

# Supporting youth transitions in Buckinghamshire

Interim report – summary version

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This report was written by The Centre for Education and Youth. CfEY is a 'think and action-tank'. We believe society should ensure all children and young people receive the support they need to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood. We provide the evidence and support policy makers and practitioners need to support young people. We use our timely and rigorous research to get under the skin of issues affecting young people in order to shape the public debate, advise the sector and campaign on topical issues. We have a particular interest in issues affecting marginalised young people.

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**Dr Sam Baars** is Director of Research and Operations at The Centre for Education and Youth. He has over a decade's experience of designing, conducting and managing mixed-methods research projects for government, universities, business and the third sector. Sam's peer-reviewed research focuses on young people, area-based inequalities, social science impact and local economic development. He gave evidence to the Education Select Committee's 2020 inquiry on left-behind white pupils, and recently edited CfEY's first book, *Young People on the Margins*. Sam is an experienced podcaster, filmmaker, radio presenter, keynote speaker and blogger.

## Executive summary

This report is a summary version of an interim report which presents findings from the first two stages of an ongoing research project conducted by The Centre for Education and Youth for The Rothschild Foundation. In the wake of a pandemic which has caused significant disruption to young people's educational pathways and employment prospects, the research sets out to explore the following four questions:

1. What is it like for young people to grow up in Buckinghamshire?
2. What stands in the way of them making a fulfilling transition to adulthood?
3. What services are these young people accessing?
4. What existing local services would benefit from being supported and expanded?

This as an opportune moment to conduct research on how youth transitions in Buckinghamshire can best be supported, given the prominence of the social mobility and levelling up agendas, and the increased attention being given to geographical inequalities, deprived contexts beyond the inner city, and the place-based processes that shape young people's lives.

When the project concludes in late 2021, we aim to have brought together a range of local stakeholders around a set of shared aims and funding priorities to support young people in the county. Young people will play a key role in this process.

The report is structured around four priority themes, which emerged from a review of the Foundation's existing grant-making and its current priorities. Each theme offers a different perspective on what it means for a young person in Buckinghamshire to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood, and the barriers they can face along the way.

First we focus on young people's **transitions** into higher education and fulfilling, stable employment. Second we focus on **accessibility**, through the lens of local housing affordability, digital access and rural links to opportunities. Third we focus on **disability** – specifically the transitions of young people with SEND and those with poor mental health. Finally we focus on **diversity**: the importance of amplifying the perspectives of all young people, particularly those from minority ethnic groups and those living in less affluent areas of the county.

The report sets out the evidence for why these themes are important, examines the current Buckinghamshire context, and identifies existing interventions which could inform future grant-funded activity in the county. We discuss the findings in detail in the full version of the report, which is accompanied by an [interactive map](#) showing key youth indicators available at the most granular geographies, in order to make it easier to visualise the distribution of cold spots at a small neighbourhood level across the county.

## Summary of findings

### Transitions to fulfilling, stable employment

- A significant proportion of 16–17-year-olds' transitions into education, employment or training in Buckinghamshire are not known by the local authority
- Nationally, young people's educational pathways and employment prospects have been significantly disrupted by the pandemic
- There is a mixed evidence base for interventions supporting young people into employment, although the literature identifies some promising programme features. In Bucks, interventions like Tool Shed may help support young people into employment, particularly those with SEND

### Transitions to higher education

- Although HE participation rates are, on average, higher in Buckinghamshire than nationally, the picture varies widely across the county. 22 neighbourhoods in the county fall within the lowest fifth nationally for HE participation, with significant concentrations to the west of Aylesbury and the east of High Wycombe
- Nationally, there are pronounced gaps in higher education participation based on disadvantage and ethnicity
- The pandemic has disrupted young people's access to information, advice and guidance (IAG) which is crucial in supporting them to achieve their ambitions for higher level study
- Educational attainment at the end of secondary school is a strong determinant of higher education prospects. There is an attainment gap of almost two years at the end of secondary school between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils in Bucks
- Other than improving primary and secondary educational outcomes, efforts to meet the Gatsby Benchmarks and to draw on ties with local universities and businesses may help to boost HE participation

### Access to affordable local housing

- The affordability of local housing compared to local earnings is broadly in line with the regional average in Aylesbury Vale and Wycombe. However, housing in South Bucks and Chiltern is some of the least affordable in the South East: South Bucks is ranked the least affordable of 67 districts in the region; Chiltern is ranked third
- Across the country, young adults are particularly reliant on the private rented sector which is often expensive and insecure
- The most effective levers to tackle housing affordability sit at the national policy level, which limits the scope for local interventions. However, there are increasingly common economic models for local action, such as Community Land Trusts

## Digital access

- Covid-19 has exposed a 'digital divide'. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to rely on mobile phones to access the internet, and less likely to have access to their own device and a broadband connection
- Our mapping suggests there may be particular digital exclusion coldspots west of Aylesbury, east of High Wycombe and north of Chesham
- Nationally, the digital divide led to unequal home learning experiences while schools were closed during the pandemic. Beyond covid-specific impacts, poor digital access also acts as a barrier to IAG relating to further and higher education, employment and training opportunities
- Action is being taken at a local level to tackle digital access issues in Bucks. Buckinghamshire County Council's 'Smarter Buckinghamshire' strategy (2018-2022) is completing rollout of broadband to rural communities

## Rural links to opportunities

- Outside densely populated metropolitan areas, young people often face long journey times to access education institutions, large employment centres and other amenities
- Disadvantaged young people are heavily reliant on public transport – in particular bus services
- Within Bucks, further education and employment cold spots tend to be in more rural parts of the county, particularly in Aylesbury Vale. The western edge of the county, at the midpoint between Aylesbury and Oxford, appears to be particularly inaccessible to further education and employment opportunities

## Supporting young people with SEND

- There is significant variation in SEND identification across the country. SEND rates in Buckinghamshire are broadly in line with the national average
- Key Stage 5 attainment and employment rates for young people with SEND in Buckinghamshire are also similar to national and regional rates
- Young people with SEND often face a range of challenges, including social ostracization, a lack of specialist support, and difficulties accessing stable and fulfilling employment
- Bucks Council have sought to tackle social stigma around disability through student-led conferences and practice-sharing between schools. Other valuable interventions identified in the literature include tailored careers education and personalised, sustained support when transitioning to adulthood

## Tackling poor youth mental health

- Poor mental health can affect young people's experiences of education, employment and personal relationships
- Overall, youth mental health indicators in Buckinghamshire compare favourably with the wider national context. However, many young people in Bucks will be struggling with their mental health as they emerge from the pandemic
- Across the country, local CAMHS are often insufficiently funded and unable to respond to demand
- Young people should be able to access support with their mental health regardless of their education, training or employment pathway
- More needs to be done to ensure young people continue to get access to high quality support as they transition from youth to adult mental health services

## Amplifying diverse perspectives

- Nationally, young people from different ethnic groups achieve significantly different educational and labour market outcomes. They also experience significant differences in relation to wider outcomes, such as their mental health
- Outside larger metropolitan centres, young people from non-White ethnic groups tend to make up a smaller proportion of the local population. This can create barriers to finding role models, accessing information and guidance, and influencing local decision-making
- Although Buckinghamshire residents are predominantly from White British backgrounds, there are sizeable groups from other backgrounds, particularly in Wycombe

## Shining a spotlight on young people in less affluent areas of the county

- While Buckinghamshire as a whole is defined in official statistics as an 'affluent' county, 1 in 14 neighbourhoods within the county are defined as 'hard pressed'. As our mapping reveals, these neighbourhoods are spread throughout Buckinghamshire, often away from urban centres
- Three neighbourhoods in Aylesbury and High Wycombe are ranked among the most limited nationally for social infrastructure, although they are not particularly deprived. This means they have relatively limited civic assets, are less well connected, and have a less active and engaged community

## Next steps

This report lays the foundations for the next stage of the project: a local consultation, involving detailed fieldwork with young people to explore their perspectives, experiences, and the changes to opportunities and support they would like to see, alongside engagement with key partners from local government, statutory services, business, and the community and voluntary sectors to hear their perspective and identify consensus for action. The findings of this interim report will guide the questions we explore in the consultation, the organisations and individuals we speak to, and the areas of the county we target when recruiting participants.

The project will conclude in late 2021 with a review of the Rothschild Foundation's youth-focused grant making, drawing on the shared priorities that emerge from the consultation work, and based on our analysis of gaps in provision, well-evidenced interventions that could be piloted in Buckinghamshire, and existing local provision that could be supported or scaled up.