



# Learning about place

## Understanding lifelong learning and social mobility in Covid Britain

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PAPERS

TOMORROW'S ECONOMY



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**CELUP**  
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## Centre for Levelling Up

The Centre for Levelling Up (CELUP) is a new research centre at the University of West London which will be producing policy relevant research focused on addressing inequality. To contact the head of the centre Professor Graeme Atherton please email him on:

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## University of West London

The University of West London is a public research university which has campuses in Ealing and Brentford in Greater London, as well as in Reading, Berkshire.



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# Executive summary

## 1. Background

The government's 'levelling up' agenda, characterises a set of places, mainly in northern England or the Midlands as left behind by social and economic changes and in a spiral of decline with poor jobs, failing schools and out-dated infrastructure. However, while geographical inequality may be widespread does grouping together places and typecasting them in this way help? Or does it actually mask the differences between and within them preventing real solutions to their problems being achieved?

This report looks at one part of the levelling up agenda – the provision of educational opportunities across eight areas across the UK, namely: Blackpool, Derby, Oldham, Peterborough Sheffield, Stoke, Wakefield and Wrexham. In each area stakeholders from across schools, colleges, higher education, local authorities and the broader private and public sector were consulted with alongside in some of the areas, young people from November 2020 – March 2021.

## 2. The places studied

The 2019 general election saw a re-making of the electoral map in Britain with Labour losing seats in its 'red wall' across the north/midlands. This research focuses primarily on areas in which these seats sit. The report includes a brief examination of some background data regarding these areas. It shows while they are above average where different indicators of deprivation, inequality or opportunity are concerned there are still significant contrasts between them. While Blackpool appears to fare badly across most of the data examined other areas perform differently on each measure relative to each other. Derby ranks especially low for social mobility for example but better on GCSE attainment while Stoke less well on GCSE attainment but better in terms of the % of areas within it in the lowest Index of Multiple Deprivation quintiles. Even when looking at a fraction of the data available on socio-economic and education it is clear each place has its own distinctive profile and individual challenges.

## 3. Key findings

- **Education opportunities do exist but the awareness, organisation and access to them is fragmented**

While provision clearly differs across areas and some are served better than others, opportunities to progress within the compulsory system/post compulsory system do exist. However, they may not always be

connected nor may learners know what is there for them. Significant gaps in connectivity and support for learners to make effective decisions exist.

***'It's about having this advice and guidance embedded in schools, but also further education colleges, but in libraries and community centres, making it embedded in the local environment.'***

■ **Educational opportunities are missing – particularly at entry level for adult learners**

There has been a demise in opportunities for community based, shorter introductory learning opportunities which offer routes back into learning for those from vulnerable groups, older adults, people that are going back into learning and retraining.

***'I've lived in this area for 70 years and this sounds very similar to 50 years ago. I thought opportunities were much greater. I can't believe my children, who are now approaching 50, were given opportunities that don't seem to have moved on in 30 years.'***

The frustration that many respondents felt here was palpable and the limitations of the new proposed Lifelong Learning Entitlement to increase participation in learning amongst adults outside of learning evident.

■ **Improving opportunities means more accessible, local provision and understanding local identities**

Local provision is seen as essential across the different places– for cultural as well practical reasons.

***'We've got to recognise the fact the history and culture of the district is still to some extent rooted in the old kind of pit mentality – when people walked out of school aged 14 or 15 straight into employment at the pit. The necessity to learn and develop and access education, culturally on some of our larger estates that we manage, is sometimes a hard nut to crack.'***

■ **Social mobility is the wrong phrase to capture opportunity and progress implying departure and deficit**

Across all the areas in the study the term social mobility was met with scepticism.

*'Social mobility definitely gives this idea of moving away. And I really don't think a lot of our students wouldn't want to move away.'*

*'It just feels as though it's an imposed term that a certain ruling class have imposed on a group of people. What does it actually mean?'*

*'we love being able to tell people that they're in a certain group without necessarily asking them what they want. I don't think social mobility means a great deal to many people in the city.'*

It was felt that a new language was required that captures a broader idea of success and is owned by those that policymakers want to give additional support to in order to progress economically in their lives.

### ■ Covid has impacted on all forms of learning but is not leading to a 'lost generation'

The pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges to learning from early years up to higher education. In particular it has affected areas of a young person's education that are at risk of passing under the radar i.e. careers guidance and work experience. Addressing these issues is not straightforward. Improving access to technology alone for example will not lead to all learners 'catching up'.

*'we had families bringing the laptops and devices back, because it's scaring them so much that they don't want to use it'.*

It is important though that we are careful in how the impact on young people is described.

*'I think we need to be really careful about this narrative around a lost generation. Our young people are listening. Why are we telling them they're a lost generation?'*

### ■ A desire for greater trust, more local control and stable funding

Across every area in this study there was a call for more resources to tackle the challenges described above across all stages of learning, initiatives such as Opportunity Areas and Uni-Connect are welcome, but those who participated in the study were labouring day to day to address educational inequality without the long term, stable funding they need. However, it is not just the level of resources it is how and who controls them and how education is delivered at local level that matters.



*'the answer has to be to take a more holistic view and I think you can best do that locally. It can't be done from Westminster. So, it is about delegating money more and it's about delegating more power'.*

*'Leave us alone, stop meddling and trust us!'.*

#### 4. Recommendations

The report shows each of the places examined are complex, multi-dimensional and diverse. Levelling up 'within' these areas is every bit as important as 'between' them and other parts of the country. The differences between and within described above is a strong message not just for Government but for Labour as well. It needs to avoid describes the places where it recently lost seats like those in this study and others as one amorphous 'red wall' group. There is so much in what the participants said in the study that could inform a distinctive approach to extending educational opportunity and thus improving social outcomes. Outlined below are a number of recommendations which taken together could form the foundations of such a new approach.

##### 1 Bring better 'careers' support to where people live, study and work

For a national careers service to be effective in places such as those studied here it has to constitute networked, flexible local provision delivered alongside other educational and employment experiences – rather than an online or physical entity they have to visit.

##### 2 Put educational opportunity at the centre of 'levelling up'

For a strategy that 'levels up' to be effective it needs to connect its approach to investment in physical infrastructure, lifelong learning, education recovery and skills development together. At its centre needs to be investment in people not projects, shaped locally around the creation of opportunities to engage in learning and skill development.

##### 3 Put flexible, entry level opportunities at heart of a national lifelong learning strategy

An 'entitlement' to lifelong learning that only includes access to Level 3 learning in specific subject areas will not attract those least likely to learn back into education. Entry level provision, not necessarily associated directly with vocational skills nor available only at the behest of the employer, but also in community based settings is required.



#### 4 Stop talking social mobility and find a post Covid language to describe opportunity and progress

What success mean differs across communities and places and is being re-shaped for many by the legacy of the pandemic. A new language for inequality and progress is required that reflects this - which avoids phrases such as social mobility, disadvantage/left behind and lost generations.

#### 5 Ensure more places have higher education provision

As Further Education Colleges do, universities in this study were actively contributing to the development of the communities in which they sit. Increasing higher education provision in places where it is under-developed, as part of the holistic approach described above, will have a major impact in extending educational opportunities across these communities.

#### 6 Take a 'hyper-local' approach to devolving control and resources

The ability of those working across these areas to affect change are being restricted by a piecemeal approach to funding and trust. A 'hyper local' approach would make all initiative based funding at least 5 years, make OFSTED inspections lighter touch in the most challenged areas and give as much control as possible as close to where opportunities are delivered.

#### 7 Support a holistic Covid learning recovery strategy

Additional learning time focused on core subjects and distributing more data/laptops is not enough enable learners hardest hit by the pandemic to recover lost progress. A more holistic approach that addresses lost careers support, confidence and work experience alongside building the capacity of all families to learn online is required.

# Introduction

*'when we talk about place, I think it's a bit more complex than a geographical place. It's a place you are in the economic system'.*

Sharon Woodward-Baker, Higher Education  
Progression Partnership, South Yorkshire

Politics like all areas of life need heuristics- shortcuts that can help us navigate our way through complex worlds. Recently, such heuristics connected to places and progress have become essential. The government's levelling up agenda, has built on long standing heuristics regarding a set of places, mainly in northern England or the Midlands that are characterised as left behind by social and economic changes and are in spiral of decline with poor jobs, failing schools and out-dated infrastructure. These ideas have been buttressed by the increasing flow of data that shows differences by places using a myriad of social and economic metrics. However, while geographical inequality may be widespread does grouping together places and typecasting them in this way help? Or does it actually mask the differences between and within them preventing real solutions to their problems being achieved?

This report looks at one part of the levelling up agenda where this more detailed thinking may be required - educational opportunities. It examines how such opportunities differ, what shapes these differences and the language used to describe them alongside impact of the Covid-19 pandemic across eight areas across the UK, namely: Blackpool, Derby, Oldham, Peterborough Sheffield, Stoke, Wakefield and Wrexham. In each area stakeholders with passion, dedication, creativity and know-how from across schools, colleges, higher education, local authorities and the broader private and public sector were consulted with alongside in some of the areas, young people.

The report is not presented as a list of their grievances but a realistic account of the challenges they and the learners they serve face. As the findings below show, speaking to people working to provide educational opportunities provide some stark messages for policy makers regarding the importance of local networks and autonomy in the design and delivery of education services. These messages relate particularly to government's 'levelling-up agenda' but also for those seeking to understand why certain parts of the country no longer appear to lean to the left as they once did.

This is the first in a series of reports from the new Centre for Levelling Up and the University of West London which will look at places, inequality and opportunity.

# Methodology

The project consisted of 10 virtual focus group discussions with education stakeholders and young people in 8 areas of the country (listed in Table 1 below). The discussion lasted between 60 to 90 minutes with the number of participants at each discussion ranging from 6 to 16. In total 118 stakeholders participated and 26 young people aged 16-18. There was a standard aide memoire used to orientate each discussion. In each meeting we discussed questions of social mobility (and the continued usefulness of the term in the post- Covid world), the provision of information advice and guidance opportunities in each area, local control and influence over education budgets (especially as regards adult learning), the evolving and multidimensional understanding of 'place' and opportunities to live, learn and work where you grew up, and the sense of identity and attachment that people feel for their local areas.

In establishing which stakeholders to invite to the discussion we worked with a range of organisations/individuals who worked or had worked extensively in each area. These key gatekeepers are recognized in the acknowledgements. While the composition of each discussion group differed reflecting local circumstances in most of the discussions representatives from the following groups participated.

- Local Authorities education directorate (including Adult Learning)
- Schools (primary and secondary)
- Further Education Colleges
- Careers delivery
- Employers
- Voluntary/community sector
- Higher Education

# Education, inequality and place

Inequalities in social and economic outcomes by place seem to have taken on an increased resonance in recent years with national polling undertaken in 2020 suggesting that it is now seen as the most serious form of inequality in Britain.<sup>1</sup> While ongoing changes in the economy and the pandemic may have exacerbated them, these inequalities have been in existence for a long time.<sup>2</sup> But they affect those of differing genders, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds in contrasting ways. Place alone has always been a blunt way of looking at inequality. However, the present government has sought to focus intently on the role that place plays. Its 'levelling up' agenda seeks to emphasise the importance of place in understanding inequality, directing resources to places it has defined in need of additional investment.<sup>3</sup>

Where education is concerned the evidence regarding differences in average levels of qualifications and achievement by young people across places is significant.<sup>4</sup> Research released in 2020 from the Social Mobility Commission showed that gaps in educational achievement between the most and least deprived families explain the vast majority of later differences in earnings between individuals from those groups.<sup>5</sup> These differences in achievement also appear to play a major role in understanding differences in earning across areas but the extent of the role that education plays varies considerably. Education is less important though in explaining pay gaps between groups in areas where these pay gaps are largest.

The pandemic has had a hugely disruptive effect on education and looks to be widening these differences in achievement and progression between groups and places. But the evidence available so far shows that the loss in learning is greater when measures of socio-economic background are concerned as opposed to just place.<sup>6</sup>

How ongoing social & economic changes, education, place and the pandemic interact is complex. So complex and the impact of socio-economic change so granular, that it is tempting to resort to either/or ways of describing different places. For example, the somewhere or anywhere dichotomy proposed by David Goodhart in his book 'The Road to Somewhere' published in 2017. Such labels can neatly capture some of the divisions between groups of people but, as the data above, and the views of the stakeholders outlined below show, the reality maybe more nuanced.

1. Duffy, B et al (2021 Attitudes to inequalities after Covid-19, London: The Policy Institute, King's College London - <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/unequal-britain.pdf>

2. Agrawal, S & Phillips, D (2020) Catching up or falling behind? Geographical inequalities in the UK and how they have changed in recent years, London: Institute of Fiscal Studies - <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Geographical-inequalities-in-the-UK-how-they-have-changed-1.pdf>

3. HM Treasury (2021) Levelling Up Fund: Prospectus London: HM Treasury - [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/966138/Levelling\\_Up\\_prospectus.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/966138/Levelling_Up_prospectus.pdf)

4. ONS (2013) 2011 Census: Key Statistics and Quick Statistics for Local Authorities in the United Kingdom London:ONS <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/keystatisticsandquickstatisticsforlocalauthoritiesintheunitedkingdom/2013-12-04>

5. Social Mobility Commission (2020) The long shadow of Deprivation: Differences in opportunities across England London: Social Mobility Commission - <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15012>

6. Department of Education (2021) Understanding progress in the 2020/21 academic year Interim findings January 2021 – London: Department of Education - <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/department-for-education-publishes-new-epi-research-on-pupil-learning-loss/>

# The places in this study

The 2019 general election saw a re-making of the electoral map in Britain with Labour losing seats in a range of areas, many of which they had held for a long time. In the quest to understand what happened, more either/or thinking emerged as these lost seats were labelled the 'red wall'. This research focuses primarily on areas in which these seats sit. As is shown in Table 1 while they may include 'red wall seats' and generally appear below the average where different indicators of deprivation, inequality or opportunity are concerned there are still significant contrasts between them.

Table 1: Key characteristics of the places examined

Area	Population <sup>7</sup>	Soc Mob ranking (out of 323 areas) <sup>8</sup>	Index of Multiple Deprivation Score (IMD) <sup>9</sup>	Quintile (Education gaps between the most and least deprived sons at age 16) <sup>10</sup>	GCSE attainment (Percentage of pupils achieving the English Baccalaureate (grades 4 or above in English and maths, A*-C in unreformed subjects)) <sup>11</sup>
Blackpool	139,446	313	45	2	10.4
Derby	257,302	316	26.3	3	26.1
Oldham	237,110	252	33.2	1	20.5
Peterborough	131,416	191	27.8	3	21.1
Sheffield	584,853	212	27.1	4	27.5
Stoke	256,375	218	34.5	1	18.2
Wakefield	348312	292	27.3	3	24

There is only a selection of the data available featured in Table 1 that relates to the socio-economic and educational characteristics of each place. As well as the obvious contrast in size, there are also considerable differences in terms of the % of the population living in the most deprived circumstances and where they rank in terms of 'social mobility' and in GCSE attainment. The social mobility index was produced in 2017 by the Social Mobility Commission. It is a composite measure including data on education achievement/progression of pupils receiving Free School Meals (FSM), house prices/home ownership and the occupational profile of the area. In terms of IMD score the average for England was 21.7 thus all the areas to some extent, are above average i.e. are more deprived than the norm. The majority of the indicators above are not available in a comparable way for Wrexham. The population of the area is 135,957. In terms of GCSE attainment the average capped 9 points score in 2018-19 score is 343 with the average for Wales 353.

7 Data can be found at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

8. Data can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-index-2017-data>

9. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-11/welsh-index-multiple-deprivation-2019-results-report-024.pdf>  
<https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/indicator-list/view/G8UcFiedVE>

10. Social Mobility Commission (2020) The long shadow of Deprivation: Differences in opportunities across England London: Social Mobility Commission - <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15012>

11. Data can be found at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/768b837e-4784-4578-9c9a-016cab562ac6>

Also included in the table is a measure of educational achievement of the most and least deprived sons at age 16 by area. Areas in the lowest quintiles have the least inequality by this measure. There are some contrasting results for the areas in this study where this measure of 'in area inequality' is concerned.

Looking across the areas Blackpool appears to fare badly across most of the data used in the Table. For the other areas, they perform differently on each measure relative to each other. Derby ranks especially low for social mobility for example but above average for the sample on GCSE attainment while Stoke less well on GCSE attainment but better on IMD. Overall, the areas appear below averages on all of the measure where national comparisons can be made. However, the table highlights that even when looking at a fraction of the data available on socio-economic and education each place has its own distinctive profile.

# Key findings: Learning matters

As illustrated above, each of the places examined is unique with its own socio-economic and educational characteristics. Drawing out any over-arching themes needs to be done carefully and should not detract from this individuality. The discussions were also wide ranging covering the education of children and adults transcending sector boundaries. Overall, it is clear that learning opportunities matter hugely to these areas – but they need to be more varied, better funded, locally controlled and related to something other than social mobility. There were six themes emerging through the discussions and these are described below.

## **Education opportunities do exist but the awareness, organisation and access to them is fragmented**

While provision clearly differs across areas and some are served better than others, opportunities to progress within the compulsory system/post compulsory system do exist. However, they may not always be connected nor may learners know what is there for them. As Graham Cowley, Blackpool Opportunity Area chair stated:

*'we've got good primary schools, we've got challenged, but improving secondary schools, we've got two fantastic Sixth Form colleges. There are many fantastic opportunities for young people with Blackpool. The issue is connecting them with those opportunities. It's giving them the belief that these opportunities are for them and giving them choice.'*

Across the areas significant FE and also HE provision was evident. Wakefield College educates over 7000 students and has had a major role in its community since the 19th century. In both Sheffield and Wrexham the universities are active in strengthening their relationships with the community in order to enhance opportunities to learn. The University of Sheffield is developing a 'civic index' to quantify and monitor their progress in community engagement while Wrexham University is becoming the first trauma informed adverse childhood experience university in the UK. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Derby chairs the Derby Opportunity Area and in Stoke, Oldham, Sheffield and Wakefield the Uni-Connect programme<sup>12</sup> consortia play major roles in the local education landscape. This provision this did not necessarily translate into local participation though as Jamie Littlejohn from Stoke said:

*'In terms of FE and HE, actually the representation's very good. I think there's two universities, both relatively close to Stoke now and three or four colleges. What's probably lacking is actually getting people in through the door.'*

<sup>12</sup> For more information on the Uni-Connect programme please go to: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/>



Provision also needs to be connected through the learning journey as Ross Renton, Principal Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) Peterborough argued:

***'I think is very much about creating a clear line of sight from primary [and] early years all the way through into whether it be higher education or apprenticeships. So there's an educational opportunity that you can identify and also engage parents.'***

In Derby several participants described the need for a 'a golden thread, right from children preschool, to HE that we can pull together.'

However, returning to Peterborough for example, while there was an aspiration to create this joined up, holistic system there was a disconnect between the opportunities available and the extent that learners/potential learners are aware of them.

***'There is a huge range of opportunities available. But I think there is the need for that wraparound information, advice and guidance. People can't necessarily access it or navigate it, or they don't know what to choose that's going to fit in with their own particular ambitions.'***

Naomi Barker, Future First, Peterborough

***'I think the brokering of all opportunity is the key here. The opportunities are there, but the keys don't...there's not the keys to the doors.'***

Henry Stauntson, Director of  
SCITT (Peterborough)

The need for greater funding for systematic information advice and guidance support as a way of building this better connection between was repeated across the different areas. As a participant in the Sheffield session remarked:

***'information, advice and guidance (IAG) is very piecemeal. It's not joined up. Having a well-funded, universal IAG, service nationally, I think that would be a really good thing.'***

This disconnect between what opportunities are actually available and knowledge of them is illustrated clearly by the experiences of one of the students from Wakefield we spoke to. She described some of the responses she receives when she speaks to young people from her community about the opportunities available for education.

***'I still get the whole, oh, I didn't know that there was a University Centre.'***

There was a recognition that careers services do exist, but they have limitations. As a participant from Peterborough remarked:

*'There is an awful lot available nationally, regionally, locally. We have a contract for the National Career Service. But it's outcome based and target driven. So you have a limited time with one person. And sometimes it takes an awful long time to work with an individual, for them to realise what they want to do.'*

Nor is this lack of awareness confined to just educational opportunities but to potential career opportunities as well.

*'When you look at the employment opportunities and the names of the employers within Oldham, there are some huge companies and I don't always think that our young people in Oldham, and the surrounding areas of Greater Manchester recognise that.'*

Michaela Andrew, Senior Enterprise  
Co-ordinator, Greater Manchester Combined Authority

At the same time as these issues of connectivity exist there is evidence of significant work being undertaken to address them. In Derby for example, via the work of the Opportunity Area the Our Future Derby project has been launched which brings role models from local employers into schools from diverse backgrounds to address stereotypes around the jobs that females enter and to raise awareness of a broader set of career options. In Oldham there is the Parent Power project, funded through the national Uni-Connect initiative. Locally led work could be crucial in taking the provision of better careers related support forward. As Peter Leedale, a retired college lecturer from Blackpool drawing on his many years of experience working in the town states.

*'It's about having this advice and guidance embedded in schools, but also further education colleges, but in libraries and community centres, making embedded in the local environment.'*

### **Educational opportunities are missing - particularly at entry level for adult learners**

While there are clearly strengths in educational provision across the different areas, albeit in the context of a connectivity challenge, there are also gaps in provision with the most frequently highlighted one the lack of provision for adults wishing to return to learning. As a participant in the Oldham session stated:

*'we've removed most of our arts and crafts community learning funded provision. People who had not been involved in classroom education since 16.'*

This demise in opportunities for community based, shorter introductory learning opportunities is a feature of several of the places in the study. As was remarked in the Wakefield discussion 'these are often the routes back into

learning for those from vulnerable groups, older adults, people that are going back into it and retraining'. But in the Wakefield the consensus was the supply of such opportunities did not meet the demand. There was also a sense that opportunity had declined rather than increased, as was commented on in the Wrexham discussion:

***'when I first moved to Wrexham over 20 years ago, there were so many things that I was able to avail of, which was really good for, having a new career, new opportunities or a new start in life. And I think now, it's so difficult for people to do that.'***

Such a decline was also felt in Wakefield.

***'I've lived in this area for 70 years and this sounds very similar to 50 years ago. I thought opportunities were much greater. I can't believe it my children, who are now approaching 50, were given opportunities that don't seem to have moved on in 30 years.'***

Einar Sykes, local councillor  
and retired teacher

It also appears that the opportunities that do exist are subject to further restrictions when it comes to accessing them. Employers have a key role in supporting adult learning as Sharon Woodward Baker from Sheffield states 'learners were coming back to re-engage with a higher level of learning not because they were self-funded, but because they were employer funded' but this 'reduced the breadth of the curriculum on offer to students'. Dave Flanagan is chair of the Blackpool Centre for Unemployed. His concern is that the proposed reforms to lifelong learning will result in learners being too dependent on their employers and a bias toward larger employers. As he said in the Blackpool discussion:

***'it's a real problem. if an employer doesn't want to release somebody to attend a college course, no matter how much funding there is they won't. So really, it's biased towards adults that work for large employers, or public sector organisations. When you look at the demographic of Blackpool, and look at the employment opportunities there's a lot of short term of low skilled work with this huge rise we see now in the gig economy.'***

Finally, Arshad Iqbal Enterprise4Education Co-ordinator from Derby points again to a demise in more community based opportunities, and points to the need for longer term more sustainable support:

***'I think that there's lots of community education that used to be around a long time ago that perhaps isn't available anymore. And I know that the Opportunity Area has done some fantastic work with local communities. But I also suspect that when that funding dries out, like other funds have come and gone to Derby is that the providers from those activities will also disappear.'***

This lack of entry level provision requires national policy change to address. The frustration that many respondents felt here was palpable and the limitations of the new proposed Lifelong Learning Entitlement to increase participation in learning amongst adults outside of learning evident.

### **Improving opportunities means more accessible, local provision and understanding local identities**

While the different places all had significant educational provision, aside from the gaps described above, there were inevitably courses not available in the locality as well as structural and cultural barriers that need to be addressed. Looking first at the structural barriers, in several of the areas transport was a real issue for learners. One student from Wakefield described how she had to take 5 buses to get from home to college. But at the same time remaining in Wakefield brought advantages to some of the young people we spoke to. As another said: 'The fact that it's such small class sizes in Wakefield mean that you can contact tutors and support a lot easier, so you actually get to meet people face to face'. Reflecting on the challenges they experienced while studying previously in a larger university town, the participant continued 'I've emailed people I've never met before, I've never seen before, and I don't like that impersonal feel'.

Local provision is seen as essential across the different places- for cultural as well practical reasons.

*'you get this real sense of not wanting to move away from Stoke. When I've suggested some times that to students they might want to consider doing their masters in Manchester, which is half an hour on the train they recoil in horror at the thought of travelling to Manchester because Stoke's so important and so central to what they are and who they are.'*

Fiona Hall, Staffordshire University

As Hannah Merry from the Higher Horizons Uni-Connect Partnership from Stoke added 'we've got a very strong sense of community and identity, and identify with the place' and that the idea of having to leave to get an education often 'doesn't always resonate with local people'. As Sarah Kettlewell, Head of Student Participation and Careers/Careers lead, Sheffield College stated:

*'it often surprises me where young people are willing and not willing to travel to for a number of reasons. The first priority can be the nearest place, and what is available at that campus. We offer so many options but young people are really restricting their potential by just choosing what's in the local area.'*

Cultural attachments to ideas of place and how they need to be understood if participation and achievement gaps in learning are to be addressed was also evident in Wakefield and Oldham. Tim Craven from Wakefield leads is the

social investment manager for Wakefield and District Housing, a large housing association based in Wakefield with over 32,000 properties in the area. As he said:

***'We've got to recognise the fact the history and culture of the district is still to some extent rooted in the old kind of pit mentality - when people walked out of school aged 14 or 15 straight into employment at the pit. The necessity to learn and develop and access education, culturally on some of our larger estates that we manage, is sometimes a hard nut to crack.'***

Amongst the young people we spoke to attitudes to educational progression, in particular to higher education, were certainly seen as mixed. They were predominantly young people who had or wished to progress to HE. While they did not describe being discouraged to progress, the majority felt that there was a lack of HE presence in their backgrounds and communities/schools and this made it more difficult for them to realise their aspirations. As one sixth form student from Stoke said:

***'In my high school a lot of people were pushed towards more apprenticeships and more vocational subjects. They weren't particularly encouraged to go on to university.'***

These cultural attachments interact with practical challenges. As a participant from Oldham said:

***'There is this idea that you can go to Manchester which is only 20 minutes away (to access learning), but if you're an adult who's working to go to higher education through part-time, evening classes it's almost impossible. Also there's kind of a sense that people from Oldham wouldn't go to Manchester.'***

However, while there are those who will not leave there are also those, particularly young people, who want to leave, because they either can't see opportunities in their home town or the provision is not there. These people are often then lost to the place for good. As Deborah Terras from Blackpool Youth Council stated:

***'I went to Blackpool sixth form once and gave a presentation. And I asked them all to stand up and I said can you all sit down for those people who don't want to stay in Blackpool and every single one of the 200 young people in front of me, bar one, sat down. They all said we want to get out.'***

Picking up on this point in the Blackpool discussion, Gordon Marsden, ex MP for Blackpool South brought out what he called a 'tension' in the system where the aspirations of young people in the town were concerned.

*'kids in Blackpool from time to time, are very cruel about the town saying I just want to get out here and make some money and do something different. But that's not what some of them say. Some of them would say, well, I don't want to be socially mobile, because, I've got my mates, my family and my extended family. So, this constant tension exists in the system.'*

This reputational element, the conversation about the place from both those inside and outside filters through to young people. As Najma Khalid from Parent Power in Oldham says:

*'Oldham has got a bad reputation in the media. It's been there for years. So our young people don't want to stay in Oldham and that's an issue.'*

Yet while Oldham has this reputation amongst those who live there it also includes much of what we associate with prosperity and quality of life. As Vicky Sinfield from the Greater Manchester Uni-Connect initiative points out.

*'We've got a gorgeous countryside, really nice places to walk, nice restaurants, an up and coming Town Centre, a new Leisure Centre and a new cinema. We've got all this but that mind-set doesn't seem to be changing. I've heard people say that Oldham's dump but it's just the way that they're thinking.'*

Returning to Wakefield we see that this negativity about place exists simultaneously with the pride and sense of loyalty highlighted earlier. As Tim Craven from Wakefield said:

*'People don't like to be told that 'there's something wrong with where people have come from, that they want to shove them somewhere else'. People like living on our estates. Our district is a great place to live.'*

### **Social mobility is the wrong phrase to capture opportunity and progress implying departure and deficit**

This issue of identity and place came through the most strongly where social mobility was concerned. Over the last 10 years social mobility has become the idea through which inequality is understood and described by politicians from across the political spectrum. However, what does the term social mobility mean to those whom it is thought need to be mobile? Across all the areas in the study the term was met with scepticism. As Fiona from Stoke stated:

*'Social mobility definitely gives this idea of moving away. And I really don't think a lot of our students wouldn't want to move away. They're there, they're very much part of their families and the communities they're in. We need a different phraseology; it's about improving your outcomes, your achievements, your opportunities'.*

The association of social mobility with physical mobility is also picked up in Wakefield and in Oldham.

Najma from the Parent Power project relayed her conversation with one of the parents the project works with. As she said 'one of the parents we spoke to said, social mobility to her means migration of people.' But the issues with social mobility however, go deeper than the implication that it means moving away. To some it implies a labelling of certain groups in ways that don't fit with their lives or how they see themselves.

***'It just feels as though it's an imposed term that that a certain ruling class have imposed on a group of people. What does it actually mean?'***

Andy Mellor, Ex Blackpool  
primary headteacher

***'we love being able to tell people that they're in a certain group without necessarily asking them what they want. I don't think social mobility means a great deal to many people in the city. If we were to ask some of the young people that we work with I'm pretty sure at no stage they'll talk about what it's done for my social mobility. So we need to talk in the language that they can understand.'***

Simon Carnall, Derby County  
Community Trust

As a participant in the Wrexham discussion remarked:

***'I don't necessarily think it's the right term, because I don't think it's particularly accessible and well understood. I don't think it gives that sense of belonging or makes people feel, that applies to me, I can be socially mobile, I really don't.'***

While Henry Staunton, Director of SCITT, Peterborough remarked:

***'if you take most of a Peterborough secondary cohort, and ask them to tell you what social mobility means, they won't be able to tell you. And I don't think 50% of the people that work in the city either would necessarily be able to accurately tell you what social mobility really means.'***

The accessibility and appropriateness of social mobility was a continual refrain through the discussion groups. It was recognized as a term that professionals use, but its inability to capture more individualised and broader understanding of progress was seen as a real issue. It assumes what success means, rather than appreciating that success for many in the places in this study needs to be seen in the context of their lives and where they live.



*'what do we mean, when we talk about social mobility? Is it just about getting a better job than your parents did or having a higher income and living in a bigger house? And actually, I think we slightly missed the point if we cap it at looking just at those sorts of things.'*

Gemma Penny, Head Teacher  
Allestree Woodland School

*'Social mobility. It's part of that idea of the individual and it comes on the back of merit, the idea if you work hard enough, you'll get to where you want to be. But I think we all know that that's quite a simplistic understanding, because there are so many barriers in the way of that anyway. I don't think students understand those words at all. I think they understand fair.'*

Sharon Woodward Baker, Higher Education  
Progression Partnership, South Yorkshire

Finally, under this theme social mobility was not the only problematic term used in in the field of education, training and employment services. Other terms such as disadvantaged in particular, are also seen as inappropriate ways of describing the individuals that the stakeholders in the discussion worked with. As Deborah Terras from Blackpool said:

*'We say disadvantaged or hard to reach and we label young people. I've worked with a lot of young people who say, don't you dare call me disadvantaged, or what do you mean, I'm hard to reach or I'm vulnerable?'*

Reflecting on his work inside Oldham in his career one of the participants commented.

*'I've really questioned myself each time where I've done any publicity or whether we've done any kind of linking up with those parents to never describe them as disadvantaged families because they might be absolutely horrified to hear that somebody was speaking about them in that way.'*

In terms of what language would be more appropriate to encapsulate either the challenges people in the areas studied face, or their individual and collective aspirations there was no-one easy phrase or term. As several participants argued, whatever terms should be used need to be defined by those we are seeking to work with. It also needs to be rooted in local circumstance based around opportunities that exist in the places studied not away from them. As Ben Dyer from the Inspirational Learning Group in Stoke said:

*'We haven't even got a train station in the city centre in Stoke. We're that far beyond the times. Social mobility doesn't mean you've got to move as an individual - it's can we actually have the opportunities of the other cities? Can we get the things which will attract jobs that will then progress the city?''*

## **Covid has impacted on all forms of learning but also brought new opportunities**

The impact of the pandemic on learning opportunities and outcomes was a recurring theme throughout the sessions. Tony Rex of Wakefield College explained how ‘hundreds of our students reported at the start of this academic year that they would need a device to be able to access online learning’. Even at HE level Professor Kathryn Mitchell, Vice Chancellor of the University of Derby and Chair of the Derby Opportunity Area recalled how amongst her students the extent of access to IT issues was a major challenge for the university.

The extent to which it interacted with existing socio-economic challenges should not be underestimated though. Ant Sutcliffe is a chair of governors at a school in one of the ten most disadvantaged areas in England in Stoke North.

***‘There has been a 75% drop in attainment in reading. There's a very simple reason for that. All the libraries were closed by this government, so there's no libraries, there's no click and collect. Some parents struggle to read and write and they haven't got any books at home and that's why the children haven't read for six or seven months.’***

In Blackpool the tendency for the town to attract those seeking work in lower skilled areas meant that the pandemic had just added to problems of unemployment and poverty. As Simon Cartmell, Chair of Blackpool South constituency Labour Party said:

***‘I think Covid has highlighted the economic inequalities that kids in all towns, but specifically Blackpool as the hardest hit town probably in Britain on all levels because of the fact we import poverty. Families that come in who are fleeing things and they come with nothing’.***

Addressing these issues is not straightforward. Improving access to technology alone for example will not lead to all learners ‘catching up’. As one participant from Derby commented:

***‘we had families bringing the laptops and devices back, because it's scaring them so much that they don't want to use it’.***

Alongside the impact on academic development it was the loss of support in areas of a young person’s education that are at risk of passing under the radar though that the participants placed the most emphasis on, in particular careers guidance and work experience. As was commented in the Wakefield discussion ‘we were a bit worried that due to other pressures and priorities schools had backed off from careers education’. This fear was echoed in Peterborough.

*'The big concern for me is that there's a whole cohorts of students, where IAG, has taken a backseat to the need to make sure the curriculum is delivered. There may be two, three, four year groups who will not understand what their options are.'*

As Peter Riley, who is the Head of Student Recruitment at Manchester Metropolitan University, from the Oldham session said:

*'It's the extra stuff that's gone out of the window and again it might well come back to those whose families have connections or know how things work. How many Year 10s will actually get work placements, compared to what they would normally have done? As a result of Covid are we going to see an increase in disparity because of the connections that people have got?'*

While its deleterious effect was evident the shift to online learning had also, in the views of the respondents, brought some positives. There was evidence of a greater engagement of parents in learning, from groups especially where prior engagement was low, young people developing new skills and learners entering adult education because it was more available online now. The balance between positive and negative effects differs as much across places as individuals. It is important though that we are careful in how the impact on young people is described.

*'I think we need to be really careful about this narrative around a lost generation. Our young people are listening. Why are we telling them they're a lost generation?'*

Gavin Cass, Supporting Improvement  
Advisor, GwE Wrexham

### **A desire for greater trust, more local control and stable funding**

Across every area in this study there was a call for more resources to tackle the challenges described above. Additional resources were required across all stages of learning, but consistent with the problems identified earlier where adult learning was concerned more funding especially for entry level, flexible, more 'bite-sized' learning was called for repeatedly. More broadly, initiatives such as Opportunity Areas and Uni-Connect are welcome, but those who participated in the study laboured day to day to address educational inequality without the long term, stable funding they need. As Gordon Marsden from Blackpool stated:

*'(Blackpool) is an amazing place. And it does have huge abilities and potential, but, goodness me, we need to have the resources - and those resources are not simply bricks and mortar.'*

The need for longer term funding was highlighted by Krishna Bainham, University of Derby.

***'a lot of funding pots are very short term [yet] the issues that we need to tackle are long term'.***

However, it is not just the level of resources it is how and who controls them and how education is delivered at local level that matters. As a participant from Oldham explained:

***'the answer has to be to take a more holistic view and I think you can best do that locally. It can't be done from Westminster. So, it is about delegating money more and it's about delegating more power'.***

While a respondent from the Wakefield session commented:

***'funding more opportunities or initiatives in response to local needs and letting those decisions and initiatives being led by local people'.***

This issue of local control is closely tied for many of those who participated in the discussion sessions with that of trust. They wanted government to:

***'work with us to better understand us, to trust us and to provide us with more local flexibility'.***

Jayne Clarke, Oldham  
Sixth Form College

or as Simon Carnall from Derby said:

***'Leave us alone, stop meddling and trust us!'.***

As Michelle Wright from North East Wales ACL Partnership said this trust means allowing professionals

***'the flexibility to be creative in the way that we work together. Don't have the limitations on what our exact pot of funding is allowed to be spent on. Let us be creative to meet the needs of the learners and meet a broader remit'.***

# Finding a level: Educational opportunity in the eight places

The analysis above shows each of the places examined are complex, multi-dimensional and diverse. Sweeping generalisations of places as rich or poor, with good or bad educational opportunities are oversimplified. That said, many people living within these areas do not have access to the opportunities as they need – compared to others in the area and nationally. Thus, levelling up ‘within’ these areas is every bit as important as ‘between’ them and other parts of the country.

None are bereft of educational opportunities but while in some areas such as Derby, Stoke, Sheffield and Wrexham higher education has a major footprint (and is like to have soon in Peterborough where a new university is imminent) who are soon to have a university potential impact) in others it is noticeable by its absence. While adult learning opportunities are lacking in all areas it is these non-university towns where the routes back to creating better ‘first’ chances for adults to return generally seem the most difficult.

The cultural and structural challenges that constrain opportunity also differ within and across areas. Transport infrastructure is a major issue for those learners from low income backgrounds in Stoke and Wakefield but less so in other areas. Ideas of what learning is for and the value of place also differed greatly. Not all the areas grappled with how place and learning were perceived in the same way - the past appeared to have a particular bearing on the present in terms of how education was valued in Stoke and Wakefield for example. While in Oldham and Blackpool it was the place itself that some felt lacked value in the eyes of young people but in Derby and to an extent Peterborough the divisions between groups within the place were in need of addressing.

The most complexity was found with social mobility. Another heuristic used by policy makers is that people essentially want the same thing in life i.e. better job and more money. Hence, social mobility when defined as economic progress works as an idea and talking about progress should be straightforward. But in reality across these vastly different areas the biggest area of commonality was a rejection of the term social mobility. It appears to mean as little to those working in a coastal town like Blackpool as it does to those in towns such as Stoke and Wakefield with their industrial heritage. Progress and success cannot be reduced as simply to economic progress at all costs – as important as employment is so is family and community which is why many don’t want to travel across the country to seek work or education. A more localised language to describe progress, owned by those whom we those across sectors are trying to assist, is required.

The discussion regarding the pandemic emphasised how these places differ. Across all areas there was evidence of how those in more educationally or economically precarious positions have suffered - from lack of digital access or training, to increased anxiety or loss of crucial IAG support. In Blackpool especially, Oldham and Stoke though the pandemic is exacerbating the economic challenges that some groups in these areas face.

### **Avoiding a new heuristic**

Extending education opportunity cannot be separated from the wider challenges that places like those in this study and those within them face. If levelling up is to be a better approach to addressing inequality than that of recent years, it will need to embed within it that connection. This will mean recognising that investment in people as well as buildings and roads is required but also ceding control to those working locally. Aside from the rejection of social mobility the other unifying theme emerging across areas was the desire for greater trust and control. Levelling up cannot mean trying to produce identical places. It must enable places like those in the study to build on their strong, durable and multiple identities to develop their own version of prosperity.

The differences between and within described above is a strong message did not just the Government but for Labour as well. It has to avoid creating a new red wall 'heuristic' that describes the places where it recently lost seats like those in this study and others as one amorphous group. There is so much in what the participants said in the study that could inform a distinctive approach to extending educational opportunity and thus improving social outcomes. Such an approach must take as its first principle diversity not uniformity across places. The final section outlines a number of recommendations which taken together could form the foundations of such a new approach.

# Recommendations

## 1 Bring better 'careers' support to where people live, study and work

More and better careers support is required which comes to those who need it rather than their having to seek it out. For a national careers service to be effective in places such as those studied here it has to be based around networked, flexible local provision delivered alongside other educational and employment experiences rather than separate online or physical entities that people have to visit.

## 2 Put educational opportunity at the centre of 'levelling up'

For a strategy that 'levels up' to be effective it needs to connect its approach to investment in physical infrastructure, lifelong learning, education recovery and skills development together. Policy siloing does not resonate with the experience of those working close to the ground. At its centre needs to be investment in people not projects, shaped locally around the creation of opportunities to engage in learning and skill development.

## 3 Make flexible, entry level opportunities for adults at the heart of a lifelong learning strategy

In the views of the stakeholders consulted a Lifelong Learning entitlement that only includes access to Level 3 learning in specific subject areas will not attract those least likely to learn back into education. Entry level provision, not necessarily associated directly with vocational skills nor available only at the behest of the employer, is required. As with careers support there was support for this provision to be available online and face-to-face in FE but also in community based settings.

## 4 Stop talking social mobility and find a post Covid language to describe opportunity and progress

Social mobility may do more harm than good if it is something that those who need additional support to progress in their lives don't recognize this term. What success means differs across communities and places and is being re-shaped for many by the legacy of the pandemic. A new language for inequality and progress is required that avoids phrases like social mobility, disadvantage/left behind and lost generations.



## 5 Ensure more places have higher education provision

As Further Education Colleges do, universities in this study were actively contributing to the development of the communities in which they sit. Increasing higher education provision in places where it is under-developed, as part of the holistic approach described above, will greatly extend educational opportunities across these communities.

## 6 Take a 'hyper-local' approach to devolving control and resources

The ability of those working across these areas to affect change are being restricted by a piecemeal approach to funding and trust. A 'hyper local' approach would make all initiative based funding at least 5 years, make OFSTED inspections lighter touch in the most challenged areas and give as much control as possible as close to where opportunities are delivered.

## 7 Support a holistic Covid learning recovery strategy

Additional learning time focused on core subjects and distributing more data/laptops is not enough enable learners hardest hit by the pandemic to recover lost progress. A more holistic approach that addresses lost careers support, confidence and work experience alongside building the capacity of all families to learn online is required.

*Learning about place: Understanding lifelong learning and social mobility in Covid Britain* is a major new report undertaken by Professor Graeme Atherton (NEON and the University of West London) and Dr Barry Colfer (Policy Network).

The report explores the evolving and multidimensional understanding of 'place' and opportunities to live, learn and work where you grew up, and the sense of identity and attachment that people feel for their local areas.

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