



Strategic Review  
**Our residents' aspirations**

January 2014

## Our residents' aspirations

Early in 2014, we undertook a strategic review to set Sovereign's direction for the next three years. We carried out an extensive research programme to help inform these decisions. This research report examined our residents' aspirations at different points in their lives.

As social landlords we do not often, if ever, stop and ask ourselves what the wider aspirations of our residents may be. To shape our new strategy we felt it was important to understand our residents' aspirations for themselves and their families.

### Key findings

- There is little evidence to support the popular notion that disadvantaged people have a 'poverty of aspiration' or are part of a 'culture of worklessness'
- Poorer young people's aspirations are the same as their more affluent peers'; however their expectations and attainment levels are measurably lower.
- Disadvantaged adults' aspirations dramatically truncate over time, however their main remaining aspiration is for their children to be able to reach their aspirational goals.
- Many disadvantaged young people and their parents often lack the knowledge and understanding of educational and employment systems that would enable them to reach their full potential.
- Recent research suggests that actions taken to increase the educational attainment and employability of disadvantaged young people should not be focussed on increasing aspiration but should concentrate on tackling the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.
- The nature of some social housing communities may act to prevent social housing residents reaching their full potential.
- Older people increasingly aspire to remain as independent as possible, not to burden anybody and to stay in their home.
- There is an increasing concern about poorer older people's loneliness.

## **Why do we want to know what our residents' aspirations are?**

It is important that we understand our residents' aspirations for themselves and for their families. This will help us to evaluate how relevant and realistic the 'changing lives' element of our current mission statement is, and will help to ensure that the areas of activity that fall under the Community Investment remit are fully embedded in our future thinking.

If we do not have an understanding of our residents' aspirations we will be in danger of missing opportunities to meet their needs, or providing services in a way that inadvertently undermines aspirations. Supporting residents to meet their aspirations also has a business benefit. If residents are better equipped to fulfil their potential they will be more likely to sustain their tenancies: being able to pay their rent, manage the up-keep of their home, balance their communities and cause less anti-social behaviour. If supported to fulfil their full potential, some residents may find themselves in a position where they feel ready and able to move on from social housing, vacating their home for another social housing tenant who may be in more need than them.

As a business with a social mission, we aim to enhance, rather than hinder our residents' ability to fulfil their potential. How can we do this, without truly understanding their aspirations for the future?

## **What can we find out about our residents' aspirations?**

The research carried out on aspirations is limited. We don't hold any data on our residents' aspirations, because we do not ask them for this information. This is the norm across the sector; there are no studies that specifically look into the aspirations of social housing tenants.

The bulk of research that studies aspirations tends to focus on younger people at a stage where aspirations are yet to be affected by the events in their life and are yet to be translated into expectations and attainment. The majority of research focusses on the aspirations of younger dis-advantaged people as this is where the problem with aspirations is seen to lie. This research on economically deprived individuals can reasonably be used in reference to social housing tenants. 2012/13 CORE figures for the England show that 79% of new tenants are in receipt of Housing Benefit and only 29% of households have a household member in any form of paid work.

There is much debate over the apparent disconnect or gap between disadvantaged children's' aspirations and their expectations of their own abilities and their ultimate education and employment-based attainment. This is commonly referred to as the 'attainment gap'.

## **Traditional views concerning aspirations**

The current government's rhetoric has been focussed on a divide between individuals who are 'strivers' who want to work hard and get on and 'scroungers' who are seen to be actively avoiding employment and personal development.

This view is not new, although they perhaps haven't been vocalised and embedded into new policy as much as recently, for instance with the recent reforms to welfare benefits.

The traditional views surrounding aspiration can be summarised as follows:

- Low aspirations are the main reason for low achievement.
- People from poorer backgrounds have depressed aspirations which affect their educational attainment and job prospects.
- Raising poorer young people's aspirations will break this cycle and lead to improved social and economic outcomes for young people from deprived backgrounds.

These views tend to portray aspirations as a chosen attribute of the individual and this has led to the belief that individuals' low aspirations are the reason for them living in poverty and remaining at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This circular logic implies that the majority of people living in social housing are financially disadvantaged, and that they therefore possess limited aspirations for their own or their children's lives.

Not surprisingly, many previous attempts to improve the lives and potential of individuals from deprived communities have been centred on finding methods to raise their aspirations. Until recently, research had not focused on asking these individuals what their aspirations actually are.

## **New views concerning young people's aspirations and attainment**

More recent studies focussing on the aspirations of young people living in deprived communities tend to contradict the notion that people in material poverty also suffer from a 'poverty of aspiration'. These studies show that their aspirations of young disadvantaged people are the same as their more affluent peers.

## **Young people's aspirations**

In 'Are Cultures of Worklessness Passed Down the Generations'(Shildrick, Macdonald, Furlong and Roden, 2012) research was carried out to critically examine the suggestion that there is a great number of families living in the UK where 3 generations of the family have never worked. The report examines whether or not a 'culture of worklessness' that would impede people's aspirations is real.

Despite extensive and lengthy research they could not find one family in the UK where members from all three generations had never worked. There were families where multiple generations were currently out of work but they had lost their jobs due to the restricted labour market, problematic drug and alcohol abuse, offending or

imprisonment, domestic violence, housing instability or physical or mental health issues.

Despite the often long term worklessness of their parents they found that the vast majority of the young people were adamant they didn't want to 'end up like their parents'. They viewed unemployment as a 'life on hold' and had recognised that their parents' aspirations had become de-pressed over time and that they had become fatalistic in their approach to life.

In 'Attachment to Place' (2013) Green & White investigate the role of social networks and attachment to a particular location or community in shaping attitudes, aspirations and behaviour of young people from deprived areas in terms of employment. Generally, the younger people they interviewed had high aspirations and held strong motivation to work. Despite the high level of reliance on benefits in the deprived communities the young people lived in, they did not see this as an attractive or desirable way to live their lives.

In 'The Influence of Parents, Places and Poverty on Educational Attitudes and Aspirations' (Kintrea, St.Clair and Houston, 2011) the aspirations of all students in three secondary schools were measured and 98% of those researched agreed that it is important to get a job when they leave school. 83% of them aspired to attend University and 89% aspired to enter education post the age of sixteen. The research took into account the children's housing tenure and level of deprivation and found that this made no difference to the results.

The finding that aspirations were not affected by tenure or economic circumstances was tested by a group of sociology students from Southampton University, who recently worked with our Strategy Team to carry out some research into the aspirations of social housing tenants. They carried out surveys with a number of young people from Basingstoke from all housing tenures and discovered that within their sample there was no evidence of a link between social housing and low aspiration. They found that young people living in social housing had high aspirations and positive views of employment.

A Joseph Rowntree report 'Young Peoples' Views and Experiences of Growing Up' (Save the Children, 2001) studied vulnerable young people such as teenage mothers, care leavers and young carers and found that their aspirations for their futures were the same as their peers from higher socio-economic groups.

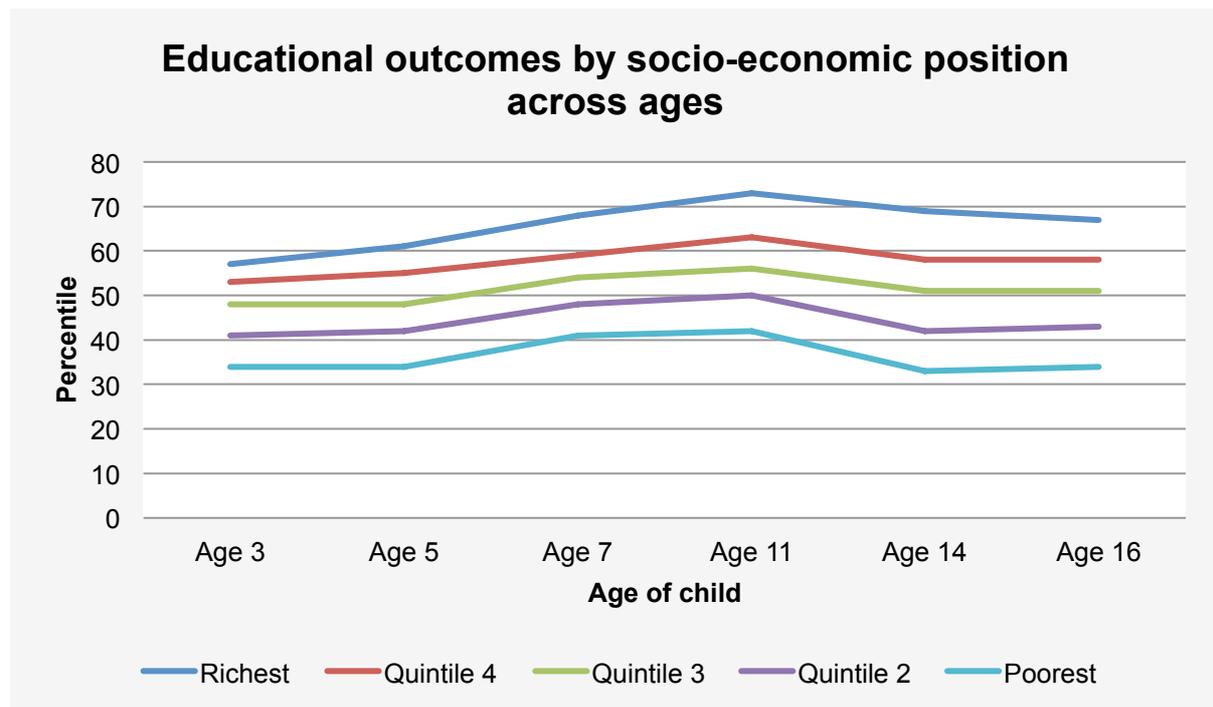
## **Young people's attainment**

The studies mentioned above would suggest that young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds possess the same aspirations for their future as their more affluent peers. They want to do well at school, enter higher education and they want to work. However, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have lower expectations and attainment rates than their more affluent peers (Goodman & Gregg, 2010).

By the age of three there is a considerable gap in cognitive test scores between children in the poorest fifth of the population and those in the richest fifth. This gap widens as children move through the education system. This gap between the

poorest and richest children grows very fast during primary school. By the age of eleven around three quarters of children from the poorest fifth of families reach key stage 2 compared with 97% of children from the richest fifth. This pattern gets starker by the time these children take their GCSEs with only 21% of the children from the poorest fifth of the population gaining five grades A-C qualifications compared to 75% of the top fifth (Goodman & Gregg, 2010).

The chart below (Goodman & Gregg, 2010) illustrates the gap in attainment between children from different socio-economic positions.



Not only does this show that the gap between the richest and poorest children's attainment, it also shows that the richest children achieved scores 10 percentiles higher at 16 than at 3. The poorest children's attainment remained the same. At the age of 3 the poorest children were 23 percentiles behind the richest children and by the age of 16 this has grown to 33 percentiles.

Although young disadvantaged people have the same aspirations for their future as their more affluent peers they have lower expectations regarding fulfilling these aspirations.

As mentioned previously: in his study of three secondary schools in disadvantaged areas, Kintrea (2011) found that disadvantaged pupils had the same aspirations as their richer counterparts. However their responses about their fears for their futures were quite revealing. Although 89% of the respondents said they wanted to attend some form of higher education, 73% of them were worried they were going to leave school with no qualifications and 70% worried that they would never be able to secure employment in the future. A recent study by the Prince's Trust 'Broke but not broken: Tackling youth poverty and the aspiration gap' highlights the low expectations that many disadvantaged people have for their futures. 22% of young people from poorer backgrounds believe that few or none of their goals in life were

achievable compared to 5% of more affluent respondents. 24% of respondents felt that they would end up being reliant on benefits and more than 20% felt that they would end up in a 'dead end job'.

A theme that emerged in the majority of the research studies was that children from poorer backgrounds had a lack of understanding and material resources to navigate the schools system in order to fulfil their aspirations.

For instance Kintrea (2011) highlights that although 96% of respondents could name an ideal career only 5% of them made a link between their own skill set and their chosen career. There were several examples of children who envisaged themselves leaving school at 16 but insisted they were going to be able to achieve high status professional careers. The research studies identify a cohort of young people who have high aspirations for their future, but who do not seem to have an awareness of how to navigate the educational and employment routes that could lead to success.

The research studied also highlighted the things that poorer children are less likely to receive that would help them to fulfil their aspirations in life. For instance a large number of poorer children were not read to as children and do not have access to a wider home learning environment as small children. Poorer students are also less likely to have access to the internet or a computer and are very unlikely to benefit from private tuition. Recent research has highlighted the growing trend for parents to pay for private tuition for their children, with 1 in 4 children benefitting from this (Wallop, 2013). As explored in the following section below they are also less likely to get the guidance they need from their parents in terms of how to achieve their goals.

## **Adults' aspirations**

As we can see from the study of the attainment of more disadvantaged young people, deprived adults are less likely to have been able to fulfil their educational aspirations or to have secured well paid and secure employment. Many deprived adults aspirations are truncated in their youth and as they get older opportunities to change this path get fewer (Creegan, 2008). Despite their decreased aspirations for their own lives, deprived adults have one remaining dominant aspiration: they want their children to fulfil their aspirations.

In 'Are cultures of worklessness passed down the generations?' Shildrick et al found that, despite their long term worklessness, parents actively strove for better for their children and they were aware of the social, psychological and financial advantages work could bring them compared to worklessness and a reliance on benefits. Kintrea (2011) found that parents of more financially disadvantaged children were very interested in their children's futures with 74% of them thinking 'often' or 'a lot' about what they wanted their children to do. Conversely the parents of less deprived children had a much more relaxed and laissez-faire attitude towards their children's ambitions and futures. There was much evidence from various research studies that, due to their own failure in education and employment, more deprived parents lacked the knowledge of how to navigate the education system in order to ensure future success for their children.

## Older people's aspirations

As we have discussed, aspirations diminish as we get older and our expectations lower. As people move towards and into retirement age aspirations in regards to education and employment become less prevalent. There has been a limited amount of research into the aspirations of older people but these studies all deliver a consistent message.

The two dominant aspirations of older people are to remain as independent as possible for as long as possible and to retain a connection with the outside world and to avoid loneliness and isolation. Older people with lower incomes were much less likely to be carrying out any activities that would lengthen the timeframe of independence in later life; they are also more likely to report that they feel isolated or lonely. Less affluent older people are also more likely to be suffering from multiple deprivations (DWP, 2011).

## The possible effect of social housing upon aspirations

The above research suggests that young people who live in social housing are likely to have high aspirations. However, it is apparent that the unemployment rate for social housing tenants is much higher than in other tenures. It could be argued that that this may be due to the individuals with the highest needs being channelled into social housing. However, as Hills (2007) highlights, the employment rates of those living in social housing with particular disadvantages are substantially lower than individuals with the same level of disadvantages living in other tenures.

It is important to question why this may be as certain aspects of living in social housing may be inadvertently reducing individuals' abilities to fulfil their aspirations. Hills suggests the following possible reasons for social housing tenants' lower employment rates:

- Individuals with the highest needs are 'streamed' towards social housing.
- Fears about loss of benefits when moving into work.
- Neighbourhood effects due to social housing's concentration in deprived areas.
- Lack of potential mobility within the sector to be able to move for work.

This last point is of particular interest as Hills highlights that at a national level one in eight house moves were associated with work but only a few thousand social housing tenants move home each year due to work-related issues.

The DWP (2008) carried out some research to try to find out why social housing tenants are much more likely to be unemployed. They did find that negative neighbourhood effects were quite prevalent in the areas which were densely populated with social housing and less prevalent in areas where social housing was more 'pepper potted'. They also found evidence that people who lived in the areas densely populated by social housing felt that they could not apply for jobs as they would be discriminated against when the potential employer saw their address.

Interestingly, very few of the respondents saw residential mobility as an issue which hindered their opportunities to secure employment. The most common reasons that social housing tenants cited as stopping them from securing employment were:

- Leaving the security of direct benefit payments for the prospect of low-paid insecure employment.
- A host of particular vulnerabilities and extra responsibilities creating barriers to employment, such as health issues, childcare issues, drug and/or alcohol dependence and criminal records.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems that young social housing tenants possess high aspirations that are similar to, if not the same as, those of their more affluent counterparts. The commonly held view that people from deprived backgrounds have lesser aspirations appears to be false, and the consequential policy drive to heighten people's aspirations may therefore be misdirected. It is apparent that throughout the lives of social housing tenants they will be less likely to fulfil their aspirations and in return their ambitions for their future gradually diminish.

This review of the research suggests that the problem is not in raising young residents' aspirations, but supporting them and their parents to close the gap between aspirations and achievements. As Carter, Wall and Whitfield (2012) suggest, deprived younger people "already have high aspirations, helping provide the right support to unleash their full potential is the key".

## References

- Barnard, H. (2013, 30 January). *Poorer students need help to fulfil their goals*. [web log] Retrieved from: <http://www.citethisforme.com/> [Accessed: 7 September 2013].
- Cabinet Office: Social Exclusion Task Force (2008). *Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities*. [report] DCLG.
- Carter-Wall, C. and Whitfield, G. (2012). *The role of aspirations, attitudes and behavior in closing the educational attainment gap*. [report] Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Creegan, C. (2008). *Opportunity and aspiration: two sides of the same coin?*. [report] Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Department for Work and Pensions (2008). *Social housing and worklessness: Qualitative research findings*. [report].
- Department for Work and Pensions (2011). *Aspirations in later life*. [report]
- Doward, J. (2013) *Britain 2013: children of poor families are still left behind* [article] The Observer
- Goodman, A. and Gregg, P. (2010). *Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behavior?* [report] Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Green, A. and White, R. (2013). *Attachment to Place: Social networks, mobility and prospects of young people*. [report] Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Hills, A. (2007). *Ends and means: The future roles of social housing in England* [report] Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion
- Kintrea, K., St Clair, R. and Houston, M. (2011). *The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attitudes and aspirations*. [report] Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Morrison Gutman, L. and Akerman, R. (2008). *Determinants*. [report] Institute of Education, University of London.

- Prince's Trust (2011). *Broke, no broken: Tackling youth poverty and the aspiration gap*. [report].
- Save the Children (2001). *Young people's views and experiences of growing up*. [report] Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Shildrick, T., Macdonald, R., Furlong, A., Roden, J. and Crow, R. (2012). *Are 'cultures of worklessness' passed down the generations?* [report] Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Students of Politics at Southampton University (2013). *Young people, their aspirations and social housing*. [report].
- University of Portsmouth (2010). *Aspirations, Expectations and Achievement: A project for Portsmouth City Council*. [report].
- Wallace, A. (2010). *Public attitudes to housing*. [report] The University of York.
- Wallop, H. 2013. *I've called in a private tutor to give my child a chance in the academic arms race*. The Telegraph, 8th October.



For more information please email [Natalie.Pearton@sovereign.org.uk](mailto:Natalie.Pearton@sovereign.org.uk)