

Understanding the Aspirations of Young People in Castle Vale

A Research Study by Sheffield Hallam University on behalf of the Castle Vale Endowment Trust

Final Summary Report

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Researchers from Sheffield Hallam University were commissioned by the Castle Vale Endowment Trust to study the drivers and forms of aspirations of young people in Castle Vale and to map their outcomes. This report summarises the study's key findings and recommendations.

Key Messages

- This research confirms the importance of prioritising supporting young people in Castle Vale to achieve positive outcomes in education, training and employment.
- There is diversity among young people in Castle Vale and complex factors influence aspirations and outcomes. Young people (and their parents/carers) do not have a lack of aspirations based on cultures of worklessness, dependency or insularity. Young people usually know family members or friends in employment of further/ higher education; some young people from Castle Vale attend university and young people reported a willingness to travel or relocate to pursue their goals.
- However, young people face a series of psychological, practical and economic barriers to pursuing their aspirations. These often include a lack of confidence and self-esteem, limited secondary school attainment, weaknesses in the soft skills required to access and sustain employment or educational opportunities; and limited practical knowledge about pathways, opportunities and actions required to achieve their aspirations.
- Young people often doubt their own abilities to achieve their goals in employment and further/ higher education and are unaware of how they can access support and advice. Participation rates in further education have increased but there remains a significant problem with young people from Castle Vale achieving further education qualifications at Full Level 3. The proportion of Castle Vale school leavers in NEET categories also remains above the Birmingham city average.
- To address these issues, partner agencies and organisations in Castle Vale need to provide an extended and more coordinated framework of supportive interventions. These should focus upon mentoring young people in further education; ensuring that young people and parents/carers have access to guidance and support; and maximising the engagement of local businesses and role models within and beyond the Castle Vale community.
- There is a need for a more robust awareness between partners about their activities relating to aspirations and support and the potential to collate enhanced information about young people's outcomes.

Key Findings

- The nature and drivers of young people's aspirations in Castle Vale and their outcomes reflect the findings of existing national research evidence, including those relating to neighbourhoods with a similar profile to Castle Vale.
- Our findings challenge the perceptions of some local stakeholders, in particular those relating to cultural barriers. We found generally high levels of aspirations and diverse goals among young people, complex patterns of education and employment experiences within families and a strong linking of hard work and the importance of education to achieving positive outcomes. Many young people have achieved or are achieving positive outcomes and have a strong sense of direction.
- However, we also found a disconnection between aspirations and the practical knowledge and self-belief to achieve them. These included psychological barriers relating to a lack of confidence in personal ability and social skills, and practical barriers including lack of awareness of opportunities and support services and financial and transport impediments. Particularly among older groups and those with more negative school experiences, there was evidence of a lack of certainty and direction about their pathways and goals in the future.
- Our analysis of outcomes data found increasing levels of participation in further education (81 percent for those aged 16-18 in 2010-11). However, Key Stage Four attainment remains lower than the city average and there is a significant problem with Full Level 3 attainment, with evidence of a recent decline and rates now below the city average. 16 per cent of residents aged 18-20 participated in higher education in 2010-2011.
- There has been a stabilisation of Castle Vale School leavers in the NEET category, although the gap with the Birmingham city average has increased.

Key Recommendations

- Castle Vale Endowment Trust should promote further interventions in the Neighbourhood Plan to support teenagers, including mentoring young people on college courses and enhancing guidance to young people and parents/carers about education and employment opportunities, routes and requirements.
- There should be further and more sustained involvement of local businesses and organisations in providing employment and related experiences for young people, complemented by an enhanced utilisation of local role models within the Castle Vale community.
- Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership should continue to prioritise efforts to increase the numbers of young people from Castle Vale going on to sixth form education.
- Consideration should be given to establishing a facilitated peer network of parents to provide support and inspiration to parents in guiding their children to pursue their goals.
- Agencies and organisations in Castle Vale should seek to access national initiatives which provide opportunities for young people to pursue and achieve their aspirations.
- Partner agencies and organisations need to enhance their understanding of each others' initiatives and interventions in order to develop a more coordinated framework of support that ensures effective targeting of forms of support to different groups of young people in Castle Vale. There is also scope for improved access to and collation of data about young people's destinations and outcomes.

1. Aims and objectives of the research study

The **aim** of the study was to understand the aspirations of young people in Castle Vale and the linkages between aspirations and educational and employment outcomes, in order to support key priorities identified in the Castle Vale Neighbourhood Plan 2011-2020, including *helping people achieve their potential and increase training, skills and education for youngsters and adults*. The four main **objectives** of the study were to:

- Review the existing research evidence on young people's aspirations and good practice guidance on how these aspirations may be supported and raised.
- Examine the nature of young people's aspirations in Castle Vale, the drivers of and influences upon these aspirations, and the linkages to outcomes.
- Use existing available data to map outcomes for young people in Castle Vale and identify further potential sources of data that may be utilised in the future.
- Develop recommendations for Castle Vale Endowment Trust and partner agencies and organisations to support the raising and enabling of young people's aspirations in Castle Vale and to enhance the outcomes for young people.

2. Methods

The research was conducted between August 2011 and January 2012 and comprised four stages:

- A review of the existing research evidence, policy context and good practice guidance relating to young people's aspirations.
- Interviews with 14 key local stakeholders, including representatives of local regeneration agencies, schools, community organisations and businesses.
- Four focus groups with a total of 24 young people (12 males and 12 females), aged between 13 and 20 years and from a range of ethnic backgrounds.
- Analysis of existing data sets, including Individualised Learner Record Data provided by the Department for Education and school leaver data produced by Connexions for Castle Vale School and Performing Arts College.

3. Existing evidence and policy contexts

The existing academic and policy research evidence about young people's aspirations was reviewed, along with good practice guidance and examples of interventions aimed at raising young people's aspirations. The key findings from the review were:

- Young people from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds have lower levels of educational attainment. Aspirations are strongly linked to educational and employment outcomes and these aspirations vary by age, gender, ethnicity and locality.
- Different models have been developed to explain drivers and influences on aspirations and their relationship with outcomes. These models identify individuals, families, neighbourhoods and schools as being important factors.

- Studies have found high levels of aspirations towards further/higher education and employment amongst young people and parents- and the linked importance of education and hard work in achieving aspirations- across social groups. Aspirations such as being happy and having a family are often viewed as being as important. Young people's aspirations are usually realistic, covering a wide range of occupational sectors, and there are limited desires for material wealth or celebrity status and lifestyles.
- However, some studies suggest differences in aspirations between socioeconomic groups and a decline in some aspirations between the ages of 14 and 16. Additionally, recent studies indicate that young people perceive declining opportunities in the labour market and doubt their ability to achieve desired qualifications. Some research has found strong connections between lower aspirations and deprivation levels, strongly influenced by school and neighbourhood effects.
- Parents/carers and other family members are the most important influence on young people's aspirations and parenting experiences and home environments are linked to educational outcomes. Teachers and role models are also important. Young people do not self-report peers and media as major influences, although some studies have found that these do have an effect.
- There is strong evidence that the majority of young people and their parents often have a very limited knowledge of what practical steps are required to achieve their aspirations and many parents express doubts about their capacities and capabilities to support their children's aspirations.

Good practice guidance about interventions to raise young people's aspirations has highlighted the importance of locally-tailored and targeted approaches, based on multi-agency cooperation. These interventions should:

- Include advice, information and guidance at different age stages.
- Focus on providing young people and parents/carers with practical support and capacity to translate aspirations into realities.
- Include support at household levels and by schools, further/higher education providers and employers, complemented by mentors, role models and community organisations.

There have been a large number of national policy initiatives and local interventions aimed at raising young people's aspirations. The government's new policy approach to young people aged 13-19- *Positive for Youth*- describes many of these interventions and reaffirms a focus on raising aspirations as a key mechanism to achieving better outcomes for young people. [For the full findings and analysis from the evidence review, see research report 1 on the study website.](#)

4. Aspirations of young people in Castle Vale

The research included interviews with key local stakeholders and focus groups with young people to examine the nature of young people's aspirations in Castle Vale, the drivers of these influences and how aspirations were linked to outcomes.

- The majority of key stakeholders believed that young people had conventional or high aspirations at primary school ages and this was supported by survey evidence from local schools. Although many stakeholders argued that these aspirations changed at secondary school stage, this was challenged by data from Castle Vale School and Performing Arts College which showed continuing high levels of aspirations.
- Families and peers were regarded as the most influential drivers of aspirations, with the media, schools and local community organisations also being cited as being significant.
- Several research participants stated that there was a trend of increasing aspirations, evidenced by growing numbers of young people going on to further or higher education, although other participants challenged this view.
- A series of barriers to higher aspirations and the achievement of more positive outcomes were identified by local stakeholders. These included intergenerational effects, the isolated geography of Castle Vale, a lack of confidence and social capital among young people and parents and parenting influence and capacity. Many stakeholders indicated that local schooling and educational attainment had been or were barriers, particularly the local secondary school, although the evidence on this was complex and several stakeholders reported significant improvements within local schools.
- Local primary schools, positive parental influence, enhanced early years services infrastructure, partnership working (including schools, colleges, universities, employers and support services) and community youth groups were identified as significant enabling factors in promoting aspirations and facilitating positive outcomes.
- There are a range of existing interventions and initiatives within Castle Vale that are focusing on raising aspirations and supporting young people to achieve positive outcomes.
- The focus groups revealed that all of the young people were exposed to different categories of occupation and educational experiences within their family contexts, although the influence of this (and of parents and peers) on their own aspirations appeared to be limited.
- Young people aspired to a wide range of occupations and some young people demonstrated considerable knowledge about what would be required to attain these aspirations, including hard work, qualifications and, in some cases, where they would have to live to maximise their opportunities. There was also a sense of realism in relation to celebrity occupations. The motivations underpinning these aspirations included having a good income and home, learning new skills, opportunities to travel and jobs that were interesting or involved helping people. There were a range of triggers generating interest in particular occupations.
- However, there was also a lack of direction amongst some young people in the older age categories (16- 20 years), who had very generalised views about occupations or educational and training pathways and no framework of knowledge about how these could be achieved. This was particularly the case for those young people who had experienced difficulties at school.
- There was evidence of a lack of self-confidence or self-belief amongst some young people. They did not lack aspirations, but rather expressed doubts about their own

abilities to achieve their goals. In addition, some financial barriers to participation in further or higher education were also identified.

Young People's Aspirations

"I used to want to be a ballerina, but now I want to be a lawyer, because I'm getting good grades at school and the teachers have said I can do it. A lawyer would be a better job. I don't want a job that is a waste of my education."

"I would certainly consider moving to Wales, because I've heard that they've got better universities there."

"There's a difference between what you want to do and what you can do."

"I don't know why I am looking at these jobs. It's too hard. It's not like if I pick one it will actually happen. I barely got through school."

"I don't want to set myself up to fail at something."

In summary, the findings of the study confirm many aspects of the existing research evidence which have identified generally high levels of aspiration and diverse goals amongst young people, but a disconnection between these aspirations and the practical knowledge and self-belief to achieve them. Our research with young people challenged some of the perceptions of local stakeholders about negative cultures within Castle Vale and also challenged the wider evidence base about the importance of parental occupations and peer influence. However, it was evident that there are different categories of young person and there is a particular need to focus on providing further guidance and support to older age groups; both through offering advice on their options and in facilitating practical support to address issues of confidence and tackle barriers to accessing and sustaining education or employment opportunities and, most specifically, on further education courses. It is also evident that there are a range of interventions being delivered within Castle Vale aimed at raising young people's aspirations and supporting the attainment of these goals, but at present these interventions are somewhat disparate and uncoordinated and there is a need to enhance targeting of these initiatives. There is also scope for greater utilisation of potential resources and partnership working within and beyond Castle Vale. For the full findings and analysis from the key stakeholder interviews and focus groups with young people, see research reports 2 and 3 on the study website.

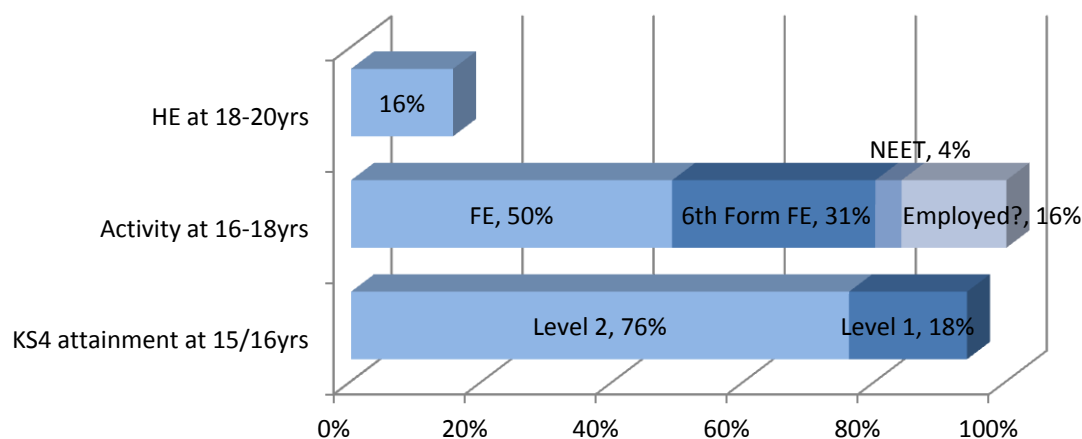
5. Outcomes for young people in Castle Vale

In addition to qualitative accounts of the outcomes for young people in Castle Vale, Individual Learner Record, National Pupils Database and local Connexions data provided to Castle Vale School and Performing Arts College were analysed which revealed the following key findings:

- 81 per cent of young people aged 16-18 living in Castle Vale in 2010-11 were in further education: 50 per cent with further education providers and 31 per cent within secondary school sixth forms. Four per cent were NEET, leaving 16 per cent, who

were either employed or not recorded in the data (Figure 1). In 2010-11, a total of 29 providers provided further education to 241 Castle Vale residents aged 16-18 and Birmingham Metropolitan College accounted for over half of this provision.

Figure 1: Activity of young people in Castle Vale, based on recent data



- Key Stage 4 attainment was lower for Castle Vale learners in 2009-10 compared with Birmingham; 76 per cent of Castle Vale pupils achieved five or more GCSEs (or equivalents) at grades A*-C, compared with 81 per cent of Birmingham pupils.
- The further education participation rate has steadily increased amongst young people living in Castle Vale over the last four years. Between 2006 and 2010 the proportion of Castle Vale School pupils entering further education increased from three in ten to over four in ten and the gap with the Birmingham city average narrowed considerably.
- Approximately four in five Castle Vale School pupils entering further education have opted for vocational courses. Of the remaining pupils, the vast majority were undertaking A Level studies rather than GCSE courses. A small proportion of pupils transferred to alternative schools' sixth forms or sixth form colleges.
- Over the last four years, Castle Vale has had a lesser proportion of 16-18 learners participating in Full Level 2 courses but a greater proportion participating in Full Level 3 courses compared with Birmingham; with the exception of 2010-11.
- In 2010-11, just over a fifth (21 per cent) of Castle Vale Further Education learners aged 16-18 were on Full Level 2 courses; 38 per cent were on Full Level 3 courses; and 40 per cent were on other courses, such as lower level courses (e.g. 'skills for life' or Level 1 course) or partial Level 2 or 3 courses (e.g. fewer than five GCSEs or equivalents).
- The achievement rates for young people completing Level 2 courses were broadly similar for Castle Vale and Birmingham learners between 2007-8 and 2009-10. However, there was a notable jump in the Castle Vale achievement rate between 2008-9 and 2010-11, from 80 to 91 per cent.
- The Castle Vale achievement rate for Full Level 3 learners declined year-on-year from 90 per cent in 2007-8 to 64 per cent in 2009-10. The trend for Birmingham was more stable over the same period, with an achievement rate of 80 per cent for each year.

- 35 Castle Vale residents aged 18-20 and 85 residents aged 21 or older entered Higher Education in 2010-11. Overall, 75 Castle Vale residents aged 18-20 participated in Higher Education in 2010-11, constituting a rate of 16 per cent of the same age population.
- There has been a decline in the proportion of pupils from Castle Vale School entering employment between 2006 and 2010 and the gap with the city average has also narrowed during this period.
- There have been fluctuations in the proportion of pupils from Castle Vale School entering training or work-based learning between 2006 and 2010, although the percentage has remained significantly higher than the city average during this period.
- There has been a stabilisation of Castle Vale School pupils in the NEET category, although the gap with the city average has increased in recent years.

In summary, further education participation rates for young people in Castle Vale have been increasing significantly in recent years and the gap with the Birmingham city average has narrowed considerably. The achievement rates for young people completing Level 2 courses had been broadly similar for Castle Vale and Birmingham learners but there has been a significant improvement in achievement rates for Castle Vale learners in the last three years. However, the Castle Vale achievement rate for Full Level 3 learners declined year-on-year from 90 per cent in 2007-8 to 64 per cent in 2009-10, compared to a stable city average of around 80 per cent. The proportion of Castle Vale School leavers in the NEET category remains above the city of Birmingham average. [For the full findings and analysis, see research reports 4 and 5 on the study website.](#)

6. Recommendations

The recommendations presented here are based on the research conducted in Castle Vale and a review of wider research evidence and good practice guidance. In framing the wider context of these recommendations, the issues and challenges relating to the aspirations and outcomes for young people in Castle Vale reflect those identified in the existing research evidence about similar communities in England. It is important to note that the prioritisation of aspirations and the achievement of potential by the Castle Vale Endowment Trust and the Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership are in line with the government's new national approach for young people aged 13-19- *Positive for Youth* (HM Government, 2011, available at: <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/youngpeople/Positive%20for%20Youth>). It is also the case that the action points presented in the Castle Vale Neighbourhood Plan 2011-2020 relating to *better educated, better trained and better off* reflect key principles of identified good practice; specifically the focus upon mentoring and support for older teenagers, prioritisation of enhanced interventions at school stages, supporting parents, developing 'soft skills' for accessing employment, and multi-agency partnership working. The following recommendations are intended to complement the Castle Vale Neighbourhood Plan and the local initiatives already being delivered by a range of partners within and beyond Castle Vale:

- Given that the achievement rate for young people in Castle Vale on Level 3 courses has reduced significantly in recent years we recommend that **the Castle Vale Endowment Trust consider further supporting the actions identified in the Neighbourhood Plan to provide support to teenagers, including those attending college on Level 3 courses.** There are two key elements required here. Firstly, there is a need to work with local colleges, especially Birmingham Metropolitan College, to discuss how young people from Castle Vale can be supported to sustain their studies and achieve better educational outcomes, through mentoring and addressing practical and psychological barriers. Secondly, there is a need to provide enhanced guidance about educational and employment/training options and routes for teenagers who have left school and are not attending college or in employment. **We regard this as the key form of additional investment that the Trust could make which would complement existing provision and strategy.**
- There should be further and more sustained involvement of local businesses and organisations in providing work and related experiences for young people in Castle Vale.** There have been positive developments in increasing engagement of local enterprises with schools, but the research evidence suggests that more sustained initiatives such as work placements will achieve greater results than school visits or presentations.
- There should be an enhanced utilisation of local role models, both peers and adults.** A key finding of the research has been that young people in Castle Vale have family members in employment (in a diverse range of occupations) or education. This offers an important potential resource of advice, motivation and guidance for young people, which should complement the use of 'external' speakers and mentors.
- Agencies and organisations in Castle Vale should seek to access national initiatives as well as local initiatives and programmes** which provide opportunities to raise aspirations and access work experiences, for example O2's Think Big programme (see <http://www.o2thinkbig.co.uk/>) and the PRIME initiative launched by leading law firms (see: <http://www.primecommitment.org/>)
- Existing attempts to enhance relationships between parents/carers and local schools should continue to be developed.** In addition to this, there is a need to provide further practical support and guidance to parents/carers about the potential options and pathways for their children. The research evidence suggests that parents do not lack aspirations for their children, but rather that some parents lack knowledge about the practical steps that need to be taken to support these aspirations, or the confidence to assume a role in guiding their children in employment or educational choices. **Previous research has suggested that parents believe that some form of facilitated peer network of parents would be the most effective mechanism for providing this support** (rather than more traditional forms of disseminating information).

- **Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership should continue to prioritise efforts to increase the numbers of young people from Castle Vale going on to sixth form education.**
- **Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership should work with partner agencies to enhance the collation of more detailed data mapping the pathways and outcomes of young people in Castle Vale.** This includes Connexions, local schools, colleges, universities and Birmingham City Council. There are also national data sets held by the Department for Education which may be accessed and analysed. Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership may also wish to investigate evaluation mechanisms used to measure service delivery impacts on aspirations, such as the Ev-asy evaluation tool developed by Inspire-Aspire South Yorkshire. See: <https://www.sheffield0to19.org.uk/professionals/i-asy/tools-and-resources/evaluation-tool.html>
- **Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership should prioritise enhancing shared knowledge about the initiatives of agencies and organisations in Castle Vale and develop a more coordinated approach to interventions aimed at supporting and raising aspirations and outcomes through more strategic targeting of bespoke interventions for particular groups of young people.** For example, it is evident that there is a lack of knowledge amongst some organisations about the initiatives within Castle Vale School and Performing Arts College and it is unclear how these relate to interventions being provided by community organisations. The synergies between these interventions need to be identified to ensure that they become complementary. In order to achieve this, there is a need to ensure that various types of support are available to different groups of young people, based on their stage of development and the levels of their support needs.
- **The specific role of the Family Support Service should be clarified.** It may either provide support to the most vulnerable families, meaning that it will work with a smaller number of cases and is likely to be focused on crisis management and stabilisation of families, rather than raising aspirations or short-term education or employment outcomes. Alternatively, it may work with a larger number of young people and parents with lower levels of vulnerability where there can be a focus on educational and/or employment aspirations. This should be coordinated with the work of local community groups who are already supporting some of the most excluded young people in Castle Vale.

7. Conclusions

Improving the educational and employment outcomes for young people in Castle Vale is correctly identified as a key priority for Castle Vale Endowment Trust and Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership. Mirroring the importance of socio-economic and neighbourhood factors in determining outcomes identified in the existing research evidence, many of the issues and challenges facing Castle Vale are shared by similar communities elsewhere in England. The attempts to address aspirations and outcomes for young people in Castle Vale

are also being developed in very difficult contemporary labour market and service budget circumstances. The actions already identified with the Castle Vale Neighbourhood Plan 2011-2020 reflect national government approaches and elements of identified good practice.

Secondary school qualification attainment rates in Castle Vale remains an important issue, although Castle Vale School and Performing Arts College has developed a considerable programme of work around aspirations and engaging with local businesses. It is also the case that data reveal increasing participation rates for young people from Castle Vale in further education, which are now close to or surpass rates for Birmingham as a whole. However, a key issue is the subsequent attainment rates on Level 3 college courses. Although level 2 achievement rates have improved significantly, Level 3 rates have declined in recent years to below city averages and there is also variation between providers. There has been a stabilisation in NEET levels for Castle Vale School pupils, although the gap with the city average remains.

Despite the perceptions of some key local stakeholders and indeed national policy rationales, we did not find a lack of aspirations to achieve amongst young people in Castle Vale, or cultures of worklessness where entire households were divorced from labour markets or further education. Young people often had a clear sense of what they wanted to achieve and what would be required to do so, and were not overly-influenced by either their parents or peers. However, what was evident, and again confirms existing research evidence, is that many young people in Castle Vale, and their parents, face a series of barriers, including self-confidence and lower expectations, and are unaware of how to ensure the practical steps necessary to enable aspirations to be pursued. It was also clear that there is a lack of coordination of interventions and information sharing between some agencies and organisations in Castle Vale and there is potential to enhance the role of key organisations, such as local colleges and businesses as well as resources within Castle Vale, including community organisations and peer networks and role models.

Reflecting the findings of the research, we recommend that supporting aspirations is more robustly coordinated and targeted across agencies and organisations and that Castle Vale Endowment Trust gives specific prioritisation to enhancing mentoring support to older teenagers in sustaining (and attaining through) college education and providing further guidance to older teenagers not accessing employment or further education.

The focus of interventions should not be on inspiring young people to achieve or have aspirations, but rather to provide the proactive practical support, guidance and mentoring that enables young people to pursue their existing aspirations more effectively.

8. Further Information

This report summarises data and findings from five study reports, which are available for free download from the study website at: <http://www.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/castle-vale.html>

For further information about the study, please contact **Elaine Batty** e.batty@shu.ac.uk or **Ruth Miller** ruthm@cvcha.org.uk