

NORTHERN HEARTLANDS UPPER WEARDALE

THE ASPIRATIONS project, based at Wearhead Primary School, emerged from a workshop with teachers and parents run by Northern Heartlands community facilitators to explore why children appear to limit their ambitions as they approach transition to secondary school. As aspirations are informed by location, influences, personality and physical limitations it made sense to work with people across the demographic in a variety of Upper Weardale locations. The additional venues included the Breakfast Club at Cowshill, The Calf House B&B, Cowshill Arts Group, North Pens Writers, Eastgate Sheep Show, Chatterbox Cafe, Maxine's Cafe, and on the bus. I used short creative interventions and conversations to elicit thoughts, feelings and impressions. I walked, often guided by local residents and schoolchildren, who showed me the area as they saw and understood it. I set up conversations for children to have with the adults in their lives to explore how aspirations may change as you grow older and circumstances alter. I asked them to explore what the area meant to them and other people in their lives.

The responses provoked the question "how can you live in a place like this?" and this framed the second stage of the investigation. Answers emerged sometimes half-formed and often tentative as if no one had thought to ask such a straightforward question before. Much still remains unanswered and those answers given have unearthed further avenues for investigation.

The limits on aspiration

Although aspiration is personal, and not something everyone is comfortable with or regards as important it has become a universal requirement. We don't have to aspire to the same things but the imperative – to do more and do better – to become fulfilled as individuals and as a society is widespread. It carries within it the idea that "we can do anything if we put our mind to it."

This attitude is potentially damaging. Far from being an encouragement, it can limit the individual's capacity to live a healthy and fulfilling life. Failure becomes a moral fault and lack of ambition a psychological aberration. We need a more considered investigation into "aspiration" and a rigorous interrogation of how the concept functions individually and socially. Although beyond the scope of this investigation we need to be mindful of its importance.

If we accept that "aspiration" is a good thing what are the potential limitations for the individual? Firstly, the expectations of family, neighbours and peer group. This is complex for expectations can inspire or limit. They are not necessarily a familial or social constant; they can change with time, experience, getting older, and in response to events that affect family and neighbourhood. This is further complicated by macro social pressures: social media, adverts, algorithms, all of which flatten the social and psychological landscape presenting an all-pervading sameness that cannot, and never will, recognise the "local" and sometimes fleeting experiences of the individual.

In the sessions at Wearhead school we explored the practical limitations to aspiration. For example; you are a promising cricketer and Durham sign you to their youth scheme. This requires regular attendance at coaching sessions in Chester-le-Street, a 70 mile round trip. Your parents are not able to drive you so what can you do? As an exercise I asked the pupils to consider this and similar. Responses were within expected parameters – from giving up to asking neighbours, family, and the cricket club to help. And when they reach

secondary school, where the pupil workload increases as the pressure of learning mounts they face further limitations.

Work with pupils and neighbourhoods on flexible thinking - if I can't do what I want to do this way are there other ways? - could be useful. Can we instil a confidence in and strategies for "Imaginative Living"? By this I mean working creatively within (whatever) restrictions exist (permanent or temporary) in order to satisfy a need and/or frame precise questions to those in influence (councils, NGOs, business, central government etc) to meet the need. This would help husband resources and funding to maximum effect. Developing Imaginative Strategies cannot be done within formal structures of experiential or class-based learning but needs a rigorous and focussed strategy that is flexible and improvisational.

Community and neighbourhood

1. For the livestock judge I talked to at the Eastgate Sheep Show, a young woman from a farm near Hexham, her community and neighbourhood were defined by farming. She illustrated this by telling of how she "let down" her best friend from school (who was not from a farming family) by failing to turn up to be a bridesmaid at her wedding because a cow was having difficulty calving. Although she caused upset the cow was the priority. Thus her friends were more and more other young farmers and farming families as they understood the demands.

2. The paucity of shops, pubs, cafes etc (some villages without any of these) mean for many that their neighbourhood, the area that frames their daily life can be the whole of the Upper Dale e.g. from Stanhope to Cowshill. Popping to the shop or pub can be logistically challenging and prevents the social intercourse that emerges on High Streets, supermarkets, the street. I noticed more and more home deliveries; convenient but socially isolating. A look at a notice board will reveal many activities and clubs advertised for village halls, community centres, and pubs. This gives a misleading impression of activity for they are geared to an older population many of whom have time on their hands (e.g. they are retired) to organise and/or attend. Teenagers I met bemoaned the lack of things to do (apart from belonging to the Young Farmers or going to the local pub) and the poor transport links. The nearest town with any night life is Durham and a night out there could cost up to a £100 (taxi are necessary). Wages are poor so that night out is an infrequent experience.

If definitions of community and neighbourhood are flexible, depending on what you do for a living, how sociable you are able to be, your age, and what is available in your immediate locality (e.g. shops), what are the implications for social cohesion, shared space and common purpose? Anthropological research (e.g. Social Capital) may be useful.

Belonging

What does it mean to belong? Is belonging defined by geography e.g. "I belong in the Upper Dale", or by a directed organisation (Young Farmers, the school), occupation, or by a community of interest (the art club, village hall committee)? It can be a combination of any of these. A thread through all encounters was the need "to belong". Belonging implies being settled and at ease a feeling was most common in the older population (natives and incomers) who had built relationships and security around uncomplicated patterns of behaviour. For the young, though belonging feels permanent when you're a child, it becomes a transient, restless, even disturbing feeling in adolescence. How can you belong when you have to travel out of the Dale for work, and for Further and Higher education? That the

young person grows away from family we might regard as the natural order of things but if, once you've moved away, your chances of returning diminish, you need to find somewhere else to belong. A return to the Dale becomes more difficult and limiting whilst the human need to belong, to be part of something else, and to have a shared identity, is what sustains a place and a community.

I talked to people who had worked away and then moved back. Others while working away returned to the Dale at every opportunity. Some never leave. A retired Fluorspar miner from Rookhope, whom I met at the Eastgate Sheep Show, said he was always glad to get back in to the Dale and leave them "daft buggers in the outside world fanning around".

The young man in the ticket booth at Eastgate Sheep Show, dressed in cloth cap, country shirt, tie and waistcoat, appeared every inch the local farmer. He was indeed from a farming family just north of Eastgate (though without the local accent), had a degree in politics, and was the manager of a charity shop in Barnard Castle. He was at the show doing his bit for family and "community" but had no interest in farming. That's why he'd gone away to study politics. He was doubtful of that choice given "the rubbish politics" at the moment. He was glad to have studied away but he came back because there was no suitable employment. His present job was the result of volunteering at the charity shop.

What are the implications for the long term sustainability of life in the Dale when a significant section of the population will find themselves belonging elsewhere?

If most people that move into the Upper Dale are retired, second-homers, commuters, small cottage and craft industries, what needs to happen socially and communally to exploit the particular skills they have to help energise the Dale?

What is their commitment to and relationship with the land, other than that of enjoying the landscape, the walking, the peace and the quiet? If they have no financial investment in the land, in the Dales economy other than leisure and food spending, what contribution can they make to its economic well-being?

The gap between the elderly and the youth is noticeable in the Upper Dale especially when the elderly are incomers and have no family connections in the Dales. Does this have implications for the social fabric and neighbourhood cohesion?

Demography

The majority of people I saw out and about, and met, were the older middle-aged and the fit and mobile elderly with most of those having a reasonable disposable income. There is an aging population and a significant imbalance of age groups. Older people tend to be long-term residents, the retired, or those with second homes. The middle-aged is a mixture of those who work on the land, work from home (and I would include housewives), and those who commute to Newcastle, Durham, Teesside, Hexham, Penrith, Carlisle.

What strategies are needed to ensure this imbalance does not distort Dale's life?

Agriculture

There was a concern that exiting the EU will have a significant impact on sheep farming (the major farming activity). The uncertainty of subsidy, the changing demands for, and fluctuating price of, sheep, have all contributed to unease. There is a feeling that those outside the Dale (including farmers in other parts in the UK, particularly arable and agri-business) have no understanding of the lives of hill farmers. Further they feel they have no

voice in the places where decisions are made and that few people in power take the time to visit the Dale and spend time with its inhabitants.

There are other factors of change; the weather becoming less predictable, less meat-eating, increased fuel costs, the decline of livestock markets, the loss of small abattoirs which means great travel for slaughter. The common consequence is greater economic hardship. One farmer had two farms some 20 miles apart as it was the only way he could make a living.

Noticeable at the Eastgate Sheep show were the number of exhibits from “hobby” farmers or owners of small-holdings. The hundreds of sheep on display gave a false impression of a dynamic sheep-farming industry though it did confirm a widespread love for and fascination with both the sheep and the land.

There were conversations about farmers becoming more managers of the land with responsibility for re-wilding, maintaining grasslands, flood management, becoming aligned with tourism, in precedence over livestock. Whatever side taken in the multi-layered arguments it was clear that the future was of concern. Things are changing but the question is “am I part of this change or is change being imposed upon me irrespective of my experience and views”

There needs to be a close examination of Dales farming over the next few years. Not just through surveys but through focussed conversations, observational diaries from farmers and other agricultural workers, embedding in the Dale for periods of time. The methodology needs to be dynamic, capturing the process of change, and implications for the future.

The Land

The North Pennines is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (there is a sign to this effect just west of Eastgate). Often referred to as “England’s Last Wilderness” it is a man-made landscape changed by mining, industry and farming. You climb out of the dale and onto the tops and you can see emptiness for miles yet you will be on land owned by Sheiks and Hedge Funds. There is public access but it is not “wild” for there are managed grouse moors (with their echoes of when this land was the hunting estate of the Bishops of Durham).

Ownership of land is going to become increasingly important. Not just who owns it but what is done with it. Will we see a decrease in Shared Space, and land usage change with no regard to environmental or community impact? There is a need for investigation into immediate and long-term impact of any changes. This landscape is deceptive; it feels and looks eternal but it is, like always, constantly changing.

Show Time

The agricultural shows are important to Dales life irrespective of age, occupation, background, politics and the like. It is a shared moment in both planning and execution. It has changed over the years but it is still there. There are three Weardale shows – Chapel, Stanhope, Wolsingham – all with their different feel. Chapel is the smallest show in the least populated part of the Dale. Stanhope is the next biggest and Wolsingham (being nearer the bigger towns of Wear Valley and further East) is the largest.

This year I noticed huge publicity for Wolsingham Show with sponsored signs throughout the Dale, Wear Valley, and beyond. There were more attractions, bigger prizes, displays etc

than previous years. It had, unlike the others, more obvious money backing it. Wolsingham Show (which I have been told wants to call itself the Weardale Show) seems more corporate, visitor orientated, and less community, than the other shows.

There are implications here for definition of place and community. Many in the Upper Dale would regard Wolsingham as not even in the Dale. For others Wolsingham is too far way (For Cowshill, Nenthead and Alston in Cumbria are nearer) and they feel alienated. Yet others feel that Wolsingham's ambition will usurp Dale's life. Chapel Show still has that local feel, representative of all people in the surroundings, yet welcoming to visitors and outsiders. It still needs financial support and if all monies are absorbed by one big event 20 miles away, in a town not seen as fully representative of the (Upper) Dale then this key local event, that affirms identity and place, could disappear.

These shows happen once a year in late summer but they are a sound indicator of change. It would be useful to have a small and focussed 3 year study of the shows that examines change and trends.

Further areas for investigation

1. People of all ages, both residents and visitors, said they felt "safe" in the Dale. cursory conversations about what they meant revealed more than just neighbourhood safety e.g. crime and anti-social behaviour, it was how the landscape made them feel. Casual, everyday, and throwaway phrases such as "God's Country", "the outside world", "peace and quiet", though easily dismissed, do indicate a state of mind, one of apparent ease in a remote and rugged location where nature is demanding but can be understood and dealt with. Far from the apparent randomness of urban life, with its real and imagined threats, the individual is more in control (and therefore "feels" safer) as long as they accept that the climate, the remoteness, and the ruggedness of the landscape must be worked with and not against.
2. Shared spaces are important to people in the Dale (as they are in other locations). It is where they meet for companionship, common cause, and intellectual, creative, and emotional stimulation. If they disappear then social isolation and dislocation will, I would suggest rise, with a consequent increase in social, health (mental and physical) and economic problems. The work of Chris Ford in to the function of social space is of particular relevance.
3. People talk of "local" issues but are perceptions of what is "local" changing? This of course assumes that there is a shared and agreed perception of "local". If so what is driving those changes and what are the implications?
4. What planning is in place that supports all ages and encourages social cohesion in the face of demographic change?

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