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Speech

Lord Agnew Schools North East speech

Schools Minister, Lord Agnew, spoke at the Schools North East summit about the Opportunity North East programme on Thursday 10 October.

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Good morning and thank you for your kind invitation to speak at one of the biggest education events in your region.

It's great to be at the Schools North East summit. Twelve years after a group of head teachers first got together to create what is still, unbelievably, the only UK regional network of schools.

I'm no-one's idea of a die-hard football fan, but St James' Park is one of the oldest grounds in the world. It's part of our national heritage.

My local team is actually Norwich City, and it just so happens that the last time we played Newcastle, back in August, the heroic Canaries won 3-1. Sadly not a performance they've managed to maintain – I was at the Aston Villa game on Saturday where they were thrashed 5-1.

Today I want to talk about a project that many of us in this room have been working on for the past twelve months. One year ago, almost to the day, the Department for Education launched Opportunity North East – a £24 million programme to improve education and employment outcomes for the young people of the region.

When we launched the programme, we knew the North East faced some unique challenges.

Of all the regions, the North East has consistently had the lowest proportion of young people in good and outstanding secondary schools. Fewer 18-year-olds from the North East attend the country's top universities when compared to any other region. It lags behind others in terms of securing a sustained destination, like education or employment, after GCSE age.

There are too many education measures on which the North East is listed ninth in the list of nine English regions. Of course, everyone in this room will know the real picture isn't so black and white. In fact, the North East has some of the best performing primary schools in the country. Children in the region can expect a great start.

But when they move from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3, something seems to change—something that leaves many, particularly the most disadvantaged, struggling to keep up with their peers elsewhere. It seems the gulf between the primary and secondary curricula is too wide for some young pupils.

Whatever the source of the problem, Opportunity North East was launched in part to tackle this very issue. That was challenge number one, which I'll return to later. But there are others.

After talking with key stakeholders in the region and analysing the data, we identified four more challenges that Opportunity North East aims to address.

We need to unlock the potential of young people in 30 of our secondary schools. We need to boost teacher recruitment, retention and development. We want to help far more young people find a pathway to a good job. And finally, we want to see many more young people progress to high quality higher education.

A year on, how are we doing?

The first thing we did was put together a strategic board made up of regional stakeholders who are passionate about the aims of Opportunity North East. Partners from schools, local enterprise partnerships, local authorities, further education, universities, businesses and Schools North East – all are on the board, and are proof of the regional collaboration driving this project.

In March, we launched the ONE Vision Schools programme—a three-year investment involving 28 secondary schools across the North East. Each of these schools currently needs support and are committed to improving; our aim is to help them become good schools.

Those ONE Vision schools include Newcastle’s own Kenton School. There’s also Polam Hall School in Darlington, originally founded as a Quaker ‘finishing school’ for girls, and Durham’s Tanfield School, where England women’s football goalkeeper Carly Telford was educated.

Each school has been matched with a high-performing school leader who will work with the head teacher to help diagnose the most pressing priorities, and develop a bespoke improvement plan. This includes all our ONE Vision schools, to fund professional development for up to four governors from each school.

Finally, through our analysis of need, we’ve identified over £5 million of savings for those schools to work on. All of our ONE Vision schools have great potential. They just need help unlocking it.

Moving back to another core challenge, in the past year we’ve been talking to all the experts –head teachers, charities like the SHINE Trust and the Education Endowment Foundation, and to Schools North East – to find out why so many children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, find the jump from primary to secondary school such a struggle.

As part of that conversation, we invited the region’s schools, trusts and local authorities to put forward their own proposals to better support pupils as they move from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3. The purpose of this project was to fund those we think could have the greatest positive impact for children.

By July, we had received some 32 draft proposals from local schools, trusts and authorities. By early next year, we will begin funding a handful,

monitoring pupils as they move through the first three years of secondary school. In the summer, we also hosted an information event where teachers, school leaders and local officials got together to hear examples of what was working outside the region.

The event was so popular, we couldn't fit everyone in the room and had to hold a second event a week later. Blackpool is a case in point. As part of its own Opportunity Area programme, it has been trialling a special town-wide "transition week" involving all Blackpool primary and secondary schools.

Young pupils are offered taster lessons to calm those back-to-school nerves, while heads from both primary and secondary schools work together on curriculum planning. As a result, pupils in Blackpool are already showing improved progress in Year 7 and Year 8—the so-called "lost years" for too many disadvantaged pupils.

I also want to highlight a third and final piece of work. In the past year we've been working to help send more young people in the North East to the country's most selective universities, based on an approach developed by the Elephant Group. Formed by a collection of London head teachers, the Elephant Group's mission is to ensure that the top third of non-selective state school pupils get to attend the top third universities.

The Elephant Group is piloting a participation programme for sixth formers in parts of England—helping them with their university applications and prepping them for admissions tests. We've been working with local schools to bring the Elephant Group's ongoing pilot to the North East, and will be holding an information session next month at Cardinal Hulme Catholic School to target help where it is most needed.

We're also looking at introducing "nudge" methods, such as undergraduates writing letters to sixth formers and other young people from similar backgrounds, sharing their university stories and inspiring them to join them. After all, Durham is already home to one of the best universities in the country.

Why shouldn't young people who were born down the road from it go there—or to Cambridge or Oxford or Bath for that matter? That's the story of Opportunity North East so far. But it's part of a wider story—one that affects schools across the country.

Over the next three years £14 billion of additional funding is going into the school system. Plus a pension funding increase of £4.5 billion – by some measures the biggest one-off boost to education funding for 15 years. We are also rolling out T Levels, the new gold standard in technical education.

Some 50 providers across the country will deliver the first T Levels from

2020—including four from the North East: Durham Sixth Form Centre, Gateshead College, New College Durham and St Thomas Moore Catholic School.

We're expanding the free schools programme with the aim of creating thousands of good school places across the country. And there are many successful ones in the area already. One example is Wynyard Church of England primary school in Stockton-On-Tees. The school, which opened in 2015, achieved an outstanding Ofsted Judgement in April 2018 whilst still in temporary accommodation.

Finally, we're rolling out a fully-funded, two-year package of training and support for early career teachers, to help recruit and retain the best and the brightest. In fact, as part of Opportunity North East, teachers here get access to this programme a year early. This gives them access to high-quality training, a trained mentor, and time off their teaching timetable to focus on their own personal development.

None of this would amount to anything, of course, without the hard work you all put in, day in, day out. I've been an education minister for two years and have worked closely with trusts for nearly nine years.

Throughout that time I've never failed to be impressed by the dedication and passion you all bring to our educational institutions, in the face of many and varied challenges.

The best way to overcome those challenges is to work together, which is why collaboration is at the heart of Opportunity North East. This is a unique region. It stretches from coastal towns to rural hamlets, with every kind of school dotting its landscape.

We need your local expertise—the hard-won knowledge of local authorities, enterprise partnerships, colleges, universities, businesses, schools—so that we make the changes that work for you, not for us.

This is part of the government's broader plan to fire up the Northern Powerhouse; to increase productivity across the region. by giving the North more control. At the heart of that goal is improving education right here, from the schools near St James' Park to every corner of the North East.

As you all know, achieving that aim isn't a question of talent—the region is full of it. It's a question of opportunity.

Thank you.

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