognised, the impact of such disadvantage can be felt in every aspect of young people's lives. It is therefore important to stress that the drive to reduce inequalities and poverty rests behind all of our proposals and the Commission believes that it needs to remain an area of utmost priority nationally too.

The Commission found that the negative impact of such a constant narrative was ever-present, convincing us that a change in perception and attitude would only be achieved if we devised new ways of measuring success. This isn't to question the validity of existing statistics – indeed, it is important that we continue to carefully consider them at all times – but it is to acknowledge that there is also a much more positive story which isn't being told.

For these reasons we are recommending that additional metrics are established to measure the things that young people consider to be signs of success. These include their achievements in arts, music, sports and performance as well as their involvement in the community. By doing this we hope that young people in Knowsley can begin to be portrayed in a different light – once again encouraging confidence and positivity. Awards of achievement would celebrate these successes, getting the message out clearly that young people in Knowsley do great things.

But how would these new measures impact employability overall? A key challenge will be to align such a change in perspective with the real demands of the local economy and public sector employers.

Challenge 7

For those who work with young people in Knowsley to be among the best in the country and for Knowsley to become a leader of national and international practice

The Commission has huge belief in this bold strategy but knows that it can only be achieved with the support of everyone who works with young people in the borough – working with the strengths of young people to challenge a negative and fatalistic attitude. That's why we are recommending a major new workforce development programme for all young people's workers, including teachers.

This programme would induct and train staff on the new young people led approach and on new ways of working together to help young people succeed. We believe that there is great potential in reaching out to the community itself to recruit and train youth workers and community 'Champions' for young people – raising the status of working with young people in the borough and encouraging new people (including those who may have been disengaged themselves) to apply.

We are also recommending more back up support for frontline workers to help them deal with pressures of the job. To reflect the importance of workforce development we are recommending a new Academy of Youth Leadership and Community Regeneration and Engagement in Knowsley. The new Academy would capture and disseminate this knowledge, influencing and informing policy and practice for young people everywhere – creating a world first.

These recommendations entail two key challenges for Knowsley: how to ensure that the Young People's Champion has real authority, and how to achieve any necessary reshaping of strategic priorities for young people in the borough. In addition, what are the implications in light of the Coalition Government's emergency June budget and the expected subsequent reduction in spending locally?

If implemented, we believe that these proposals could have a remarkable impact as a catalyst for positive change in all aspects of Knowsley young people's lives – raising aspiration, opening up opportunities and vastly improving life choices.

As a result, the levels of poverty and disadvantage will, we believe, drop substantially in the years and decades to come. Understanding how and what works will be essential and we are recommending careful evaluation throughout.

However we are also aware of the national and international significance of such change, which makes this a blueprint for action for every area of disadvantage in the country and beyond.

About the Knowsley Young People's Commission

The Knowsley Young People's Commission brought together a group of academics, policy analysts, media representatives and creative thinkers to develop new perspectives in the complex area of public policy for young people in Knowsley. The Commission was commissioned by Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council and delivered by 4Children.

The Commission set out to understand and analyse:

- What life is like for young people in Knowsley
- What are young people's values, aspirations, dreams and achievements?
- How family, friends, communities and professionals shape young people's lives
- What are the challenges young people in Knowsley face?
- How those challenges can be overcome to unlock young people's potential
- What lessons national and international experiences can offer us in identifying potential solutions

The Knowsley Young People's Commission is grateful to Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council and all of those who have informed and inspired our thinking.

independence mates challenge CONFIDENCE
alltime DREAM apprenticeship FAMILY
like to TALK to someone MENTORING DEAL WITH IT
gigging MINT go places

4Children is the leading edge agency shaping and influencing national policy, and developing and delivering a wide range of innovative children's services 0–19 throughout the country.

4Children's expanding programmes of universal and preventative services are finding new solutions to offer children, young people and families the support they need to flourish in their communities – making joined up, dynamic and high quality services a reality and helping to turn policy into practice.

Find out about 4Children's wide range of support programmes, children's centres and services at www.4Children.org.uk or call 4Children's Information Helpline on **020 7512 2100**.

The Knowsley Young People's Commission Full Report and Research Report are available on request by emailing info@4Children.org.uk

The Knowsley Young People's Commission

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With thanks to the young people of Knowsley, their families and communities, for their inspiration.

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