Implementation of Opportunity Areas: An independent evaluation

Final Research report

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Executive Summary

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to evaluate the implementation of the first year of the Opportunity Area (OA) programme. The evaluation started in January 2017 and finished in June 2018. It focused on the *process* of implementation and did not seek to assess impact (which will be the focus of the on-going wider evaluation). The evaluation comprised three rounds of interviews, supported by case studies, comprising over 200 interviews. The findings are intended to support the DfE's learning about the programme to inform its development, and that of other programmes in the future.

About Opportunity Areas

The OA programme, announced in October 2016, forms a fundamental part of the government's approach to increasing social mobility. The DfE has targeted a three-year, seventy-two million pound (£72m) support programme at 12 local authority district (LADs) areas identified because of the social, economic and cultural challenges they faced in improving people's life chances. The approach was endorsed by Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: a plan for improving social mobility through education (DfE, 2017): the DfE's overarching strategy to tackling entrenched disadvantage. Improving education by addressing a range of deep-rooted issues that affect children and young people's outcomes is a key part of this strategy.

The 12 OAs were selected from those LADs that were in the weakest sextile for both the 2016 Social Mobility Index (SMI) and the Achieving Excellence Areas Index.[1] These indices identified the areas that were in most need of additional support across a wide range of issues. In addition, the DfE took into consideration geographical spread, including looking at coastal, rural and urban areas. The first six OAs (Blackpool, Derby, North Yorkshire Coast[1], Norwich, Oldham and West Somerset) were announced in October 2016 and the second six (Bradford, Doncaster, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, Hastings, Ipswich and Stoke-on-Trent) were announced in January 2017.

The programme has adopted a type of place-based approach whereby DfE staff work both centrally, within DfE, and locally within the OAs. These teams are known as 'local delivery teams' and are supported by a dedicated (non-DfE) programme manager.

Each OA formed a partnership board which has strategic direction and oversight of the OA alongside the DfE local delivery team. Boards comprise a range of professionals from

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[1] Further information about how the OAs were selected can be found in 'Opportunity Areas Selection Methodology' Paper.
[1] This is the Borough of Scarborough

across the public, private and voluntary sectors (e.g. early years, schools, colleges, universities, local authorities (LAs), health, businesses and the voluntary sector) and often involve the Regional Schools Commissioner's (RSC) office. Each OA developed and published a [Delivery Plan](#) which set out the OA's areas of need, its priorities and related targets.

About the evaluation

The NFER evaluation primarily focussed on the first six OAs to be established. Three rounds of data collection, with partnership board and subgroup members, in the first six OAs were conducted during spring 2017, autumn/winter 2017 and spring 2018. During winter 2017, the evaluation team carried out interviews with a small number of key stakeholders in the second group of OAs, and, in spring 2018, they conducted six case studies across both groups of OAs.

Summary of findings

Developing partnerships with and in OAs

In each OA, a partnership board was appointed to work with the DfE to plan, commission and oversee change within the area. While partnership boards were not accountable bodies, they had strategic oversight of the programme within their area alongside the DfE delivery teams. Each partnership board was led by an independent chair/s and comprised representatives from different education phases, employers and the voluntary sector, among others (e.g. health colleagues).

Overall, partnership board members were enthusiastic and passionate about being involved in the OA programme. They were committed to maintaining momentum to achieve the objectives articulated in the delivery plan priorities. On the whole, partnership boards were working well.

Most partnership boards were supported by a number of subgroups which comprised wider groups of local stakeholders. Subgroups were often aligned to specific delivery plan priorities and led the operational work of the partnership board and OA. Across the OAs, the early years and school-focused subgroups made more progress (in terms of commissioning interventions or programmes) compared to other subgroups, such as those focusing on skills, employment and cultural priorities. Where subgroups became established quickly and were working well, the evidence suggests that this was as a result of building on pre-existing local networks and structures (e.g. headteacher groups).

Working with DfE

DfE local delivery teams and programme managers invested a significant amount of time to get to know and engage with local stakeholders. This was vitally important in gaining

local credibility and developing an in-depth understanding of the local area. This process also helped DfE delivery teams to identify individuals to invite to the OA partnership board. Partnership board members appreciated the support of the DfE delivery teams and felt they were responsive to local concerns while also making the Department's positon clear.

Achievements and challenges of the OA partnership model

One of the key achievements of the programme so far was the value of the partnership board and DfE local delivery team input. Stakeholders were also pleased that they had:

- continued to make progress in terms of identifying areas of need, developing the delivery plans and starting to fund projects and interventions;

- developed a shared, cross-sector awareness and understanding that social mobility was a local issue and had established a collective sense of purpose to tackle it;

- involved a range of local stakeholders to work collaboratively to drive the OA programme forward locally.

Overall, interviewees felt that DfE had succeeded in engaging with local stakeholders, which was starting to lead to effective implementation of the programme.

While the partnership model underpinning the OA programme was widely regarded as being a success, nonetheless, some areas for development existed. These related to a need to enhance local engagement, input and influence over the programme (especially with the community, parents/carers and young people and also with colleagues from health, early years, all schools, social care, employers, housing, the voluntary sector and transport). Particularly early in the programme, several stakeholders observed that sometimes the partnership board felt too led by DfE and not driven enough by a representative selection of stakeholders. Stakeholders highlighted some logistical challenges associated with the programme such as the time commitment involved and the practical implications of implementing a programme while it was being defined and developed. This led some to request greater clarification about the programme's aims at the national and local level and how the OA programme aligned with other programmes made available to OAs.

Delivery plans and priority setting

Each OA was successful in producing a delivery plan that was informed by data and local intelligence. OA stakeholders greatly valued having access to a wide range of data and softer intelligence from a cross-section of local stakeholders to inform priority and delivery plan development.

Each delivery plan set out the local challenges, priorities for intervention and targets. Delivery plans included up to four priorities, driven by the OA's needs. Across the 12

OAs, a total of 45 priorities were identified, variously addressing early years, primary and secondary education, post-16 and employment outcomes. Typical examples of priorities included improving early language development, outcomes at key stage 4 and supporting young people with transitions between education and employment. Some OAs published additional themes, such as improving mental health or promoting essential life skills, that cross-cut or underpinned multiple priorities. Not all OAs chose to focus their work across all phases of education, tailoring their priorities to those most relevant to the local area.

Delivery plans indicated how OAs planned to take advantage of other nationally-funded programmes and initiatives to provide additional support to OAs. These included the DfE-led initiatives, such as the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund (TLIF), the Strategic School Innovation Fund (SSIF), the Essential Life Skills (ELS) programme and support from organisations such as the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC), the National Citizen Service (NCS) and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).

The research evidence indicated the importance of maintaining the utility of delivery and work plans as 'live' documents which reflected and would be responsive to changing local needs and progress being made.

Generally, OA stakeholders felt involved in deciding their OA's priorities. Partnership board members considered that engagement with wider stakeholders in priority-setting had been valuable for ensuring synergy with, and avoiding duplication of, existing provision. Some stakeholders considered that delivery plan development had been driven too heavily by DfE and/or requested greater time for reflection and analysis of the data. Additionally, many interviewees thought that local non-educational challenges that affected social mobility were not adequately reflected or that ways of delivering against some priorities were not innovative enough to address local issues. Greater communication with local communities was also needed.

From planning to implementation

OAs stakeholders' commitment, passion and willingness to improve local young people's social mobility was a driving force behind the OA programme. The pace of their OA's work had accelerated after the first year as the programme moved from set-up (e.g. convening partnership boards) to planning (e.g. developing delivery plans) and into commissioning OA-funded programmes. For some, there was frustration that slower progress had been made than expected but the evidence suggests that the systems established had ensured appropriate accountability arrangements and safeguards were in place. Partnership board members in most OAs felt that the balance between planning on the one hand and commissioning or delivering provision on the other was appropriate.

By early 2018, OAs were either ready or nearly ready to start delivering against their delivery plan. By this time, partnership board members felt much clearer about how this work would be taken forward and who was responsible for progressing each aspect of

the delivery plans. By spring 2018, OAs had started to deliver against some of their priorities.

Delivery plan priorities focused on early years, and primary and secondary education which were progressing more quickly than work on the post-16 priorities. The main reason for this was there were existing structures, such as groups and networks of early years professionals and school senior leaders, which the OAs built on to plan and manage the change. In contrast, there were fewer existing post-16 structures for OAs to draw on, and the post-16 and skills sector is complex involving many players, which may have made progress slower in some cases. Examples of activities getting started more quickly included support for early language development, classroom activities to enhance teaching and learning or professional development activities. Other facilitating factors which contributed to the effective delivery of OAs' plans included developing productive working relationships with key stakeholders; building capacity for delivery within LAs and a range of providers; and having dedicated LA link officers who could act as trouble-shooters.

The evidence suggests that the OA programme could be enhanced if a more strategic and coherent approach to accessing the resources and services of national programmes such as SSIF and TLIF had been developed. This would involve scoping which programmes and their components best aligned with and would add value to OAs' priorities and involve agreeing a coordinated approach across each OA, taking into consideration the available capacity in schools to bid for and deliver or use the resources and services.

Measuring and sustaining success

Interviewees were eager for the overall programme and specific projects and programmes to be evaluated; they were keen to find out what works and why and for this learning to be shared. Most partnership boards were developing a system for monitoring outputs (e.g. a dashboard and/or RAG-rating by priority, theme or intervention) and across OAs, evaluation was being built into many tenders for commissioning projects.

Interviewees were keen to measure progress in the short-term, although across OAs it was felt that the task of measuring the impacts of the programme would need to extend over five to 15 years in order to capture the longer-term effect of their work on social mobility. Many interviewees thought that a combination of quantitative (e.g. national and local statistics) and qualitative (e.g. perceptions) data and evidence was required to evidence comprehensively the impact of the OA programme. A commonly held view was that DfE should be responsible for national data collection and setting up common frameworks and the OAs should gather additional insights into practice at a local level.

Stakeholders were committed to sustaining the programme and passionate about ensuring it had a 'lasting legacy'. They explicitly tried to ensure OA funds would only be used for sustainable projects and interventions. Furthermore, they aimed to ensure

sustainability by building on existing groups and networks, ensuring wider stakeholder engagement (educationalists and non-educationalists), building capacity within the system and ensuring evidence of impact is shared. Perspectives varied on whether the current model was sustainable, some felt the current approach could not be sustained longer term, particularly for those who sat on multiple groups. Programme management resource was highlighted as necessary for supporting the sustainability of the OA infrastructure in the future.

DfE intended the OA programme to evolve and develop at the national level while it was being implemented within local areas. Stakeholders appreciated the place-based approach which has given them the opportunity to provide local input and influence within a national framework of support and challenge, however, by its nature, this has also caused some minor areas of challenge and concern.

Suggestions for improvement and next steps

Based on a thorough analysis of the evidence collected for this evaluation, we present the following recommendations for improving the OA programme.

- DfE should consider extending the timeline of the programme to reflect the concerns identified by interviewees and ensure the programme has a realistic prospect of achieving cultural change.

- Delivery plans and priorities, or local work plans, should continue to be reviewed and updated as appropriate in line with progress. Updates should consider: the inclusion of innovative interventions and ensuring that programme activity is delivering for changing local needs. Where data is presented to stakeholders, it should be done so in an accessible, manageable and coherent way to maximise stakeholder engagement quickly and comprehensively.

- DfE teams should continue to be mindful of schools' capacity and should develop a strategic and coherent strategy for accessing national partners and programmes' services for the OA. DfE should consider developing shared resources across the OAs, e.g. streamlined project bidding processes.

- DfE should ensure that regular and consistent messages about the aims and scope of the programme, new developments, progress and achievements are shared across OAs so that stakeholders and local communities are aware of the benefits gained to date and what the OAs are planning to deliver in the future.

- DfE should support sharing learning and information between OAs so they can learn about what works, in what contexts and why, to the greatest extent possible.

- If the DfE rolls out the OA programme further or introduces other place-based programmes, they should:

- Appoint a committed, respected and independent chair to each new area. Generally, the chair role has provided strong leadership, inclusivity and engagement of partnership board members and focussed on children and young people outcomes.
- Ensure transparency about who was invited to join the partnership board and why.
- Provide administrative support to partnership boards *and* subgroups to achieve faster progress.
- Ensure local stakeholder engagement encompasses a range of sectors, and different groups within sectors; it should also raise the profile of the OA programme from the outset within the local community to seek their commitment and involvement.

Across partnership boards, interviewees reported that later in spring 2018, they planned to take stock of progress to date and would start to put plans in place for next year. Partnership board members wanted to be in a stronger position in year two than they were in the first year of the programme in terms of aligning their plans with decision-making in partner organisations, for example, schools' development plans and priority setting processes.

Chapter 1   About the OA programme and our evaluation

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to evaluate the implementation of the first year of the Opportunity Area (OA) programme, focusing on the *process* of implementation. The impact of the programme will be the focus of the on-going wider evaluation starting in autumn 2018. Our process evaluation started in January 2017 and finished in June 2018 2018, comprising three rounds of interviews, supported by case studies. The evaluation aimed to explore:

- OA stakeholders' understanding and engagement in the programme and their views of the programme throughout the implementation phase; and

- the features of the programme that have worked well and what have been the barriers and challenges and areas for improvement.

Its purpose was to support the DfE's learning about the OA programme to inform its development and that of other programmes in the future. The findings presented in this report are based primarily on the views of stakeholders involved in the first six OAs (Blackpool, Derby, North Yorkshire Coast[2], Norwich, Oldham and West Somerset). We also interviewed a small number of stakeholders from the second group of OAs (Bradford, Doncaster, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, Hastings, Ipswich and Stoke-on-Trent) and their views are reflected throughout. While we undertook the evaluation, the national OA programme and its local implementation was developing and evolving. As a result of the timing, this report reflects a snapshot during the early stages of OA the programme's development.

Aims of the Opportunity Areas programme

The OA programme, announced in October 2016, formed a fundamental part of the government's approach to increasing social mobility. Over three years, DfE targeted a seventy-two million pound (£72m) support programme at 12 local authority district (LADs) areas, identified because of the social, economic and cultural challenges they faced in improving people's life chances. The approach had been endorsed by Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: a plan for improving social mobility through education (DfE, 2017): the DfE's overarching strategy to tackling entrenched disadvantage. Improving education by addressing a range of entrenched issues that affects children and young people's outcomes was a key part of this strategy.

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[2] This is the Borough of Scarborough.

Initially six OAs were announced in October 2016:

- Blackpool

- Derby

- North Yorkshire Coast

- Norwich

- Oldham

- West Somerset.

In January 2017, DfE announced a further six areas:

- Bradford

- Doncaster

- Fenland and East Cambridgeshire

- Hastings

- Ipswich

- Stoke-on-Trent.

The OAs were designed to help develop young people's knowledge and skills and ensure they were able to access high-quality advice and enriching life opportunities. OAs sought to achieve this by primarily focusing on improving educational outcomes and support in other areas proven to influence social mobility. The programme's approach therefore situated school improvement in the context of broader issues that influenced life chances such as personal resilience, parenting, opportunities for volunteering and cultural enrichment, and to develop leadership skills, alongside specific support such as effective Careers Education Advice and Guidance (CEAG), and support to access higher education.

The nature and extent of challenges varied from OA to OA. Many OAs had educational attainment that lagged behind the national average at the end of the early years foundation stage, primary (key stage 2) and secondary stage (key stage 4). Substantial gaps between outcomes for all children and those from disadvantaged backgrounds were a widespread concern. Broader issues, such as children's and young people's mental health and wellbeing, disengagement from school and problems with behaviour and poor attendance rates, and access to high-quality cultural/life experiences, were also noted as a challenge for some OAs. An analysis of key challenges was published in the [Delivery Plan for each Opportunity Area](#).

A place-based approach

The OA programme adopted a type of place-based approach based on LADs. This method highlighted differences between localities which could be masked by county-wide data. It also allowed issues to be identified at a broader level than that of individual schools.

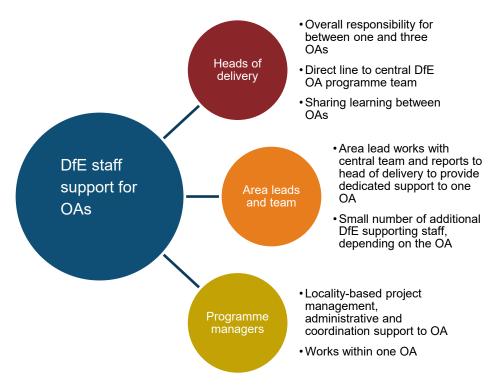To identify the LADs that would be targeted, the DfE undertook an analysis of:

- Achieving Excellence Areas (localities identified because of issues of educational underperformance, where there was a lack of quality school places, and not enough capacity for school improvement), measuring school performance (based on five indicators) and capacity to improve (based on six indicators).
- The Social Mobility Commission's Social Mobility Index (SMI) that took account of broader indicators (e.g. salaries, house prices) not solely those related to educational outcomes.

Both measures were used to select a 'long-list' of 32 LADs ranked in the bottom sextile of the 2016 Social Mobility Index and Achieving Excellence Areas Index which were then filtered using further criteria that took account of factors such as geography, type of area, and the nature of the challenges confronting them. This enabled the 12 OAs to be identified (which were ranked between 301 and 324 of the total 324 areas in the data analysis). The Opportunity Areas selection methodology and data are published on GOV.UK.

The OA programme was designed to enable local stakeholders to have a key role in identifying needs, establishing priorities and in overseeing project delivery. OAs were required to form a cross-sector partnership board that would work with a dedicated DfE local delivery team and a DfE-appointed independent chair. The partnership board and DfE delivery teams developed local delivery plans which identified the barriers to social mobility and outlined overarching aims, priorities, targets and actions that would guide its work. In developing the delivery plans, the OAs were expected to consult with a broad range of stakeholders, including businesses, voluntary and community organisations, early years providers, schools, colleges, universities, and local authorities (LAs).

Each OA had a small team of DfE officials who worked with the partnership board and local stakeholders to implement the programme. Local delivery teams were led by a head of delivery who held responsibility for the programme in one or more OAs and provided a link between the central DfE and local OAs stakeholders. Each OA was supported by at least a dedicated area lead and a local programme manager. Programme managers posts were funded by the DfE but locally-based, often in the LA or other local institution, such as the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) or university. Funding for the DfE's officials did not come from the programme's £72m budget, but local programme managers (and any other locally employed staff) were funded from the programme budget. Figure 1 outlines the DfE support for the programme.

Figure 1: DfE team support to Opportunity Areas

Heads of delivery
- Overall responsibility for between one and three OAs
- Direct line to central DfE OA programme team
- Sharing learning between OAs

DfE staff support for OAs

Area leads and team
- Area lead works with central team and reports to head of delivery to provide dedicated support to one OA
- Small number of additional DfE supporting staff, depending on the OA

Programme managers
- Locality-based project management, administrative and coordination support to OA
- Works within one OA

Links to other programmes

In addition to £72m DfE core funding for the OA programme, OAs were offered priority access to a range of DfE initiatives and relationships were brokered with non-DfE organisations to offer dedicated services that aligned to the broad aims of the OA programme. Several key examples include:

Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF)

A DfE programme in which schools, Teaching School Alliances and multi-academy trusts accessed funding through a competitive bidding process to enable them to develop local capacity for improvement activities to support school leadership, governance, teaching methods, and financial health.

Teaching and Leadership innovation Fund (TLIF)

A DfE programme which funded a range of professional development programmes delivered by approved national providers, covering topics such as leadership development, the quality of teaching, managing challenging pupil behaviour, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects and phonics.

Essential Life Skills Programme (ELS)

A DfE programme, which enabled children and young people to access extra-curricular activities in the arts, sports, volunteering and social action projects, was only available within OAs.

Maths Hubs

Partnerships of schools, sponsored by DfE, coordinated a programme of mathematics professional development programmes (such as Teaching for Mastery) and related activities to support other local schools to deliver high quality mathematics education.

National Citizen Service (NCS)

A series of voluntary social action programmes which aimed to develop young people's confidence and self-belief, administered by the NCS Trust. The NCS is not funded by the DfE, but committed to focusing on Opportunity Areas – including through trialling dedicated coordinating staff in schools in each of the areas – in order to increase the number of young people involved in the programme in OAs.

National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)

An Office for Students programme that aimed to boost higher education participation rates amongst disadvantaged young people, largely by delivering outreach programmes to young people aged 13 – 18.

Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC)

A social enterprise set up by DfE in 2015 which helped connect schools to employers, promote high-quality careers education and guidance, and ran and administered funds for careers and enterprise programmes. The CEC had an Opportunity Areas fund which targeted £1m at each of the two groups of OAs.

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)

The What Works Centre for Education (jointly led by EEF and the Sutton Trust), EEF supported evidence-based practice in education, funded highly robust research and evaluation for educational interventions, and ran programmes to expand the capacity of the system to improve, for example the network of Research Schools. The EEF, in partnership with the DfE, funded a dedicated Research School to support each OA.

OAs also drew on other support and resources such as the National Careers Service's online directory of support and the National Apprenticeship Service.

It is worth noting that many of the partner organisations or DfE teams (e.g. schools, individual LAs, Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs), other public service providers) were accountable for their own work and subject to their respective audit and inspection arrangements. OAs worked with these external processes as they implemented the OA programme.

About the evaluation

Our process evaluation sought to address three questions in relation to the first year of OA programme:

- What has worked well within and across OAs?
- Where could improvements be made nationally and locally?
- How could the OA strategy be refined to improve future delivery?

The evaluation primarily focused on the first six OAs to be established, with three rounds of data collection from partnership board and subgroup members (during spring 2017, autumn/winter 2017 and spring 2018). During winter 2017, we carried out interviews with a small number of key stakeholders in the second group of OAs. The data from all interviews is presented in this report. Generally, the views from interviewees in the second group of OAs were similar to those in the first group, but we have noted differences where they occurred.

We also completed case studies across six OAs during spring 2018. Two case-study themes were chosen in collaboration with DfE. The first explored local area governance, networks and structures within Derby, Ipswich and West Somerset. The second examined the initial progress around early years priorities within North Yorkshire Coast, Norwich and Oldham. Across the case studies we interviewed partnership board or subgroup members, local stakeholders including early years, school and LA leaders and/or practitioners and carried out an observation.

In most cases, the team conducted semi-structured interviews by telephone, although we also carried out a number of face-to-face interviews, particularly for the case studies. Overall, the team interviewed over 130 stakeholders involved in the OAs - around a quarter of whom were interviewed in each of the three waves - to capture their experiences of setting up the programme.

Table 1: Summary of evaluation methodology

Phase of fieldwork	OA group	Timescales	Number of participants
Wave 1	First group	March to April 2017	38
Wave 2a	First group	September to December 2017	62
Wave 2b	Second group	November 2017 to January 2018	19
Wave 3	First group	March to May 2018	57
Case studies	Across both groups	March to June 2018	35
Total number of interviews			**211**

Interviewees included:

- All DfE OA heads of delivery, most area leads and programme managers (where they were in post at the times of the interviews);

- An OA partnership board chair in each of the 12 OAs; and

- Representatives from the early years, primary and secondary schools, colleges/post-16 providers, universities, the voluntary and community sector, LAs, LEPs, employers and the skills sector, along with other independent individuals involved in the programme.

Prior to each stage of data collection, NFER researchers worked with DfE heads of delivery and area leads to identify interviewees outside of the DfE team. The people interviewed were those most heavily involved in the OA programme, either as partnership board and/or as subgroup members.

OA Programme and evaluation timeline

Figure 2 below sets out the timeline of the OA programme and the evaluation between October 2016 and May 2018.

Figure 2: OA timeline of activity, October 2016 to June 2018

It is important to note that because we were carrying out the interviews while the programme was being implemented, our data reflects developments over time. The pace of change, at times, was fast and information presented to us became out of date quickly, for example, because of developments or decisions taken immediately after an interview which moved things forward or affected the dynamics between key stakeholders. It is important to bear this context is mind when reading the report.

About this report

This report presents the evaluation findings under the following key chapters:

- Chapter 2 examines how partnerships were developed with and in OAs.

- Chapter 3 looks at OAs' delivery plans and priority setting.

- Chapter 4 explores the journey from planning to implementation.

- Chapter 5 investigates how OAs were measuring and sustaining success.

- Chapter 6 presents conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 2   Developing partnerships with and in the OAs

Summary of key findings

Each OA had established a partnership board, led by DfE with local stakeholder input, to plan, commission and oversee change locally. Partnership boards were led by highly-valued independent chairs and supported by DfE local delivery teams, programme managers and subgroups which comprised local stakeholders and tended to be linked to delivery plan priority areas. Partnership boards had strategic oversight of the programme locally and, on the whole, were functioning well.

Generally, local stakeholder representation on the partnership board and subgroups included the early years, schools and colleges, universities, businesses, the skills sector, the voluntary sector and LAs and, in some cases, others (e.g. health colleagues).

Successes of the partnership model included: the DfE delivery teams' investment in building local relationships to understand the area and get to know stakeholders and their link between central DfE and local areas; the role of the chair in providing strong leadership, inclusivity and focus on children's outcomes; cross-sector collaboration, cohesion and a shared common purpose; highly-committed individuals who were determined to bring about change; and the progress the OAs had made to date against their delivery plans.
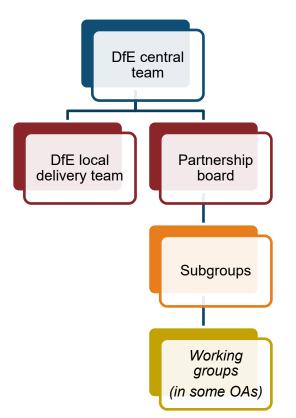
Challenges associated with the partnership model included ensuring a broad range of sectors and stakeholders within sectors (including the community) were engaged in and contributing to the programme; logistical pressures for partnership board members (such as the time commitment required to be involved in the programme); and the need for clarity about the extent to which the programme was locally-led or driven by DfE. A related challenge was the extent to which central DfE fully understood the needs of local areas in order to bring about change to social mobility.

Areas of development for the programme, or similar programmes in the future, include ensuring broad and representative stakeholder engagement, input and influence; providing administrative resource to support the partnership board and subgroups to progress and giving clarity about who is involved in the programme and why.

Partnership working was a fundamental element of the programme involving OA stakeholders working together, sometimes for the first time, supported by DfE local delivery teams. This section discusses OA partnership boards, how OA partnership board members engaged with wider stakeholders locally and how OAs were supported by DfE.

Establishing partnership boards

In each OA, a partnership board was appointed to work with the DfE to plan, commission and oversee change within the area. While partnership boards were not accountable bodies, in collaboration with the DfE, they had strategic oversight of the programme within their area. Partnership boards tended to be supported by subgroups that were often aligned to key priority areas in each OA's delivery plan (see Chapter 4 for further information about delivery plans and priorities). Figure 3 summarises the governance structure within OAs.

Figure 3: OA governance structure

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                    DfE central
                       team
                         |
          +--------------+--------------+
          |                             |
      DfE local                   Partnership
    delivery team                    board
                                        |
                                    Subgroups
                                        |
                                  Working
                                   groups
                                (in some OAs)
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Each partnership board was led by one or, in the case of Stoke-on-Trent, two independent chairs, and comprised a range of leaders from the key sectors involved in the programme. Stoke-on-Trent had two chairs to provide a balance between local educationalists and employers. Partnership boards met regularly (e.g. monthly or bi-monthly) to drive forward OA programme developments and work with DfE and others to align national and local programmes.

DfE local delivery teams led the initial formation of the partnership boards with input from local stakeholders, usually through meetings with key individuals. Generally, this process had been successful although time consuming. A small number of local stakeholders questioned why some individuals had been invited to join the board as opposed to someone else (e.g. 'headteacher X' rather than 'headteacher Y'). This created a mild sense of mistrust among some stakeholders about DfE's motivations behind the

appointments and the programme overall. Some of these concerns may have been related to press coverage at the time about academisation and the expansion of grammar schools. That said, interviewees were pleased to be involved and enthusiastic about helping to drive forward change locally (see section below: Motivations for getting involved in the programme).

Partnership board composition

Partnership boards comprised between eight and 15 representatives - generally considered about the right size by our interviewees. Membership, across most OAs, had been consistent to date and comprised a range of stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors[3], generally including:

- early years leaders or experts

- headteachers or principals from primary and secondary schools (including maintained and academies) and/or chief executives of multi-academy trusts

- college principals

- local university leaders (e.g. a Vice Chancellor, Head of Faculty)

- both large and small businesses

- LEP leaders

- the LA (e.g. Directors of Children's Services or LA education leaders)

- local voluntary sector leaders

- a senior leader from the CEC.

Some partnership boards also included health care professionals or staff from a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). Some partnership board members in the second group of OAs came from organisations that did not feature in the first group of OAs. These included, for example, a trade union and a local football club. These appointments appeared to reflect the opportunities or challenges facing local areas. For example, in Hastings there is a focus on mental health so a member of the local Clinical Commissioning Groups joined the partnership board. Within Stoke-on-Trent, the local football club is active in the community and also involved in the OA programme. The RSC or a representative from their office attended meetings in many OAs, along with other central DfE staff.

Local stakeholders valued the presence and input of senior DfE officials at partnership board meetings. They felt it demonstrated DfE's commitment to the programme. That said, in the early stages of implementation, some stakeholders felt that there could have been better coordination of Department's view and focus on some issues; stakeholders

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[3] OA delivery plans list the members involved in their partnership board for that area.

found that they would hear one thing from officials in an OA meeting but a different view from other DfE officials involved in other areas of the Department's work.

Reportedly, stakeholders had been involved in the programme in multiple ways, including:

- attending partnership board and/or subgroup meetings (most partnership board members also sat on one or more subgroups);

- interrogating data on the local area provided by DfE, the LA and other local providers or organisations;

- auditing existing provision to avoid future duplication;

- co-producing OA-specific delivery plans;

- engaging with a wider group of local stakeholders within their sector;

- commissioning OA-funded projects and programmes (from late 2017/early 2018); and

- starting to monitor OA-commissioned activities through partnership board and subgroup meetings.

Partnership boards had built on existing governance arrangements for pre-established groups where appropriate, however, interviewees were clear that the OA partnership board was a new and different entity. Stakeholders felt it was logical to build on existing structures and knowledge while recognising that the OA board had a different remit.

Partnership board chairs

The DfE delivery teams selected and appointed partnership board chairs, most of which were based in the locality. Some chairs considered themselves to be relative newcomers to an area and, as such, benefitted the OA by providing an external and objective view of the OA's challenges and possible solutions. Partnership board chairs tended to be high-profile individuals who came from a range of organisations. These included leaders from universities (most were from local universities but not all), large or small local businesses, a national government advisor and local/national education leaders/experts. Chairs tended to be well respected both locally and nationally.

The role of chair was consistently cited as a success of the programme with many interviewees commenting on their expert leadership of the programme locally. Individuals across most OAs described their chair as inclusive referring to them as someone who listened, ensured everyone's voice was heard, kept the meetings focused on the OA's desired outcomes to improve outcomes for local children. One interviewee explained the importance of the chair:

'the chair has dramatically impacted the way the partnership board is operating….he has got that level of respect and expertise that has changed the dynamic'.

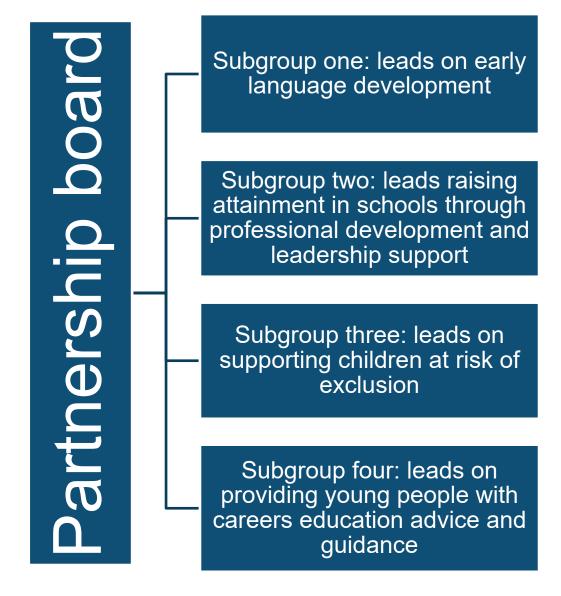# Motivations for getting involved in the programme

Interviewees expressed a range of drivers for getting involved in the programme. Some had been previously involved in a local initiative or stakeholder board (e.g. local headteacher group) that was trying to improve educational outcomes. This enabled the OA to build on existing expertise and knowledge from, for example, the Scarborough Pledge in North Yorkshire Coast, Better Start in Blackpool or existing school improvement groups. Similarly, some partnership board interviewees from universities aimed to have more practical involvement in supporting OA priorities, such as through teacher training and/or evaluation, linked to the aims of their university.

Other partnership board members became involved through a personal and/or professional interest in improving social mobility and children's outcomes (this was usually associated with their day job). For others, their motivations for getting involved also related to bringing together people from within education and across broader sectors to work collaboratively and providing an independent, non-educationalist or external view to the OA.

Partnership board subgroups

Partnership boards tended to be supported by a number of subgroups. Where they were in place, generally, subgroups were linked with a priority area in the delivery plan and were tasked with driving forward the targets set out in the plans. For some priority areas, particularly those focused on schools, one or more subgroups had been developed and was linked to the different phases of education (e.g. a primary-phase subgroup). Within one OA, in addition to the subgroups they established 'working groups' that sat under the subgroups and worked across the priority areas. The subgroups and working groups involved some partnership board members as well as wider stakeholders to support the subgroups on specific topics, such as school improvement. An example of OA partnership board and subgroup arrangements is presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Example of partnership board and subgroup arrangements in one OA

Partnership board

Subgroup one: leads on early language development

Subgroup two: leads raising attainment in schools through professional development and leadership support

Subgroup three: leads on supporting children at risk of exclusion

Subgroup four: leads on providing young people with careers education advice and guidance

The role, developmental stage and apparent value and effectiveness of the subgroup model varied between OAs. By spring 2018, for instance, the position of subgroups across the first six OAs was quite different thus reflecting the local needs of the OAs. For example, in one OA, board members reported that the subgroups were working well, had a settled membership, and that the partnership board was both 'picking up on work of the four subgroups' on a monthly basis as well as holding the subgroups to account. Conversely, in another OA, subgroups were currently being established and were developing a clearer alignment with the partnership board.

Between these positions, in other OAs, the role of the subgroups was still developing and there were divergent views about recent progress. Interviewees were keen to note that they felt progress was being made but it had, at times, been a challenging and time-consuming journey. In another OA, the local DfE delivery team had steered the partnership board away from subgroups in favour of smaller bilateral meetings between the delivery team and key stakeholders.

In Focus: subgroups

In one OA, the introduction of the OA programme provided an opportunity for local stakeholders and leaders to review, refresh and reinvigorate existing structures and enhance stakeholder engagement in these. Previous structures were described as a 'scatter-gun approach' with the OA programme creating a more powerful approach which was underpinned by strategy, clear structures, data/evidence and milestones. The OA had brought a new local emphasis which focused on all local children and this helped to break down barriers between different types of educational settings. Sharing a common purpose to improve outcomes, regardless of which setting a child attends, was fundamental to making the structures work.

Subgroups tended to be chaired or co-chaired by a representative from the partnership board to ensure alignment throughout the OA governance structures. Within the schools-focused subgroups, each leader had been allocated a small number of schools with whom they were expected to share OA developments and seek feedback. Furthermore, these groups were supported by additional resource (e.g. the programme manager or facilitator). This extra resource had been essential in creating a coherent structure and momentum across the OA.

For the subgroup that had been more recently established, the partnership board chair and programme manager, supported by the DfE delivery team, spent time identifying stakeholders and an external chair. This initial investment in time clarified the context of the programme, its issues and ambitions. Each subgroup had a common set of terms of reference which helped to provide clarity.

One of the first tasks for the subgroups was to map existing provision. Members needed to understand what was available but also had a responsibility to provide clear information and guidance to schools. In addition to the subgroups, the OA established cross-cutting working groups to facilitate the OA's work. These included groups on special educational needs and school improvement.

There was evidence of synergy starting to develop between subgroups in some OAs, although this did not appear to be universal and several stakeholders felt more could be done to promote cross-subgroup working. One OA was making arrangements for greater cross-group working and information sharing which stakeholders, across OAs, said they would appreciate.

Our analysis identified a number of factors that interviewees valued about the subgroup model. These included:

- Subgroups taking forward the priority areas identified by the partnership board; generally, the partnership board was expected to have strategic oversight and the subgroups led the operational developments.

- Clear lines of communication between the partnership board and subgroups; this included having partnership board members sitting on each of the working groups so information could be shared both ways.

- The partnership board holding subgroups to account by providing challenge and scrutiny of proposed ideas and bids; interviewees felt that partnership boards should provide this level of rigour (this was identified by interviewees in OAs that did provide this but also by interviewees who felt more was needed from their board).

- Adequate administrative resource to support the partnership board *and* subgroups; where additional resource had been put in place to support the subgroups, this was perceived to be one of the factors that helped facilitate progress over other groups.

In focus: Setting up new structures

In one OA, linked to the new partnership board and four new 'subgroups' was the development of a new governance structure comprising a wider stakeholder group that connected with existing networks. This facilitated alignment with the OA programme priorities and cross-sector collaboration locally.

Broadly, the subgroups put forward proposals which the partnership board reviewed and either recommended modifications or gave approval for subsequent procurement by the subgroup. The subgroups each connected with other relevant partnerships to both cascade information about the OA activities and to gather input into OA developments from a broader group of organisations. The data shows that this was often facilitated by members of the partnership board or subgroups having dual membership with other groups such as regional networks of headteachers, Teaching Schools and teacher training providers, the Chamber of Commerce and a local economic development partnership. Also of benefit was having representatives with knowledge of national programmes, such as TLIF and SSIF, and networks of expertise that OAs could draw on, such as the CEC and the LEP. These insights informed the development of the OA activities; ensured duplication was avoided, that learning was shared and opportunities were maximised across the locality.

The evidence shows that although further work was needed to enhance stakeholders' sense of involvement and co-production of the programme, the involvement of relevant, trusted and credible local school and business leaders, balanced with some external experts who provided a degree of independence and influx of new ideas, was seen as a positive local development.

Across the OAs, the early years and school-focused subgroups had made more progress (in terms of commissioning interventions or programmes) compared to other subgroups, such as those focusing on skills, employment and cultural priorities. Some of the subgroups working on schools-focused priorities had built on existing groups and/or

relationships between headteachers/schools. These subgroups started from a more advanced position than subgroups looking at relatively new areas of collaboration, which tended to convene a new network of stakeholders and which seemed to take longer to become established.

In Focus: Building on existing expertise

One OA has drawn together representatives from different local authority departments, the DfE and external agencies to streamline collaborative ways of working across two of their delivery plan priorities. These priorities were connected with the development of young people's work-related skills and transitions to employment. Contributors to this new forum had specialist expertise on areas such as careers guidance, young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), the curriculum and OA-specific knowledge.

The evidence shows that stakeholders valued being able to draw together their collective expertise and learning about ongoing initiatives; they also reported to benefit from having open and frank discussions and focusing on the geographical context of the OA. Additionally, having all interested parties in one forum enabled consideration of existing relationships in the wider area, the local context and alleviated potential and/or historical tensions.

Functionality of partnership boards

By spring 2018, interviewees reported that their partnership boards were functioning well, providing focus and oversight in moving towards implementation and challenging proposals when they were brought to the table. One interviewee described the quality of the board discussions: '…a good mature peer-challenge-based type of debate where everybody leaves thinking that we've actually achieved something here'.

As the DfE and local stakeholders became clearer about the programme and its national and local aims, many interviewees across most OAs noted the partnership board approach had become more focused, effective and mature. One interviewee observed: 'now we have a good understanding of how things should be and where we're trying to get to'.

As the programme, its systems and structures started to embed, other interviewees indicated that the partnership board:

- had more effective chairing and that boards were less driven by DfE input
- were being more strategic in their approach by, for example, focusing on the outcomes for all local children and young people rather than some stakeholders being more invested in how the programme could benefit their own sector or service-users
- concentrated on a clear plan to turn priorities into actions

- used stricter accountability and monitoring systems (this emerged as programmes and interventions started to be commissioned)

- focused on sustainable, evidence-based and value-for-money interventions.

Wider stakeholder engagement in the OA

Local stakeholder engagement underpinned the ethos and implementation of the OA programme. Stakeholders came from several sectors including early years, school and college leaders, universities, businesses, health, the voluntary and community sector and LAs. It is important to note that the OA programme sought to engage professionals from both the education sphere and wider and so not all stakeholders had a background in or experience of working with the education sector or with DfE. This was thought to provide a wider perspective and offer external views to local issues. Figure 5 below shows the stakeholders involved across the OAs.

Figure 5 Involvement of stakeholders in OAs, by sector

Partnership board members across all OAs believed wider stakeholder engagement was essential; they were committed to involve service providers both during the planning stage and after the delivery plans had been published. Where this had taken place, it had helped the partnership board to identify suitable priorities and routes for delivery as well as gain a wider perspective. One stakeholder commented:

> 'The fact it [the OA programme] *has galvanised a community of interested parties within* [OA] *has been a highly valuable thing. All different interested parties - headteachers, local authority, the university, voluntary agencies and so on - getting them around a table regularly and frequently has been of huge value because they now all talk to each other; so that orchestration is very important.'*

Across the OAs, the level of engagement from different sectors or stakeholder groups varied. Partnership board members sought to improve engagement across all groups, particularly with a broader range of schools, employers, the voluntary sector, young people, parents, and other community groups. As the programme developed, interviewees reported that partnership boards had strengthened these relations across these sectors, although many were aware that more work was needed to raise the profile of the OA programme within these sectors and among the local community.

Generally, interviewees felt the engagement of the LA in the programme had improved as the programme started to become embedded locally. In some OAs, there had been some initial tensions between the DfE delivery teams and the LA as a result of lack of clarity about some issues (such as OA funding arrangements) or due to historical tensions or disagreements. In the main, these issues were resolved and, overall, LAs appeared to be well engaged and supportive of the OA programme as it developed.

It was a similar situation for schools. While some schools had been well engaged in the programme from the start, in some OAs more work was needed to involve a cross-section of local schools particularly those from a specific phase or some schools most in need of additional support and that probably also had less capacity for change.

Stakeholders across all OAs were highly committed to engaging with families and the community and a small number of OAs had made progress in this area. Many stakeholders felt more needed to be done to promote the programme to residents and to capture the voice and input of the local community, families, children and young people into OA developments. Interviewees considered on-going communication to be important in enabling the partnership board to see if it was bringing about change locally (See Chapter 5).

Working with the DfE delivery teams

During the early phases of the programme, the DfE local delivery teams focused on engaging with local stakeholders across early years, schools, colleges, universities,

businesses, the voluntary and community sector and LAs in order to better understand the challenges facing the OAs. This process also helped DfE delivery teams to identify individuals across these sectors to invite to the OA partnership board.

OA programme managers also spent a significant amount of time getting to know local people and understanding the local context. This was vitally important in gaining local credibility amongst stakeholders and developing an in-depth understanding of the local area and its needs. Based on the evidence collected, we believe this time was well spent as many interviewees described the programme manager role as one of the main successes of the programme to date. One interviewee observed:

> *When I read the delivery plan for the first time I thought 'that is* [OA name]*'. They* [the head of delivery and programme manager] *listen to people locally. The way they looked at the data etc. was good and then they steered well…. they have the wisdom to reflect and the determination to make it work for local people. They have a genuine desire to make it work – got the right people – they listen. They need to have the passion and wisdom to listen and make the decision when to say ok now we've got to drive this forward.*

As the programme developed, the programme manager role also continued to grow. Programme managers provided a 'facilitating role' between the DfE delivery teams and local organisations and helped to raise the profile of the OA programme among local stakeholders and provided practical support and resource locally. This included setting up partnership board and subgroup meetings, attending meetings, driving forward, setting up and starting to monitor progress against delivery plan developments and providing local support and challenge. The DfE local delivery teams also had a role in supporting these activities and providing a link between central DfE and OAs. Stakeholders reported that DfE delivery teams were starting to share learning between OAs (e.g. the three OAs in the eastern region planned to get together for a joint away day).

Relationships with the DfE teams

Overall, interviewees felt that DfE had succeeded in engaging with local stakeholders, which was starting to lead to effective implementation of the programme. Interviewees felt the DfE team were supportive, that they listened, were transparent, enthusiastic, committed, engaged and reflective. They were responsive to local concerns while also making the Department's positon clear.

Stakeholders valued the 'healthy' challenge DfE delivery teams provided locally, in particular the partnership board. One interviewee explained: 'if there is something that is put forward that they do not think will work, they are not afraid to challenge it back.' OA stakeholders also noted the skill of delivery teams in not getting embroiled in local tensions that had historically existed within some OAs. More broadly, DfE officials and

OA stakeholders recognised that areas of disagreement were inevitable and said that these had mostly been resolved quickly.

Stakeholders generally agreed that communication with DfE was positive. In the early stages of the programme, stakeholders valued having regular meetings with delivery teams and having access to DfE data about areas of concern. While there was overwhelming positivity about the DfE local delivery team officials, a small number of interviewees in a small number of OAs felt that, centrally, DfE needed a better understanding of the local area and the extent to which the OA programme could influence social mobility locally (e.g. due to transport issues in both rural and urban areas). This comment was made by individuals from different sectors and was noted more strongly in the earlier rounds of the interviews, which may suggest that some interviewees were less concerned about this issue as the programme progressed.

Within OAs where communication between stakeholders had required improvement due to a lack of engagement or misunderstanding about the programme, away days or stakeholder meetings had helped to improve the situation. This enabled stakeholders to get to know one another and create a shared common understanding about the programme and its aims.

Stakeholders also recognised that the programme's processes and approaches were emerging in light of experiences on the ground in each area. As such, interviewees felt that some areas of the programme required refinement or more clarity. On the whole, these issues appeared to be relatively minor and were easily resolved at later stages (e.g. related to clarification about timescales and milestones or about the different roles and responsibilities of the DfE delivery team members). Other requests for clarification related to policy-level developments, such as how national programmes would be made available to OAs and what the funding arrangements would be (some local misconceptions were reported initially).

There was a strong sense among stakeholders that a clear definition of social mobility was needed so there was clarity about the programme and its aims; furthermore, it may help to engage local stakeholders and provide clarity around monitoring and evaluation principles. As the programme developed, it became clear that the programme was focused on improving social mobility through an education lens. While many understood why this was the case, some interviewees had an on-going sense of frustration that the focus of the programme should be broader than just education. Many of the issues facing the OAs were inter-generational or 'ingrained' and as such needed a broader solution. Stakeholder frustration continued for a small number of interviewees during our latest round of interviews.

Achievements of the partnership model

Alongside, the value of the partnership boards and DfE input, stakeholders were also pleased with the continuous progress they had made and the momentum and willingness for further progress. For example, one interviewee explained: 'we have a clear focus for achieving educational impact. A clear direction of travel has been identified…it is clear how we move forward strategies to reach targets.' Another interviewee explained why they were pleased with progress made:

> 'I think progress has been really pleasing actually. Over the last couple of months we've been presenting a dashboard to the Partnership Board so that they can see how we are delivering against our first year targets. So there are some greens on there and some ambers and I think there's only a couple of reds where there are areas that we're worried about. But there's stuff happening. So I think compared to the task as it appeared when the delivery plan came out which was really daunting, actually progress has been really good. In September and October we worried about school engagement, but now school engagement is really good as well.'

Other prevailing achievements of the partnership board, as identified by stakeholders across many OAs was that, on the whole, the board had:

- developed a shared, cross-sector awareness and understanding that social mobility was a local issue and that there was passion and a common sense of purpose to tackle it. For example, one interviewee echoed the views of others when they explained:

  'there was significant awareness lacking of how poor social mobility is in [OA name] and I think there is that level of understanding now….there was almost disbelief at first….this has been a real wake-up call and with that has come action'.

- convened the right people around the table who were working collaboratively and cohesively together through open and honest dialogue (in one OA, an away day for the partnership board, convened by their chair, was considered to have significantly helped develop a unified board)

- identified and agreed the key priorities outlined in delivery plans

- identified, progressed and funded quality projects and interventions that aligned with delivery plan priorities[4].

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[4] When we interviewed stakeholders in the second group of OAs, they were not yet in a position to have commissioned projects but we are aware from DfE officials that during early 2018, delivery had started across all 12 OAs.

Potential challenges and considerations for future roll out

While the partnership model underpinning the OA programme was widely regarded as being a success, nonetheless, several specific challenges were highlighted by interviewees.

Championing local influence

Interviewees from across OAs consistently suggested enhancing local engagement, input and influence over the programme. They wanted the OA programme to better engage with specific sectors, most often referring to the community, parents/carers and young people but also with colleagues from health, early years, social care, employers, housing, the voluntary sector and transport. Within the school sector, some interviewees felt all schools in the OAs should have a greater contribution, as should school governors. If governors were involved, some stakeholders argued, this could help to build a sustainable model and could result in OA programmes being written into school development plans.

Particularly early in the programme, several stakeholders observed that sometimes the partnership board felt too DfE-led and not driven enough by a representative selection of stakeholders, particularly those from local schools. A recent example arose when one interviewee noted that there was a lot of work taking place outside of the board particularly between the programme manager, the DfE delivery team and, often, the LA. Whilst an interviewee observed that this was not necessarily a bad thing, the comment was made that '…there are times when I feel like it's not the participants and the board members who shape the projects'. A typical suggestion was for:

> *'A way of making sure that the stakeholders, whether that's schools,* [early years] *settings, employers could have a bigger steer on what's coming forward and being proposed…some mechanism by which they could influence what's coming forward. I suppose that would counterbalance some of this centralised input.'*

Local stakeholders wanted to ensure the programme would start to resolve local issues around social mobility and wanted to ensure the priorities reflected local needs. A small number of interviewees also gave examples of local stakeholders suggesting the OA needs one thing and yet, while the DfE delivery teams listen to this, the OA was then told they needed to implement something else.

Engagement beyond the education sector

Stakeholders considered that more needed to be done to engage local businesses and the voluntary sector in the programme as well. Some observed that the board was too 'school-focused' and needed to involve more businesses to improve the balance. Where a big business had recently joined the board in one OA, for instance, this was considered an immediate and significant improvement. While some had been heavily involved from

the outset, there was also scope for greater voluntary sector input as well. It is likely greater engagement will emerge as the programme develops further and priorities requiring employer and VCS input are initiated.

Strategic and operational focus

While interviewees in some OAs observed that their partnership boards were developing their strategic direction, in a couple of OAs interviewees felt that the board was still too operational in its approach. For example, one interviewee observed that the partnership board was 'not yet setting the agenda' for itself. Additionally, other interviewees felt there was scope for partnership boards to develop their strategic approach further and become more focussed in decision making.

Managing logistical pressures

Interviewees identified that being a partnership board member is a time-consuming role. Local stakeholders commented on the volume and scale of work involved, such as frequency of meetings (some OAs had moved from monthly meetings to bi-monthly meetings in order to reduce time commitment, it is too early to report on the effectiveness of these different approaches). Another practical, yet important issue for local stakeholders, related to receiving paperwork with appropriate detail and in sufficient time to review in advance of meetings. Furthermore, stakeholders felt their engagement was currently sustainable for most members but many were concerned about the on-going capacity of board members, on top of their day jobs, to ensure the programme leaves a lasting legacy.

In addition to the challenges noted above, stakeholders referred to the practical implications of implementing a programme while it was being defined and developed. Particularly in the early stages of the programme, this led to many requests for greater clarification about the programme at the national and local level. Furthermore, the practicalities of having to deal with a busy school improvement landscape with a number of different programmes running concurrently within OAs caused concern and challenges locally. Stakeholders felt there could have been greater alignment with, and clarity between, the different programmes available to OAs.

Considerations for future roll out

Stakeholders made a small number of recommendations about the partnership model which should be considered for future roll out of the OA or similar place-based programmes. These related to:

- Ensuring local stakeholder engagement encompasses a range of sectors and different stakeholder groups within specific sectors (e.g. different types of schools and those from different phases, or a range of local employers). In addition, stakeholders felt more could be done to raise the profile of the OA programme

within the local community, children, young people and families and seek their input into developments. OAs had plans in place to broaden their current levels of stakeholder engagement.

- Providing administrative support to partnership boards *and* subgroups, the data show that this helped to facilitate faster progress as well as providing much needed administrative support to groups' members.

- Appointing a committed, respected and independent chair to provide strong leadership, a focus on outcomes and inclusivity of all partnership board members.

- Giving transparency about who was invited to join the partnership board and why.

Chapter 3   Delivery Plans and priority setting

Summary of key findings

No individual delivery plan had more than four priorities and, across the 12 delivery plans, a total of 45 priorities spanned the early years, primary and secondary education, post-16. Typical examples included improving early language development, outcomes at key stage 4 and providing young people with information and support to transition between education and employment. Some OAs also published additional themes, such as promoting essential life skills or improving the quality of teaching.

The majority of OA stakeholders felt involved in deciding their OA's delivery plan priorities. There was a strong view among partnership board members across all OAs that the delivery plans addressed some of the right priorities and focus for their areas and had achieved the right balance of delivering new provision and developing existing capacity.

Evidence points to a view among interviewees that the DfE drove the delivery plan development process and suggests that the DfE and the OA could be bolder and more innovative with their programmes and selection of interventions. Additionally, although stakeholders viewed national and local data and intelligence as fundamental to understanding and diagnosing needs and priorities within OAs, the evidence suggests a need for an appropriate balance between having sufficient, but not overwhelming data.

The evidence also indicates a concern that delivery plans contain imprecise or unachievable priorities due to the speed with which they were finalised. Greater clarity and overt association with local targets would go some way to alleviating unease.

Once established, the partnership boards, heavily supported by local DfE delivery teams, identified their OA's needs and developed priorities which were published in each OA's delivery plan. In this section we outline the process of developing the delivery plans, how OAs established priorities and suggest ways to improve the process.

In focus: OA delivery plans and priorities

Delivery plans: Each OA has a published plan which provides a message from the Secretary of State and the Chair of the partnership board. It outlines the vision for the OA and provides information about what has been achieved to date (prior to the OA programme) and where, based on the data, the OA faces particular difficulties. Details of the partnership board members are also provided. Each plan specifies up to four priority areas and, in some OAs, overarching themes are also identified (e.g. good attendance from early years to further education). Delivery plans were published one year after the initial announcement for each group of OAs.

Priorities: Each partnership board identified a small number of priorities which would be the focus of OA and wider funding. For each priority, the plan explains why it is a particular concern within the OA and what the OA will do to create change. The plans specify OA activity for 2017/18 (first group of OAs) and for 2018 (second group of OAs). An example of a priority is ensuring all children are school ready by the age of five. Plans also detail OA's targets for 2020/21 (e.g. rates of fixed-term and permanent exclusions in secondary schools will be halved).

GOV.UK publishes the [delivery plans for the 12 Opportunity Areas and the methodology used to select them](#).

Developing a delivery plan

Prior to the publication of the delivery plans, OA stakeholders explored a wide range of data (at the OA, LA and ward level) to identify priorities and develop a delivery plan. Data included statistics from the SMI, DfE and local organisations and often the LA (e.g. early years and nursery provision data, attainment and attendance data, destinations data, health data, workforce data). In addition, interviewees and wider stakeholders provided softer data and intelligence, through meetings and events, to inform problem diagnosis situated within wider contextual issues and the challenges facing OAs locally.

This consultation enabled them to draw on the knowledge of existing partnerships and networks, such as school improvement boards, and groups of primary and secondary schools. It was an important step in ensuring that the OAs built on existing strengths and did not duplicate provision that was already in place. In some cases, the partnership board commissioned further data collection and analysis to reaffirm the OA's initial diagnosis of need and also to help to achieve synergy between its work and other existing programmes and strategies. Building on the OA programme's commitment to using data and evidence, the delivery plans assured that existing evidence of impact or promising practice was in place before selecting an intervention or programme to fund.

Figure 6: Process of developing the delivery plans

| Step 1: analysed data, evidence and intelligence; engaged stakeholders | Step 2: problem diagnosis; considered wider contextual issues and specific OA challenges; developed long list of priorities | Step 3: refined the list and identified the final priorities | Step 4: finalised the delivery plans and priorities and started to identify evidence-informed interventions |

Throughout the evaluation, many stakeholders talked positively about how OAs were driven by data and that the quality of the data provided had been good. For others, however, the amount of data was overwhelming. Overall, the stakeholders were able to use the data to develop the priorities based on evidence but felt they would have benefited from more time to reflect and analyse. In our view, this indicates that there is a balance to be achieved by DfE in providing sufficient data to aid decision-making but not too much as to overwhelm local stakeholders.

Some interviewees felt the partnership board could have been provided with more timely data. Stakeholders felt that having access to recent and the most up-to-date data would have been more useful in being able to start to address local needs based on current evidence. A small number of interviewees explained that the data was two or three years old. It may have been that stakeholders had access to the most recent published data as there is often a time-lag between data being collected and made available publically. Small numbers of interviewees also mentioned that certain data could not be taken outside of meetings. Interviewees felt that enabling stakeholders to securely access data between meetings for further interrogation would have helped with planning and providing further scrutiny through the partnership board meetings.

During spring 2017, some interviewees commented that it was difficult to access data (especially robust data) on non-school based outcomes. At this time, some DfE officials and OA stakeholders felt further data and intelligence were needed in the next phase of development (during spring/summer 2017), which they planned to gather through meetings with wider stakeholders. Furthermore, they hoped to further engage the community and/or capture the young person's voice. A small number of interviewees talked about the need to interrogate the current data more to better understand the narrative behind the barriers or drivers of social mobility locally. For example one interviewee explained: 'There may be some tension because this is seen as a DfE

initiative but to address these issues we need to look more broadly at a much wider set of data.'

Some interviewees explained that this process of data analysis had identified or heightened their own awareness of local challenges, such as high teacher turnover or pockets of geographical disadvantage in addition to the recognised most deprived areas within an OA.

In focus: How data analysis has facilitated reaching more deprived children

One OA was addressing a priority to ensure all children are school-ready by the age of five having identified that a large number of children were entering the system below the expectations for their age.

They interrogated their data to gain a better understanding of the pattern of performance in each locality in order to refine its analysis of LA-wide issues. This identified areas within the OA where the percentage of children achieving a good level of development (GLD) in the early years foundation stage profile was low. It also highlighted parts of the OA where there were noticeable differences in the performance of specific groups of pupils (such as the level achieved by boys compared with girls). This data analysis identified the need to implement interventions in localities where they had not worked before.

The OA supported the delivery of the National Children's Bureau's 'Making it Real' project which supported parents and carers to help their children to develop literacy skills. OA funding added value by 'scaling-up' the work and extending it to additional localities. Some of the funding was used to release practitioners in schools to engage parents through initial engagement activities and a programme of regular home visits and half-day events. Participating families were given a selection of books (and a box to keep them) and were involved in activities such as visiting a local library, taking part in a book hunt, and highlighting opportunities to use environmental print (e.g. road-signs, numbers on doors, shop fronts etc.) to help their children's literacy development.

Establishing priorities

During 2017, interviewees reported that OAs had adopted one of two approaches to delivery plan development. The approach appeared to have been determined by the local DfE delivery teams. Either DfE officials took the lead in writing the plan, which was then shared with the partnership board and/or stakeholders for review and comment. Or, key individuals or subgroups had been tasked with developing their specific area of the plan which was then shared with the partnership board and DfE officials for ratification before submission to the Department for final approval. Where elements of delivery plans had

been written locally, interviewees requested having access to templates in advance in future.

Interviewees did not appear to be aware that OAs had adopted different pathways for developing their plans. On the strength of the evidence gathered, we believe that our data does not suggest one approach was more successful than the other. This will need to be investigated further in the impact evaluation. It is worth noting that some stakeholders involved in either approach made comments about the programme feeling that it was led by DfE.

There was a strong view among partnership board members across all OAs that the delivery plans addressed the right priorities and focus for their areas, however some acknowledged that other priorities could have also been chosen. In some OAs, they had identified priorities very early in the development of the plans but in others there had been more prolonged discussions to achieve an agreed plan. Delivery teams and local stakeholders referred to the OA programme as bringing a national agenda into a localised context.

Some partnership board members believed that certain partnership board members had been more involved than others in the work of defining their OA's priorities. This was mainly because they had been involved when the plans were being developed whereas others had joined the partnership board after the work of identifying priorities had started. Across the OAs, partnership board members perceived that it was beneficial to have DfE delivery teams working alongside local stakeholders. This had been an essential ingredient in the process of getting a broader overview of their OA's needs as one interviewee explained: 'Very simply, just bringing everybody together, with strong partnership board and structures underneath, that has been very powerful.'

Some partnership board members across the OAs felt that the initial process of developing the plans had been 'top-down', possibly because of the timescales to which they were working.

Summary of delivery plans' priorities

DfE intended that no individual OA identified too many priorities so that action and activities could be targeted, achievable and sustainable. As such, delivery plans had more than four priorities each; however, some OAs also published additional overarching (or enabling or underpinning) themes, such as mental health, on which they would focus some OA resource.

Across the 12 delivery plans, a total of 45 priorities spanned the early years, primary and secondary education, post-16. Over half of these priorities focused on improving pupils' academic outcomes at primary and secondary school with the remainder focusing on

early years or post-16 provision. A larger number of priorities in the second group of OAs' delivery plans were cross-phase, compared to the first group's plans.

More specifically, delivery plan priorities across the first six OAs included:

- five priorities in the early years

- 11 priorities in schools

- five priorities in post-16 and adulthood.

In addition, two OAs identified six further overarching themes.

Across the second six of OAs, priorities included:

- four priorities across early years and primary phases

- six priorities across early years, primary and secondary phases

- one priority that focuses solely on secondary education

- four priorities in post-16

- two priorities that span secondary and post-16 phases

- seven priorities across all phases of education

- one priority on improving mental health.

Of the overarching themes across the second six OAs, these generally covered all education phases and focused on, for example, parental engagement, improving the quality of the workforce, developing collaboration across the OA and improving children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

The need to ensure that the delivery plans achieved synergy with other local and national initiatives and programmes was emphasised by interviewees across the OAs. They explicitly linked relevant priorities to other national programmes available within OAs, such as TLIF or SSIF. This demonstrated that partnership boards were trying to join up OA and wider school improvement activities. At the local level, for example, in some OAs, interviewees described the way that priorities for school improvement outlined in the delivery plan linked well with existing school improvement priorities. Similarly, it was noted that OA plans for provision in the early years dovetailed with existing programmes (e.g. Make it Real). This reflected the way the OAs had linked with existing strategy groups and had spent time developing a full understanding of existing needs and work. The partnership board members were seen to have confirmed that the focus of existing strategies was correct while also bringing added value to the work by providing a fresh perspective and additional resources.

In focus: Building on existing evidence

One OA had expanded their use of Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being scales (SSTEW) to improve early years pedagogy by strengthening self- and peer-review and enhancing staff development plans. The aim was that this would improve the quality of early years education.

The scales had been recently academically researched, developed and evaluated. Through prior funding, some early years practitioners in the region had been trained in the use of the SSTEW scales. The OA funding had enabled the training to be expanded throughout the OA so more early years settings were benefitting from the assessment techniques to develop staff further. Hence this place-based approach was meeting the needs of the local community.

Staff said that they enjoyed working collaboratively and felt that the scales were a 'useful self-assessment process'. Practitioners were also positive about receiving CPD in their own settings and not having to travel to receive it. Overall, interviewees reported that there was buy-in to the SSTEW assessment tool or framework as it had been seen to work in other early years settings and is evidence-based.

Figure 7 below provides typical examples of priorities from across OAs and examples of additional themes present in some OAs. Within the boxes, we have provided one example priority for each phase of education.

Figure 7 Examples of priorities and additional themes across the OAs

Examples of priorities and additional themes

Additional theme
(e.g. children and young people's mental health or building parental engagement in their children's education)

Early years priority	Primary priority	Secondary priority	Post-16 priority
e.g. Increase the number of children achieving a good level development in the early years.	e.g. Improve literacy in primary schools, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.	e.g. Raise aspiration and increase access for young people to a wide range of career choices and post-16 routes.	e.g. Skills for employment and business.

In focus: In-depth illustration of the process of taking an element of an early years priority from idea to practice

The partnership board in one OA commissioned a pilot project to create a network of local experts to raise the profile of the speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and provide support to colleagues, children and families within their own setting. The project, using a cascade model, was part of a wider-phased process, which in the future, will establish a network of trained practitioners. They will provide support within their own setting (e.g. school or nursery) and work with leaders and practitioners in other settings to create locality-and-OA-wide expertise.

The programme's development was led by the early years working group with input from a cross-section of expertise (e.g. a local university, children centres, schools, private and voluntary nurseries, family support organisations and health practitioners). Notably, expertise included an early years LA strategic lead with foresight for expansion beyond the OA.

An initial briefing session was held for leaders and practitioners who could attend without having to commit to the programme. Following this, nine twilight sessions were delivered to practitioners across a targeted group of early years settings and schools.

This project is part of a six-staged process with a clear review processes built in after each stage of delivery. The opportunity for regular feedback was deliberately built into the model so the training could evolve, improve and meet local needs (e.g. participants feeding back to senior leaders for sharing with the working group and programme manager who could then work with the provider/s). Future monitoring will comprise collecting baseline data (on entry at school), EYFS outcomes and subsequent usual in-school assessments until the end of key stage 2.

Many expressed a strong sense of ownership of the delivery plans which they felt reflected a common understanding of the OA's focus, priorities and targets. Generally, they believed that the plans had achieved the right balance of delivering new provision and developing capacity within local systems to respond more effectively to their area's needs.

Successes and challenges associated with the delivery plans and priority setting

Successes

According to the evidence, OA stakeholders explored a wide range of data, and collaboration cross-sector and with wider stakeholders provided contextual softer data

and intelligence to inform the development of the delivery plan. The majority felt involved in deciding their OA's delivery plan priorities and several interviewees across both first and second group OAs cited a success being the publication of the delivery plans. These interviewees felt pleased with a focussed and locally relevant plan.

There was a strong view among partnership board members across all OAs that the delivery plans addressed the right priorities and focus for their areas and had achieved the right balance of delivering new provision and developing existing capacity.

Challenges

Some interviewees felt that the process of deciding priorities had been driven too much by DfE. Additionally, some stakeholders felt they would have benefited from access to more current evidence and more time to reflect and analyse.

A small number of stakeholders across OAs suggested that the DfE and the OA could be bolder. Local stakeholders felt that DfE were, in some instances, playing it safe with some of the programmes and interventions being recommended (it is important to note that suggested interventions were often grounded in evidence) and that the OA programme was not necessarily supporting small-scale innovative projects – this was something that was originally mentioned as being part of the programme but a small number of interviewees felt had not really featured as part of the programme to date.

Finally, some stakeholders were frustrated that a communication strategy, at a national and local level, had not yet been developed, or that there had not been a launch of the programme and delivery plan to the local community and wider stakeholders.

Chapter 4   From planning to implementation

> **Summary of key findings**
>
> OAs stakeholders' commitment, enthusiasm and willingness to bring about change locally was a driving force behind the OA programme. For the first group of OAs the pace of their work had accelerated after the first year as they moved from set-up (e.g. convening partnership boards) to planning (e.g. developing delivery plans) and into a phase of commissioning OA-funded programmes. Although there was some frustration with slower progress being made than expected, the emerging view was that the right systems had been put in place to enable work to be delivered smoothly while at the same time ensuring appropriate accountability arrangements and safeguards were in place.
>
> By autumn 2017, OAs were either ready or nearly ready to start delivering against their plan. By this time, partnership board members felt much clearer about how this work would be taken forward and who was responsible for progressing each aspect of the delivery plans. By spring 2018, OAs had started to deliver against their priorities and most progress was being made with priorities relating to schools. The facilitating factors which contributed to the effective delivery of OAs' delivery plans were using structures already in place (this was particularly the case for school-related priorities); developing productive working relationships with key stakeholders; building capacity for delivery within LAs and a range of providers; and having dedicated LA link officers who could act as trouble-shooters.
>
> The evidence suggests that the OA programme could be enhanced if OAs developed a more strategic and coherent approach to accessing the resources and services of national programmes such as SSIF and TLIF. This would involve scoping which programmes and their components best aligned with and would add value to OAs' priorities and agreeing a coordinated approach across each OA, taking into consideration the available capacity in schools to bid for and deliver *or* use the resources and services. Another recommendation is that any considerations for the future roll out of the OA programme should include developing shared resources such as tools and templates for use in the OA-project bidding process.

The OAs considered that undertaking a thorough diagnostic analysis of social mobility challenges in their areas, setting priorities for action and planning the way ahead were the main building blocks for implementing change. They were keen to move into delivering a portfolio of projects and interventions that would have a practical value and benefit for young people in their area. In this section we present the findings on OAs' commissioning activities, provide examples of OA-funded projects, examine policy titling (the preferential access to national programmes given to OAs), identify the factors facilitating the effective implementation of OAs' delivery plans and explore implementation challenges.

Moving into delivery

For the first group of OAs, stakeholders across all OAs reported a strong feeling that the pace of their work had accelerated after the first year. This was to be expected as the OAs moved from set-up (e.g. convening partnership boards) to planning (e.g. developing delivery plans) and into a phase of commissioning OA-funded programmes. By autumn 2017, after some necessary delays to the programme (which are discussed below), OAs were either ready or nearly ready to start delivering against their plan. By this time, partnership board members felt much clearer about how this work would be taken forward and who was responsible for progressing each aspect of the delivery plans. This clarity emerged as local structures were put in place to support delivery through the partnership board, the subgroups all directed by the priorities outlined in the delivery plans.

Stakeholders shared a strong sense of commitment to ensuring that their partnership board delivered what was intended in the plans. This commitment, enthusiasm and willingness to bring about change locally was one of the driving forces behind the programme to date and, considered by many interviewees, to be one of the successes of the programme at the national and local level. Based on the evidence we have collected, we feel that some of this may be due to the personalities of the individuals involved, but it has also stemmed from a (sometimes emerging) shared commitment to their local area and its children and young people. Partnership board members wanted all local young people to have the same opportunities, not just those who attended specific schools or were from a more advantaged background.

By spring 2018, OAs had started to deliver against their priorities. While progress was being made, most interviewees recognised that some priorities were advancing more quickly than others. In particular, progress had been made with priorities related to schools. This appeared to be because OAs had built on the work of existing structures when taking forward school-related priorities but had tended to create new networks for other priorities, such as post-16 provision, as there were fewer existing structures to build on.

There was a view among partnership board members in most OAs that the balance between planning on the one hand and commissioning or delivering provision on the other was appropriate. They believed that it was right that they had devoted time to plan their work thoroughly in order to achieve success. They also felt that the emphasis on planning had enabled them to develop a clear idea of how the OA would add value to what schools and other providers were already doing in their localities. As was noted by one interviewee:

> *This time last year, when beginning to think about priorities, progress felt slow. That stage of the process was important because it allowed people to express their voice, and coordinating those into a clear programme, which we did over the summer, was important. If we had started with a template it would not have had as*

much purchase with stakeholders in the early stages. It was a necessary, messy early stage but it has made for a stronger programme overall.

Even so, not all partnership board members across the OAs were happy with the pace of the work explaining that too much emphasis had been placed on planning and too little on delivery in the first year. They would have liked to have started the work earlier in order to have made more progress. It may have been possible that delivery could have started sooner, in some areas, were it not for some of wider factors that influenced progress within the OAs (see section below on challenges associated with delivery).

A sense of frustration with the pace of change was a recurring challenge throughout the evaluation and was a reflection of individuals' strong commitment to initiating change and an eagerness to get started. While most OAs had made some progress by spring 2018, several partnership board members in one OA felt that progress had been particularly slow (one interviewee described progress in this OA as 'average at best', while another believed the OA had suffered from 'confused autonomy and no traction'). Partnership board members in this OA referred to issues with providers and procurement processes. Elsewhere, it was felt that progress had been slowed because of the need to get different stakeholders to engage and adapt their strategies in response to the delivery plan. For example, targets around social inclusion had been delayed in one OA because of a decision to dovetail the work with the LA's broader inclusion strategy. This meant that a wider range of issues would be addressed but that it would take longer to do so.

Commissioning activity

As OAs moved into the commissioning phase of the programme during late 2017 and early 2018, local stakeholders described the range of activities they had been involved in to support commissioning. These included:

- recruiting providers and ensuring the right partners were on board

- establishing commissioning frameworks (which some partnership board members felt had been more time-consuming than they had anticipated)

- devising processes to consider proposals for projects that were clearly understood and transparent

- establishing protocols by which decisions taken by subgroups could be taken to partnership boards and then passed to the relevant DfE delivery team, for approval, as required

- ensuring decisions about which projects to fund were taken transparently on the basis of the agreed criteria, and that stakeholders were prepared to reject proposals which failed to meet those expectations

- setting up pilot projects in order to identify which approaches/ projects were most effective in delivering the OA's aims

- establishing quality assurance processes and measures to ensure that providers worked to the plan

- setting up a 'dashboard' system to give partnership board members an overview of projects and their progress and/or establishing a 'RAG rating' criteria in order to monitor the progress of individual projects

- ensuring providers took account of each other's work when delivering projects, for example, ensuring they did not duplicate the work of other providers or created projects that targeted the same groups of people.

Partnership board members believed that the right systems had been put in in place to enable work to be delivered smoothly while at the same time ensuring appropriate accountability arrangements and safeguards were in place. For example, partnership board members, led by the DfE delivery teams, agreed to set the level of sign-off required for different amounts of expenditure. This meant that LA officers could sign-off expenditure to a certain level, whereas LA procurement processes required amounts over a set ceiling to be signed off by LA elected members.

Procurement processes

As directed by the DfE, OAs used existing LA procurement procedures to commission OA provision. This system provided an established framework, supported by robust and transparent processes under the monitoring and auditing regimes governing LA commissioning processes. Many interviewees valued these qualities of the procurement framework, especially where partnership board or subgroup members themselves were potential providers. That said, there was a strong sense that interviewees were frustrated and described these processes as 'slow', 'bureaucratic' and complicated. In a small number of OAs, the LA lacked the necessary capacity to manage the OA commissioning, which further slowed these OAs' progress while they waited for new appointments to be made or waited while the LA progressed the work.

A range of models were used to procure OA work which can be categorised broadly as follows:

- Model 1: Direct commissioning where OAs issued tenders, through the LA, for outside providers to deliver specified provision or released funding directly to schools (e.g. on a formula or other agreed basis)

- Model 2: Commissioning schools to support other schools (e.g. Teaching Schools or Research Schools)

- Model 3: Offering grants that providers could access through a bidding process (either competitively or by earmarking funding that providers could access for an agreed purpose).

The evidence collected during this evaluation indicated that it was too early to say whether one procurement model was more efficient and effective than another.

OA-funded projects

Partnership board members described the range of work commissioned by the first group of OAs in early 2018[5].

Figure 8: Categories of OA-funded projects to date

Work to develop capacity across the OA

• e.g. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for early years practitioners, leadership development

Work to enhance pedagogy

• e.g. classroom-based activities to address specific areas for improvement such as programmes in maths, English, or phonics

Promoting inclusion

• e.g. measures to strengthen pastoral support, providing support to schools to reduce exclusions

Parental engagement

• e.g. enhancing engagement activities to nurture parents' skills in supporting their children's learning, especially in reading and oracy skills

Enhancing CPD

• e.g. developing practitioners' capacity through training; accessing support from research and teaching schools; developing the use of video recordings to enable practitioners to reflect on their own practice.

Reviewing provision

• e.g. gaining a better understanding of the strengths and areas of development by conducting mapping exercise or community-wide consultations; youth engagement research and other opportunities for young people to input into the plans

Strengthening educational systems

• e.g. establishing more effective links between providers (e.g. secondary schools and post-16 providers)

Establishing funding streams

• e.g. developing their own evidence-based practice fund (separate from any national funding streams) to enable schools to bid for funding for evidence-based projects

Enhancing local provision

• e.g. increased nursery places or allocating additional funding to existing projects to improve the pace of the work (e.g. to enhance young people's opportunities to engage with employers or to promote awareness of opportunities in higher education)

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[5] We did not collect data from the second group of OAs at this time but are aware from newsletter and social media updates that similar work was underway.

Each of these aspects of the OAs' work were seen as essential in moving towards a coherent school improvement strategy locally.

Reflection and learning

Partnership board members described how they intended to learn from the first year's activity as they approach and plan for the next year. They wanted to reflect on what had gone well and where improvement could be made. Some interviewees believed that they should streamline processes, arguing that some of the initial arrangements had been too cumbersome and had created frustration because of the slow pace of change in their OA. This led a small number of partnership board members across a small number of OAs to suggest that the OAs should have their own capacity to commission and manage their work by establishing distinct legal and financial structures for the OAs themselves. This would mean moving away from the current DfE-managed approach.

Accountability regimes

Partnership board members described the complexity of the accountability regimes within which they worked. These included the OA's responsibility for undertaking activities within a broader framework where many of the partner organisations or other DfE teams (e.g. schools, individual LAs, RSCs, other public service providers) were each accountable for their own work and subject to their respective audit and inspection arrangements.

Partnership board members were aware that they were accountable for evaluating outcomes and developing a strong evidence base of what works. Some interviewees observed that a desire to maximise the amount of funding spent directly on delivery could restrict their ability to monitor and evaluate effectively. Partnership board members were wary of becoming too focused on meeting process indicators (e.g. the number of schools engaged) rather than focusing on impact (e.g. the change in pupil outcomes as a result of a programme).

Facilitating factors

Partnership board members identified a number of facilitating factors which contributed to effective implementation of their delivery plans. The main factors were:

- spending time developing good relationships with key stakeholders such as schools, colleges, third sector organisations, and existing partnerships/bodies (e.g. regeneration partnerships);

- using structures that were already in place;

- having dedicated link officers within the LA who could act as trouble-shooters where OA stakeholders were working with LA staff; and

- building capacity for delivery within LAs, schools, early years providers, post-16 providers etc., and ensuring that other partner organisations such as those in the third sector had capacity to deliver when committing to projects.

The message emerging from the evidence collected is that implementing delivery plans effectively is a collective effort drawing on local experience and expertise. This is the essence of a place-based approach which uses collaborative capacity and endeavour to create multi-faceted and integrated programmes and interventions that are responsive to local needs and priorities.

OAs and 'policy tilting'

OAs were given preferential access to some national programmes. Stakeholders were enthusiastic about what was referred to as 'policy tilting': they hoped that it would provide greater opportunities, as well as further additional resource, for the benefit of local schools, children and young people.

Early on, stakeholders sought additional clarity about which programmes would be available to the OAs and wanted further information about their aims, eligibility criteria and how to access the offers. They also requested clarification about how these programmes would align and be coordinated with local needs and what benefits this would bring to the OA over and above the existing national offers (this was specifically related to the involvement of the CEC and the NCS). In addition, further information was needed about how the different funding streams could be accessed. At times, stakeholders felt it was a messy and confused picture but as the programme progressed, the DfE and partnership boards became clearer about how national programmes would align with the OA programme.

In focus: Clarifying the offers of different programmes

Within some OAs, time had been spent developing tools to enhance clarity about which programmes were available and what their eligibility and funding criteria were. This helped to provide the partnership boards with necessary information and was also often shared with schools and other stakeholders. The types of activities OAs developed included hosting an event (e.g. a partnership board meeting or headteachers' conference) or developing an information sheet or infographic.

On the strength of the evidence gathered, we believe stakeholders' drive for greater clarity about the national offer within OAs was underpinned by the desire to ensure there was a coherent OA strategy to meet local need and to ensure schools were not overloaded with too many school-improvement programmes within a short space of time. This concern related both to schools that would be receivers of support but also those providing support locally. OA stakeholders felt that the DfE could have eased the load on OA schools and partnership boards through improved coordination of the number of

offers available within OAs. Stakeholders reflected that many schools struggled with capacity and had other priorities on which to focus. As result of the limited capacity in many OA schools, senior leaders did not have the time to look for information about new offers or to access bids for new funding streams. Where the partnership board had helped to coordinate this work, this had been appreciated by local stakeholders.

In addition to enhanced national coordination of offers within OAs, a small number of interviewees from across all OAs suggested that DfE streamline the funding processes. Stakeholders suggested having a single source of funding, rather than multiple strands, would have been beneficial as it would have reduced the time needed to seek the different funds. An associated point, raised by a small number of stakeholders in two OAs during the course of the research, was a feeling that the DfE lacked an understanding of their local area and particularly the geography by offering schools several programmes at once.

Views on the specific programmes

During our last rounds of interviews, we asked stakeholders how they felt the OA programme aligned with other national programmes. Most interviewees' responses included references to the SSIF and TLIF. However, a small number of interviewees mentioned other programmes as well. We summarise the key findings below.

SSIF

Initially, stakeholders welcomed the additional resources that the SSIF programme might offer locally. However, interviewees pointed out the potential limitations on providers, particularly schools' capacity to bid for SSIF funding rounds. In their view, where schools had not been successful in the earlier rounds, interviewees indicated that some schools might be unlikely to re-apply and for those that have been successful in an earlier round, they were busy setting up and delivering the programmes so may not have the capacity to bid for future rounds[6]. Some stakeholders noted that some opportunities were being missed owing to local capacity issues. A small number of interviewees across a small number of OAs observed that there was a slight disconnect between the focus of SSIF-funded programmes and their OA's priorities. This view was more widespread when stakeholders referred to the TLIF programme.

TLIF

Interviewees across most OAs queried the relevance of the TLIF-funded programmes to their OA, describing the programme as 'top-down' or as a bit 'left-field' compared to the OA programme which had been developed based on local needs. The fact that TLIF did

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[6] DfE has informed the evaluation team that they do have re-applications to SSIF from previously successful and unsuccessful providers.

not necessarily align with OA priorities, stakeholders felt, meant take up amongst schools had been limited.

A very small number of stakeholders across some OAs did not know much about TLIF or, in contrast to the views of others in the partnership board, felt that the programme had been well-coordinated locally or that take up had been good. This suggests that further communication and messaging about these programmes is required to clarify any misconceptions.

Essential Life Skills

A small number of interviewees across the OAs commented on the Essential Life Skills programme. Generally, they appeared to be positive about the progress made with this programme and valued the additional resource and focus on supporting young people to develop wider skills (e.g. resilience, emotional wellbeing and employability). As this programme was being solely managed by the OA DfE delivery teams and the partnership boards, some interviewees felt this had eased the process and increased the speed of implementation as opposed to the method adopted by TLIF and SSIF, for example.

CEC and NCS

There was some initial uncertainty about the offers of CEC and NCS, but these were clarified in late 2017 when representatives presented at some partnership boards. More generally, we received mixed messages about engagement with CEC and NCS. For example, in one OA the CEC was working closely with a subgroup and this appeared to be working well once everyone understood the offer. In another OA, a small number of stakeholders felt that CEC was not offering what schools wanted or needed and could have introduced the programme within the OA in a more coordinated and effective way. A small number of stakeholders in a small number of OAs queried the relevance of the NCS programme to OAs and in promoting social mobility more generally. Many interviewees, however, did not comment on the NCS programme suggesting a lack of exposure to it.

EEF Research Schools

Research schools had a fundamental role in supporting the OAs. Across most OAs, feedback indicated that this was working well. Interviewees said that they had established a productive working relationship with research schools. This included research schools sharing information and evidence about which school-level and classroom-based interventions (e.g. to improve literacy or numeracy) work well in certain contexts.

Some interviewees were unsure whether research schools had the capacity to support the partnership board and/or subgroups as well as act as service providers. They felt that there was only so much research schools, along with other schools, could commit themselves to delivering.

Other programmes

Across the OAs, a small number of interviewees commented on other regional and national programmes. These included the Northern Powerhouse and NCOP. In OAs that were part of the Northern Powerhouse, a small number of interviewees felt that more could be done to improve alignment between the two programmes. A similar message came from stakeholders across OAs that were involved in the NCOP programme. They felt that these programmes, which had a similar aim, could be better aligned nationally and regionally in order to maximise outcomes for young people.

Successes and challenges

Successes

OAs' commitment, enthusiasm and willingness to bring about change locally was a driving force behind the OA programme. The time OAs invested in building on existing structures or setting up new networks paid dividends by harnessing a range of relevant experience and expertise to plan and deliver change. The systems OAs put in place to support the change process provided a framework with the right levels of accountability and safeguards that public money was being spent appropriately in a fair and transparent way.

In the end, OAs appeared to strike a suitable balance between planning and commissioning or delivering work which meant that the time spent reaching a common understanding of local social mobility issues and agreeing appropriate responses was worthwhile because it informed and shaped delivery. OAs were successful in establishing the necessary processes to support project commissioning including provider recruitment, project proposal assessment and decision-making, and the quality assurance of project delivery.

In addition to the structures, systems and processes set up by OAs, other factors which enabled their successful move from planning to delivery were developing productive working relationships with key stakeholders such as early years providers, schools, post-16 providers and employers and building capacity for delivery within LAs.

Challenges

The pace of the programme was an on-going concern. Initially, interviewees were disappointed about the amount of time it took before delivery could commence. During 2017, many interviewees across the 12 OAs felt frustrated that there had been some necessary delay to the programme as a result of, for example, the general election and its associated period of 'purdah'. This meant restrictions were placed on how DfE could engage with local stakeholders for weeks leading up to the election. While most partnership board activity ceased during the period of 'purdah', one partnership board

continued to meet but without DfE officials present. Interviewees in this OA felt that it enabled them to continue progress, albeit at a slower pace. One interviewee explained:

> *From a board point of view where our remit is to make sure people do not fail in their education … stopping for a period, seemed very odd to me. How do we tell young people "sorry, there was a general election so we decided not to worry about your education"?*

Interviewees across a small number of OAs felt that, had it not been for the period of purdah, they could have started to deliver against their priorities earlier in 2017.

Later on in the programme (during 2018) a change in Secretary of State also left some OA stakeholders feeling unsettled. They perceived that the previous Secretary of State was highly committed to the OA programme and had visited many areas since the programme's inception. When a new Secretary of State was appointed, some stakeholders were concerned about the implications for the OA programme and whether there would be such strong commitment to it. This happened at a time when OAs were starting to commission activities and allocate OA funds to local projects.

Considerations for future roll out: setting up shared tools and templates

Interviewees recognised that the evolving and developmental nature of the programme has resulted in everyone involved, including DfE, working out what the programme meant for stakeholders while it was being implemented. A small number of interviewees across a small number of OAs suggested that some resources could have been developed in advance to make the implementation of the programme more streamlined and efficient. As one interviewee observed, many of the 'criticisms and challenges are because it was a brand new programme'. Another interviewee's view, echoed by others, was that the programme needed:

> *A different timeline for set up and how it is phased. There was a government announcement to launch OAs and then thought was given to how to work out how to implement the programme. In practice, this involves uncovering how things unfold week by week without a clear implementation plan. The government's approach should have been to set out timelines and identify how and who to deliver this.*

The emerging message is that any considerations for the future roll out of the programme should include developing shared resources such as tools and templates for use in the OA-project bidding process.

Chapter 5 Measuring and sustaining success

Summary of key findings

As the programme evolved and programmes were commissioned, monitoring and evaluation increased in importance among partnership board members. Partnership boards were providing subgroups and in some cases wider stakeholders with regular updates on progress and early outputs from the programme. They planned to measure success using outcome measures, such as improving young people's educational outcomes, attainment and aspirations, drawing on both quantitative data (e.g. statistics on qualifications obtained) and qualitative evidence (e.g. perceptions of progress made by young people). The prevailing view was that comprehensively capturing these outcomes would take longer than the three-year funded OA programme.

The feedback indicated that a key contribution of DfE's role in monitoring and evaluating the OA programme should be to share learning and information between OAs so they could learn about what works, in what contexts and why. This knowledge-exchange function could also help to support sustaining the progress made OAs.

There was a strong commitment across OAs to sustaining the programme. The range of factors linked to promoting sustainability included: building on existing groups and networks, ensuring wider (non-educational) stakeholder engagement, building capacity within the system and sharing evidence of impact, as and when it emerged.

One of the aims of this evaluation was to identify the features of the OA programme that had worked well. This entailed exploring the appropriate measures of success and possible methodologies for applying the measures. A related issue involved how OAs planned to sustain the progress they have made to date. In this section, we present stakeholders' views of the meaning of success in the context of improving the social mobility for young people living in disadvantaged areas and stakeholders' observations on measuring the outcomes from OAs' activities and interventions, including types of data needed and timescales. We also provide findings on how OAs interpreted sustainability and their early approaches to sustaining the changes they were making.

Monitoring and evaluation

We asked interviewees about monitoring and evaluation in both earlier (2017) and later (spring 2018) rounds of interviews. As might be expected, when we first interviewed OA stakeholders early on in the programme, monitoring and evaluation was not a high priority as much time and effort was focused on establishing the programme. Focus on monitoring had increased as the programme started to become embedded locally and

many stakeholders agreed that more detail about what and how this would take place was now needed. It is positive that monitoring and evaluation has been on some stakeholders' minds from the outset because this reflects their understanding of the importance and usefulness of these processes.

Expectations and success measures

Early in the evaluation a recurring theme among stakeholders was the need for further clarification about DfE's expectations and plans for monitoring and evaluating OAs at the national and local or initiative level. Some stakeholders were curious about how research schools and local universities, for instance, would be involved, and whether they could be involved more. Interviewees also talked about the need to develop a local strategy for monitoring as it currently felt a little 'ad hoc'.

In the first round of interviews across the 12 OAs, we asked for views on what should be the success measures for being an OA. Interviewees gave several examples, often referring to the targets in their delivery plan. Most commonly interviewees across the 12 OAs referred to:

- improving educational outcomes, attainment and aspirations for local children and young people (e.g. through more good or outstanding schools and/or better job prospects and cultural experiences)

- improving social mobility locally which should include broader issues than traditional educational outcomes (such as vocational qualifications, proportion of young people in employment etc.) and include softer outcomes (e.g. raised aspirations)

- engaging more with families so they can better support children's education, promote aspirations and cultural experiences

- closing the gap between disadvantaged young people and their peers

- improving local collaboration within the education sector and between educationalists and employers, as well as other sectors (e.g. health)

- building a model that is sustainable beyond the three-years of OA funding.

A small number of interviewees across a small number of OAs requested that social mobility was defined more precisely so clear targets and progress indicators could be established. For example, interviewees indicated that they would like more specific key performance indicators relating to social mobility (i.e. adding further detail to delivery plan priorities).This would particularly help with monitoring progress in transitions to adulthood and enhancing young people's social and cultural capital through extending their horizons by broadening their range of experiences throughout their school lives.

Timescales and types of data

Interviewees were keen to ensure the OA trajectory or progress indicators are adequately measured, believing that a realistic measure of improvements in social mobility will take several years to capture in hard data, such as numeric measures of progress made by young people in developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes which enable them to make successful transitions between different educational phases and from education to employment and adulthood. Some considered timescales of a minimum of five to 15 years were required to fully start to understand the impact of the programme. Interviewees cited examples such as the London Challenge programme, where change was not evident until five years after inception. They referred to children in the early years, who may benefit from an OA-funded intervention, where it would take three years to monitor change among current two year olds in terms of their becoming school-ready. All interviewees acknowledged the importance of assessing progress over the three years of OA funding as well as referring to need to track trajectories to ensure priorities were on target during this time.

Many interviewees recognised the need for and the complexities associated with monitoring and evaluating the OA programme. Several interviewees across OAs were concerned that monitoring and evaluation would focus on traditional educational outcomes measured through 'hard' data, for example statistical data on academic qualifications obtained. As part of the monitoring and evaluation of the OA programme, interviewees thought it important to achieve a more complete picture of outcomes by including progress made by young people taking vocational routes in education and their transitions to apprenticeships and employment. They also wanted monitoring and evaluation to capture other outcomes such as improvements in the home learning environment and enhanced cultural aspirations, engagement and attitudes.

Interviewees across most OAs referred to the need for monitoring and evaluation to also include qualitative or 'perception' data. For example, some maintained that it was extremely important to capture the local stakeholder voice and that of young people/families 'on the ground'. They thought that this should be analysed on an ongoing basis through local monitoring and evaluation activity and throughout the forthcoming national OA impact evaluation. Talking to people, some argued, would enable OAs to really understand what was changing at the local level and would help the partnership board and subgroups to assess the scale of the cultural shift needed and the rate of progress being made in achieving this. They considered that this would also enable OAs to establish a 'feedback loop' into the partnership board about the success of local developments and their impact which could inform future partnership board commissions.

Monitoring and evaluation processes

At the time of interviews in late 2017 and spring 2018, most interviewees were aware of what monitoring and evaluation was or would be taking place. Several explained that the

partnership board and/or subgroups would be (or was) receiving a rolling presentation of data to monitor priorities and programmes. Across most OAs, subgroups were expected to monitor the detail and report back to the partnership board. For most OAs, interviewees explained that they were currently measuring outputs (e.g. number of schools engaged) rather than assessing outcomes or impact and that this was expected to come later. Within one OA, a small number of interviewees referred to a baseline survey of young people and parents/carers and, in another OA, a stakeholder survey. In addition to monitoring outputs, a small number of interviewees across some OAs referred to financial monitoring which they expected to increase within the next year as more money would be invested.

Most interviewees across all of the first group of OAs explained that their partnership board provided monthly RAG (red, amber, green) ratings or dashboard updates of progress made towards delivery plan priority targets. These tended to be presented by priority, theme and/or intervention. Programme managers played a key role in compiling and sharing monitoring information and data. Some programme managers and other interviewees such as partnership board and subgroup members talked about the resource and time required to effectively monitor the OA. Some of these interviewees observed that if more monitoring and evaluation was requested in the future then it might result in them having to 'give up' something else in order to dedicate the time needed.

Interviewees gave examples of how evaluation was being built into their OAs' work. Generally, individual partnership board funded projects would be subject to evaluation and this was often, or would be, built into tenders and commissions. One interviewee explained the benefits of evaluation:

> *There is plenty of evaluation; evaluation is built into all of the programmes. When the project is finished, there is going to be some quite robust evidence left behind which could inform future policy and planning.*

A small number of people were concerned that the onus for this was placed on the providers and that there was a need for external evaluation as well. Several interviewees explained that the size and focus of the evaluations would be proportionate to the programme (e.g. a larger project would be subject to more rigorous evaluation or that projects under £25,000 may have limited evaluation).

A small number of interviewees averred that there would inevitably be overlap between the national impact evaluation and local evaluations. They felt that this needed further thought and that monitoring and evaluation activity, particularly for schools, should not be burdensome which might affect their engagement.

The role of the DfE

Many interviewees were clear that not only should DfE have a role in monitoring and evaluating but this should not replace local evaluation as this helped to provide a different

perspective. For example, local evaluation could examine operational and practical issues and explore issues in greater depth around delivery and what works at the local level within their OA's context. Interviewees described DfE's role as being to provide 'oversight', 'consistency', 'to share best practice', 'provide accountability' and 'explore value for money and unintended consequences'.

A strong theme emerging from the data was interviewees' desire for DfE to share learning between OAs. Examples were given where this was starting to happen already but the evidence shows, this needs to be more widespread. Across all OAs, interviewees talked about the importance of sharing learning particularly where OAs are tackling similar priorities and/or where emerging or actual evidence of impact (and why) emerged. Interviewees were keen to hear about 'what works' elsewhere with one interviewee explaining that this could create opportunity for 'economies of scale'.

There was a strong feeling that some structure was required but that DfE should not create a burdensome model: any strategy, outcomes framework or key performance indicators (KPIs) that may be developed should not be onerous for local stakeholders. There was a strong view among some that qualitative data should be included in any framework in order to throw light on the processes of change underpinning outcomes achieved.

Sustainability

Most interviewees were passionate about and committed to ensuring the OA programme had a 'lasting legacy'. They pointed out that sustainability was a regular feature at partnership board meetings with some OAs dedicating a forthcoming meeting to consider sustainability. Some described sustainability as being built into the 'culture' of their OA while others felt that while sustainability was on their OA's agenda, discussions to date had been 'superficial' and required further thinking. One interviewee said that while sustainability was discussed, achieving it would be the challenge – this view was echoed by many others. A very small number of interviewees considered that it was too early to think about sustainability.

Almost all interviewees across the OAs explained that sustainability was built into thinking about specific project commissions, including being explicitly stated in tender documents. Interviewees said that their OA would only commission a project if they were confident it could be sustainable in the future. One interviewee explained:

> *We have started to think about* [sustainability]*, it* [the OA programme] *has got to have a legacy that carries on, it is in the structures and in the learning. The things that we leave behind, that we know will have an impact, for minimal cost are the things that will be sustainable. Anything that is expensive and will have an impact only for those children who are here now, it will be worthy … but it will be unsustainable in the long term.*

Interviewees across OAs identified a number of key principles which their OA had considered important for promoting sustainability, these included:

- building on existing groups and networks, not creating new ones, where possible

- clarifying the vision for stakeholders as this will promote engagement

- building capacity within the system (e.g. five teachers trained in mastery approaches to teaching mathematics) rather than funding new positions/appointments

- ensuring wider (non-education) stakeholder engagement; projects are more likely to be sustainable if, for example, businesses, theatres, museums etc., are involved

- engaging with the community to a larger extent

- sharing evidence of impact, as it emerges, to create an appetite amongst stakeholders and the community to get involved; small numbers of interviewees felt people will only engage in projects if they are confident they will not end shortly.

Interviewees' views varied on whether the programme infrastructure was sustainable beyond the three years of funding. Several interviewees gave different timescales for the start and end of the programme and a small number wanted clarification on when the programme would end.

Interviewees in one OA outlined challenges on a programme underway to be finding time to carry out initial assessments. For example, for the initial assessment of current practice to take place, the early years setting has to be fully staffed to allow the leader to concentrate on the assessment. Much of this challenge is due to the fact that it is very difficult to access early years supply staff to cover, for example, staff sickness. There are no supply agencies so securing the extra staff that are needed in order to maintain staff/child ratios on assessment days is challenging. Securing the time could prove to be a risk to sustainability.

Interviewees across OAs thought that the OA infrastructure would only be sustainable with, at least, some funding and/or programme manager resource. One chair observed that their OA's partnership board would continue if the OA funding ceased. Another interviewee explained that the model, in principle, could continue as the partnership board could continue to coordinate local activity, noting that stakeholders would gravitate towards (future) funding streams.

Chapter 6   Conclusions and recommendations

The OA programme, announced in October 2016, formed a fundamental part of the government's approach to increasing social mobility. OAs targeted a seventy-two million pound (£72m) support programme at 12 local authority districts, identified because of the social, economic and cultural challenges they face in improving people's life chances. The aim of the programme was to improve children and young people's social mobility by raising educational attainment; their cultural and life experiences in order to raise their aspirations and better prepare them for employment.

The conclusions presented here are based on NFER's process evaluation undertaken between January 2017 and June 2018.

Conclusions

DfE intended the OA programme to evolve and develop at the national level while it was being implemented within local areas. Stakeholders appreciated the place-based approach which had given them the opportunity to provide local input and influence within a national framework of support and challenge, however, by its nature, this had also caused some minor areas of challenge and concern.

The time invested by the DfE and local leaders at the outset was valued by many OA stakeholders as they felt they had been listened to. This investment of time was viewed positively in terms of building trust and positive relationships with local stakeholders. The evidence collected indicates that at a national- and individual-OA level, the programme was both data and value driven. The DfE provided the partnership board members with national data to support their understanding of why their area had been identified as an OA. Local data and intelligence supplemented DfE's data to inform their problem identification, needs diagnoses and the development of their delivery plans and priorities. Some stakeholders had been surprised, or 'shocked', at the extent of issues facing local young people and families. For many, this had spurred a strong commitment and passion to bring about change locally. This appetite for change had been maintained, to date, with stakeholders remaining strongly committed to improving social mobility outcomes within and across OAs.

Although delivery of projects and programmes had taken longer to begin than expected, progress had accelerated in late 2017 and early 2018. Many OAs started to deliver at this time and more projects were about to commence.

Partnership board members had used existing local knowledge and national or local evidence of impact, or signs of promising practice, to inform their commissioning. An ethos and commitment emerged about being informed by using data, and a desire to contribute to the growing evidence-base around 'what works'.

Despite the relatively early stage of the programme, some initial indicators of change and associated benefits started to emerge. Although it remains too early to see the impact of projects and programmes, OA stakeholders reported greater cross-phase and cross-sector collaboration as one of the greatest successes to date. Many felt that these positive relationships would continue in the future, suggesting that the OA programme may be starting to develop a lasting legacy. Other reported successes included: setting up the OA infrastructure (especially the partnership boards and subgroups); developing a shared understanding and purpose among local stakeholders; developing the delivery plans and the highly-valued DfE local delivery teams, dedicated programme managers and independent chairs. Finally, stakeholders were pleased to have started to deliver activities that they believed would have a local impact.

Inevitably, there were challenges associated with the programme. An on-going challenge related to the availability of capacity within the system in terms of, in particular, schools engaging with or delivering OA activity and/or other national programmes (e.g. SSIF). Stakeholders were also concerned about the sustainability of the programme. This challenge included considerations of the local OA infrastructure (which many wanted to keep in place, but was also about sustainability of the projects the OAs commissioned). Other challenges related to the need for clarity about the aims of the programme, accountability measures, national and project-level monitoring and evaluation, and the time needed to bring about change. Ideally, stakeholders wanted a quick and simple process that captured both national and local statistical data, as well as local perceptions, on outputs, outcomes and ultimately impacts.

It is relatively early days for the programme overall and there is a great deal more to do, however significant progress had been made already in implementing the programme within areas. There remains an on-going risk about what can be achieved, and measured, within the proposed timescales, but progress to date is promising. The emerging dynamic for change in the OAs continues to drive implementation of the programme.

Summary of key recommendations

Recommendation 1

DfE should consider extending the timeline of the programme, to reflect the concerns identified by interviewees and ensure the programme has realistic expectations of achieving cultural change.

Recommendation 2

Delivery plans and priorities, or local work plans, should continue to be reviewed and updated as appropriate in line with progress. Updates should consider: the inclusion of innovative interventions and ensuring that programme activity is delivering for changing local needs. Where data is presented to stakeholders, it should be done so in an

accessible, manageable and coherent way to maximise stakeholder engagement quickly and comprehensively.

Recommendation 3

DfE teams should continue to be mindful of schools' capacity and should develop a strategic and coherent strategy for accessing national partners and programmes' services for the OA. DfE should consider developing shared resources across the OAs, e.g. streamlined project bidding processes.

Recommendation 4

DfE should ensure that regular and consistent messages about the aims and scope of the programme, new developments, progress and achievements are shared across OAs so that stakeholders and local communities are aware of the benefits gained to date and what the OAs are planning to deliver in the future.

Recommendation 5

DfE should support sharing learning and information between OAs so they can learn about what works, in what contexts and why, to the greatest extent possible.

Recommendation 6

If the DfE rolls out the OA programme further or introduces other place-based programmes, they should:

- Appoint a committed, respected and independent chair to each new area. Generally, the chair role has provided strong leadership, inclusivity and engagement of partnership board members and focussed on children and young people outcomes.

- Ensure transparency about who was invited to join the partnership board and why.

- Provide administrative support to partnership boards *and* subgroups to achieve faster progress.

- Ensure local stakeholder engagement encompasses a range of sectors, and different groups within sectors; it should also raise the profile of the OA programme from the outset within the local community to seek their commitment and involvement.

Glossary of terms and names

CEAG   Careers Education, Advice and Guidance

CEC   Careers and Enterprise Company

CPD   Continuing professional development

EEF   The Education Endowment Foundation

ESL   Essential Life Skills programme

EYFS   Early Years Foundation Stage

LAD   Local Authority District

LEP   Local Enterprise Partnerships

NCS   National Citizen Service

NCOP   National Collaborative Outreach Programme

NEET   Not in Education, Employment or Training

PRU   Pupil Referral Unit

RSC   Regional Schools Commissioner

SMI   Social Mobility Index

SSIF   Strategic School Improvement Fund

TLIF   Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund

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