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Devolving Power in Education and Youth

Lessons from the
Opportunity Areas Programme

Cunningham, C., Brown, C., Donnelly, M.,
Young, E., Davies, J., Dickson, M., Siddiqui, N.,
Pearce, N., and Harris, R.

From the Centre to the Periphery research project



From the Centre to the Periphery is a 1.5million UKRI-funded evaluation of the Opportunity Areas programme that aims to deliver new knowledge about what works in addressing regional inequalities through area-based education initiatives.

[From the centre to the periphery: reducing spatial divides through area-based education initiatives](#)

Executive Summary

In response to the Cabinet Statement, Rewiring the State¹, we present preliminary findings from our research on the From the Centre to the Periphery project², the first quasi-experimental evaluation of the Opportunity Areas programme – a major £108 million Government intervention that ran from 2017 until 2022 with the aim of closing regional gaps in education and skills - to offer key principles and recommendations for policymakers aiming to devolve power in education and youth.

Within this policy brief we apply data from our evaluation of the Opportunity Areas programme and broader research on place-based approaches to social mobility to offer a framework that can guide the UK Government's strategy for devolution. We present six policy recommendations based around our three key principles:



1 Cabinet Office (2026) Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement. Available at: [Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement \(HTML\) - GOV.UK](#)

2 From the centre to the periphery: reducing spatial divides through area-based education initiatives

Principle 1:

Building Local Capacity

Building local capacity is about the enablement of longer-term thinking, forming strong local partnership structures, and the upskilling of people in local areas to empower them to develop solutions specific to their place-based needs.

Our research shows that having a staggered approach to funding can limit the ability to think longer-term, which then restricts the impact of the intervention. Therefore, we recommend that:

- *Investment in generational change should fund area-based education initiatives for 10-year periods, with accountability measures being adjusted to allow the success (or otherwise) of the initiative to be given time to come into fruition.*

We found that partnership boards offer a framework for building trust within communities, which in turn fosters local capacity building. The local partnership model, and the trust that underpins it, then, is crucial for devolving power. Therefore, we recommend that:

- *Building local capacity involves devolving power to people with tacit local knowledge who can come together to build trust within communities.*

There are various examples from our research which show that the funding given to areas enabled Opportunity Area boards to encourage people take risks, experiment, and learn-in-practice. It helped schools to build provision already in place, or experiment with new projects that they wouldn't have been able to fund, while also supporting people to become community leaders, thereby ensuring the sustainability of the model. Therefore, we recommend that:

- *Communities of Practice should invest in people through projects that aren't afraid to take risks, building future leaders that can ensure the sustainability of the local partnership model.*

Principle 2:

Shifting the Balance of Power to Enable the Local

Shifting the balance of power to enable the local is about limiting the extent to which top-down systems of measurement can infringe upon experimenting with new ways of working. It is about creating channels for reciprocal learning between national and local governance, both from the ground-up, and between departments at the centre.

Through our research, we found that local stakeholders held deep knowledge that the centre could have learned from, but that this rarely happened. Rather, these local knowledge hubs went largely untapped, oftentimes due to the infringement of the top-down KPIs that put a limit on local creativity. This highlights the need for a genuine two-way relationship, where the centre and local areas learn from each other on how problems are framed, what solutions are needed, and how they are delivered.

Therefore, we recommend that:

- *The relationship between central government and local areas needs to involve reciprocal learning. Cross-departmental working at the centre should strive to become a Community of Practice. As with the Local Partnership Model within areas, Communities of Practice should be built within central government where identity and belonging are recognised as central to the learning process, participation and membership.*

Principle 3:

Prevention Over Remediation

Our evaluation of the Opportunity Areas programme highlights the importance of addressing the structural conditions that sustain and underpin inequalities of disadvantaged groups. This means tackling the root causes of inequality, including early years interventions, addressing issues of identity, belonging and mental health challenges. This also means action to reimagine how we measure success in terms of outcomes, which can only be achieved by talking with and listening to the community, including young people.

The evidence suggests a need for strategies to be co-produced with young people and shaped by an understanding of how identity, disadvantage and place intersect, recognising that factors like socio-economic background, SEND, ethnicity and gender mean one-size-fits-all solutions rarely work. Therefore, we recommend that:

- *Prevention strategies should consider the ways in which place shapes disadvantage. They should invest in social conditions that can build belonging, along with better infrastructure where needed, such as improved transport links.*

When considering education and opportunity in youth, current accountability measures often miss the mechanisms that drive long-term change. They are a world away from the young people themselves. Success should not be judged by narrow attainment or employment figures alone. Devolved areas need shared measures that capture the wider conditions underpinning opportunity — belonging, inclusion, confidence, agency, relationships, and successful transitions into sustained education or employment. These offer earlier signals of whether systems are heading in the right direction and can be strengthened or reorientated accordingly. Therefore, we recommend that:

- *Systems that measure the impact of place-based initiatives should remain flexible to capture the wider conditions that underpin opportunity such as belonging, inclusion, confidence, agency, relationships, and successful transitions.*

Introduction

On 31st July 2026 the UK Government released its Cabinet Statement, *Rewiring the State*³. At the heart of this devolution strategy is the ambition for ‘places (to be) able to set their own ambitions and integrate services to meet people’s needs’. The methodology to achieve these goals is for central government to ‘support the devolved governments, strategic authorities and local authorities to deliver that commitment, working in partnership with businesses and the voluntary, community, academic and faith sectors’. This devolution strategy is about ‘surrendering power that for too long has been held in Westminster and Whitehall, and returning it to people and the places where they live, work and invest’.

Our research on the *From the Centre to the Periphery* project deals with these very matters. Analysing the ways in which area-based education initiatives can reduce spatial divides, we evaluate the Opportunity Areas programme, which was a Department for Education (DfE) funded initiative that ran from 2017 until 2022, operating in twelve ‘social mobility cold spots’ in England. The ethos of this programme was for central government to invest money into local areas through partnership boards that comprised of local leaders from a range of backgrounds, such as education, the community and voluntary sector, and business. Our research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the first quasi-experimental evaluation of the Opportunity Areas programme. Through our findings we aim to show what worked well and what improvements can be made for any future area-based education initiatives.

At the time of writing, we are two thirds of the way through the project and are getting a clear sense of what is needed for area-based initiatives to see some success. We have spent time talking with and getting to know those who were involved in the Opportunity Area partnership boards. We have visited schools within the Opportunity Areas and in their ‘matched comparison areas’ that have similar challenges but did not receive the

intervention, and we have held events within Opportunity Areas, partnering with and listening to people from the community to learn about what is needed to improve the lives of young people within the area. Our observations have informed opinion pieces about devolution;⁴ we have applied findings from our quantitative analysis to produce policy briefs;⁵ and we have theorised on the policy measures that both enable and challenge the prevention of NEETHood.⁶

We present this policy brief, ***Devolving Power in Education and Youth: lessons from the Opportunity Areas programme*** from our position as a cross-institutional team of scholars who have expert knowledge of education and place-based approaches to social mobility. In the sections that follow we apply our preliminary findings from our evaluation of the Opportunity Areas programme to lay out key principles and recommendations to be adopted by policymakers.

3 Cabinet Office (2026) *Rewiring the State* – Cabinet Statement. Available at: [Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement \(HTML\) - GOV.UK](#)

4 Cunningham, C., Davies, J., Donnelly, M., Siddiqui, N. (2025) “English HE can meet Jacqui Smith’s challenge by embracing devolution”, in *Times Higher Education*. Available at: [English HE can meet Jacqui Smith’s challenge by embracing devolution | Times Higher Education \(THE\)](#)

5 Davies, J., Dickson, M., Donnelly, M., Brown, C., Siddiqui, N., Pearce, N., Harris, R., Young, E., and Cunningham, C. (2025) *Green shoots of hope? Increased optimism about future study and work in England’s Opportunity Areas*. Available at: [Green shoots of hope? Increased optimism about future study and work in England’s Opportunity Areas](#)

6 Cunningham, C., Brown, C., Davies, J., Donnelly, M., & Dickson, M. (2026) “Accessing Optimism: Rethinking Wellbeing, Inclusion, and Belonging for Young People in Britain Who Are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET)”. *Youth*, 6(2), 41. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth6020041>



Devolving Power in Education and Youth

Geographic divisions that exist within countries can be understood as ‘borders within’. These borders are manifested by the amount of money people earn and the levels of economic growth and decline places experience, along with health and education outcomes. To understand what shapes and maintains these divisions between different areas we must listen to the people that live within them; people and their relationships with *place* hold the key to fixing the issues which create geographic inequalities.⁷

This policy brief presents three key principles and six recommendations that can be adopted by policymakers working towards devolving powers in education and creating opportunities for young people. Having spent time listening to and learning from people of all ages within Opportunity Areas and their ‘matched comparison areas’, we lay out these key principles to inform policy that is orientated towards equality in education and opportunity in youth.

Our principles are empirically evidenced and grounded in the recognition that devolution is not simply about moving powers geographically. It is about **enabling places to build collaborative systems that understand their communities, create the conditions for belonging and opportunity, and generate learning that continuously improves both local practice and national policy.**

⁷ Donnelly, M. (2025). *The Borders Within*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press. Retrieved Aug 12, 2026, from <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447369097>

Principle 1: Building Local Capacity

Building local capacity is about the enablement of longer-term thinking, forming strong local partnership structures, and the upskilling of people in local areas to empower them to develop solutions specific to their place-based needs.

Long-term Thinking

It is evident from our evaluation of the Opportunity Areas programme that for devolution to work, local areas need to think and plan for the long-term. This is achievable through the provision of long-term funding mechanisms which allow more impactful interventions specific to local needs to be developed and enacted. Crucially, it enables these interventions to be rigorously tested to understand their impact, in order to then adapt and refine the interventions accordingly.

Our research shows that **having a staggered approach to funding can limit the ability to think longer-term, which then restricts the impact of the intervention.** Our analysis of Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data demonstrates that, in line with the national average, for many of the Opportunity Areas and their matched comparison areas, there was a decrease in Level 3+ study in the period after the Opportunity Area programme began. Of the 12 Opportunity Areas, only Doncaster and Ipswich saw increases in the post period.

Our qualitative case study work has identified that within Ipswich, through the Opportunity Area programme, there was a unique approach which gave emphasis to supporting teenagers and young adults in the area, such as with the creation of spaces organised and managed by the young people themselves, and events which gave emphasis to listening to youth voice. This work still continues today through the legacy project that has emerged from the Opportunity Areas programme – the Ipswich Social Mobility Alliance (ISMA)⁸, which has a twenty-five-year vision for social mobility.

The sustained investment in young people in these age groups seen in Ipswich, rooted in ideas of long-term thinking that is not limited by funding cycles, may help to explain the increase in Level 3+ study observed in this area.

However, the way that funding was distributed during the Opportunity Area programme undoubtedly created challenges for many of the areas. Funds were directed from central government to the Opportunity Area partnership boards, which then forwarded the funding towards specific projects based around key priorities that were agreed between the partnership board and the DfE. Although the programme ran for five years, the funding that partnership boards received from central government was staggered, with the first instalment being for three years, followed by two one-year extensions.

The covid-19 pandemic, which hit in the middle of this period, may have shaped the ways in which the final years of the programme were funded. Importantly, however, the first instalment of funding was for a three-year period only, reflecting broader trends of short-term investment. As one Independent Chair of an Opportunity Area partnership board explains, 'on the third one (year), the big issue was there was a cliff edge at the end, and that's just typical of these sorts of funding streams'. The negative impact of the staggered approach to funding is similarly reflected through our quantitative analysis of school exclusions and attendance. Findings suggest that although some of the Opportunity Areas did make improvements, this was short-lived. We interpret this unsustainability as being a feature of the limited time of the programme, as addressing school exclusions and attendance requires tackling underlying issues such as SEND provision, parental engagement, instability within schools etc, which typically are not resolved within three years.

The majority of board members that we spoke to from a range of different areas highlighted the need for the funding to be distributed in longer-term instalments. As one person explains:

'One of the challenges of the Opportunity Area approach... the most fundamental problem of it was that we were trying to achieve long term change with a short-term programme... You're given money for a period of time to initiate long term change, and then you look at the data and think, well, that long term change hasn't happened in three years. So... it shouldn't be a shortterm programme. It's a 10year programme, not a three or even a five-year programme.'

(Partnership Board Member)

For others, while the issue of longer-term funding was important, measures of accountability were more so, whereby the need to view change through a longer-term lens was emphasised:

'One of the things we said at the beginning actually, to find out how well we've done, come back and look at the data in 10 years' time... because you're not going to see it overnight.'

(Partnership Board Independent Chair)

Viewing change beyond the funding-cycle gives recognition to the fact that 'social change is generational'. This view of long-term change was seen by many of those working within Opportunity Area partnership boards. Notably, there are two such examples where this vision of long-term change transformed into a legacy project of the Opportunity Area programme, with the established working partnerships continuing:

Bradford - Education Alliance for Life Chances (EALC)⁹ –
'We've taken the basis of the partnership board and kept going with gritted teeth (referencing EALC)... We haven't had the multimillion pounds... What we've got is the will in the room... because we know that government funded programs come and go.'

(Partnership Board Member)

Ipswich – Ipswich Social Mobility Alliance (ISMA)¹⁰ –
'At the end of the OA, we all got together and said, is it going to be another one of those projects where it's a fixed time limit, and we all go home...? And we all said, "No... We were going to keep it going", even though we didn't have any money, and we were going to work differently. And that's why we started ISMA.'

(Partnership Board Independent Chair)

These legacy projects from Bradford and Ipswich show the importance of having a long-term vision when tackling issues of social inequality and social mobility. They demonstrate that long-term thinking exists beyond funding-cycles and that the local partnership model is crucial for creating generational change.

Recommendation 1: Investment in generational change should fund area-based education initiatives for 10-year periods, with accountability measures being adjusted to allow the success (or otherwise) of the initiative being given time to come into fruition.

Local Partnership Model

Area-based education initiatives have the best chance of success when supported by a strong local partnership model. Collaboration between **key actors from a range of backgrounds** such as education, health, transport, housing, business/industry, and the third sector is key in giving young people the support that they need, while also helping to deliver the *Rewiring the State* strategy to shift power, funding, and accountability from central government to local leaders.¹¹ These partnerships should surface from and be organised around the **tacit local knowledge held by trusted individuals and institutions**; people who understand the 'grain' of *place*, can work at multiple levels of the system and command local trust.

Our research shows that partnership boards offer a framework for building trust within communities, which in turn fosters local capacity building. The local partnership model, and the trust that underpins it, then, is crucial for devolving power.

The *Education Alliance for Life Chances* that emerged from the Bradford Opportunity Area is a prime example of this:

'We'd built up a real strong link between health and education. So, we brought two huge complex systems together to try and tackle some of these things that were playing out in schools.'

(Partnership Board Member)

This system's thinking continues today, with the partnership bringing together Bradford's schools, health services, police, the Local Authority, voluntary services, universities, faith leaders and business to tackle childhood inequality and improve social mobility for all.

The work going on in Bradford shows that strong community leadership that is rooted in *place* can help to build the relationships that are needed to understand the barriers within a particular area. A similar approach is taken in Ipswich:

'The schools had been quite insular... we absolutely forced them to – they could not have money without collaborating. They had to work together. The first event we did was the first time that all of the schools in Ipswich had been in one place at the same time.'

(Partnership Board Independent Chair)

A strong local partnership approach fosters trust. As our policy brief *Green Shoots of Hope? Increased optimism about future study and work in England's Opportunity Areas* (Davies et al., 2025) showcases, young people living within Opportunity Areas have higher levels of optimism post the OA intervention compared to those in similar areas who saw a decline (see Fig. 1). Moreover, this decline in similar areas aligns with a nationwide decrease in optimism amongst young people, suggesting that the OA intervention formed an important buffer against a similar decrease within the OAs. There is arguably a link between the trust that is being built within these areas and the increased levels of optimism among young people. Trust is built through relationships, and as the Independent Chair of a Partnership Board notes, 'relational working was at the heart of everything that we did'. This finding chimes with policy recommendations emerging from a collaboration between

9 Home - Education Alliance for Life Chances

10 Ipswich Social Mobility Alliance

11 Cabinet Office (2026) *Rewiring the State* – Cabinet Statement. Available at: [Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement \(HTML\) - GOV.UK](#) Priority%20Policy%20Actions%20from%20the%20SW%20JoB.pdf

academics, local policymakers and young people across the 11 unitary authorities of South West England, which recognised ‘trusting relationships as the mechanism of change to achieve engagement in EET’.¹²

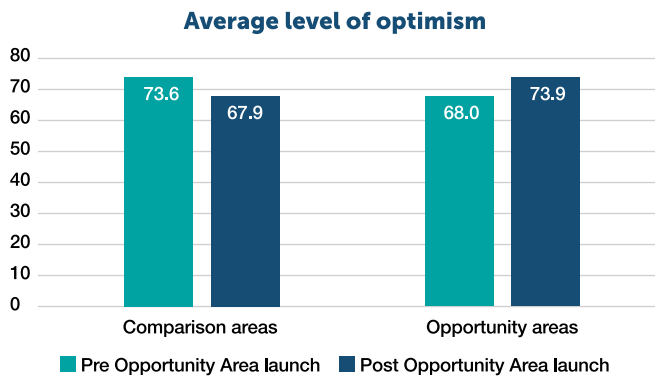


Fig 1.

The national decline in optimism about study and careers prospects among young people (Davies et al., 2025) has emerged in the context of a changing education system which has seen a reduction in partnership working. Academisation since the 1990s brought with it a policy churn which created a fractured system, effectively ‘farming out’ schools to remote Multi Academy Trusts that were largely inward looking, and with it, the convening power of Local Authorities has been eroded. As one Partnership Board Member explains:

‘There used to be really vibrant networks around local authorities... the local authority don’t have the power to convene that they used to have before. This gave us a power to convene and a group of people who were going to make things happen, which I think has been sadly lost.’

(Partnership Board Member)

The Opportunity Area programme gave space for re-connecting the networks that have been lost over time. It also offered room for expanding the networks through the creation of partnerships that were able to share staff, knowledge, data, and responsibility. These partnerships were grounded in the **understanding that education does not exist in a silo**. During our conversations with board members from across the Opportunity Areas, the relationships and legacy partnerships that emerged from the programme were seen as its greatest success. As one Independent Chair of a Partnership Board highlights when discussing the relationship between schools and their local university:

‘We were very fragmented. And for me, schools feel that they can bring their young people, or even come and ask advice from the university... So, for me, it’s massively transformed how we work as an ecosystem....I do think we created a community and a commitment that was really, really positive.’

(Partnership Board Independent Chair)

Another Independent Chair explains how the Opportunity Area programme opened their eyes to new ways of collaborative working:

‘Legacy sounds very grand. I suppose what I mean is...did we affect sustainable change?... One way is the experience of collaboration and working together, relationships... it sounds really soft and cuddly, but it’s so important.’

(Partnership Board Independent Chair)

The local partnership model offers an authenticity when it comes to understanding the people of a *place* and what is needed to help them overcome barriers. As one Partnership Board Member suggests:

‘Politicians... don’t even really know what it’s like in some of these communities and how different they are.’

(Partnership Board Member)

Often the power from central government overshadowed the efforts of the Partnership Boards on the ground and there was a feeling about there being a lack of authenticity coming from the centre:

‘So long as we spent the money, and we could fill in a spreadsheet to show how it was spent, then they were happy... The actual impact (on children was) less of a priority.’

(Partnership Board Member)

Nonetheless, despite there being a top-down power element that did influence the Opportunity Areas programme, the Partnership Boards actively tried to ensure that power was coming from the ground up:

‘We wanted to make sure that schools had that opportunity... to try and identify some strategy that the civil servants of the DfE probably hadn’t thought of, because the school staff are the ones who are closest to what the problem is.’

(Partnership Board Member)

Recommendation 2: Building local capacity through partnership boards involves devolving power to people with tacit local knowledge who can come together to build trust within communities.

12 Douthwaite A. and Brown, C. (2025: 2;16-19) ‘Engaging Young People in Employment, Education or Training. Priority Policy Actions from the Southwest’ Policy Brief; accessible; <https://connectedbelonging.co.uk/assets/docs/Engaging%20Young%20People%20in%20Employment%20Education%20or%20Training%20Priority%20Policy%20Actions%20from%20the%20SW%20UoB.pdf>

Enable Risk-taking and Experimentation to Develop Novel Solutions Specific to Local Areas

As discussed above, the local partnership model is crucial for building trust within communities. The partnership board, comprised of those with tacit local knowledge working together towards shared goals, can help to **support other people to become community leaders, thereby ensuring the sustainability of the model**. The reciprocal working of the local partnership model creates Communities of Practice¹³ where researchers and practitioners develop shared knowledge and practice through sustained, collaborative participation, grounded in action oriented towards upskilling researchers and building research capacity.

Reciprocal working that is characterised by trust allows people to take risks.

There are various examples from our research which show that the funding given to areas enabled Opportunity Area boards to encourage people take risks, experiment, and learn-in-practice. It helped schools to build provision already in place, or experiment with new projects that they wouldn't have been able to fund. One such example is the development and growth of a Post-16 Sixth Form in the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area. As a staff member of the college explains when talking about the funding:

'It probably sped up the development and the growth of the sixth form and it's all about adding what you can afford in order to increase the opportunity. You know, you can't go from 7 to 27 A Levels overnight...what it did was probably speed up by two to three years trajectory. It probably sped up the growth, accelerated the growth by between two to three years.'

(Staff Member, Sixth Form)

This staff member discusses this growth as a result of having space to trial something new and allowing it time to grow without worrying about immediate results of success, such as the number of students being enrolled onto a course. Having this time and space to experiment is conceptualised as 'risk taking':

'It allowed us to take risks... it sort of underwrote the risk of running, introducing an A Level in...Psychology, Sociology...an A Level that might only have eight or six students.'

(Staff Member, Sixth Form)

This example from the Fenland & East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area is important on a number of levels. Our quantitative findings show that young people in rural areas experienced less of an increase in levels of optimism about their prospects for future study and work options when compared with those from post-industrial and coastal regions (see Fig. 2, 3, 4) (Davies, et al., 2025). Findings from our qualitative research within schools, both within Opportunity Areas and their matched comparison areas, suggest that these lower levels of optimism in rural areas are shaped by what teachers have described as 'travel to learn time'. **Poor transport links and lack of provision often mean that young people do not view education or career prospects as something easily accessible to them.** By offering and expanding sixth form provision within the area, young people's worlds become opened-up to new opportunities. Our recent quantitative analysis shows that when compared with similar rural areas, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire did not face the same large decrease in both Level 2 and Level 3 participation (see Fig. 5). This suggests that the interventions around Level 3 study in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire had a positive impact compared to similar areas, which suggests correlation with the 'risk taking' that the Opportunity Area funding enabled.

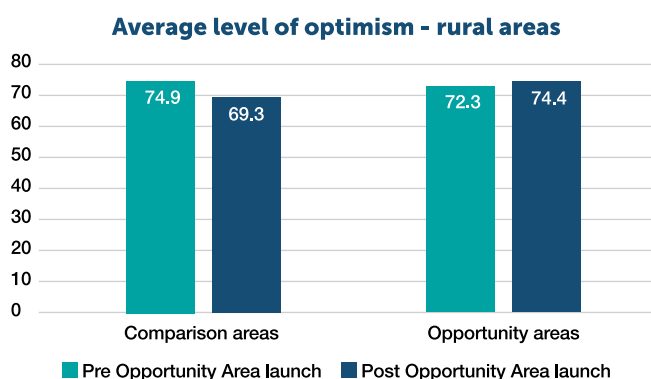


Fig 2.

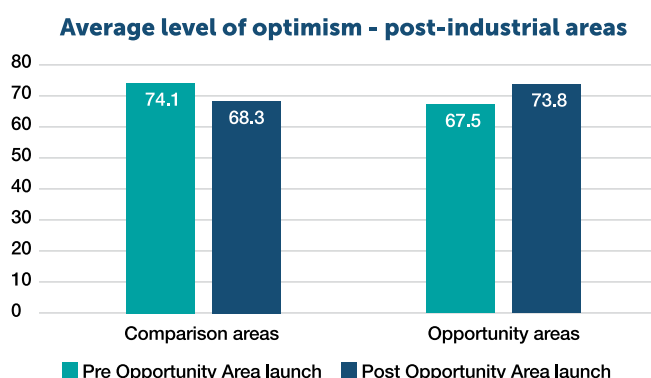


Fig 3.

¹³ Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge University Press.

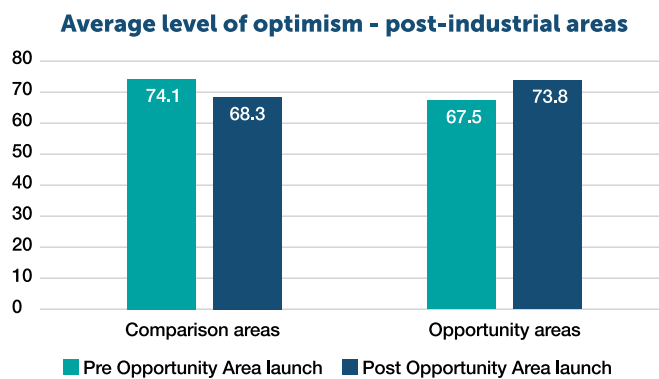


Fig 3.

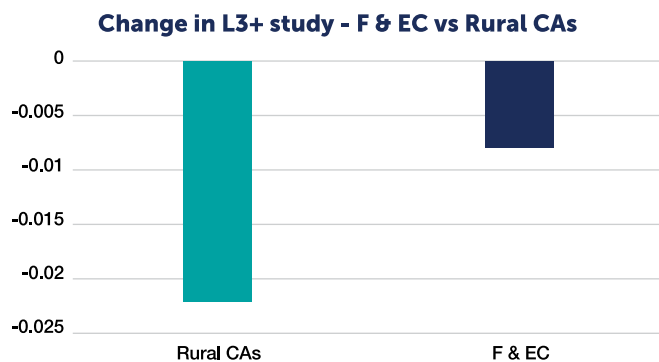


Fig 5.

Other examples where Opportunity Area funding contributed to the investment in projects that have led to a lasting impact and cultural shifts within different areas include literacy and reading networks, research champions, evidence networks, and English, Maths and Science Hubs. These projects brought together students, schools, teachers, practitioners and researchers to **learn collaboratively within Communities of Practice**. These projects enabled risk taking by allowing space for experimentation to occur and giving the projects time to grow.

However, **Communities of Practice are not just about projects; they are first and foremost about people.**

Investing in people to empower them to grow individually and develop ideas brings with it its own element of risk as these people may decide to leave the organisation and take their expertise with them. Yet, it is the trust built up through the partnership working and the commitment to an area that makes the risk taking a viable option. Within this environment, the Opportunity Area funding gave way to an investment in research capacity building, through the upskilling of researchers. As a Research Champion from Bradford explains:

'For me, it was the starting point of my moving into leadership... I'm a legacy of the project... that's the foundation of who I am now as a leader.'

(Research Champion, Bradford)

Recommendation 3: Communities of Practice should invest in people through projects that aren't afraid to take risks, building future leaders that can ensure the sustainability of the local partnership model.

Principle 2: Shifting the Balance of Power to Enable the Local

Shifting the balance of power is about limiting the extent to which top-down systems of measurement can infringe upon experimenting with new ways of working. It is about creating channels for reciprocal learning, both from the ground-up, and between departments at the centre.



The Opportunity Area programme was not organised in a way that local partnership boards just received funding from central government to spend on projects and activities of their choice; partnership boards were held accountable to the DfE, who were mediating this funding stream. From the outset of the programme, DfE representatives helped to shape the Opportunity Area Delivery Plans within each area by determining what the key priorities of focus should be. While many members of partnership boards found this approach useful, as the data provided by DfE helped to highlight particular issues that needed addressing, others raised concerns that the **top-down KPIs sometimes limited local creativity**, especially when the focus from central government was on short-term impact:

'Any conversations about long term plans that would lead sustainable change were not really up for discussion. It was about providing results and providing results quickly.'

(Partnership Board Member)

Local stakeholders held deep knowledge that the centre could have learned from, but our findings suggest that this rarely happened. Rather, these local knowledge hubs went largely untapped. This highlights the need for **a genuine two-way relationship, where the centre and local areas learn from each other on how problems are framed, what solutions are needed, and how they're delivered**. As a CEO working with a partnership board explains:

'It wasn't place based, because we're told what to do... What I would like is for a conversation that genuinely leads to a consensus on what it is that needs to improve and how we might tackle it.'

(CEO working with Opportunity Area Partnership Board)

Despite the ongoing negotiation of power dynamics between *centre* and *place*, many people we spoke with found the efforts coming from DfE to be supportive and beneficial:

'The credit... has to go to people, particularly from the DfE, who showed some humility in coming in and recognising the value of what was going on already at local level and becoming part of the team... They did that and they did it really well.'

(Partnership Board, Independent Chair).

The relationship between *centre* and *place* needs to be open to change at both ends when tackling complex issues like improving social mobility. Local partnership boards offered a flexible and adaptable approach that was often met with rigidity at the centre. Many questioned why the Opportunity Area programme was a project of the DfE when social mobility is a much more complex issue than just education:

'What is needed to make the biggest difference in outcomes for children in Bradford is not polishing the teaching... the reason kids don't do very well at school is because they don't have enough food and they don't have enough security at home... housing, transport, criminal justice, health inequalities... that's what that program should have done from the beginning, but the government doesn't work like that.'

(Partnership Board Member)

The need for cross-departmental working at the centre is a recurring theme of our research. As with the Local Partnership Model within areas, Communities of Practice¹⁴ should be built within central government where identity and belonging are recognised as central to the learning process, participation and membership.

Recommendation 4: The relationship between central government and local areas needs to involve reciprocal learning. Cross-departmental working at the centre should strive to become a Community of Practice. As with the Local Partnership Model within areas, Communities of Practice should be built within central government where identity and belonging are recognised as central to the learning process, participation and membership.

¹⁴ Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Principle 3: Prevention Over Remediation

Our research on the Opportunity Areas programme underlines the importance of addressing the structural conditions that sustain and underpin inequalities of disadvantaged groups. This means tackling the root causes of inequality, including early years interventions, addressing issues of identity, belonging and mental health challenges. This also means giving space to reimagine how we measure success in terms of outcomes, which can only be achieved by talking with and listening to local people, including young people.



As discussed above, our research has produced evidence which identifies that improving social mobility is not about education alone. **Issues of inequality should be addressed by cross-departmental working at the centre that reciprocates learning with collaborative partnership working within areas.** Nonetheless, education is a key mechanism through which inequality is perpetuated. Devolved systems should invest in early intervention and sustained support through childhood and adolescence, rather than waiting to react once young people have disengaged. **Preventing disengagement is both more effective and cheaper than reconnecting young people after they become NEET.** As a Principal from a Sixth-Form College in one of the matched areas explains it:

'Nursery age... are already behind... by the time they get to primary, they're already behind... that carries on into high school... unless we get nursery sorted out... all of that puts us behind.'

(Principal, Sixth Form College)

Educators often face challenges later on in the education system that could have been addressed through earlier interventions. The Opportunity Area funding was useful for experimenting with a range of projects that covered both early years interventions, and projects suitable for those further down the line. For example, as one Assistant Head of an Academy explains:

'We put lots of different programmes in place, like the honours programme for our most able disadvantaged students... a weekly masterclass and a university style lecture... lots of different trips and visits, lots of careers links.'

(Assistant Head, Secondary Academy).

Programmes such as this were aimed at boosting young people's aspirations for further study and career prospects. Yet, they also helped with **supporting young people to feel valued and connected through a sense of belonging.** This is important as Southwest local policy-makers have identified belonging as a key pathway to meaningful engagement in Education, Employment and Training (Douthwaite and Brown 2025, p2, p19-21). Creating programmes that target students from disadvantaged backgrounds becomes possible when applying data that education providers hold about student characteristics. While strategies such as this can be important and beneficial for some young people, our research suggests a need for **strategies to be co-produced with young people and shaped by an understanding of how identity, disadvantage and place intersect, recognising that factors like socio-economic background, SEND, ethnicity and gender mean one-size-fits-all solutions rarely work.**

An early years' consultant working within one of the Opportunity Areas highlights that the concept of disadvantage is complex, has many key assumptions, and has aspects that are often overlooked:

'Disadvantage wasn't explored enough... we need to really hone in on what is our understanding of disadvantage in this area... it's not just pupil premium funding... West Somerset is probably a classic of that; it's the classic location of isolation... disadvantage will come in so many different forms.'

(Early Years Consultant)

Understanding *place* is crucial for understanding disadvantage. This understanding cannot be reached by looking at quantifiable metrics alone; it must be approached by talking with and listening to people. Those with a knowledge of *place* are best positioned to understand the ways in which disadvantage works in different areas.

One College Principal gives an example of how knowledge of *place* can help to build the infrastructure that young people need:

'Our transport cost... we pay a transport company £1.2 million... our net cost is about £800,000... we only charge our students a pound each way to make it affordable... this college wouldn't run if it didn't have the transport structure.'

(College Principal)

Our findings suggest that lower levels of optimism within rural areas (Davies et al., 2025) can largely be attributed to poor infrastructure which brings challenges to fostering a sense of belonging within an area. Place-based approaches to social mobility need to recognise the unique challenges of an area and encourage cross-departmental working at the centre to help overcome them.

Recommendation 5: Prevention strategies should consider the ways in which place shapes disadvantage. They should invest in social conditions that can build belonging, along with better infrastructure where needed, such as improved transport links.

Measuring What Matters

When considering education and opportunity in youth, current accountability measures often miss the mechanisms that drive long-term change. They are a world away from the young people themselves. Success should not be judged by narrow attainment or employment figures alone. **Devolved areas need shared measures that capture the wider conditions underpinning opportunity — belonging, inclusion, confidence, agency, relationships, and successful transitions into sustained education or employment.** These offer earlier signals of whether systems are heading in the right direction and can be strengthened or reorientated accordingly.

Many involved in the Opportunity Area programme recognised the goal of improving social mobility within their area as being a long-term objective that could not realistically produce evidence of short-term impact. Often, the need to measure distracted from the task at hand and caused frustration:

I got a little bit frustrated by some of the measures of impact that the DfE insisted on. You know, we spent a ridiculous amount of time in some of our meetings looking at Ofsted outcomes, which were just completely unrealistic... There was an assumed relationship between our projects and those outcomes, which was just unrealistic... It would be better to find much better ways of measuring impact... Let's not do fake kind of impact measuring, wasting everybody's time and actually sometimes leading yourself down completely wrong paths by thinking that there's a relationship there that isn't

(Deputy Independent Chair, Partnership Board).

Through our research we have come across many examples that demonstrate that the long-term approach to social mobility that keeps young people at the centre and is enacted through local partnership working often produces impact that is not easily measurable. As a football mentor explains it:

'We've gone from a young person... wouldn't really engage with school... to now he's talking in front of camera and doing his own interviews, and he's supporting other young people. That in itself is impact... we can't always count everything but just showing that shows what a difference the project's made.'

(Football Mentor)

When investing in area-based initiatives, funders need to trust the people doing the work on the ground to invest the money wisely, without requiring them to produce evidence around pre-determined benchmarks. **Communications between Communities of Practice at a local level, and cross-departmental working within central government, can enable tailor-made metrics suitable to each area.** As discussed previously, *place* shapes disadvantage in unique ways. Broadbrush metrics that ignore these disadvantages reduce their legitimacy as a system of measurement:

'There's no sort of decent infrastructure here... the nearest hospital is 26 miles away... awful public transport... seven miles to my nearest bus stop... our numbers are going to be skewed (when data is aggregated) and you're kind of being overlooked.'

(CEO, Academy Trust)

These findings highlight that schools and youth providers require measures that capture children and young people's sense of belonging across the different social domains of their lives, and that enable consideration as to how levels of belonging vary according to different social groups (e.g. gender ethnicity, SES, SEND carer status). One example is the Connected Belonging Questionnaire (CBQ), which has been used by schools across the Southwest, London and the West Midlands to support belonging and inclusion in school.¹⁵

Recommendation 6: Systems that measure the impact of place-based initiatives should remain flexible to capture the wider conditions that underpin opportunity such as belonging, inclusion, confidence, agency, relationships, and successful transitions.

15 Douthwaite, A., Olaniyan, Y. D., & Brown, C. (2026). The Connected Belonging Questionnaire (CBQ) as a Youth Voice Measure: Operationalizing an Intersectional Lens to Engage Young People. *Youth*, 6(2), 49.



Conclusion

This report showcases what policymakers need to consider when devolving power for education and opportunity in youth. ‘Returning it (power) to people and the places where they live, work and invest’¹⁶ brings many challenges due to the ‘rewiring’ of the State apparatus that is needed to allow this shift in power, funding, and accountability to occur. Perhaps the biggest challenge of this ‘rewiring’ is the necessity of Westminster and Whitehall ‘surrendering power that for too long has been held’.¹⁷ Yet, as we have shown throughout this report, devolution is not simply about moving powers geographically. It is about enabling places to build collaborative systems that understand their communities, create the conditions for belonging and opportunity, and generate learning that continuously improves both local practice and national policy.

In applying preliminary findings from our evaluation of the Opportunity Areas programme and situating our observations within our broader research expertise, we present three key principles that offer a framework for the enabling of places, the creation of conditions, and the generation of learning, to occur: 1) Building local capacity; 2) Shifting the balance of power to enable the local; and 3) Prevention over remediation.

Through this framework we have developed six recommendations to be considered by policymakers:

Recommendation 1

Investment in generational change should fund area-based education initiatives for 10-year periods, with accountability measures being adjusted to allow the success (or otherwise) of the initiative to be given time to come into fruition.

Recommendation 2

Building local capacity involves devolving power to people with tacit local knowledge who can come together to build trust within communities.

Recommendation 3

Communities of Practice should invest in people through projects that aren’t afraid to take risks, building future leaders that can ensure the sustainability of the local partnership model.

Recommendation 4

The relationship between central government and local areas needs to involve reciprocal learning. Cross-departmental working at the centre should strive to become a Community of Practice. As with the Local Partnership Model within areas, Communities of Practice¹⁸ should be built within central government where identity and belonging are recognised as central to the learning process, participation and membership.

Recommendation 5

Prevention strategies should consider the ways in which place shapes disadvantage. They should invest in social conditions that can build belonging, along with better infrastructure where needed, such as improved transport links.

Recommendation 6

Systems that measure the impact of place-based initiatives should remain flexible to capture the wider conditions that underpin opportunity such as belonging, inclusion, confidence, agency, relationships, and successful transitions.

16 Cabinet Office (2026) Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement. Available at: [Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement \(HTML\) - GOV.UK](#)

17 Ibid.

18 Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.



From the centre to the periphery: reducing spatial divides through area-based education initiatives