



Department
for Education

Opportunity Areas
Insight Guide
**Place-based
Working**



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Opportunity Areas

The long-term objective of the Opportunity Areas (OA) programme is to transform the life chances of children and young people in 12 areas of the country with low social mobility. In doing so, it aims to learn more about what works in improving education outcomes in coastal, rural and urban areas. The programme seeks to tackle regional inequality by convening resources, using evidence-based approaches and testing new approaches to unlock the barriers that hold young people back in geographic areas where the educational challenges are greatest.

With this series of insight guides, we are sharing the experiences of those working hard to make a difference in the Opportunity Areas for others to learn from.

Further information about the programme can be found on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)

This guide is the fifth in a series. It provides insights from a number of independent chairs of Opportunity Area partnership boards and elaborates how they have implemented

the Opportunity Areas as a place-based programme, drawing from both their own OA and more widely across the programme. It is illustrated with examples of approaches and projects developed in the OA programme. These examples are based on a considered perspective of the OA delivery team and not formal evaluation, unless otherwise stated.

This guide is being published alongside the OA process evaluation (conducted by NatCen) and five intervention level evaluations and summary report (conducted by York Consulting). These provide further insights into place-based working.

Who is this guide for?

- Practitioners and system leaders in areas of deprivation who are interested in evidence-based place-based approaches.
- Anyone working in a social mobility 'cold spot' who wants to learn from peers facing similar challenges relating to educational outcomes.

Each guide that we publish is followed by a webinar to connect interested parties with those involved in the featured projects. If you would like to find out more, or you would like to attend a webinar, please get in touch: Opportunity.Areas@education.gov.uk



Foreword from the Secretary of State for Education



The opportunities that a young person has should not be determined by their place of birth – everyone deserves a great start in life and to be able to realise their aspirations. Since 2017, the OA programme has been helping children and young people in some of the most disadvantaged places by breaking down barriers so that they can flourish and succeed.

The programme has been a key part of the government’s wider work to support the most vulnerable and make sure no community is left behind as we level up opportunities across the country. To support its aims, the Department for Education has invested £108 million over 5 years, supporting projects within schools and beyond the school gates.

I remember well, as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, when I took responsibility for the OA programme in 2019, I was impressed and enthused by the place-based approach and commitment to improve the life chances of children and young people.

Fast forward to 2022, and, now as Secretary of State for Education, I have the privilege of extending my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has contributed to the OAs over the past 5 years, particularly those on local

partnership boards. These boards are made up of representatives from local councils, community organisations, and leaders in business and education. Their work has been to build on evidence, to innovate, and support and challenge to improve outcomes. I am grateful to everyone for their fantastic work and for going above and beyond to give the children and young people in these areas the best start in life. My particular gratitude goes to the independent chairs of partnership boards who have worked closely with officials from the Department for Education and given generously and honestly their experience and expertise in these 12 areas.

This guide, alongside the process evaluation of the OAs, is one of the ways the programme is sharing learning. There are other guides in the series, covering themes such as careers education and information, advice and guidance, teacher recruitment and retention, and health and education projects. In addition, each OA has shared learning with other similar areas through a “twinning” programme. At the forefront of this guide is the importance of place-based working, which, at the heart, has seen the dedication of local delivery partners and the community coming together to drive change and transform the lives of our children and young people. This guide elaborates the characteristics of the place-based approach,

Everyone deserves a great start in life and to be able to fulfil their potential.

provides a perspective from our DfE team, and – most importantly – it sets out the achievements of the programme.

The insights in this guide will be invaluable for others who are embarking on place-based approaches. Across government, we are shifting focus and resource to Britain's most disadvantaged communities, facilitating system change with 12 bold missions, announced in the Levelling Up White Paper. These efforts are cross-government and cross-society, shifting power to local leaders to spread opportunity and prosperity. Included in these missions is the ambition to effectively eliminate illiteracy and innumeracy in primary school leavers, with a focus on the most disadvantaged parts of the country.

We have identified 55 Education Investment Areas where we will implement a package of measures to drive school improvement and improve pupil outcomes. A subset of 24 areas has been selected as Priority Areas where we will make even more intensive investment. All 12 OAs will transition into Priority Areas so that we can renew our ambition and focus on school improvement and the excellent OA work that has proven its worth, but still needs our collective attention.

The OAs have kickstarted change and inspired pride in place, which will be embedded and built upon as we take the next steps to break the link between geography and destiny.

True change does not happen by chance. Government can provide support and direction, but it is only through parents, community leaders, schools, local authorities, and professionals working together that we can achieve sustainable change that meets local needs to ensure our children thrive in the place they live.

I hope by sharing what we have learned, you will find the insights gathered in this guide helpful and inspiring in our mission to make children's lives better across all areas of the country.



The Rt. Hon Nadhim Zahawi, MP
Secretary of State for Education

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**Education Investment
Areas identified**



Key insights





Place as a function of geography, system, and need



Tricia Pritchard
Chair of Fenland and
East Cambridgeshire
Opportunity Area Board

In exploring the OA place-based approach, it is important to consider what we mean by ‘place’ in terms of geography, system and structures, and identified need.

For this programme, 12 areas were selected based on the Social Mobility Commission’s Social Mobility Index and the DfE’s Achieving

Excellence Areas Index. Further to this, the DfE considered the merit of a geographical spread, so that across the programme coastal, rural and urban areas were represented. It is noteworthy that areas were selected, and there was no process of bidding for areas that met an extended set of criteria.

Further information on **how the Opportunity Areas were selected can be found here.**

Geography as an educational barrier

The definition of geography as the study of places and the relationships between people and their environments resonates with the place-based approach adopted by the OAs. From the North-West and South Coast, to rural East Anglia and West Somerset, and the industrial towns and cities of the Midlands and the North of England, the physical, human, political and economic geography of each region has been influential in shaping programmes designed to meet local needs and regional contexts. In each OA, a place-based approach has aimed to address educational barriers to social mobility in which geography has often been a factor.



Place as a function of geography, system, and need

The 12 areas were selected taking into consideration the link between where children grow up and go to school, and the chances they have of doing well in adult life. The areas can be classified as areas of disadvantage and poor social mobility. They are also areas where there are wide gaps between the achievement of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from non-disadvantaged backgrounds, where there are schools which require improvement, where aspirations are low and where young people have limited opportunities to make career choices and choose their career route. Hence, the areas share a set of common features, but beyond these similarities there are many differences.

Each area has its own challenges. The challenges of rural poverty and rural isolation are distinct from those in an urban area. League tables and Ofsted reports highlight gaps in the quality of education between schools in the same locality and schools in different regions across the country. This, in turn, has an impact on house prices; it is well known that property prices are higher near good schools. Location and place play an important part in defining the learning culture of an area, and this means that, at all stages of a child's education, place matters.

Local, cultural and political education barriers

Geography has played a major role in determining how to overcome the unique challenges in each OA. Rural areas particularly are often not well served by public transport. For example, in rural Fenland, the dykes and drainage systems determine the road routes. Rarely is it possible to go in a straight line from one place to another, and journeys can take a long time, particularly without a vehicle. This, alongside preconceptions about the desirability of an area, has an impact on recruiting and retaining teachers. The impact of local infrastructure extends further. For example, young people in Fenland have restricted access to a local labour market because poor transport systems and digital connectivity have historically led to fewer businesses investing in the area. One of the hallmarks of the OA programme has been identifying the challenges where the Opportunity Area can exert a positive influence, while recognising there are some challenges that are beyond the OAs control.

Negotiating the political geography of individual OAs has also presented challenges, especially in areas that have a range of local government bodies, each with its own structure and responsibilities. It has been important to develop a culture and establish mechanisms whereby one conversation is held with multiple partners to assure coherence and shared understandings, rather than multiple conversations with individual partners which could, and often do, lead to divergent understandings. To meet the current and future needs of young people, creating a coherent support system and not a set of competing agendas within the same geographical area has been a vital factor in ensuring that time is not wasted and that project delivery timescales are met.



Place as a function of geography, system, and need

The educational landscape has many providers and stakeholders. The OA programme has sought to strengthen local and regional networks by encouraging greater collaborative working towards a common purpose. Linking with existing strategy groups and dovetailing with existing programmes has been a key factor in encouraging schools and early years settings to engage with the work of the Opportunity Areas.

The power of belonging to and identifying with a place cannot be underestimated. A child's destiny is often determined before they start school. Where a child grows up can influence their life chances as they progress from school to employment. Similarly, the culture of an area can influence how open people and organisations are to embracing change.

OA teams and partnership boards have consulted widely and listened to those who live, work, and learn in those areas, moving away from a 'one size fits all' model, instead towards enacting collective action. The strategy to build and strengthen local networks so that programmes are shaped and owned by those who are delivering them has been a key success across the different Opportunity Areas. The programme, with its localised intervention approach, has been a catalyst

to address issues of historic insularity and entrenched disadvantage.

For some areas, increasing aspirations and raising expectations may mean young people move away from the area in which they have grown up. If there were a wide scale exodus of young people from an area, what would this mean for community sustainability? The OA programme has highlighted such issues. Some areas share a border with a more prosperous area, town or city. Cambridge, one of the most prosperous cities in the United Kingdom, with 2 universities and considerable investment in the Oxford/Cambridge Arc project, is a good example. While apprenticeships are more popular in the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire OA than in many other regions, the range is limited with a lack of high-level apprenticeships within or near the area.

Socio-economic education barriers

Socio-economic and educational factors linked to geographical location affect the life chances of young people. Children find it difficult to learn if their welfare needs are not met. Disadvantaged children need to have the same access to cultural and sporting

The power of belonging to and identifying with a place cannot be underestimated.

Place as a function of geography, system, and need

activities that other children have in order to boost their confidence and broaden their horizons, and yet the geography of an area and the socio-economic position, and, in some cases, the low education levels of their families can present barriers. Investing in

digital learning platforms across the whole-school age range would be a lever but not a total solution to promoting more equality of access to high-quality education and extending employment opportunities.

79% 

of participants reported an **increase in the ability to cope with challenging situations**

OAs targetting their approach

Derby Opportunity Area: This is Derby

Derby County Community Trust was awarded OA funding to lead a consortium of Derby's arts, culture, sport organisations in delivering This is Derby is a collaborative, local approach to provide Derby's disadvantaged young people with access to culture, arts, sports and leisure activities as a vehicle for enhancing life skills and having a positive impact on social mobility in the city.

Activity was focused in target wards of deprivation, with an additional hub targeted at children and young people who attend special schools. This partnership, community-based model was successful in building strong local relationships and reaching children and families in some of the most disadvantaged and disengaged communities in the city.

Provider surveys found that 88% of participants described an increase in confidence and 79% of participants reported an increase in the ability to cope with challenging situations. It also helped to connect children and families in the most disadvantaged wards of the city with schools and other public services, leading to improved health outcomes, greater community cohesion and better behaviour and attendance in school.



Place as a function of geography, system, and need

Whilst a designated area such as an OA must have a defined boundary as an area which is the focus of investment, the boundary is one that is porous in a number of ways. Often, delivery partners cover an area wider than the designated area, for example across all districts within a shire county. Good practice, too, does not observe lines on a map or organisational boundaries; the OA programme has shone a light on the importance of sharing good practice, sharing resources and sharing a wider pool of expertise across and between areas. This flexibility in how we approach boundaries has been an aspect of the programme that has required situated judgement and flexibility, always foregrounding the aim of improving outcomes for children and young people.

Increasing social mobility, with its emphasis on raising attainment and expanding cultural capital and career choices— aspects which

the OA programme has striven to address— is linked closely to geographical mobility and geographical disadvantage. The Social Mobility Commission's report titled **'The long shadow of deprivation: differences in opportunities across England'** highlights the importance of education in driving opportunities, while at the same time pointing out that education is not enough to get on in the areas with the lowest social mobility.

Adopting a co-ordinated approach to overcoming barriers to social mobility at national and local level matters. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a remarkable determination to make use of technology to overcome geographical boundaries, continue the professional debate and not to be deflected from the core purpose of the OA programme; to improve the life chances of every young person wherever they live, learn or work.





Place as a function of geography, system, and need

OAs unlocking the potential of digital platforms



Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area: Webinar series

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we consulted with schools and settings to determine the most appropriate route to deliver continuous professional development (CPD). As a result, a series of live and pre-recorded CPD sessions were built onto Knowledge Hub, a digital hosting platform that would be free and easily accessible to users. This was subsequently expanded to include learning sessions for pupils. Feedback from users indicated that this was a preferred platform as users could access products at a time and place that suited their situation and so a decision was made to continue use of the platform into the fifth year of the OA. A gap analysis was conducted to identify topics that were missing and those that users would find beneficial. This has led to the expansion of the series to include topics such as teaching assistant support, curriculum resources, leadership, governance and subject specific support, as well as virtual author and illustrator visits. Use of the platform has reached beyond the OA into Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and West Norfolk, with over 140 schools accessing support, 100 of which fall outside of the OA area.

140

Schools accessing support

Characteristics of the OA place-based approach



Graham Cowley
Non-Executive Director Atlas BFW
Chair Blackpool Opportunity Area

The 12 OAs are all different but have common characteristics, for example high levels of deprivation, poor attainment outcomes, high levels of young people not in education, employment or training.

However, those who have worked in the OAs identify common features of what has worked across these diverse areas – there are certain characteristics of the place-based approach that have helped make a change within their place of operation. These characteristics include:

- Developing an understanding of the systems and culture within a place, mapping what exists and gaps that may be preventing progress.
- Using local expertise to secure ownership and buy-in.
- Strong local governance.
- Using an evidence-based and practical approach whilst being strategic in that approach.
- Making careful decisions on financial investment.
- Fostering a culture in which local leaders and organisations work together.

Here, we explore these characteristics in more detail and consider the common characteristics and key ingredients of place-based working in the OA programme.





Characteristics of the OA place-based approach

Mapping and working with what's already in a place

In developing their delivery plans, OA partnership boards diagnosed local challenges and considered local data to determine priorities for funding allocations. Widespread community consultation, such as focus groups with school leaders, early years practitioners, and MAT CEOs, took place to ensure these evidence-based findings matched local community perceptions.

For example, in some areas, the OA was able to accelerate and expand existing activity using local delivery organisations to widen the reach and maximise impact.

The OA as an accelerator



Stoke-on-Trent Opportunity Area: 'holiday food and activities' projects

The OA prioritised providing additional support for children to access activities through school holidays. The provision of food was an important aspect to help families in need. Building on small-scale, pre-existing activity, further provision was piloted throughout 2018 and 2019 with a range of partners which targeted community organisations and schools in specific wards with high levels of deprivation. Enrichment activities were provided and parents and children were given access to school nurses and family support workers. (Food was not funded by the OA. This was provided by local partners and donations).

One partner, Port Vale Community Trust, tested different approaches via OA funding. Learning from these pilots ultimately brought into existence a self-sustaining charity, The Hubb Foundation, the reach of which is now city-wide. This experience is informing national policy development in this area.

Characteristics of the OA place-based approach

OAs empowering parents

Oldham Opportunity Area: improving early literacy

Making it REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) helps early years practitioners to build parents' knowledge and confidence with reading and writing and create a strong early home learning environment, engage in their child's learning and to support their child's readiness for school by age 5. It has been part of Oldham's early years strategy since 2009, when Oldham participated in a National Lottery funded partnership project with the University of Sheffield and National Children's Bureau. The OA partnership board agreed to scale up the previous work that had already been delivered in Oldham with the National Children's Bureau and the Sutton Trust. In 2018, the Opportunity Area funded the delivery of Making it REAL in 31 schools and settings, targeting 8 of the most deprived wards in Oldham. Delivery started in February 2018 and is ongoing.

The mapping and identification of what was already in place in an OA also included identifying what current systems did or did not exist and developing an understanding of the culture within a place, including where things needed to change.

Committing to a long-term delivery plan and encouraging the development of enduring strategies arguably helped secure buy-in and longer-term participation from local stakeholders. Rigorous monitoring and regular evaluation of initiatives facilitated successful deployment and management of projects that reflected evolving need.





Characteristics of the OA place-based approach

OAs providing external evidence-based input

Blackpool Opportunity Area: Key Stage 3 Literacy project and Education Endowment Foundation input

The key stage 3 (KS3) Literacy project brought all Blackpool secondary schools together to collaborate and implement evidence-based, whole-school approaches to literacy, supported by a backbone organisation, Right to Succeed. Schools identified named KS3 Literacy Senior Leads who were trained in a series of Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) evidence-based whole-school approaches, by the Blackpool Research School at St. Mary's Catholic Academy and took responsibility for: increasing capacity and developing improved processes for change and enhancing students' reading ability through improving decoding, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension of texts, within their own school. Additionally, the schools agreed to participate in a common assessment approach (GL Assessments).[1]

GL Assessment data shows a 27% increase in the number of high-ability readers between 2020 to 2021, an uplift in reading performance across the whole cohort.

27% 

increase in the number of high-ability readers between 2020 to 2021

When OAs determined that the local offer was not sufficiently developed or capacity in the system needed strengthening and exposure to 'what good looks like' was deemed important within a place, OAs brought in tailored external input. In this approach, a key partner has been the EEF and their EEF Research School network.¹ The OA work with EEF research schools has brought challenge to OA thinking, such as scrutiny of the evidence base for proposed projects, as well as providing evidence-based continuous professional development and recognised interventions for school communities.

1 <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/>

Characteristics of the OA place-based approach

Financial investment

DfE funding was fundamental to driving the place-based approach across the OAs. Investment linked to targeted priorities enabled the establishment of projects tackling a range of issues from early years through to post-16 and beyond. It leveraged external resources and it facilitated activity by convening and inspiring local people, and broadly it offered new capacity and capability to bring about change.

The financial investment acted as a galvanizer, bringing local and national partners to the same table to strategically plan and commit investment to address local issues and priorities.

In addition, investment helped unlock match funding.

OAs unlocking match-funding through partnership



Stoke-on-Trent Opportunity Area partnership with the City of Stoke-on-Trent Council: the 'Better Together' project

This was a joint OA and council funded project (£620,500 OA funding with £400,000 local authority match funding) covering all primary and secondary schools in the city. It enabled schools to have a link to a Social Worker and Educational Psychologist to help identify children and families at risk of running into difficulties, and to train school staff to identify early signs. It was a multi-agency approach to safeguarding, supporting parents and keeping families together. The project ended in 2020 and learning has subsequently been absorbed into the council's early help approach.





Characteristics of the OA place-based approach

The DfE OA investment includes Civil Service resource. DfE teams allocated to individual OAs have brought expertise, insight, rigour and challenge. These teams have worked with local partnership boards, and this combination has ensured funding decisions have been rooted in evidence and provided best value. The teams also provided a bridge between national policy and local need, enabling national initiatives to 'land' in ways that maximised local value.

It is important to note that the method of deployment of resources allowed benefits to greatly exceed costs by harvesting the value of collaborative working and by drawing in match resources.

Strategic

In the worlds of education and social services, the trend towards services being provided by individual specialist organisations has had the positive effect of enabling those organisations to focus their skills in their specific area of expertise. OAs have identified impressive examples of best practice in many individual aspects of social intervention in schools, councils and the third sector. In recognising the need to strategically drive and monitor all activities, the OAs have co-ordinated, brokered, and supplemented existing activity, all to drive significant improvements in outcomes for young people.

OAs have brought expertise, insight, rigour and challenge.

Characteristics of the OA place-based approach

OAs have been able to establish themselves as system leaders within a place owing to the OA governance model, including the independent leadership provided by the chair and board, openness from local councils and stakeholders to work with OAs, and the substantial funding of the programme. The OAs were not rooted within a specific organization that may have come with a particular agenda or philosophy and were therefore able to broker collaboration of key organisations, thereby filling a strategic gap. The governance of the programme is elaborated on page 24 onwards.

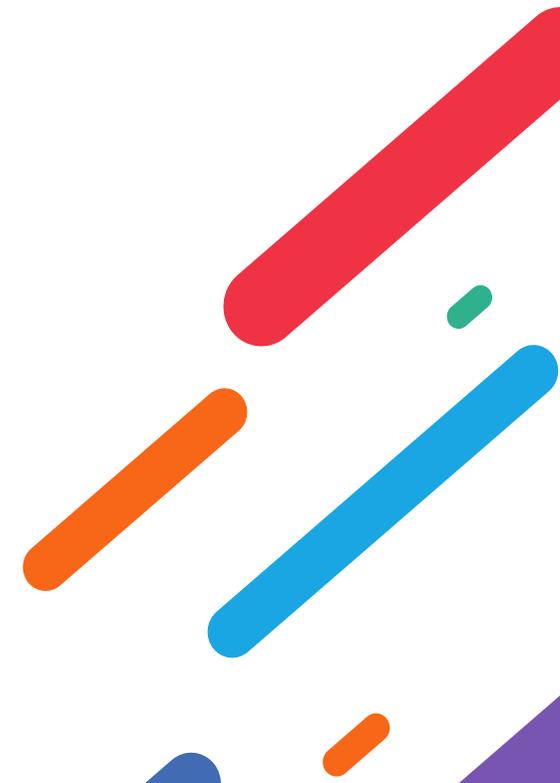
OAs have developed a strategic approach within a place. For example, some OAs have worked with councils to develop evidence-based, strategic, and forward-looking plans that have an eye to the future and life beyond the OA programme.

OAs driving strategic long-term approach

Blackpool Opportunity Area and the development and implementation of a 10-year education strategy

Blackpool OA was instrumental in shaping the development of Blackpool's 10-Year Education Vision and Strategy. The OA provided resources to drive and operationalise the strategy and its associated pillars focused on Literacy, NEET reduction, and inclusion. This built on the foundations of the OA's work over the previous 5 years, providing a clear mechanism for the longer-term sustainability of the OA initiatives and embedding the cultural and systems change that the OA has driven.

Importantly, the strategy recognised a wider view of education brought about through the wide-ranging OA collaboration, manifested in wrap around support for schools and targeted actions to improve numbers in full-time work.





Characteristics of the OA place-based approach

Embedded in this strategic approach has been the drive for sustainability beyond the life of the OA Programme. Across all 12 OAs, partnership boards have been focused on ensuring investment decisions have had sustainability 'wired in', so that both the work itself and the learning would be embedded beyond the OA funding period. This has included identifying who would continue to lead work, embedding newly created systems, assuring the use of resources beyond the life of the programme, and preserving the positive change in culture.

OAs driven by strategy



Oldham Opportunity Area's support for an Early Years Partnership

Oldham OA identified the need for the improvements in early years provision delivered through OA investment to be owned and championed at a strategic level within the borough. The OA resourced a robust and holistic review of local priorities for early years, which led to the development and implementation of an early years strategy. The strategy is delivered by an Early Years Partnership which offers clear direction, purpose and accountability. The strategy is underpinned by an outcomes framework which has established a unifying language across services, highlighted existing collaborations and emphasised shared contribution to shared outcomes, and assisted commissioning decisions by targeting earlier stages of development and focusing on early prevention of problems. The strategy, partnership and outcomes framework provide a single, unified purpose to improve outcomes for Oldham's youngest residents.

Characteristics of the OA place-based approach

An independent approach

The Civil Service teams have provided a rigour that has supported independent OA partnership board chairs and board members to generate a collective energy in each place. The independent partnership boards, established by the Secretary of State for Education, have harnessed and directed this energy into the implementation of their targeted delivery plans.

Local sector leaders from across the educational phases, businesses, and charities sit on the boards, and individuals do so voluntarily. Board members know their communities and the local systems well, bringing close knowledge to the forum of the children and their families who would benefit from OA work.

Boards are chaired by independent senior leaders who are, for example, multi-academy trust CEOs, university Vice-Chancellors or business leaders. Chairs have brought credibility and helped get ‘buy-in’ to the OA ethos through their independence. The OAs have demonstrated that local leaders are collaborating to set locally determined priorities, which has assured stakeholder agency and ownership to the aims and objectives of the programme.

More broadly, OA partnership board chairs have brought energy and drive, a balance of strategic overview and a ‘hands on’ practical approach, ideas and challenge to the status quo, and a passion to support local people to fulfil their potential. Chairs have also been able to represent their OA’s aims and objectives from a strong position of local knowledge paired with independence as they have engaged local elected members and parliamentarians.

“With the backing of the Secretary of State for Education, as the independent Co-Chair of the Stoke-on-Trent Opportunity Area I was given the authority and decision making ‘clout’ to be able to direct the work of the OA so that it was targeted at issues affecting my community. I was also able to support and challenge the council and other local partners in seeking what was best for children and young people in my city in a neutral way. This helped bring groups together to develop projects and interventions that directly addressed needs.”

**Carol Shanahan, Co-Chair
Stoke-on-Trent Opportunity Area**

Developing flexible evidence-based, data-driven approaches to address local issues that were a barrier to social mobility.

Characteristics of the OA place-based approach

The independence of the board and chairs has manifested itself in delegated decision-making to develop flexible evidence-based, data-driven approaches to address local issues that were a barrier to social mobility. These approaches have evolved over time to address changing circumstances.

It is noteworthy that OA chairs, partnership boards, and Civil Service teams have approached their OA work on two levels: rolling the sleeves up and ‘getting stuck in’ by leading projects on the ground, and by providing the strategic input, as exemplified in the Blackpool case study, earlier in this guide.

Constraints and limitations

Whilst the programme has provided opportunities, realising those opportunities has required operating within some limitations. Some examples include:

- Funding is finite, and OAs have needed to prioritise and focus investments in projects and interventions. Managing expectations, self-interest, such as when organisations look to the OA to fill financial gaps or launch favoured projects, have all needed to be considered and balanced, with a tight focus on the OA aims.

- Linked to funding are funding cycles: an initial 3-year programme was twice extended by 1-year funding agreements, each requiring an approval process. Inevitably, this uncertainty had an impact on planning, embedding and sustainability efforts. It is also widely recognised that the true impacts of initiatives to strengthen social mobility will take longer to achieve.
- In the set-up phase of the programme, some OAs faced criticism and opposition from some sectors. For example, we know some schools and councils were keen to access funding and fully determine its use, which could arguably have plugged gaps but may not have had wider impact, nor facilitated systemic and cultural change in the way that the OA programme has.
- The level of transparency around how boards were established, who was invited onto them and why, can hinder progress at the outset, especially if there is perceived bias with the same ‘favoured’ individuals within an area being represented.
- Given the voluntary nature of the programme, nobody has been forced to engage and participate. For example, some schools may have chosen not to engage for a range of reasons, including other priorities

and lacking capacity. Conversely, having engaged voluntarily, the whole-hearted and long-term commitment of partners has been assured.

- Where OAs have operated in an education landscape characterised by a mix of council-run schools, diverse multi-academy trusts (MATs) and single academy trusts, more time was needed to bring partners together and develop a collaborative approach.





Characteristics of the OA place-based approach

Summing up

What has made the OA approach work as a place-based initiative? This can be summed up along the lines of the following characteristics:

- Initially, filling the strategic leadership gap and then encouraging the emergence of local strategic leaders.
- Evidence-based understanding of the local challenges and opportunities, a shared delivery plan to tackle them, and a culture of shared responsibility, ensuring the OA adds value and does not duplicate.
- Focused leadership to drive the place-based agenda, exemplified in the OA partnership board, OA chairs and local leadership.
- Deploying evidence-based initiatives, monitoring rigorously, and ensuring outcome measures are clear and plans are in place that enable effective evaluation.
- Working with local and national partners in a collaborative way and having tenacity to overcome obstacles. Build co-operation through a 'work with' rather than a 'done to' approach, using this culture to break down barriers between delivery partners so as to harvest operational synergies.
- Long-term funding, resources, external support, and Civil Service programme management. In combination, this has brought capacity and expertise where needed, together with the time – an essential ingredient – to effect social change.
- Agility to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances (the COVID-19 pandemic is a prime example) and being open-minded to address emerging issues and changing needs.
- Taking a broad view of education and considering the important wrap-around support to schools which enables them to focus on teaching quality.
- A recognition of the importance of quality, local work opportunities in supporting social mobility.

The Value of Governance: Enacting change through partnership



Professor Kathryn Mitchell CBE DL
Vice-Chancellor & Chief Executive,
University of Derby
Chair of Derby partnership board

The value of good governance is that it assures 3 fundamental elements: transparency, independence, and accountability. On this premise, OA partnership boards were enabled to enact change through effective and collaborative decision-making. The establishment of OA partnership boards arose through compelling dialogue and consultation between local partnership and the DfE, and in the case of Derby OA, initiated through mediated conversations by local MPs.

This starting point denoted an openness and willingness by the DfE to listen to and respond to issues and concerns raised by both education providers and the significant array of support networks delivering education services across these designated areas. The strength of OAs and their resilience during times of change, not least the COVID-19 pandemic, can arguably be attributed to the governance structures that have supported a more consultative approach and a more devolved partnership model, denoting the importance of place ownership with DfE oversight.

It is important to note that the designation of OAs was not always welcomed in the initial stages, and there was a nervousness that they may be perceived as initiatives with short-term monies into areas with long-term and intractable poor outcomes for many young people within these areas.

Transparency of governance, providing two-way assurances, was critical, especially in relation to three core components:

- Control and distribution of monies.
- Local decision-making.
- Central approval.

The value of good governance is that it assures 3 fundamental elements: transparency, independence, and accountability.



The Value of Governance: Enacting change through partnership

The local governance structure

The decision to have independent chairs determined by place was crucial, as this empowered the OAs to lead change, but more fundamentally, with the authority of central government, to identify the solutions in direct response to the identified place-based issues. As importantly, the partnership with DfE Heads of Delivery enabled a strong and powerful decision-making process which was a catalyst for driving local change, with oversight sitting firmly with the DfE. This governance approach was potent in overcoming initial scepticism at the time of 'building the board' that initiatives would be driven centrally for deployment locally. Instead, it assured local ownership.

The selection of independent chairs was not the same in each OA. From a personal perspective, it was a significant decision to take on this role due to the time commitment and the importance of leading a board to deliver a step-change through innovative solutions to improve the outcomes for young people in our city. As we approach the mid-point of the fifth year of the programme, in the majority of OAs, the independent chairs have maintained their roles that were initially foreseen to be for 3 years. While timely

evolution of boards is important, so too is the commitment and continuity that this has provided.

Independent chairs could be perceived as disrupters in a system. It was apparent at the inception of the OAs that these designated areas were weary, fractured, and felt disempowered. The education system was and remains a complex system, with significant numbers of multi-academy trusts (MATs) and local authority-maintained schools, and no party having the remit to generate and galvanise effort around a clear, place-based vision. OAs were able to fill this gap, which possibly acknowledges the general willingness of disparate groups to coalesce around a focused approach to improving the chances of young people within a place, when the conditions are conducive. However, due to the large number of organisations involved in delivering these services, effective governance was never more critical.

Across all OAs, there were recognised infrastructures addressing issues around school improvement, but inherent in many of these structures was a singular approach rather than a community or place-based approach. For example, within Derby there were regular meetings of headteachers at

The decision to have independent chairs determined by place was crucial.



The Value of Governance: Enacting change through partnership

both primary and secondary levels, and it is important to recognise that for early years there had been some momentum in addressing performance outcomes at a city-wide level. However, the lack of engagement across the system between primary, secondary, and tertiary education providers was striking. Initially, as an independent chair, the request to work collaboratively, addressing performance outcomes in a more holistic way was not always positively received. However, through dialogue and openness, a wider recognition that the system adopted across the city was possibly creating unhelpful boundaries was one ripe for discussion and challenge.

Without doubt, the size and shape of OA partnership boards has been dependent upon the nature of the challenges in each

place. For Derby OA, there were significant issues across performance outcomes at all age-groups, but the need for improvement in early years outcomes and transition to secondary were both critical to success. Prior to the OA, partnership working across Derby schools was patchy – there was, for example, a functioning strategy group for primary and secondary – and although a number of educational leaders were sceptical about the OA, the formalisation of a board that had the overarching aim of improving outcomes for our young people could not be ignored. In some instances, the selection of board members was challenging due to local requests for membership and assessing how they would meet the needs of the board. Derby OA selected board members who were directly linked to school delivery models and identified other key members representing the wrap-around support required to safeguard and develop young people, including from the voluntary sector and employers. In addition, the role of the **Regional Schools Commissioner** on the board has been extremely valuable as we had a number of complex school leadership issues, and, with their support, we were able to provide a holistic approach to a small number of schools, which, without their insight and support, may have taken the board longer to approve.

“
Prior to the OA, partnership working across Derby schools was patchy.
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The Value of Governance: Enacting change through partnership

Many of the OA partnership boards devolved management and oversight of identified strands of work to subgroups. Oversight of these groups was, for Derby OA, led by the DfE Head of Delivery and their team. This was a stretching and important governance responsibility, especially if selected initiatives were not delivering to plan. For an independent chair, this structure enabled effective engagement between the board and sub-groups and was a key strength. Moreover, this collaborative working pattern, which evolved over time, led to our key partners' active support of equitable improvements of provision and not just their own provisions, recognising the broader aim of increasing opportunity for young people across the city.

The formulation of sub-groups was critical to drive activity and support decision-making. Drawing again on Derby as an example, where the initial primary focus was educational pathways, it became clear that a more cohesive approach to how our city provides opportunities to young people was lacking, and this led to the formation of a sub-group called 'Broader Horizons' which brought in more community-based partners. In Derby, the governance of sub-groups was mostly uniform, with most chairs of sub-groups on

the main board. This provided the board with critical insights into progress and performance of work strands and assured continuity, enabling effective decision-making.

Another important characteristic of the OA partnership boards is that they have provided a jurisdiction for engagement for all schools, whatever their independent structure. With multiple partners comes multiple lines of accountability, and, understandably, it took time for MAT CEOs and school governors to assure themselves of the fit between their own autonomy and the wider vision of the OA. Again here, the clear OA governance structure was invaluable in providing both information and assurance on the roles and responsibilities of board members, and, importantly, the boards' responsibility to the Secretary of State.

Support from the local DfE delivery leads was very much welcomed by OA partnership board members as well as by partners. A key element of the OA approach, and one which the Derby Board communicated as part its engagement strategy, was that the city had been given the opportunity, overseen by a central DfE team, to deliver change with impact. This was extremely well received and enabled high-quality and effective governance; the city and our partners were, and felt, accountable.

The clear OA governance structure was invaluable in providing both information and assurance on the roles and responsibilities of board members.





The Value of Governance: Enacting change through partnership

However, as OA chair for Derby, the remit to assure delivery of the programme and how it benefitted the identified young people in the city was both an honour and considerable responsibility, especially as in the initial phases it was apparent that there was not a unified view on how this could and should be achieved.

Developing a delivery plan

The development of the delivery plan was extremely well led by the DfE Heads of Delivery and their teams. In addition, the role of the central DfE senior programme lead has been proactive and supportive, providing a strong conduit between local and central leadership. In relation to the governance process, the commitment of these teams to work collaboratively with the educational leads and, in particular, the voluntary sector in addressing the core aims of the programme was duly undertaken. A compelling ask in terms of governance was that it was bespoke to local needs. Reflecting on this process, this has been one of the most powerful outcomes of the OA place-based approach. Each OA had the same remit but developed tailored plans and interventions to meet local needs. The programme did not roll out from central initiatives, rather each OA created a nuanced plan to meet their local needs.

The role of independent chairs to assure local improvements against national benchmarks was critical through transparency, independence, and accountability. Therefore, the role of board members and the chairs have been vital in driving a strong and local delivery plan.

Two particular examples of the impact of the Derby partnership board operating a place-based approach come to mind: early years and secondary school exclusions. The original data dashboards for each OA gave clear insight into performance and outcomes. For Derby, these showed that significant numbers of children were not ‘school-ready’. Here, the fundamental insight was enabling families to access support in our local communities as an unmet need. There was some best practice in some nurseries that demonstrated exceptional engagement with families, which gave clear local benchmarks on which we could build. Another key issue was the mobility of young people between schools in the city, linked to exceptionally high levels of exclusions and in-year school moves. The improved working partnership instigated through the board has seen considerable improvement and a significant reduction in permanent exclusions and has possibly, according to feedback from schools, made a significant contribution to improvements that have been noted in Ofsted inspections.

Each OA created a nuanced plan to meet their local needs.

The Value of Governance: Enacting change through partnership

Governance of delivery plan and projects

The formal approval for delivery plans was not always smooth running. Challenges included timeliness and aligning differing perspectives into a collaborative vision. The role of the DfE Heads of Delivery and their insights from across the breadth of all 12 OAs was supportive and informative. Pertinent to a rigorous approval process has been the commitment of these teams to challenge stakeholders and partners to address the most fundamental issues facing the local area and the desired outcomes for their young people. As expected, at times, individuals found it difficult to extricate themselves from a decision best for their own provision rather than the wider benefit for the city. Here too, the board and independent chair had a critical role in assuring all key priorities were assessed against data and evidence, thereby disaggregating the decision from the personal needs of their core organisations. This approach fostered a strong and trusting relationship between board members and enabled the board to work at pace. Moreover, the integration of the local DfE leads working in partnership with schools and providers invigorated local partners to grasp

the opportunity to shape the delivery of the programme for their young people and their communities. This remains the 'heartbeat' of the board today.

Another key component of effective governance has been assessment of activities and projects to assure robustness of the delivery of plans. This required challenge and scrutiny in equal measure and, initially, some members found this challenging. Retrospectively, feedback is that this has enabled the board to develop a strong and respectful working relationship, as well as create a sense of team. Initially, presentations for the delivery of projects were limited in their evidence-base and were presented in terms of 'we think this will work'. Whilst it was important to acknowledge the in-depth understanding that local practitioners had of their local environment, it was essential that they could evidence the rationale for their projects, and, just as importantly, how the OA partnership board would measure success. In the first round of proposals, this meant the board requested re-presentation to address these requirements. As chair, I wanted to create a strong culture of accountability and this required the board to be able to assess whether selected programmes should be terminated if they were not delivering against success measures.

Another key component of effective governance has been assessment of activities and projects to assure robustness of the delivery of plans.



The Value of Governance: Enacting change through partnership

Overarching governance structure

The overarching governance structure between independent chairs, DfE Heads of Delivery, and the DfE Senior Responsible Owner for the programme has developed over time. Meetings of chairs with the senior DfE leads created a safe space to discuss and share both concerns and successes. It has also enabled chairs to work across OA boundaries, and, in the latter part of the programme, integrate successful initiatives from a number of OAs. This sharing of good practice highlights the strength of central governance and denotes the commitment of the DfE team to enabling the OAs to flourish at the local level while being held to account. This central role was critical to assure that funding was committed to impact young people, and that the boards, via the chairs, were an effective conduit to ensure local and central demands were being addressed.

The engagement and support of ministers has been welcomed and vital to the OA communities. Derby OA received a ministerial visit at the inception of the programme. This was extremely well received, especially by the

young people of Derby and school leadership teams who acknowledged it as a commitment to their city and their young people. Throughout the programme there has been continued support from ministers, including ministerial visits, which have impacted positively not only the area visited but on all OAs, as they have strengthened understanding of the OA approach and partnership working to enhance life chances for young people in the OAs.

“The work of the OA has served to bring Derby City’s key stakeholders for children and young people together towards a shared common goal. Incisive strategic thinking and a drive to mobilise resources at the Derby OA partnership board level has served to support actions across all age groups to improve outcomes from the very youngest to those stepping towards apprenticeship and University that has raised aspirations and ambition in Derby. Its impact in difficult times is strong and long lasting.”

**Neil Wilkinson,
Executive Headteacher,
Bemrose School, Derby**

The Value of Governance: Enacting change through partnership

For some, these governance approaches that enable effective partnership working are felt to have contributed to improved OFSTED ratings, a recognition of strong leadership at both school and area level.

“The approach used by the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area ‘tipped the scales’ in our favour and resulted in the school’s first ‘good’ Ofsted judgement in 25 years.

Within every Opportunity Area there will be different levels of need. The FECOA strategically deployed the resources and expertise we needed to create a bespoke package of support. This approach transformed the fortunes of our school and the community it serves!”

Mr Rob Litten, Executive Headteacher at New Road and Park Lane Primary School

The role of independent and voluntary chairs within this programme has also been challenging. From a personal perspective, it has been one of the most important roles I have undertaken. This work on the OA programme has influenced how I undertake my day job and made me fundamentally re-think how universities undertake their outreach and regional engagement activities. Critically, the OA has challenged me to assess the role universities can play in enabling and supporting our local communities to grow and enhance their opportunities.

In the OA programme, we have seen that effective governance is critical in supporting effective and timely decision-making. Its further success is that each area of the OA programme is committed to continue and enhance their delivery with impact, which demonstrates the value of local determinism with central oversight.

Some key lessons learned from the programme

A perspective from the Department for Education team

There are elements of the OA programme's delivery model which are innovative, and this is particularly true of the way we have worked with our independently-chaired local partnership boards to engage with local stakeholders. This has helped create an enduring, close working relationship between each local area and the DfE.

Given these innovations, the delivery model has attracted scrutiny and comment from a wide range of interested parties, including Parliament. This input has helped us to reflect on and refine our delivery model as the programme has progressed.

Drawing on that feedback, we offer here some of our learning about delivering place-based programmes.

Place-based working requires more than just geographical targeting of interventions.

Many government policies, including many from the DfE, are targeted at particular parts of the country. This is sensible and understandable. There are problems which are particularly acute in certain areas, and it makes sense to target additional funding/interventions to those areas. This can often deliver the most impact and the best value for money.

However, we have learnt from the OA programme there is often real value in going beyond simply telling a place that it will benefit from a new initiative or has qualified for additional funding. Sometimes it is important to go beyond "place-targeting" to true "place-based working".

There is a genuine value to partnership working.

Some key lessons learned from the programme

In the OA programme, we have seen the positive impact on stakeholders when they have been given the opportunity to themselves choose, with DfE support, their priorities and interventions. This has been done in a way that is sensitive to the particular needs of each area. While such local engagement and tailoring requires time and resource, this can often be time and resource well spent when it secures local buy-in and leads to a more impactful programme. When we talk about the success of ‘place-based’ working, this kind of local engagement, tailoring and ownership is one aspect of that success. There is more to place-based working than simply selecting areas to ‘receive’ an initiative.

There is a genuine value to partnership working.

We have found the OA local partnership boards to be invaluable in ensuring we chose the right interventions for each OA, and that those are then delivered with the full support of local stakeholders. This is widely felt to have ensured that interventions have had greater impact and generated better value for money than if they had been delivered in the area without any local engagement or buy-in.

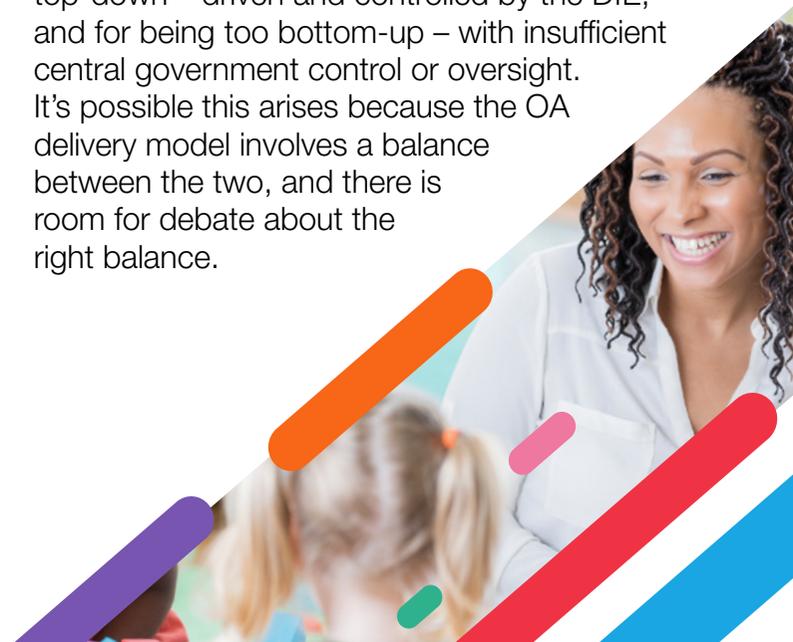
We have struck a careful balance. On the one hand, being a member of an OA partnership board is not a public appointment and is wholly unpaid. The boards do not have executive responsibility or power over the programme, and the relevant senior official in DfE is ultimately responsible for authorising funding, with ministers approving delivery plans. Technically, the boards are ‘ad hoc advisory groups’. At the same time, the boards have had a significant influence on the way the programme has been designed and delivered in each of the 12 areas. By convening the board and involving them in the decision-making, we have ensured that local knowledge is fully integrated in the process, and that local buy-in has been secured.

The structure of the boards has been important also, as elaborated elsewhere in this guide. OA Boards have been seen as neutral, led by chairs who are well-respected local figures. This has enabled the OA programme to be the arbiter between competing local views and interests in a way that has often been very helpful. Meetings between chairs and DfE ministers has given chairs the opportunity to raise key issues from their areas. In addition, the board has helped ensure

the relevant local authority is involved in the decision-making process, and in many cases has been charged with the procurement and delivery of selected interventions. Servicing a local partnership board does require a certain amount of time and resource, but as noted above, those involved in the OA programme hold that this engagement leads to improved outcomes and better value for money.

It’s important to get the balance right between setting a clear direction for the policy and adapting it to local circumstances.

Interestingly, the OA programme has been criticised on occasions both for being too top-down – driven and controlled by the DfE, and for being too bottom-up – with insufficient central government control or oversight. It’s possible this arises because the OA delivery model involves a balance between the two, and there is room for debate about the right balance.





Some key lessons learned from the programme

As noted above, we have made full use of our local partnership boards as a key part of delivering the programme. However, the boards have not had executive responsibility, which means it is not true to say that place-based working means giving up all central control. Part of the success of the programme has been in striking the right balance.

The OA boards have helped to choose the right interventions in each area and helped to drive them forward. Each board has representatives from the local authority who have ensured that the necessary procurement of the chosen interventions is achievable and deliverable. Each board also has on it a DfE Head of Delivery who has ensured that proposals align to DfE priorities. The boards designed the local programmes, and the resultant delivery plans have been approved and supported by ministers. This model, as described elsewhere in this guide as both bottom-up and top-down, has been balanced, acceptable to each area, and replicable.

The best providers may not be local.

It might seem natural to assume that a place-based programme would use local providers to deliver it, and there are good reasons why we would do so. The local body charged with

procuring interventions (such as, in the case of the OAs, the local authority), may have call-off contracts to draw on or lists of pre-approved local providers, either of which may help speed up the delivery process. The use of local providers may also reassure local stakeholders that the programme will be delivered by people who know and understand the local area. It may also help foster local goodwill and boost local business.

However, as elaborated elsewhere in this guide, it has been an important feature of the OA programme that external expertise has, at times, been appropriate to bring in new thinking, and to disrupt local systems with the aim of improving services for local people. These external providers have also often shared best practice from their work in other, similar areas – a key improvement driver. In procuring interventions, the aim in the OA programme has been to use the best providers, whoever and wherever they are, to deliver the most impact and the best value for money. In some cases, that has meant drawing on external delivery partners.

External expertise has, at times, been appropriate to bring in new thinking.

The benefits of place-based working



Tim Coulson
Chair, Norwich
Opportunity Area Board

The previous sections of this guide set out how the structure of the OA programme has enabled the OAs to develop understanding of, and respond to, local context and challenges by listening to local communities and the professionals who work in them. The OAs have focused on strengthening the capacity of local systems to drive change through a culture of collaboration, local vision relating to local priorities, and strong local leadership.

This approach has enabled the OA programme to refine and adapt programmes to respond to local need and has given greater local ownership of achieving the desired changes. It has given local leaders a chance to look beyond the remit of individual organisations to work in the gaps, to get upstream of the issues and work collectively in the interests of young people. It has enabled the OAs to focus on effective implementation, developing local networks and working with local partners that have credibility with, and are trusted by, local communities.

The resulting cultural shift has been greater than the sum of the constituent projects, and it has created the foundations for longer lasting change.

Local leadership

Giving recognised local leaders a central role in shaping the OA programmes through the partnership boards and supporting stakeholder groups ensured the OAs had credibility and a strong sense of local ownership from the outset. Working closely with partners who understood the local landscape and historical challenges ensured that programmes were attuned to local context and need, and worked to strengthen existing arrangements.

Representation from a wide range of partners on the boards helped to simplify decision-making, providing a focal point for communication of issues and supporting collective problem solving.

This collective leadership across organisations, sectors and schools, including from different MATs, focused on making the system work better for young people in the area, particularly the most vulnerable. This was pivotal in winning hearts and minds of key partners and has set the tone for strong collaboration and partnership at all levels throughout the programme.



The benefits of place-based working

OA leadership galvanising change



Leadership straddling support and constructive challenge **Blackpool Inclusion Project: Continuum of Provision**

The Continuum of Provision project was set up in a context of high numbers of permanent exclusions in secondary schools and increasing demands on the high needs budget.

This project was driven by a group of MAT CEO's committed to improving inclusion in secondary schools in partnership with the local authority and OA. This collective leadership has galvanised change.

Local leadership, sharing data and learning has created a culture of constructive challenge and support between schools.

“We genuinely believe that the extra capacity that has been provided by the Ipswich OA school lead role and the work with other local schools and within our MAT was a significant part of our gaining a Good status by Ofsted following a number of years as Requires Improvement.”

Secondary Head Teacher, Ipswich

The OAs have energised the local system, giving passionate local leaders agency and permission to drive change. The motivation and commitment that this distributed leadership has provided is a strong foundation for future sustainability.

The benefits of place-based working

OAs driving change through networks and leadership



Norwich Opportunity Area: Communication Champions

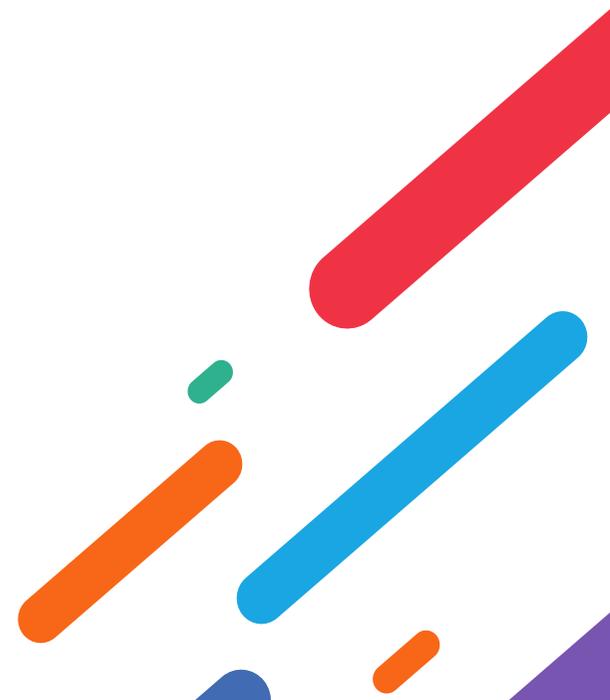
The Communication Champions project in Norwich was led voluntarily by a passionate local headteacher, who had taken his primary school in the city's most deprived ward to 'Outstanding'. His energy, knowledge and leadership were pivotal in winning hearts and minds to drive change that is now benefitting schools across Norwich, Norfolk and beyond. From 2017-2019, the percentage of children in Norwich reaching the expected level of development in speech language and communication, and good level of development overall, increased faster than the national average, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.

Key features of the project have been the development of a sustainable network of hundreds of expert practitioners and the establishment of Communication Hub schools and settings to maintain these networks, which has ensured further distribution of leadership in the city.²

Collaboration

There are issues which individual settings cannot address alone and where silo working gets in the way of what is best for children. By bringing partners together to jointly address shared issues, the OAs have developed approaches centred around children's needs, rather than organisational remits. In this way, collaboration has added value and quality through sharing learning, co-ordinating support and tackling common problems together. The commitment to local collaboration has seen some previously adversarial relationships move to productive ones with an ethos of collective problem solving.

² Opportunity Areas Insight Guide Early Years Norwich Case Study: page 21



The benefits of place-based working

Collaboration: A child-centred approach

By supporting local stakeholders to step back and create a single vision for change in a place, the OAs have worked in the gaps between schools and settings, working across phases as children transition through the education system. The initiatives that many OAs have developed on inclusion and transitions have focused on ensuring the child's needs are met in the movement between organisations.

OAs working across phases as children transition through the education system



Stoke-on-Trent Opportunity Area: Improving literacy and numeracy in Private, Voluntary Independent (PVI) settings and Nurseries

The focus of the project was both to develop and solidify relationships between schools and their PVI settings by encouraging professional dialogue and, through this, to foster a shared vision to ensure the best outcomes for children, through improved readiness for formal teaching in literacy and maths. This was achieved by the sharing of pedagogical strategies and in providing continuity of resources between schools and settings. The project also opened avenues of CPD for PVI staff, building their skills and confidence. Phonics and maths were initially chosen as they were the key areas where children struggled to achieve milestones at the end of reception.

The project has demonstrated success, with children making progress in early reading, phonics and maths, and with nursery children (in those schools reporting data) making more rapid progress and providing them with an improved readiness to continue learning on school entry. Improved relationships between settings and schools will provide smoother transition for children and improve their readiness for school.





The benefits of place-based working

OAs building networks to share learning



Doncaster Opportunity Area: Transitions Project

The Doncaster OA Transitions Project has facilitated the development and strengthening of partnership working between the primary and secondary sector providing a borough wide transition offer for children moving from Year 6 to Year 7.

The project has led to the creation and implementation of clear transition processes and practices providing enhanced data exchange to inform planning and support for children in their new settings.

Universal borough transition days have been developed along with a wide range of resources to support families and children. For example, the virtual tour of each secondary school setting with welcome messages from school leaders, offered to all Year 6 children, enables families to actively participate in their child's transition experience. The OA-funded team also provides specialist transition support to those children identified by primaries as requiring more intensive assistance.

The programme led to the creation of a cross-phase Transitions Steering Group which continues to provide appraisal and challenge to the team as they look to refine systems and practices and explore how better to support other transition points.

The benefits of place-based working

OAs sharing learning through networks

Derby Opportunity Area: Transitions Project



Derby's Transitions project has strengthened city-wide transition arrangements including introducing common transfer days, improving data/information sharing between phases, information sharing protocols and events, and enhanced support for vulnerable students.

Initially focused on improving transition between primary and secondary, the project has now been expanded to support transition from secondary into post 16 and from Year 2 to Year 3.

Developed during lockdown, the OA-funded Transitions Portals, which facilitates data sharing and enables schools to put the right support in place for pupils pre-transition, have exceeded all expectations and proved invaluable.

This project has been a catalyst for significant and substantial change that is now becoming business as usual for the city as it sets a new high benchmark for transitional support.

Collaboration and innovation

Collaboration across different sectors can be more challenging, with data-sharing typically a barrier. Where partnerships have worked well, the ability to compare intelligence and identify patterns has shone a light on obstacles and unleashed creative and innovative thinking. Having local capacity has enabled OAs to trial new ideas, test early policy thinking, and unlock previously intractable data sharing issues.



The benefits of place-based working

OAs delivering innovative support through cross-organisational partnerships



Bradford Opportunity Area: Glasses in Classes

The connections developed within Bradford OA have been facilitated by a commitment across all relevant organisations (including schools, local authorities and NHS Foundation Trusts) to work in genuine partnership to support schools to meet the needs of their children and young people.

The Glasses in Classes project was developed in Bradford OA to improve literacy by tackling uncorrected eyesight problems in school. Children who need glasses receive two pairs; the child's own pair to be worn as directed by the optometrist, and a second pair which are sent to and kept within the school.

Through the Early Identification of Autism project, Bradford OA has pioneered the UK's first real breakthrough in the early identification of undiagnosed Autism Spectrum Condition that enables children to get the support needed at an earlier age.

Further information about these projects can be found in the Opportunity Areas Health Insight Guide: **Opportunity Areas Insight Guide – Health and Education** (publishing.service.gov.uk)

Opportunities to share learning, best practice and ideas

All OAs have experienced a significant culture shift towards increased professional collaboration. Leaders, teachers, and practitioners have been supported to participate in peer networks and communities of practice. Feedback suggests this has improved professional confidence, wellbeing, and motivation, and helped to build trust and mutual support across settings. Crucially, this has extended the impact of continuous professional development (CPD) through peer support for embedding and sharing learning.



The benefits of place-based working

OAs driving culture change through best practice



Norwich Opportunity Area

Education professionals in Norwich have reported a significant change in the culture and ethos of how schools work together at all levels. Headteachers have set the tone for the programme by meeting regularly to identify priorities for collective action, share ideas and practice, provide mutual support and constructive challenge. This has also simplified decision-making, enabling introduction of new city-wide initiatives on transition, inclusion and aspirations.

Professional networks have been developed to embed learning from CPD and drive continual improvement and sharing of best practice on all priority areas - including networks of expert practitioners on early years communications, inclusion, transition, emotional literacy, evidence-based practice, careers, senior leads on disadvantage and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, remote teaching. Schools tell us this has had a positive impact on professional confidence and expertise and strengthened the resilience of the local system in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Collaboration has been of particular value on work to tackle the very high exclusion rates in the city. Development of the Norwich Inclusion Charter and Inclusion Champion network has strengthened trust and relationships between schools in a range of different MATs and led to greater consistency of language and approach. This has enabled schools to have more open and constructive conversations about how best to support vulnerable pupils, for example through managed moves, and identify expertise and enhanced provision across the city. Early evidence suggests this has enabled schools to reduce levels of persistent disruptive behaviour, and exclusions have started to decline.





The benefits of place-based working

OAs tackling challenges through shared learning



Blackpool and Stoke-on-Trent OA: Football Mentoring and Twinning project

The Football Mentoring and Twinning project in Blackpool and Stoke-on-Trent OAs offers a bespoke mentoring model to support disadvantaged and disengaged young people aged 11 to 17, using football club resources which are replicable across other football clubs in other areas. The community trusts in each of the three football clubs – Blackpool FC, Stoke City FC and Port Vale FC – are twinned with football clubs in other parts of the country with similar challenges to Blackpool and Stoke, and where there are gaps in provision, to share resources, expertise, and learning from the OAs’ place-based approach.

“ Collaboration across trusts and school types has enabled OA schools to compare experiences and approaches. ”

The emphasis on collaboration has been particularly welcomed by those in challenging roles, for example school inclusion leads working with some of the most vulnerable pupils, where peer support, the exchange of ideas, and practical co-operation has been particularly valued. Collaboration across trusts and school types has enabled OA schools to compare experiences and approaches in responding to challenges in the local context. Local collaboration has also supported the pooling of ideas and created opportunities to work together on joint initiatives.

The benefits of place-based working

OAs championing leadership and shared networks



Derby Opportunity Area: SEND Programme

The Derby OA SEND Programme trained over 70 SEND Peer Challengers, who continue to provide support to city schools. It also created a network of SENCOs focused on delivering city-wide SEND improvements.

Sharing learning has been central to the programme, in particular: bringing the city's SENCOs together through Derby SENCO.Net to create a support network and facilitate the sharing of best practice, learning and ideas; robust research and evaluation reports; and an annual SEND Conference to share learning, which now draws interest from other areas of the country.

The project has resulted in a stronger leadership culture in mainstream schools that promotes SEND achievement and inclusion; ensuring the sharing of responsibility and accountability for SEND across the learning community; and an increase in the amount of direct work in mainstream schools that effectively improves SEND outcomes. Reductions in SEND exclusions and improvements in attainment have all been captured through the evaluation.³

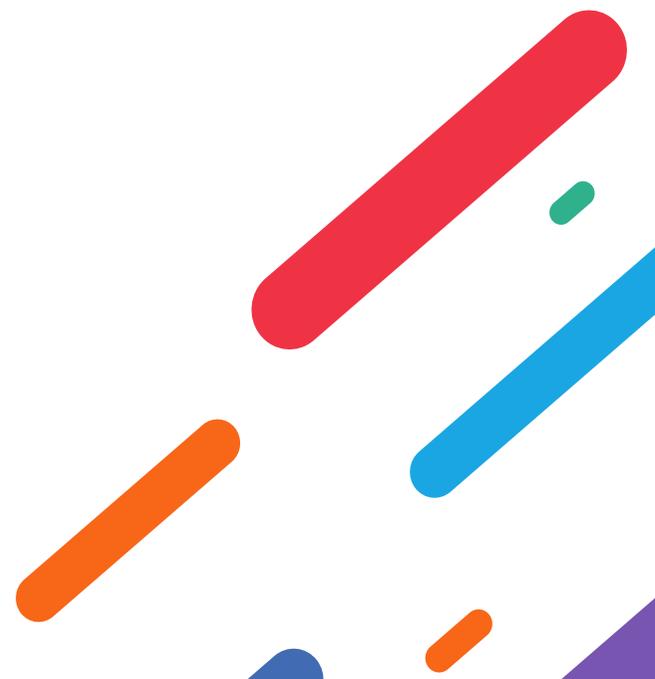
Over

70



trained SEND Peer Challengers

³ SEND Peer Challenge Project - International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS) - University of Derby





The benefits of place-based working

OAs driving collaboration



Norwich Opportunity Area: Careers Facilitator Network

The Careers Facilitator Network in the Norwich Opportunity Area brought every secondary school together to improve Compass scores against all 8 Gatsby Benchmarks – strengthening schools’ capacity to support pupils with careers advice, sharing best practice through CPD workshops and a collaborative network, coordinating employer engagement with schools and delivering new city-wide engagement activities attended by over 1,200 students from across Norwich.

This led to dramatic improvement in Norwich Opportunity Area schools’ performance on careers support. By the end of the 2019/20 academic year, participating schools had made a significant shift in their progress towards meeting the Gatsby Benchmarks, outperforming the national average for its scores against 7 of the benchmarks.

Further examples can be found in our **Careers insight guide**.

“
**Greater benefits for
the local system
and the schools
themselves.**
”

The benefits of place-based working

Collaboration: A co-ordinated approach

In many OA projects, collaboration has enabled all or most schools in an area to move collectively to introduce a new approach at the same time, which has led to greater benefits for the local system and the schools themselves.

OAs centralising teacher recruitment and retention



North Yorkshire Coast: Teacher recruitment.

The North Yorkshire Coast had a long-standing challenge to recruit and retain teachers due to the geographical isolation of the region.

The OA commissioned an innovative project that aimed to centralise teacher recruitment through a single consultancy service. The model consists of three complementary aspects:

1. A full-time recruitment partner who works solely with schools in the area to support their recruitment needs.
2. Financial incentives, including a recruitment/retention and relocation offer in certain circumstances.
3. Recruitment marketing programme. A recruitment portal was launched in September 2019 to advertise teacher vacancies and schools to potential applicants.

OA funding for this project ended in August 2021, with the project moving to a low-cost subscription model. The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire OA also adopted this recruitment and retention model; an in-depth analysis of their approach can be found in the **Teacher Insight Guide**. By September 2021, 24 of the area's 53 schools had signed up for the model.

It has filled 384 vacancies to date (234 teaching posts and 150 support posts) with 380 of them filled first time.





The benefits of place-based working

OAs re-engaging children after COVID-19 disruption



Hastings Opportunity Area: Literacy Programmes

The Hastings partnership board agreed to implement evidence-based literacy programmes across all of the schools within the OA. 20 schools opted for some common approaches including Daily Supported Reader, Destination Reader, and Accelerated Reader. Common approaches have helped develop inter-school collaboration for the benefit of the ‘Hastings learner’, regardless of school or Academy Trust. A town-wide emphasis on literacy took on a new focus by re-engaging children following the COVID-19 disruption, particularly learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many schools report that the progress made by children has improved, as shown by their own monitoring. For example, one primary school reported that 56% of Year 1 pupils made 6 or more terms progress, with 67% making 4 terms progress or more in the 2020 to 2021 academic year. Teachers are positive about the reinforcement of a reading culture. Feedback in monitoring reports also indicates that there has been a positive effect on teaching and learning, and of the priority given to the teaching of literacy, reading and oracy across all schools.

The majority of Hastings’ schools are implementing whole-school, evidenced based approaches to teaching literacy that are upskilling staff and enabling shared and consistent approaches. Schools are reporting a positive impact on literacy attainment, pupils’ progress and enjoyment of reading, in addition to increased professional dialogue. 2019 data show that 72.9% of pupils at key stage 2 reached the expected standard in reading compared to 73.8% nationally, which was a 16.4 percentage point increase since 2016. In 2019, disadvantaged pupils at key stage 2 exceeded the national average with 66.4% pupils reaching the expected standard in reading compared to 62.3% in England.

56%

of Year 1 pupils **made 6 or more terms progress**

The benefits of place-based working

OAs providing professional development and tailored tuition



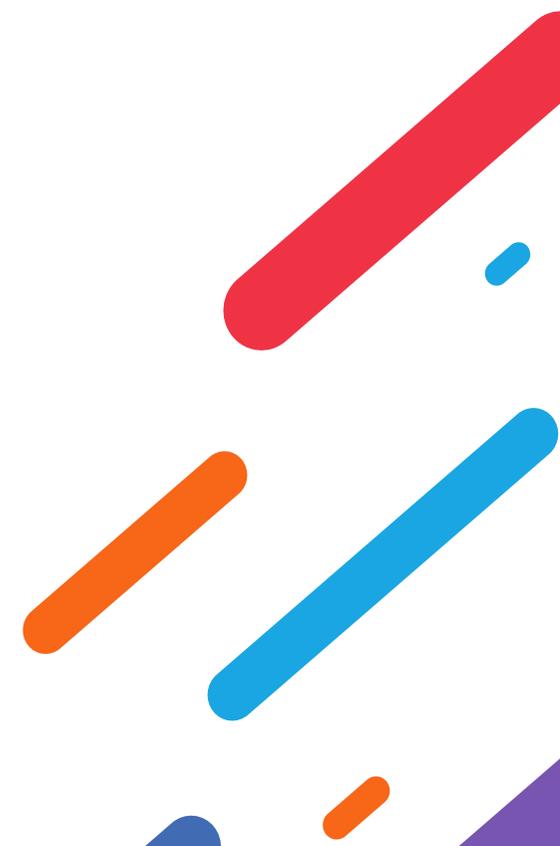
Bradford Opportunity Area: Get Further

In 2020 as a response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic – the Bradford Opportunity Area (BOA) funded a pilot partnership between Bradford College and Get Further – an award-winning charity that matches students in further education in need of extra help in English or maths to top tutors. 90 students at Bradford College received extra, tailored support through weekly small group tuition across the 20-21 academic year.

The funding also enabled Get Further to provide a professional development programme and fully-resourced GCSE maths resit curriculum, to two maths teachers at the College, to drive improvement in the wider delivery of this qualification. Teachers reported that students developed a deeper understanding of the subject and made connections to other areas of maths. 62% of the students receiving tutoring improved by at least 1 grade compared to their previous highest grade in maths. This increased to 65% of students when they received 10 sessions or more.

81% of English students progressed by at least a grade, increasing to 90% with students who attended more than 10 sessions.

As a testament to the success of the partnership, Bradford College chose to use its 16-19 tuition fund allocation to extend the number of spaces on the programme to an additional 90 students. The College is also continuing this partnership with Get Further in 21-22, through the extension of the 16-19 tuition fund.



The benefits of place-based working

OAs facilitating collaboration across organisations

Doncaster Opportunity Area: SEND

To ensure a ground-up approach to meet needs identified by schools Doncaster OA formed a representative working group to advise on the latest most pressing local SEND needs in the borough.

The group included representation from the Local Authority SEND team as well as 15 primary and secondary SENCO's, senior leaders and heads across the borough. Consultation identified Speech Language and Communication Needs (SCLN) as the primary area of current local need for mainstream provision.

The OA liaised the NHS Speech and Language therapy team (SALT) and developed a comprehensive offer of CPD training around SCLN. This offer is targeted at practitioners.

“ Enabled OAs to tailor their offers to the evolving local context. ”

Responsiveness: Local need

The flexibility to choose and set priorities that are specific to local context has enabled OAs to tailor their offers to the evolving local context and address specific needs and gaps. Programmes and delivery could be designed to address the correct problem; to target specific cohorts, settings or wards, and to respond quickly when circumstances change.

Responsiveness: Targeting

Needs can vary considerably across different areas, and a one size fits all programme can result in an inefficient allocation of resources. By working closely with local experts to understand context and refine offers, OAs were able to focus resources where they are most needed, be that target cohorts, settings, or wards.



The benefits of place-based working

OAs delivering bespoke support



Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area: Targeted Ready to Learn Offer

When scoping activity for Year 5, partnership board members asked that a focus be placed on supporting disadvantaged children and young people where the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was seen to be disproportionately high, in order to support them to re-engage with learning through bespoke, school-led activities to ensure their attendance, improve their wellbeing, and provide opportunities for enrichment. The board asked that the programme be designed to complement national offers of support to educational providers, including the education recovery plan and National Tutoring Programme.⁴

Eligible schools were identified using a criteria of 15% or more pupils receiving Free School Meals, and 15% or more pupils identified as Special Educational Need or Disability.⁵ Floor and ceiling values for the grant were applied (£6,000 minimum, £22,000 maximum). Using data from June 2021, this equated to 16 schools (15 primary, 1 secondary) receiving support for the equivalent of 1,770 children.

Participation in the ‘Ready to Learn’ project was optional. Schools participating in the project received a ‘toolkit’ to help them think through the priorities for their cohorts (particularly those approaching key transition points) and provided advice on good practice and promising approaches such as those recommended by EEF.

The bespoke, school-led nature of the project means that each school would be expected to see changes in a range of different outcomes, which included:

- Improved emotional regulation.
- Improved attendance.
- Improved levels of wellbeing (this can include emotional and psychological wellbeing, physical wellbeing and social wellbeing).
- Higher levels of learning motivation and resilience.
- Ability to develop good and stable peer relationships.
- A sense of “belonging” to, and engagement with, the school or setting.
- Continuity in teaching practices across all transition stages.
- Parental engagement with children’s learning.
- Increased exposure to cultural enrichment opportunities.

4 **Education Recovery Support (June 2021)**

5 Summer 2021 census, via <https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>

The benefits of place-based working

Responsiveness: Agility to respond to changing need

The close relationships between local leaders in the education system have enabled the OAs to respond quickly as needs have changed. This became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools collaborated online, providing a source of mutual professional support and enabling them to share ideas and compare approaches during a time of unprecedented challenge. The strength of local relationships enabled the OAs to stay attuned to evolving needs and adapt priorities quickly, with many providing focused early support through tutoring, mentoring, support for the home learning environment and transitions. This gave the OAs a degree of resilience and ensured they are in a strong position to contribute to educational recovery.

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The strength of local relationships enabled the OAs to stay attuned to evolving needs and adapt priorities quickly
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The benefits of place-based working

OAs meeting the needs of the community: a response to COVID-19



Stoke-on-Trent Opportunity Area: Family-by-Family project

The Family-by-Family project supports vulnerable families hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic and works with families who have been through tough times (Sharing Families) to coach others going through similar experiences (Seeking Families) so they can make lasting changes in their lives. The project was developed by **The Australian Centre for Social Intervention** and **Shared Lives Plus**, and joint-funded with Stoke-on-Trent City Council. The aim of this innovative pilot is to demonstrate that, by activating untapped resources of families' strengths and experiences and sharing with families in need, it strengthens connections and builds community capability. The long-term aim is to reduce referrals to statutory services and crisis response, while also looking to shift the broader system of support towards strength-based family practice. There is a clear focus on behaviour change, and families are coached and guided to make a lasting change in their lives, whether it's ending drug and alcohol misuse, or spending more time together as a family. Early feedback from families and stakeholders is that the project has been successful in improving confidence and wellbeing and reducing social isolation across families, and increasing opportunities to access training and employment.

Increasing opportunities to access training and employment.

The benefits of place-based working

OAs improving mental health provision

West Somerset Opportunity Area: Trauma Informed Schools

West Somerset schools agreed to introduce the Trauma Informed Schools programme to develop inclusive practice in the context of increased waiting times for services to support children and young people with mental health issues, as well as a rise in fixed term exclusions. During and after the first COVID-19 lockdown, there was a significant increase in requests for mental health support. Additionally, there was evidence that the needs of some young people fell between specialist support and what a school's support team could offer, creating a provision gap for many young people. Trauma Informed Schools provides a single, area-based approach to mental health and emotional support. Since 2020, staff and senior leaders at 21 schools have participated in a programme of training and accreditation. Anecdotal feedback from participating schools indicates that this work is having a positive impact on suspensions and attendance in some of our schools. Two people are training as trainers, to support legacy and the programme has been extended to the early years sector.



21 

schools have participated in a programme of training and accreditation





The benefits of place-based working

OAs harnessing the potential of remote working



Ipswich Opportunity Area: Remote Learning Support Assistants

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as laptops had been offered to disadvantaged pupils, it became clear during Autumn 2020 that many were struggling to engage effectively when learning at home. By listening to feedback from school leaders on the lack of pupil engagement and the experience of local families, Ipswich OA was able to adjust priorities, working at pace with headteachers to recruit and train Remote Learning Support Assistants (RLSAs) across 17 schools by January 2021. They were ready to support over 1,000 pupils to engage in remote learning during the Spring 2021 lockdown, targeting those who might otherwise fall through the gaps.

Pupils and their families were supported to locate online resources, troubleshoot IT difficulties, establish study routines and engage with the curriculum. As COVID-19 restrictions eased, RLSAs saw their role evolve to support pupils to reengage with learning within the classroom, on their return to school.

The benefits of place-based working

Responsiveness: Responding to the correct problem

Data is an important driver, but a fuller picture can be gained by combining data analysis with qualitative information to respond to causes not just symptoms. This has been done in the OAs by listening to local communities and the professionals who know them.

OAs fostering a culture of wellbeing



Doncaster Opportunity Area: Teacher Health and Wellbeing programme

Recruitment and Retention was identified as an issue for Doncaster at the start of the OA programme, but take-up of the initial programme of recruitment support was lower than anticipated. Further consultation with schools identified that staff health and wellbeing was an issue affecting retention. Based on this feedback Doncaster OA was able to pivot delivery to create a Teacher Health and Wellbeing programme.

The programme design was developed in collaboration with school leaders to provide individual health and wellbeing programmes delivered on site or online and accommodated around individual school timetables. Following a meeting with the head teacher to identify their school's specific needs, a bespoke package of training and interventions was agreed. These could include, but were not limited to: supporting the development of a school health and wellbeing charter, one-to-one or group coaching, supervision training for leaders and staff training on a range of wellbeing areas, such as resilience, self-care, work/life balance, and stress management.

The programme aims to support schools to identify and address the needs of their staff at an early stage to support increased staff wellbeing and retention. In addition to the bespoke offer, the programme has trained over 100 school staff in Doncaster schools to become accredited Mental Health First Aiders (Adult) to better support colleagues and promote health and wellbeing.

Schools have fed back that the programme has helped to foster a culture that prioritises staff health and wellbeing and empowers staff and leaders to recognise the importance of understanding their own wellbeing and that of others. Schools consider the programme has helped secure 'wellbeing' as an integral part of their own development and empowered them to continue to develop their wellbeing culture and ethos.



The benefits of place-based working

OAs working with partners to share data



West Somerset Opportunity Area: Early Years

At the planning stage of the OA, a significant priority for partners was to address low attainment levels at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, which they believed were contributing to low levels of achievement at later educational stages. Partners, including representation from schools, health, statutory and voluntary sectors, worked closely together to share data and identify weaknesses in provision. The planning process took account of existing services and personnel including a standing, but fragile, early years quality hub, the health visitor service, some existing literacy specialist resource, and services provided by West Somerset Homestart, as well as some tried but limited interventions associated with speech and language development. This provided the platform for delivery of the West Somerset OA early years delivery plan, which is holistic and responds to local needs. Collaboration between local services and investment in professional development and service enhancements has been valued and well regarded.

Partners worked closely together to share data and identify weaknesses in provision.

The benefits of place-based working

Working ‘upstream’ of the issues

Individual organisations are often driven by their Key Performance Indicators, and this can skew investment towards short-term wins that impact more directly on performance data. However, when a whole system comes together, the business case looks radically different; investing early in preventative measures typically provides much better value for money than costly intervention ‘downstream’. Research shows that if children live in disadvantaged areas, they are less likely to be able to access high-quality early years education and good schools and are more likely to fall behind as they move through the education system. If development gaps that arise between those born into disadvantaged homes and their peers are not tackled early, they prove stubbornly hard to close despite everything the school system can do. That’s why most OAs have invested in ‘upstream’ measures, such as strengthening early years provision, or tackling SEMH needs that schools tell us are often the cause of persistent disruptive behaviour or absenteeism.

OAs innovating within speech and language programmes



Stoke-on-Trent Opportunity Area: Closing the Word Gap Project

Stoke-on-Trent OA has invested £535,000 of funding into the ‘Closing the Word Gap’ project, developing children’s communication skills in the early years so that they are able to access a full range of educational and social opportunities when they start school. Led by the NHS Midlands Partnership Foundation Trust, the Speech Therapy service has worked closely with settings, teachers, school staff and parents, emphasising that speech and language is everybody’s collective responsibility. Specialist speech and language therapists have been assigned to named schools, which has led to strong working relationships and trust between partners. The project has developed an early screening audit tool, now used by schools across the city, which identifies at an early stage any children falling behind with speech and language using nationally recognised best practice. Therapists help to shape and guide schools in developing an action plan to support children with their speech and language, providing training, modelling and support as necessary. Resources for parents have been shared via the **Stoke Speaks Out** website, and the project reports increased confidence from parents in supporting their child’s development.





The benefits of place-based working

OAs targetting cause over symptom



Oldham Opportunity Area: Better Communication

Oldham Opportunity Area funds the Better Communication Team, focusing on early years. The team works directly with schools and early years settings, using baseline data to target specific cohorts which need additional support but which may not meet the threshold for Speech and Language Therapy. The team provide tailored support, upskilling the staff in those settings to identify and intervene with the children who need additional support, drawing on local and national resources.

OAs have focused on addressing the root causes of poor behaviour and absence, rather than the symptoms, by investing in whole-school or individual approaches.

OAs have focused on addressing the root causes of poor behaviour and absence, rather than the symptoms, by investing in whole-school or individual approaches to support social, emotional, mental health or wellbeing needs.

The benefits of place-based working

OAs providing strategic and targeted investment



Ipswich Opportunity Area: SWERL

Education professionals told us that unmet emotional and mental health needs were a key factor driving high rates of persistent absence and disruptive behaviour in Ipswich schools. The OA's early investment in mental health and wellbeing approaches saw 40 schools (30 in Ipswich and 10 in Felixstowe) collectively engage with University College London's Supporting Wellbeing and Emotionally Resilient Learning (SWERL) programme.

Schools formed a professional network and were equipped with an audit framework to examine existing practice across seven domains, enabling leaders to better understand staff training needs and review the effectiveness of policies and interventions. They were supported to develop a bespoke and sustainable whole-school plan, applying a tiered response to prevention and early identification of mental health needs. This enabled school leaders to target investment and implement strategies to enhance the wellbeing and mental health of pupils and staff, using evidence-based approaches such as Thrive, Forest Schools, and therapeutic approaches.

Strengthening in-house capacity in a structured way across the 40 schools has made it easier to identify new centres of local expertise and leadership. As a result, a sustainable network of 6 Resilience and Wellbeing Hubs has been established that is able to offer support to schools, settings and professionals across Suffolk.

Easier to identify new centres of local expertise and leadership.

The benefits of place-based working

OA-driven training networks strengthening theory, analysis and planning



Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area: Positive behaviour support

Steps is a trauma-informed, therapeutic, whole-school approach to positive behaviour management. It focuses on understanding the feelings and thoughts behind behaviour and considering the effect it has on all individuals' experiences and emotions within a particular group. The Opportunity Area has funded training for staff and senior leaders in schools and early years settings, coupled with support to implement that approach within their setting, and to embed it for the long term.

Training includes theory, analysis tools, and planning tools that support whole-school and individual needs. The approach is based on analysing and planning for the needs of children and young people, understanding the factors that lead to both internalised and externalised behaviour, and supporting school staff to address behaviour through developing appropriate policy and planning for each setting and cohort. Over 290 staff have been trained on a 'train the trainer' basis, with training networks developed to support implementation and share practice for longer term sustainability. The Opportunity Area has also supported the implementation of this approach into Peterborough schools, through the 'twinning' relationship, which aims to share learning with other areas.

290+



staff have been trained
on a 'train the trainer' basis

Further examples, including Derby Opportunity Area's Emotionally Healthy Schools, can be found in our **Health and Education insight guide**.

The benefits of place-based working

Better delivery

Ensuring that OA programmes have remained attuned to the local needs and landscape of each area has been crucial to securing ongoing commitment to the programme. By co-designing solutions with local partners, the OA offers have been seen as relevant, credible and providing good value for money, which in turn has secured strong buy-in to support delivery. The additional delivery capacity provided at local level, through DfE staff and locally employed programme managers, has also enabled the OAs to focus on building the foundations for effective implementation by not just funding school projects but supporting practitioners to develop the skills to embed, evaluate, and sustain those initiatives.

Better delivery: Landing national initiatives effectively

The OAs found that the stronger schools in each area were typically best able to access and make good use of support offers and initiatives. The schools that most needed support were generally less well equipped to access offers, because they faced competing demands and challenges. This was exacerbated by the volume of offers schools and settings received once the OAs had been identified. Local teams were able to support the schools that had greater need to access the right offers, ensuring resources were directed to where they are most needed.





The benefits of place-based working

OA-led training networks strengthening theory, analysis and planning



Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area: Senior Leadership Support

Fenland and East Cambridgeshire offered senior leadership support to all schools, to assist with identifying and reviewing priorities (particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic) and assessing which Opportunity Area interventions would be appropriate for that school. Experienced senior leaders or National Leaders of Education were brokered through the local Teaching School Hub, with the Opportunity Area funding up to 3 days of their time per school. Schools were able to decide how and when that support could be most effectively deployed. It was also valued by school leaders as making a helpful contribution to their own wellbeing when faced with extremely challenging circumstances.

The benefits of place-based working

Better delivery: Trusted messengers

It takes time to build credibility with local partners. Working with trusted messengers and delivery partners who have already established themselves in the locality has made it possible to land projects well and make headway more quickly. We learnt that, for delivery of advice and support, families valued trusted relationships with their schools and settings, or known local providers.

The Research Schools network has played a pivotal role.

OAs empowering locally-based teams



Hastings Opportunity Area: Local support

In the Hastings OA, a locally recruited and based team has brought credibility and reassurance to delivery of new ways of working and sponsored interventions. Members of the locally-based team developed strong relationships with schools and delivery partners, thereby becoming familiar with local needs, understanding challenges, suggesting solutions and troubleshooting when necessary. This has greatly assisted the delivery and roll-out of sponsored programmes and was of additional value when the programme was required to adapt and respond to new needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. As new practice, such as in literacy and maths, has become embedded, the local team has convened practice-sharing workshops and extended the network of contacts that is creating greater collaboration.

Better delivery: Effective implementation

One-off training or interventions alone are seldom enough to drive long-term improvement. Schools and early years settings need space, skills and capacity to implement and evaluate the right interventions to drive rapid improvements in early literacy and numeracy, English and maths, supported by professional communities of practice and opportunities to network across educational phases.

The OA programme has undertaken EEF implementation training, and many OAs have invested in giving professionals the time and training on how to implement, embed and evaluate projects in order to maximise and sustain change. The Research Schools network has played a pivotal role in this.

The benefits of place-based working

OAs funding expert interventions



Ipswich Opportunity Area: Key Stage 2 Attainment and Implementation Leads

EKO Trust was commissioned to deliver bespoke support packages to 11 schools showing significant underachievement at KS2. Participating schools were supported to plan and effectively implement a range of evidence-based approaches from curriculum to pedagogical development and assessment, with strong implementation a key feature of the project. These schools saw a shift in the proportion of students meeting the expected standard in Reading, Writing or Maths. Of the schools that reported on the rate of improvement in these individual subjects, this was in the range of 26% - 36%, and all schools achieved their baseline.

Learning from this and other early projects, the OA is funding development of expert implementation leads (ILs) in target schools and settings to improve attainment for disadvantaged pupils from EYFS to KS4 by embedding evidence-based practice in the teaching of maths and English, strengthening implementation capacity, and forming a strong local community of practice. The ILs have benefited from an intensive programme of training through Unity Research School, shaped by needs and priorities combined with EEF training in effective implementation. They have been supported by Evidence Leads in Education to:

- Identify a specific area of challenge within their settings.
- Reflect upon the latest evidence-based research and prior experience of implementing a range of evidence-based approaches.
- Develop bespoke action plans to drive up attainment in maths, English, early literacy or numeracy.
- Share effective strategies for cascading learning and embedding best practice throughout their settings.

Through this collaborative network, the secondary leads identified literacy as a common priority following the COVID-19 Pandemic. This has led to development of a consistent and joined-up approach to improving KS3 literacy across Ipswich high schools, underpinned by a common assessment tool and literacy interventions. In a July 2021 survey, 71% of headteachers in Ipswich schools and colleges agreed that, as a result of the OA projects, research and evidence-based practice for addressing the disadvantage gap was now better embedded within their schools compared to previous years.

“We have gained so much knowledge and experience of successful implementation which will enable us to continue to innovate and explore. My school would not have made the rapid progress it has without it.”

Primary Head Teacher, Ipswich

The benefits of place-based working

OAs investing in leaders



Derby Opportunity Area: Leadership programmes

Derby's Research school has delivered bespoke leadership programmes, which have supported Derby's leaders to develop an evidence-informed, tailored, strategic whole-school approach, including:

- Leading Learning.
- Effective Use and Evaluation of the Pupil Premium.
- Teaching for Memory.
- Metacognition.
- Evidence Champions.
- Quality First teaching.
- Recovery curriculum/strategy.
- TA leadership training.
- A new programme to provide additional support for teachers whose early career has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

They have also provided intensive support for 3 of Derby's schools facing the greatest challenges, as well as working in partnership with the local English and maths hubs to develop and deliver tailored programmes for Derby's schools, and supporting our sharing learning work in Ashfield and Mansfield.

Research School programmes are validated through the national Research Schools programme and EEF. Feedback demonstrates that these programmes have improved competence and confidence in school leaders, enabling them to revise school plans and strategies, drive change throughout the school and change practice in the classroom.





The benefits of place-based working

Better delivery: Creative delivery models

By co-designing projects with local partners, the OAs have been able to make best use of combined assets and ideas to tackle a local issue and shape more creative responses.

OAs supporting the transition into further education



Ipswich Opportunity Area: What a Difference a Day Makes

“What A Difference A Day Makes” is a Saturday morning intervention offering Year 11 pupils 24 hours of extra maths tutoring from local teachers at the University of Suffolk to boost pupils’ maths skills ahead of GCSEs, which saw early cohorts achieve average improvements of 1.3 grades in maths assessments. Partnering with the university not only made the project more attractive for pupils but helped raise aspirations and independence, with participants more likely to consider going on to higher education. Teachers reported improvements in pupils’ confidence, self-esteem and behaviour, with knock-on benefits for their performance in other subjects.

Following the cancellation of 2020 GCSEs and a prolonged period away from school for most Year 11s, the programme was adapted to create the Summer Step Up Programme to support targeted pupils make a smooth transition to further education. Developed in close partnership with a local college, the programme provided online mentoring, wellbeing and study support for those Year 11s considered least likely to go on to study without significant support. Participants made good progress in their post-16 courses compared to students with a similar profile and almost all sustained their destinations throughout a challenging year in 2020/21, with the college reporting a high retention rate compared with previous cohorts.

“**Teachers reported improvements in pupils’ confidence, self-esteem and behaviour.**”

The benefits of place-based working

Key considerations and learning from the OAs' approach to place-based working

This section has outlined some of the many benefits the OAs have experienced from working in a place-based way and the enabling characteristics.

To maximise the benefits, experience from the OAs suggests:

- **Focus** – Agree on the choice of a small number of priorities and do them well.
 - **Active ingredients** – Invest in the active ingredients that will sustain change over time – strong and distributed local leadership and a culture of collaboration.
 - **Honest broker** – Create partnerships that can play the part of 'honest broker' and stand the test of time – transcending changing and competing organisational and political drivers and keep local children, families, and evidence at their heart.
 - **Local capacity** – Assure local capacity to build relationships from the bottom up and ensure schools and settings
- facing the greatest challenges access the support they need.
- **Update** – Be alert to changes in school leadership to ensure induction includes the local partnership and the contribution this can make to each school.
 - **Relationships** – Work to secure strong relationships with, and involve, those who control levers that can affect more substantial change, such as large-scale funding programmes, and/or accountability mechanisms.
 - **Share learning** – Consider the ways learning can be shared, including the role MATs can play in relation to place, such as the opportunity to share learning and be outward-facing and spread best practice.
 - **Networks** – Create strong networks with other places facing similar challenges and maximise potential to learn from the experience and successes of others. Seeing change in a place where challenges have previously been entrenched can give hope, insight, and inspiration to others. We hope this and the other OA insight guides can play a part in doing just that.

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Seeing change in a place where challenges have previously been entrenched can give hope, insight, and inspiration to others.
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Department
for Education



May 2022