



Department
for Education

Opportunity Areas Process Evaluation

Research report

May 2022

**Berenice Scandone, Jonah Bury, Yvonne
Robinson, Mansor Rezaian, Emily
Roberts, Helena Takala, and Hannah
Woodbridge: NatCen Social Research**



Government
Social Research

Contents

Executive Summary	4
1. Background	11
1.1. Policy background	11
1.2. Evidence from previous national evaluations	17
2. National OA process evaluation	19
2.1. Method	19
2.2. Report structure	23
3. Programme level findings	24
3.1. Defining social mobility	24
3.2. Year 1 to 4 delivery	25
3.3. Place-based approach	37
3.4. COVID-19 response	45
3.5. Twinning	50
3.6. Progress to outcomes	54
3.7. Sustainability	61
4. Conclusions	67
4.1. Years 1-4 delivery (RQ1)	67
4.2. Project engagement (RQ1)	69
4.3. Place-based approach (RQ2)	69
4.4. COVID-19 (RQ3)	71
4.5. Twinning (RQ4)	71
4.6. Perceived outcomes (RQ5)	72
4.7. Sustainability (RQ6)	73
Appendix A: Data collection methods by research wave	74
Appendix B: Participant sample by research wave	77
Appendix C: Opportunity Area level findings	78
Glossary of terms	170
References	172

Executive Summary

The Department for Education's (DfE) Opportunity Areas (OA) programme provides targeted support with the aim of improving the life chances of young people in 12 areas across England which face entrenched challenges. It adopts a place-based approach, where a clearly defined local area is allocated funding and a high level of decision-making autonomy to deliver projects which meet its specific needs. This is done in partnership with national and local stakeholders and delivery partners. Each of the 12 OAs was 'twinned' with other parts of the country facing similar challenges to help improve young people's education and employment outcomes.

NatCen Social Research was commissioned by the DfE to complete an independent national place-based process evaluation exploring Years 1-4 of the programme. This report presents findings from 162 qualitative in-depth interviews and 27 focus groups with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads and beneficiaries across all OAs. Strategic stakeholders interviewed for the report were by necessity those who had senior roles in the programme and that this should be borne in mind when reading. Data collection took place between November 2020 and September 2021 and focused on Year 1-4 delivery, coronavirus (COVID-19) responses, twinning, perceived progress and sustainability.

Key findings

Years 1-4 delivery

- The findings from this evaluation indicate that across OAs, the programme facilitated the adoption of innovative approaches and consistent practices among professionals and education settings.
- Each OA had a partnership board, which is an advisory body whose members offer expertise and knowledge relevant to the local Opportunity Area. Partnership boards were considered a success as they promoted collective decision-making and saw high levels of engagement. The holistic make-up of the partnership boards, with representation of individuals and organisations across sectors, was also valued. This was because cross-sector representation provided new perspectives on how to address existing challenges and brought influential system leaders together which facilitated local organisations' buy-in. Finally, cross-sector representation was seen as key for tackling a complex issue like social mobility. In some cases, however, the partnership boards were perceived as being too focused on education or specific types of settings.
- The OA staffing model was viewed positively, including by staff themselves. The staffing model was characterised by two key features: (a) a Head of Delivery with responsibility for the programme in one or two OAs and providing a link between

the central DfE and local OA team; and (b) a delivery team including a dedicated area lead and a locally-based programme manager. Consistency in staffing and low turnover at a strategic and operational level in the OA delivery team was considered to make delivery more effective. On the other hand, where staff turnover among the delivery team was high this meant relationships needed to be ‘restarted’ multiple times. The presence of a senior Head of Delivery in each OA was especially valued as showing the DfE’s commitment to the local areas.

- Cultural shifts were identified as a key benefit of the programme, reflected in increased and embedded collaboration between education settings and cross-sector working. Key facilitators to this were:
 - the OA delivery team taking time to build trusting relationships with local education leaders to enable ‘buy-in’ to the programme and the associated accountability structures – dedicating enough time to build trust was considered a vital first step to ensuring local stakeholders’ engagement
 - the perceived neutrality of the OA delivery teams among local organisations, which made it possible to successfully bring different actors together
 - the OA programme bringing together multi-agency stakeholders, for example through the OA partnership boards and working groups.
 - the OA programme facilitating knowledge-sharing among educational settings, by leveraging the existing local expertise to support others in the area
 - the provision of funding and creation of capacity among local organisations to make change happen
- In contrast to this, where education settings had contrasting agendas and approaches or where the education landscape was less uniform (where it included a mixture of different academies (single academies, MATs) or multiple MATs and maintained schools), cultural shifts were more difficult to achieve.

Place-based approach

- Engagement with local stakeholders was considered key to a place-based approach. This was characterised by listening to local voices in shaping priorities and involving local organisations to design and deliver bespoke programmes. Local organisations’ understanding of the area enabled their offer to be tailored to beneficiaries’ needs, although in some cases external organisations were helpful to plug gaps in local expertise and capacity. Local involvement and collective ownership were perceived as a main strength of this approach, which differed from

previous top-down education initiatives delivered prior to the OA programme in those areas.

- Some strategic stakeholders noted that a place-based approach required decision-making around what constitutes 'place'. They believed it was easier for a place-based programme to engage stakeholders and beneficiaries in places that had a shared identity compared to those that had a less coherent identity. Examples of the latter were OAs consisting of 'a collection of places' (i.e. a number of small distinct places such as multiple towns) with different demographics and distinct identities. In OAs with a less distinct local identity, they suggested a place-based approach could only work by focusing on connecting key systems leaders from the multiple places.
- Previous experience with DfE-led interventions within the area influenced local stakeholders' and beneficiaries' engagement with the OA programme. Teachers and school leaders who had negative experiences of other DfE-led initiatives could be sceptical of new interventions. One solution to building trust and allaying concerns was to engage with schools as partners from the outset. OA delivery teams established positive working relationships and buy-in when they took time to listen to teachers and schools and were clear about what the project involved.
- An education landscape that was less uniform (where it included a mixture of different academies (single academies, MATs) or multiple MATs and maintained schools) hindered collaboration between schools, especially where a lot of them tended to be fairly small. In contrast, a small and more uniform education landscape facilitated delivery, engagement and collaboration between schools, especially where partnerships and relationships had already been in place. For instance, one OA with a limited number of schools was largely dominated by two Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), which a strategic stakeholder believed ensured collaboration.

Project engagement and accessibility

- Project beneficiaries'¹ engagement in the OA offer was especially high when projects were considered relevant to their needs. This happened when projects plugged an existing gap in the support available and were accessible. Evidence of

¹ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

previous impact also encouraged professional beneficiaries' engagement as it increased their confidence in the projects. Professional beneficiaries additionally valued opportunities to identify which projects they wanted to implement. Children and young people enjoyed participating in projects delivered by individuals they found inspiring and had developed positive relationships with.

- In rural and coastal OAs, the lack of transport infrastructure and distances between areas were an ongoing barrier to beneficiaries' engagement with projects. Remote location also hindered some of the educator recruitment initiatives. Some examples were given of ways the OA delivery team adapted to these circumstances (for instance in moving projects to accessible locations) which helped overcome the barriers, but this was not explored in depth.
- Communication strategies that targeted different audiences through multiple channels were particularly effective at encouraging beneficiary buy-in and wider community awareness of OA projects. In some OAs, however, strategic stakeholders attributed limited beneficiary engagement with projects to the lack of a well-formulated communication or branding strategy.
- Across OAs, a lack of staff capacity constituted a challenge for LAs and educational settings. LAs and education stakeholders were at times unable to deliver or take part in OA projects because of competing demands and staff turnover. OA delivery teams sought to support settings by considering their needs and promoting aspects of the programme that aligned to those needs.

COVID-19

- In March 2020, OAs adapted activities to support local communities in addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. OA responses included support for staff and families to enable home learning, food provision and mental health support. The partnerships established pre-pandemic facilitated quick and tailored adjustments and sharing of best practice.
- Lessons from the first national lockdown highlighted the usefulness of planned response to COVID-19. To implement this, delivery teams created COVID-19 'back up plans' to plan how OAs would repurpose funds and adapt to online delivery in the event of another lockdown. A successful example was the use of funds to bring in remote learning champions, who helped schools design remote learning strategies. This meant by the time of the second national lockdown, schools could benefit from and deliver online content and lessons.
- Some COVID-19 project adaptations were particularly successful, for example OAs saw higher take-up of online professional training and career events. Online delivery removed transport barriers to beneficiary engagement in rural OAs. In contrast, it was not possible to deliver practical activities and those that required

building rapport were less effective online. Digital divides meant not everyone benefitted in the same way from online support.

- COVID-19 increased pressures on education settings, limited staff capacity to deliver and take part in projects and activities were often cancelled due to teacher or pupil illness or COVID-19 cases in schools. There was a widespread view among strategic and local stakeholders that the pandemic had also exacerbated education and social mobility challenges and had slowed down and in some OAs halted the progress that some beneficiaries, especially children and young people, had made.

Twinning

- In Year 4, each OA was twinned with other areas that had not been previously involved in the OA programme to work in partnership and share best practice to address identified priorities in the twinned area. Implementing learning from the OA enabled a more co-ordinated response to local issues and averted potential challenges. Twinned area leads² appreciated the flexibility to adapt projects to local differences and needs. Twinning facilitated conversations between strategic stakeholders, providers and communities in twinned areas.

Perceived outcomes

- This evaluation asked strategic and local stakeholders and project leads and beneficiaries about the outcomes they perceived the OA programme and OA-funded projects to have achieved. Strategic stakeholders across OAs believed that progress had been made towards achieving particular priorities set out in the OA delivery plan. They explained that the expected progress had not been made across all priorities, also due to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 also hampered the collection of quantitative national and project evaluation data, which made measuring and demonstrating the impact of programme activities more difficult.
- In early years, strategic stakeholders, professional and parent beneficiaries believed that they had observed progress in children's academic attainment and communication and listening skills. OA funding and projects were also seen to

² 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

enable early years settings to increase staff capacity and improve staff training and skills.

- In schools, strategic stakeholders and professional beneficiaries felt that pupils had improved their attainment in English, maths and science. They perceived that there were reduced rates of exclusion and increased attendance among pupils as well as higher rates of staff recruitment and retention. Strategic stakeholders believed that projects that aimed to improve education outcomes had been more successful in primary schools. They attributed this to a number of reasons including: key stage 4 (KS4) having less targeted funding than KS1 and KS2, the larger size of secondary schools, and teenagers being considered as harder to engage in projects compared to younger children.
- Post-16 perceived outcomes included an increase in young people's retention and progression in education, facilitated by better awareness of options and how to pursue them. There was increased careers support, which young people said had benefitted them. However, strategic stakeholders in a few OAs thought post-16 outcomes were a less successful area, sometimes due to a lack of education infrastructure (e.g., having few further education colleges). They also regarded post-16 impact metrics as being more difficult to define.
- Parent and young people beneficiaries reported benefitting from social and extra-curricular activities, especially during lockdowns, in terms of practical and emotional support and developing new hobbies and skills. Professional and young people beneficiaries' engagement with projects around mental health was high and mental health support was particularly valued in the context of the pandemic.

Sustainability

- Strategic stakeholders and professional beneficiaries across OAs emphasised the value of maintaining the networks and collaborations created at different levels and were arranging to do so. There were concerns that without OA funding it would be difficult to sustain activities more reliant on funding, while those that had been sufficiently embedded were perceived to be more likely to continue.
- National and local organisations had committed to continue delivering and providing funding for initiatives that had proved especially valuable during the OA programme, which facilitated sustainability. OAs had also started identifying other potential sources of funding and sought to secure strategic drive by aligning current projects and activities with local long-term strategies.
- Strategic stakeholders stressed the importance of measuring progress in the longer term, over 10-20 years. To enable place-based improvement alongside social mobility, they emphasised the need to address structural issues in the OAs

beyond education (e.g., lack of transport infrastructure, low wages and limited career opportunities in the OA).

1. Background

1.1. Policy background

In October 2016, the then Secretary of State for Education announced a new social mobility package.³ At its heart was the Department for Education's (DfE) Opportunity Areas (OA) programme. This has been running for 5 years and received £108 million with the aim to improve young people's life chances in 12 local areas, which typically face entrenched and widespread social and economic challenges.⁴ The first 6 OAs were announced in October 2016: Blackpool, Derby, North Yorkshire Coast, Norwich, Oldham and West Somerset. A further 6 OAs were announced in January 2017: Bradford, Doncaster, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, Hastings, Ipswich and Stoke-on-Trent. The OAs are spread across England, 9 are urban, 3 are rural, and 4 are coastal (with some overlap in the type of areas). Coastal and rural OAs were specifically chosen to test what works in areas with challenges such as limited transport infrastructure and being remote.

The OA programme adopts a place-based approach, where a clearly defined local area is allocated funding, decision-making and strategic DfE oversight to deliver projects which meet the specific needs of that area. Each OA formed a cross-sector partnership board that works with a dedicated DfE Head of Delivery and a DfE-appointed independent chair. Partnership boards are advisory bodies whose members offer expertise and knowledge relevant to the local OA. Boards have no legal status or statutory authority. The board's role is to provide advice, recommendations, support and challenge to the DfE Head of Delivery.

In each OA, DfE local delivery teams work with the partnership board and local stakeholders to implement the programme. A DfE Head of Delivery leads the delivery team in one or more OAs and provides a link between the central DfE and local stakeholders. The partnership board and local delivery teams developed delivery plans which identified the key barriers to social mobility and the priorities, targets and actions for the programme in the area. In developing and delivering these plans, the OAs were expected to consult with a broad range of local stakeholders, such as businesses,

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-mobility-package-unveiled-by-education-secretary>

⁴ Further information about how the OAs were selected can be found in the ['Opportunity Areas Selection Methodology' paper](#).

voluntary and community organisations, education settings and local authorities (LAs), as well as national partners such as the Education Endowment Foundation.

Due to spending review periods set by The Treasury, the OA programme was initially funded for three years (years 1-3) and then for two separate additional years (years 4 and 5). Each OA published an initial 3 year delivery plan⁵ which set out the key local priorities and targets. Table 2 provides an overview of the OAs and priorities set. In November 2019, an £18 million extension to the OA programme was announced (Year 4). This focused on supporting young people following the COVID-19 pandemic, working towards the original priorities and building on previous years' learning. Each of the 12 OAs was 'twinning' with places facing similar challenges to help improve young people's education and employment outcomes in other parts of the country. A further £18 million extension (Year 5) was issued in May 2021, with a focus on ensuring sustainable change. This study focuses on Years 1-4.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas>

1.1.1. Overview of OAs and priorities

Table 1: Colour code for OA priorities table (table 2)

Key
Early Years
School / attainment
Post-16
Soft skills or Mental health

Table 2: OA priorities

OA	Area type	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 4
Blackpool	Urban/ coastal	School/ attainment priority. Raise attainment and progress in schools	School/ attainment priority. Support for vulnerable children and families to improve attendance and outcomes and reduce school exclusions	Post-16 priority. Improve advice and support for young people when moving between schools, colleges and into work	
Bradford	Urban	School/ attainment priority. Strengthening school leadership and the quality of teaching	School/ attainment priority. Improving literacy in Bradford's primary schools, particularly for disadvantaged pupils	Post-16 priority. Improving access to rewarding careers	School/ attainment priority. Using evidence and research to remove barriers to learning

OA	Area type	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 4
Derby	Urban	<p>Early Years priority.</p> <p>Increase the number of children achieving a good level of development</p>	<p>School/ attainment priority.</p> <p>School Improvement: raise attainment in Derby's primary and secondary schools</p>	<p>Soft skills or Mental health priority.</p> <p>Broadening Horizons: ensure that all children in Derby benefit from a broad range of experiences throughout their school lives.</p>	<p>Soft skills or Mental health priority.</p> <p>Additional priorities: Mental Health, Transitions & Pathways</p>
Doncaster	Urban	<p>School/ attainment priority.</p> <p>Building solid foundations for all children</p>	<p>School/ attainment priority.</p> <p>Brilliant teaching and leadership for all secondary pupils</p>	<p>Post-16 priority.</p> <p>No career out of bounds</p>	<p>Soft skills or Mental health priority.</p> <p>Opportunities extend to all</p>
Fenland and East Cambridgeshire	Rural	<p>Early Years priority.</p> <p>Accelerate the progress of disadvantaged children and young people in the acquisition and development of communication, language and reading</p>	<p>Soft skills or Mental health priority.</p> <p>Strengthen the effectiveness of support for children and young people with mental health concerns and those with Special Educational Needs</p>	<p>Post-16 priority.</p> <p>Raise aspiration and increase access for young people to a wide range of career choices and post-16 routes</p>	<p>School/ attainment priority.</p> <p>Recruit, develop and retain the best leaders and teachers in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire</p>
Hastings	Urban/ coastal	<p>School/ attainment priority.</p> <p>Improving literacy</p>	<p>School/ attainment priority.</p> <p>Raising attainment in maths</p>	<p>Soft skills or Mental health priority.</p> <p>Improving mental health and resilience</p>	<p>Post-16 priority.</p> <p>Broadening horizons and preparing young people for work</p>

OA	Area type	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 4
Ipswich	Urban	Soft skills or Mental health priority. Ensure all children in Ipswich are prepared to learn for life by developing key behaviours such as resilience and self-regulation	School/ attainment priority. Strengthen the teaching profession in Ipswich by providing world-class support and development	School/ attainment priority. Improve attainment for disadvantaged pupils by embedding evidence-based practice in the teaching of English and maths	Post-16 priority. Inspire and equip young people with the skills and guidance they need to pursue an ambitious career pathway
North Yorkshire Coast	Rural/ coastal	Early Years priority. Children get a head start in life through a high-quality early years education	School/ attainment priority. Improving maths attainment and become an area where children excel in maths	School/ attainment priority. A generation of readers who use the power of literacy skills and a love of reading to unlock future opportunities	School/ attainment priority. Increase number of good and outstanding secondary school places, and reduce exclusions
Norwich	Urban	Early Years priority. Improve early speech, language, listening and communication	School/ attainment priority. Raise attainment through targeted, evidence-based continuous professional development for teachers and stronger system leadership support	School/ attainment priority. Support children at risk of exclusion from school	Post-16 priority. Give young people the information and support they need to move successfully between school, college, university and into work

OA	Area type	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 4
Oldham	Urban	Early Years priority. All children are school-ready by the age of 5	School/ attainment priority. Raise attainment for all, and raising it fastest for disadvantaged pupils	Post-16 priority. All children and young people to be ready for life, learning and work	
Stoke on Trent	Urban	Early Years priority. Improve outcomes in Early Years Foundation Stage	School/ attainment priority. Improve outcomes in KS2 English, maths and science	School/ attainment priority. Improve pupil engagement in learning at all stages	Post-16 priority. Improve the choices young people make from 16
West Somerset	Rural / coastal	Early Years priority. Every child has a great start in life	School/ attainment priority. Educational excellence in the classroom.	Post-16 priority. Transition to adulthood, best possible education outcomes for young people.	Post-16 priority. Skills for employment and business.

1.2. Evidence from previous national evaluations

In 2018, the DfE published the first OA national process evaluation, conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), (Easton et al. 2018).⁶ This covered Year 1 of the programme and focused primarily on the first 6 OAs to be established. Data collection took place between spring 2017 and spring 2018 and included interviews with all Heads of Delivery and partnership board chairs, most delivery leads and local programme managers, and representatives from different sectors. It also involved case studies focusing on local governance, network and structures (3 OAs), and on progress around early years priorities (3 OAs).

The evaluation found that, on the whole, partnership boards were working well and committed to the objectives outlined in the delivery plan. The role of the chair was consistently cited as a success, with interviewees valuing their expert leadership of the programme locally. However, it was observed that in some instances, boards were too focused on education, while more involvement of businesses and balance across sectors would have been beneficial.

Investing time to engage with local stakeholders was essential for the DfE delivery team to gain credibility, understand local challenges and identify suitable partnership board members. Local stakeholders appreciated the input of senior DfE officials at partnership meetings, as it demonstrated commitment to the programme. While views about the delivery teams were overwhelmingly positive, there were some challenges. Some stakeholders thought the delivery plan had been too heavily influenced by the DfE, and that local non-educational challenges were not adequately reflected in the priorities set.

In Year 1, the OAs moved from set-up and planning to commissioning OA-funded projects. By spring 2018, OAs had started to deliver against their priorities. Progress was quicker for early years, primary and secondary education compared to post-16 priorities. The main reason for this was that there were fewer existing structures (e.g., networks between stakeholders and settings) and many actors for the post-16 and skills sector, making delivery more complex. Effective delivery was facilitated by developing productive relationships with key stakeholders, building capacity within Local Authorities (LA) and providers and having dedicated LA link officers who could act as trouble-shooters.

⁶ Implementation of Opportunity Areas: An independent evaluation (gov.uk). Retrieved, November 2021, from:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/747975/2018-09-04_OA-process-eval_FINAL.pdf

Partnership board members saw local stakeholders' engagement (e.g. LAs, businesses, schools, young people and families) as essential to the programme's success. Across OAs, the level of engagement from different sectors and project beneficiaries varied. In some OAs, more work was needed to involve certain schools such as those most in need of additional support. There was a strong view that more should be done to promote the programme to residents and capture the voice and input of the local community, families, children and young people (CYP) into OA developments.

Local stakeholders in many OAs welcomed that the programme had developed a cross-sector awareness of social mobility as a local issue and a collective sense of purpose to tackle it. They considered the partnership model underpinning the programme to be a success and stressed the value of the partnership board and DfE input. On the other hand, they reported logistical challenges such as the time commitment needed and the difficulties of implementing a programme while it was being defined and developed.

Across the OAs, some stakeholders stressed that it would take at least 5 to 15 years from the OA programme inception to fully understand its impacts and capture the longer-term effects on social mobility. Stakeholders were committed to ensuring the programme had a legacy. They sought to do this by only using OA funds for projects that appeared sustainable, building on existing networks and ensuring stakeholder engagement across sectors. Sharing evidence of impact was also considered crucial to achieving sustainability.

2. National OA process evaluation

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to lead the national place-based process evaluation of the Opportunity Areas (OA) programme. This study builds on the national Year 1 evaluation (Easton et al. 2018)⁷. The findings are intended to support the DfE's learning about the programme with the aim to inform its development as well as generate learning for other similar programmes in the future.

This research took place between October 2020 and November 2021 and sought to capture insights from Years 1-4 of the programme. Over 3 waves of qualitative fieldwork, the evaluation aimed to:

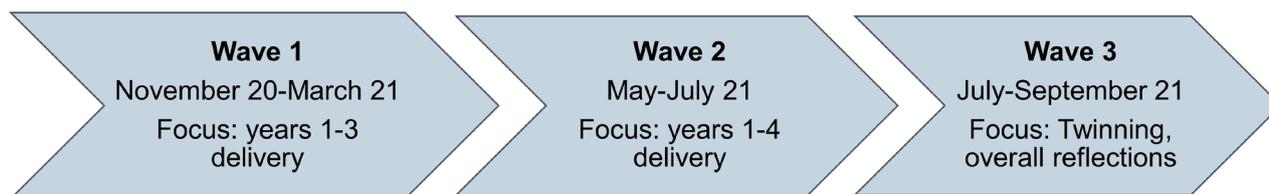
- explore how the OA programme was delivered across OAs in Years 1 to 4, including what worked well and less well
- understand the benefits and challenges of taking this place-based approach to programme implementation
- examine how COVID-19 has affected delivery and how project beneficiaries have been supported throughout the pandemic
- understand the perceived outcomes of the programme and the key factors affecting them
- explore the twinned area approach including its successes and challenges
- explore methods of sustainability and legacy, and how these have been implemented

2.1. Method

This qualitative evaluation is divided into 3 fieldwork waves (see figure 1). This report presents the findings from across the 3 waves.

Figure 1: Fieldwork overview

⁷ Implementation of Opportunity Areas: An independent evaluation (gov.uk). Retrieved, November 2021, from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/747975/2018-09-04_OA-process-eval_FINAL.pdf



In each wave, the data collection design was replicated across each of the 12 OAs (see Appendix A for details). In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted by telephone or online by experienced NatCen researchers, using a topic guide to ensure consistency in discussions across researchers and participants. Topic guides, one for each participant type and data collection wave, were developed in consultation with the DfE.

Wave 1 took place between November 2020 and March 2021. We conducted interviews with Heads of Delivery (referred to as strategic stakeholders), local programme managers and delivery leads (referred to collectively as local stakeholders), project leads and project beneficiaries including professionals, young people and parents/carers. Interviews covered participants' views of the local area and social mobility challenges, reflections on Years 1-3 delivery including what worked well and less well, how OAs responded to COVID-19 and planning for Year 4 delivery.

Wave 2 was conducted in May-July 2021. It involved interviews with Local Authority (LA) education leads and interviews or focus groups with senior education and community leads (both referred to as local stakeholders) and with project beneficiaries. Local stakeholders discussed local challenges and opportunities for children and young people, reflections on Years 1-4 delivery including what worked well and less well, views on the OA programme's place-based approach, perceived impacts and longer-term sustainability. Project beneficiaries discussed perceptions of the local area, experiences of taking part in OA-funded projects including what they liked and did not like and perceived impacts of taking part.

Wave 3 took place in July-September 2021. It involved interviews with Heads of Delivery, chairs of the partnership board (collectively referred to as strategic stakeholders) and one OA Senior Responsible Officer (also referred to as a strategic stakeholder). These asked about local social mobility challenges and opportunities, reflections on Years 1-4 delivery including what worked well and less well, views on the OA programme's place-based approach, perceived impacts and longer-term sustainability. We also interviewed twinning leads from the OA and/or the twinned area. These interviews covered participants' reflections on twinning including what worked well and less well, perceived outcomes of twinning and expected longer-term benefits and sustainability.

Recruitment

At the beginning of each wave, the DfE research team invited the Heads of Delivery to take part in the fieldwork and/or support research activities. The Heads of Delivery aided the recruitment of the strategic and local stakeholders, project leads, OA twinning leads and twinned area leads. Strategic stakeholders interviewed for the report were by necessity those who had senior roles in the programme and this should be borne in mind when reading. Heads of Delivery also selected 2 projects to focus on in wave 1 and 1 or 2 projects in wave 2. For wave 1, the project lead for one of the 2 projects supported the recruitment of beneficiaries from Years 1-3. For wave 2, the project leads helped with the recruitment of beneficiaries from Year 4. Projects were selected to ensure a range of focus (e.g. early years and post-16), and to gather insights on those that had not been evaluated previously, avoiding replication and minimising burden.

Sample

Over the 3 waves of fieldwork, we conducted 162 interviews and 27 focus groups across the 12 OAs. Table 3 shows the overall intended and achieved sample by research encounter and participant type (see Appendix B for a breakdown by research wave).

In wave 1, a total of 17 professional beneficiaries and 3 young people were included in this wave across 10 OAs. In wave 2 we conducted at least one beneficiary focus group in each OA in this wave. Across the 12 OAs, we conducted 6 focus groups and 6 interviews with professional beneficiaries, 2 focus groups and 9 interviews with parents and 6 focus groups and 6 interviews with children and young people.

Unfortunately, the recruitment of beneficiaries at wave 1 was compromised by the national lockdown and partial school closures in January-March 2021 and related pressures on schools and OAs during this time. At wave 2, further challenges to beneficiary recruitment were associated the increase in COVID-19 new cases in July 2021, especially among school children. As a result the full quotas for beneficiaries were not achieved.

Table 3: Overall sample

Participant type	Interviews No. achieved	Focus Groups No. achieved
OA Senior Responsible Officer	1	0
Head of Delivery	24	0
Chair of the partnership board	11	0
Delivery lead	10	0
Local programme manager	10	0

Senior education / community leads	10	14
Local Authority education lead	12	0
Project leads	24	0
Project beneficiaries	40	13
Twinning leads	21	0
Total	162	27

Source: NatCen sample monitoring information

Analysis

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded (with participant permission) and transcribed verbatim. At the end of the research encounter, participants were given the opportunity to have information removed from the analysis if they did not want it to be included. The data was synthesised thematically and by case using the NVivo Framework approach.⁸ Analysis was conducted by theme, across participants, and by case, across themes. This allowed mapping the full range of views and experiences, identifying commonalities and differences across participants, and developing explanations. The analysis was fully documented and conclusions can be linked back to the original data source.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the NatCen Research Ethics Committee and DfE ahead of recruitment and data collection. Before the research encounter, participants were given clear, detailed information about the content of each discussion and how their information would be stored and used. They were also notified that the data collected would be published in a report for the DfE. Strategic stakeholders were informed that due to the nature of their role, there were limits to ensuring full anonymity. They were therefore given the option to say things 'off the record' and request removal of

⁸ Ritchie J. et al. (2014). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. Sage: London.

information from the analysis. Participation was voluntary and individuals could opt out of specific discussion or the full study.

Limitations

There are 3 main limitations to this evaluation that should be borne in mind when reading the report. Firstly, this study did not involve an analysis of monitoring information to assess progress to outcomes. The findings around progress to outcomes are therefore only based on the views of the research participants and capture perceived rather than actual outcomes. Secondly, some of the strategic and local stakeholders interviewed had only been in post for a short period of time and therefore there were limits to the extent to which they could recollect aspects of OA programme delivery in Years 1-3. Finally, the recruitment of project beneficiaries at waves 1 and 2 was compromised by the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that fewer children, young people and parents / carers took part in the evaluation than intended.

2.2. Report structure

The remaining report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 3, Programme level findings**, provides an overview of learning from across all OAs. This covers:
 - definitions of social mobility
 - delivery in Years 1-4 (including the partnership board, staffing, collaboration between education and local stakeholders, communication, planning ahead and beneficiary engagement)
 - benefits and challenges of the place-based approach
 - COVID-19 response
 - twinning
 - perceived outcomes and sustainability
- **Chapter 4, Conclusions**, outlines the key programme level findings and how they compare with other national OA evaluations published
- **Appendices:**
 - **A- Data collection methods by research wave**
 - **B- Participant sample by research wave**
 - **C- OA-level learning**, provides key findings for each OA

3. Programme level findings

3.1. Defining social mobility

Strategic and local stakeholders' definition of social mobility centred on three overlapping themes. These were:

Increasing choice by providing young people with opportunities, such as accessing high-quality education, employment and training. There was a view that young people's choices and prospects of achieving upward mobility could be constrained in areas where the local economy was characterised by low-wage and low-skill jobs.

It's about providing an environment in which children, young people can actually take opportunities...the challenge is that the immediate economy is somewhat limited. Because of the dependency of the service sector and agriculture, the economy is a bit low-skill, low-pay.

Strategic stakeholder, rural OA

Raising young people's aspiration through developing an awareness of existing opportunities. Strategic and local stakeholders cited examples of young people happy to pursue low-skilled jobs that were common in their area. To counteract this perceived lack of aspiration and create an awareness of alternative pathways, they considered quality education and training provision essential. Strategic and local stakeholders saw poverty as a barrier to social mobility. They discussed how the state of being poor stifled long-term strategic thinking (e.g. applying for placements in advance), which could enable upward mobility.

In order to be socially mobile, you've got to be able to think long-term. I think one of the impacts of poverty is that it forces people to think on a daily and a weekly basis. **Local stakeholder, coastal OA**

Improving life chances by breaking the link between young people's background and outcomes. Strategic and local stakeholders shared a view that outcomes, including in education and employment, were still largely determined by factors outside young people's control (e.g. family background and place of birth). This made access to quality education and employment vital. However, strategic and local stakeholders in some OAs were concerned that qualifications could lead to an increase in geographic mobility and 'brain drain'.

They suggested that a place-based approach to social mobility needed to focus on keeping skilled individuals in the area so that they can 'run our businesses and work in our schools and give the people in our area the best chance there is'. This required a

focus on creating a sense of belonging and pride in place, in addition to high-quality education and good employment.

Social mobility...it's defined in well-adjusted adults that feel part of a community, feel that sense of belonging and a sense of purpose. These are the things that matter. **Local stakeholder, urban OA**

A few strategic stakeholders articulated two shortcomings with the term social mobility:

Social mobility does not question entrenched inequalities. The view that social mobility as a term does not go far enough in tackling ingrained hierarchies, as it does not question the existence of a hierarchy and is 'a politically acceptable way of talking about inequality'.

Social mobility does not have a clear timescale. A belief that it is unclear whether social mobility is best understood and addressed through a long-term approach (e.g. by investing in early years) or by focusing on the short- to medium-term. A strategic stakeholder noted that this lack of clarity was mirrored in how partnership board chairs approached the selection of thematic priorities.

Some chairs felt for the first time in government they were...being given permission to think long-term...and to plough money into the early years...Other chairs were much more impatient to see and to deliver improvements that were tangible and visible. **Strategic stakeholder, coastal OA**

3.2. Year 1 to 4 delivery

This section provides a thematic overview of what has worked well and key challenges to programme delivery across OAs, from the beginning of the programme to the end of Year 4. Key themes covered in this section include the partnership board; staffing; collaboration between education and local stakeholders; communication; planning ahead; and beneficiary⁹ engagement.

⁹ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

3.2.1. Partnership board

There was broad agreement among strategic and local stakeholders that the partnership board was one of the main successes of the programme structure. They cited several reasons for this:

Collective decision-making. Key decisions on the partnership board were made collectively and largely driven by consensus. Strategic stakeholders highlighted decision-making around key priorities at the start of the programme as illustrative of this collective approach. Where board members disagreed about issues, decisions tended to be driven by the question of what was most beneficial for the OA. In one area, for example, a board member and head of a sixth form wanted the OA to invest in supporting key stage 5 (KS5) students to get into Russell Group universities.¹⁰ Others believed it was important for young people to choose the 'right' university for them. Instead of causing friction, the head of the local sixth form ended up supporting the majority viewpoint.

High levels of engagement. There was a view that the wide majority of board members were strongly engaged with the partnership board and OA programme. In some OAs, this was reflected in members adopting a more hands-on approach by chairing working groups and subgroups. A group of strategic stakeholders thought it was important to have a 'working board' of individuals committed to 'make things happen'. They believed engagement was highest where there was a close link between the partnership board at a strategic level and subgroups overseeing the board's operational work. They explained it could be helpful for partnership board members to have the 'right' level of seniority to maintain the link between strategy and operation.

Partnership board chairs across OAs appreciated ministerial visits, as these underlined the importance of the programme and Department for Education (DfE) commitment. Particularly at the beginning of the programme, strategic stakeholders reported ministerial visits were regular, allowing chairs to have more in depth conversations with ministers.

In a limited number of OAs, a lack of capacity tended to be one reason why some board members attended meetings less regularly or were less involved with the programme (e.g. chairing working groups). For instance, in one area, a board member was preoccupied with managing their business during COVID-19 and so had less capacity to

¹⁰ The Russell Group is a self-selected association of 24 research intensive universities in the UK, which are considered especially prestigious.

engage with the programme during this period. In another OA, strategic stakeholders reported that a group of board members did not see a direct benefit to their organisation or sector and were therefore less engaged.

Holistic make-up. A group of strategic and local stakeholders reported that the composition of boards across OAs largely worked well, because it brought together individuals across sectors and organisations. There were three benefits to this:

- **challenge.** A cross-sector group of individuals made it easier to challenge education providers and Local Authorities (LAs) to improve their practice and standards; this was often through their perspectives, for instance, from business
- **influence.** There was a widely held view among strategic and local stakeholders that having influential systems-leaders in ‘the same room’ maximised the likelihood of challenges being addressed; examples of systems-leaders included LA and local education decision-makers – in one area, a strategic stakeholder noted how a successful project involving children receiving glasses in school might not have happened without key decision-makers simultaneously learning about children’s unmet needs in the OA
- **social mobility.** A belief expressed by a small group of strategic stakeholders was that a partnership board comprised of different sectors aligned with the idea of social mobility, which was best addressed holistically rather than through one sector alone

However, in a small number of OAs, local stakeholders perceived partnership boards as being insufficiently balanced. They saw them as not reflective of ‘the whole system’, as they were either too education-focused or did not include all types of educational settings in the area. In areas where boards were less balanced, local stakeholders sensed a risk that children and young people’s outcomes were not addressed from a whole-system perspective.

Credible local education leaders. A perspective shared across strategic stakeholders was that effective board members needed to have ‘credibility’ within the local education system to ensure that the OA’s strategy was translated into operational success. For instance, local education leaders (e.g. school heads) who were well respected by their peers were perceived to be best placed to ‘unblock’ and overcome some schools’ reluctance to engage with the programme. They also helped articulate the OA programme in a language that their peers understood. In one OA, Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) persuaded their colleagues to get involved in school improvement projects.

[T]hey helped articulate the OA vision to their colleagues across the [OA] and perhaps reframed it so that it landed better... But it helped get the buy-in and connection to the work. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

Because of their credibility, board members were able to broker relationships between the OA delivery team and new delivery partners, where these did not exist.

Some strategic stakeholders saw advantages in board members being locally based, as this could increase their credibility and maximise local buy-in among delivery partners and beneficiaries. Others thought it was particularly beneficial for the chair to be external to the area or from a non-education background, to be perceived as fully independent. This was considered to be especially important by strategic stakeholders in areas with a less uniform education landscape, characterised by a mix of academies, LA-maintained schools and long distances between education settings.

3.2.2. Staffing

Strategic and local stakeholders and project leads pointed to the OA staffing model as a key success of the programme. The staffing model was characterised by two key features: (a) a Head of Delivery with responsibility for the programme in one or two OAs and providing a link between the central DfE and OA delivery teams; and (b) a delivery team including a dedicated area lead and a locally based programme manager. Key reasons the staffing model was seen to have worked well were:

Consistency. A group of local stakeholders across OAs believed that consistency in staffing at a strategic and operational level in the OA delivery team made delivery more effective. This was because those who had been in the area for longer were likely to understand local challenges and would have built trusting relationships with local stakeholders, such as school heads.

In some areas, strategic and local stakeholders and project leads reported that staff turnover among the OA delivery team meant relationships needed to be 'restarted' multiple times, which took time.

You feel like you've got a relationship going and the person's got to know the area...so they'd be coming up on the train and starting to get a grip of who's who...and then they'd change... each individual person's been really good. It would have just been nice to have one, rather than a few. **Local stakeholder, rural OA**

Awareness of remit. Some local stakeholders explained that delivery worked well where the OA team was aware of 'the scope of where their influence and ability is'. In practice, this meant knowing where they required the partnership board or the LA to get heavily involved, for instance around co-ordinating a COVID-19 response.

Flexibility. Having a flexible staffing model enabled the OA delivery team to draw on DfE resource or the LA where they did not have 'the right person in the local team'. There

was a view among some strategic stakeholders that this flexibility made the staffing model responsive to local circumstances and ensured smooth delivery.

Seniority. Across OAs, strategic stakeholders appeared positive about the Head of Delivery being a relatively senior civil servant. This was because it:

- demonstrated to local areas a **commitment** from the DfE to the programme
- maximised **buy-in** among other key stakeholders, such as MAT CEOs
- enabled a **feedback loop** to the DfE, as being a link between the local OA team and the DfE allowed Heads of Delivery to inform strategic discussions about certain areas or LAs
- allowed a greater impact **on systems change**

If you can have a conversation about the strategic direction of the council...or about the way children's services teams...interact with heads, your impact is just multiplied massively...it enabled us to have much greater impact on systems. **Strategic stakeholder, coastal OA**

Shared learning. The switch to a model of one Head of Delivery per two areas during the pandemic, rather than a Head of Delivery per OA increased shared learning between OAs and enabled Heads of Delivery to apply examples of good practice across areas.

3.2.3. Collaboration between education and local stakeholders

Strategic and local stakeholders saw facilitation of greater collaboration as one of the key benefits of the OA programme, and reflective of what they saw as cultural shifts. This collaboration was facilitated both across educational settings and between educational settings and local stakeholders, such as businesses.

The OA programme had developed and strengthened relationships between schools that had previously operated in silos. A group of strategic and local stakeholders suggested that the OA programme had led to a cultural shift in educational settings within OAs, with schools collaborating at strategic and operational levels.

Operationally, schools collaborated on subject areas or across the whole school. For example, in one OA, schools established a city-wide English and maths network for sharing best practice and resources. This network was developed from the OA team bringing together senior education leads in the area, who collectively expressed an interest for collaborating on these subjects. A local stakeholder emphasised that this would have been inconceivable before the OA programme. This was because schools had either worked independently, had different agendas or there had been no 'lever' to bring them together.

Across OAs, this applied particularly to collaboration between LA-maintained schools and MATs.

Strategic collaboration involved partnerships between senior leaders (e.g. headteachers or deputy headteachers) across schools in the OA. In one area, the OA programme had facilitated MAT CEOs to establish a network with regular channels of exchange. A different area saw the local secondary MAT strengthening their careers programme through working closely with the local college. And in another OA, the cultural change was mirrored in secondary school leaders working together to reduce fixed-terms exclusions.

We have revolutionised the way secondaries work together...and we're starting to make a massive change in how they manage... vulnerable or pupils at risk of exclusion. **Strategic stakeholder, coastal OA**

Cultural shifts were reflected in how the OA programme brought together stakeholders beyond education across OAs. For instance, in one OA, secondary schools had established new ties with local businesses to enable students to learn about different career options.

Secondary pupils getting access to business and encounters and stuff has been greatly improved, and we've smashed a lot of those targets. It's really been quite impressive. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

Facilitators to joined-up working and creating cultural shifts

This evaluation found that, across OAs, the following factors facilitated collaboration between educational settings and wider stakeholders and cultural shifts in how education challenges were addressed:

Building trusting relationships, supported by accountability structures. Some strategic stakeholders stressed the need to build trust with local education leaders to enable 'buy-in' to the programme and the associated accountability structures. Examples included schools signing Memoranda of Understanding or funding for projects being tied to reporting requirements to facilitate their commitment to engaging with specific projects. Engagement was also facilitated by the OA team involving key actors in conversations with schools, e.g. Ofsted, Regional Schools Commissioners and LA Director of Education. A few strategic stakeholders suggested that accountability processes alone would have inhibited open discussions with education leaders and stifled any cultural change, and that building trusting relationships was a vital first step.

Acting as an 'honest broker'. The perceived neutral presence of the OA delivery team among local organisations enabled them to bring a range of organisations together, even

those who may have previously had difficult relationships. In one OA, the delivery team brought together local third sector organisations who had previously been in competition for similar resources and target audiences. The organisations then formed a collaboration that some strategic stakeholders felt would continue to exist beyond the OA.

Having...an honest broker and a convener in the area...has been really powerful, particularly when it comes with DfE, local authority backing. **Strategic stakeholder, rural OA**

In areas where there had been little or no collaboration between schools and academies, the OA delivery team created stronger working relationships between the two. There was a view among some strategic stakeholders that LAs alone would not have had the necessary 'levers' to achieve this, as academies are not accountable to the LA.

[W]hen academies are directly accountable to the DfE and schools are directly accountable to the local authority but then in turn to the DfE, I think that us being...in the room was absolutely important to be able to corral both schools and academies together. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

Bringing together multi-agency stakeholders and enabling innovation. Strategic stakeholders cited the OA partnership boards and working groups as good examples of how the programme brought together multi-agency stakeholders. These working groups facilitated joined-up working between education and multi-agency partners. For instance, one priority area chaired by a primary headteacher also included representatives from the health sector and the LA. Bringing together multi-disciplinary perspectives encouraged holistic and innovative approaches to tackling educational challenges. One OA addressed teacher recruitment through a system-wide perspective. This approach considered the needs of prospective teachers and their families. For instance, by helping teachers' partners find new jobs in the area the OA hoped to make it more appealing for teachers to relocate to the area.

Sharing expertise across educational settings. The OA programme leveraged the existing local expertise of high performing settings to support others in the area. In one area, the LA had developed, through the OA programme, an overview of schools with best practice in key subjects and matched maths specialists at a local trust with schools that required support. Across OAs, professional networks strengthened, which was especially beneficial for schools used to silo-working.

[Y]ou were almost quite isolated in where to get support from...now it's literally an email away and you know you've got support straightaway and you can be guided to different schools as well which I think is really useful. **Professional beneficiary, urban OA**

Creating capacity to make change happen. Where project leads were given enough capacity to invest in their projects, they reported achieving demonstrable progress. In one OA, each school had an inclusion champion who had allocated time to invest in their role, which made it easier to support children at risk of exclusion. There was also a view that the additional funding allowed different sectors to embrace partnership working and successfully tackle social mobility challenges in their OA. Additional funding helped because partnership working and building professional relationships takes time and requires more capacity.

A shared focus on outcomes. In the few areas where relationships between members of the partnership board and the LA had originally been tense, there was a view among strategic stakeholders that they had improved with time. This was facilitated by harnessing a shared focus on the OA programme's aim of improving social mobility.

It's been an openness and willingness not to be organisationally precious, but to say, 'We're all primarily concerned here with improving the outcomes for the children of [OA] and that's what has to drive us'. **Local stakeholder, urban OA**

Barriers to joined-up working and creating cultural shifts

Strategic and local stakeholders in a small group of OAs acknowledged key barriers to achieving cultural shifts through collaborations between education and wider stakeholders. These were:

Contrasting agendas and approaches on key issues. For example, in one OA, the LA's approach to teaching maths did not align with the OA programme's Maths Hub approach. This created some tension and a sense within the LA that they were being sidelined by a national programme with funding for alternative projects.

Entrenched differences between schools and personality clashes between senior education leaders. In a small number of OAs, long-standing rivalries between local schools or tense relationships between senior education leaders complicated collaborative working. For instance, in one OA, some schools were initially unable to work together due to historical tensions between groups of parents and governing bodies at the different schools. This slowed down the expected progress in one of the priority areas. This was solved by the chair of the partnership board reaching out to school governors and convincing them to put past differences aside. In another OA, strategic stakeholders reported finding it more difficult to engage with secondary headteachers than with primary headteachers. They attributed this to a more competitive relationship among secondary headteachers, making it harder to achieve consensus within the group.

Smaller educational settings having less of a voice. There was a view in a few OAs that smaller educational settings or single academies could be less involved in the OA

programme if MATs were overrepresented on the partnership board. To avoid this, some strategic stakeholders emphasised the importance of having different types of educational settings represented on the board, including representatives from LA-maintained schools.

3.2.4. Communication

Strategic and local stakeholders, professional beneficiaries and parent beneficiaries cited several examples of effective communication about OA projects across OAs. Communication strategies that targeted different audiences (e.g. parents, young people and early years practitioners) through multiple channels were important to gain beneficiary buy-in and create a wider community awareness of OA projects. In one area, parents found out about a parenting programme through leaflets at the GP surgery and Facebook.

I think the marketing has been really good with [project name], so it's on Facebook...There were leaflets in the doctors for people to know about [project name]. **Parent beneficiary, rural OA**

In another OA, a strategic stakeholder cited the example of multiple projects that operated under the same name which included the area name – beneficiaries were aware of this and developed a sense of co-ownership through feeling part of an area-wide effort to improve social mobility.

Knowing that you're part of a whole is...really important...it makes you want to engage because you realise it's connected to these other things [projects]. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

In a few OAs, however, strategic stakeholders identified challenges around communicating what the OA programme was about, who was involved in the programme and who could participate. They attributed this to three factors:

Communications expertise. Local stakeholders attributed limited project engagement among educational settings and families to lacking an effective communication or branding strategy. They concluded that such strategies required expertise and consideration at the outset. In one area, a local stakeholder reported being challenged by headteachers, who were initially unsure what the programme was about despite being briefed about it from members of the board.

[T]here was a lot of challenge from the heads because they didn't really understand what the OA was about...I think one of the problems was you've got non-communication experts trying to work out how to communicate, to develop communication strategy, on top of everything else. **Local stakeholder, urban OA**

Clarity. In a few areas, there was confusion among schools about their eligibility, resulting in schools not applying for funding to deliver projects. For instance, an ‘outstanding’ school in a deprived area initially thought their Ofsted rating excluded them from participating in the OA programme.

Information sharing. A few local stakeholders thought that publicity and decision-making about the OA could have been cascaded more effectively through governors and trusts from the partnership board. They believed this was important to raise awareness of existing partnership working and to be inclusive of parents, young people and children as stakeholders.

3.2.5. Planning ahead

Some local stakeholders identified the shift in the programme timeline and the need to spend money within a limited period as challenges to delivery.

There was a view among a small group of local stakeholders that a realisation that the programme was going to be five years at the outset would have enabled partnership boards to adopt a different strategic approach. For instance, in one area, the board purposefully focused on a narrow set of interventions and priorities to ensure impact could be evidenced within three years. In another area, the perceived pressure to spend the money at the beginning of the programme led to a selection of projects that did not add up to an overarching strategy.

If we had known from the beginning it was going to be five [years], it would have been so much better, I think. You could see why the money wasn't going to stay [in the OA] if it wasn't spent, so they [the board] were just trying to get it spent. **Local stakeholder, urban OA**

The perceived pressure to spend money within the financial year resulted in challenges implementing projects in some areas, even where the ‘right’ projects had been chosen by the OA partnership board. Some local stakeholders suggested that the DfE could have given OAs more time to consider how best to implement place-based projects and built this into the programme timeline.

I think the key challenge has been implementation, and that has been particularly driven by budgets and this money must be spent by August, and these decisions need to be made by this time. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

A group of strategic stakeholders noted that the ability to spend the money throughout the financial year rather than at one timepoint worked well. This was mirrored in a group

of OAs waiting until the OA delivery team had developed a detailed understanding of the area rather than spending everything at once.

3.2.6. Beneficiary engagement

OAs delivered a wide range of projects aimed at different beneficiary groups, including professionals, children and young people (CYP) and parents/carers. Examples of projects covered, for instance, speech and language training programmes for early years staff; antenatal classes for expectant parents; and a mentoring project to support young people with their education and overall wellbeing. Engagement levels and interest in the OA offer were high among professional, CYP and parent/carer beneficiaries where they identified projects as relevant to their needs. This happened when projects were:

Evidence-based. An awareness that the interventions had evidence of impact increased confidence in their implementation among professional beneficiaries. In one OA, Trusts started to engage with interventions that had achieved successful results in neighbouring Trusts.

The research has been really important to get our staff on board with the why, this is the reasons why. I think that always really drives them. They've got that evidence base then to drive them.

Headteacher, coastal OA

Plugging a gap. Where there had previously been a gap in training or support, professional and family beneficiaries were motivated to engage. One example included a high take-up of an antenatal class among expectant parents as the nearest usual provision had been too far away and expensive. Another example included parents of children with autism creating a support network with other parents whose children had the same condition.

I do find it...therapeutic because you just realise, we're all in this. You're not the only one, one of many parents who are going through this. **Parent beneficiary, urban OA**

Accessible. Where beneficiaries could access activities easily, they tended to be more engaged. This was particularly relevant for projects in rural areas with limited transport links. In one area, the breastfeeding group was held in a local village hall which meant that it was accessible for all those who did not drive.

I could walk there from my house, which is unheard of for things like this, because we can't walk to anywhere. It was really nice just to not have to go out and get a taxi or something...I didn't drive, so it was difficult. **Parent beneficiary, rural OA**

Delivered by inspiring facilitators. Children and young people enjoyed participating in projects where they found those delivering the projects inspiring and had developed positive relationships with them. For instance, in one area, a young person explained that they enjoyed spending time with their mentor, which led to them regularly attending and engaging with the project.

[W]e had similar interests and we could keep a conversation going about those interests that we've both got. When you find someone that you can relate to, it's easy to get on with them. **CYP beneficiary, urban OA**

A young person in another OA believed that positive relationships with session facilitators were essential to making participants feel at ease and engage with the project.

I was just comfortable with the people...that was the main thing really. I think as long as you get on with people, you're all right really. **CYP beneficiary, rural OA**

Delivered by experts. Beneficiaries enjoyed that projects and sessions were run by individuals with expertise in their area. This reassured beneficiaries about the perceived usefulness of the project. In one OA, a parent beneficiary explained that the facilitators' professional background in education contributed to the overall engagement with the project.

[T]hey [facilitators] both have a background in early years and primary school years, and it showed. They just knew what to do, which I needed sometimes, so yes, it was really good. **Parent beneficiary, rural OA**

In contrast, strategic and local stakeholders, project leads, and beneficiaries attributed limited project engagement among educational settings, families and children and young people to the following factors:

- **limited communication or branding strategy.** Strategic stakeholders and project leads reflected that such strategies required expertise and consideration at the outset
- **one-size fits-all.** Where the OA imposed generic interventions onto schools, engagement was more limited
- **language.** In some areas, engagement of under-reached groups (e.g. Pakistani and Eastern European families) could prove challenging, especially where materials and flyers were only in English
- **technology.** A lack of access to technology or a reliance on parents to be at home to assist with technical issues limited engagement among a group of children and young people beneficiaries on some projects

3.3. Place-based approach

This section outlines strategic and local stakeholders' views on key characteristics, benefits and challenges of the OA programme's place-based approach. It concludes by highlighting a range of factors affecting place-based delivery and engagement.

3.3.1. Characteristics

Strategic stakeholders outlined two key characteristics of the place-based approach, including the OA place-based approach:

The unit of 'place'. Some strategic stakeholders noted that a place-based approach required decision-making around what constitutes 'place'. They contrasted the OAs that have a clearly-defined identity with those that had a less coherent identity, for instance OAs consisting of 'a collection of places' with different demographics and distinct identities. They believed it was easier for a place-based programme to engage stakeholders and beneficiaries in places that had a shared identity compared to OAs covering multiple small places. In OAs with a less distinct local identity, they suggested a place-based approach could only work by focusing on connecting key systems leaders from the multiple places.

You can't go on the streets and say to people, 'Where do you come from'....You've got to try to say, 'Right, who are the people we need to get together in order to bring about significant improvement for the children who live in these places?' **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

Strategic stakeholders explained that a by-product of deciding on a 'unit' of delivery was that those outside the 'place' would be excluded from accessing support. For instance, in one area, several schools outside the OA fell into special measures and there was a view that this might have been averted had they been able to access the OA offer. In this context, the notion of 'twinning' OAs with other areas might be one way of addressing the challenge of creating place-based boundaries (see section 3.5. on Twinning).

Engaging with and involving local stakeholders. Strategic stakeholders across OAs agreed that a place-based approach needed to involve the local population, including systems leaders, delivery partners and prospective beneficiaries. This meant:

- **spending enough time diagnosing local challenges and strengths**, leading to a clear-cut understanding of the 'uniqueness' of place and the development of a vision and strategy for place-based delivery

- **‘co-designing’ a place-based program** with ‘credible’ stakeholders known in the area (e.g. MAT CEOs), thereby avoiding the perception of delivery being imposed and controlled from central government
- **using local delivery organisations** to design and deliver bespoke programmes or tailoring national programmes to the area

3.3.2. Benefits and challenges

Local programme ownership and buy-in

Strategic and local stakeholders regarded the emphasis on local partnership and collaboration as essential to local buy-in of the OA programme from stakeholders and intended beneficiaries. The establishment of a partnership board of local stakeholder representatives and enlisting local organisations to deliver projects was perceived to be a strength of the OA place-based delivery model.

Trust. Strategic and local stakeholders and project leads reflected that partnership board members and local delivery organisations tended to be trusted by prospective beneficiaries and delivery partners. This was particularly the case for those sceptical of ‘outsiders’ from national providers or top-down programmes led by central government.

If I'd have just rocked up to say, 'We've got a government policy, I'm going to tell you now what we're going to do and how we're going to do it', it would've been very difficult to pull off. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

Collective ownership. The involvement of multi-agency stakeholders such as schools, local businesses and the LA created the perception that the programme was collectively owned, rather than something the DfE had imposed centrally. A group of strategic and local stakeholders thought the involvement of local stakeholders to shape the programme from the start was unique to the OA place-based delivery model.

We've had to take ownership over it and it's not someone coming in and telling us what to do... and don't really know what it's like here. **Strategic stakeholder, coastal OA**

[T]his wasn't a top-down approach....Quite often, what the DfE will say is, 'This has worked in London, and so therefore, it can work in [OA].' Actually, quite liberating I think for us...was, 'Look, here's £6 million. What do you think's going to make a difference, based on what you know about your community, your young people.' **Local stakeholder, rural OA**

In a few OAs, there was a view that the DfE had been more prescriptive at the start, while this shifted to a more bottom-up approach over time, with local leaders being given more freedom in shaping the programme.

I think what we've managed to shift it to is a bottom-up. Yes, let's look at what's best nationally, but actually our leaders know what's best for them. **Local stakeholder, rural OA**

Identification. On an operational level, project leads and professional beneficiaries considered it helpful when young people were able to identify with those delivering projects, as this made 'it more real...and really helps them engage'. This was more likely to be the case if projects sat within locally prestigious organisations (e.g. football teams) or local volunteers came from the area.

Strategic stakeholders, local stakeholders, and professional beneficiaries regarded local stakeholder involvement especially important for employment and career-related projects. For instance, one school-based professional beneficiary explained that pupils in their area benefitted from local professionals and school alumni sharing their career journeys. This helped pupils to know that high-skilled professions (e.g. becoming a lawyer) were a possibility. This type of local stakeholder involvement was perceived to make the programme distinctly different from other national school improvement and social mobility initiatives.

Sustainability and legacy. Those who emphasised the importance of local programme ownership suggested that the involvement of local stakeholders ensured networks and projects were likely to stay beyond OA funding. This helped the programme achieve 'stronger sustainability and legacy'. One view among strategic stakeholders was that local delivery organisations had vested personal and professional interests in the area. They were committed to ensuring wider programme success compared with national initiatives and organisations.

They understand why it's important to deliver this particular intervention...These are actually people who live in [OA], work in [OA], are responsible for some aspect of service in [OA]...they are people who are actually very conscious of the need for good quality delivery and therefore committed to making it happen. **Strategic stakeholder, rural OA**

A responsive programme design, tailored to local needs

Strategic and local stakeholders and projects leads agreed that the OA place-based delivery model was responsive to the local population's needs, reflected in tailored support and interventions delivered by locally based organisations.

Local knowledge and responsiveness. The partnership boards' knowledge and insights of the area were considered an asset and enabled the delivery team to identify overarching programme priorities that addressed social mobility challenges. For instance, a group of strategic stakeholders praised partnership boards for their holistic make-up, including local employers who understood the skills required in the local labour market. In one OA, the partnership board established mental health and parenting initiatives following OA-wide discussions with local stakeholders about key priorities. Local delivery organisations knew where and how to reach the target population, especially under-reached families. During the first national lockdown, local providers in another OA identified that free school meal provision was limited and responded to this by providing additional food to these families.

Tailored support. The partnership boards' and local delivery organisations' knowledge and understanding of their area enabled their support offer to be tailored to beneficiaries' needs. They were able to tap into existing networks and partnerships to deliver programmes without having to learn about the area and build relationships from scratch.

One of these national providers...could have come into the city, but it would have taken them six months to do the bit of work that we've already done because we've got the partnerships because we've got the network. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

For example, one OA had speech and language therapists whose provision accounted for the different demographic make-ups of the local schools and their distinct challenges around language and communication needs. A group of schools had a large proportion of pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) while other schools had large pupil populations who spoke English as a second language; therefore a contextual approach was essential for beneficiaries to engage with the project. In a rural OA, the delivery team commissioned projects that suited the needs of small schools in remote communities where there were few MATs.

It's fitted with what it's like...having things for small schools and mixed-age and the OA have been really, really accommodating of how would delivery work best after school. **Local stakeholder, rural OA**

External delivery

A group of strategic and local stakeholders stated that having the option to bring in experts and delivery organisations from outside the OA area was a strength of the OA delivery model. External input was particularly helpful where there was a lack of local expertise or capacity to design or deliver improvement initiatives. External expertise could provide a layer of credibility to the programme, demonstrate 'what good looks like' and help

improve local provision. For example, in one OA, the regional Maths Hub were brought into the project and linked up with local schools to improve maths provision.

Local schools providing local solutions might not necessarily be the best solution, especially where standards aren't great. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

Strategic and local stakeholders emphasised that local ownership needed to be complemented rather than replaced by external expertise. They cited national programmes such as Maths Mastery tailored to the area as illustrative of how the local and national could be effectively combined through the OA model.

I think what the Opportunity Area does at its best is it understands the peculiarities of the very local localness of the problems. It takes it up and it says, right okay we've got some big national things that have a rigour ... let's stick them into there and make them work in a way that is [OA]. **Local stakeholder, rural OA**

Some strategic and local stakeholders believed that external experts and organisations could be more objective and ask challenging questions (e.g. explore reasons for low attainment levels) to help local schools or delivery organisations identify solutions. They suggested that a key challenge of a place-based approach could be a 'parochial' or 'insular' mindset and resistance to outside ideas or projects. This risked 'bad habits' becoming entrenched. In contrast, external input could improve delivery and outcomes.

[E]xternal challenge, different perspectives coming into the city, fresh eyes, that brings opportunity and strengthens aspects of what we're doing. **Local stakeholder, urban OA**

Professional beneficiaries who felt isolated and lacked a cohesive professional support network appreciated assistance from external providers. For example, in one OA, early years settings without a support network received bespoke expert input on best practice research.

At times, however, strategic and local stakeholders, project leads, and professional beneficiaries regarded external delivery at odds with a place-based approach. This was due to a perception that external providers did not always tailor provision to meet local needs. In one OA, an external organisation had not sufficiently considered the needs of individuals living in deprived communities, which resulted in the OA commissioning a different provider the following year.

External providers could encounter difficulties in establishing trust with beneficiaries. A local stakeholder contrasted the relative ineffectiveness of a national, London-based organisation with the success of a local community organisation in engaging parents.

With some communities in [OA], people coming in with like a London accent I think kind of put people off a little bit. I do think that affected their ability to deliver. **Local stakeholder, urban OA**

Some strategic and local stakeholders raised concerns that OA procurement processes could favour national organisations over local ones, as they had more experience in writing bids even if they were not necessarily best placed to deliver a locally based programme.

Factors affecting place-based delivery and engagement

This evaluation identified five factors that shaped place-based delivery and engagement across OAs:

Previous experience with DfE-led interventions. Teachers and school leaders who had negative experiences of other DfE-led initiatives could be sceptical of new interventions. This lack of trust was amplified where they felt central OA DfE staff, who were unfamiliar with the local context, were leading the terms of engagement. One solution to building trust and allaying concerns was to engage with schools as partners from the outset. OA delivery teams established positive working relationships and buy-in when they took time to listen to teachers and schools and were clear about what the project involved. For instance, teachers who were reluctant to be observed by external consultants were reassured by the OA delivery team explaining that these were independent and would not report to senior school management.

Capacity. Across OAs, a lack of capacity constituted a challenge for LAs and educational settings. LAs and education stakeholders were at times unable to engage with the OA offer because of competing demands and staff turnover. LAs with capacity challenges at strategic and operational levels were also affected in their engagement. On a strategic level, it meant that the OA delivery team needed to re-engage with the new LA leadership each time there was a staff change, which could cause programme delays. On an operational level, strategic stakeholders explained that LA restructures and staff changes could undo progress. A protective factor that minimised disruption to programme delivery included having a consistent OA delivery team and being proactive in engaging newly appointed LA leads.

Initiative overload could be a barrier to engagement for schools that had committed to multiple OA projects or projects outside the OA programme. One OA addressed this by appointing retired headteachers to lead projects in primary schools, which created additional capacity. Staff turnover in educational settings could also limit engagement and result in a lack of ownership, making it difficult to build momentum. Certain educational settings appeared more likely to have challenges around capacity. This included:

- **MATs** are accountable to their board rather than the LA and could therefore be reluctant to commit to the programme or free up their teachers' time for projects
- **under-performing schools** had limited ability to lead on projects due to Ofsted inspection cycles
- **smaller schools** could find it challenging to free up enough time for designated members of staff to lead projects in addition to their teaching responsibilities
- **schools in the most disadvantaged areas** had an additional challenge of lacking social capital (e.g. pre-existing contacts with local businesses) needed to deliver on projects without too many additional time commitments
- **geographically isolated schools** could struggle to engage with the programme, as they lacked a peer support network that could help increase staff motivation and at times did not have enough beneficiaries for projects to be viable
- **early years settings** could have even less capacity than schools. Early years staff in private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings are not salaried and therefore found it more challenging to commit to projects in their own time without pay

Education landscape. An education landscape with a mixture of different academies (single academies, MATs) and maintained schools hindered collaboration between schools, especially where a lot of the schools tended to be fairly small. In contrast, a small and more uniform education landscape facilitated delivery, engagement and collaboration between schools, especially where partnerships and relationships had already been in place. For instance, one OA with a limited number of schools was largely dominated by two MATs, which a strategic stakeholder believed ensured collaboration between schools across the whole OA.

If ... you can persuade the MATs to keep working on sharing practice amongst themselves ... and agreeing to work together on particular initiatives ... then I think you've got something that's really powerful about making the place work. **Strategic stakeholder, coastal OA**

Identification with place. Delivery and engagement were shaped by how well-defined the place was and how strongly individuals identified with it (see section 3.3.1. on the characteristics of a place-based approach). Where an OA covered multiple places, strategic stakeholders thought it was challenging to mobilise stakeholders and beneficiaries through place.

Unless you define your place in a way that's meaningful for the people who are going to benefit, you may as well not bother calling it place-based ... that's also about how the communities, the families feel and identify themselves and what they identify with. **Strategic stakeholder, coastal OA**

A focus on too big an area also risked limiting engagement, because projects could not always account for differences between places and educational settings within the area. In one OA, local stakeholders explained that differences in levels of social mobility and perceived aspiration between neighbouring wards made a 'whole-town' approach less effective. In another OA, the variety of school types resulted in a group of schools disengaging with the programme. A suggested solution was for place-based delivery to be more localised and focus on specific wards and neighbourhoods.

Practical factors. Practical factors that affected delivery and engagement related to location, infrastructure, capacity.

The lack of transport and distances between places was a challenge to beneficiary engagement and project attendance in coastal and rural OAs. For instance, a project struggled to place teachers into an area due to a reluctance to live in a remote location. Similarly, a school in a rural area was unable to generate enough interest in a course at the local Further Education (FE) college because of the sparse population. In another example, poor transport links in a rural OA meant that a literacy project had to be moved to the local supermarket rather than a museum to ensure attendance.

Recruitment of disadvantaged parents and other under-reached groups to projects was difficult across OAs. It was especially difficult in OAs where there was no physical hub like Children's Centres to facilitate outreach. In one OA, delivery organisations tried to recruit parents for a speech and language project by visiting local supermarkets and libraries, which proved to be an inefficient approach.

They were literally going to places where they thought those families would be, so community groups, libraries. I think they were even in Aldi at one point and McDonald's. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

Similarly, recruitment via schools was challenging, especially when parental engagement with education was low. Community hubs or other local professionals (e.g. health visitors) could be an effective pathway to engage disadvantaged parents. In one OA, the local delivery team of a school re-engagement project, successfully reached parents and children through community centres and via an online toolkit. The LA has since employed full time staff to continue this work.

Variation in COVID-19 infection rates between OAs meant that delivery was more challenging in areas with higher levels of infections (see section 3.4. on COVID-19 response).

3.4. COVID-19 response

3.4.1. Programme delivery responses

The COVID-19 pandemic affected programme delivery in all OAs. Some OAs had high levels of infections and strict social distancing measures for prolonged periods. As a result, delivery in Years 3 to 4 was substantially affected. However, in Year 4, there was a greater understanding of the hurdles to overcome. Key challenges included the closure of educational and training settings, limited staff capacity in partner organisations, and finding the right balance between COVID-19 recovery and underlying social mobility work.

OA delivery teams worked with local partners to assess areas of delivery. Where possible, emphasis was placed on continuing projects established pre-pandemic to support existing need. In most OAs, funding was made available for the LA, local organisations and education settings to use flexibly for COVID-19 recovery.

The speed of adjustments varied across OAs. Lack of staff capacity in partner organisations (e.g. schools) disrupted delivery of new and existing projects. This could depend on the stage of delivery and whether projects had already been set up, but also on the external OA environment. For instance, high tier areas with higher levels of COVID-19 infections experienced more challenges.¹¹ Across areas, the strategic networks that the OA had established pre-pandemic facilitated quick and tailored place-based adjustments. Moreover, they enabled professional support and exchange of best practice generally and also specifically in relation to addressing COVID-19 related challenges.

This programme had created a sense of community between the schools in [OA], and this became very helpful during the lockdown. There was a culture of schools being there for each other and

¹¹ The Department of Health and Social Care published guidance on the tier system operating in England between December 2020 – January 2021:

- Tier 1 - Medium Alert
- Tier 2 - High Alert
- Tier 3 - Very High Alert
- Tier 4 – Stay at home

headteachers informally sharing resources and support. **Project lead, urban OA**

Lessons from the first national lockdown highlighted the usefulness of planned response to COVID-19. For example, delivery teams created COVID-19 'back up plans', which were developed to plan how OAs would repurpose funds and adapt to online delivery in the event of another lockdown. In one OA, funds were used to bring in remote learning champions, who helped schools design remote learning strategies. This was considered particularly effective as it meant that by the time of the second national lockdown, schools could benefit from and deliver online content and lessons.

Focusing support

OA delivery teams and local partners assessed priorities and targeted support to meet the local challenges resulting from the pandemic and national lockdown. Across OAs, young people and families in most need were prioritised. All OAs provided academic help, for example, through tuition for pupils or distributing learning material to homes. OAs also provided vital in-school support, for example assisting with children learning from home and working with more vulnerable pupils to keep them in school. Project beneficiaries, strategic and local stakeholders described the provision of laptops through OA projects as an 'invaluable' resource.

I've recently written a blog post for [project] explaining how much of a Godsend the laptops were, because I think we had one laptop to share between all four of us, two children, two adults trying to work from home...So, yes, that for me just absolutely changed the face of home schooling for us. **Parent beneficiary, urban OA**

Holistic support focused on the delivery of food and learning resources and could provide temporary reprieve as part of COVID-19 recovery. Project beneficiaries, strategic and local stakeholders stressed the importance of OA support throughout the pandemic. They particularly valued the mental wellbeing support and the holistic benefits of activities delivered as part of OA projects during the national lockdown.

During lockdown [OA project] really helped because it makes you feel more athletic going into nature and makes you feel proud of yourself for actually doing those things rather than staying home and doing something else. **CYP beneficiary, rural OA**

Online delivery of projects

Projects that relied on in-person or school-based delivery were paused during spring and summer 2020 and those that were able to then resumed in the new academic year (in

September 2020). Some projects moved to online or blended delivery with online and in-person elements. The extent to which this was possible and effective depended on the type of project. Projects that worked well tended to be ones that could adapt to an entirely online format, involved short / focused sessions and made good use of digital resources (e.g. digital learning materials). For instance, in a coastal OA, a careers project aimed at young people at risk of becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) was easily adapted online, allowing employers to provide careers guidance and opportunities for work experience to young people through a virtual platform. In a rural OA, an expectant and new mothers project successfully used remote forums enabling participants to connect socially and share experiences of pregnancy.

[T]he [project] was really the only group that I could connect with other mums. That was the first time that somebody put me in contact with other mums. That was the first time somebody really cared about how I was feeling and doing and was consistently there despite the pandemic. **Parent beneficiary, rural OA**

In this project, participants were introduced to key aspects of prenatal and antenatal care via video explanations. This allowed participants to have greater control of how and when they accessed course content and enabled a more flexible approach.

Benefits of online delivery. The benefits of online delivery included the ability to reach a wider pool of people, continued support for families and improved parental engagement. For example, there was greater take-up of online teacher continuing professional development (CPD) and career events for young people. Remote delivery could also facilitate logistics. In rural OAs, where attendance on some projects had previously been limited due to the lack of transport infrastructure and the difficulties of travelling to a particular venue, the move to online approaches improved attendance. Online delivery also encouraged innovative approaches such as virtual tours of schools and universities, and employer behind-the-scenes videos. As most resources provided through online projects could be accessed after the courses ended, participants appreciated the opportunity to further engage with course content.

It was quite nice because at the end of the course, I think I still had access a little bit longer to the online lessons... Just the general information regarding each lesson, the breakdown. **Parent beneficiary, urban OA**

Family engagement and targeted pupil support projects benefitted from working directly with parents during the national partial school closures, rather than through schools. Work with parents often required significant effort to establish engagement, which could prove difficult for schools juggling commitments. Project delivery teams acted as the first point of contact for parents, enabling projects to progress more efficiently and ensuring consistency in how participants were engaged. Additionally, project beneficiaries,

strategic and local stakeholders explained that mental health support was a priority and online delivery proved valuable during COVID-19.

Limitations of online delivery. While there were reported benefits of online delivery, there were some activities that could not be delivered online. For example, lesson observations required teachers to be in school and practical training courses, such as brick laying, could not be completed until national restrictions were lifted. Strategic and local stakeholders and parent beneficiaries noted that projects involving younger children, one-to-one targeted family activities and those that focused on sensitive issues were less effective online. In one OA, for instance, young people involved in the delivery of a children's wellbeing and mental health project described difficulties in building rapport through remote delivery.

When you're trying to develop a project online, there's not that same energy as you have if you're in a room with people...I know when Zoom first started, like, no cameras on, everyone muted, ask a question and just complete silence. **CYP beneficiary, rural OA**

Online delivery highlighted different levels of access to technology, including to (any or high-quality) internet connection and necessary IT equipment. In most rural OAs, high-quality internet connection was an issue. There could also be different levels of competence and understanding in using technology for project beneficiaries and those delivering activities. OAs worked to alleviate these issues through setting up initiatives aimed at improving digital inclusion (i.e. access to internet and skills to use it), designed to support schools struggling with their online offer.

3.4.2. Implications of COVID-19 for the OA programme

Place-based implementation

Strategic and local stakeholders emphasised the importance of being physically present in the OAs to build trusting relationships with partners. They described the difficulty of doing this virtually, especially when there was no track record of partners working together and noticed this hindered timely implementation of projects.

Although virtual learning has opened many doors, it's also shut some as well. It's stopped those relationships being formed on the ground.

Strategic stakeholder, rural OA

To address emergent needs, delivery teams consulted more with local stakeholders to co-develop activities and OA projects took a more ground-up approach in their COVID-19 responses. For example, in OAs where budget was allocated to COVID-19 recovery, strategic stakeholders reported involving schools in how to allocate funding which

facilitated good levels of take-up and engagement. Working in this way ensured projects were not imposed by the OA but identified and led by local stakeholders from the start.

Limited staff capacity

COVID-19 increased pressures on most education settings and limited staff capacity to deliver and take part in project activities. Across OAs, activities were often cancelled due to teacher or pupil illness or COVID-19 cases in schools.

The fourth year of the project was designed to be about COVID-19 recovery, but in reality everyone was still in the midst of the pandemic for most of the year, and it was more about survival...school staff had to massively pivot what they were supposed to be doing to meet the needs of families. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

Educators were able to maintain OA projects when they had become integrated into their day-to-day work, but less able to prioritise other programme activity. Pupil learning and wellbeing setbacks were linked to the partial school closures. One approach was to focus on community COVID-19 response initiatives, such as the provision of family support workers who visited young people's homes, delivered food and resources and generally checked in with young people and their families. Such activities helped to reach those in need while minimising burden on overstretched education settings.

Measuring progress

Monitoring progress and assessing OA targets has been challenging during the pandemic. COVID-19 stalled collection of quantitative data, which made evidencing impact more difficult. Strategic stakeholders explained it was not always possible to collect project evaluation data and project learning was therefore limited for some areas. The work required of delivery partners to evidence impact alongside delivering projects and liaising with multiple stakeholders could prove burdensome. Perceptions of success were often based on beneficiaries' and participating settings' feedback, highlighting qualitative changes such as improved relationships and behaviour change.

Social mobility challenges

COVID-19 exacerbated pre-existing social inequalities and 'reset' social mobility challenges across OAs. Strategic and local stakeholders reported challenges around deprivation with food bank usage in the OA going up and many families 'struggling' to meet 'basic needs'. They mentioned that children and young people known to social care, with SEND or at risk of exclusion faced difficulties returning to school and receiving the support they needed. They also spoke about increases in domestic violence, child abuse and parental and child suicide. Strategic stakeholders stressed the difficulty of reconciling social mobility work with COVID-19 recovery. The rapidly changing context of

COVID-19 demanded an often-quick response which saw OA delivery teams tackling problems as they came up. This left little time for the groundwork and strategic planning needed to implement interventions geared towards social mobility and longer-term change.

3.5. Twinning

The 12 OAs were twinned with other areas that had not been previously involved in the OA programme. The aim was for the two areas to work in partnership and share best practice to address identified priorities in the twinned area. A key driver for twinning activities was building on OA projects with proven success. OA twinning leads¹² identified key factors that were integral to successful OA projects:

- **a ground-up approach**, which did not impose an agenda but built on existing local knowledge and gave local stakeholders more say in the types of support they needed
- **multi-agency working**, which fostered collaboration between local service providers, organisations and beneficiaries and drew on LA knowledge to improve social mobility outcomes for children and young people
- **tailored projects**, which explored local priorities and addressed specific place-based issues through a targeted approach
- **impactful projects**, with good levels of take-up and engagement and evidence of impact (e.g. improved attainment and reduced school exclusions)

OA twinning leads and twinned area leads¹³ perceived twinning as an opportunity to improve project delivery by implementing learning from the OA.

3.5.1. Twinning approach

Replication of OA projects was an important aspect of the twinning approach, which involved duplicating what worked in OAs. A commonly held view among OA twinning leads and twinned area leads was that replication enabled understanding of how and why OA projects had been successful and obviated the need for experimentation.

¹² 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

¹³ 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

What has been so brilliant about the twinning project is that we've been able to replicate what has worked [in OA]. So, there's been no decision-making about what to try or not to try. It's been very much a case of [OA] has done this. This has worked. **Twinned area lead, rural OA**

OA twinning leads and twinned area leads also emphasised the value of adopting a flexible approach and tailoring projects to account for local differences and meet the needs of delivery partners and project beneficiaries in twinned areas. Twinned projects could be, for example, scaled-down versions of those in the OA and bespoke to different project beneficiaries.

It's like, 'This is how we do things, and if you want to do it similarly, you can', but also have that flexibility of if it's not working for you, you can add in your own elements that you think would work. **Twinned area lead, coastal OA**

Decision-making about twinned area

OA twinning leads based their decisions about potential areas they could be twinned with on a range of factors. These included areas which were in close proximity to the OA and/or shared similar demographics and socio-economic challenges. Decisions were also based on pre-existing strategic relationships between the OA twinning lead and twinned area lead.

Aims and focus of projects

Twinning projects reflected key priority areas of the OA programme (i.e. early years, school attainment, post-16, mental health and soft skills). They focused on maths and literacy skills, school exclusions and education to work transitions. Within this, most projects centred on three core areas of work:

- **school improvement and teaching quality.** A range of activities, including training support and evidence-based strategies, aimed at strengthening leadership, curriculum and teaching practice
- **support for community engagement.** Partnership working with community and voluntary organisations to provide a range of out-of-school activities focused on young people's wellbeing and re-engagement with learning
- **capacity building.** Increasing capacity within education and community settings, through staff recruitment initiatives and upskilling strategies

Sharing learning

Twinned area leads valued learning from the OA as they approached delivery, as it could make some aspects of getting projects up and running smoother and more efficient. Most OA twinning leads played a central role in guiding twinned areas on project planning and implementation. They built on opportunities to pass on key skills such as fundraising and advocacy. Mechanisms to facilitate learning between OAs and twinned areas included:

Networks. Support networks established among OAs, twinned areas and other neighbouring areas provided a forum for project leads and delivery partners to come together and share learning. For example, OAs used these networks to share case studies of previous project involvement and templates for baseline assessments.

Conferences and events. Conferences and events were seen as a good way for twinning leads to share learning about OA projects with local providers, facilitating thinking about gaps in service provision and building engagement and momentum. For example, in one OA, twinning leads explained that a conference organised early on in the project played a 'big part' in bringing providers together and managing expectations, especially around timescales.

Peer learning. Peer learning amongst local stakeholders provided an extra level of support to guide planning and delivery of twinned projects. In one OA, OA school leaders acted as critical friends, providing insight and challenge on the improvement plans of twinned area schools.

3.5.2. Successes and challenges

Successes of twinning

Implementing OA learning. Lessons from the OA allowed twinned areas to understand what worked well and less well before adopting projects. This was considered integral to the success of twinning for the following reasons:

- it helped generate a more co-ordinated response to local issues, by applying OA delivery planning to twinning projects
- It averted potential challenges which enabled projects to run more smoothly, limited 'firefighting' and saved time

Most twinned area leads cited not having to 'start from scratch' as key, enabling some areas to hit the ground running and progress projects at a faster pace. This was particularly important for areas where there was limited community capacity in terms of time and resources.

Facilitating closer collaborations. Twinning facilitated conversations between local and strategic stakeholders, providers and local communities in twinned areas. Twinning leads

believed this would not have happened without OA funding. Examples included schools in a rural area who were encouraged to initiate discussions through twinning activities, where previously there was a lack of communication. Enabling conversations was considered important in cementing local relationships that could be sustained.

A tailored approach. OA twinning leads and twinned area leads appreciated the value of a tailored approach based on local circumstances in twinned areas. Recognising local differences between OAs and twinned areas enabled twinned area leads to respond to the needs and priorities of delivery partners and project beneficiaries in their area as well as the different kinds of support they required.

Challenges of twinning

Limited staff capacity. Staffing capacity issues in education settings could result in limited project engagement. A twinned area lead described how a lack of staff capacity in one school meant teachers could not be released to undertake training. This highlighted the need to be more 'up front' with school partners at the start of projects about the level of commitment involved.

Lack of previous networks. It could take considerable time to get projects up and running and secure buy-in where partners had not worked together before. Twinned area leads stressed the importance of encouraging early and regular communication between local partners such as school leaders. They believed investing time to build relationships could help mitigate potential problems of collaboration longer-term.

Resourcing challenges. Twinned projects were, for the most part, wholly reliant on funding from the OA to support the costs of implementation. As funds allocated to twinned areas varied across OAs, a few twinned areas which received less funding were restricted in terms of the number of settings that were able to receive support to deliver improvements.

COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted projects across all twinned areas. OA twinning leads and twinned area leads described key challenges around setting closures, social distancing restrictions and the cancellation of courses and training provision. Consequently, there were 'rocky starts' or delays in the roll out of projects and intermittent interruptions due to illness or COVID-19 cases in settings. OA twinning leads and twinned area leads noted that this made it more difficult to measure the impact of projects.

Covid has just thrown the biggest spanner in the works for us! It's just unbelievably hard to try and quantify what we're doing with data because there's just been such a rocky road where there's been bits missed and bits not done and bits that have obviously shown children

have gone backwards and then forwards. **OA twinning lead, urban OA**

3.6. Progress to outcomes

3.6.1. Perceived outcomes

This section presents the viewpoints of strategic stakeholders, local stakeholders and project leads and beneficiaries around perceived outcomes of the OA programme and OA-funded projects. It focuses on four key areas: early years, schools, post-16 education and mental health/soft skills. These were the broad domains that the key priorities set out in the OAs' delivery plans fell into (see section 1.1.1). All findings are based on the views of these participants only and have not been triangulated with other sources of data (e.g. attainment data).

Early years

Children's progression. Strategic and local stakeholders as well as professional and parent beneficiaries thought OA projects had an impact on children's academic attainment. As part of this, they discussed perceived improvements in children's literacy and reading capabilities as well as communication and listening skills. Local and strategic stakeholders referred to performance indicators such as the Good Level of Development (GLD) data which they believed supported their point about improved outcomes.

They also emphasised local schools' and other interested parties' (e.g. NHS) 'buy-in' to the projects in terms of commitment and funding as indicators of success. Anecdotally, they spoke about the positive feedback received from staff in reception classes and parents around new practices, resources and services.

The pride that [parents] took and the development that they'd seen in their own children, you got such a fantastically solid sense of what a difference this was making on the ground. It was amazing! I was nearly in tears and one of the parents was nearly in tears. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

While local and strategic stakeholders believed that Good Level of Development (GLD) data showed improvements, they caveated this by saying that this data had not been collected since 2019 and measurement of impact was therefore limited. Other data limitations included schools not being required to send their Early Years Foundation score profile.

Staff skills and capacity. Local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries believed that OA projects provided opportunities for early years staff to develop their skillset. This

led to staff being better able to support and motivate children. OA funding was also described as a mechanism that allowed early years settings to increase their staff capacity in terms of staff recruitment.

Legacy of early years outcomes. Local and strategic stakeholders expected progress in early years to improve outcomes for children further down the line and therefore have a long-term legacy.

Schools

Improved attainment in core subjects (English, maths and science). Multiple local and strategic stakeholders as well as professional beneficiaries thought that pupils' attainment within core subjects had improved, particularly at key stage 2 (KS2) and KS3 level. They believed that teacher assessed grades, examination grades and other performance indicators which compared rates of attainment against national averages indicated progress.

For all three of our key stage 3 year groups, the mean standard age score moved from being in line with national average to being significantly above national average. There was...a particular improvement for disadvantaged students in Year 7. That's where we were seeing a huge impact. **Professional beneficiary, coastal OA**

Reduced rates of exclusion. Local and strategic stakeholders believed that as a result of OA projects, fewer students were getting excluded from school. Also based on feedback from schools, they explained that students who were previously considered liable to being excluded were being more engaged and included in their school communities.

Between the three of us - the schools, the local authority and OA - we have got schools now talking about zero exclusions in the near future
Local stakeholder, urban OA

Local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries also described children as being more engaged and interactive at school and, as a result, **higher rates of pupil attendance.** In some OAs, projects targeted families as a whole (e.g. via parental engagement programmes), which was considered especially effective.

Increased staff training opportunities, recruitment and retention. Local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries spoke about the OA programme offering school staff the opportunity to engage in training. As a result, practitioners and teachers felt more confident and better placed to engage with children and support them (e.g. in terms of the transition into secondary school). They also felt more able to support parents with

mental health issues or when discussing wellbeing in general. Teachers also described themselves as being more reflective and deliberate in terms of their teaching practices.

Some strategic and local stakeholders referred to Ofsted ratings and reports to discuss the scale of improvements across different schools within localities. These included increased rates of recruitment and retention for teaching staff.

I'd gone through the same process four years previously, where we ended up with two really weak candidates. This time we had a field of 14 and were able to shortlist eight. **Local stakeholder, rural OA**

Differential impact in primary and secondary schools. A recurrent view from strategic stakeholders was that OA projects aimed at improving 'educational outcomes' were more impactful in primary compared to secondary schools. Targets for achieving impact were mentioned as often not being met in secondary schools. Reasons for this included:

- KS4 was seen as having less 'focused' funding than KS1 and KS2 (i.e. less targeted and specific in terms of the outcomes it aimed to achieve)
- implementing changes was considered more difficult in secondary schools than in primary schools (e.g. due to a continued focus on age-based learning that put students in year groups rather than 'individualised' learning which was more likely to recognise that certain children might struggle irrespective of their age) – secondary schools were therefore seen as taking longer to engage with
- the larger size of secondary schools which meant there was less of a 'communal' feeling within settings
- some secondary schools were defined as first needing to recruit high-quality staff before changes and interventions could happen, while this was seen as less of an issue in primary schools
- teenagers were seen as harder to engage with in comparison to younger children

Post-16

Where outcomes were perceived to have been achieved, these related to two key areas:

Increased retention and progression in education. Some local and strategic stakeholders believed there were higher rates of young people remaining in education after the age of 16. They spoke about the encouraging number of young people who had enrolled onto college programmes. They also cited particular young people who they thought would have previously not considered remaining in education.

Professional beneficiaries thought projects helped raising young peoples' aspirations through exposing them to different experiences.

Year 11s have the opportunity to go to [university] to take part in some master classes there. So that was really good in terms of raising their aspirations and seeing what university life was like.

Professional beneficiary, urban OA

Parent beneficiaries spoke about being more confident in supporting their children with decision-making. They explained that by taking part in projects, they had more information about the options that were available for young people, including funding opportunities.

I've been a part of [OA project] since the start...I've really enjoyed it and I've learned so many new things through parent power regarding universities and higher education and other options that are out there for children. **Parent beneficiary, urban OA**

Increased awareness of career options. Some strategic and local stakeholders reported that projects had increased the scale of career services within schools as well as the interactions between young people and career support staff. A group of strategic stakeholders spoke about how targets (or interim targets) for employer interactions had been met or exceeded. Online platforms were especially helpful during the pandemic as they allowed careers support to continue.

Young people felt that as a result of taking part in projects, they were more deliberative and reflective about their career. Projects made young people more aware of their options, some of which they had not previously considered, and piqued new interests. They also facilitated interactions with mentors and seeking careers advice.

Other strategic stakeholders in a few OAs perceived post-16 outcomes as the area where the OA programme had been less effective. They explained that the metrics for assessing progress were often more difficult to define compared to other priority areas. In some of these OAs, a lack of infrastructure (e.g. having few further education colleges) was given as the reason why post-16 outcomes were the least successful priority area.

Mental health and soft skills

Engagement in social and extra-curricular activities. Strategic and local stakeholders mentioned that project beneficiaries had good access to workshops and events, which offered practical and emotional support. Parent and young people beneficiaries spoke about how they gained new hobbies and skills through social and extra-curricular activities. Professional and parent beneficiaries observed that for young people, these

activities provided them with the skills to improve their behaviour and anger management within school settings.

We've had a significant - and I do mean significant - reduction in the amount of pupils who have been involved in serious incidents...I think that reflects an upskill in our staff approach towards children regulating their mental health but also supporting the families as well.

Professional beneficiary, urban OA

High levels of participation in mental health projects. According to strategic stakeholders, professional and young people beneficiaries' engagement with OA projects around mental health was high. They referred to the number of mental health staff that were present and active in education settings as a measure of success. They also highlighted high rates of enrolment on projects supporting mental health and the positive outcomes of these (e.g. children staying in school and being engaged), especially in the context of the pandemic.

Our retention levels were as high as they were pre-pandemic, despite learners, at times, appearing to be in mental health crisis, and I think had we not had those posts in place, I think our student retention rates would have really suffered. **Local stakeholder, urban OA**

Professional and young people beneficiaries thought the emotional support provided to young people helped with their mental health. They believed that, as a result of this, young people felt more confident about expressing themselves.

The students felt like we actually cared about them and how they were feeling and what was going on in their thoughts and feelings process. **CYP beneficiary (mentor), urban OA**

Systemic outcomes

Better communication and collaboration between local actors. A common view among strategic and local stakeholders in most OAs was that the OA programme increased the volume and strength of networks between schools, LAs and other local stakeholders such as businesses. They saw this as highly beneficial to outcomes and targets being achieved and, in some instances, as a shift away from previous more unilateral practices and cultures of 'competition'. They explained networks allowed schools to see what others were doing and for 'new' conversations to take place. Networks between schools and other bodies also ensured that children and young people could be supported in areas other than attainment (e.g. health).

There's been a much greater integration. People are talking to one another. If the worst thing we've done is to get those conversations and kept them continuing for the next few years, that will have been an achievement in itself. **Local stakeholder, rural OA**

Challenges measuring impact on social mobility. Strategic stakeholders identified a tension between the short timeline of the programme, the need to demonstrate impact and the complexity of local social mobility challenges (e.g. underperforming schools, inadequate housing and transport). There was a view that the programme needed to be long-term for improvements to manifest.

You can't expect to see improvement straightaway. I think for a few of our delivery plan targets, we know that we're going to miss them ...but it doesn't mean...we've not generated improvements. It just means that the problems were so severe, that it's taken time to rectify them and to put schools in a place where they can start to focus on getting the data up. **Strategic stakeholder, rural OA**

Concerns were raised about the programme being presented through the lens of social mobility despite being about education. To enable social mobility, participants stressed the need to address structural employment issues in the OA beyond education (e.g. low wages, jobs with limited progression and lack of employers in the OA). They considered a structural and holistic view of social mobility as critical for future place-based approaches.

Even if we were to have an endless pot of money to improve the education of said child, there would be barriers that mean that they can't fulfil the potential that education offers them. **Strategic stakeholder, urban OA**

3.6.2. Factors affecting outcomes

Strategic and local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries regarded the following factors as affecting OA outcomes:

Funding. Strategic stakeholders reported that OA funding allowed for projects to be implemented, leading to ideas being put into practice. In some cases, such as for school-based projects, funding also acted as an incentive to ensure the commitment of those involved in project delivery. Funding was seen as a springboard to projects having impact, as it offered a means for projects to 'take off'. Some strategic stakeholders felt that, for projects to be sustained, it was important to match initial investments with a sustained allocation of financial resources.

Place-based approach. This meant that the needs and characteristics of each OA were taken into account when considering how outcomes could be achieved and in selecting, designing and implementing projects. As part of this, local stakeholders were involved in the design and delivery of projects. Strategic and local stakeholders as well as professional beneficiaries considered a localised knowledge of ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ as key to OA projects being successful, since different areas were described as having different issues:

It's about central government recognising the importance of place, and one-size-fits-all does not work... you have your working principles, you have your meta targets, national targets. Delivering them requires I think a high degree of local flexibility. **Professional beneficiary, rural OA**

More detail on how the place-based approach to OA programme implementation affected outcomes can be found in section 3.3.2. on the benefits and challenges of the place-based approach.

Communication between local stakeholders, delivery partners and beneficiaries. Strategic and local stakeholders said the networks developed by the OA created a context for effective planning and communication between actors. This included sharing resources, strategies and practice(s).

Local stakeholders mentioned that as a result of OA projects, heads of schools that previously had little to no contact with one another were able to meet and communicate in a regular manner, discussing the challenges they faced and possible solutions. Other local stakeholders spoke about how the channels of communication established helped conversations to develop. This meant that conversations were able to move away from what were considered to be ‘unhelpful debates’ about the ‘structure’ of education (i.e. multi-academic trusts), towards issues that were deemed more important such as curriculum-based issues. Strategic stakeholders also emphasised the positive connections that emerged between schools and career services. These connections meant that schools were better able to access careers advice and resources (e.g. career advisors coming into settings).

Where communication was poor, this led to information and practices not being shared effectively across different parties. In some instances, delivery partners did not understand the purpose of the OA programme. Strategic stakeholders also referred to the challenges that came with engaging with partners at the LA level.

The specific characteristics of locations. In some OAs, strategic stakeholders spoke about local infrastructural issues as undermining OA outcomes. For example, localities not having enough medium/highly skilled workforce or sixth-form colleges meant that

projects could not be effectively implemented in practice. More detail on how the specific characteristics of locations affected outcomes can be found in section 3.3.2. on the benefits and challenges of the place-based approach.

COVID-19. Strategic and local stakeholders explained that COVID-19 had disrupted projects and undermined progress towards outcomes. They also described how COVID-19 made it more difficult to measure impact due to a lack of data or of comparable data (e.g. on school attainment). This is described in more detail in section 3.4.2. on the implications of COVID-19 for the OA programme.

3.7. Sustainability

3.7.1. Perceived sustainability of progress

Strategic and local stakeholders and professional project beneficiaries discussed the long-term sustainability of OA progress relative to three key areas:

Structures of collaboration. Across OAs, there was agreement on the value of maintaining the networks and collaborations created at different levels. Local stakeholders appreciated the opportunities for mutual exchange and joint working that cross-sector partnerships provided. They also saw the dialogue with the DfE as an important achievement and were concerned about this ending. Local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries concurred the professional networks built through the OA facilitated sharing of best practice and keeping areas of work 'high profile' within settings.

There were contrasting views about how easily these structures could be maintained without funding. One concern was that, without appropriate resources, staff turnover could lead to collaborations being dropped.

You only need 50 per cent of those who used to be working in that model to change, and suddenly the thing starts to disintegrate. I think that's where the resourcing comes in. If you've got some money that people are coming together to collectively spend...the incoming person will still be part of that programme. **Local stakeholder, urban OA**

Local stakeholders regarded it key to retain an equivalent of the partnership board as a convening vehicle and strategic driver for delivery. Where the education system included academies and maintained schools, they stressed its importance to ensure co-ordination.

Continuation of projects and activities. Strategic and local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries were concerned the withdrawal of OA funding would make it difficult to sustain the work being done. Projects and activities more reliant on funding

were considered more difficult to sustain and those struggling to be funded more likely to be dropped. Professional beneficiaries worried that projects addressing COVID-19 related issues would be stopped when support is still needed. One view among local stakeholders was that having had experience of 'what works' may help schools to better prioritise funds in the future.

Long-term social mobility outcomes. Where stakeholders reported there had been progress in early years, school and post-16 outcomes, local stakeholders hoped this would build a long-term legacy for children, young people and families. There was also a view that school leaders' improved understanding of best practice and its embedding in settings would facilitate long-term school improvement. On the other hand, local stakeholders in some OAs noted the programme had limited impact on longstanding issues affecting social mobility locally (e.g. transport barriers, lack of career opportunities and viability of rural schools).

Local stakeholders stressed the importance of measuring progress in the longer term, over 10-20 years, for example through longitudinal studies. They also highlighted challenges with evaluating place-based social mobility programmes, as individual social mobility may be linked to geographical mobility and thus deplete the area of resources.

3.7.2. Barriers and facilitators

The following factors were considered to affect the sustainability of OA work:

Embedding and ownership. Strategic and local stakeholders believed that projects and activities that had been sufficiently embedded and were part of settings' ways of working were more likely to stay. Projects were also regarded sustainable where local stakeholders had committed to providing funding and decision-making. This included projects that reflected the area's priorities or built on pre-existing work. An example was mental health support being continued through the local NHS. Professional beneficiaries explained that being given ownership of projects facilitated sustainability as they felt more invested. They thought the longer timeframe of the OA programme had been beneficial as it gave them time to grow and develop projects.

Relationships and trust. Strategic and local stakeholders emphasised the importance for sustainability of the trust and relationships that the OA programme created among local stakeholders.

Continued engagement with the OA board and working together as a partnership to be clear about our priorities and how we think we can meet them. So, it comes back to what I said earlier, it's all about relationships and trust that we can use the resources we've got wisely. **Local stakeholder, urban OA**

Where they thought there had been genuine systems change and sectors and partners were working well together, they expected this would have a legacy post-OA funding. Conversely, where they perceived that strong structures had not been put in place and progress had mainly been reliant on key personalities, they worried that the work would not continue beyond the programme.

Shared learning. There was a view among local stakeholders that investment in networks will facilitate sustainability through the sharing and cascading of learning. Learning not being adequately shared was described as a barrier. This could happen at various levels, for example between the OA and LA and between project beneficiaries and those who did not take part.

At a strategic level, local stakeholders stressed the need to consider how their learning could be best cascaded to future boards and working groups, so it would not be lost. This need was also flagged at an operational level. Professional networks, hubs and research schools were regarded as crucial to the sharing of best practice. Websites and online learning hubs could help share learning across and beyond OAs. Professional beneficiaries reflected high staff turnover was a challenge to ensuring learning from OA-projects was shared within settings. In some OAs, they thought the OA programme would improve teacher retention and thus boost sustainability.

Dependence on funding. Strategic and local stakeholders as well as professional beneficiaries agreed that projects and activities that were less dependent on continued funding were more likely to continue. In contrast, projects more dependent on funds like those involving a contracted provider or licencing fees were considered more difficult to sustain. It was noted that while valuable projects may continue, important but expensive components may be cancelled.

A major concern was that the withdrawal of funding would affect staff's capacity to deliver and take part in projects. Local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries stressed that without funding, sustainability would depend on people committing their own time, which would be a challenge. They worried that without paid time for staff, projects may not continue despite their success

I am working in another very familiar similar project that doesn't have funding attached to it, and pretty much everybody has dropped out of that project. I think that's really telling of what could potentially happen here if we don't continue to fund it appropriately as it should.

Professional beneficiary, urban OA

Local and strategic stakeholders observed that sourcing new funding for projects would be difficult due to the LAs' limited funds and severity of other issues in the area (e.g.

domestic violence). One view was that it would have been useful if the programme had generated more learning on how to maximise resources through collaborative sharing.

COVID-19. Strategic and local stakeholders commented that COVID-19 had slowed down and in certain instances ‘undone’ a lot of the progress achieved through the OA programme. They flagged the danger for local areas of the ‘double whammy’ resulting from the loss of funding and implications of COVID-19 in terms of worsened social issues. Strategic and local stakeholders also highlighted that due to COVID-19, it was not possible to conduct project impact assessments as data was not available (e.g. pupil attainment data comparable with previous years). They were concerned that a lack of impact evidence would make it more difficult to justify the continuing funding of projects.

3.7.3. Approaches to ensure sustainability

Strategic and local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries sought to ensure the long-term sustainability of OA progress and outcomes in four main ways:

Deciding what work to continue. Decisions on what activities to continue in Year 5 and beyond were based on perceived need and effectiveness. Work that filled a gap in provision and aligned with local priorities was sustained. Conversely, where set targets had been achieved, activities could be stopped. The most impactful projects were continued and sometimes scaled up to other settings and areas. Separate projects could be integrated in single programmes of work for a more holistic and streamlined approach.

Year 5 initiatives also aimed to further embed best practice so this could continue once OA funding ends. At a strategic level, this meant maintaining or establishing governance structures for priority areas of work. At an operational level, it involved strengthening organisational capacity and relations, for example through networks and hubs.

Planning for sustainability. This included strategic and local stakeholders developing ‘Year 6’ plans and delivery partners setting out project sustainability plans to assess how activities can last beyond the OA and the structures and funding that need to be in place. In some OAs, local stakeholders reflected that it would have been helpful to have a long-term plan for each project at the start, outlining how this would be funded once the programme ended. In other OAs, strategic and local stakeholders as well as professional beneficiaries reported that sustainability had been accounted for from the outset.

To ensure projects would be viable long-term, plans for sustainability were included as an assessment criterion for proposals and funding was conditional on this. One way to maximise sustainability was for the LA or other partners to partly fund or commit to funding projects. The OA supported providers to answer sustainability questions and revisited them throughout the project lifetime. Professional beneficiaries appreciated that sustainability was built into activities and OA staff encouraged them to consider this.

Securing funding and strategic priority. OA delivery teams, partnership boards and LAs had started identifying and applying to other possible sources of funding to sustain activities and governance structures post-OA. Potential sources of funding included Big Lottery Fund, Community Renewal Fund and local charitable or philanthropic trusts. Local stakeholders emphasised the need to make sure this does not deprive existing local initiatives of funding. Projects that successfully addressed a local need and achieved impact managed to secure funding from national and local organisations. It was also observed that OA status could help with attracting funding.

Strategic and local stakeholders sought to secure ongoing strategic drive for the areas of work that the OA covered. Where local strategies reflected OA priorities, this was regarded as key to sustainability. However, there was a view that this was not enough and continued support from the DfE (e.g. in terms of providing data and a dedicated agenda for the area) would be needed to sustain the work. In some OAs, strategic stakeholders discussed plans for the LA to continue working with the DfE to drive the local strategy forward.

Achieving local ownership. Ensuring that local organisations could take full ownership of activities involved planning for how to sustain them without external funding. Strategic and local stakeholders reported that, where projects were seen to be especially valuable, LAs and/or local organisations (e.g. NHS, local trusts and hubs, education institutions and voluntary and community sector organisations) had committed to continue delivering them and providing funding.

So that new mental health support team which will work with schools, its delivery can build on what the OA has achieved and can be the legacy vehicle for that period of work. **Strategic stakeholder, coastal OA**

OAs were also looking at maintaining projects long-term on a 'buy-in basis', where schools opting in would pay to take part, which could be cheaper for schools with tighter budgets.

Continuing collaboration among a 'building block' of organisations (a core foundation of organisations and people continuing to do the work they had been doing as part of the OA programme) was also regarded key to achieving local ownership. There were plans to maintain networks and collaborations at different levels. In some OAs, local stakeholders intended to keep a high-level board with similar functions to the partnership board and in some cases the same members. Strategic and local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries also mentioned arrangements to sustain professional networks, including school, early years and family hubs. More informal approaches involved setting up WhatsApp groups and regular events.

Finally, strategic and local stakeholders discussed how new 'legacy bodies' were being created to continue the work of the OA. This included setting up strategy boards (e.g. around school improvement, early years and education and skills training) with their own funding streams. For example, as independent charitable trusts which could fundraise and draw on endowments for specific purposes. Strategic stakeholders explained that the OA had provided drive and support for these bodies. Some of them were already making decisions about prioritisation and procurement of work.

4. Conclusions

This qualitative process evaluation of the OA programme aimed to:

1. explore how the OA programme was delivered across OAs in Years 1 to 4, including what worked well and less well.
2. understand the benefits and challenges of taking this place-based approach to programme implementation.
3. examine how COVID-19 has affected delivery and how project beneficiaries have been supported throughout the pandemic.
4. understand the perceived outcomes of the programme and the key factors affecting them.
5. explore the twinned area approach including its successes and challenges.
6. explore methods of sustainability and legacy, and how these have been implemented.

In this chapter, we discuss key findings in relation to each of these aims.

4.1. Years 1-4 delivery (RQ1)

The OA programme aimed to improve social mobility in 12 areas across England. Strategic and local stakeholders' definitions of social mobility centred on 3 key themes. Firstly, increasing young people's choice by providing opportunities; secondly, raising aspirations through an awareness of options; and thirdly, improving life chances by making family background and birthplace less relevant in shaping outcomes. However, it was noted that a focus on social mobility did not engage critically with persisting social inequalities. This is because it is geared towards improving individuals' standing within existing socio-economic hierarchies rather than challenging those hierarchies.

Successes and challenges of programme delivery

The findings from this evaluation indicate that across OAs, the programme brought innovative approaches and consistency of practice across professionals and education settings. Two elements of the OA delivery model which strategic and local stakeholders considered especially successful were the OA staffing model and the partnership board.

The OA staffing model was praised for:

- having the same individuals at a strategic and operational level, which was perceived to make delivery more effective
- the delivery team's flexibility and ability to draw on DfE resource or the Local Authority (LA) where they did not have 'the right person in the local team'
- the seniority of the Head of Delivery, which was seen to demonstrate the DfE's commitment to the OAs and facilitated buy-in among local stakeholders

On the other hand, strategic and local stakeholders reported that where the OA delivery team had high levels of staff turnover, relationships needed to be ‘restarted’ multiple times.

In line with the Year 1 evaluation (Easton et al. 2018), the partnership board was regarded a success. This is because:

- board members generally reached decisions collectively and the vast majority were engaged, with some involved in day-to-day delivery
- boards tended to have cross-sector representation; this brought in different perspectives, maximised the chances of addressing challenges and was considered important for a complex issue like social mobility, although in a few cases, boards were perceived as being too focused on education or specific types of settings

Strategic stakeholders identified cultural shifts, reflected in increased and embedded collaboration between education settings and cross-sector working, as one of the main benefits of the programme. Strategic and local stakeholders thought that the following factors had facilitated these shifts:

- the OA delivery team dedicating time to build relations of trust with local education leaders and ensure local stakeholders’ engagement
- the perceived neutrality of the delivery team, which enabled them to act as a broker and bring local organisations together
- bringing together multi-agency stakeholders, such as through the partnership boards and working groups
- facilitating the sharing of best practice among education settings
- creating capacity to make change happen, including through funding
- harnessing a shared focus on the OA programme’s aim of improving social mobility

In some OAs, joined-up working was more difficult to achieve where education settings had contrasting agendas and approaches on key issues or where the education landscape was less uniform. This highlights the need to take historical relationships into account and for long-term partnership working to build mutual trust and collaboration.

Some local stakeholders identified the timing of communication around the Year 4 and 5 extensions as a challenge to delivery. They explained that knowing at the outset that the programme was going to last 5 years or more timely communication about the extensions would have enabled partnership boards to plan ahead more effectively.

4.2. Project engagement (RQ1)

Project beneficiaries' engagement in the OA offer was especially high when projects were considered relevant to their needs. This happened when projects plugged an existing gap and were accessible. Professional beneficiaries particularly valued projects with evidence of impact and opportunities to identify what worked for them. Children and young people enjoyed participating in projects delivered by individuals they found inspiring and had developed positive relationships with. In rural and coastal OAs, the lack of transport infrastructure and distances between areas were an ongoing barrier to beneficiaries' engagement.

Communication strategies that targeted different audiences through multiple channels (e.g. local and social media outlets as well as local services) were particularly effective at encouraging beneficiary buy-in and wider community awareness of OA projects. Community hubs or local professionals (e.g. health visitors) were in some cases an effective pathway to reaching families, especially those who could not be engaged via schools. In some OAs, however, local stakeholders attributed limited beneficiaries' engagement with projects to the lack of a well-formulated communication or branding strategy.

Limited staff capacity and competing priorities meant some education settings felt unable to commit to all available projects. This was a particular issue for small settings, those part of multi-academy trusts with large internal education initiative offers, settings that underperformed and those in areas with high levels of deprivation. Staff capacity could be even more limited in early years settings, especially those in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector. OA delivery teams sought to support settings by considering their support needs and promoting aspects of the programme that aligned to those needs.

4.3. Place-based approach (RQ2)

Strategic stakeholders outlined two key characteristics of a place-based approach:

The unit of 'place'. Some strategic stakeholders noted that a place-based approach required decision-making around what constitutes 'place'. They believed it was easier for a place-based programme to engage stakeholders and beneficiaries in OAs that had a clearly-defined shared identity compared to OAs consisting of 'a collection of places' (i.e. a number of small distinct places such as multiple towns) with different demographics and distinct identities.

Engaging with and involving local stakeholders. Strategic stakeholders across OAs agreed that a place-based approach needed to involve the local population, including systems leaders, delivery partners and prospective beneficiaries. This meant spending

enough time diagnosing local challenges and strengths to develop a clear delivery strategy; ‘co-designing’ a place-based programme with stakeholders who had local ‘credibility’; and working with local organisations to design and deliver bespoke programmes or tailor national programmes to the area.

The main benefits of taking this type of place-based approach included:

Local buy-in. Local partnership board members and delivery organisations were considered more likely to be trusted by prospective beneficiaries and delivery partners, particularly those sceptical of national providers or top-down initiatives led by central government. The involvement of multi-agency stakeholders such as schools, local businesses and the LA created the perception that the programme was collectively owned, rather than something the DfE had imposed centrally.

Relevant provision. Strategic and local stakeholders and projects leads agreed that the OA place-based delivery model was responsive to the local population’s needs. Local delivery organisations’ understanding of their area enabled their support offer to be tailored to beneficiaries’ needs. The possibility to bring in delivery partners from outside the OA was also considered helpful, especially to plug gaps in local expertise or capacity. Strategic and local stakeholders emphasised that local ownership needed to be complemented rather than replaced by external expertise.

Sustainability and legacy. The involvement of local stakeholders and delivery organisations was seen as important to ensure the sustainability of networks and projects beyond OA funding, also as they had vested personal and professional interests in the area.

Key challenges of this place-based approach included:

- in rural and coastal OAs, the lack of transport and distances between places was a challenge to beneficiary engagement and project attendance
- in OAs with a less uniform education landscape, characterised by a mixture of different academies and maintained schools, collaboration between schools was hindered
- in OAs with a less coherent identity (e.g. those covering multiple places), strategic stakeholders thought it was challenging to mobilise stakeholders and beneficiaries through the idea of place
- a focus on too big an area also risked limiting engagement, because projects could not always account for differences between places and educational settings within the area

4.4. COVID-19 (RQ3)

Starting in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic affected all OAs. COVID-19 disrupted programme delivery everywhere and especially in areas with particularly high numbers of cases. It increased pressures on education settings, limited staff capacity to deliver and take part in projects, and activities were often cancelled due to teacher or pupil illness or COVID-19 cases in schools. The pandemic also exacerbated education and social mobility challenges and strategic and local stakeholders reported it slowed down and, in some cases, halted the progress that beneficiaries, especially children and young people, had made.

OAs adapted their programmes and projects to support local communities in addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. OA responses included support for staff and families to enable home learning, food provision and mental health support. Strategic and local stakeholders and project beneficiaries stressed the value of the OA support during lockdowns. Where strong multi-agency partnerships had been established before the pandemic, this facilitated quick and tailored project adjustments and sharing of best practice.

Some COVID-19 project adaptations were particularly successful, for example OAs saw higher take-up of online professional training and career events for young people. Online delivery could overcome transport barriers to beneficiary engagement in rural OAs. Family engagement and targeted pupil support projects were also more effective due to engaging with families directly rather than through schools. On the other hand, practical activities could not be delivered online and those that focused on sensitive issues, involved younger children or one-to-one targeted family support were less effective. Different levels of access and competence in using technology meant not everyone benefitted in the same way from online support. Lack of reliable internet connection was an issue in rural OAs.

4.5. Twinning (RQ4)

In Year 4, each OA was twinned with other areas that had not been previously involved in the OA programme to work in partnership and share best practice to address identified priorities in the twinned area. Twinning involved replicating and tailoring OA projects with proven success. Implementing learning from the OA enabled a more co-ordinated response to local issues and averted potential challenges. Twinned area leads appreciated the flexibility to adapt projects to local differences and needs. Twinning facilitated conversations between strategic stakeholders, providers and communities in twinned areas. Similar to OAs, lack of previous networks among local stakeholders, limited staff capacity and COVID-19 slowed twinning progress.

4.6. Perceived outcomes (RQ5)

This evaluation asked strategic and local stakeholders and project leads and beneficiaries about the outcomes they perceived the OA programme and OA-funded projects to have achieved. Strategic and local stakeholders across OAs believed that progress had been made towards achieving particular priorities set out in the OA delivery plan. They stated that they had not seen the expected progress across all priorities, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They thought that given the extent of pre-existing challenges, it would have been difficult to achieve set targets for all priorities within the short timeframe of the programme. COVID-19 also hampered the collection of quantitative national and project evaluation data, which made measuring and demonstrating the impact of programme activities more difficult.

Strategic and local stakeholders and project leads and beneficiaries perceived the following progress for each of the domains that the OAs' priorities fell in:

Early years. Strategic and local stakeholders as well as professional and parent beneficiaries believed they had observed progress in children's academic attainment and communication and listening skills. Local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries also thought projects enabled early years settings to increase staff capacity and improve staff training and skills.

Schools. Strategic and local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries felt pupil attainment had improved in English, maths and science, as measured by teacher assessed and examination grades. They believed there were reduced rates of exclusion and higher rates of attendance among pupils as well as higher rates of staff recruitment and retention. Strategic stakeholders considered projects aimed at improving education outcomes to have been more successful in primary than in secondary schools. They attributed this to a number of reasons including: key stage 4 (KS4) having less targeted funding than KS1 and KS2, the larger size of secondary schools, and teenagers being considered as harder to engage in projects compared to younger children.

Post-16. Strategic and local stakeholders perceived an increase in young people's retention and progression in education beyond the age of 16, facilitated by better awareness of options and how to pursue them among young people and parent beneficiaries. They also spoke about an increase in the scale of careers support and young people said they felt more informed when it came to making decisions.

Mental health and soft skills. Parent and young people beneficiaries reported benefitting from social and extra-curricular activities, especially during lockdowns, in terms of practical and emotional support and developing new hobbies and skills. Professional and young people beneficiaries' engagement with projects around mental

health was high and mental health support was particularly valued in the context of the pandemic.

Across OAs and priority areas, strategic stakeholders highlighted key mechanisms which they thought had contributed to achieving outcomes. They explained that OA funding allowed for projects to be implemented and incentivised commitment of those involved in delivery. Taking a place-based approach, involving local stakeholders in the design and delivery of initiatives, meant the needs and characteristics of each OA were taken into account in developing solutions. They also believed the programme promoted better communication and collaboration between sectors and stakeholders, which facilitated the sharing of practices and effective planning towards a unified set of goals. Where networks were less developed, poor communication and practices not being shared were identified as reasons why outcomes were not achieved.

4.7. Sustainability (RQ6)

Strategic and local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries across OAs emphasised the value of maintaining the networks and collaborations created at different levels. Retaining an equivalent of the partnership board was considered important to provide strategic drive and coordination, especially in OAs with a less uniform education system consisting of different types of academies (single academies, MATs) and maintained schools. There were arrangements to sustain professional networks and new 'legacy bodies' were being created to continue the work of the OA. Local stakeholders also stressed the need for ongoing collaboration with the DfE.

There were concerns that the withdrawal of OA funding would make it difficult to sustain projects and activities, particularly those more reliant on funding. In contrast, initiatives that had been sufficiently embedded were perceived to be more likely to continue. For work that was seen as especially valuable, national and local organisations had committed to continue delivering it and providing funding, which facilitated sustainability. OAs had also started identifying other potential sources of funding and sought to secure strategic drive by aligning current projects and activities with local long-term strategies.

Local stakeholders stressed the importance of measuring progress in the longer term, over 10-20 years. They also highlighted tensions between individual social mobility and place-based improvement if socially mobile individuals leave the area. To enable social mobility as well as place-based improvement, local stakeholders emphasised the need to address structural issues in the OA beyond education (e.g. lack of transport infrastructure, low wages and limited career opportunities in the OA).

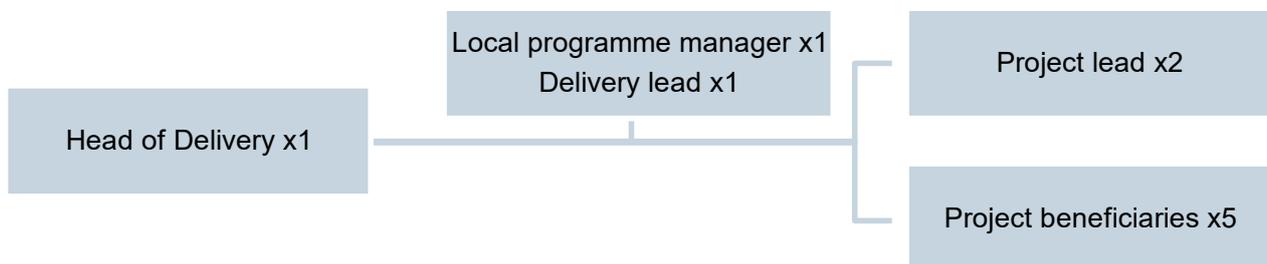
Appendix A: Data collection methods by research wave

Wave 1

Wave 1 fieldwork took place between November 2020 and March 2021 across all OAs. There was a pause in fieldwork during January and February 2021 due to the national lockdown and associated partial school closures to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

The data collection design was replicated in each OA. We aimed to interview Heads of Delivery (referred to as strategic stakeholders), local programme managers and delivery leads (referred to collectively as local stakeholders), project leads and project beneficiaries including professionals, young people and parents/carers. The fieldwork design in each area is shown in figure 2.

Figure 2. Wave 1 fieldwork design for each OA



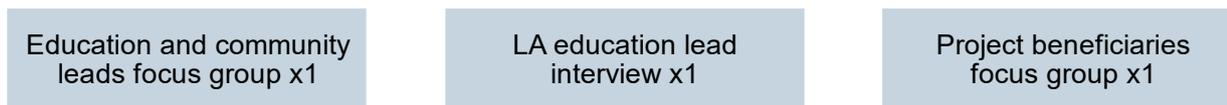
All participants took part in an in-depth interview, by telephone or online (via MS Teams), lasting around 60 minutes. Interviews were led by an experienced NatCen researcher, using a topic guide to ensure consistency in discussions across researchers and participants. Five topic guides, one for each participant type, were developed in consultation with the DfE. The topic guides broadly covered the following areas:

- an overview of the local area and the social mobility challenges faced by young people
- reflections on Years 1-3 delivery, including what worked well and less well
- how OAs responded to COVID-19
- planning for Year 4 delivery

Wave 2

Wave 2 took place in May-July 2021. In each OA, we conducted interviews with Local Authority (LA) education leads and interviews or focus groups with senior education and community leads (both referred to as local stakeholders) and with project beneficiaries. Figure 3 shows the fieldwork design in each area.

Figure 3. Wave 2 fieldwork design for each OA



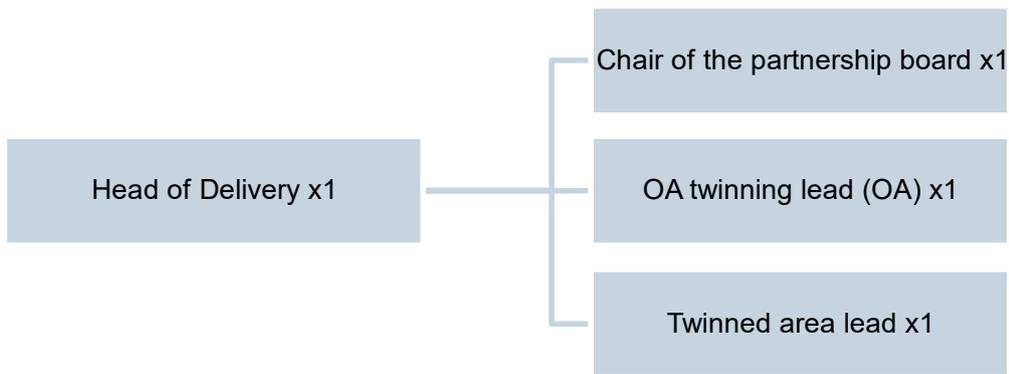
Interviews were conducted by telephone or online (via MS Teams) and lasted around 60 minutes. Focus groups were conducted online (via MS Teams or Zoom) and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The topic guides broadly covered the following topics:

- local challenges and opportunities for children and young people
- reflections on Years 1-4 delivery, including what worked well and less well
- views on the place-based approach
- perceived impact of the programme
- expected longer-term benefits of the OA programme and sustainability

Wave 3

Wave 3 fieldwork was conducted between July and September 2021. In each OA, we aimed to interview Heads of Delivery, chairs of the partnership board (collectively referred to as strategic stakeholders) and twinning leads from the OA and/or the twinned area. Figure 4 shows the fieldwork design in each area. In addition to this, we also interviewed one OA senior responsible officer (also referred to as a strategic stakeholder).

Figure 4. Wave 3 fieldwork design for each OA



All the interviews were conducted online (via MS Teams). Interviews with the Heads of Delivery, chairs and OA Senior Responsible Officer lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The topic guides covered the following:

- local challenges and opportunities for children and young people, and what social mobility means for the OA
- reflections on Years 1-4 delivery, including what worked well and less well
- views on the place-based approach
- perceived impact of the programme
- expected longer-term benefits of the OA programme and sustainability

Interviews with the twinning leads lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and covered:

- involvement in the twinning process
- key similarities and differences between the twinned area and the OA
- reflections on twinning, including what worked well and less well
- perceived outcomes of twinning
- expected longer-term benefits of twinning and sustainability

Appendix B: Participant sample by research wave

Table 4: Wave 1 sample

Participant type	Target no. of interviews	No. of interviews achieved
Head of Delivery	12	12
Delivery lead	12	10
Local programme lead	12	10
Project leads	24	24
Project beneficiaries	60	19
Total	120	75

Table 5: Wave 2 sample

Participant type	Target no. of interviews	No. of interviews achieved	Target no. of focus groups	No. of focus groups achieved
Senior education / community leads	0	10	12-24	14
Local Authority education lead	12	12	0	0
Project beneficiaries	0-48	21	12-24	13
Total	12-60	43	24-48	27

Table 6: Wave 3 sample

Participant type	Target no. of interviews	No. of interviews achieved
OA Senior Responsible Officer	1	1
Head of Delivery	12	12
Chair of the partnership board	12	11
Twinning leads	12-24	21
Total	37-49	45

re listed in alphabetical order.

Appendix C: Opportunity Area level findings

This section provides a high-level summary of the learning obtained in each OA gathered during the OA process evaluation. The OAs are listed in alphabetical order.

Blackpool¹⁴

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the Opportunity Area (OA) national process evaluation for Blackpool. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 2 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in Blackpool OA.

For Blackpool, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and September 2021: 9 interviews and one focus group with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads and twinning leads (OA twinning leads¹⁵ and/or twinned area leads¹⁶); and one interview and one focus group with project beneficiaries¹⁷.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of Blackpool OA.

¹⁴ The OA delivery plan for Blackpool can be found at:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/675034/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan-Blackpool.PDF

¹⁵ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

¹⁶ 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

¹⁷ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

Background¹⁸

Blackpool is a coastal town in North West England. Several strategic and local stakeholders and beneficiaries described how some families move in and out of the town due to seasonal and low paid, transient work. Blackpool OA delivery plan states that prior to the OA, educational attainment was around the national average for primary schools and below the national average for secondary schools. Some local stakeholders reported that historically, schools have seen frequent changes in leadership. However, they also acknowledged that Blackpool has strategic plans for jobs and economic growth, with a strong Lancashire Enterprise Partnership (LEP).

Local priorities

1. Raise attainment and progress in Blackpool's schools
2. Support for vulnerable children and families to improve attendance, outcomes and reduce school exclusions
3. Improve advice and support for young people when moving between schools, colleges and into work

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Identifying the right priorities and projects. Several local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries strongly believed the OA's priorities and projects covered the right thematic areas, targeting the greatest local educational needs.

Effective leadership. Project leads commended strategic and local stakeholders on their management of priorities. They fostered collaborative relationships through regular communication, which was an effective approach for addressing challenges. Education leaders on the partnership board proactively addressed any concerns, using their credibility with other stakeholders (e.g. headteachers) to achieve buy-in.

Collaboration between schools. Multiple local and strategic stakeholders noted that the OA programme supported secondary schools to work together in professional networks and across projects set up by the OA. Schools then developed shared approaches to tackling common challenges. For example, establishing a common goal to reduce fixed-

¹⁸ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders and project beneficiaries.

term exclusions and improving information-sharing to support pupil moves between schools. Another example has been the development of a single shared 'Blackpool Careers Journey' for schools.

Complementing current structures. The OA projects complemented current structures in Blackpool's education landscape. A local stakeholder noted how the OA programme did not establish a separate school board. Instead it drew on the Blackpool School Improvement Board which evolved into the Blackpool Education Improvement Board.

Challenges to implementation

Delayed start to delivery. Projects took a bottom-up approach to engage local stakeholders in the set-up phase, so some local stakeholders reported that it took longer to set up than expected. For example, within exclusions work, schools needed time to think beyond their own context and consider the wider challenges across the locality. Local stakeholders believed that this change in perspective was a necessary step for the project to have maximum impact.

Challenge with Department for Education (DfE) staff turnover. A commonly held view of local stakeholders was that when DfE staff left their role within the OA delivery team, the knowledge they had about Blackpool and the OA programme left with them. This created instability, as it meant the local authority (LA) and DfE had to re-establish relationships and share knowledge again.

Too many projects and initiatives. Several local stakeholders reported that in the first year of the OA, the many projects on offer meant that some schools lacked capacity to adopt and implement all the initiatives. For example, some schools opted out of the speech, language and communications project as they had committed staff time to other OA projects. Furthermore, schools were involved with other non-OA initiatives that were happening simultaneously.

Complexity of data sharing. A limited number of strategic stakeholders highlighted that complex data security requirements (e.g. of the LA) on some projects made it difficult to share data between partners. This was important for effectively targeting and helping beneficiaries. One solution a strategic stakeholder highlighted was to clearly outline to decision-makers the benefits of data-sharing for achieving wider programme outcomes.

COVID-19 response

Each project was required to make adaptations to ensure COVID-19-secure delivery. Where possible, projects took a blended approach with a mix of online and in-person delivery, although some projects had to be delayed or stopped. Projects generally adapted well, for example, the Team Around the School project supported home learning and continued to work with children at risk of exclusion. Increased numbers were reached through virtual delivery. However, online delivery excluded those with no digital

access or resources. Projects responded by providing offline resources; for example, the Blackpool Literacy Trust Reading Campaign 'Get Blackpool Reading' provided books and magazines to pupils through schools. These adjustments affected the delivery timeline and so impacted on anticipated project outcomes.

Most local stakeholders believed that COVID-19 accelerated closer partnership-working between the DfE and the LA. This was driven by the need for a coordinated response to emerging challenges. Some local stakeholders believed the LA was trusted by the DfE, as it was ideally placed to coordinate local groups due to its knowledge of Blackpool's communities and their needs.

Twining

Blackpool OA twinned with the LEP, which oversees Lancashire County Council, Blackpool Council, and Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council. Lancashire Careers Hub are the project lead on behalf of the LEP. This twinning was based on geographic proximity, the shared LEP, and because members of the partnership board had close links with Lancashire County Council. Lancashire Careers Journey was selected as a project: it had been successful in Blackpool and the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) had cited it as good practice nationally. The project focuses on 4 strands: a website with local careers opportunities, support for career leads in schools, engaging employers to prepare young people for work, and targeting those at risk of becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

The geographical proximity between the two areas, with individuals living in Blackpool and working in Lancashire and vice versa, meant that twinning provided a platform for promoting Lancashire's employment opportunities and businesses in Blackpool. Overall, a twinning lead described the twinning process as 'smooth', with project implementation happening quickly due to buy-in from those driving the project.

However, at the time of fieldwork (August 2021), a twinning lead felt there had been less progress than anticipated. The absence of an employer network in Lancashire – in contrast to Blackpool's Responsible Business Network - meant it was slow to engage employers in Lancashire with the project. Funding was limited when spread across each of the 15 business networks, which impacted the scale of activity. The initial focus therefore was to engage business networks to 'commit' to this approach. Despite these barriers, a twinning lead noted that when compared to before the project, Lancashire's

Gatsby Benchmarks¹⁹ had improved. For example, there was an increase in the number of individuals having meaningful encounters with employers. Twinning leads believed the project was somewhat sustainable, particularly the website. However, they noted that more resource-intensive strands of the project, such as those targeting young people at risk of becoming NEET, were more dependent on external funding to continue.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (attainment in schools). Local stakeholders believed that schools had improved and literacy had improved over the course of the OA programme. Several local stakeholders credited the establishment of the secondary heads group with supporting this priority, as it brought key stakeholders together who previously had not collaborated. However, some strategic stakeholders argued that the broader Blackpool OA strategy has had a greater impact on children in secondary schools than in primary schools, which they partly attributed to a stronger focus on key stage 3 (KS3) and KS4.

Priority 2 (attendance, outcomes and reducing exclusions). Multiple strategic and local stakeholders believed that while this priority took around 6 months to kick-off, it was highly successful in improving attendance and reducing exclusions. Some strategic stakeholders attributed these improvements to the uniform approach adopted across Blackpool. Meetings involving multi academy trust (MAT) chief executive officers – facilitated through the OA programme – led to a consistent approach across schools. The uniform approach made schools better able to support young people who had previously been disengaged or needed extra support within the school environment, when compared to before the OA programme.

Priority 3 (support for young people when moving between schools, colleges and into work). Local stakeholders cited many successes, despite them feeling that they had not achieved their targets on Priority 3. The successes reported included an increase in enterprise advisors supporting schools with their careers provision since the start of the OA programme, and improved Gatsby Benchmarks, e.g. an increase in the number of career advancement opportunities available to young people since 2016. A strategic stakeholder believed that a struggling local economy due to the pandemic, rising NEET figures and financially precarious household finances were key barriers to achieving better outcomes. For instance, the strategic stakeholder claimed that many beneficiary

¹⁹ The 8 Gatsby Benchmarks serve as a framework for improvement in careers provision and have been adopted as part of the Government's Careers Strategy and statutory guidance for schools and colleges.

households reported being unable to afford for family members (particularly 16-18 year olds) to take up apprenticeships.

Other outcomes. A widespread view amongst strategic and local stakeholders was that the OA programme was a very cohesive social mobility programme aimed at **young people**. This was because it combined multiple projects, priorities, and targets into a single strategy. They argued that this was the most effective approach to target something as complex as social mobility. However, a small group of local stakeholders were sceptical that the programme increased young people's outcomes outside of education, such as improving their employment prospects.

Sustainability

All 3 priorities will be kept, as they have been purposefully built into the town's 10-year education strategy which aligns with the OA programme.

To determine project continuation beyond the OA programme, each project will be required to submit plans in early 2022. A legacy and sustainability framework will then be used to assess their progress to date and the strength of alignment to the 10-year strategy. A group of local stakeholders expressed concerns about the financial viability of projects beyond the programme. For example, even if the LA or an individual school had an allocated budget for a project, it will be difficult to guarantee the budget will be spent on that project. It is possible funds might be used to address COVID-19-related challenges or to support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Some local stakeholders suggested it will be challenging for projects to source funding externally, although there are plans in place to draw on the European Social Fund or the Community Renewal Fund.

Many strategic and local stakeholders thought that the networking and relations built over the course of the OA programme have embedded learning for the long-term. They believed that the OA programme achieved long-term systems change, reflected in close partnership working between business and education through Priority 3. They 'personally' committed to continue working together after the end of the OA programme.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples are based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths; this does not reflect the size of the project.

Project 1: Speech, Language and Communications (SLC) Project

Led by Blackpool LA, the project was funded by both OA and DfE *Bercow: 10 Years On* funding. SLC specialist capacity building helped schools better identify pupil need and embed wider school-based practices through a combination of continuing professional development (CPD) delivery and additional support. Additional LA capacity helped engage schools where there were high levels of SLC need. Training was tailored to schools' needs and mapped onto the Communication Trust Progression Tools and the Graduated Approach to SEND document.

A participant believed school staff benefitted by developing a clearer understanding of SLC through the training. The training took them 'back to basics' and helped them understand what improved delivery would look like in their own school context. They perceived the project to have empowered teachers to provide communication support in the classroom with the aim to reduce the referrals to NHS and Advisory teaching service.

A participant reported that remote staff training during the pandemic had high levels of attendance. They perceived the project to have helped put SLC on the LA's radar more widely, as SLC is embedded in their recently developed literacy strategy. This suggests longer term sustainability, as it is now part of the core LA offer. Project implementation challenges related to school capacity and online delivery. Some schools withdrew from the project, as they had committed to other OA projects within the early delivery period.

Project 2: Blackpool Literacy Campaign

Led by the National Literacy Trust, the 'Get Blackpool Reading' project aimed to raise literacy levels by highlighting the benefits and enjoyment of 'Reading for Pleasure'. A network of volunteer Literacy Champions engaged with children and adults in schools and community-based settings (such as the Grand Theatre or libraries). Teacher beneficiaries highlighted that the success of the campaign was partly due to it being tailored to the area. For example, by including local authors, or working with known and trusted local organisations, such as the football club.

I think really tailoring it to Blackpool again just makes it more real to our pupils as well and really helps them engage. **Teacher beneficiary**

COVID-19 impacted on literacy development within school. Teachers were unable to enforce the dedicated reading time, and online delivery limited the ability to reach parents who could previously be engaged 'at the school gates.' Teacher beneficiaries noted that school cultures are now more supportive of reading.

[My school] didn't have a single book in it prior, and now, we have a library.... You can walk down the corridors now and our adults read out loud to the children. **Teacher beneficiary**

Bradford²⁰

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for Bradford. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 3 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in Bradford OA.

For Bradford, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and September 2021: 10 interviews and 2 focus groups with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads, and twinning leads (OA twinning leads²¹ and/or twinned area leads²²); and 2 interviews and one focus group with project beneficiaries²³.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of Bradford OA.

Background²⁴

Bradford is a city in West Yorkshire, located in close proximity to Leeds. Bradford OA delivery plan states that the area has a fast-growing economy and has developed a reputation as a city of research. In line with the OA delivery plan, multiple strategic stakeholders reported that educational attainment across all key stages was below the national average. It was a recurring view amongst local stakeholders that academisation of secondary schools had led to an increasingly fractured education system. They also felt that limited graduate opportunities and low-skilled employment have meant that

²⁰ The Bradford OA delivery plan can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696830/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan_Bradford_v10_FINAL_WEB.PDF.pdf

²¹ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

²² 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

²³ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

²⁴ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders.

young people may not be aware of the career options available to them. The OA delivery plan reports that outside of the OA programme, Industrial Centres of Excellence have brought together schools and local employers to support young people's futures through career initiatives.

Local priorities

1. Strengthening school leadership and the quality of teaching
2. Improving literacy in primary schools, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and supporting parents as partners in literacy learning
3. Improving access to rewarding careers
4. Using evidence and research to remove barriers to learning

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Taking a place-based approach. The involvement of local authority (LA) personnel in the programme ensured that OA priorities aligned with the LA and reflected the local area. A widespread view amongst strategic and local stakeholders was that local providers were better able than national partners to tailor their approaches to local needs and used their connections and informal routes (e.g. youth clubs, coffee mornings) to reach beneficiaries, such as parents/carers. Local partners were also quicker to respond and adapt projects to the local environment and emerging challenges.

Effective engagement. Several strategic and local stakeholders believed that key local leaders were engaged with the OA through partnerships. The partnership board comprised of highly regarded local stakeholders, including Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of multi-academy trusts (MATs), LA personnel and local leaders across Bradford's districts. The board provided an essential support and challenge role which drove the delivery of the programme. There was strong engagement with professional beneficiary networks (e.g. headteachers network and research network), which facilitated peer-to-peer support, sharing of best practice and brought agencies together to work towards a shared goal.

Building on existing provision. Working with provisions that were already available in the area was viewed by some local stakeholders as an effective strategy. For example, removing health barriers to learning was a priority that capitalised on existing evidence held by the Bradford Institute of Health Research and the Born in Bradford Study, to inform project development.

Challenges to implementation

Measuring outcomes. Some strategic stakeholders reported a lack of clarity from the DfE about indicators of success in the absence of quantifiable impacts, e.g. parental engagement. They found that national and local delivery partners did not always collect the necessary data to measure impacts and due to COVID-19, data was not always available (e.g. GCSE attainment). Furthermore, several strategic and local stakeholders explained that the impacts of projects may only be seen in the long-term after the OA programme has ended.

Selecting the right delivery partners. Some strategic and local stakeholders felt that although national delivery partners had submitted high quality proposals, they could lack local knowledge to tailor their support and engage beneficiaries. For example, it could be difficult for national experts to gain the trust of professional beneficiaries and establish effective relationships. A small number of local stakeholders also reflected that appointing multiple project delivery partners was problematic, as no single provider had oversight of the full project.

Tension between decision-makers. A few local stakeholders reported that there were challenging relationships between the board and the local council when it came to decision-making. A small number of local stakeholders perceived there to be limited representation of stakeholders across the different sectors on the board. They believed that the composition of the board meant that decisions did not always reflect the views of all sectors. Those who were not involved in decision-making requested greater transparency and documentation around the process, e.g. procurement choices.

COVID-19 response

Where projects could be adapted, changes were made quickly in a tailored, place-based way. This was facilitated by the strength of relationships established before the pandemic. Other projects were paused due to limited capacity and competing priorities of professional beneficiaries. It was much harder to re-engage beneficiaries once projects resumed as there were still challenges with competing priorities.

Projects shifted their focus to address emerging issues (e.g. transition stages). Additional support addressed wellbeing and home learning, such as 'Lessons on Wheels' which delivered printed schoolwork to students. Bradford OA also ran a pupil listening campaign with young people to identify what they wanted COVID-19 recovery to look like. In response, the OA funded an event called 'Summer of Fun' where the LA and local organisations put together a summer programme of enjoyable activities.

Professional beneficiaries involved in the parental engagement project suggested that COVID-19 negatively affected schools' ability to engage with parents meaningfully, which

was detrimental to the progress of parental engagement work. Changes to the mode of communication (e.g. Zoom and social media platforms) were made to maintain contact with parents as much as possible.

Twinning

Bradford twinned with Knowsley on the school improvement project. Knowsley was selected due to its similar levels of deprivation. They had also been experiencing educational challenges that Bradford had faced several years earlier. The project was selected as it aligned with the twinned area's priorities. It targeted primary schools that were Ofsted-rated 'good' but identified as at risk of a 'requires improvement' rating. These schools received implementation training from the Bradford Research School and were supported by a National Leader of Education (NLE) to develop and implement a bespoke action plan for improvement.

Bradford transferred learning from Year 1 to 4 delivery to the twin area. For example, training in Knowsley started before schools began action planning so that headteachers had the opportunity to apply their learning. Knowsley schools found it useful to work with someone from outside their area, who provided an external perspective that was free from internal politics. However, twinning leads reported that the LA in Knowsley were initially confused by the offer, as there was a lot of jargon and uncertainty around the criteria for participation. Twinning leads reflected that future messaging to stakeholders in the twinned area needed to be clearer.

Twinning leads suggested that learners' academic attainment has improved following the project. They thought headteachers had a better understanding of the importance of evidence-based initiatives and were more confident in their ability to improve the school. Bradford will provide training and support the schools to sustain the changes made. There is a hope that participating schools will share their best practice with other schools in Knowsley and that headteachers will remain in post and advocate the approach. Twinning leads would like the LA to adopt this approach to school improvement and deliver it across all schools in Knowsley.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (quality of teaching). Some local stakeholders reported that schools are improving with regards to the quality of learning that they are able to provide to children. They felt that stronger school leadership, with the support of the research school, has been key to driving forward educational improvements while giving schools autonomy. Multiple strategic stakeholders reported that the Ofsted ratings have improved meaning that an increasing number of children attend a 'good' or 'outstanding' school and have access to higher-quality teaching.

Priority 2 (literacy and parental engagement). Some strategic stakeholders believed that there had been successes in terms of improving literacy. They thought that locally driven projects, such as community champions, had been particularly impactful. However, they perceived that national partners were not able to deliver anticipated literacy improvements. Several local stakeholders noted that educational outcomes were negatively impacted by the pandemic and were difficult to determine as a result of exam cancellations. Some strategic stakeholders and professional and parent beneficiaries also suggested that there had been positive impacts on parental engagement. They explained that activities such as food parcel deliveries during COVID-19 school closures were believed to increase the number of families accessing early help. In some cases, professional beneficiaries also reported that there was improved attendance of children belonging to families that schools have supported through parental engagement work.

Priority 3 (careers). Multiple strategic stakeholders believed there had been improvements on the Gatsby benchmarks. However, a small number of strategic and local stakeholders believed there had been limited progress in improving access to rewarding careers. Although these stakeholders reported that the OA hit its target to deliver four employer interactions per child, they were not convinced by the quality of interactions. Due to limited school capacity, a small number of strategic stakeholders believed it was difficult to connect businesses with schools in a sustainable and meaningful way. As a result of the OA programme, a PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) office has opened in Bradford with the continued aim to employ school leavers. However, some local stakeholders reflected that more work needed to be done in the area's employment structure to retain skilled individuals.

Priority 4 (research barriers to learning). A common view amongst strategic and local stakeholders was that work in this area was particularly successful. They observed that projects which addressed health barriers to learning have led to more joined-up thinking between education and health sectors in Bradford. This has led to the founding of the Centre for Applied Education Research, the implementation of an early years autism screening system and the delivery of a large-scale randomised control trial of 'Glasses for Classes'. More children now have access to glasses who need them, and children are assessed for autism earlier. This work strand has received interest from ministers in the Department for Health and Social Care.

Other outcomes. Several local stakeholders and school staff reported that academies and maintained schools are no longer working in silos and recognise the importance of networking and sharing good practice. Schools are more connected with health and children's social care systems, leading to a more joined-up approach to pupils' education.

Sustainability

Some strategic and local stakeholders thought that projects were sustainable when delivery partners co-designed them and made long-term commitments. For example, as a result of their involvement with the OA, PwC opened a permanent office in Bradford and committed to supporting young people into high quality employment.

A small number of professional beneficiaries and local stakeholders believed that the strength of relationships built during the OA programme will be key to sustainability. Professional beneficiaries valued the networks they had developed through the OA and expressed the desire to maintain them.

Local stakeholders have been working with the council to identify sources of funding to continue building the attainment strategy and the Teaching School Hub has committed to delivering teacher development. The partnership board are keen to continue as a charitable trust or legacy board to be funded through philanthropic donations. In one example, a strategic stakeholder discussed the idea of a Social Mobility Foundation which would be based at the Centre for Applied Education Research. The LA intends to continue working with key stakeholders, such as MATs, through representatives on the partnership board.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples is based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths, this does not reflect the size of the project.

Project 1: Removing health barriers to learning

This priority takes a holistic approach to children's learning by addressing health needs and facilitates joined-up working between school and health services. Projects include sharing pupil data to aid early identification of neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism as well as staff training to support pupils with additional needs. Another project, 'Glasses in Classes', provides glasses and treatment to children with uncorrected eyesight.

These projects brought together health professionals and the local community to co-deliver the different elements of support. This helped to build trusted relationships in the area. Early findings indicate Glasses in Classes has been a success.

Project 2: Literacy Support Grants

This project provided support to schools with low literacy attainment. It was co-developed by local teachers, who tailored the literacy package to the needs of schools in the area. It was implemented with the assistance of the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) Research School. Independent audits were carried out at participating schools to assess current practice and develop a bespoke literacy improvement plan.

Collaboration with the EEF Research School aided the integration of evidence into the project and provided appropriate and targeted support for schools. Stakeholders reflected that the project could have been further strengthened by encouraging networking between participating schools, to share best practice and improve the cost efficiency of the project.

Project 3: Parental engagement project

Parental engagement leads were appointed in schools, these were often members of the school's senior leadership team. Schools put in place a range of parental engagement activities, including workshops, coaching, coffee mornings and distributed food parcels. They provided support with life skills (e.g. writing a CV, interview practice), health and wellbeing and remote learning (e.g. IT skills).

Parental engagement leads received mental health first aid training, which they found particularly helpful. This support aligned with schools' priorities around mental health. Beneficiaries also appreciated the opportunity to form professional networks.

[J]ust being able to speak to somebody else who was doing the same role in a different school really helped. **Parental engagement lead**

Tight timescales were challenging because under-reached families took longer to engage with meaningfully. This was made more difficult by the pandemic and limited staff capacity. Parental engagement leads reported that they were making more conscious efforts to listen to parents' needs. Schools found that this led to a reduction in the number of pupils involved in serious incidents and improved attendance. They also reported that improved relationships with the school had led to an increase in the number of families accessing early help. Parents said they appreciated the range of support, especially with English and maths, IT and careers.

[T]he school helped me, put me through to a work coach and that work coach is helping me go on more courses, so I can go on to get my confidence, my skills levels, and [go to] interviews. **Parent beneficiary**

A celebration event to recognise achievements and provide momentum for the continuation of professional networks has been planned.

Derby²⁵

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for Derby. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 4 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in Derby OA.

For Derby, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and September 2021: 9 interviews and 2 focus groups with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads, twinning leads (OA twinning leads²⁶ and/or twinned area leads²⁷); and 7 interviews and one focus groups with project beneficiaries²⁸.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of Derby OA.

Background²⁹

Derby is a mid-sized city in the East Midlands with a history of engineering and manufacturing. The city remains home to large employers in these sectors offering high-quality local employment. A group of strategic and local stakeholders explained that there is also a high-performing general Further Education (FE) college and a university in Derby. They highlighted though that outside these opportunities, the city has pockets of deprivation and families with little access to local career and education opportunities.

²⁵ The OA delivery plan for Derby can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/675035/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan-Derby.PDF

²⁶ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

²⁷ 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

²⁸ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

²⁹ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders.

Derby OA delivery plan reports that prior to the OA, educational attainment at all stages was below the national average.

Local priorities

1. Early Years: increase the number of children achieving Good Level of Development (GLD)
2. School Improvement: raise attainment in Derby's primary and secondary schools
3. Broadening Horizons: ensure that all children in Derby benefit from a broad range of experiences throughout their school lives
4. Additional priorities: Mental Health, Transitions & Pathways

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

An effective local brand. The OA used branding linked to the city to raise awareness about projects. The perceived benefit of this for some strategic stakeholders was that it created ownership among beneficiaries and increased take-up. For example, the OA ran a marketing campaign ahead of the main early years project 'Talk Derby'. Another project offered schools access to sports and arts providers under the brand 'This is Derby'.

Partnership working. The OA brought together people from different sectors and organisations to work for a shared vision of the city. New professional networks were formed between schools and different sectors (e.g. health, employment). Some local stakeholders believed the relatively small size of the city helped to foster collaboration because people were known to each other from before, and it was easy to meet.

Addressing local needs. The OA tailored project content to align with schools' needs. For example, the OA developed a bespoke phonics project with primary school leaders. This was important because some local stakeholders suggested that previously schools in Derby had not engaged with a national phonics programme that they considered too generic. Similarly, the OA developed a bespoke mental health project for children and young people that addressed an unmet need that schools in Derby had identified.

Creative ways to engage beneficiaries. Some local stakeholders felt that the OA adopted creative approaches to encourage beneficiary engagement. One project worked with Year 10 and 11 pupils to re-engage them with education. The delivery team built relationships with families outside of school, recognising the important role they play in education. They delivered events in community centres and developed an existing online school tool kit to further enhance family and pupil engagement at secondary schools.

Challenges to implementation

Delayed start to delivery. A project targeting English and maths provision in secondary schools did not start until Year 2 because schools had existing provision under the Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF). At the time, the OA considered this to be enough but looking back, some strategic stakeholders thought the delay contributed to slow improvement in key stage 4 (KS4) English and maths attainment in Years 1 to 3.

Engaging disadvantaged schools. At the time of fieldwork, secondary schools in the most disadvantaged areas were less likely to engage in school improvement activities, despite having the most to gain from them. Some local stakeholders believed that the main barrier was staff capacity in these schools with staff having to prioritise more immediate challenges (e.g. behaviour, persistent absences) ahead of a school improvement project. To engage these schools in Year 4, the OA team designed a package of support that offered customised support to school leaders.

Reaching young people disengaged from education. In most cases strategic stakeholders said that the OA made progress in reaching the most disadvantaged young people (e.g. family engagement, activities involving cultural organisations). However, a group of local stakeholders said that the OA could have achieved even more in this area. They perceived that many OA projects were school-based, which did not reach those who did not regularly attend school. One suggestion for achieving this was through social and cultural activities that target young people outside school (e.g. film or games nights).

COVID-19 response

Many school-based activities, such as peer reviews, paused in March 2020 and resumed in September 2020. Teacher continuing professional development (CPD) and training were successfully moved online, although limited staff capacity had an ongoing influence on engagement in all projects that required staff to take time out of their day job (e.g. school-based projects). Some local and strategic stakeholders said remote delivery most negatively affected projects involving in-person activities with disadvantaged families. While delivery of these projects continued partially online, they considered this less effective, as building relationships with families was more meaningful to do in-person.

The OA worked with the local authority (LA) on the COVID-19 response, helping them build capacity and engage under-reached groups. A group of local and strategic stakeholders discussed how the OA's work in Years 1 to 3 was useful for schools during partial school closures. For instance, the OA had funded a Transitions Portal that digitally collected information about pupils transitioning from primary to secondary school. Schools used the Portal during the first lockdown and continued to use it after.

Twining

The OA twinned with neighbouring LAs that are in the same Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) with Derby: Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. One of the LEP's aims is to establish Careers Hubs across all 4 LAs. The OA wanted to support this strategy and focus on young people's employment in the post-COVID-19 period. Activities included sharing and co-producing online resources with the twinned areas.

A view among twinning leads was that having the DfE lead the project helped with delivery, as local actors saw them as operating outside the political dynamics of the LAs. They also spoke positively about the choice of projects since it enabled twinned areas to build on what they had already planned to deliver as part of the LEP's plans to establish Careers Hubs. Twining with the OA brought in resources to expand the offer online.

Twining activities launched later than expected. Twining leads explained that working across teams that were collaborating for the first time led to initial communication challenges. They noted that remote working contributed to these difficulties. Contractual and data-sharing issues also delayed the start.

It was too early for strategic stakeholders and twinning leads to discuss benefits of twinning for schools and young people. They found that the main benefit to date was to create partnership-working between education and economic development teams in Derby and twinned areas, which had not existed before twinning.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (early years). Some strategic stakeholders reported that the goal to achieve GLD for all Derby children was achieved in 2019, before the main early years programme had fully launched. Strategic stakeholders felt that the success of the OA's early years projects was in cementing these positive results in future years. In their view, strong leadership and commitment from those who delivered early years projects were key to their success. They also believed that it helped that the early years community agreed that speech, language and communication (SLC) was an area for improvement in Derby.

Priority 2 (school improvement). A group of strategic stakeholders believed that they had met some targets but explained that it was difficult to estimate progress in KS2 and KS4 without national data. The perceived progress was based on anecdotal evidence from schools as well as teacher-assessed grades. These strategic stakeholders gave different reasons for not meeting some of the school improvement targets. One view was that KS4 results were challenging to achieve because of wide disparities between local secondary schools, and limited capacity in the most disadvantaged schools. Another view was that KS2 and KS4 projects needed more time to show quantifiable impact because of how late in the pupils' educational journey these interventions took place.

Priority 3 (Broadening Horizons) and additional themes. Projects under Priority 3 were reported to have increased children and young people's access to culture and sports. Some strategic stakeholders said that this was reflected in participation data and feedback from beneficiaries. The OA also delivered projects under the additional mental health priority area (e.g. assigning designated mental health leads in schools).

Other outcomes. A common view among strategic and local stakeholders was that the OA cultivated a shared vision for the city among **local actors** (e.g. schools, employers). This was evident in increased partnership-working and knowledge-sharing. They also noted that **secondary headteachers** collaborated more as a result of taking part in OA projects. Some local stakeholders believed that while they had not yet improved KS4 results, headteachers were more committed to delivering consistent improvements.

A group of strategic and local stakeholders commented that the OA programme fostered a more holistic understanding of supporting **children and young people** beyond school by improving wellbeing and access to social and cultural activities. On the other hand, they perceived that progress towards increasing social mobility for children and young people was not yet evident and required longer to materialise.

Sustainability

Several strategic stakeholders said that after the OA, the focus will shift away from projects that they feel have already successfully met their targets (e.g. early years) towards those that still required work (e.g. school improvement). They suggested that the LA needed to continue the delivery of individual projects to ensure sustainability. One example where this was already happening was the family engagement and behaviour work, where the LA appointed people from OA projects to deliver similar activities at the LA.

It was important for some local stakeholders to retain elements of the OA partnership board that had brought structure to project delivery. The OA partnership board's legacy and sustainability subgroup have been partners in local bids to become a UNESCO Learning City. Even if the bid was unsuccessful, local stakeholders believed that the status and 'prestige' of being a former OA would attract funding from other sources.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples are based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths; this does not reflect the size of the project.

Project 1: Talk Derby

Talk Derby is a speech and language training programme for early years staff, aimed at upskilling staff and improving early language provision in Derby. The techniques shared at training were simple and free to implement. This made it accessible to different types of settings and staff. In addition, Talk Derby was offered to all early years staff. This included childminders, who had not always been able to attend training targeted mainly at settings.

Take-up among childminders was relatively low. Early years practitioners suggested that childminders needed a different outreach approach to other early years staff (e.g. in-person meeting instead of a generic email). And while they were positive about the training content, they believed the duration and timing meant not everyone could take part. Shorter sessions over an evening would have been more accessible.

Early years practitioners who took part said the project changed their interaction with children.

It's changed me and the way I speak to children... it's made me a lot more aware of the impact that my setting and how I am with the children can have from such an early age.

Early years practitioner beneficiary

They also reported being able to spot gaps in children's language development sooner. Staff who attended training shared learning with their colleagues. This means that knowledge is now embedded in the system, making the benefits more sustainable.

Project 2: Let's Talk Derby

Let's Talk is an early language project for parents. It is part of the OA's wider 'Talk Derby' SLC project. It consists of 6 weekly sessions with a speech and language therapist who remotely observes a play session between a parent and their child and provides advice on how to best support the child's early language development. Parents also have access to online training videos.

Parent beneficiaries who took part liked that the one-to-one support felt personalised to their child. Parent beneficiaries described how the sessions had a relaxed atmosphere rather than one where they felt pressured or criticised; this helped with their engagement. Parent beneficiaries also liked that it was easy to attend the online sessions.

Let's Talk taught parents to use a wider range of verbs and descriptive words and to give their children more time to speak and answer questions. Parent beneficiaries believed

that these changes helped improve their children's communication and early language skills, which in turn reassured them about their child's school-readiness.

I was actually quite terrified about the idea of him [child] going to school... I'm feeling so much more relaxed and confident now. **Parent beneficiary**

Project 3: KS4 English and maths

This CPD project addresses low attainment in KS4 English and maths in Derby through peer-to-peer support. Project leads chose this delivery approach with the view that it would create more collaboration between secondary schools that were perceived to have worked in silos before the OA programme. This would lead to more sustainable changes in the sector.

Although the project fostered collaboration between schools, a participant reported that it did not improve results at KS4. Project leads found that one reason for this was that the project did not always reach the most disadvantaged schools. They also thought peer reviews were not the best way to engage secondary schools. This is because the secondary sector is competitive and schools therefore reluctant to discuss specific challenges facing their settings. Senior leaders were also cautious about dedicating staff time to projects outside the school. In retrospect, project leads believed investing in external training and expertise could have made the project more accessible.

Project 4: Our future Derby

This project aims to break down career stereotypes and raise aspirations among primary school pupils in the most disadvantaged wards in Derby. The project trains teachers to become careers champions and helps them deliver events in schools.

Participants spent time building relationships with each school and gave staff hands-on support during delivery. They believed this helped with overall take-up and engagement. The main drawback for participants was that some schools engaged less well than others due to competing priorities. But overall, they said that the project was easy for schools to deliver and children found the events fun and engaging. Children engaged particularly well when volunteers were from Derby, or when they spoke about their journey of coming from a less privileged background.

Doncaster³⁰

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for Doncaster. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 4 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in Doncaster OA.

For Doncaster, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and September 2021: 10 interviews and 2 focus groups with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads, twinning leads (OA twinning leads³¹ and/or twinned area leads³²); and 5 interviews and one focus group with project beneficiaries³³.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of Doncaster OA.

Background³⁴

Doncaster is a large town in South Yorkshire that is known for its history of coal mining and railways. The town is geographically dispersed and made up of smaller communities with their own local identities. Several strategic and local stakeholders explained that Doncaster has experienced significant economic and job growth in recent years, but some communities remain marked by intergenerational poverty. Doncaster OA delivery plan reports that prior to the OA, educational attainment was below the national average.

³⁰ The OA delivery plan for Doncaster can be found at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696827/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan_Doncaster_v10_FINAL_WEB.PDF.pdf

³¹ OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

³² 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

³³ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

³⁴ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders.

Local priorities

1. Building solid foundations for all children
2. Brilliant teaching and leadership for all secondary pupils
3. No career out of bounds
4. Opportunities extend to all

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Inspiring project leadership. Successful projects benefitted from leaders who brokered partnership-working within (e.g. schools) and between sectors (e.g. schools and businesses). These included Careers Hub and Challenge Partners projects. Some strategic stakeholders believed the role of leadership was particularly evident for projects within Priorities 3 and 4. They believed that these thematic areas did not have strong systems-leaders or administrative structures, like schools did. This had the benefit of providing more space for individual leaders to co-create the projects.

Collaboration and ownership. The OA enabled schools to work together on shared issues (e.g. Transition Steering Group, Challenge Partners, Doncaster Association of Secondary Heads). A group of strategic stakeholders thought that when schools understood the value of working together, the projects were more successful. This was especially compared to what they considered previous and more prescriptive school improvement activities.

Tailoring projects to local needs. Some strategic and local stakeholders thought that the most successful projects were tailored to the local context. For example, literacy in primary schools emerged as an area that needed additional support. Rather than commissioning a national reading programme, the OA developed a bespoke offer to schools that addressed school and subject leadership in reading. These strategic stakeholders explained that this approach meant projects took longer to launch, as they required bringing people together and agreeing on shared goals. But they concluded that it was time well spent because it led to more successful and sustainable outcomes.

Challenges to implementation

Too many small projects. A perception among several local stakeholders was that the OA had initially offered schools too many projects, which led to schools developing 'initiative fatigue'. Over time, they believed that OA developed fewer initiatives that were more bespoke to schools and more focused on helping school leaders implement initiatives. Some strategic stakeholders agreed that the OA had initially invested in too many projects with small budgets and scope. They saw these as less likely to have

meaningful and long-lasting impact compared with larger projects that aimed for systems change.

Communication with schools. Some local stakeholders reported that in the early part of the OA programme, schools often found out about opportunities too late and as a result missed out on them. In addition, many schools incorrectly believed that they were not eligible to take part in OA projects (i.e. due to not being in the right Ofsted category or not having enough disadvantaged pupils). However, these local stakeholders perceived that communication with the OA improved over the course of the programme.

Engaging secondary schools. A group of strategic and local stakeholders discussed how the OA had mixed success engaging the secondary sector in school improvement activities at the outset, although this improved over time. For one, the OA needed to invest time to engage secondary schools that are part of regionally-led multi-academy trusts (MATs) in local projects. In addition, these strategic and local stakeholders said that the OA did not initially have good engagement from some of the most disadvantaged secondary schools. Some strategic stakeholders suggested that subject-based continuing professional development (CPD) did not address the deep-seated challenges faced by these schools, hence making the offer less appealing to them.

COVID-19 response

School-based projects were either paused in March 2020 and resumed in September 2020, moved to remote delivery or completed early. Some local stakeholders perceived that schools with large numbers of disadvantaged pupils had even less capacity than others to engage with OA projects during partial school closures.

Teacher CPD and training moved online at the start of the pandemic. Engagement in training and CPD increased because professional beneficiaries found it less time-consuming to participate remotely than in-person. Remote working also meant that more employers could attend virtual events with schools. Some strategic stakeholders said that virtual engagement with employers would continue in the post-COVID-19 period.

Some strategic and local stakeholders thought that the OA's pre-pandemic work was helpful in mitigating the effects of the pandemic. For instance, the Careers Hub had cultivated relationships between schools, employers and the local authority (LA) who came together in a steering group to develop a plan to prevent a rise in young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) in Doncaster.

Twinning

The OA twinned with the other three LAs in South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA): Sheffield, Rotherham and Barnsley. The OA works closely with the MCA and started sharing Careers Hubs activities a year before twinning started. Several strategic

stakeholders and twinning leads explained it was natural to build on this work through twinning. They used the twinning resource to help set up a Careers Hub and two careers websites for young people, START and Panjango. The website idea resonated with the MCA as it has a commitment to an all-age career platform in their current economic plan.

Twinning leads found it positive that they could use the online resources already developed at Doncaster but customise them to fit the local areas. They also liked that Doncaster OA shared resources and invited regional colleagues to careers events where they could observe and learn. However, the involvement of four LAs meant it took the OA longer than expected to commission work and issue contracts.

At the time of the interviews, it was too early for twinning leads to discuss benefits for schools and young people. The main perceived benefit of twinning to date was the creation of regional networks between careers leaders. Before twinning, careers leaders did not collaborate regionally. Now, they share best practice across South Yorkshire. Some strategic stakeholders at the OA were confident that these networks would remain in place beyond the OA programme, as careers leaders valued the increased collaboration.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (primary school improvement). A group of strategic stakeholders perceived that there was a small improvement in reading, writing and maths at key stage 2 (KS2) shortly before the pandemic, compared to when the programme started in 2017. However, they also felt that this was not enough to meet targets. Some strategic stakeholders believed that the more collaborative approach of the primary sector drove the potential upward trajectory in results. They felt that primary schools were willing to recognise weaknesses and work together to improve results in Doncaster.

Priority 2 (secondary school improvement). Some strategic stakeholders said the KS4 attainment targets were designed to be 'stretching'. While they felt that schools made modest improvements before the pandemic, compared to 2017, they did not think that the OA was on course to meet targets. These strategic stakeholders believed that this was due to the time it took to engage the secondary sector in OA projects. In addition, they perceived that school improvement activities, designed to be collaborative, were more successful with primary schools compared to secondaries, as they were considered to be more competitive.

Priority 3 (careers). Some strategic stakeholders reported that improvements were made on Gatsby Benchmarks and the number of pupil encounters with employers. The strategic stakeholders believed the Benchmarks were a useful tool that provided schools a clear target to work towards and therefore helped mobilise action. Moreover, the OA's positive relationship with the external provider (Careers and Enterprise Company) and

the local Chamber of Commerce helped to achieve the target number of employer encounters.

Priority 4 (opportunities). A group of strategic stakeholders said that the OA successfully helped extend the reach of Children’s University and National Citizen Service programmes. In addition, the OA had fostered productive relationships with the third sector and individual providers, and this helped meet expected outcomes.

Other outcomes. Some local stakeholders explained that the OA helped break down barriers for **children and young people** ‘beyond the school gate’. For instance, the projects highlighted how addressing poor behaviour and persistent absences require an understanding of pupils’ family contexts. Some local stakeholders reported anecdotal evidence that attendance and number of exclusions had both reduced over the course of the programme. At the time of the interviews, strategic and local stakeholders believed that it was too early to see improvements in social mobility.

Strategic and local stakeholders reported that **schools**, particularly primary schools, were working together more than before the OA. Stakeholders had different views on whether secondary schools also collaborated more. Some found that schools worked together more through the new Doncaster Association of Secondary Heads, while others believed that networking remained weak.

Sustainability

At the time of interviews, the OA partnership board was collaborating with the LA to ensure continuity of the OA’s work. Doncaster LA has a 10-year Education and Skills 2030 strategy (ES2030) that speaks to many of themes that the OA is focused on. Key personnel from the partnership board will contribute to this work in governance and board roles.

Strategic stakeholders said that all priorities will remain, but that the focus of each will shift towards more successful or higher priority activities. For example, the collaborative networks formed under Priorities 1 and 2 will remain but schools will take part in fewer, smaller projects. Under Priority 3 work on careers will continue, including the MCA careers hub. Under Priority 4, schools and the LA may continue some of the activities (e.g. summer activities, Children’s University).

Project examples

Each of the following project examples are based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths; this does not reflect the size of the projects.

Project 1: Transition Project

The aim of the project is to improve transitions to secondary school for all Year 6 pupils in Doncaster. Before the project, schools had inconsistent approaches to transitions that led to poor outcomes (e.g. low attendance, exclusions) for some pupils. An OA-funded team at the LA set up a Transition Steering Group with local schools to agree on best practices. The delivery team then helped schools implement them.

Headteacher beneficiaries valued that the project provided all schools with the same resources (e.g. virtual tours, workbooks). They also liked that the delivery team was easy to reach to resolve queries from staff and parents. Some local stakeholders reported that the project was unsuccessful at initially engaging some secondary schools that are part of MATs, as some continued to follow the transition policies of their MATs.

Headteacher beneficiaries believed the project helped them to better plan for transitions. In addition, the delivery team created more capacity in schools by taking on administrative tasks (e.g. creating resources, organising communications, answering parent queries). This allowed schools to focus on pupils' needs.

It meant that I could really just focus on the students and that's the most important bit: that they're more comfortable coming up [to secondary school]. **Headteacher beneficiary**

Project 2: Doncaster Careers Hub

The project aims to increase Doncaster schools' performance against the Gatsby Benchmarks and thereby improve outcomes for young people. All secondary settings are signed on to the Hub, which provides them with free-of-charge support and resources to improve their attainment on the Benchmarks. Activities include employer events at schools, careers fairs and one-to-one support for young people.

A participant said that the project raised schools' attainment against the Benchmarks. Employers benefitted from having a single point of contact for all settings, including smaller ones. Similarly, schools benefitted from having access to new and varied providers and employers. Moreover, the Hub has raised the profile of careers in education and schools now consider careers to be a key school improvement priority. Senior leader beneficiaries noted that young people enjoyed the events organised through the Hub. They engaged particularly well when meeting local residents in different professions; this opened their eyes to what they could themselves achieve.

Students don't realise there are jobs for lawyers, doctors, in Doncaster itself. This means they [now] think more widely than what their family does for work. **Senior leader beneficiary**

Project 3: Learning Matters

This CPD project aims to upskill headteachers to improve teaching and learning in disadvantaged primary schools in Doncaster. The local EEF Research School delivered the project, which consisted of training events followed by ongoing support from experienced local headteachers. Competing priorities in schools meant that engagement levels varied. But training participants fed back to project leads that the project created a more evidence-based culture in schools. Before, headteachers used their professional judgement or experience to make decisions. Now, they looked to evidence (e.g. EEF guidance, training material) to direct teaching and learning.

Project 4: Post-16 Mentoring Project

This mentoring project at Doncaster College aims to support young people with their education and overall wellbeing. Since December 2020, learners at the general further education college have had access to weekly, one-to-one sessions with a college-based mentor. In these sessions, mentors support young people with their education (e.g. workload, attendance) and encourage them to stay focused on their goals.

There was a point where I wasn't going to my [GCSE] maths classes and she [mentor] said that it's good to just get it out of the way now because next year it will probably be harder to pass it. Ever since then, I've been a lot more concentrated. **Children and Young People (CYP) beneficiary**

CYP beneficiaries reported having a good relationship with their mentor who they found easy to speak to. They explained that the advice and support had helped to keep them on track with college assignments. They were now expected to pass their English and maths GCSEs which had held them back from progressing onto a Level 3 course. They also highlighted that mentoring benefitted their mental health.

Fenland and East Cambridgeshire³⁵

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for Fenland and East Cambridgeshire. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 3 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire OA.

For Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and August 2021: 11 interviews and one paired interview with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads and twinning leads (OA twinning leads³⁶ and twinned area leads³⁷); and one focus group with project beneficiaries³⁸.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of Fenland and East Cambridgeshire OA.

Background³⁹

Fenland and East Cambridgeshire are 2 neighbouring local authority districts (LADs) in Eastern England. Strategic and local stakeholders described both as large, rural areas with small populations. They reported that larger towns in East Cambridgeshire have transport links to Cambridge, but smaller communities in both localities are geographically isolated with limited transport. Strategic and local stakeholders stated that

³⁵ The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire OA delivery plan can be found at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696826/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan_Fenland_East_Cambridgeshire_v11_FINAL_WEB.PDF.pdf

³⁶ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

³⁷ 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

³⁸ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

³⁹ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders.

education provision is dispersed due to small populations and schools struggle to recruit and retain staff. They observed that post-16 opportunities, particularly in Fenland, are limited by the cost and time of travel.

Local priorities

1. Accelerate the progress of disadvantaged children and young people in the acquisition and development of communication, language and reading
2. Strengthen the effectiveness of support for children and young people with mental health concerns and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
3. Raise aspiration and increase access for young people to a wide range of career choices and post-16 routes
4. Recruit, develop and retain the best leaders and teachers

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Addressing gaps in local provision. Several OA projects filled gaps in local education supply. For example, the OA helped to address a gap in SEND provision by funding special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) qualifications in participating schools. The OA also invested funding in local sixth form provision that was at risk of closure. These investments were seen by some strategic stakeholders as successful in addressing issues in local provision.

Investing time in building relationships. Some local stakeholders perceived that the OA was successful in building relationships with and between schools. At the start of the programme, the OA delivery team visited each school in-person and organised network events to share best practice. They also reached out to early years settings and childminders. Strategic stakeholders thought this led to improved engagement in OA projects. These stakeholders considered networking between schools particularly valuable in a rural area where schools are smaller and more dispersed than in urban areas.

Flexible and bespoke approaches. The OA gave schools and early years settings opportunities to suggest their own solutions to challenges they faced. For example, in Year 4, schools could bid for up to £5,000 to aid with COVID-19 recovery. In Years 1-4, schools could also bid to fund their own teacher recruitment and retention solutions. Some strategic stakeholders discussed how these approaches encouraged take-up and engagement.

Right balance of support and challenge. Some strategic stakeholders stated that many schools in Fenland were behind national averages in educational attainment at the

start of the programme. The OA offered schools support and investment to work on improvement plans, while remaining mindful of local challenges of teacher recruitment and retention. Some strategic stakeholders believed that the OA achieved a good balance of support and challenge to facilitate improvements in attainment.

Challenges to implementation

Gaining school buy-in. In Year 1, the OA delivery team offered schools a set of interventions to choose from. This unintentionally created the perception that the OA was telling schools what to do and was perceived by schools to be similar to previous programmes which schools believed to be unsuccessful. Some strategic stakeholders said that schools were sceptical and thought this was one reason why take-up of projects in the first 2 years was low. They observed that engagement improved as activities became more bespoke over time, and that including schools in project selection at the outset would have encouraged buy-in from the start.

Addressing school improvement. Some strategic stakeholders discussed how it was initially challenging to engage school leads in frank conversations about opportunities for school improvement. This made it harder to identify and implement school improvement activities. In addition, many of the ideas that schools themselves proposed lacked an evidence base. The OA addressed these challenges by setting up professional networks for schools to share best practice and by encouraging schools to consult evidence-based solutions for school improvement (e.g. from the Educational Endowment Foundation).

Effective partnerships. Some strategic stakeholders thought that the OA delivery team occasionally experienced challenges establishing effective partnerships with external organisations (e.g. NHS, local authority). For example, the OA partnered with the local NHS Trust to provide schools with a single point of contact for mental health provision, and with the local authority (LA) to deliver careers activities in schools. However, limited time and resources within partner organisations meant their capacity to deliver projects was reduced.

COVID-19 response

Some school-based projects moved online, and the delivery period was extended to December 2020 or April 2021. Delivery continued, albeit with reduced capacity of schools to take part. The OA offered schools a £5,000 grant that they could flexibly use to respond to COVID-19. Some schools used it to top up the number of laptops available through the national programme. The OA also supported schools to deliver online learning and re-focus curriculums on COVID-19 recovery. Some strategic stakeholders noted that COVID-19 had a large impact on project delivery under Priority 3, particularly apprenticeship activities that were curtailed by the labour market effects of the pandemic.

Travel is a significant barrier in this rural area. Some strategic and local stakeholders observed that one unintentional upside of COVID-19 was to reduce travel barriers through remote delivery. For example, attendance in the partnership board meetings improved because members did not have to travel. And while normally travel barriers mean that the area was removed from centres of expertise like Cambridge or London, online events made it possible to bring in external knowledge. Attendance in these events among professional project beneficiaries was high during remote delivery.

Twinning

The OA originally twinned with King's Lynn and West Norfolk, an LA that borders Fenland. The delivery team planned to deliver mental health training in schools, but uptake among schools was low. The OA redirected the funding and twinned with Peterborough City Council. They decided to extend the STEPS project to the twinned LA. STEPS is a therapeutic approach to behaviour management in schools and involves staff training. The OA also delivered a continuing professional development (CPD) webinar series, which was available to all staff.

Twinning leads from the OA and twinned area agreed that the choice of activities and school engagement were good. Twinning leads at the OA noted that the OA's existing relations with education leadership in the twinned areas helped with take-up. For example, having the buy-in of senior leaders made it easier to promote the offer to schools. In addition, training participants fed back that delivery was high-quality.

Twinning leads said they had feedback from training in which participants said they felt more confident and empowered to manage behaviour in schools. It was too early for twinning leads to assess impacts on pupils, as it would take time to embed the STEPS approach. Twinning leads at the OA said the twinning process strengthened relations between the LAs. However, some of the leads from the twinned area were unsure about what being a twinning partner meant and what the rationale for choosing them was.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (language and reading). Some strategic stakeholders thought that outcomes for early years and key stage (KS1) and KS2 improved up until 2019. The strategic stakeholders also suggested that the reading gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children had nearly closed in 2019. They also believed that KS2 attainment improved more slowly but was also on an upward trajectory. Individual interventions reportedly also showed progress. One that was highlighted as a positive intervention was the Talking Tigers early years language intervention. These strategic stakeholders ascribed these perceived positive results to the investment in literacy and phonics at early stages of the OA programme, as well as best practice networks set up by the OA.

Priority 2 (mental health and SEND). Some strategic stakeholders explained that the target for reducing waiting lists for children and young people's mental health referrals was challenging to measure (i.e. the OA does not have access to this data on a regular basis). It was also not an area that the OA could influence (i.e. they did not have leverage over the local NHS Trust). On the other hand, strategic stakeholders reported that the uptake of mental health training increased over the course of the OA programme. The strategic stakeholders recalled that the feedback they had received on the effects the training on participants' confidence and abilities was positive. They also stated that feedback from schools suggested that thanks to the OA programme's focus on mental health, the topic was now more of a priority in local schools compared to before. The OA benefitted from building relationships with local mental health providers who shared their knowledge and expertise to shape the delivery and content of the training.

Priority 3 (careers and post-16). Some strategic stakeholders said that the OA made some progress in secondary schools achieving higher on the Gatsby Benchmarks. In addition, careers provision in local schools was described as being less patchy than pre-OA. On the whole, however, these strategic stakeholders thought the OA did not make a strong impact in this area. One reason they gave was that the OA had little influence on the local post-16 environment compared to, for example, the LA. These strategic stakeholders also perceived that the partnership board had more expertise in schools and early years, and therefore felt more confident investing in these areas compared to post-16 and careers.

Priority 4 (teacher recruitment and retention). Some strategic stakeholders reported that the OA reached its teacher recruitment targets. Strong take-up from schools, especially of the incentive allowance scheme, helped to reach targets. These stakeholders discussed less progress in retention compared to recruitment. They explained that many barriers to retention (e.g. transport, labour market) were not within the scope of the OA to address.

Other outcomes. It was the recurring view of local and strategic stakeholders that the OA projects brought **schools** closer together. They reported that schools now collaborate more and share best practice through professional networks. In particular, smaller rural schools are now more involved in the local school community. Local stakeholders also thought staff are more confident to try out new approaches to teaching and leadership, when before they kept to what they already knew.

Some strategic stakeholders noted that investment in the local sixth form college means that more **young people** can access sixth form provision locally rather than having to travel to Cambridge. In addition, projects aimed at Broadening Horizons allowed children from the local area to see and experience new things (e.g. visiting Cambridge University). These activities also benefitted **parents** who took part with their children. Most strategic

and local stakeholders perceived that it was too early to assess improvements in social mobility.

Sustainability

The OA partnership board plans to form a charitable trust to build on the work of the OA. They aim to raise a large endowment from individual donors, charities and employers. The trust will initially focus on early years and post-16 in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire but with a view of extending the scope to schools as well as other localities in East Anglia. The trust will have a board of trustees and a number of advisory groups (e.g. headteacher advocates) who will steer the trust's priorities. For strategic stakeholders, the perceived benefit of a trust was that like the OA partnership board, it will help to coordinate a 'fragmented' local education system, characterised by different academies and maintained schools.

Local and strategic stakeholders expected that the focus on school improvement and early years provision will be maintained through the professional networks the OA helped to establish in the area. However, they said that teacher recruitment and retention activities will likely not continue because there is no other obvious funding source to maintain them.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples are based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths, this does not reflect the size of the projects.

Project 1: Youth Advisory Board and Wellbeing Wallet

The Fenland Youth Advisory Board (YAB), set up by the OA, brings young people (aged 13-24) from the local area together in monthly meetings to discuss topics important to them. The YAB commissioned the Young People's Counselling Service to develop a Wellbeing Wallet, an online toolkit with advice and activities to support young people who are struggling with their mental health. The toolkit will be rolled out in secondary schools in Fenland over the 2021/22 school year.

Young people who helped develop the toolkit found it a positive experience. They enjoyed collaborating and sharing their thoughts with others. The mental health topic created a lot of interest among young people, which meant attendance was good. However, the launch of the toolkit was delayed by COVID-19. Once the development meetings were up and running again, the beneficiaries found that the quality of interactions was not the same in remote meetings compared to in-person.

Developing the toolkit made young people who took part in the project more aware of mental health topics. It also helped them discuss their own mental health more openly during meetings. Lastly, they felt proud to make a difference to their local community.

I know that I'm contributing to positive change for students in this area. It just makes me very happy that I get to be involved in something. I feel very proud about it. **Children and Young People beneficiary**

Project 2: Cultural Enrichment Activities for Young People

Activities under this project included Essential Life Skills that worked with disadvantaged young people who were put forward by their schools and colleges. Fenland YAB signed-up young people to be Youth Voice representatives in local schools or colleges. Lastly, Detached Youth Work supported young people NEET or on the antisocial behaviour order list during school holidays.

The projects achieved successes in building relationships with local partners, which helped with project delivery. For example, the Detached Youth Work project coordinated with the local community police to reach more young people. In addition, Fenland YAB had good relationships with local schools. By contrast, the set-up of the East Cambridgeshire YAB was delayed as they lacked existing relationships with schools. A challenge for the overall project was that it was limited to mainstream provision and did not reach special schools and colleges.

Project 3: Teacher Recruitment Package

This project aims to recruit high-quality teachers to the local area. The project provides funding for schools to offer incentives to new recruits. Schools could apply for bespoke grants, for example to cover relocation costs, childcare, inductions, postgraduate studies and CPD. The project led to schools recruiting more high-quality staff.

It has helped the recruitment of teachers in the area, which was a real need, and I think it's really important to have. **Project lead**

Schools appreciated that the application process was flexible and straightforward. The project benefitted schools by giving them new ideas on what they can offer new recruits. Some schools used the funding to develop a teacher induction programme. For these schools, the same resources could be used again for future inductions.

A challenge for the project at the start was low awareness of the scheme, although it improved over time and the project met its target numbers. Take-up was lower among early years settings. Feedback from the early years sector suggested that the grant was targeted more at education and early years professionals.

Hastings⁴⁰

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for Hastings. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 2 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in Hastings OA.

For Hastings, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and September 2021: 9 interviews and 2 focus groups with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads and twinning leads (OA twinning leads⁴¹ and/or twinned area leads⁴²); and 3 interviews and one focus group with project beneficiaries⁴³.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of Hastings OA.

Background⁴⁴

Hastings is a seaside town on the south coast of England. Some local stakeholders commented that the town has long-standing intergenerational poverty with some neighbourhoods being among the most deprived in the country.⁴⁵ It has a large proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET)

⁴⁰ The OA delivery plan for Hastings can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696829/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan_Hastings_v12_FINAL_WEB.PDF.pdf

⁴¹ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁴² 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁴³ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

⁴⁴ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders.

⁴⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

when compared to the national average⁴⁶, and, as reported by a strategic stakeholder, many young people leave the town to seek job opportunities elsewhere outside of the dominant service and hospitality sector. Many strategic stakeholders referenced the poor transport links between Hastings and other areas in East Sussex. However, multiple local stakeholders noted that despite a lack of local transport, Hastings is a growing commuter town with many residents working in London. Hastings has a rich cultural history with galleries and performance venues opening in the town.

Local priorities

1. Improving literacy
2. Raising attainment in maths
3. Improving mental health and resilience
4. Broadening Horizons and preparing young people for work.

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Combining local delivery with external support. For example, the Hastings Maths project supporting teachers was locally owned and led by the Ark Academy Trust and the Sussex Maths Hub. Some local stakeholders saw this flexible delivery model as a way to ensure a shared level of professional expertise and consistent practice across schools.

Strengthening collaboration between settings. All types of educational settings across Hastings worked together on projects, such as the work under the Broadening Horizons priority. It brought together professionals from multiple sectors to make young people aware of different career options and enrichment activities. Some strategic stakeholders acknowledged that these activities would have been difficult for one setting to lead independently, making collaboration a strength of the local model.

Effective board that challenges. The partnership board brought together stakeholder groups including businesses, the borough council, the county council, the health authority, the education authority and representatives of schools in Hastings. A group of local stakeholders believed that this enabled board members to challenge each other

⁴⁶ Data available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/neet-and-participation-local-authority-figures> and <https://czone.eastsussex.gov.uk/student-management/participation-education-training-employment/data-on-participation-and-neet/>

effectively. The cross-sector composition, particularly representation from outside of education, introduced a new way of thinking about education challenges.

A focused approach. Some strategic stakeholders explained that clearly defined priority areas helped delivery remain focused throughout the programme. It ensured that money was spent purposefully on projects across all 4 priority areas and that funding was not spread too thinly.

Challenges to implementation

Ownership of OA. The OA programme fell under the remit of the East Sussex County Council (ESCC). Some local stakeholders believed ESCC were better placed to deliver changes to educational outcomes, as they had existing relationships with local schools and the DfE. Others thought that ESCC was too 'removed' from Hastings and did not understand the place as well as Hastings Borough Council. The same local stakeholders regarded the ownership structure of the OA programme as a potential challenge to achieve sustainability, as the OA programme was less integrated into Hastings Borough Council's strategic planning.

Working with non-OA projects. A small number of local stakeholders believed there was limited joined-up working and coordination between projects within the OA programme and outside of it. They cited the example of the Lego Lab funded by Hastings Borough Council. A group of local stakeholders thought the OA programme could have promoted this project. They thought the Lego Lab could have been aligned and coordinated better with OA programme interventions. The local stakeholders did not comment or discuss whether the Lego Lab should have been funded by the OA, but they noted that it was illustrative of a lack of joined-up working with other projects.

Engaging secondary schools. Many strategic and local stakeholders explained that leadership turnover and changes to the secondary school landscape (e.g. 2 schools merging) limited secondary school engagement with the OA programme. Furthermore, they suggested that some schools were reluctant to take up new projects if they already had existing projects in the same thematic area e.g. literacy. However, a strategic stakeholder believed that a group of schools switched to OA projects after seeing other local schools improve their outcomes through OA interventions.

Funding applications from schools. Some local stakeholders explained that schools experienced difficulties applying for specific non-educational grants (e.g. from the Arts Council), as they tended to be inexperienced with such applications. They noted that while the 2 OA liaison officers assisted schools with such applications as part of their wider role and duties, they believed more support was needed to assist all schools in Hastings when applying for non-educational grants.

COVID-19 response

Local stakeholders were involved in ensuring projects could deliver or adapt after the start of the pandemic. Where possible projects moved delivery online, while those reliant on in-person activities stopped, like the Broadening Horizons extracurricular activities.

Where projects did stop, funding pivoted to COVID-19 support, such as to alleviate food poverty. Some projects changed their scope. For instance, the Literacy Campaign shifted from community events to focus on distributing books to children to aid home learning. The distribution occurred through a local foodbank, and many strategic stakeholders believed it reflected the strong and complementary relationships in the community.

Overall, local stakeholders frequently voiced concerns about COVID-19 undoing the work of the OA programme in Hastings. This is because it exacerbated social mobility challenges (e.g. poverty).

Twinning

Hastings twinned with Portsmouth local authority (LA) on 2 literacy projects that had run successfully in Hastings: Hackney Learning Trust's Destination Reader and Daily Supported Reading. Portsmouth LA chose literacy as the twinning focus, to raise standards in reading and writing at key stage 1 (KS1) and KS2. 11 schools with the highest proportion of disadvantaged pupils and the greatest perceived need were selected for twinning.

A twinning lead reported improvements in pupils' enthusiasm for reading and knowledge of books over the course of the projects. Schools remarked that children's enthusiasm remained despite transitioning to remote learning during COVID-19.

While limited to 11 schools, a small number of strategic stakeholders and a twinning lead reported a willingness among schools to share learning more widely. The Portsmouth Education Partnership shared insights at a local education conference and – at the time of fieldwork (August 2021) – was planning on sharing more learning about the projects to schools across the town.

The 2 projects are continuing in Year 5. Funding has been arranged to cover all schools currently involved as well as the possibility of including new schools.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (literacy). A group of local stakeholders cited anecdotal findings to demonstrate that schools have become better at promoting reading for enjoyment and more adept at supporting children with low literacy levels. They suggested this was because Priority 1 projects provided schools with a framework and resource for effective

intervention. However, COVID-19 meant there has not been any standardised national data available since 2019. Some strategic stakeholders referenced that primary schools had seen improvements in phonic standards. Local stakeholders contrasted this with secondary schools which they suggested had not achieved the KS4 literacy targets. Multiple local and strategic stakeholders attributed this contrast to the fairly disrupted landscape of secondary education in Hastings, which included 2 schools merging and a high turnover at senior leadership level.

Priority 2 (maths). Some local stakeholders reported anecdotal feedback that teachers were more confident delivering maths after receiving dedicated continuing professional development (CPD) from the local Maths Hub. Almost all schools adopted the Maths Mastery approach and teachers emphasised that from their perspective children's engagement and understanding of maths had improved. A local stakeholder noted that secondary schools had made some progress towards the numeracy targets but had not yet achieved them. As with Priority 1, several strategic and local stakeholders identified leadership turnover and the disruption caused by the merging of 2 secondary schools as barriers to more progress at KS4.

Priority 3 (mental health and resilience). A local stakeholder referred to a qualitative evaluation carried out in 2020 that reported mental health practitioners and beneficiaries were complimentary about the benefits of mental health projects. A strategic stakeholder suggested that the mental health provision was instrumental in softening the impact of COVID-19 on young people. Some local stakeholders suggested that there had been an overall improvement in school attendance and a decline in the number of exclusions contributed to a more resilient pupil population when compared to before the programme.

Priority 4 (Broadening Horizons). Broadening Horizons offered a range of activities and projects for children to participate in. Strategic stakeholders explained that members of the partnership board had close links with partner organisations delivering the activities. They regarded this as vital to the project's success. A small number of local stakeholders reported high levels of attendance and engagement across activities.

Sustainability

Several local stakeholders commented that the Hastings OA partnership are concentrating on sustaining current projects rather than initiating new ones. All projects required long-term sustainability strategies as part of their broader project plans, and so sustainability has always been part of the OA planning in Hastings.

Some existing projects have already secured delivery beyond the OA programme. This includes a project on mental health, which will draw on National Health Service (NHS) mental health support teams. ESCC are also looking at what Broadening Horizons

projects the voluntary and community sectors can deliver and what aspects can be sustained through other funding, such as National Lottery Funding.

At the time of fieldwork (September 2021), the partnership board were exploring low-cost ways of building capacity related to twinning with other ESCC schools outside of Hastings. There is a view that twinning in this capacity can create a support network for schools and provide them with greater capacity to adopt and maintain projects.

To maintain cooperation between schools after completion of the OA programme, the make-up of the partnership board has also been changed to include a multi-academy trust (MAT) chief executive officer (CEO). This reflects the view of some strategic stakeholders that MAT headteachers have been instrumental at facilitating strategic cooperation across local schools.

However, a group of local stakeholders noted that they had considerable concerns over future funding. For instance, there were questions over Hasting Borough Council's ability to maintain funding for key projects, although there is no expectation for them to do so. A group of local stakeholders suggested that without funding certainty, those volunteering their time and effort to work on OA projects might be less inclined to do so in the future.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples are based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths; this does not reflect the size of the project.

Project 1: Hastings Literacy Project

This project aims to improve literacy levels in Hastings and for the lifetime of the OA programme a literacy fund for evidence-based solutions was established. Schools researched and selected their own literacy projects. Teacher beneficiaries and early years advisory beneficiaries believed this fostered ownership by schools and made it more likely for projects to be embedded.

That's been the strength in it, the flexibility, and the fact that we've had to research it ourselves. We've had to take ownership. **Headteacher beneficiary**

Overall, teacher beneficiaries believed more children were reading at home when compared to before the project. They evidenced this by noting the engagement and interest children showed when choosing books to take home. Teacher beneficiaries also noted that the project has enabled them to engage with parents in a new way, resulting in positive conversations and improved relations more generally.

Compared with primary schools, secondary schools found it harder to implement interventions due to limited staff capacity. The project addressed this by working with schools to identify what was feasible to implement with the available resources.

Project 2: Hastings Maths Project

This project aims to improve maths attainment by implementing Maths Mastery approaches. External Maths Mastery trainers provide ongoing coaching to embed practice.

Beneficiaries said the project resulted in increased levels of pupil engagement during lessons, when compared to before the project. A view of teachers was that this was partly because it was different from a more conventional method of teaching maths.

Our maths lessons are language-rich because we get children to be critical thinkers...to bounce ideas off each other and to build their understanding alongside their peers.

Regional maths lead beneficiary

School engagement and implementation were helped by senior-leadership buy-in, but limited staff capacity meant that engagement was lower than for the literacy project.

A beneficiary noted their concern that schools will find it challenging to fund regular visits by external Maths Mastery trainers after the OA programme ends. A regional maths lead suggested the establishment of a Hastings-wide Maths Hub to support schools might be a potential solution to this.

Ipswich⁴⁷

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for Ipswich. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 3 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in Ipswich OA.

For Ipswich, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and August 2021: 7 interviews and one focus group with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads, and twinning leads (OA twinning leads⁴⁸ and/or twinned area leads⁴⁹); and 4 interviews and 2 focus groups with project beneficiaries⁵⁰.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of Ipswich OA.

Background⁵¹

Ipswich is a town in Suffolk. Some local stakeholders reported that Ipswich had a thriving engineering sector but has seen a recent rise in digital and cultural sectors. Several strategic and local stakeholders and project beneficiaries noted that the area benefits from a network of Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) institutions. The OA delivery plan states that the area also benefits from several industries offering employment opportunities. Multiple local stakeholders and project beneficiaries felt that

⁴⁷ The Ipswich OA delivery plan can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696854/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan_Ipswich_v11_FINAL_WEB.PDF.PDF

⁴⁸ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁴⁹ 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁵⁰ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

⁵¹ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders and project beneficiaries.

despite a high proportion of good schools, there are attainment gaps between young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. This is also in line with what is reported in the OA delivery plan. Some local stakeholder also commented that literacy and numeracy attainment and the number of adults with higher levels of education are below the national average.

Local priorities

1. Ensure all children are prepared to learn for life by developing key behaviours such as resilience and self-regulation
2. Strengthen the teaching profession by providing world-class support and development
3. Improve attainment for disadvantaged pupils by embedding evidence-based practice in the teaching of English and maths
4. Inspire and equip young people with the skills and guidance they need to pursue an ambitious career pathway

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Opportunities for learning. The OA programme provided professional beneficiaries and beneficiaries involved in project delivery with valuable opportunities to attend training and share best practice. For instance, local stakeholders reported positive feedback from school staff who had taken part in Supporting Wellbeing and Emotional Resilience in Learning (SWERL) on the mental health and wellbeing training provided. Early years settings valued learning about best practice on the Child Development Champions project, as prior to the OA they had lacked the professional support networks of school-based practitioners. What a Difference a Day Makes (WADADM) mentors and Remote Learning Support Assistants (RLSA) interviewed as part of the research appreciated the opportunity to share learning through formal and informal networks.

Addressing local needs. Several strategic and local stakeholders found that projects with a refined understanding of the area's needs, and which were highly targeted and reactive to local feedback, helped to engage local people. In some cases, this involved working with national experts to design and deliver programmes bespoke to the needs of each setting, such as the Workforce Development Programme. National partners brought consistency and expertise by leading on audit processes that could be followed by a bespoke response to local need. In other cases, it involved working with local providers, for example, the Youth Social Action project which was delivered by a key player in the local voluntary community sector. Their well refined understanding of the needs of individual wards enabled a high level of targeting. In another example, RLSA project beneficiaries cited the use of informal means of communication with participants (e.g. text

messages) and translation tools to overcome language barriers as an effective way of engaging the local community.

Strong local commitment. Commitment from the local community was important to successful programme delivery. Partnership board members were committed to the programme aims, highly regarded in the community and able to give a steer on local priorities. Working groups of local stakeholders (e.g. senior leads from educational institutions and community organisations), chaired by Partnership board members, gave the programme a bottom-up approach to implementation. The commitment and goodwill of local employers, FE and HE institutions also made projects possible.

Broad approach to social mobility. A group of local stakeholders explained they wanted to create long-term systemic change in Ipswich. This required a greater breadth of focus than academic attainment. To achieve this, projects addressed several challenges including wellbeing (e.g. through the Supporting Wellbeing, Emotional Resilience and Learning (SWERL) programme) and parental engagement in early years education. Having board members from education and non-education backgrounds facilitated this wider focus. Cross-sector representation of the OA board also opened up discussion about what social mobility meant to the area and what the wider system needed to look like to enable the best opportunities for young people in Ipswich.

Challenges to implementation

Limited project resources. Some local stakeholders felt it was challenging to deliver projects which had small budgets as they were often reliant on volunteers for support. For example, the Primary World of Work project relied heavily on employers from HE and FE institutions volunteering their time. Limited school staff capacity was in some instances also a challenge to their take-up of OA support. This was especially the case for settings which had received poor Ofsted ratings or those that had taken on too many initiatives. School capacity challenges were mitigated by introducing a funded School Lead post.

Quality of project delivery. Aspects of project delivery could have been improved. A few local stakeholders noted that national partners did not always provide adequately tailored support due to their lack of local area knowledge. For example, the early years training delivered by a national partner in the first two years of the programme was not at an appropriate level for the early years practitioners.

Strategic planning. Some strategic stakeholders observed that in hindsight, the priorities set were too broad and working groups did not always have the necessary expertise. Multiple local stakeholders thought that in some cases, the local authority's (LA) procedures and DfE restrictions slowed down the procurement of delivery partners, especially when commissioning third sector organisations. This could delay project

implementation. Planning for projects for which hard outcome data would not be available within the timeframe of the programme (e.g. long-term impacts on NEET figures) was especially difficult as delivery could not be continuously refined based on measured outcomes in order to maximise impact.

Evidencing impact. Several strategic and local stakeholders explained their intended approach mainly involved projects delivered by local partners and aimed at achieving long-term systemic change (e.g. teacher continuing professional development). These were not designed for assessment of short-term impact on pupil outcomes. Local stakeholders observed that this sometimes caused a tension with messaging from the DfE around the need to provide evidence of impact and value for money. This led Ipswich to commission national projects with an evidence base for measurable short-term outcomes in the early stages of the programme. Some local stakeholders considered these projects to be less successful than the place-based initiatives built from the ground up and thought they were unlikely to lead to long-term systemic changes.

COVID-19 response

Projects with in-person activities were delayed, cancelled or adapted for online delivery. Projects adapted their focus and additional resources were put in place to address COVID-19 challenges (e.g. transition support, home learning resources and mental health support for school and early years staff). The shift in focus was aided by the OA's already broad scope, having not focused narrowly on attainment.

In some cases, schools repurposed funds from cancelled projects to purchase laptops for children and young people who did not have access to IT equipment. Additional support was also introduced in response to COVID-19, such as with emotional wellbeing and remote learning. For example, Remote Learning Support Assistants were recruited to support disengaged pupils and their families with remote learning (see Project case study 3).

COVID-19 brought about additional local challenges. Data was received late or was not available as a result of school closures and capacity challenges, which made it difficult to extract learning to inform funding decisions. At the start of Year 4, educational settings had reduced capacity to engage as a result of the additional burden on their settings. To address this challenge, some early years and school-based projects were rolled over into the next academic year.

Twinning

Ipswich twinned with Felixstowe, who chose to partner on the SWERL programme and transition project. Felixstowe was selected due to its similar levels of deprivation and its key priorities aligned with Ipswich, including wellbeing, transition and aspirations.

However, twinning leads noted that a lack of clarity from the DfE around what twinning should look like and tight delivery timeframes made the process challenging, as considerable time was spent on reviewing data and identifying a suitable twin area.

SWERL involved a whole school approach to supporting school pupils' wellbeing and emotional resilience. As part of the SWERL offer, University College London (UCL) helped schools to audit how they supported pupils' emotional and mental health needs, assisted them in developing a targeted action plan, and schools were given funding for implementation. For the transition project, Ipswich provided Felixstowe with transition grants and resources (e.g. common assessment transfer documents).

Ipswich used a place-based approach to twinning guided by the twinned area's needs and priorities, which twinning leads thought to be successful. This was done by presenting Felixstowe headteachers with different project options instead of a fixed plan. The OA applied learning from the implementation of Year 1-4 Ipswich projects in Felixstowe, such as the optimum frequency of meeting. As projects had already been refined in Ipswich prior to twinning, this led to a smoother process across all stages of implementation in Felixstowe.

Twinning leads reported anecdotally that SWERL had improved school staffs' wellbeing and thought that this would translate into the students' wellbeing, but expected the full impact would be seen the following year. Twinning leads thought the transition project led to greater collaboration between primary and secondary schools and there are plans to deliver this across Suffolk. Twinning leads explained that both projects would likely to be sustained as no further costs are required.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (resilience and self-regulation). A group of local stakeholders thought that the SWERL project had led to long-term change in how schools support wellbeing. They explained that schools in Ipswich that were trained on the SWERL approach are now thinking about their whole-school approach to emotional wellbeing. Through the Strong School Start Network, early years settings and schools were brought together and strengthened collaborations to facilitate pupils' transition between educational phases and improve school readiness. OA funded WellComm for all settings and schools, which has led to a more consistent way of assessing pupils' speech, language and communication development across settings.

Priority 2 (teaching profession). The OA Year 4 delivery plan reported an improvement in Ofsted ratings by the end of Year 3 of the OA programme, compared to the start. This improvement was already in progress at the start of the OA programme but was also partly attributed to initiatives under this priority. Some local stakeholders reflected that more data should have been collected at the start of the OA programme in order to

benchmark the overall impacts of the projects. As a result, local stakeholders were unable to comment on the overall impact of the strengthening the teaching profession initiatives but believed there were some individual school success stories.

Priority 3 (evidence-based practice). A group of local stakeholders perceived the Evidence-Based Practice Fund, through which schools implemented evidence-based projects of their choice, to be a success. Individual school projects implemented through the fund which demonstrated the most impact through evaluations formed the basis for future projects in Ipswich. Some strategic stakeholders felt that more success was seen in KS2 bespoke projects. They believed that this was as a result of the peer-to-peer support provided by EKO Trust and the expertise of NLEs who provided a bespoke consultancy service for each primary school. Strategic stakeholders also noted that the WADADM led to an improvement in the number of pupils achieving English and maths GCSE.

Priority 4 (careers). Strategic stakeholders believed that there had been improvements on Gatsby benchmarks. They noted that the Enterprise Coordinator had been strong at engaging with employers and developing connections with Ipswich schools. The Primary World of Work project saw some positive outcomes (see Project case study 2). However, some strategic stakeholders reported that due to perceived progress in priority 4, from Year 4 funding was instead focused on priorities 1 and 3 where needs were greater.

Other outcomes. Several local stakeholders perceived there to be greater joined-up working in the area, especially between **MATs and LA maintained schools**. This led to more sharing of good practice through network meetings. They thought the research school facilitated the sharing of resource and knowledge, particularly between **Early Years Foundation Stage settings**.

Sustainability

Some strategic and local stakeholders discussed continuing the OA partnership board once funding is withdrawn, to maintain local community enthusiasm around OA projects. There was a view that ownership of OA projects should be independent and not sit within the LA, or else it could become political. A small number of local stakeholders also reflected that more planning at an earlier stage around the legacy element of the programme would have been beneficial.

Some local stakeholders noted that projects that require no further funding once structures have been set-up are more sustainable. For example, settings that took part in the transition project have agreed to keep in place a fixed 'transition day' for pupils to move between early years, primary and secondary schools. Other projects likely to be sustained are those that have local ownership, such as through local hubs. The local associate research school will maintain the network of evidence leaders in education and

implementation leads in schools, and an online learning hub will be set up with Norwich and FEC OAs to capture learning and share ideas. A few local stakeholders were concerned about the sustainability of progress resulting from continuing professional development (CPD) as they reported high rates of early years staff leaving the sector.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples is based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths, this does not reflect the size of the project.

Project 1: What a Difference a Day Makes

This project originally aimed to improve KS4 maths attainment by providing pupils with 24 hours of tuition from local teachers ahead of exams. There were a limited number of places and pupils were selected by their school to participate. Pupil attainment data showed an estimated 1.3 grade average increase in maths GCSE. Stakeholders also perceived there to be a positive influence on pupil aspirations as a result of the exposure to HE and increased confidence in maths.

Schools reported not just an improvement in their [pupils'] skills in that specific subject...but also their general attitude to learning. Their confidence, their wellbeing had just lifted as well. **Stakeholder**

The project adapted as part of the COVID-19 response to support pupils to transition to FE by providing catch-up maths and English tuition and self-management skills (e.g. coping with stress and revision techniques). The programme adapted again for Year 4 delivery, where students from the University of Suffolk provided online group mentoring in maths, English and general wellbeing.

As they were also young people, mentors considered themselves more approachable than teachers and were able to offer advice on further study. Mentors reported that an internal survey found that pupils' wellbeing improved. Mentor beneficiaries thought that pupils were better prepared for the future as a result of the support they received with their personal statement. Mentors also reported that the programme helped them develop the vocational skills and experience needed to pursue a career in teaching.

[I]t's provided me with all of the skills and experience that I need to make myself ahead of other people who will be applying for teaching degrees and programmes. **Mentor**

Project 2: Primary World of Work

This project aimed to raise aspirations by bringing careers knowledge into primary schools. Activities included visits from Primary Enterprise Advisors, college taster days and talks from employers. Around 20 primary schools and 20 to 30 colleges, universities and employers participated.

Online resources, such as lesson plans, were considered particularly successful due to their accessibility and facilitated project legacy. However, buy-in from employers and organising the larger events was challenging. Stakeholders felt the project helped to broaden aspirations and raised awareness of different career paths. Based on schools' survey feedback, children came away thinking about new possibilities and demonstrated understanding of the skills involved in different professions. In the future, stakeholders would like to see the project expanded to reception age children.

Project 3: Remote Learning Support Assistants

The RLSA project introduced a funded school role to engage children in remote learning during COVID-19 school closures. RLSAs were trained through the Teaching Assistant network and tasked with contacting families of pupils at risk of not engaging in remote learning. RLSAs assessed the barriers to learning (e.g. access to equipment, low engagement with education), obtained the necessary equipment, provided parents with technical support and engaged pupils with online 1-to-1 activities.

RLSAs reported using a child-centred approach to engage pupils in activities that aligned with pupils' interests whilst incorporating the curriculum. They thought that this was a particularly effective way of engaging pupils that did not engage with the formal curriculum.

If I'd gone in with the curriculum, as set up, they'd already not been engaged with that for some time ... Whereas if you're talking about a project or their interests, then it all, everything lightens up and you can move forward. **RLSA**

When schools reopened to all pupils, RLSAs adapted to support the reintegration of vulnerable returning pupils and continue to support remote learning for some self-isolating children. Due to staff shortages, some RLSAs said they were asked to provide in-class teaching support, but there was limited opportunity for training before being brought into the classroom. This concerned RLSAs with limited teaching experience.

RLSAs reported that pupils who were previously not engaging appeared to engage more in education. Parents fed back to RLSAs that they were more open about asking the school for help or advice. RLSAs valued having additional training opportunities through

the schools they were placed in. They believed there was a need for this role in the longer term and expressed concerns about funding for the project ending, as it was designed to be a short-term intervention to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 school closures.

North Yorkshire Coast⁵²

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for North Yorkshire Coast. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 3 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in North Yorkshire Coast OA.

For North Yorkshire Coast, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and September 2021: 10 interviews and one focus group with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads, and twinning leads (OA twinning leads⁵³ and/or twinned area leads⁵⁴); and one interview and 2 focus groups with project beneficiaries⁵⁵.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of North Yorkshire Coast OA.

Background⁵⁶

The North Yorkshire Coast is a rural coastal area in North England. It is comprised of multiple towns along its coastline. The OA delivery plan states that the area has several growing economic sectors including engineering, IT and health and social care. Several strategic and local stakeholders thought the rurality of the area and poor transport networks limit options to commute to a place of employment or further study. This has led

⁵² The North Yorkshire Coast OA delivery plan can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/675038/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan-NYC.PDF

⁵³ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁵⁴ 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁵⁵ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

⁵⁶ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders.

to challenges attracting professionals and teachers to the area where many children do not have access to a good school. The OA delivery plan shows that in recent years there have been significant investments to improve the life chances of young people in the area.

Local priorities

1. Children get a head start in life through a high-quality early years education
2. Improving maths attainment and become an area where children excel in maths
3. A generation of readers who use the power of literacy and a love of reading to unlock opportunities
4. Increase number of good and outstanding secondary school places, and reduce exclusions

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Engagement and collaboration. Key local figures, their networks and effective community outreach (e.g. twitter, door-knocking) facilitated strategic and community engagement. The OA has supported multi-agency collaboration between previously insular institutions, including schools, the local authority (LA) and national government. This has led to greater innovation and brought together different elements of the system, for example, bringing those in the teaching profession into discussion with social workers. Some local stakeholders highlighted the importance of the local programme manager who was a bridge between the DfE delivery team and local stakeholders. Through this relationship, experts at the national level could be brought in to help and advice.

Effective leadership. Individual leaders, such as headteachers in the area, brought strong leadership to the OA. Local leaders, including the partnership board chair and school governors, facilitated constructive conversations between settings and professional beneficiaries who previously had difficult relationships. Strong leadership from partners, such as the partnership board, the Maths Hub and EEF research school drove the projects forward. The partnership board members supported decision making at a strategic level, while the EEF research school supported the implementation of evidence-based school improvement projects. Their expertise and skills were invaluable to successful project implementation.

Building trust. The local OA delivery team were effective in building trust among local community stakeholders, such as among school leaders. This was achieved by listening and responding to local need. As a result, there was more collaboration between central and local government and trust among project beneficiaries. Those in the education sector appreciated the investment in their local area and were positive about the prospect of contributing to EEF research.

Challenges to implementation

Engaging beneficiaries. Professional beneficiary engagement was hindered by several factors, including low project awareness, geographical location (e.g. poor transport links) and distrust of new people coming from outside the local area with new initiatives. A lack of staff capacity and resources across settings was also a barrier. For example, it was especially difficult for early years practitioner to find time to take part in continuing professional development (CPD) offers compared to school staff. As practitioners are not typically salaried, attendance to CPD during working hours meant they would lose out on paid work, and attendance outside of working hours had no financial incentive.

Managing relationships. The LA had invested in different educational initiatives to the ones the OA promoted. For example, the LA and Maths Hub approach to teaching maths in schools did not always align. Before the OA, relationships between the LA and some education settings could be tense. Relationships between education settings were also tense, as the area included a number of distinct towns and communities, which could make partnerships and collaboration difficult for the OA programme. Negotiation facilitated by key stakeholders in the OA helped to overcome some of these challenges.

Aligning priorities. The programme did not align with the LA pre-existing priorities, such as health, apprenticeship routes into employment, and their focus on the whole family as opposed to the child. Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) sector board representation also decreased over time. This led to a narrowed focus on specific curriculum areas and outcomes, such as SATs and GCSEs.

Strategic planning. A few local stakeholders reflected that frequent changes to DfE staff over the course of the programme hindered continuity and delivery and were a challenge for maintaining drive. Short-notice extensions to the OA funding caused issues at the strategic and operational levels. Some local stakeholders thought that the public sector was slow to react to the extension considering the short timelines for delivery.

COVID-19 response

COVID-19 disruption was relatively limited with many projects already well established as part of professional beneficiaries' day-to-day jobs or able to move online quickly (e.g. teacher CPD). However, school engagement in projects was limited due to immediate priorities around COVID-19. A small number of projects were cancelled, and others were paused.

There was an increased focus on community initiatives and on families that were most affected by the pandemic. A flexible investment fund was created to respond to COVID-19 challenges and deliver community-driven projects on resilience, wellbeing and remote education. Some local stakeholders considered the OA's COVID-19 response to be

better than the national offer, as it was place-based and driven by knowledge of the local area. For example, they reported that the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) was less successful than the OA offer due to unreliable WIFI in parts of the area.

Twinning

North Yorkshire Coast twinned with Bridlington on school behaviour and inclusion. Bridlington was chosen due to its similar demographics and proximity which had logistical benefits for delivery. However, exclusions in the area were not particularly high compared to the national average or neighbouring areas.

North Yorkshire Coast worked with three secondary schools to codesign bespoke projects around behaviour, inclusion and student wellbeing. Bridlington schools could use the funding as they saw fit. This covered provisions such as child therapists (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)), wellbeing managers and existing programmes, for example, the Social Mediation and Self-Help (SMASH) programme. A mentor was also available to each school to share good practice and support if necessary.

Previous connections between the OA and schools in the area proved beneficial as they sped up the twinning process. However, twinning took longer than anticipated. Due to the pandemic and competing priorities, schools and the LA had less capacity to engage. North Yorkshire Coast's own capacity to deliver the project was limited as they only had a small team and were managing other projects in the OA simultaneously.

Twinning leads thought that most progress would be made in terms of increased provisions of practical support for potentially vulnerable students. They expected that this would lead to improved children's attitudes to learning, general wellbeing and hopefully a reduction in exclusions. Twinning leads did not expect there to be any systemic changes, such as in decision making or wider practice, in Bridlington as sharing of best practice between schools was lower than expected.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (early years education). Several local stakeholders felt that there had been improvements in speech and language and school readiness. Some strategic stakeholders perceived improvements in the number of children attaining a Good Level of Development (GLD) in areas such as phonics and writing. However, it was difficult to formally identify improvements due to the lack of national assessments and as early years settings were not required to report scores.

Priority 2 (maths attainment). Some strategic stakeholders believed that the proportion of children doing well in maths had risen and progress in maths attainment looked

positive. However, due to COVID-19, limited data has been available and school closures may have undermined the successes of the project. After Year 3, all CPD had been delivered and investment in this priority was reduced as there was considered to be less need for additional funding.

Priority 3 (literacy). The OA Year 4 delivery plan indicates that at the end of Year 3, 500 pupils benefitted from speech and language therapists. Some strategic stakeholders felt that there was progress made at reading at KS2.

Priority 4 (good school places). According to some local stakeholders, teacher retention and attraction of new talent into the area was seen to have been a success, especially at senior levels, based on the number of vacancies. Some local stakeholders felt that by hiring talent from outside the area has driven standards in education and has been important in changing the culture in some schools. Multiple local stakeholders perceived a reduction in numbers of exclusions. However, they noted that improvements are also likely to be partly attributed to the work the LA had also been doing in this area before the OA.

Other outcomes. Several local stakeholders perceived there to be **systemic changes** in the area, including increased sharing of expertise and awareness of networks. The OA has promoted more joined-up thinking and system-wide approaches to tackling issues. This has meant that professional networks have strengthened and there are stronger relationships across the system, such as between social workers, health professionals and schools.

Sustainability

A few local stakeholders thought that projects which stemmed from genuine systemic change would have a legacy after OA funding ends, but the number of projects this applied to was limited. They considered projects to be less sustainable when they required a substantial time commitment and were reliant on goodwill.

There were concerns around the longevity of partnerships, as these relied on a small number of key local figures. One view of a local stakeholder was that there needed to be an LA co-ordinator post-OA to manage the collaborations between stakeholders.

A few local stakeholders emphasised that COVID-19 negatively affected the sustainability of the OA programme as momentum has been lost.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples is based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited

view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths, this does not reflect the size of the project.

Project 1: National Literacy Trust (NLT) Literacy Hub

The hub was introduced to tackle low literacy outcomes. It was set up by the NLT with a commitment to remain in the area for the next ten years and a long-term plan to be self-sufficient. The NLT targeted wards most in need by providing resources (e.g. books) and hosting literacy events and programmes. The hub developed a strong local identity through Literacy Champions and community partnerships. In turn, this helped to promote trust with local families and improve project sustainability.

Plans to source local funding to support the hub could not be secured due to COVID-19 related economic challenges. This led to greater reliance on other forms of support from local organisations (e.g. promoting awareness and volunteering time). Due to COVID-19, the number of active Literacy Champions dropped, and in-person activities were paused. In response to COVID-19, the hub partnered with Beyond Housing to ensure families most in need had access to books and literacy activities.

Project 2: Home Learning Environment Programme

This project aimed to teach families about the home learning environment. Structured sessions, delivered by specialist Practitioners, focused on activities families could do with young children to promote learning and school readiness. While existing statutory services took a targeted approach, this project was universal and had potential to reach a wider range of families. Practitioners noted that as the project branched out into new parts of the North Yorkshire Coast, they found it challenging to establish themselves alongside existing providers. However, delivery staff developed positive and trusting relationships with families.

Stakeholders reported a tangible difference to families' confidence since engaging with the project, and that this had positive changes for children's learning and confidence. COVID-19 has hindered the ability to build and maintain relationships with families. The project has adapted by providing families with resources to support home learning (e.g. books).

Project 3: Children's University

Children's University was organised by the University of Hull. Pupils were given a "learning passport" and logged "learning hours" by doing activities outside of school (e.g. sports, museum visits, camping, cooking and reading). Local organisations partnered with the project and advertised that their activity contributed to a learning hour.

Children valued the variety of activities to choose from, but it was not always easy to do all the activities they wanted to try due to COVID-19 restrictions or bad weather. Children particularly enjoyed spending time doing activities with family members. The activities encouraged children to stay active, appreciate the outdoors and take up activities they had never tried.

What I liked about it was it wasn't just trying new things, but it was opening new opportunities and doors that I didn't think of. **Children and Young People (CYP) beneficiary**

The project gave children the opportunity to think more about their careers path. For example, after spending time at a wildlife centre, one child wanted to be a zoologist.

Norwich⁵⁷

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for Norwich. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 2 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in Norwich OA.

For Norwich, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and August 2021: 10 interviews and one focus group with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads, and twinning leads (OA twinning leads⁵⁸ and/or twinned area leads⁵⁹); and one interview and one focus group with project beneficiaries⁶⁰.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of Norwich OA.

Background⁶¹

Norwich is a city in Norfolk. Some strategic and local stakeholders reported the city had a strong local economy and benefitted from a thriving creative sector, some excellent schools and 2 universities. Although Norwich appears prosperous, multiple local stakeholders explained that there were pockets of entrenched disadvantage. Several strategic and local stakeholders thought that education challenges include a 'fragmented' education system, high rates of exclusions and poor educational attainment particularly

⁵⁷ The Norwich OA delivery plan can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696825/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan_Norwich_FINAL_WEB.PDF.pdf

⁵⁸ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁵⁹ 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁶⁰ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

⁶¹ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on interviews with strategic and local stakeholders and project beneficiaries.

at KS2. Project beneficiaries also highlighted early years speech and language delays as a key challenge for the area. Some local and strategic stakeholders are concerned that poor mental wellbeing and limited mental health and SEND provisions are a barrier to young people's education.

Local priorities

1. Improve early speech, language, listening and communication
2. Raise attainment through targeted, evidence-based continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers and stronger school system leadership (school improvements)
3. Support children at risk of exclusion from school
4. Give young people the information and support they need to move successfully between school, college, university and into work

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Local expertise. The OA established a strong partnership board and multi-agency working groups who provided valuable local expertise. The delivery team gathered intelligence from the ground up through meetings with professional beneficiaries (e.g. Communication and Inclusion Champions, Emotional Literacy Support Assistants, Transition Leads and Careers Facilitators). The local EEF research school made a strong contribution due to their high standing within the community and local knowledge. These networks provided professional and local expertise to support the OA delivery team to implement and adapt the programme offer.

Collaboration and partnerships. There were several successful partnerships in the area. In one example, a collaboration brought together the expertise of a national partner and the passion and knowledge of a local partner to deliver a successful project. Working with local stakeholders enabled the delivery team to align the OA offer with existing provisions. For example, the OA introduced projects which were consistent with Norfolk County Council's early years transformation work. Collaboration on the partnership board, including stakeholders from different sectors (e.g. school leaders, third sector, local authority, district council, NHS), facilitated a joined-up approach across the city. Throughout the programme, the OA formed fruitful external connections with experts, for example, School of Education & Lifelong Learning at University of East Anglia (UEA).

A flexible model. The OA delivery team's flexibility to adapt priorities and projects in response to the local environment was key to the programme working well. For example, the inclusion priority shifted focus after support gaps around key transition stages emerged during project delivery, resulting in the formation of transition working groups.

Individual projects trialled different approaches to find the most appropriate modality to engage under-reached groups. This helped ensure that projects were being delivered in the most effective way and responding to the area's needs. Some strategic stakeholders thought that Norwich OA were able to implement changes more flexibly than the local authority (LA) would have been able to do, as there were fewer restrictions and procedures in place which would have otherwise slowed project delivery.

Challenges to implementation

Capacity and engagement. Limited staff capacity hindered education settings' engagement with the OA offer. Settings which struggled with staff capacity felt overwhelmed by the many OA offers and found it difficult to implement all projects effectively. School-based professional beneficiaries could find the time commitment of projects challenging. School capacity challenges were mitigated by introducing a funded School Lead post. Changes to how services were delivered (e.g. Children's Centres) meant there was an element of disruption to reaching families.

Monitoring improvements. By the time project data was obtained, it was often too late to make changes or target beneficiaries most at risk. There were concerns around the completeness of data for some projects (e.g. exclusion data), which meant local stakeholders were uncertain about the extent the data could be relied on as a baseline for tracking progress. There was also a concern that the timeframe between project implementation and data collection was too short to see any substantial outcomes. This has made it more difficult to extract learning and best practice.

Selecting the right delivery partners. Several local stakeholders found the procurement process challenging. They explained that local providers sometimes lacked innovative and high-quality proposals compared with national organisations. Yet, national partners were not always best placed to deliver the place-based approach. There was also an issue with non-OA funded projects attempting to use the OA funding streams for their work in schools. OA leads mitigated this by explaining the need to follow procurement procedures.

Appropriateness of offer. Some strategic stakeholders did not always consider the support offered to schools appropriate or relevant to their needs. For example, the Inclusive Culture Package offer allowed schools an element of choice to decide which package would be most suitable for their school context. In a few cases, however, the option chosen did not align with the multi-academy trust's (MAT) approach to inclusion, which caused some tension. Strategic stakeholders who discussed this acknowledged that more work needed to be done to understand the MAT context.

COVID-19 response

Some projects were adapted for online delivery and established networks maintained communication whilst face-to-face meetings were not possible. Across networks, engagement was mixed and while for some it remained strong or even increased, for others it decreased. For example, teacher CPD saw increased attendance due to the accessibility of the online mode. However, school improvement programmes encountered challenges engaging education settings due to competing internal priorities.

Existing projects adapted their scope to address the challenges of COVID-19. For example, a maths and English improvement project changed its focus to support young people transition from school to post-16 education or training, in light of GCSE examinations being cancelled. Additional support was put in place to assist home learning and wellbeing and introduced virtual tours for children starting school. Funding was reallocated to targeted tuition, which was put in place more quickly than the national tuition offer. To meet the needs of primary schools who had struggled with their online offer, the OA funded Remote Teaching Champions with training from the research school on how to design a remote teaching strategy.

Twinning

Norwich twinned with Great Yarmouth by sharing the inclusion charter project. Strategic stakeholders and twinning leads explained that the area was selected as it had high rates of exclusion and a 'fragmented' education system (characterised by a number of different MATs), contributing to long waiting times for children to be transferred to other placements by the fair access panel. The project involved encouraging collaboration between seven key secondary school headteachers in the area. An Inclusion Champion was nominated from each school to attend meetings and lead on development of an inclusion plan, with funding provided for implementation.

Great Yarmouth headteachers' engagement was encouraged through the advocacy of Norwich headteachers who shared their positive experiences and achievements from the project. However, there were delays getting the project up and running as there was no previous track record of schools working together and delivery timeframes were tight. The project led to greater collaboration between MATs in Great Yarmouth. Twinning leads hoped that collaboration will lead to fewer exclusions and that keeping young people in education will ultimately improve social mobility outcomes.

Norwich also twinned with Breckland by sharing the early years Communication Champion project. Breckland was selected as it is an area within Norfolk with similar early speech, language and communication (SLC) challenges as Norwich. The project involved delivering CPD to EYFS settings, schools, childminders and Early Childhood &

Family Service staff who received resources such as the WellComm toolkit, and support to set up a communication hub school.

The OA worked closely with Norfolk County Council early years advisers to pitch the project to early years settings and schools. Advocacy from Norwich Communication Champions facilitated engagement. However, lack of school capacity limited attendance to the initial launch event and meant some settings struggled to release staff for training. Twinning leads acknowledged they should have been more upfront with schools about the level of commitment required, such as the amount of time required for staff to attend training. Twinning leads reported that pre- and post- training surveys showed increased beneficiaries' knowledge and confidence in identifying and supporting children with speech and language needs. They explained that the majority of Communication Champions continued onto leadership training, which will provide sustainability. However, sign-up to the honorarium payment, which commits Communication Champions to cascading training to colleagues has not been as high as expected.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (early speech). There was a shared view amongst strategic and local stakeholders that progress had been made towards improving early language and communication. Professional beneficiaries reported that the Communications Champions project had broken down silos and brought people together to address early language and communication (e.g. through networking). Some strategic and local stakeholders perceived that early years staff are better equipped to support children with their language and communication. School staff described having a renewed focus on speech and language which led them to pay more attention to children falling behind their peers and reach out to involve parents.

Priority 2 (school improvement). Some strategic stakeholders thought that the OA has made good progress in working with school leaders to develop their leadership confidence. For example, providing leaders with coaches, bringing headteachers to work together in a variety of areas. These strategic stakeholders observed that headteachers were regularly attending strategic problem-solving meetings every month and there was a shift in culture, i.e. moving away from a culture of blame to one of problem-solving.

Priority 3 (inclusions). Stakeholders felt that fluctuation in fixed-term and permanent exclusions may be connected to school closures. Where progress to reducing exclusions had been made, strategic stakeholders attributed this to a shared commitment between schools who are working together to support managed moves. Where progress was more limited, strategic stakeholders thought this was because schools had other challenges and exclusions were not their first priority. Some strategic stakeholders believed that projects addressing exclusions have seen widespread cultural changes in collaborative working.

Priority 4 (careers aspirations). There was a perception among some strategic stakeholders that positive progress had been made in Norwich OAs Gatsby benchmarks. In some cases, strategic and local stakeholders thought young people's aspirations had improved. Progress was facilitated by designated Careers Facilitators, the CEC who linked schools up with employers, and Cornerstone Employers Group which have carried on meeting as a network. However, the post-16 strand of work was less of a focus in Year 4, due to the limited number of Further Education (FE) institutions and competing COVID-19 priorities.

Sustainability

Several strategic and local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries expected the structures of local collaboration created by the OA to remain, as these have been effective and do not require funds to sustain. School leaders plan to continue meeting and will likely continue work around inclusion and transition. The research school and early years communication hubs developed during the programme have provided a good infrastructure to continue OA work. They have taken ownership of projects which strategic stakeholders hope will lead to the continuation of CPD offers and advocacy for issues such as early years speech and language with backing from Norfolk County Council.

A few local stakeholders and professional beneficiaries held the view that programmes were more likely to fall by the wayside if they relied on funding or a contracted provider as capacity and enthusiasm decreased. For example, the Inclusion Champions in primary schools who were paid to take time out of their timetable to run the programme. School staff emphasised that without funding, the administrative burden would be too high for schools to commit to projects long-term when they have so many other priorities. However, where funded hours for additional responsibilities have been particularly successful (e.g. Careers Facilitators), schools have continued to fund these through other means.

Strategic stakeholders are in discussion about plans for 2022/23 and beyond, including continuing networks around the specific projects, e.g. early years, inclusion, and the headteacher groups. There are discussions around the LA continuing to apply learning from the OA work across Norfolk going forward.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples is based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths, this does not reflect the size of the project.

Project 1: Norwich OA School Leads

This project aimed to bring the secondary education strands of the OA together, by providing schools with capacity to drive forward interventions. School Leads appointed at senior leadership level completed EEF implementation training and line managed the Inclusion Champion, Careers Facilitator and Research Lead. Stakeholders reported that the project brought a greater focus to those from disadvantaged backgrounds as opposed to overall attainment. School Leads were most effective when newly recruited as they did not have an existing workload and had a clearly defined role within the school. Internally recruited School Leads lacked recognition of their new role from staff and had competing demands on their time. Strategic input from the headteachers group and collaboration between School Leads contributed to the success of the project. There were concerns that as School Leads progress into different roles the project may not be sustainable.

Project 2: Communication Champions project

This project aimed to boost early years speech and language development, by upskilling early years and healthcare practitioners. It involved an expansive CPD offer, resources (e.g. WellComm toolkit) and the formation of Communication Champion networks and hubs.

The appointment of a competent project lead was considered essential to coordinate the project. The networking element was particularly successful as it gave participants the opportunity to share learning and facilitate the future legacy of the project. However, building initial relationships with settings was challenging, as there were limited existing connections and a cold-calling recruitment approach was used. Some settings' lack of capacity to participate also made building relationships difficult. The project broke down silos that early years staff had previously worked in to address children's needs. Communication Champions found the CPD offer particularly helpful at improving their knowledge of speech and language difficulties. However, several participants observed that the intervention was no replacement for speech and language therapists.

Schools won't be able to plug a speech and language gap. We'll get better at identifying, better at meeting the needs ... but we're not speech and language therapists.

Communication Champion

Communication Champions reported that they had already seen improvements in children's communication. The WellComm element of the project has been extremely positive in settings that have used it and is likely to be sustained as there is no additional costs to continue using the WellComm resource packs that had already been purchased.

There has been an immediate measurable impact on children's outcomes. With having the WellComm data to actually look at it, you can clearly see when we've identified children and then worked with them on speech and language. **Communication Champion**

However, the project intended for Communications Champions to train other members of staff in their setting, but Communication Champions thought this was poorly communicated and noted that this did not always end up happening. Professional beneficiaries worried the staff might not commit to the project long-term without funding.

Oldham⁶²

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for Oldham. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 3 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in Oldham OA.

For Oldham, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and September 2021: 12 interviews with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads, and twinning leads (OA twinning leads⁶³ and twinned area leads⁶⁴); and 2 interviews and 2 focus groups with project beneficiaries⁶⁵.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of Oldham OA.

Background⁶⁶

Oldham is a large town in Greater Manchester with a growing and diverse population, and a strong local identity. Strategic and local stakeholders stated that the town benefits from transport links to the city centre and is home to many post-16 providers, including a Higher Education (HE) institution. Yet, they also reported that the town has experienced challenges relating to high youth unemployment and deprivation. In line with the Oldham

⁶² The Oldham OA delivery plan can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/675046/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan-Oldham.PDF

⁶³ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁶⁴ 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁶⁵ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

⁶⁶ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders.

OA delivery plan, in addition, they mentioned that educational attainment in schools was behind the national average.

Local priorities

1. Ensure all children are school-ready by the age of 5
2. Raise attainment for all, and raising it fastest for disadvantaged pupils
3. All children and young people to be ready for life, learning and work

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Building on existing provision. The OA invested in existing projects and priorities in Oldham. Some stakeholders considered that starting with a clear local vision of what change was needed meant that progress was achieved early. Examples include the mental health project in schools, which was a recognised local priority; and REAL, an early years literacy project that the OA scaled up to more settings in Oldham. Some strategic stakeholders considered projects not based on existing provision to be less successful (e.g. technical education activities under Priority 3).

Systems change. Several strategic stakeholders said that projects were designed to foster sustainable, long-term change. For example, the OA delivery team supported local partners to set up an early years board that continues to meet independently of the OA programme. The OA also supported the introduction of a new school improvement organisation to supersede a previous approach. Oldham Learning allows the LA, maintained schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs) to collaboratively identify local education priorities. It began to work independently of the partnership board in Year 4, including commissioning school improvement projects.

Strong relationship with LA. The LA was involved with OA decision-making from the start and a local councillor sat on the partnership board. A common view among strategic and local stakeholders was that the LA and OA worked together on the same priorities, not competing ones. This was evident in how communications about priorities from the 2 sides were aligned. For strategic stakeholders, close collaboration with the LA will, along with sector-wide engagement, enable OA outcomes to be more sustainable.

Bringing schools together. A recurrent view among local and strategic stakeholders was that the OA brought the education sector in Oldham together. For example, the OA revitalised an old school improvement organisation as Oldham Learning and invested in relationships with pre-existing primary and secondary headteacher partnerships. Stakeholders said that previous efforts to bring schools together had not worked. The OA was different because it came with funding and resources that previous efforts had not.

Challenges to implementation

Engaging academy schools. The OA had mixed success engaging secondaries in school improvement projects. One group of strategic stakeholders perceived this to be a key reason why the OA did not achieve its key stage 4 (KS4) targets. They explained that a large proportion of secondary schools in Oldham are academies. Some MATs were at an earlier stage of developing collaborative local relationships, and it therefore took longer than expected for the OA to build relationships with these schools. By contrast, many primary schools already worked closely with the LA (or were LA maintained) and the OA was able to capitalise on those relationships.

Measuring progress for mental health. Some strategic stakeholders discussed how the initial target as set out in the delivery plan (reducing the number of lost learning hours to mental health issues) was not possible to measure due to lack of existing data. The OA first worked with a local university to design a basket of indicators, but later changed plans when the Greater Manchester Combined Authority announced a new wellbeing measure for local schools. These stakeholders said that despite these changes to plans early on, it was the most sustainable option for schools to adopt the measure introduced by the Combined Authority as it meant schools did not have to adopt one measure, then switch later on.

Leading partnership-working. Some strategic stakeholders discussed that a more minor challenge for the OA was working with multiple delivery partners. For instance, the OA commissioned a technical education project that involved a post-16 setting in Oldham managing several local and national delivery partners. The organisations involved in the project often managed competing delivery priorities, which led to project delays.

COVID-19 response

Many school-based projects paused in March and resumed in September 2020. Once resumed, projects involving in-person delivery continued with changes. For example, the REAL project lead collaborated with a local Forest School to re-design delivery for the outdoors. Where possible, school-based projects were redesigned for remote delivery which allowed them to carry on through lockdowns. This included the mental health project that moved online and also added some new elements to its provision (e.g. new practical resources for schools about COVID-19 and pupil welfare).

The OA redirected resources to respond to the pandemic. For example, the delivery team paused interventions that had already achieved success earlier in OA delivery (e.g. literacy) and instead upscaled the mental health work in schools. The OA also supported schools with remote learning. This included delivering training courses for schools on remote teaching and setting up a new digital champions network. The OA also helped local schools with accessing additional laptops for pupils, if they expressed a need.

Several strategic stakeholders considered the OA's COVID-19 response to be a success. They perceived that the strong local relationships created by the OA helped with the response (e.g. the relationships the mental health delivery team developed with schools).

Twinning

The OA twinned with Tameside, a neighbouring LA to Oldham. Tameside is less ethnically diverse than Oldham but shares similar levels of deprivation and social mobility. The OA and Tameside LA agreed to use the twinning resource to support Tameside schools' COVID-19 response to remote learning. The local EEF Associate Research School surveyed schools on remote learning. They then delivered training for up to 3 staff members in each school and set up a digital champions network – the same strategy that the OA had successfully deployed at the early stages of the pandemic in Oldham.

In Year 4, the Associate Research School at the OA received funding from DfE's EDTECH Demonstrator Programme. Part of this funding was invested in training in the twin area. This meant that some of the twinning resource was no longer needed. The OA re-engaged with Tameside LA to implement something new, but a lack of capacity affected the ability to design and procure bespoke activity as originally envisaged. Instead, the OA delivered additional continuing professional development (CPD) and curriculum support to schools in the twin area and invested in making the CPD available online for future use.

OA stakeholders were not able to cite evidence of impact but said that anecdotal feedback from schools suggests that the training helped support remote learning. For OA stakeholders, the most significant perceived impact was the professional link formed between the education leadership team at the twin LA and Oldham Learning.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (early years). Some strategic stakeholders believed that the OA was on track to meet its Good Level of Development (GLD) target. They mentioned that there had been some positive evidence from the REAL project (2018) on children's early literacy skills. The strategic stakeholders felt that it was down to that commitment of the early years sector and project delivery teams that had helped achieve these outcomes. Before the OA, early years stakeholders in OA lacked a shared approach to addressing local early years needs. The OA's focus on early years therefore resonated with them.

Priority 2 (school improvement). Some strategic stakeholders regarded outcomes for this priority to be more mixed compared to Priority 1. It was felt by strategic stakeholders that progress was made towards KS2 targets, though this was less pronounced at KS4. Strategic and local stakeholders discussed two main reasons for the mixed outcomes.

One reason was the time needed to effect change. The changes made at secondary school come later in a child's education and consequently need a longer time scale to show. The second reason raised was the challenges the OA faced in engaging with the local secondary sector. Some of the schools were part of MATs and had access to support from the trust and were less likely to seek it than locally from the OA.

Priority 3 (mental health and employability). Some strategic stakeholders believed that the OA were on track to meet the young people's wellbeing and output targets for the project in schools. They discussed the benefits of having a strong delivery team and of mental health being an existing local priority that they could build on. By contrast, they felt that the picture for **employability** was more mixed. Anecdotal feedback from schools suggested that young people were now better-informed about their options after school. However, some strategic stakeholders did not believe these activities were meaningful enough to impact young people's employability. These stakeholders on reflection felt that it was perhaps more challenging for the OA to find its role in the post-16 space compared to schools and EY. They perceived that the delivery team did not have as clear a steer from the partnership board of what post-16 projects should look like.

Other outcomes. One group of strategic stakeholders thought the **LA** had benefitted from working directly with the DfE through the OA programme. They explained that the growing importance of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority means that individual LAs have fewer opportunities to work directly with government departments. By working directly with Oldham, they felt that the DfE could develop a more nuanced understanding of the specific education and social mobility challenges in Oldham rather than the wider conurbation.

Strategic and local stakeholders commented that they had not seen enough evidence to say whether the OA improved **social mobility**. This was, in their view, because the timeframe for the programme was too short to assess impact on social mobility.

Sustainability

Many strategic and local stakeholders agreed that the OA successfully focused on sustainability from the start. The early years strategy board and Oldham Learning, for example, already operate independently and will continue to do so after the programme ends. To fund Oldham Learning going forward, the organisation will make an offer to schools that they can choose to buy into. In Year 5, the OA delivery team planned to support Oldham Learning with project management, to ensure a smooth transition of responsibilities.

The mental health project in schools was transferred to the local NHS clinical commissioning group. Some strategic stakeholders expected most other projects to stop delivering, because the LA would not have resources to continue funding them.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples are based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths, this does not reflect the size of the projects.

Project 1: Parent Power

This project helps local parents improve their understanding of HE opportunities available in Oldham and elsewhere. Project content is led by the parents who choose which topic to focus on. 2 project leads help them plan the activities.

Activities were aimed at both parents and children. They included hosting guest speakers from University of Cambridge, a visit to the local HE provider and a session on student finances. During COVID-19 related partial school closures, the group ran a resilience course for parents, a session on mental health with Healthy Minds Oldham and provided families with laptops to support remote learning.

Participants valued meeting likeminded parents who shared an interest in giving their children the best opportunities. They appreciated the social aspect of Parent Power during lockdowns and enjoyed meeting parents from different backgrounds as it provided opportunities for cultural learning and sharing. They liked that the project was flexible, and they could get involved as much or as little as they wanted.

Parents initially found the remote meetings challenging. They did not feel as confident speaking out as they had during the in-person meetings and thought the interaction between participants was not the same online. However, they reported that their technical skills in Zoom increased during COVID-19.

Parents believed that Parent Power increased their knowledge of HE opportunities and how to access them. This allowed them to inspire their children to aim higher when they finish school. The project also inspired parents to think about continuing their own education, in particular following the visit to the local HE provider.

Parent Power has also helped us parents to gain that confidence that even at this age we can also go to university, we can go to college. **Parent beneficiary**

For some parents, working in a group improved their communication and English language skills. For others, taking part in new activities (e.g. hosting a podcast, visiting a university) increased their confidence and willingness to try new things. Parents observed that children particularly benefitted from the guest talk from University of Cambridge, which made studying at Oxbridge feel accessible to them.

Project 2: KS4 Disadvantaged Boys

The project addressed the attainment gap for disadvantaged boys. 6 schools with the largest gap in Oldham identified a cohort of boys on Pupil Premium who took part in activities that aimed to raise aspirations (e.g. employer talks, visits to the local university). Other strands of the project delivered all-staff CPD.

Schools that took part in the CPD responded well to delivery being flexible, enabling them to work with their own school improvement plan and decide when sessions were delivered. However, some schools changed their selected pupil cohort several times because they grappled with which pupils would benefit from the project the most. A wider challenge was variable school engagement. Schools part of MATs were less likely to engage with the project as they had other interventions from within the Trust.

Project leads reported that the CPD offer had the most benefits and that staff continue to work in an evidence-based way. Senior leader beneficiaries described how their colleagues spoke differently about their teaching after the training. For example, they used language from the training in an everyday teaching context. They observed that the training challenged professional thinking and was therefore effective.

It was making people aware of things that they might have been doing in a misguided way, that they could actually do differently. **Senior leader beneficiary**

Project 3: School Improvement Community

This project aimed to address the below average attainment among primary schools in Oldham. The schools worked in triads around curriculum-based topics like reading or science. Schools were audited by an independent consultant and wrote action plans based on the feedback received. Schools also quality-assured each other by making visits to other schools to record impact and improvements.

Senior leader beneficiaries observed that the project brought the schools together as a professional learning community. All staff benefitted from the project, but particularly headteachers who found a new community of peers they could trust and share learning with. Quantifying project impact however was a challenge, as the project aimed to change the culture and ways of working which is challenging to measure.

Stoke-on-Trent⁶⁷

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for Stoke-on-Trent. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 4 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in Stoke-on-Trent OA.

For Stoke-on-Trent, the following research was conducted between November 2020 and September 2021: 11 interviews and one focus group with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads and twinning leads (OA twinning leads⁶⁸ and/or twinned area leads⁶⁹); and 8 interviews and one focus group with project beneficiaries⁷⁰.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of Stoke-on-Trent OA.

Background⁷¹

Stoke-on-Trent is a city made up of 6 towns, surrounded by a rural county. Multiple strategic and local stakeholders described how Stoke-on-Trent was once a thriving industrial centre with pottery works and steelworks, but these sectors have declined. Some local stakeholders noted that there have been investments in the city with the development of schools and industrial expansions bringing new jobs. Stoke-on-Trent delivery plan shows that prior to the OA, despite a strong post-16 education sector, the

⁶⁷ The OA Delivery Plan for Stoke-on-Trent can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696855/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan_Stoke-on-Trent_v8_FINAL_WEB.PDF.PDF

⁶⁸ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁶⁹ 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁷⁰ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

⁷¹ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders.

city had one of the lowest rates of progression into Higher Education (HE) in the country.⁷²

Local priorities

1. Improve outcomes in Early Years Foundation Stage
2. Improve outcomes in key stage 2 (KS2) English, maths and science
3. Improve pupil engagement in learning at all stages
4. Improve the choices young people make from 16

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Collaboration between schools. Multiple local stakeholders stated the OA programme was enabling schools to work closely together. Schools had previously operated in a ‘fragmented landscape’, but the OA programme has resulted in primary headteacher groups, a behaviour network where every school has a key contact and schools share information, and a whole city ‘Teacher Educator’ support offer.

Building on existing strengths. A common view of local stakeholders and project leads was that the OA programme built on existing strengths in Stoke-on-Trent, for example the strong Early Years network. They believed the existing infrastructure made it easier to bring local stakeholders together to plan projects. Projects also worked with partners who were respected in the area, for example the local football clubs. This allowed greater reach and engagement.

Well-networked independent chairs. The co-chairs of the partnership board were well-networked and able to bring people together, which enabled a greater number of partners than would otherwise have been possible. Several local stakeholders particularly liked the 2 independent chairs having different professional backgrounds (business and education), as it provided the board with a range of expertise.

Tailored projects. Projects were delivered flexibly and tailored to specific areas in the city and to individual schools. For example, speech, language and communication (SLC) projects accounted for the different demographic make-up of schools and their unique

⁷² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/progression-to-higher-education-or-training/2018-19#dataBlock-59124cad-bf85-43f7-40b2-08d87b36a35d-tables>

challenges, e.g. children who spoke English as a second language. This was achieved by involving teachers and speech therapists, particularly at the planning stage. A small number of local stakeholders believed this resulted in a much more inclusive programme.

Department for Education (DfE) leadership. A view among multiple local and strategic stakeholders was that the DfE local delivery team has been effective, for instance by ensuring value for money across projects. Other local and strategic stakeholders thought that DfE involvement enabled collective responsibility for the programme, which facilitated a culture of collaboration; they believed this might have not been the case had it been overseen by a single entity. A strategic stakeholder also noted that DfE involvement brought credibility and weight to the programme.

Challenges to implementation

A large project portfolio. A few local stakeholders perceived the large number of OA projects caused some commissioning and contracting challenges at the beginning of the programme. A local stakeholder described this period as 'overwhelming', given the complexity of commissioning so many projects in a limited timeframe. Some local stakeholders would have preferred a more focussed plan with a narrower portfolio of projects. They believed this would have made commissioning easier and potentially created more impact on some projects.

Communicating programme aims. A group of local stakeholders believed the range of OA priorities and projects made it more difficult for local stakeholders to articulate the goals and purpose of the OA programme to headteachers.

Lacking a brand. Some local stakeholders found it challenging to create awareness of the OA programme in the city. They believed that an OA brand would have created more project engagement from beneficiaries. They explained that there was not enough time or expertise for a coordinated communications and branding campaign.

Capacity. A group of local stakeholders argued that there was not always enough capacity (e.g. in the local authority) to meet relevant administrative tasks, such as managing procurement. This resulted in delays to programme delivery, although some local stakeholders acknowledged these processes had improved since the beginning of the OA programme.

COVID-19 response

At the start of the pandemic, local stakeholders worked alongside project leads to decide on how to adapt project delivery. All projects were agile enough to adapt to changing circumstances. This included the Holiday Food and Activities Project, which provided curriculum-based activity packs to children who were not getting help during school closures. Many projects moved online; for some this improved delivery, for example

attendance at teacher continuing professional development (CPD) training increased. However, some local stakeholders highlighted the difficulty in replicating a place-based approach remotely, as they regarded physical presence as essential for relationship-building with project leads, beneficiaries, and other local stakeholders.

COVID-19 also impacted schools in other ways, with significant numbers of pupils leaving and moving into the area. This reduced schools' capacity to engage with or lead on OA projects. For example, a local stakeholder recalled that a single primary school had over 100 pupils join or leave in the academic year 2020/21. Also, some of the most vulnerable children (such as those in social care, risk of exclusion, or those with special educational needs and disability (SEND)) still had not returned to the classroom by summer term 2021, and so had not accessed school-based projects.

Twinning

In the absence of a prescriptive twinning framework, the OA delivery team designed their own approach to sharing learning. Strategic stakeholders labelled their approach 'micro-based twinning', as the twinning project happened at a smaller level than the local authority (LA): the Football Mentoring project involved the 2 Stoke-on-Trent based football clubs twinning with football clubs in areas with similar levels of deprivation. Stoke City FC twinned with Rotherham United FC, and Port Vale FC with Lincoln City FC. As part of the project, staff from football clubs mentor young people in local schools and assist them with careers advice and emotional and behavioural support.

The project was selected to assist COVID-19 recovery efforts and to address a local need around the provision of pastoral mentoring. The OA delivery team had been aware of an increase in pupil disengagement from school at the beginning of the pandemic. As Football Mentoring would provide pastoral support, some strategic stakeholders believed this could help address pupil engagement and complement academic mentoring that had been happening in schools as part of the National Tutoring Programme (NTP).

Children and young people (CYP) beneficiaries enjoyed the project. They reported that teachers complimented them on improvements in their behaviour and overall engagement. Twinning leads believed the highly bespoke approach was key to the success of the project, with sessions tailored to each young person's needs.

The Premier League Charitable Fund has committed to match some funding for the 2021/22 academic year. As this was a pilot project, it is being independently evaluated. If it's shown to have promise and potential to be replicated, there is an ambition to roll-out the project to other football clubs, subject to future funding.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (early years). A group of strategic stakeholders explained outcomes associated with this priority were long-term and difficult to comment on at time of fieldwork (August 2021). However, they believed that there were early signs of future success in speech and language therapy and transition projects, which was based on Ofsted reports and teacher feedback.

Priority 2 (outcomes in KS2 English, maths and science). Several stakeholders reported that there is limited data on Priority 2. However, some strategic stakeholders cited the value of the support hubs in providing student and curriculum support. At the time of fieldwork (summer 2021), they acknowledged that a few schools who would have benefitted most had not yet accessed the network.

Priority 3 (pupil engagement in learning). Several strategic stakeholders stated that Priority 3 projects took around a year to develop, which delayed delivery. They reported it was time-intensive to identify the drivers underpinning unauthorised absences and then select relevant projects to address these drivers. Some local stakeholders strongly believed the selected projects were successful. Local stakeholders credited a city-wide approach towards managing exclusions, in addition to existing networks and relations between schools (e.g. Primary Leaders Network) with this positive outcome. Local stakeholders stated the LA is now recognising this approach, which will provide sustainability for the priority.

Priority 4 (post-16). A view among some local stakeholders was that progress had been slower than expected and that achieving the targets would be a key priority for Year 5. Despite this, a participant described anecdotal feedback from teachers involved in the Post-16 English and maths resit project as highly positive. The participant believed that since the start of the project, teacher engagement has improved, with colleges working more closely together.

Other outcomes. Several local stakeholders saw the OA programme as a more 'inclusive' programme compared to previous education programmes, as it involved **teachers** and other local stakeholders in decision-making and planning. This enabled more effective planning, because individuals were able to signpost and provide expertise based on their roles and responsibilities.

At the time of fieldwork (June 2021), several local stakeholders thought it was too soon to measure or comment on whether the OA programme has improved social mobility prospects for **young people** in the area.

Sustainability

Before the start of Year 5, strategic stakeholders started reviewing all projects against several criteria to determine their continuation beyond the OA lifecycle: leadership, potential systems change, changes to ways of working, required resources and availability of funding.

At time of fieldwork (summer 2021), strategic stakeholders had already reviewed and approved the continuation of some projects beyond the OA programme. Other projects that have been approved to continue will source funding from elsewhere. For instance, a charity will fund the Holiday Food and Activities Project.

A group of local stakeholders identified that staff turnover within schools could jeopardise the sustainability of school-based projects. This is because individuals leaving schools might not fully share operational knowledge and learning with replacement staff.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples are based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths; this does not reflect the size of the project.

Project 1: Closing the Word Gap

Led by the NHS North Midlands Foundation Trust, this project provides specialist SLC support in primary schools. Each school has a speech therapist who observes and works with teachers.

Teacher beneficiaries were grateful for having a speech therapist 'on hand', which had not been available before the OA programme. Schools reported that the intervention helped children make progress with their vocabulary.

They are expanding their vocabulary and extending their sentences, sometimes with encouragement, sometimes not. We're hearing it in the observations, we're hearing it in their play, so we're noticing the impact of it. **Teacher beneficiary**

Teacher beneficiaries reported that training had improved their confidence with SLC, and enabled staff to interpret screening tool data and make independent decisions about children's support needs. Schools liked that training was tailored to their needs and believed a national SLC training provider would struggle to understand the SLC challenges in the city.

Teacher beneficiaries were confident SLC work would be embedded, with schools planning on using self-assessment tools and implementing SLC interventions after the project ends.

Project 2: Post-16 GCSE English and Maths resits

A collaboration between 3 Further Education (FE) colleges, this project aimed to improve practice, share dialogue on GCSE English and maths resits and create a learning community. The project focused on improving vocational teachers' confidence to integrate English and maths as part of their courses.

The OA brought in external consultants to identify gaps and provide guidance. Strategic stakeholders believed this gave credibility to the project and increased buy-in. Across courses, the level of teaching staff engagement was high due to their interest in their subject and commitment to their students. One of the participants saw this project as a success, as colleges now worked more closely together.

Project 3: Football Mentoring

In this project, staff from football clubs mentor pupils and offer careers advice and social and emotional support, with the aim of increasing pupil confidence and resilience. The project has helped pupils to better engage with school, with young people recognising positive changes in their behaviour.

Before, I'd just go off on one, but now I just stop and I try and leave the situation for a bit and then I just go back to it when I'm ready and I'm calm. **CYP beneficiary**

Pupils explained that the mentors were approachable and made them feel at ease. They highlighted that some mentors had similar life experiences to them, which helped create a strong relationship. Pupils enjoyed the sessions, and so would have liked to have attended more mentoring sessions than were on offer.

Project 4: Excellence Partnerships for Maths and Science

These two separate projects aim to improve the quality of teaching for maths and science teachers through CPD and accreditations. Teacher beneficiaries across projects and schools reported that the CPD opportunities enabled them to share good practice and

advice with teachers in other schools. These conversations continued beyond the CPD training.

I think particularly because of the community feel ...we've got newsletters. We've got WhatsApp groups with the science leaders across the city who are constantly communicating with each other. **Teacher beneficiary**

Teacher beneficiaries on both projects believed some of the skills they had learnt on CPD sessions equipped them to respond to the challenges of remote learning. For example, how to be selective when planning virtual lessons. Overall, they thought the quality of their maths and science teaching had improved, and that the changes and investments in CPD would encourage them to remain at their settings.

West Somerset⁷³

Scope and method

This section summarises findings from the OA national process evaluation for West Somerset. It presents the views of interview participants on the successes and challenges of programme delivery, COVID-19 response, twinning process, perceived outcomes and sustainability. It also includes information from 3 example projects which were sampled to access beneficiary and project level information. They were selected on the basis of not being previously evaluated and to ensure balance across all OAs and should not be seen as representative of the projects undertaken in West Somerset OA.

For West Somerset, we conducted the following research between November 2020 and September 2021: 10 interviews and 2 focus groups with strategic and local stakeholders, project leads and twinning leads (OA twinning leads⁷⁴ and/or twinned area leads⁷⁵); and 6 interviews and one focus group with project beneficiaries⁷⁶.

⁷³ The OA delivery plan for West Somerset can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/675052/Social_Mobility_Delivery_Plan-West_Somerset.PDF

⁷⁴ 'OA twinning leads' are OA-based staff responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁷⁵ 'Twinned area leads' are staff based in the twinned area who are responsible for leading the twinning process.

⁷⁶ The term '[professional / children and young people / parent] beneficiaries' is used throughout to refer to those who have taken part in OA-funded projects.

All findings are based on the views of these participants and have not been triangulated with other sources (e.g. attainment data). Due to this and the high-level focus, the annex should not be read as a comprehensive overview of activity of West Somerset OA.

Background⁷⁷

West Somerset is a rural area in the South West of England. The area largely borders the coast and is isolated from larger towns and cities. Some local stakeholders and the majority of beneficiaries described how families without access to private vehicles are often isolated from services such as GPs and adult training. A few local stakeholders noted that childcare provision is patchy and there is only a single sixth form in the area. Several strategic and local stakeholders, as well as many beneficiaries, reported that work (e.g. agriculture, hospitality) is frequently seasonal and low paid, and young people are often unaware of education and employment opportunities outside of the area. The majority of beneficiaries, local stakeholders, and strategic stakeholders commented that a lack of public transport is a barrier to reaching work both within and outside West Somerset.

Local priorities

1. Every child has a great start in life
2. Educational excellence in the classroom
3. Transition to adulthood, best possible education outcomes for young people
4. Skills for employment and business

Year 1 to 4 delivery

What worked well

Combining external delivery and local ownership. Projects struck a balance between external and local delivery, which several local stakeholders believed was key to successful implementation. External partners delivered high-quality interventions, for example the Maths Hubs delivering Maths Mastery. However, local practitioners chose the most suitable projects to deliver, rather than opting for an 'all or nothing' approach. Most local stakeholders acknowledged this to be important, as they perceived local

⁷⁷ The background description of the OA provides an overview of the local area prior to the OA programme. It draws on the OA delivery plan as well as interviews with strategic and local stakeholders and project beneficiaries.

educational settings to have the best understanding of what their staff and children needed.

Alignment with LA strategy. Somerset County Council developed a new education strategy as the OA programme was taking place. It closely aligned with the OA programme and illustrated a strong ‘synergy’ between the local authority (LA) and OA. Local stakeholders saw the strategy as a vital part of the OA programme’s sustainability, as it potentially enabled the LA to continue aspects of the OA programme after its end.

Better understanding of educational settings’ needs. Multiple local and strategic stakeholders credited the granular approach used in West Somerset for giving a more comprehensive understanding of social mobility challenges. For example, early years settings were individually reviewed before the roll-out of early years projects, which included looking at settings’ staff and pupil make-up. This enabled delivery organisations to tailor projects to settings’ specific needs, for instance the FAB project.

Challenges to implementation

Limited capacity and demand. Multiple local and strategic stakeholders described how rural schools were limited in the number of OA projects they could take on, as they lacked capacity to give teachers time off to attend training. Some local stakeholders felt that rural schools were unsure which projects to select and found the process overwhelming. Furthermore, a strategic stakeholder noted that low capacity to deliver then impacted demand and project viability. For example, a project aimed at 10 schools might only have been selected by 4 schools and so would no longer be financially viable. Other educational settings faced similar problems with demand, such as the cancellation of new post-16 training courses due to low take-up.

Procurement difficulties. Several local stakeholders noted that some local organisations, who had already been delivering similar services locally, were not equipped to bid for funding within a national procurement framework. This resulted in national delivery organisations with limited connection to the area often winning contracts. Some local stakeholders believed this undermined the place-based approach and the benefits that came with it.

Approach needed to be more localised. Some local stakeholders and project leads thought that the OA programme was not ‘local enough’. They believed the partnership board should have had less county-wide representation, as too many of the members were perceived to have little connection to, and understanding of, West Somerset. Likewise, several local stakeholders suggested that the district council, Somerset West and Taunton Council, should have had ownership of the OA programme rather than Somerset County Council. They were perceived to have better knowledge of the area.

COVID-19 response

COVID-19 impacted school engagement with the OA programme at the beginning of the pandemic, as schools needed to focus elsewhere (e.g. managing A-Level and GCSE assessments). This caused OA work to 'drop down the list', although some projects continued without interruption. Local stakeholders worked with project leads to decide which projects could continue delivery during the pandemic.

Some projects could not be delivered online due to limited internet connectivity, although the OA offered IT equipment to all schools to assist with home learning. Other projects successfully transitioned online, such as the Virtual Careers Fair; teachers reported higher levels of engagement with this event than the in-person Careers Fair. The move to online has led to a broader and more permanent shift to virtual working across OA projects than prior to the pandemic. For example, the OA delivered virtual continuing professional development (CPD) to teachers to overcome issues associated with transport and rural infrastructure.

Voluntary organisations received OA funding to support other COVID-19 relief projects. A strategic stakeholder acknowledged this flexibility and support has 'kept families together'. Moreover, COVID-19 helped address historical challenges around teacher recruitment in West Somerset. There has been an increase in teaching applications since March 2020, likely due to the 'race for space' and desire to leave urban areas.

Twinning

The OA's decision to twin with Dorset County Council was facilitated by an existing working relationship between their respective early years professional leads. Dorset County Council wanted a more densely populated area to benefit from the twinning activities, as the county's large and predominantly rural geography would make implementation more challenging. On this basis, Dorset County Council and West Somerset OA selected Weymouth and Portland. Another reason for selection were key similarities with West Somerset OA: they ranked similarly on the Social Mobility Index and had comparable early years outcomes.

Dorset County Council were particularly keen for twinning to focus on speech and language development. The twinned area applied the same delivery model and projects (Early Talk and Early Talk Boost) as West Somerset but at reduced scale (10 settings in total). A twinning lead regarded this positively, as Weymouth and Portland would have lacked capacity to develop a new project locally. Parts of these projects focused on CPD for early years staff, who had had limited opportunities to access CPD before twinning. A 'train the trainer' approach meant that staff who did not participate in the projects benefitted from participants at their setting sharing key learning.

A twinning lead believed communication has helped twinning to be a success, as there has been consistent dialogue between twinning leads in both areas. They believed this was key for collaboration between the areas to continue beyond the OA programme. At the time of fieldwork (August 2021), West Somerset and Dorset County Council were actively looking to expand twinning and share learning with other areas in their counties.

Progress to outcomes

Priority 1 (every child). Due to COVID-19 impacting data collection, there has been no new data collected on this priority since 2019. However, some strategic stakeholders believed that there had been positive indications of progress among participating cohorts of early years children since the OA programme began, using Good Level of Development (GLD) assessments. A strategic stakeholder reported positive anecdotal feedback from project leads and beneficiaries.

Priority 2 (educational excellence). A strategic stakeholder believed there had been improvements in phonics, though since 2019 delivery and data collection for Priority 2 has been heavily affected by the pandemic, with no standardised test data available. At the time of fieldwork (June 2021), a small number of local stakeholders stated that they were not aware of improvements in key stage 1 (KS1) and KS2 attainment since the OA had started. They speculated high turnover of senior leadership in primary schools could have been a potential reason for limited improvement in KS1 and KS2. They noted that high turnover at senior leadership level required the OA to re-engage with the leadership and persuade them to commit to and embed OA projects, which could take time.

Priority 3 (transition to adulthood). A group of local stakeholders believed that a higher number of students were now staying in post-16 education. They felt that improved strategic partnership working between the local secondary multi academy trust (MAT) and the local college was a key reason for this. For example, they now shared a careers advisor and the MAT expanded the offer of their careers programme thanks to this partnership.

Priority 4 (skills for employment and business). Most strategic stakeholders perceived that there had been less progress in this area and identified limited capacity (i.e. lack of time that schools and teachers could allocate to projects) and demand (i.e. lack of student numbers) as contributing factors. They cited limited engagement of local employers and businesses as another reason progress was slow. They also believed the programme's emphasis on school improvement made businesses reluctant to get involved.

Other outcomes. A group of local stakeholders credited the OA programme with introducing new and creative approaches to addressing challenges in the **local education system**. This included mapping and understanding the needs of all

educational settings, giving **the LA** a more comprehensive understanding of the issues affecting educational settings in West Somerset. Most strategic and local stakeholders emphasised that the OA programme has successfully brought people and organisations together with a common sense of purpose. There are now stronger cross-sector relationships between **education settings, health agencies** and the **voluntary sector** than before OA.

Sustainability

One of the main aims for Year 5 was to provide a more targeted offer to educational settings to improve their practice in key areas. Several strategic and local stakeholders considered this vital to make them less reliant on external support once the OA programme ended. One example included the tailored support package for early years settings, which only provided access to those projects that targeted their specific needs (e.g. special educational needs and disability (SEND)).

Many strategic and local stakeholders were keen for the benefits of the OA programme to extend to areas outside of West Somerset. For instance, Somerset County Council have established a School Improvement Commission covering the whole county, which will build on the work of West Somerset OA on school improvement.

Multiple strategic and local stakeholders identified support networks as a way of decreasing reliance on OA projects. Schools established their own support networks through greater collaborative working, allowing them to draw on each other's strengths. Closer working practices and collaboration between multiple agencies (e.g. health agencies, voluntary sector, education settings) was regarded as a key achievement of the OA programme by most local and strategic stakeholders. They believed that this closer working could lead to a wider legacy, for instance through the establishment of Family Hubs.

Example projects

Each of the following project examples are based on a small sample of participants (sometimes one or 2). This means that the summaries provided may present a limited view of the project. The variable sample size will also make the project examples below different lengths; this does not reflect the size of the project.

Project 1: Supporting the Early Years Workforce

This project provides development opportunities for early years practitioners and helps parents create high-quality home learning environments. Training was tailored to individual settings' needs and covered many areas (e.g. maths, emotional wellbeing). A

participant emphasised how the project created networks among practitioners, which facilitated collaboration and confidence.

Local stakeholders praised the range of high-quality options settings could choose from. This choice gave settings ownership of projects. A teacher beneficiary described the training as well-planned and accessible. One setting reported that staff were now able to recognise speech, language and communication (SLC) difficulties and understand which interventions to adopt. However, some settings felt overwhelmed by the high number of interventions and reported difficulties cascading training due to time pressures. Teacher beneficiaries suggested having a co-ordinator to advise each setting on which interventions to prioritise would have been helpful.

Project 2: Bump Start

Bump Start provides antenatal support to expectant parents. Before the project, the nearest antenatal class was 48 miles away and cost £120 an hour, so the programme met a chronic need in the area.

Local stakeholders and parent beneficiaries believed the status of Home-Start (the project provider) as a charity was key to the success of the project, as it helped to build trust with parents. Parents did not see the charity as an 'authority' in the same way they perceived NHS midwives as such.

You could be open and honest with and say, 'I'm struggling with...' or, 'have you got any ideas with?' They were there as an ear to listen as well as give advice if you asked for it.

Parent beneficiary

Parent beneficiaries felt the atmosphere of sessions fostered a wider support network for expectant parents, which they regarded as vital during lockdown. They also appreciated and trusted the advice convenors gave during COVID-19.

Bump Start is now being extended across the whole county of Somerset.

Project 3: Duke of Edinburgh

This project aims to enhance young people's CVs by involving them in a variety of activities focused around practicing skills, volunteering, and physical activity.

The children and young people (CYP) beneficiaries involved enjoyed the activities. They believed volunteering made them feel 'useful', although they would have liked the project

sessions to have run more frequently. The activities made them feel more independent and more open to trying new things. They also taught them about the importance of dedication and reliability. They believed it was very different compared to the activities they had been familiar with from school, e.g. day trips.

I thought it would be like another school, like school activity kind of thing, but when I got here, it was completely different. We've got free rein. **CYP beneficiary**

CYP beneficiaries attributed the success of the project to the good relationships with the convenors, who they felt acted as equals rather than superiors.

Glossary of terms

Local stakeholders: these include the local Delivery Leads, Programme Managers, education and community leads and LA education leads who took part in this research.

Partnership board: OA partnership boards are advisory bodies whose members offer expertise and knowledge relevant to the local OA. Boards have no legal status or statutory authority. The board's role is to provide advice, recommendations, support and challenge to the DfE Head of Delivery.

Place-based approach: the OA programme adopts a place-based approach, where a clearly defined local area is allocated funding, decision-making and strategic DfE oversight to deliver projects which meet the specific needs of that area.

OA staffing model: the OA staffing model was characterised by two key features: (a) a Head of Delivery with responsibility for the programme in two OAs and providing a link between the central DfE and local OA team; and (b) a local delivery team consisting of a dedicated area lead and a locally-based programme manager.

Local stakeholders: these include the DfE Senior Responsible Officer, Heads of Delivery and chairs of the OA partnership boards who took part in this research.

Twinning leads: these include the OA twinning leads and twinned area leads who participated in the evaluation.

Abbreviations

CPD	Continual professional development
CYP	Children and Young People
DfE	Department for Education
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
FE	Further education
GLD	Good level of development
HE	Higher education
KS	Key stage
LA	Local authority
MAT	Multi-academy trust

NEET	Not in education, employment or training
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NTP	National Tutoring Programme
OA	Opportunity Area
PVI	Private, voluntary and independent
SEND	Special educational needs and disability
SLC	Speech, language and communication

References

Easton, C. et al. (2018). *Implementation of Opportunity Areas: An independent evaluation*. London: DfE.

Opportunity Area delivery plans, available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas>

Ritchie J. et al. (2014). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. London: Sage.



Department
for Education

© Department for Education 2022

Reference: RR1220

ISBN: 978-1-83870-362-2

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at
www.education.gov.uk/contactus

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications