

REACHING OUR POTENTIAL: DEVELOPING A STRATEGY FOR RAISING ASPIRATIONS IN NORFOLK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This is the Executive Summary for *Reaching Our Potential: Developing a Strategy for Raising Aspirations in Norfolk*.

The full report is currently available via the Shaping the Future Web site¹

The *Reaching Our Potential: Developing a Strategy for Raising Aspirations in Norfolk* report has been produced as the result of wide-ranging consultation and multi-agency working. The full list of the organisations whose representatives contributed to the report is to be found in the main report.

The collective views expressed in the full report and in this Executive Summary have been reached as a result of a lengthy collaborative process that began in February 2005 and are not necessarily to be taken as the views of any single participating organisation or individual.

This Executive Summary presents main findings of *Reaching Our Potential: Developing a Strategy for Raising Aspirations in Norfolk* but the full, definitive document has primacy and should be consulted in all matters relating to methodology, analysis of data, and operational detail.

BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

Identifying the problem

A number of separate initiatives, including Norfolk's 20-year Community strategy, *Norfolk Ambition*, the *Norfolk Learning and Skills Council's Plan for Reform* and Norfolk County Council's *Shaping the Future* strategy, had identified the apparently low level of aspiration among individuals, communities and businesses across Norfolk as a significant problem. These findings were backed by considerable anecdotal evidence pointing to the same conclusions.

It was established that low aspiration leads to low levels of achievement and so has a serious, negative impact on the economic and skills base of the county, as well as adversely affecting the individuals concerned and their communities.

¹ <http://www.learning.shapingthefuture.org.uk/Strategy/Resources.asp>

In order to tackle the related problems of low aspiration and low achievement it was necessary to develop a new and holistic approach, which built on previous initiatives and research and which was able to deliver:

- an accurate assessment of the present situation;
- a coherent strategy for helping individuals and communities in Norfolk;
- measurable, positive outcomes.

These aims came together as *Reaching Our Potential: Strategy for Raising Aspirations in Norfolk*.

The under-pinning ethos has been to enable relevant organisations and key stakeholders to work together to raise the aspirations of the people of Norfolk:

"...to create a culture in Norfolk, which enables us to fulfil our potential, leading to increased educational, economic, social and environmental benefits."

Asking Fundamental Questions

In order to realise this vision and to offer practical solutions to the perceived problems of low aspiration / low achievement in Norfolk, it was necessary to address a number of fundamental questions:

- For the purposes of the strategy, how was the term "aspirations" to be defined?
- What was the perceived level of aspiration and achievement of the people of Norfolk, when compared to the rest of the nation?
- What strategies could be adopted to raise aspiration?

Defining "Aspiration"

Before beginning any major project it is important to return to first principles and to define terms. For the purpose of the *Reaching Our Potential* project the following working definitions were agreed:

- **Aspiration:** "The desire to achieve our potential"
- **Level of aspiration:** "What we perceive our potential to be"
- **Maximising aspiration:** "Ensuring that we are aware of our full potential... AND can access opportunities to fulfil that potential... AND have the desire to do so"

Aspiration in Norfolk

A variety of potentially disadvantageous geographical and socio-economic factors have effected the development of the county and tended to limit the aspirations of its people. These have included poor transport infrastructure, an historic reliance on declining traditional industries, a lack of higher-level jobs and a workforce that is less well qualified than that in other parts of the country.

While there is no nationally recognised measure of aspiration, there has been a long standing and deep-rooted belief that people in Norfolk suffer from low aspiration. Evidence for this has been inferred from a range of indicators detailing the comparatively high percentage of inhabitants with few qualifications, or no qualifications at all.

CREATING A STRATEGY FOR NORFOLK

It was in order to help the population Norfolk to develop the skills it needs for the future, while maintaining all that is good and often unique about the county, that the Reaching Our Potential strategy was developed. This was timely, given Central Government's recognition that raising aspirations is a priority: many recent policies have been aimed at raising aspiration or removing the barriers that prevent people from realising their potential.

The challenge for stakeholders

It was recognised that in order for the strategy to be effective, Reaching Our Potential stakeholders would need to:

- move away from a short-term funding led approach;
- develop a shared understanding of the term "raising aspirations";
- be fully engaged in the process;
- acknowledge that much is already being done that can be built on;
- share good practice across all sectors;
- measure outcomes;
- identify champions to drive the agenda forwards

The fundamental principles underpinning the strategy

A number of fundamental principles were established. These principles were to be applied to each of the six key issues / themes, and were:

- Ensure that leaders across the county are fully behind the strategy
- Start young by seeking to influence young people and their parents as soon as possible, certainly before age 16;
- Be inclusive and ensure that actions and outcomes are available to every sector of the community and all Norfolk people, irrespective of age, ability or disability;
- Evaluate what is being done and be willing to adapt, if necessary;
- Be brave and in order to succeed take risks when necessary;
- Communicate effectively and form genuine partnerships that work;
- Make sure that opportunities match new expectations

SIX THEMES FOR CHANGE

Six broad, interrelated issues / themes were identified as being of paramount importance to the success of the strategy. They are:

1. Generating leadership

We need to ensure that leaders across the county are fully committed to developing the potential of all the people of Norfolk, understanding and acknowledging the value of strong aspirations.

2. Developing the knowledge and skills base

Education and training are at the heart of the raising aspirations agenda. Only by providing flexible, high-quality education and training can we give people the tools they need to realise their potential.

3. Helping people make choices

If aspirations are to be realistic and realised, it is vital that complete, accurate, and impartial information and guidance is made accessible, so that the people of Norfolk can make informed choices.

4. Maintaining a thriving economy

By ensuring that people's skills match local employment opportunities, and that both grow in tandem, and by understanding and encouraging entrepreneurship, we will maintain a thriving local economy.

5. Creating active and engaged communities

Everyone should be able to contribute to the life of their community and have access to a range of learning, cultural, community and recreational activities. Increased participation creates opportunity and leads to stronger, happier communities.

6. Promoting culture to all

Cultural activity, in its widest forms, helps to develop aspirations and is a vehicle for change and progression. It fosters learning and creativity and must be made available to communities in every part of Norfolk.

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

Accurate evaluation of the various elements of the Reaching Our Potential strategy is of vital importance. The ideals set out in the strategy and the detailed plans for their execution will be of little or no benefit unless their impact can be properly assessed, which means that an evaluation framework must be created in order for the strategy to succeed and be proved to have succeeded.

CONCLUSIONS: THE "E" WORD

Raising aspirations is about empowering people.

By giving them information, guidance and a wide variety of choices, we can give them the confidence to discover their potential; but we must ensure that, having raised their expectations, we can meet them.

To provide wide-ranging opportunities for all our approach must be innovative, bold and coordinated.

This strategy is not the end of such a process: it is just a beginning.