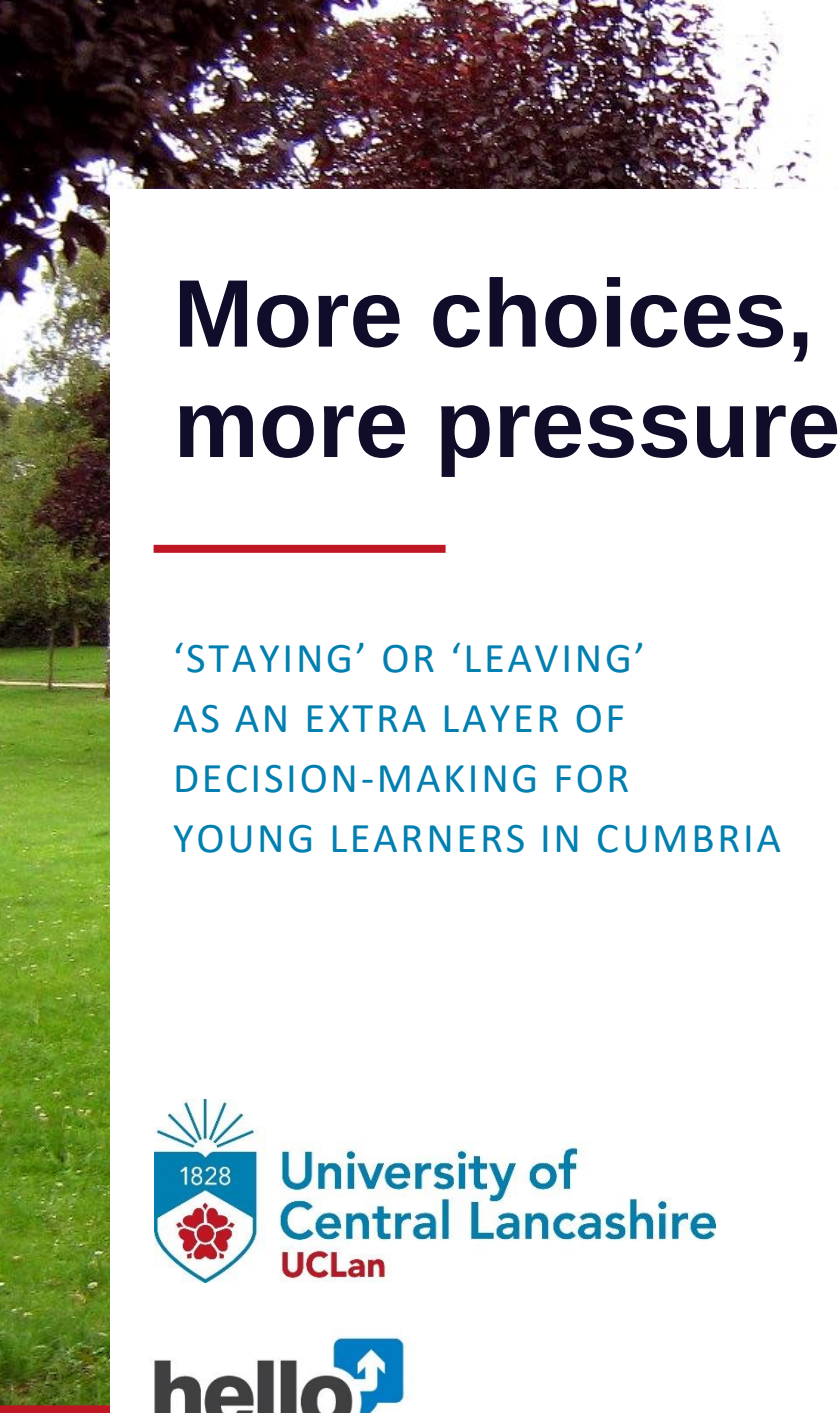


More choices, more pressure

‘STAYING’ OR ‘LEAVING’ AS AN EXTRA LAYER OF DECISION-MAKING FOR YOUNG LEARNERS IN CUMBRIA



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Contents

Executive summary....4

Background and motivation....7

About Cumbria....8

Methods....9

- Phase 1 data....9
- Literature review....9
- Practitioner survey....10
- Paired depth interview....10
- Young learner survey....10
- Impact of Covid-19....10

Literature review....11

- Hello Future reports....11
- Other sources....12

Research questions....16

Settings for discussion....17

- Formal settings....17
- Parents and families....20
- Friends and peers....21

Why do practitioners pose the 'stay or leave' question?....23

- Wants/aspirations....23
- Broadening horizons....23
- Limited local career choices....24

Is there a dichotomy of views about 'staying or leaving' in Cumbria, and how does this arise?....25

- Views of Carlisle/Cumbria....27
- Geography and travel....29

Ambitions and opportunities 29
'Who you know' 31
What are the impacts of questions of 'staying or leaving' on young learners? 32
Discussion and recommendations.....36
Bibliography 39

Executive summary

Background

This report was commissioned by Hello Future, the Cumbrian Uni Connect, to investigate whether young learners in Cumbria and other geographically-isolated areas face a layer of decision-making – whether to stay in, or leave, their local area – which is independent of other questions such as whether to go to university. The study also looked at the impacts on Cumbrian students of facing this extra decision on top of the uncertainties to do with education and jobs that all young people encounter.

Methods

In order to investigate this issue, we used a mixed-methods study drawing on our previous research on peer conversation among pupils in Carlisle[1,2], as well as other Hello Future reports and the wider literature. We also conducted surveys with young learners in Cumbria and widening participation (WP) practitioners nationwide, as well as an interview with two members of the Hello Future team.

Findings

We found that:

- Most young learners in Cumbria encounter discussion about whether they should 'stay or leave' in formal settings such as school WP sessions, and/or in the family group.
- Overt discussion among peers on this point is uncommon, but young people are aware of what choices their friends might make, and can be influenced by a desire to 'stay together'.
- WP practitioners in geographically remote areas are more likely to raise the issue of 'staying or leaving' with young learners in contexts independent of decisions about university.
- Urban WP practitioners are more likely to frame stay/leave discussions around 'broadening horizons' – seeing beyond the local area – while those in remote/rural settings are more motivated by the limited local career choices available to young learners.
- There are a range of drivers that might lead young people to form two distinct groups – 'stayers' and 'leavers'. These include:
  - Differing views about life in Carlisle/Cumbria, including issues of diversity;
  - Geographical issues and willingness to travel;
  - Ambitions and the opportunities available locally;
  - Whether parents/family live, or have experience of living, outside the local area.

[1] *Something to talk about: The impacts of peer conversation and relationships on the choices of young learners in Carlisle*, https://www.hellofuture.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Something-to-talk-about_-The-impacts-of-peer-conversation-and-relationships-on-the-choices-of-young-learners-in-Carlisle.pdf

[2] *Hidden speech, private thoughts: a case study in peer conversation and educational choice*, https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/openu/jwpll/2021/00000023/00000001/art00008

- Negative impacts on young learners associated with tensions over whether to stay or leave including anxieties over having to make the decision, and difficulties in talking to friends about this.
- Many young participants voiced a desire to be given more information about the options available to them.
- It was common for young learners in Cumbria to have thought deeply about the question of whether they should leave the local area.
- Conflict about who would stay and who would leave did not tend to arise. However WP practitioners reported that students commonly seemed to need to justify their decisions on this point, implying that they anticipated being 'judged' by others.
- WP Practitioners felt that the stay/leave decision was likely to be a source of stress that is particular to young people growing up in very remote areas.

Recommendations

We make the following recommendations:

1. WP programmes and practitioners should acknowledge that young learners in Cumbria may have anxieties around the question of whether to stay in or leave the region which are specific to those in more isolated/remote areas. In addition, many have thought deeply about this question. It is important, therefore, that when discussions around such points are instigated this is done with sensitivity and seriousness.
2. Due to the tensions surrounding these issues, young people may exhibit a need to justify their choices, or a sense of bravado, during discussions. Those moderating the sessions should consider what can be done to increase feelings of acceptance or comfort.
3. There was a clear desire from our young participants for more information about potential future choices. Given that it is likely that they already have access to multiple sources of information, from within their school and organisations such as Hello Future, it would be worthwhile conducting a listening exercise, preferably across multiple age groups, to determine what they perceive to be missing. Attention should be paid to whether specific information which is relevant to a geographically isolated cohort may be lacking.
4. While it was not our intention to gather information about the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's attitudes, it is notable that our pre-pandemic interviewees exhibited a greater sense of decision about their future choices than our pandemic-hit survey respondents, who manifested high degrees of uncertainty. It may be necessary to adapt WP sessions in future years to take account of this shift.
5. While it is unclear at the moment whether pandemic working patterns will lead to a long-term shift towards remote working, WP organisations in areas such as Cumbria should monitor such trends, as they have the potential to remove some of the pressure associated with having to move away to pursue a specific career.

Limitations of this study

The initial design for this study included a series of interviews with young people aged 18+ who had previously been involved in the Hello Future programme, to discuss their decision-making processes regarding their education and career choices. However due to the pandemic, and specifically the lockdown of early 2021, we were unable to proceed with this aspect. In addition, recruitment for our survey of young learners was hit by the associated school closures, with only a small number of responses received. Confidence that the concerns in this document raised about issues of 'staying or leaving' are specific to remote areas such as Cumbria could be strengthened by also gathering the views of young learners in more central regions of England.

Background and motivation

Our recent report for Hello Future, *Something to talk about: The impacts of peer conversation and relationships on the choices of young learners in Carlisle* (Canovan et al., 2020, 2021) identified the question of whether young people wanted to stay in or leave the local area as a strand that appeared time and again in interviews with both WP practitioners and learners. The questions that all young people have about their futures – should I go to university? find an apprenticeship? opt for a job? – were overlaid by another uncertainty – should I leave Cumbria? – which in some cases seemed to be entirely independent of the other variables.

The question of whether young people should 'go away' to university is a familiar one within the WP community, and in the Cumbrian context was addressed in another recent Hello Future report, *Understanding the rural and coastal contexts in widening participation* (Grabrovaz & Grimwood, 2019). But there is a wider issue here. Young people in Cumbria – and possibly, by extension, other geographically remote areas – appear to be being asked to consider the possibility of leaving their home area as a decision distinct from that of whether to 'go to' university. In other words, it seems that an additional layer of complexity may be present for young people in Cumbria at a time in their lives which is already one of choice and flux.

Some young people interviewed for *Something to talk about* felt that peer-to-peer discussion about leaving or staying in Cumbria might be divisive. Meanwhile WP practitioners reported that this question, when raised in their sessions, could lead to 'arguments'. The report included a recommendation that practitioners

> Consider whether leading discussions focused on 'leaving' Cumbria may be divisive and uncomfortable for young people. Is it possible to refocus discussions to avoid this becoming an extra layer of pressure for young people who are already faced with a series of daunting decisions?

Following this recommendation, Hello Future decided to commission some additional research on this point, the findings of which are presented here. Henceforth we refer to the current report as Phase 2 of the study, with *Something to talk about* comprising Phase 1.

This report aims to study in greater depth the question of whether young people in Cumbria, and potentially other similarly isolated areas, face an extra layer of decision-making – whether to 'stay' or 'leave' – which is not experienced by those in more central or well-connected regions. Further, it aims to investigate the impacts of such imposed choices on young people's educational and career aspirations.

About Cumbria

Cumbria and its only major settlement, Carlisle[3], are extremely geographically isolated by English standards. The whole county is more than 150 miles as the crow flies from England's centre of population near Rugby[4], a distinction shared only by the extreme south west and north east of the country.

Cumbria is the third largest county in England, after North Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, and the second most sparsely-populated after Northumberland. Although Carlisle is on the UK's West Coast Main Line railway, journey times to other major settlements are lengthy, at well over an hour in any direction. The nearest major city, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, is accessible only via the northern edge of the Pennine mountains, meaning that travel by both road and rail is disproportionately slow.

While Carlisle itself is objectively isolated, settlements in the west of the county are even more cut off. Poor infrastructure and mountainous geography can mean that journeys within Cumbria can be lengthy by both road and public transport, making the prospect of travelling beyond the county potentially daunting.

In addition to this isolation – and quite likely because of it – Carlisle also has one of the lowest levels of social mobility in England, ranked 320/324 areas in the most recent government statistics[5]. This means that children from deprived backgrounds in Carlisle are much less likely on average to attain a good job and/or standard of living.

The purpose of the current report is to investigate whether these circumstances, as suggested by our Phase 1 findings, lead to a tendency for young people to worry about staying in or leaving the local area in a way that is perhaps not mirrored among populations that are more connected to the rest of England.

[3] Major towns and cities are defined by the Office for National Statistics as having populations of over 75,000: https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/townsandcitiesintheuk
[4] https://jamesjgleeson.wordpress.com/2016/08/21/tracking-englands-shifting-centre-of-gravity-over-time/
[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-index

Methods

In order to investigate this question in more detail, we instigated a mixed-methods study, including a review of data gathered in Phase 1 of this project, an extensive literature review, and surveys and interviews with young people and WP practitioners, as follows.

Phase 1 data

Our starting point for this study was data gathered from the first phase of the project, which consisted of interviews with 12 young learners and six Hello Future practitioners. For a detailed description of how data collection was organised, see our Phase 1 report[6]; the following is a brief overview:

Young learners: We interviewed a total of 12 young learners in two settings in Carlisle: a secondary school and a youth centre. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and lasted up to 30 minutes. Four participants were from year 9 (i.e. aged 13-14), seven from Y11 (aged 15-16) and one, aged 18, was studying at a further education college.

Widening participation practitioners: Interviews with Hello Future staff were conducted at the organisation's offices and lasted up to one hour. Of the six practitioners we spoke to, four were originally from Cumbria while two were from other similarly-remote parts of the country, namely East Anglia and the South West.

We re-analysed data gathered from these interviews with the question of the impacts of considerations of 'staying' and 'leaving' on young people in Carlisle in mind. All respondents were given pseudonyms.

Findings from this process were then supplemented by a variety of other methods of data collection:

Literature review

Hello Future reports: Since its inception in 2017, Hello Future has commissioned a wide range of research studying various aspects of its target area and activities. We began by reviewing this literature for findings and data of relevance to the study question.

Other sources: We also conducted a broad search of both peer-reviewed journal articles and 'grey' literature such as research reports, relating to ideas of young people 'staying' and 'leaving' their local areas. This then enabled us to refine our research questions.

[6] https://www.hellofuture.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Something-to-talk-about_-The-impacts-of-peer-conversation-and-relationships-on-the-choices-of-young-learners-in-Carlisle.pdf

Practitioner survey

When we embarked on Phase 2, anecdotal evidence suggested that 'staying or leaving' was not a dichotomy which widening participation practitioners presented to their target groups in all areas. For example, it was not clear that young learners in central urban areas were asked whether they would like to leave those areas, independent of conversations around higher education destinations. In order to ascertain to what extent the question of 'staying' or 'leaving' is a feature of WP activity in other areas of the country, we conducted a brief online survey of practitioners in England. The survey, which was promoted via the Uni Connect network, attracted 87 responses covering most English regions.

Paired depth interview

To explore these themes further, we conducted a 'paired depth' interview with two of the Hello Future practitioners that we interviewed in Phase 1. Paired depth interviews are useful where the two interviewees have a pre-existing relationship (in this case, as colleagues) and can lead to a sustained dialogue between participants which gives the interviewer a deeper understanding of the topic in question (Wilson et al., 2016). The two practitioners were given different pseudonyms from those used in Phase 1 to further protect their identity.

Young learner survey

The initial Phase 2 project design included provisions for online surveys to be conducted with young people in the Hello Future target group, who we expected to be able to recruit at least partly through their schools. However during recruitment for the survey, the UK announced a second Covid-19 related school closure period, which significantly impacted our ability to attract participants. In total we received nine responses from young people.

Impact of Covid-19

As well as the above, the initial plan for this study included interviews with students in their first year of university who had participated in Hello Future activities at school. However, during recruitment for this aspect of the research, the UK entered a period of strict lockdown, with most students being taught remotely. This severely impacted recruitment and the decision was taken not to continue with this aspect of data collection.

Literature review

Hello Future reports

A number of previously-published Hello Future reports are of interest when pursuing the question of decisions to stay or leave. Of particular relevance is a 2018 report by the University of Cumbria, *Understanding the rural and coastal contexts in widening participation* (Grabrovaz & Grimwood, 2019). This research focused specifically on small communities in West Cumbria, rather than the larger settlements of Carlisle and Barrow; it also considered the question of staying and leaving specifically in the context of decisions about HE participation. Data collection was via three focus groups held in schools with young people aged between 15-17.

In this study the concept of 'moving away' was considered in some depth; as the authors note, it "emerged as a significant factor in decision-making about HE in all focus groups. Thus, the first response for participants in all three focus groups on being asked to think about how living 'here' affected how young people think about going to University, related to 'moving away' or 'missing family'". However rather than there being a homogeneous response to these issues, one WP practitioner told researchers that her experience was "strongly dichotomous" – young people were strongly motivated either to move away or to stay. As she told the researchers,

> Almost always, there is a really clear split. It's one camp firmly or the other camp firmly. I don't meet many students who are like, maybe I'd move away. I meet students who either can't wait to leave or students who are like, absolutely not. That's what this sort of tight-knit community does to people. It makes them feel like, I hate this and want to be far away and experience all these other things, or it makes people think, I love where I'm from, I'm really proud of where I'm from, I feel like I'm part of something really wonderful and I want to stay here.

Although questions of 'moving away' may be magnified by the extreme geographical remoteness of the setting for this study, as previously noted it was also a recurrent theme in our research with young people in Carlisle, the county's largest urban area. Our Phase 1 report (Canovan et al., 2020) found that in Carlisle, there was less certainty among the interview group about whether or not they wanted to 'leave':

> Some of our young participants were clear that they wanted to leave Carlisle, while others were unsure; only one was definite that they wanted to stay. Some were unsure about what 'leaving' might look like but were negative about 'staying'.

An analysis of Hello Future's baseline survey data (Cosmos Engagement, 2019) sheds some light on the differences between these areas of Cumbria. Surveys were conducted among young people in years 9-13 in schools and colleges. Splitting the target region into three areas – Carlisle and Eden (Carlisle and its surrounds), Furness (Barrow and its surrounds) and rural West Cumbria – the report

highlights that while 63% of Carlisle respondents want to study away from home at a HE institution, only 25% from Furness and 16% from West Cumbria agreed. The geographic location of HEIs was not a factor here, however; only 1-2% of respondents from all areas said that they did not want to attend HE because "There is nowhere close enough to home."

Parents and family can be a major influence on young people's decisions about whether or not to leave their local area, and a report into the views of parents and carers conducted for Hello Future (Shore, 2018) found a consistent theme across Cumbria that respondents wanted Hello Future to provide a range of additional information to them and their child/children. "Providing information that would show there is a whole world out there. Just because we don't live in a city," was one parent's view of how Hello Future could help their child. Phase two of this report, meanwhile (Shore, 2020), includes a comment from one parent, "Lack of opportunities due to geographical remoteness," as a barrier to supporting their child.

Other sources

Having considered the evidence available from Hello Future's own reports, we then widened our search to include other relevant literature.

A report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2000 (Shucksmith, 2000), suggested that rural youth face additional barriers to their urban counterparts as they transition from education to work, which are "linked to their geographical isolation and the narrow range of opportunities which are available". Specifically, it suggests that "young people from rural areas become integrated into one of two quite separate labour markets – the national (distant, well-paid, with career opportunities) and the local (poorly paid, insecure, unrewarding and with fewer prospects)".

This point was the overarching theme running throughout the literature; the reasons and conditions that create this choice can be broadly categorized into three main themes:

1. Identification with, and attachment to, place: a strong attachment to their local town, 'tight-knit' community and rural way of life;
2. Conflict between staying and leaving. Leaving is seen as not just about going to university, but leaving the community behind. For some it was seen as necessary or 'worth it' for educational or working, while others actively chose to pursue a paths that enabled them to stay within their home community;
3. The influence of outside encouragement, norms and expectations is seen by some as key in making the idea of leaving seem attractive and possible, or scary and risky.

Let us consider the literature associated with each of these themes in turn.

Identification with, and attachment to, place

In their 2018 study, Stockdale, Theunissen & Haartsen (Stockdale et al., 2018) investigated the decision-making processes undertaken by young adults in Northern Ireland and the Netherlands who had chosen to stay in their local/rural area, and how they change throughout their lives. By

conducting qualitative interviews with young adults, they found that the process of staying was "dynamic, multifaceted and nuanced". Staying was found to be the outcome of a complex interplay between competing personal considerations; far from being a passive process, stayers exerted considerable agency.

Rönnlund (Rönnlund, 2020), meanwhile, conducted ethnographic studies with 14-16 year old students and staff members in Sweden, and found a strong identification with their home town amongst students who did not intend to leave, such as "I am a small place person". Conversely, those who expressed a desire to leave felt like an outsider among both family and friends.

Also of interest here is Alloway & Dalley-Trim (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009), who explored the obstacles impacting rural Australian students' aspirations and expectations towards HE. Using focus groups and interviews with older teenagers, they found that attachment to home was a 'potent consideration' for students alongside an apprehension over the prospect of city life, which was seen as frantic, dangerous and isolated. Several students gave examples of people they knew who had moved away for university only to move back because they couldn't adjust, or missed the rural way of life so much.

Conflict between staying and leaving

An interesting contribution to the literature is made by O'Shea et al (O'Shea et al., 2019), who investigated young Australians' thoughts as they contemplated their futures after school. Talking to both 16 year old pupils and teachers, they used a range of qualitative methods to identify three key themes:

Growing up rural: Reflections of their upbringing were largely positive, and any mention of things that were lacking were countered with perceived benefits.

Learning to leave: Participants had clearly articulate future plans and ambitions that were often tempered with sadness at the acknowledgement that their pursuit would require leaving their community. Leaving was described as hard, scary, exciting: "As a necessary act, departure was tinged with a sense of loss and even anticipated grief." Teachers felt it was their duty to encourage students to leave, often relating this push to their own experiences/biographies.

Striving to stay: In some cases, young people felt that "Leaving the community was the only way to enable acquisition of the necessary skills and resources that would facilitate their eventual return and resettlement." As such, they often planned their intended subject choices around careers that would enable them to return to their community. Their choice of university was also often deliberately chosen to be as close as possible to allow for regular returns home, even if this meant a compromise on the quality of university. Similarly, regional rather than large city universities were seen as less intimidating.

Overall, the authors suggest that: "For any young person, the decision to attend university or move away for employment is multi-layered and complex but this is often heightened for those from rural and remote communities."

The influence of outside encouragement

Rosvall (Rosvall, 2020) conducted qualitative interviews with guidance counsellors in high schools in Sweden in order to compare the career counselling received by young people in rural and urban areas. They found there was an overall tendency amongst counsellors in rural areas towards promoting the out-migration of students to metropolitan areas, described as 'learning to leave'. Part of this was a result of counsellors focusing on the individual and their interests or career ambitions as unbounded to a place, rather than explicitly connecting them; indeed, they did not explicitly consider "social, cultural and economic attachments of the students to their places".

Meanwhile Rosvall, Rönnlund & Johansson (Rosvall et al., 2018) investigated influencing factors in the career decisions of rural youths following post-compulsory education. By conducting an ethnographic study in six rural Swedish towns, they found that although most students valued their local town, across the six schools "this discourse was almost always subservient…to the discourses advocating mobility and independence" and an acknowledgement of the lack of opportunities available locally. However the authors identified differences between the six schools in what they termed the 'school social code', by which they mean the degree that school staff and peers talked about out-migration as a requirement to fulfil future life and career plans, or positioned the rural place as somewhere to remain (or return to after finishing studies). In a school with a strong out-migration code, adult participants (teachers, parents, school staff) tended to express thoughts that the children, especially high achievers, were being prepared for educational attainment and out-migration; however in a smaller and more remote school with a weak out-migration code, teachers talked much more often about the local town and studies related to the local context.

In the UK context, Midgley & Bradshaw (Midgley & Bradshaw, 2006) explored the experiences of 16-19 year olds in rural areas at the time of leaving compulsory education and the immediate aftermath of those transitions, and investigated whether rural youth faced specific challenges. They found that parents and older siblings were mentioned as "vital sources of advice when young people were making decisions about their future" and this could be seen to have both positive and negative consequences. For instance, some young people felt they had been pressured by their parents to go straight into work on leaving compulsory education, where others were encouraged to follow their ambitions. There was evidence of a clear dichotomy of thought between those who were going straight into employment and those who were going on to university, whereby those in work saw their future in the local area, but all of those going to university accepted that in order to achieve their ambitions they would have to leave on a permanent basis; this had been known and discussed with parents throughout their school life.

Meanwhile in Canada, Friesen and Purc-Stephenson (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016) explored perceived personal, social and cultural factors that prevented young people from rural areas from attending university. The study was based on interviews with 18-23 year olds from Alberta, Canada. It found that the young people in the sample were aware that they would have to move away for university and were unwilling to do so, but there was no mention that it would necessarily be a

permanent move away from the community. Educators were described as actively discouraging university attendance by sharing predominantly negative stories of debt, high workloads and impact on personal relationships; university was devalued within the community in general, and the young people felt pressured to stay within the community.

Research questions

Our Phase 1 findings and the literature review suggest the following questions for this study to address:

1. In what settings do discussions of staying in or leaving Cumbria take place, and what is the nature of these discussions?
2. Where WP practitioners initiate such discussions, what are the motivations for this?
3. The literature suggests that young people in isolated areas may have a clear dichotomy of views about whether to stay in their local area. Is this the case in Cumbria, and why does this arise?
4. What is the impact on young learners of having to consider staying or leaving as an extra layer of decision making?

We address these questions in turn.

Settings for discussion

Our initial Phase 2 project design included provisions for online surveys to be conducted with young people in the Hello Future target group. As previously mentioned, recruitment was severely hit by the second Covid 19-related school closure period and we received a total of nine responses. However despite the fact that this is an undeniably small number, some interesting findings emerged. For example, it transpired that 8/9 of the participants had taken part in discussions about whether they planned to stay in Cumbria or leave. These had taken place in a variety of settings, either formal, for example Hello Future sessions or with teachers in class, or informal, largely with family members. We will consider the wider evidence on discussions in these settings in turn, and also include a brief comment on the evidence on peer conversations around staying/leaving.

Formal settings

Formal settings for discussions focused around the decision to stay in or leave Cumbria might include classroom sessions, or activities such as those provided by Hello Future. In Phase 1, some of our practitioner interviewees described an activity in which this question might be raised, in which young learners were asked to make quick decisions between a variety of options, from the trivial – pizza or pasta – to more weighty matters. One practitioner, Rowan, gave this description:

> So, the activity works that sometimes we'll say, 'Stand on this side of the room if you want to move away from Cumbria. Stand on this side if you'd like to stay in Cumbria,' and you get conversations between the two.

This activity, the practitioners explained, presented young learners with a series of binary choices and asked them to choose one or the other. When we conducted our paired depth interview with practitioners Quinn and Frankie in Phase 2, we explored these types of sessions in more depth. Interestingly, the practitioners indicated that since Phase 1, the organisation had moved away from posing the binary stay/leave question:

> Frankie: …what we did quite a bit last year was we played a game called This or That… One of the things that we had in there, that I think we're moving away from now, is would you rather stay in Cumbria or go further afield which gives them two options, either one or the other. That's why we're looking to stay away from that now, but that's something that we did do.
>
> […..]
>
> Quinn: … as Frankie has mentioned, we're moving away because even if you try and explain it as, 'Would you want to move away in the future, or would you like to stay within the area?' I think for a young person it makes them seem like, well as the game says, this or that, two extremes. You can only choose one.

When asked about the underlying thinking behind the activity, Frankie explains:

> I think the idea behind it was to show, within the classroom, that everyone has different preferences, not everyone is the same. You have your own unique preferences and what you might want to do in little things, not just moving away or staying at home but simple things of maybe what social media platform you use or anything like that.

Quinn notes that the exercise was intended to highlight a range of values espoused by the young learners. "We get them to consider their values and we get them to weigh up and prioritise what their values are. Those might be a high wage or family or location or if they want to move away or if they want to stay. It's very much seen as a value. Is that something that's important to them, staying or going somewhere further afield."

However, as Frankie explains, the exercise has come to be seen as problematic:

> I think with this whole question of stay and leave, I think it's been a bit of a learning process for us working locally as well, dealing with it and maybe how divisive it might be and understanding maybe how big of a thing it might be to learners or important it might be to them. Maybe we weren't as aware as much.

The practitioners stress that such discussions were moderated in such a way as to be respectful and to link to relevant skills. Quinn points out:

> When we talk about leaving home then, whether that's within the county or whether that's outside of the county, it's in the context of if you're leaving home to go and live at university for example, here are some skills that you might develop in the process. I think in that sense, it's explicitly about here are all the benefits of moving out of your comfort zone or going to university for the skills that you gain on top of your degree…

Frankie points out that options such as apprenticeships are also discussed, and makes the general point that acceptance of different views is part of the session:

> I think when we try to facilitate it, we try and facilitate that it's okay to either want to go away, that's what you want to do or if you want to stay at home, that's perfectly fine as well. I think the whole workshop… is trying to let the learners know that whatever they want to do in the future is their decision and whatever they value quite high is them personally, what's important to them. If we do get, 'Well why would you want to move away?' or, 'Why would you want to stay in Cumbria?' we facilitate that as well actually that's okay because that's really important to them.

As can be seen, there is a strand of decision-making here that is distinct from those around university attendance that are typically faced by secondary-age pupils. The question then arises as to whether this is a choice that is also presented to young people in less isolated regions of the country.

In an attempt to distinguish whether questions about 'staying or leaving' are more often posed to young people in certain areas, we conducted a survey of widening participation practitioners across

the Uni Connect network. A total of 86 responses were received from practitioners working in most regions of England.

One of the questions asked was "In your work, do you routinely ask the young people if they want or intend to leave the area they live in?" A total of 53 respondents said they did ask the question, with 29 asking solely in the context of leaving to go to university, and the remaining 24 asking in other contexts as well of/instead of HE progression. Meanwhile 33 had not asked the question.

As the question of going away specifically for university has been covered elsewhere, we are interested in those who discussed going away outside of these contexts.

We used different ways of classifying areas in order to understand differences in response rates. We asked participants to choose whether they worked in cities/urban areas or small towns/rural areas; we then asked them if they considered the area in which they worked to be remote/geographically isolated. We also used an objective measure of a community's isolation: whether or not it is within a 50-mile radius of one of England's largest urban areas. Using an online map-plotting tool[7], we drew a 50-mile radius around each English urban area with a population greater than 500,000[8]. The only counties where the majority of the area falls outside of these radii are Cumbria, Norfolk, Suffolk, Cornwall and Devon.

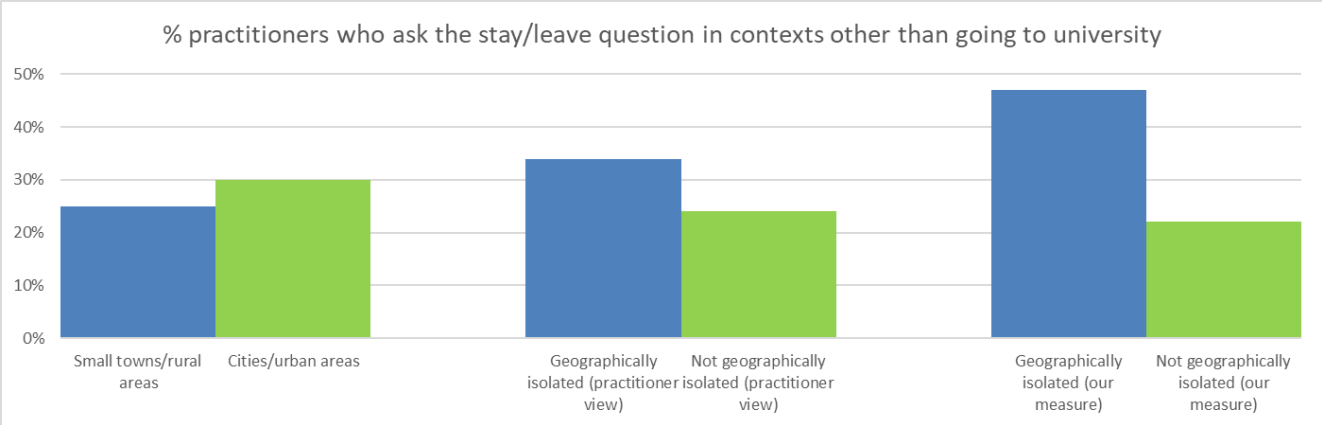


Figure 1: % of WP practitioners initiating discussions of whether young people wish to leave their local area, outside of the context of going to university.

As can be seen in Figure 1, there was no significant distinction between urban and rural areas in the rate at which they asked the stay/leave question in contexts other than university choice. This indicates that respondents from central rural areas may not necessarily feel their young learners to be 'cut off' or experience difficulties in accessing opportunities, while these issues may be experienced in remote cities such as Carlisle.

[7] https://www.freemaptools.com/radius-around-point.htm
[8] http://www.demographia.com/db-worldua.pdf

There was a greater difference when we asked survey participants for their subjective view on whether the area in which they worked was geographically isolated or not. In this case, 34% of practitioners in areas which they considered to be isolated asked the stay/leave question compared to 24% of others. However when we use our objective classification of isolation, this distinction widened to 47%:22%, a result which is statistically significant at $p<0.05$ ($p=0.032$). Our survey suggests, therefore, that WP practitioners in the most remote areas of England are significantly more likely to raise the idea of 'leaving' with young learners outside of the context of going to university.

Parents and families

The influence of family on decisions to stay or leave came across very strongly in our Phase 1 interviews with young learners, with a dichotomy of views emerging about how parents perceived the best path for their children's future. Young learner Harry expresses this well:

> I think there's a very broad spectrum of ideas on that... I think certain families are very close-knit and then there's no way [the children] are going anywhere. And there are other families which are equally close-knit but, because of that, they want them to go somewhere and do the best they can… I think it's very – It's a very individual question.

Several of our young participants expressed doubts about 'leaving' family. Chloe, for example, is considering maybe going somewhere else for university, "but I'd want to come back because my family's here and… Yes. I don't think I'd leave very long because my brothers, my nannas and my mum and dad." Emily, on the topic of whether she would like to leave, takes a similar view: "It depends on probably family, or something. Because sometimes I want to be closer to my nana, and sometimes I want to be closer to either my parents or my auntie." Chloe has been talking to her mum about her future plans; whether Emily's feelings were based on discussions that had taken place within her family were unclear. However other evidence suggests this is likely to be the case; in our Phase 2 survey of young learners, most (7/9) respondents stated that they had discussed whether they wanted to leave or stay in Cumbria with parents/siblings. Although some stated that there had been broad agreement in these discussions as to the best plan – "They said to do what I feel is best for me," – others reported "differing opinions".

For those who were confident in a desire to leave, there was often a family member's presence in the destination area to provide a safety net. In Phase 1 Olivia, who would like to move to America, told us that many of her family members lived there. Daniel, who moved to the UK from another country several years ago, said:

> I don't know if there are any universities close to where I live, so I might go back to [my home country] to do study, and come back when I'm done... or the US… I've got an auntie in the US, so it will be easy.

The family's previous educational experience was also a factor, and had the capacity to prompt discussion. William is considering going to a specialist arts university

> …because there's one in London that my dad went to… we have talked about [me] moving away before, like, my mum's talked about it once or twice… I know that's what it includes, probably.

In our paired depth interview, practitioners Frankie and Quinn discussed the influence of families on discussions about future plans. Frankie said:

> …when you do come across learners who have had their siblings who have recently gone away… they're more open to have a conversation about that. You find that they may have an idea about it… But there are also some siblings who have just recently gone into an apprenticeship around the area and they've got a nice car and they're doing really well at such a young age. They're like, 'My friend did this,' or, 'My sister did this,' or whoever, 'and they're doing really well'. I think that is a big factor.

Quinn also notes the impact of connections, whether family or other associates, on university choice:

> I guess it depends on how much they know about that pathway. I think whenever I've had students who have chosen to go on to university or move out of Carlisle, it's been because they have connections to a place. That's why I say quite a few often go to Newcastle because that's where they've visited with school. For me growing up, Newcastle was the place to go to if you wanted to go somewhere different but it's close enough on the train. Maybe they're moving to a university because they've had someone in the year above who has gone there.

Friends and peers

In Phase 1 of this research, we found that young people were discussing their educational futures and career choices with their friends and peers, although they were sometimes unaware of this; some interviewees overtly stated that they had not had such conversations but later revealed a significant depth of knowledge about friends' plans. However another side to this was that some aspects of conversation were too sensitive or potentially divisive to approach; for example, one young learner told us that he could talk to his friends about one of his ambitions, to be a professional sportsperson, but not his other which was to become a maths teacher. This echoed findings from previous research (Brooks, 2003) which noted that such conversations about the future had the potential to lead to discord.

There were some indications in our interviews with young learners that peer-to-peer conversation on the subject of staying and leaving can be a somewhat tense affair, as illustrated by this conversation between William and the researcher:

> Interviewer: So, do you think your friends, then, are quite motivated to leave?
> William: Some of them, yes. Some of them wouldn't know where to go… If it was… less of a taboo, as well, if they actually talked about it, like, among friends what you want to do….
> Interviewer: So, you think there is a bit of a taboo there?
> William: Yes.

Interviewer: Why's that?
William: Because Carlisle isn't a massively thriving place education-wise, and not everyone's families have gone to uni like mine, so…
Interviewer: Yes. So, maybe a bit divisive, would you say?
William: Yes.

Of the conversational settings where the stay/leave question could be posed, therefore, within the peer/friendship group is probably a lesser factor. However the friendship group still has the potential to have a significant impact on the stay/leave decision, even if overt conversations around this point are avoided; one theme that arose was that some young learners prefer to stay together so that if they leave, they leave as a group. This tendency was covered in our Phase 1 research (Canovan et al., 2021); practitioner Devon, for example, noted that they themselves went to the same HEI as several friends. The prospect of leaving friends behind, therefore, could be a stressor; Harry, for example, notes that

> …walking in as a two, I think you'd find making friends a lot easier, because you already have a friend interaction. Where a single person in a new city, that is a lot harder. It is a lot harder…. I think that's obvious to a lot of people in my year group.

Harry is a focused individual who has a clear goal in terms of subject and university choice, but he feels that for his peer group more generally, such considerations would weigh heavily:

> There's a mentality around the people I know of, like going to university and living together. And that sounds great. And, I mean, it sounds fun, as well. Don't get me wrong, I'd probably really enjoy it. But… it's not a personal priority.

And he adds:

> …I think there's a massive correlation between friendship groups and university. And I think the vast majority of people who haven't had opportunities to plan those things properly will be swayed by friendship groups into areas or degrees which they're not going to properly enjoy or do really, really well in.

Why do practitioners pose the ‘stay or leave’ question?

It is understandable that WP practitioners initiate discussions about whether students should stay in, or leave, their local areas. A key aim of organisations such as theirs is to undertake higher education outreach, and as very remote areas may have fewer HEIs – Cumbria is home to only one university, the University of Cumbria – the likelihood is that those who choose to go into HE will in fact leave the county.

We saw in our survey results that more than six in 10 WP practitioners routinely asked young learners if they wanted to stay in, or leave, their local area. To explore the reasons for such discussions in greater depth, we conducted an inductive content thematic analysis on the free text responses to the survey. These fell into three distinct categories: wants/aspirations, broadening horizons and limited local choices, which are discussed in turn below.

Wants/aspirations

Most commonly, practitioners discussed asking young people the stay/leave question in the context of their future wants and aspirations. This was the case for practitioners in all geographical categories, and was usually specifically relating to university options. Responses received, together with a summary of the type of area the practitioner was working in, included:

> Usually specifically related to where they'd actually like to study at HE Level, and giving them information to help them break down perceived geographical barriers. (Rural, not remote)
>
> University specifically – would they want to study closer to home at one of the local options, or move away. (Rural, remote)
>
> I ask them where they want to study at university – in the south west or further afield. (Urban, not remote)
>
> Tends to be about whether they want to move away from home to go to Uni. (Urban, not remote)

Broadening horizons

Some practitioners, predominantly from urban and/or non-remote areas, mentioned that the young people they worked with were often not aware of opportunities beyond their local area. Consequently, the stay/leave question was asked in the context of expanding young people’s considerations for their options beyond compulsory education, both in terms of university and their future more generally. Here are some examples of such responses:

> Many young people within the area may not have travelled far beyond their local community and therefore may not know about the opportunities and experiences available to them further afield. (Urban, remote)
>
> It is in the context of their future progression. University is a big part of this, but also we discuss it when mentioning apprenticeships, employment etc. Geographical area is useful for students: some want to be as far away from home as possible; some want to move out but still be commutable if needed; and some have no idea what's outside our county. (Urban, not remote)
>
> Often students I work with don't even consider moving away as a possibility, so I challenge this perception and ask them to think about what potential benefits this has. (Urban, not remote)

It is interesting that practitioners in urban areas are concerned that their local young learners may not be considering futures outside their regions. In some ways this is reflective of the situation faced by our Cumbrian cohort; however, the key difference is that there is likely to be a wider range of options obviously available to non-remote urban learners. They may be able to do 'better' by moving away – for a more prestigious university, for example or a wider range of employers – but may not be faced with the suggestion that their preferred future is wholly incompatible with staying in the area.

Limited local career choices

Some practitioners mentioned that the stay/leave question was asked in the context of a need to leave due to limited local choices in HE, apprenticeships and jobs. This was mostly raised amongst practitioners in rural and remote areas:

> …those who wish to go on to university don't have a choice unless they wish to commute. The options are limited for career pathways here e.g. if you want to work in TV and film there is no work available. (Rural, remote)
>
> University, and for future career, especially if they want to work in an area where there are few employment opportunities locally (i.e. media). (Urban, not remote)
>
> Usually in relation to university to help them think about their choices for UCAS but can be more generally as depending on what career they want [as] there can be limited options locally. (Rural, remote)

It is clearly important from a WP perspective to raise such issues with young learners. Nevertheless, it may be the case that a sustained focus on questions of staying and leaving can have impacts on young people's decision-making processes and may prove to be a source of stress.

Is there a dichotomy of views about 'staying or leaving' in Cumbria, and how does this arise?

As noted in our literature review, relevant studies previously conducted with rural young people have found a dichotomy of views about staying in or leaving their local area, particularly for university (Grabrovaz & Grimwood, 2019; Midgley & Bradshaw, 2006). Let us now examine whether such a dichotomy arose during our data collection, and how this might occur.

The first thing to point out is that in our Phase 1 interviews with young learners, there were several young people who were very keen to leave the local area while only one was certain that they wanted to stay. It is important to note that our interviews were conducted mostly with pupils who were at least somewhat engaged with the Hello Future programme, which may have affected the results slightly, and in fact our other groups – WP practitioners, and young people who filled out our survey – told a slightly different story.

However let us begin by hearing the voices of interviewees who were set on leaving. There were two intertwined strands of thought here – being keen to 'leave', but also actively not wanting to 'stay'. William, for example, expressed an interest in moving to London:

> William: I'd love to, yes. It's something I want to do, so, yes.
> Interviewer: What about staying, would you…?
> William: I really wouldn't want to stay.

Here we can see that as well as feeling positive about London, William is negative about the idea of 'staying'. Olivia expressed a similar view:

> Interviewer: Do many friends talk about wanting to stay here, in Carlisle?
> Olivia: What do you mean, like, moving away?
> Interviewer: Yes. Like, do they want to stay here rather than not move away?
> Olivia: Not much people want to live here.

Although a plurality of our young interviewees held negative views about Carlisle and/or expressed a desire to leave, not all were so certain. Grace was our only interviewee to be very clear about wanting to stay in the local area; far from being boring, she finds the local environment is a source of comfort:

> Interviewer: Would you want to stay in Cumbria, do you think?
> Grace: Yes.
> Interviewer: Yes? Why?
> Grace: Because I lived on the same road for at least 14 years.

Interviewer: Like it there? What are the reasons do you think there are for you staying?
Grace: It's small.
Interviewer: Yes, and that's how you like it?
Grace: Yes.

Oliver, meanwhile, pondered a 'middle way' whereby he can experience a somewhat different life without too much of a dislocation:

> I was thinking that if I get my apprenticeship done and get that over and done with, I could look for jobs just around the outside of Carlisle, just so I can go and see somewhere new and explore, rather than just staying in the same city for the rest of my life.

Turning to our Phase 2 survey of young people, we have already noted that almost all respondents reported 'stay or leave' conversations in a variety of settings; interestingly, 7/9 participants said that such discussions had involved opposing views or differing opinions, indicating the potential for tensions to arise.

Our survey then asked, "To what extent has where you want to live in the future been a part of your thoughts about what to do after leaving school?" Here we saw a clearly dichotomous set of results, with several pupils saying it was not an issue of consideration at all – "No affect [effect] on me" – but others seeing it as very important: "I been thinking about it a lot and I want to live in [the] local area closer to family but the only thing I worry about is the money to do it," or even a struggle or battle: "It's been a big part as I'm constantly fighting towards it."

However, among the survey group, there was much more uncertainty about desires to stay or leave than among our interviewees, with 6/9 respondents saying they were undecided on this point. This is interesting, because all the students in this group were aged 16-18 and thus might have been expected to have had firmer ideas about their future direction. Instead, a sense of uncertainty emerges:

> I haven't spoken about it enough.
>
> I'm not sure where is the best college.
>
> Because I'm uncertain about my future at the moment.

Because 16-18 year olds have already made the first critical decision about their futures – their destination for post-16 study – it may be that they have more attention to now turn to questions of geographical location for the next step, and thus there is space for more uncertainty to emerge. However we can only speculate on this point; further, it is important to note that survey data was gathered during the unprecedented setting of a global pandemic, which had the potential to cause major psychological and social dislocations. A greater feeling of uncertainty than expected, then, is maybe not surprising.

So what is our practitioners' view on the potential existence of two groups – the 'stayers' and 'leavers'? In our paired-depth interview, Quinn told us that the outcome of the game where young people are asked if they want to 'stay or leave' could lead to strong opinions, but also uncertainties:

> I think generally with that game you have students who are really adamant and make it really obvious that they're moving to a certain option. It's quite interesting. That's what starts the discussion. I've had quite a few students who are unsure and we've said, 'Why don't you stand in the middle?'
>
> Some, they've maybe chosen that they want to move outside the county and say, 'It's dead boring here. I've grown up here,' and probably that overwhelming response with those who decide to move away. Then those on the other side say, well I've heard some say that it's because their family is here and they enjoy the county and their friends are here. Then yes, you have those in the middle who think, 'Well maybe one day,' but they're in between or undecided.

Taken together, our data suggests that while there are groups with strongly-held views on both sides, there are also individuals who are still uncertain about the question of staying or leaving, and that it is possible that this uncertainty has been exacerbated by the pandemic. For those who have not yet come down on one side or the other, contemplating such a decision may be a stressful experience, particularly if exacerbated by external pressures.

When we analysed our data in order to examine more closely what might drive young people to come down on one side or the other, several themes emerged that had the potential to generate a dichotomous outcome between the 'stayers' and the 'leavers'. These include personal views of Carlisle and Cumbria; geography and travel; ambitions and opportunities; and the influence of 'who you know'. Let us consider these in turn.

Views of Carlisle/Cumbria

There were different views about Carlisle, and Cumbria more widely, which might inform such desires to 'leave'. One strand is that there is little to interest the young people in the area, as in this exchange with Joshua:

> Interviewer: So, you've been in Carlisle all your life?
> Joshua: Yes.
> Interviewer: Yes, okay. What do you think of it? Is it alright?
> Joshua: It's alright, but there's nothing really here, is there? I don't think.

Emily held the same view:

> Emily: We're always bored.
> Interviewer: Is that something in Carlisle?
> Emily: Yes, you always get bored really easily.

There was an underlying assumption among some young people who hadn't discussed the issue that others would feel as they did, and want to leave. Daniel, who is not a Cumbrian native and dislikes the weather, ascribes his own view to his peers:

> I haven't talked about it that much. But I reckon if you asked a few people, yes, it'll be common that they want to move somewhere.

Another potential motivation for young people who saw themselves as non-conforming, for example in matters of appearance or sexuality, was to access an environment where they might feel more accepted or find peers with similar attitudes more easily. Samuel, who sees himself as "an emo kid", discussed the difference between Carlisle and Manchester, where he has a family connection:

> …there are just more diverse groups down in Manchester than there are up here… more people to actually relate to and actually find that they have the same mindset as yourself.

And Chloe, who envisions a future in photography, also felt that she might be more comfortable elsewhere:

> I think if it's a bigger city, there's more diversity, so, like, people wouldn't, like… I was looking into fashion photography and, like, different outfits where I was, like, if you walk around Carlisle in something different, you'd get very stared at.

Our Phase 1 practitioner participants also identified these two motivations for 'leaving'. Casey noted that although learners in Carlisle had more opportunities than those in more rural locations,

> …I think the learners and the influences we work with here would probably still say it's rubbish and there's not a lot going on and there's no art scene and there's no this and there's no support and we're disconnected.

Morgan also highlighted the extra 'push' that might be felt by young people from diverse groups:

> ...One girl told me there was no culture in Cumbria, she wanted to move away from that… she was from an ethnic minority and you could tell she was obviously aware that… I don't know if she felt different or…

And in our paired-depth interview, Quinn echoed this point:

> It seems to be, for a couple of Carlisle students, out of frustration that they want to move somewhere new. We've had one student who we mentored who fed back he just wanted to move somewhere that was more diverse. They actually said, 'I want to move somewhere where I can see people who just look like me,' which I think is something that really stood out to me.

Geography and travel

As Frankie notes, one factor in this is certainly geography, with similarities and differences emerging between West Cumbria, which is particularly isolated, and Carlisle, which has better transport links. Frankie works in West Cumbria and Quinn in Carlisle. Quinn commented to Frankie:

> I guess your schools are quite far apart whilst Carlisle, it's maybe a bit more central, got better travel links. I think that has an effect on the students' ideas for the future or where they can connect to, some popular options being Newcastle and a little bit further afield but still relatively close, being in the north.

Frankie points out that for the young people they work with in the west, even travelling to Carlisle for post-16 options can be challenging. However they add that these geographical constraints are not limited to the more rural areas of Cumbria:

> …even Carlisle students, their options are maybe going to Newcastle or Manchester. It actually does seem quite far away compared to where we are at the moment, even though Cumbria is quite a big area. But they're all localised in their areas. Actually places like – even though Newcastle is only an hour and a half to two hours on the train, maybe two hours from here, it still feels like a very long time away.

From these comments, one can see how practical considerations around transport and travel times could be a major factor in any emerging dichotomy between 'stayers' and 'leavers'; there will be those young people who see such journeys as feasible, or even as adventures, while for others they will be daunting, or a barrier.

Ambitions and opportunities

Another area of potential division is whether young people feel that they can achieve their ambitions within their local area. When we conducted our survey of young learners, one of the questions we asked was "If you could choose anything, what would you love to do when you finish school?" and found that responses to this varied widely, from "Own Chanel and become a fashion icon" to "Delivery driver". Clearly, some of these outcomes are more likely to be achievable locally. Most of the young people were reasonably confident of their ability to achieve this ideal outcome, with the pretender to Chanel responding that they would "get as close as I possibly can as it is a very high goal". However when asked "To what extent do you think you could fulfil your career ambitions in Cumbria?" respondents displayed a higher degree of uncertainty, answering "To some extent," "It depends", or in one case,

> Could make a comfortable living although I feel as [though there] are not enough resources to accomplish every dream.

As an aside, it is interesting that only 3/9 young respondents identified themselves as living in a remote or geographically isolated area. As discussed earlier, the whole of Cumbria is objectively

remote from the major population centres of England; there is a question here about the development of knowledge of such remoteness.

The availability of opportunities was also highlighted in our paired-depth interview. In West Cumbria, the presence of a prominent major employer – the Sellafield nuclear site – is a factor in the decision making of the local young people. As Frankie notes, there are some schools where the majority of young people want to work in Sellafield and/or do an apprenticeship. Here travel is a factor, but also money:

> …with a lot of our schools, like Sellafield on the doorstep and they know maybe family members or friends who have gone into Sellafield and are earning a lot of money at quite a young age, quite a good wage and that's very attractive for them. If you're seeing somebody who is not that much older than you earning a really good wage, then they think that's the best way to go. They don't have to move for that. It's right there.

But others feel differently:

> I've had a few conversations that they wanted to do x, y or z and it's maybe not available around here as much in this area. A few of them are quite open because they may be quite career orientated. They were happy to move away for whatever. It might be university, it might be another opportunity.

Frankie says that for West Cumbrian students, those who want to move away tend to already have some sort of plan in mind:

> What I just picked up there might be different for different areas but I think when I do have conversations with learners about this, and maybe they're thinking of the area, but they are very career focused and what they could earn, what they could do. When we are having a conversation within the area about what they could do next and they do want to move away, they have a career or a course in mind.

These thoughts were echoed by young learner Oliver, who wonders whether concerns about local opportunities are specific to the Cumbrian setting:

> I feel like it [Carlisle]'s a bit different to other places; I feel like there's a shorter variation of places that we can get jobs down here, but then I feel like, if you moved off down to, say, somewhere down south, there's a wider variation of jobs and places to work…

Again, it is clear to see how perceptions of the available options locally could lead to the formation of two groups – those who believe they can pursue their ambitions in the area, and those who do not. The question is whether or not the young people are fully aware of all the local options, especially at a time when the pandemic has driven what may prove to be a radical and permanent shift in working patterns. This is not an issue that we are able to cover here, but is one that may be worthy of future study.

‘Who you know’

Another factor to be considered is ‘who you know’; we discussed this in our previous section on parents and families, but a broader familiarity with people who have taken the route that you are thinking of is another important potential source of dichotomy. Quinn says:

> When I think of the conversations that we’ve had in schools, a lot move towards maybe traditionally what their families have done or what their parents have done or what their brothers and sisters have done. That’s probably a big influence that comes up in conversation and using their experience and measuring up against, is that something they’d want to do? Do they want to follow in the same kind of career or pathway?

As Frankie points out, this can extend to the choice to attend university:

> Also we talked about family influence on working locally with those different opportunities but also the family influence can influence them to go to university or move further afield because they’ve seen siblings go. I’ve had many conversations, ‘My sister is at this university. It looks really good. They’re doing this course.’ That can also have a big factor as well.

The same is true of other choices, for example Sellafield:

> Maybe they feel more confident that they’ve got friends and family who have gone through that process already. It’s like an easier option.

This, then, constitutes a further basis for divisions between young people’s opinions on staying and leaving to occur. Of course the impacts of parental occupation and experience will be felt by learners all over the country; however in particularly remote areas, where few parents have attended HE or where several generations have pursued the same occupation, these influences may be more strongly felt; choosing to do something other than a well-trodden family path can prove difficult. Quinn recalls speaking to one young learner

> …[who] wanted to study somewhere that was known for its history course so it would mean moving away. But they hadn’t told their parents that because there was an expectation they would get into a local apprenticeship as their parents had done. I think you do get those learners who have those ideas or hopes for what they want to study or what career they want to pursue that maybe seem like a bit out of the expected from their family. There is maybe that implied judgement or they’re scared to share that…

Quinn goes on to highlight the way that families may view the decision for a child to leave with trepidation:

> We’re a bit more cut off… perhaps parents and carers are thinking, ‘If you move away, will you come back? Will it be harder for you to visit?’ …Something that comes up a lot actually is some saying, ‘I’m going to move here because it’s away from home but close enough to visit,’ but they would write off moving somewhere really far away like in the south for example.

What are the impacts of questions of 'staying or leaving' on young learners?

We can see from the previous section that there can be a tendency for dichotomous views on whether or not to leave the local area to develop, driven by views of Carlisle and Cumbria, opportunities, geographical considerations and influence of family. However not all of our respondents had as yet come down on one side or the other, with those who responded during the pandemic seeming more uncertain on this point. It now remains to be asked how the pressure to make such a decision might impact on the young people of the area.

As we have seen, there are indications that initiating discussions on 'staying or leaving', as has at times been done in Hello Future sessions, may place an extra burden on peer conversations about the future which already have the potential to be difficult. For example, we refer to Rowan's description of the activity previously mentioned, where young people divide themselves into two groups based on whether they want to move away from Cumbria:

> …you get conversations between the two. Some of them are just like, 'Why would you move?' and the two schools of thought is, 'Well, everything's here. My family's here.' Then, usually the other side is like, 'But it's boring,' and then they're arguing with each other.

Practitioner Devon picks up on the idea that such discussions can have uncomfortable outcomes for some learners:

> Like, if you had a group of five and four of them are like, 'No, we're getting out of here.' People say Cumbria's naff. There's nothing happening. There's nothing going on. So, that's the argument for leaving. If you are the one to stay, it would be like you're the boring, naff one.

This, of course, has the potential to make peer interaction more difficult, and perhaps to be a source of tension or conflict. Earlier studies such as Brooks' found that young people avoid conversations about the future because differences in aspiration and educational attainment can be divisive; here they are divisive on another level, that of who will 'leave' and who will not, as well as who will go to university and who will not. William's earlier comment that such conversations could lead to discord is relevant here; Harry also comments that even contemplating such a discussion

> …is almost committing yourself to something, and that nailing down is scary, if you don't know what you want yet… those conversations are almost threatening, because they're so solitary in the outcome of them. It's just if you walk into it, you know you kind of have to make decisions, just to engage in the conversation to begin with.

Looking at our survey of young learners, we recall that 8/9 respondents had taken part in discussions about 'staying or leaving' in a variety of settings. Uncertainty about this choice was reported by the

majority; in all, 5/9 respondents said they were worried about the issue. One participant encapsulated many concerns:

> I worry about leaving my family behind and the thought of the unknown.

Another felt the need for more external support:

> I feel like I would need more guidance and help with the process. I also feel like this is never a talked about subject in educational environments so I wouldn't know how to move properly or what to look out for.

This feeling of a lack of information about the decisions that they would have to make was also a recurrent theme in our Phase 1 interviews with young learners, both in general terms and specifically about what 'leaving' might entail. William, for example, who is in Year 9, says next steps are "confusing" and "not taught about enough… you have to, like, Google to find out what this all means". Olivia, meanwhile, notes that some of her friends have worries about this lack of information:

> A lot of them say that they don't really know what to do and, like, they're scared of what might happen… Scared of not knowing what to do.

It is likely to be the case that the desire for more information on, for example, how universities work is experienced by young learners nationwide, rather than restricted to our Cumbrian cohort. For many of our participants, however, there will be another level of uncertainty about what life is like more generally elsewhere; for example, while several interviewees expressed some level of familiarity with Newcastle (the closest major city, although still a significant journey), more distant conurbations such as London tended to be very much seen as 'other'; one of our survey respondents, for example, explained that

> I worry as most people would, moving is a scary thing for most people, and especially someone like me who has never lived anywhere except my hometown, let alone a whole other county or country.

This sense of a lack of information could have two meanings; it might provide a reason for difficulty with decisions about 'staying or leaving', but the obverse – that uncertainty about the future creates a hunger for advice – may also be the case.

Asked whether the question of staying or leaving was a source of anxiety for young people in Cumbria, WP practitioners Quinn and Frankie immediately agreed that it was. Quinn said:

> I guess there is a bit of anxiety around those options. I think that the very words stay and leave carry a lot of weight to them. Stay sounds quite permanent, I think. Then leaving just sounds like you could be leaving something behind. But then also I guess the anxiety in that decision. If you're presenting it as this or that, these are the two options, I guess that's quite a weighty decision so there is maybe some anxiety around that.

Whether or not such pressures lead to overt conflict is less obvious. Although Rowan comments on 'arguing' in the quote above, our paired depth interview gave a slightly different perspective. Quinn says:

> I don't hear much active conflict between the students about it. It's more them justifying their choice or their decision. The most conflict I see is… where we give them topical or just really unimportant choices like, 'Do you prefer Xbox or PlayStation?' 'Do you prefer pizza or pasta?' and they get really animated conflict there. But actually, when you see them move into the values and those options, they tend to be a bit more considerate of other people's sides and more active in describing their own experiences and voices.

This was borne out by our survey findings; all participants rejected the idea that they felt pressured into talking about leaving Cumbria, and only 3/9 felt it was a source of conflict. Of those who felt a sense of tension, this seemed to be between their own priorities, rather than a disagreement with others:

> I want a good house and career, but I want to live near my horses, the farm, and my family.
>
> Because I want to explore outside Cumbria but I don't like change.

Meanwhile those who did not detect any conflict tended to assert their own agency:

> Never been forced to stay anywhere.
>
> If its best for me I'll do it.

The latter responses suggest a degree of bravado. However a more common response was one of at least some uncertainty, with several expressing conflicting pressures, suggesting again that there is a degree of tension or difficulty associated with the decision to 'stay or leave' for this cohort.

Despite a lack of overt conflict about staying or leaving, Quinn noted that learners felt a need to make a strong justification of their choices in this regard:

> There doesn't seem to be too much judgement with each other or conflict with each other when we have those discussions say in a group. But if you try and get to the root of why a learner is choosing an option or why they might want to do that, that's just for us to find out and know how we can support them. But they often want to really justify that and prove that point to you maybe because they think there is an implied judgement, or they need to stand their ground on it.

There is a suggestion here that the 'stay or leave' decision brings with it an inherent tension, one that may prompt a defensive response.

The practitioners note that while in the context of the 'stay or go' activity a snap decision is asked for – "When we pose the question, we don't really give them much time to think deeply into it," says Frankie – there are other opportunities for deeper, more thoughtful reflection on this theme. Quinn says:

> …when I think to those deeper conversations, those one to one conversations, they put a lot of thought into it because they have done their own, well in my experience they've often done their own research into areas or universities or options on why they'd want to move to that place. If I've talked to a student before and they're certain that they want to leave Cumbria and go to a certain place, they can reel off the reasons why they would choose that place over others and why that city or that location.

We can see from these responses that there is the potential for tensions to arise from the necessity of making a 'stay or leave' decision, and that at least some young learners – one might go so far as to say many – have considered this point in great depth. But is this pressure a particular feature of ideas of the future among Cumbrian young learners – an extra layer of decision-making? In our paired-depth interview, Quinn and Frankie felt that this was likely to be the case. Quinn said:

> I've only in my career worked with local Cumbrian young people, but I would think that rings true. Possibly because they haven't travelled, well because of our connections, maybe haven't ventured outside of the county as much as a young person in London for example where they can just hop on a tube every day for example… Perhaps because Cumbrian young people are less likely to have had that experience and built those skills, just in navigating transport for example, it maybe hasn't opened up those options as much to them. That is a big question to them; should I leave or stay?

Discussion and recommendations

It is clear from our data that young people in Cumbria often participate explicitly in discussions revolving around whether they should stay in or leave their local area. These discussions sometimes take place in formal settings such as WP sessions, and often with parents and other family. Although explicit discussions on this topic were not usual between peer/friendship groups, the perception of friends' views about staying or going were a clear influencing factor on young people's decisions, with many choosing destinations where they would be able to remain within their group.

When looked at from the perspective of WP practice on an all-England level, our study shows that while raising the question of leaving the local area was a fairly common exercise, doing this outside of discussions of HE destinations was less common. Discussing 'leaving' outside of the context of university was much more widespread among practitioners in very isolated areas, including Cumbria but also East Anglia and the extreme south-west of England; this suggests that formal discussions of staying or leaving may be more commonly experienced by young people in these areas, reinforcing our theory that this may be an 'extra layer' of decision-making that is not routinely faced by young people in central/urban areas.

The motivations for such discussions on the part of WP practitioners can be classified as looking at wants and aspirations (usually in the context of university); broadening horizons, particularly among practitioners in urban areas; and limited local career choice, largely in rural/remote areas. At first glance, it might seem as though the second and third motivations might balance each other out, leading to both groups being drawn into decision-making around 'staying and leaving'. However, as we discuss in the text, it is clear that the stakes will in general be lower for the urban group; whilst the 'optimum' outcome by some measure – a wider choice of employers, for example – might be achieved by moving to a different area, that is not the same situation as one in which the only option for employment is to move. That is not to say that practitioners in isolated areas should avoid raising the subject of employment prospects and the potential limits to local career choices; it is more a question of being aware of the anxieties that might be felt around such subjects.

For young people in Cumbria and similar areas, tensions around the decision-making process as to whether to remain in the local area are likely to be exacerbated by a number of pressures that tend towards building a dichotomous response, forming two groups that are strongly inclined to either leave or remain. The formation of such a dichotomy can be driven by views of the local area, including feelings about the diversity or otherwise of the local population; geographical constraints and the individual's willingness to travel; ambitions, and locally-available opportunities to fulfil these; and personal contacts, particularly family, and their experiences of life in Cumbria and elsewhere.

As our report shows, these factors do indeed combine to produce a sense of anxiety in some of our young respondents, or if not such a negative response, indications that serious thought has gone into the question of whether to stay or leave. Difficulties with peer conversation on this point, and the

perception of their divisive nature, may lead to such concerns being somewhat hidden; however WP practitioners noticed anxiety around the issue among young learners. While outward conflict between opposing groups was not generally expressed, practitioners found that students had often thought deeply about their response to the idea of leaving or not, and seemed to feel the need to justify their conclusions to others. Meanwhile the majority of our survey participants voiced uncertainty about what the right choice might be for them, and several felt the need for more information about their options; we speculate that the inherent difficulty of the question leads to an increased appetite for guidance on this count.

Finally, it seems clear that this pressure to decide whether to 'stay or leave' is more strongly felt in Cumbria – and perhaps, by extension, in similarly isolated areas – than by young people in other areas of England. Discussion of views of Carlisle and Cumbria, transport, concerns about the availability of options for the future, and lack of knowledge about the world elsewhere, were widespread and specific in a way that suggests an emphasis on this decision that is perhaps not faced elsewhere. This impression is reinforced by our WP practitioner participants, who felt that the specific isolation of the Cumbrian scene was likely to make the contemplation of 'staying or leaving' a particularly intense and emotive affair for local young learners.

Recommendations

1. WP programmes and practitioners should acknowledge that young learners in Cumbria may have anxieties around the question of whether to stay in or leave the region, which are specific to those in more isolated/remote areas. In addition, many have thought deeply about this question. It is important, therefore, that when discussions around such points are instigated this is done with sensitivity and seriousness.
2. Due to the tensions surrounding these issues, young people may exhibit a need to justify their choices, or a sense of bravado, during discussions. Those moderating the sessions should consider what can be done to increase feelings of acceptance or comfort.
3. There was a clear desire from our young participants for more information about potential future choices. Given that it is likely that they already have access to multiple sources of information, from within their school and organisations such as Hello Future, it would be worthwhile conducting a listening exercise, preferably across multiple age groups, to determine what they perceive to be missing. Attention should be paid to whether specific information which is relevant to a geographically isolated cohort may be lacking.
4. While it was not our intention to gather information about the impacts of the pandemic on young people's attitudes, it is notable that our pre-pandemic interviewees exhibited a greater sense of decision about their future choices than our survey respondents, who manifested high degrees of uncertainty. It may be necessary to adapt sessions in coming years to take account of this shift.

5. While it is unclear at the moment whether pandemic working patterns will lead to a long-term shift towards remote working, WP organisations in areas such as Cumbria should monitor such trends, as they have the potential to remove some of the pressure associated with having to move away to pursue a specific career.

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