

# CSN POLICY BRIEFING

## Opportunity Areas: a DfE response to Social Mobility

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### Summary

The DfE published the plans of the first six opportunity areas in late October 2017 (see [Social Mobility and Opportunity Areas](#)) and the Secretary of State for Education linked this with professional development for teachers in a [speech](#) in early November 2017. This briefing considers previous policies linking social mobility and education, and a recent report from the Social Mobility Commission entitled [Time for Change](#) (see Related Briefings). Opportunity Areas are seen as a major response to this report. The key priorities in the six Opportunity Area plans are outlined together with some of the debates about how they have been defined; in particular whether an area or individual focus is best, and whether improved social mobility is best generated by focusing on greater equity. The report then looks at how they are to be funded within an overall climate of cuts to school budgets.

This briefing will be of interest to elected members and officers in local authorities and partner organisations with responsibility for economic development, poverty, schools, education services, and youth services.

### Background

The post second world war tripartite system was about creating a 'meritocratic' society, where individuals could realise their potential through education, and make social progress. This objective of opportunity for all also generated a concern for those that appeared to be left behind or failed by the system and structure of education.

One attempt to do something about urban deprivation was Jim Callaghan's Urban Programme (started in 1968, when he was Home Secretary), which ran in parallel with Educational Priority Areas. There was creative use of third sector organisations working with local government, with strategic support provided by central government. The 1997 Labour government was elected with a commitment to providing opportunity through education, and the first academy schools were created as a focus for improving outcomes in inner city schools which were seen as failing their pupils. Education Action Zones were also set up in areas where improvement was needed and a focus on children and families brought with it a commitment to interdepartmental working (although this time with a distrust of local government).

The Coalition government and those following it have seen creating a self-improving system of school trusts independent of local government as the key to improvement for all (although the recent creation of the Strategic School Improvement Fund is a further development). It is always difficult to measure success in education over short time scales, but the evidence that is starting to emerge suggests that whilst there may be benefits to the school led system, significantly closing

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the gap between the outcomes of the most advantaged and those who are deprived may not be amongst them.

## Policy Context

The House of Commons Education Committee published [Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children](#) in June 2014 and asked Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (Sir Michael Wilshaw) to comment on a recent Ofsted report '[Unseen children: access and achievement 20 years on](#)' (see Related Briefings). He took the opportunity to push closing the achievement gap back up the list of success criteria for schools.

More recently the Social Mobility Commission, an advisory non-departmental public body published [Time for Change: an assessment of government policies on social mobility 1997 to 2017](#) (see Related Briefings) which provided a critical analysis of a socially divided Britain. Its chapters covered Early Years, Schools, Youth Transitions to adult life and Work, and it identified social mobility 'cold spots' where there is no focused effort to close social divides. The creation of 'Opportunity Areas' was a response to this. [Social mobility opportunity areas: déjà-vu, again?](#) published by Education Datalab pointed out that "any policy which tries to improve the attainment of the lowest performing pupils by targeting only the lowest performing local authorities would miss the majority of pupils with the lowest attainment" and suggested that both area-based and individual focused policies are needed.

In August 2017 the Education Policy Institute (EPI) published [Closing the Gap? Trends in Educational Attainment and Disadvantage](#) in August 2017 which said that whilst there has been some progress in closing the gap for disadvantaged pupils, the gap is closing slowly and inconsistently. The most disadvantaged pupils in England have fallen further behind, and are now on average over two full years of learning behind non-disadvantaged pupils by the end of secondary schooling. The report suggests it would take a full 50 years to reach an equitable education system where disadvantaged pupils do not fall behind their peers during formal education to age 16. EPI followed up a Teach First conference in October that focused on Opportunity Areas by publishing [Why aren't there any Opportunity Areas in the North East?](#) In it EPI outlines the government methodology, pointing out that that unless this is modified it is not likely there will be any Opportunity Areas in the North East.

DfE: [Small-scale research projects: summaries](#) (August 2017) contains a short summary of research carried out by York Consulting for the DfE on how the effectiveness of Opportunity Areas can be evaluated. They point out that in such a wide-ranging area as social mobility there will be a diverse range of policies and factors that have an impact outside of the area programmes themselves; making measurement more difficult. Their first risk for these projects is unrealistic expectations as "within the 3-year evaluation timescale it is unlikely that significant progress will be evident on all the headline indicators", and they suggest that "plans are made to monitor progress annually over a longer timescale". SchoolsWeek referred to this under the headline [We won't know if opportunity areas have worked until at least 2021](#).

## Briefing in full

Plans for the first set (six of the 12) of [Opportunity Areas](#) were published by the DfE in October 2017. Criteria used to select areas cross referenced social mobility and educational data. The [Social Mobility Index](#) published by the Sutton Trust relates to the four areas included in the Social

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Mobility Commission [Time for Change](#) report of Early Years, Schools, Youth Transitions and work was combined with data from the Achieving Excellence Areas Index which showed current educational performance set against capacity to improve measures.

Each area has local governance and local partners, but there is also a national partnership with the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) which has pledged up to £4 million to focus its work on the Opportunity Areas promising all pupils aged eleven to eighteen in the opportunity areas “at least four meaningful encounters with employers and the world of work”. The CEC expects to work with government, Local Enterprise Partnerships, and alongside business, voluntary organisations and schools and colleges to offer more young people valuable experiences with employers and mentors to help prepare them for the world of work. Opportunity Areas will also be targeted by the government’s National Citizen Service volunteering initiative.

The DfE is providing £3.5 million to fund the establishment of a research school in each of these areas to help develop and spread evidence-based best practice and to overcome local challenges and barriers to education. This element of the programme is to be led by the Education Endowment Foundation (see [Research Schools in social mobility opportunity areas](#)), who also provide a ‘Teaching and Learning Toolkit’. It is intended that research schools will build affiliations with some large numbers of schools in supporting the use of evidence based research, engaging with local schools in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of intensity.

## Area Plan Priorities

All the [Opportunity Area Plans](#) consider professional development and leadership in some form or other. Professional development is seen as about evidence informed practice as well as training, and leadership is perceived as covering teaching and subject skills as well as school leadership. Most plans were concerned about early years take up and improving achievement in literacy, mathematics and science. Support for pupils and families appears in various forms, including a focus on Special Educational Needs and Disability, parental engagement, or academic resilience.

Each plan outlines three major priority areas for local action. These included:

### Blackpool

- raise attainment and progress in Blackpool’s schools
- support for vulnerable children and families to improve attendance and outcomes and to reduce exclusions from school
- improve advise and support for young people when moving between school/college and into work

### Derby

- increase the number of children achieving a good level of development in the early years
- raise attainment in our primary and secondary schools
- ensure all our children benefit from a broad range of experiences throughout their school lives

### North Yorkshire Coast

- children get a head start in life through a high quality early years education
- the North Yorkshire Coast becomes an area where children excel in maths

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- a generation of readers who use the power of literacy and a love of reading to unlock opportunity
- a good secondary school place for every young person on the North Yorkshire Coast

## Norwich

- improving early speech, language, listening and communication skills
- raise attainment through targeted, evidence based, continuous professional development and stronger school leadership
- support children at risk of exclusion from school
- give young people the information and support they need to move successfully between school, college, university and into work

## Oldham

- ensuring all children are school ready by the age of five
- raising attainment for all, and raising it fastest for disadvantaged pupils
- all children and young people to be ready for life, learning and work.

## West Somerset

- every child has a great start in life
- educational excellence in the classroom
- transition to adulthood
- skills for employment and business

Plans include detailed targets. As well as early years take up, closing the gap in progress and attainment, percentage of good or excellent schools and NEET or sustained post 16 placement targets the plans also include targets in areas specific to the local area and its perceived needs. These might cover exclusion targets, mental health plans in school and actual mental health support, or year on year improvement in resilience of children (using measures such as the Mental Toughness Questionnaire or Headstart's resilience surveys). Plans for the other six designated areas will be published in due course: Bradford, Doncaster, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, Hastings, Ipswich and Stoke-on-Trent.

## Comment

The DfE has promised up to £72 million investment for Opportunity Areas, and said that they will get “priority access” to its Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund (worth £75 million over three years) which focuses on supporting the development of teachers and school leaders in challenging areas. Justine Greening’s speech launching the new [Institute for Teaching](#) says it “will operate mainly in the North and central England, including in the Education Secretary’s Opportunity Areas which have been identified as social mobility ‘cold spots’.”

For the National Union of Teachers (NUT) this funding will “not go far” when taken in the context of the National Audit Office [forecast](#) of a £3 billion real-terms cut to school funding by 2020. From this perspective the funding is not new money in addition to school base budgets, but a re-packaging of money being cut. The [School Cuts](#) website (run by the NUT and other unions) which shows the impact that current proposals for school funding reform will have by 2020, also predicts significant losses for schools in the 12 opportunity areas when funding is rebalanced, that could be greater

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than the Opportunity Area funding to be provided. However, for those areas in receipt of Opportunity Area funding this will be a welcome boost at a time of likely budget reductions.

The criteria used to select areas may remain an issue whilst there is little clarity on the relationship between social mobility and disadvantage. Education Datalab may be correct that targeting through geography alone may be inadequate. It may be that local responses also need a national direction of travel to be effective. The York Consulting report, hidden in the [Small-scale research projects: summaries](#) also hints at broader issues. Its point about the wide-ranging nature of social mobility as a policy issue suggests that worthy goals may require a national, rather than, or in addition to, a local focus to be addressed adequately.

Improving cross departmental approaches could enable things to happen at a local level. For example, making coldspots places where young teachers want to live, work, buy a house and raise a family requires actions across a range of government departments. Local authorities are much more limited in the support they can offer than was the case in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Social Mobility Commission report was not entitled [Time for Change](#) for no reason. It recognised that a deep and wide-ranging response was required to an increasingly divided society. Its target was government policy itself as it outlined its 5 key lessons. These included:

- ensure social mobility and inclusiveness are a cornerstone for all government policy
- ensure that conflicting departmental priorities do not undermine the long-term objectives of social mobility
- prioritise a long-term goal (improved social mobility) over short term change.
- line up resources properly to tackle disadvantage; identifying how public spending is being redistributed to address geographical, wealth and generational divisions.
- stop limiting government scope for action by assuming that markets will deliver - deregulation has not delivered the social cohesion needed.

The DfE, it seems, has outsourced responsibility to social mobility 'coldspots' to show us how this issue can be tackled in the hope that the 'market' will follow. Whilst it is clear from the plans so far provided that local areas and their schools will make a serious effort to tackle this as it relates to their communities, it may be beyond the capacity of schools and consortia of schools to tackle this national issue alone without the benefit of the wide-ranging government response proposed by the Social Mobility Commission.

## External Links

DfE: [Social Mobility and Opportunity Areas](#) (October 2017)

DfE: [Justine Greening launches new Institute for Teaching](#) (November 2017)

Social Mobility Commission: [Time for Change: an assessment of government policies on social mobility 1997 to 2017](#) (June 2017)

Education Committee, Parliament: [Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children](#) (June 2014)

Ofsted: [Unseen children: access and achievement 20 years on](#) (June 2013)

Education Datalab: [Social mobility opportunity areas: déjà-vu, again?](#) (October 2016)

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Education Policy Institute: [Closing the Gap? Trends in Educational Attainment and Disadvantage](#) (August 2017)

Education Policy Institute: [Why aren't there any Opportunity Areas in the North East?](#) (October 2017)

DfE: [Small-scale research projects: summaries](#) (August 2017)

SchoolsWeek: [We won't know if opportunity areas have worked until at least 2021](#) (August 2017)

The Sutton Trust: [The Social Mobility Index](#) (April 2015)

Education Endowment Foundation: [Research Schools in social mobility opportunity areas](#) (March 2017)

National Audit Office: [Financial Sustainability of Schools](#) (December 2016)

The Guardian: [Social mobility is the wrong goal – what we need is more equality](#) (June 2017)

## Related Briefings

[Alternative provision to social exclusion: IPPR – Making the Difference: Breaking the link](#) (November 2017)

[School Improvement: the DfE's developing Place-Based Approach](#) (July 2017)

[Time for Change: Social Mobility Commission Report](#) (July 2017)

[State of the nation 2016: social mobility in Great Britain](#) (January 2017)

[UK Poverty: Causes, Costs, and Solutions](#) (November 2016)

[Can grammar schools work for everyone? A review of the evidence](#) (October 2016)

[Counting the cost of UK poverty: Joseph Rowntree Foundation \(JRF\) Report](#) (September 2016)

[Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the 'glass floor' – SMCP report](#) (August 2015)

[Cracking the code: how schools can improve social mobility – SMPC report](#) (November 2014)

[Unseen children: access and achievement 20 years on, Ofsted](#) (September 2013)

[Higher Education: the Fair Access Challenge – Report of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission](#) (July 2013)

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