THE SUTTON TRUST

The Opportunity Index

The geography of opportunity and social mobility in England

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Overview

- The **20 constituencies with the highest ranking for opportunity are in London**, with East Ham ranked top. Amongst the top 50 constituencies, all bar 8 are in London.

- The **highest ranked area outside of London is Birmingham Perry Bar (West Midlands), at position 23**. The lowest ranked London borough is Orpington, at 327th.

- Comparing the **highest ranked area of East Ham (London) to the lowest ranked area of Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (North East) shows a 30 percentage point gap in achievement of GCSE grade 5 in English and maths** between FSM pupils in both areas.

- **FSM pupils from East Ham are over three times more likely to have a degree by age 22**, at 35%, compared to those in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, at 10%.

- **While 18% of FSM pupils from London are in the top 20% of earners at age 28, only 7% of those from the North East are**, as are 7% from the North West and 7% from Yorkshire and the Humber.

- **FSM pupils from Ruislip Northwood and Pinner are six times more likely to fall in this top 20% of earners** compared to those in Leeds East, at 25% compared to 4% respectively.

Recommendations

Gaps in opportunity open up early. **To close them, the government should have a renewed national focus on closing the attainment gap between lower-income children and their peers.** This should include:

- **Equalising access to early education**, by making at least 20 hours of provision available to all three- and four-year-olds.
- **Reforming the National Funding Formula**, to rebalance funding back towards schools serving the most disadvantaged communities.
- **Ensuring no child is hungry in school** by expanding free school meal eligibility to all children on Universal Credit.
- **Reducing social segregation in schools** by making admissions policies fairer.
- **Funding evidence based interventions in schools,** like tutoring.
- **Incentivising the best teachers to work in the most disadvantaged schools,** by making changes including enhancing financial incentives and increasing flexibility.
- **Restore pupil premium funding in real terms, and extend it to post-16 institutions.** The attainment gap doesn't end at 16, and neither should dedicated funding.

While changes in the education system do matter, the education system alone cannot eradicate the attainment gap. **The government should implement a comprehensive plan to reduce, and ultimately to end child poverty in the UK.**

Steps should be taken to increase the supply of apprenticeships for young people, and tackle barriers for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This should include increasing financial incentives for employers, ringfencing Levy funding for younger age groups, and a review of support provided to young apprentices.

Government should redouble efforts on access to higher education, including increasing the maintenance support available for students, and stronger regulatory expectations for universities with a focus on socio-economic disadvantage – including encouraging a clear and consistent approach to contextual offers.

Barriers to accessing professional jobs for those from disadvantaged backgrounds should be tackled, including contextual recruitment practices and banning unpaid internships.

Economic policy should focus on spreading opportunity across the country. Opportunities for social mobility will only be available nationwide if there is a more even spread of economic opportunities across the country. This should be a sustained effort across government, potentially including greater devolution of powers and reforms to funding for local government, as well as greater investment in infrastructure regionally – including transport, and opportunities for education and training.

Introduction

Opportunity is not evenly spread across Britain. A young person's socio-economic background - including the income level of their family, their parents' educational qualifications, and their family's wealth — all play a critical role in shaping the options available to them. From the school they attend, to the networks they grow up in and the resources they have access to — all these factors heavily influence an individual's chances of success in education and work.

But as well as variations between families and across socio-economic groups, Britain is also highly divided geographically. It is a country in which *where* you grew up can have as much, if not more impact, than your family's individual socio-economic circumstances.

A young person in a low-income family in London has a good chance of getting a place at university. But in other parts of the country, for a young person with similar family circumstances, this is simply not the case. And while some areas have ample economic opportunities, others have very few high-quality and well-paid jobs available, and those who grow up there are faced with the choice of leaving for better opportunities elsewhere.

The Government's Opportunity Mission gives a welcome focus to inequalities in life chances. But the data here lay out the scale of the challenge. In a country that is increasingly fragmented, and in which much of the public believe divides by socio-economic background are growing over time,[1] it is more important than ever to understand how exactly there opportunities diverge, and to tackle these inequalities so that every young person, no matter what family they come from or where they grew up, has an equal chance to succeed.

This report explores in detail how socio-economic background, geography and opportunity interact, with data looking at both parliamentary constituency and regional level in England. From educational attainment, to opportunities in higher education and employment, including the incomes that young people from different parts of the country go on to earn in adulthood, with a focus on the chances of income mobility for young people from lower income homes. With data covering more than 10 million young people across the past 25 years, it provides an unprecedented insight into the geography of opportunity and social mobility in England.

"Britain is a country in which *where* you grew up can have as much, if not more impact, than your family's individual socio-economic circumstances."

The Sutton Trust — The Opportunity Index

Opportunity by constituency

The Opportunity Index is based on data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) and the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset, linking educational data for all pupils in state schools in England, to earnings and benefits records in adulthood. Equivalent data is not available in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, so the report focuses on England only. It includes cohorts of those who took their GCSEs in 2002, to those who took them in 2024. Depending on the measure, the most recent data has been used in order for the picture to be as up to date as possible, and in most cases several year cohorts have been pooled in order to maximise statistical power. Data by constituency corresponds to the area where a pupil grew up and attended secondary school. Eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) aged 16 is used here as the primary indicator of socio-economic disadvantage.[2]

A broad variety of indicators of educational and employment outcomes have been collected for each constituency, from GCSE results, to the number of those in education, training and employment post-16, to average earnings from employment, as well as the proportion who move away from their 'home' area as adults.

An 'Opportunity Index' for each constituency narrows this down to six key indicators of opportunity for Free School Meal eligible pupils:

- **School:** Attainment 8 score (based on best GCSE results across 8 subjects).
- **Post-16**: A Level results (based on Average Points Score)
- **Post-16**: Percentage in sustained education/employment after KS4.
- **Post-18:** Percentage with degree by age 22.
- **Employment**: Average earnings at age 28.
- **Employment:** Percentage in sustained employment at age 28.

The Z-scores (distance from the average) for Free School Meal pupils have been combined to find an average score across these measures. These scores have then been ranked to indicate where barriers to opportunity are the highest, as well as the lowest, for FSM pupils compared to the average young person in England.

As shown in Table 1, nationally, FSM pupils fare worse on all six measures compared to non-FSM pupils.

On Attainment 8 (a measure that is a combination of results in eight GCSE-level subjects including English and Maths), FSM pupils have a score of 34, that is notably lower than the score of 49 seen for non-FSM pupils. At post-16, FSM pupils in England are 16 percentage points less likely to be in sustained education, an apprenticeship or employment after Key Stage 4, at 65% compared to 81% respectively. They are also half as likely to have an undergraduate degree, at 16% compared to 32% of non-FSM pupils. And in adulthood, at age 28, FSM pupils go on to have average earnings that are over £5,000 lower than that of non-FSM pupils.

Table 1: National data for indicators of social mobility

	All Pupils	FSM	Non-FSM	FSM/ Non-FSM gap	FSM/national average gap
GCSE (Attainment 8 score)	46	34	49	15	12
A Levels (Average Points Score)	34	30	35	5	4
Sustained education/employment KS4	79%	65%	81%	16pp	14pp
Degree by age 22	29%	16%	32%	16pp	14pp
Average earnings at age 28	£22,172	£17,030	£22,829	£5,799	£5,142
Sustained employment age 28	67%	55%	69%	14pp	12pp

But behind these national statistics are many different scenarios, at both regional and constituency level.

As shown in Table 2, the 20 constituencies with the highest ranking are in London. Indeed, amongst the top 50 constituencies, all bar 8 constituencies are in London. The lowest ranked London borough is Orpington, at 327th.

Table 2: Opportunity Index ranking for highest and lowest ranked constituencies

Rank	Constituency	Region	Attainment 8	A Level APS result	Sustained education/ employment after KS4	%age with degree by age 22	Average earnings at age 28 (£)	Sustained employment at age 28
Highest: 1	East Ham	London	48	33	83%	35%	21,135	60%
2	Stratford and Bow	London	46	32	78%	41%	20,388	60%
3	Brent West	London	49	34	73%	33%	21,360	57%
4	Bethnal Green and Stepney	London	48	32	69%	33%	21,033	62%
5	Bermondsey and Old Southwark	London	46	33	73%	32%	21,337	59%
6	Cities of London and Westminster	London	47	30	67%	37%	22,644	56%
7	Queen's Park and Maida Vale	London	47	35	68%	35%	19,471	54%
8	Ilford South	London	43	33	74%	35%	20,969	57%
9	Ealing Southall	London	46	33	68%	31%	19,827	57%
10	Hackney South and Shoreditch	London	46	31	73%	31%	19,258	56%
11	Ilford North	London	43	32	69%	33%	22,111	57%
12	Leyton and Wanstead	London	43	31	77%	31%	19,777	57%
13	Harrow West	London	42	32	80%	29%	20,361	55%
14	Poplar and Limehouse	London	45	31	71%	26%	20,604	60%
15	Streatham and Croydon North	London	41	29	69%	30%	24,279	58%
16	Brentford and Isleworth	London	42	32	68%	30%	21,518	59%
17	Hammersmith and Chiswick	London	47	34	68%	28%	20,191	50%
18	Wimbledon	London	45	33	69%	24%	21,374	57%
19	West Ham and Beckton	London	42	31	76%	24%	20,229	59%
20	Kensington and Bayswater	London	44	33	58%	37%	20,299	47%
National average for all pupils		**X**	**46**	**34**	**79%**	**29%**	**22,172**	**67%**

524	Buckingham and Bletchley	South East	30	26	51%	9%	16,232	50%
525	Leeds West and Pudsey	Yorkshire and The Humber	29	29	54%	9%	4,685	49%
526	Weald of Kent	South East	26	27	52%	10%	19,020	49%
527	Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven	South East	28	27	68%	4%	16,112	46%
528	Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor	North East	26	31	59%	7%	14,994	46%
529	Nottingham South	East Midlands	30	26	57%	8%	15,666	46%
530	Liverpool Walton	North West	23	28	50%	12%	15,683	53%
531	Bootle	North West	27	25	51%	8%	15,679	55%
532	Clacton	East of England	25	25	54%	13%	15,921	50%
533	Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend	North East	31	26	51%	7%	14,121	51%
534	Bristol East	South West	26	21	53%	11%	15,492	56%
535	Stockton North	North East	28	22	56%	14%	14,456	48%
536	Hastings and Rye	South East	24	29	71%	5%	14,828	44%
537	Sheffield Heeley	Yorkshire and The Humber	25	26	63%	10%	13,617	49%
538	Bristol South	South West	26	27	59%	4%	15,576	51%
539	Lincoln	East Midlands	30	24	51%	8%	14,872	49%
540	Sevenoaks	South East	30	27	56%	5%	15,704	42%
541	Mid Leicestershire	East Midlands	28	32	52%	6%	15,834	39%
542	Cramlington and Killingworth	North East	23	28	47%	8%	16,031	53%
Lowest: 543	Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West	North East	28	28	38%	10%	14,158	46%

The highest ranked area outside of London is Birmingham Perry Bar (West Midlands), at position 23. This constituency is ranked particularly well considering the proportion of FSM pupils with a degree at age 22; 32% have a degree, compared to a national average of 29% for all pupils, and 16% for FSM pupils. The next highest ranked constituencies outside of London are Luton South and South Bedfordshire, at 33, South West Hertfordshire, at 37, and Windsor, at 39, all of which are adjacent to the capital.

The areas with the lowest ranking are more geographically spread, as shown in Table 3. The South East has the largest number in the bottom 50 at 11, but proportionally, constituencies in the North East are most likely to rank low, followed by Yorkshire and the Humber.

Table 3: Number of constituencies in top and bottom 50 on Opportunity Index, by region

Region	Number of constituencies in Top 50	Number of constituencies in Bottom 50	Total number of constituencies
London	42	0	75
East of England	4	2	61
South East	2	11	91
West Midlands	2	2	57
North East	0	5	27
East Midlands	0	6	47
South West	0	7	58
North West	0	8	73
Yorkshire and the Humber	0	9	54

These results show how variable access to opportunity is across the country. Comparing the highest ranked area, East Ham (London), to the lowest ranked area, Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (North East), shows a 19 point gap at GCSE level between FSM pupils in both areas. There is a 30 percentage point gap in the proportion of FSM pupils achieving GCSE grade 5/above in English and maths, at 45% compared to 15% respectively. And FSM pupils from East Ham are over three times more likely to have a degree by age 22, at 35%, compared to those in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, at 10%.

Average earnings at age 28 are almost £7,000 lower for FSM pupils growing up in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West compared to those raised in East Ham. While there is a £4,780 pay gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils in Newcastle. 40% of FSM pupils are not in sustained employment at age 28 in East Ham, compared to 54% in Newcastle.

More information about the constituencies where FSM pupils are more likely to access opportunity can be explored through the accompanying interactive map and tables, available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/opportunity-index-interactive-map.

35%

of FSM pupils who grew up in East Ham have a degree by age 22, compared to 10% in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West.

Education and employment outcomes across the life course

The following section presents regional and constituency-level findings for the individual measures discussed above, as well as additional measures across the life-course, including progression to higher education and sustained employment.

Attainment

School attainment

The following section looks at GCSE results in an area using Attainment 8 and Progress 8 scores, as well as the proportion of pupils achieving passes in English and maths. While Attainment 8 scores are a combination of results in eight GCSE-level subjects including English and Maths,[3] Progress 8 compares Key Stage 2 attainment to Key Stage 4 in order to indicate progress in 8 subjects from Year 6 to Year 11.[4] Scores above zero represent an average grade that is higher than would be predicted based on age 11 performance alone, while scores below zero represent an average grade below that prediction.

Firstly looking at Attainment 8 regionally, the picture is very much one of London showing a striking difference, with less variation among other regions. The average score for FSM pupils is highest in London, at 41, and lowest for those in the South East, at 32 (Figure 1). This compares to an England average of 46 for all pupils. All top 20 ranked constituencies for FSM pupils are in London, while the bottom ranked constituencies are more geographically spread; six lie in the South East and six lie in the North West. While the attainment gap between FSM pupils and non-FSM pupils is 19 in the South East, the gap is 12 in London. While FSM pupils in the South East have the lowest scores, their non-FSM classmates have the second highest after London.

**Figure 1: Attainment 8 for FSM and non-FSM pupils, by region**
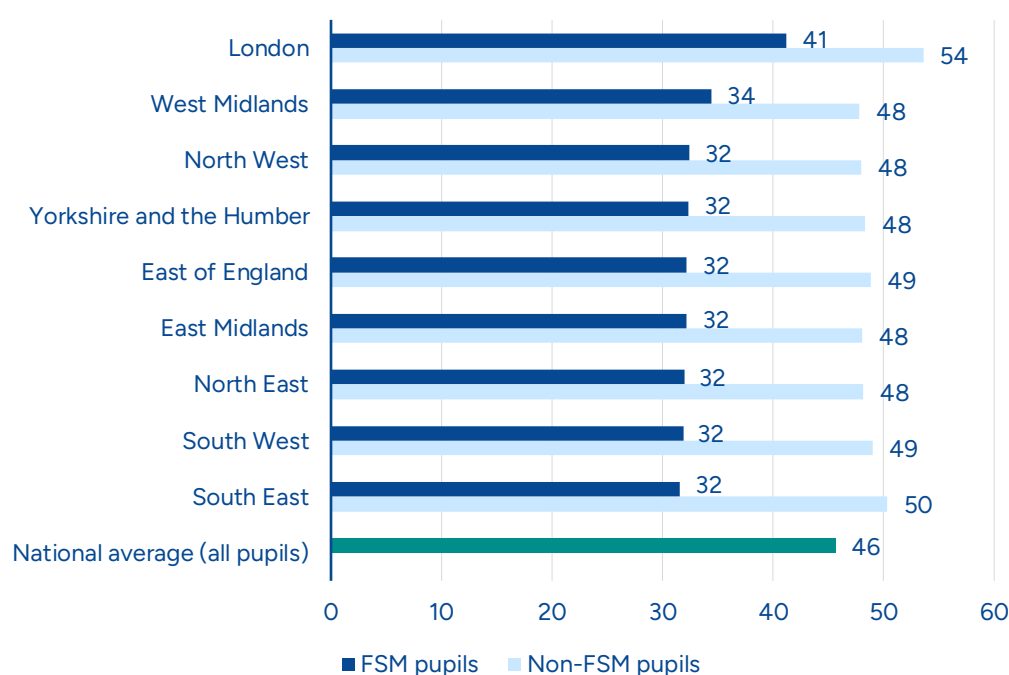
Note: Data applies to 2023/24 cohort.

Looking at progress in secondary school, the average Progress 8 score for FSM students ranges from -0.8 in the North East to -0.1 in London. This compares to a national average of -0.05 for all pupils. Even in London, FSM pupils perform slightly less than the typical pupil nationwide. Positive scores here indicate above average progress between Key Stages 2 and 4, while negative scores indicate below average progress (this does not necessarily mean that pupils have made no progress). All bar three of the top 20 constituencies with the highest progress 8 averages are in London, while the bottom 20 constituencies have a more varied geographical spread. An FSM pupil in lowest ranked constituency Dorking and Horley progresses by around two grades less, on

average, compared to a pupil in the highest ranked constituency of Brent West, at 0.51 and -1.47 respectively.

Considering English and maths specifically, as shown in Figure 2, London has the highest proportion of FSM pupils achieving grade 5 at GCSE at 34%, compared to 19% in the East Midlands, East of England, the South East and the South West (the regions with the lowest figure) and a national average for all pupils of 42%. There was an attainment gap of 31 percentage points in the South East (19% for FSM pupils compared to 50% for non-FSM pupils). Again, the gap is smallest in London, at 22 percentage points.

Figure 2: Percentage of FSM and non-FSM pupils with grade 5 GCSE English & maths, by region
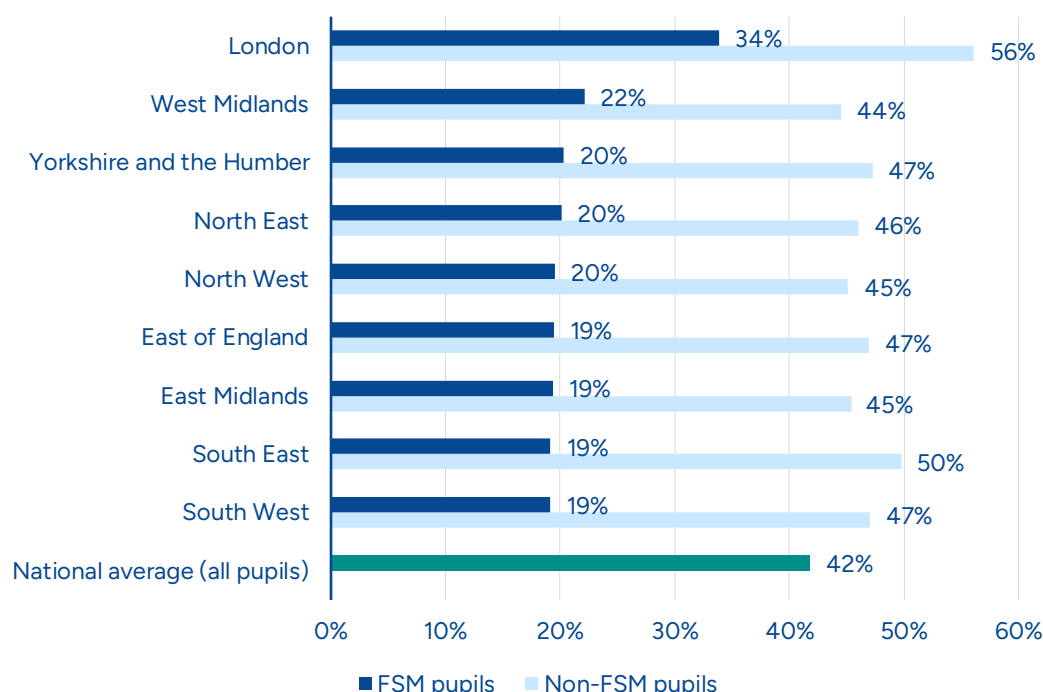
Note: Data from 2023/24 GCSE cohort.

16-18 study

Destination after Key Stage 4

Considering the percentage of pupils in sustained education, an apprenticeship, or employment following Key Stage 4 gives a sense of young people's progression after GCSE. Sustained is defined as having sustained participation between October and March in the academic year after Key Stage 4.

68% of FSM pupils in London were in sustained education, apprenticeship or employment following KS4, compared to 61% of FSM pupils in the North East (Figure 3). The national average proportion for all pupils was 79%. London was the region with the lowest gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils, at 10%, but the gap was actually largest in the South East, at 18%, with the gap in the North East standing at 17%.

There are no clear regional patterns when considering the top and bottom ranked constituencies on this indicator, but it should be noted that no constituencies from the East Midlands or the North East fall in the top 20 constituencies. Interestingly, higher proportions of FSM pupils in 7 constituencies go into sustained education, an apprenticeship or employment after KS4 compared to the national average for all pupils (East Ham; Colne Valley; Kenilworth and Southam; Luton North; Tottenham; Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton; and Harrow West).

Figure 3: Percentage of FSM and non-FSM pupils in sustained education, an apprenticeship, or employment after Key Stage 4, by region
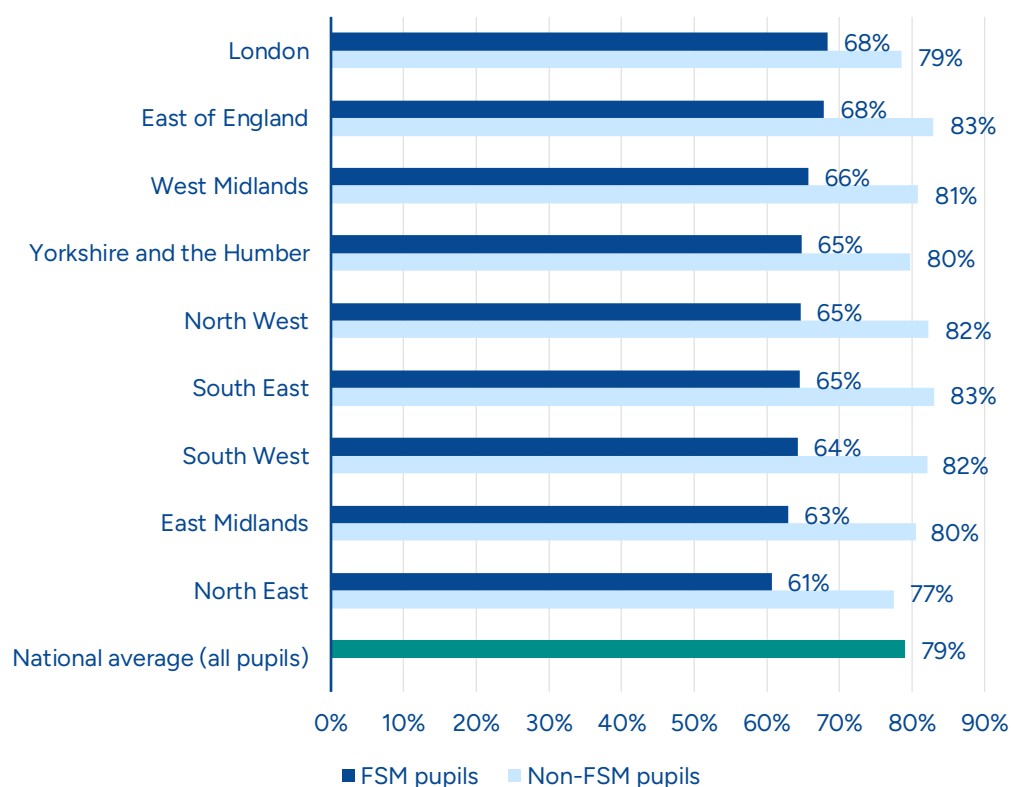
Note: Data from 2013/14 to 2018/19 GCSE cohorts

There is a 45 percentage point gap in the proportion of FSM pupils heading to sustained education or employment after Key Stage 4 in the top ranked

constituency of East Ham compared to Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, at 83% compared to 38% respectively.

A Level and technical qualification grades

Determined by Average Points Score (APS) for A Level grades, FSM pupils in London perform best with an APS of 32 (equivalent to a C), compared to a national average for all pupils of 34 (equivalent to a C+). As Figure 4 shows, there is much less regional variation in this category, because the cohort of those taking A Levels is self-selecting, particularly for FSM students, many of whom do not take A Levels. The attainment gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils is largest in the East and South East (both 6 points), and lowest in London and the West Midlands (both 4 points).

Figure 4: A Level APS point score for FSM pupils, by region
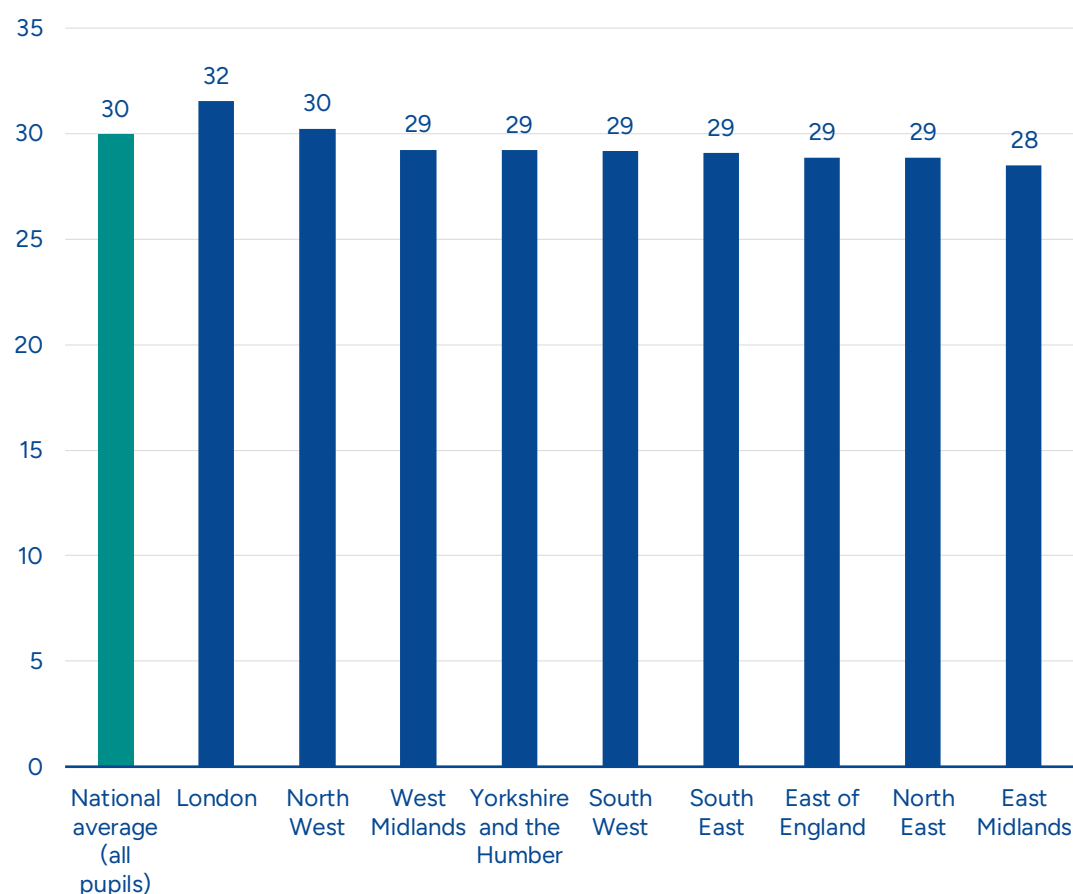
Note: Data from the 2019/20 to 2021/22 GCSE cohorts

Interestingly, five constituencies from the North West fall in the top 10 ranked areas, with the top three being Altrincham and Sale West; Stretford and Urmston; and Blackburn, who all have a score that is higher than the national average for all pupils. In the lowest ranked 20 constituencies, the APS score for

FSM pupils was at least nine points lower than the overall England average (almost a grade per subject). No London constituencies fell within the lowest ranked 20 areas. There was a gap of 16 points between the highest ranked constituency of Altrincham and Sale West (37, equivalent to a B- in each subject)) and the lowest of Bristol East (21, equivalent to a D).

The average A level grade for FSM pupils was grade C in all regions. In London and the South East, the average grade for non-FSM pupils was B-, while in all other regions the average was slightly lower at C+.

Moving to other Level 3 qualifications, results for Tech levels and applied general qualifications have also been considered. Applied Generals and Tech Levels cover a wide range of subject areas, from tourism, construction or health and social care through to business, engineering or accountancy. Tech levels are also more strongly focused on a particular industry or profession with more practical, work-based learning. Applied general qualifications offer a broader understanding of an industry or sector and combine academic and practical learning.

Considering tech level qualifications, FSM pupils performed best in Yorkshire and the Humber and London, with an APS of 30, compared to 31 for all England pupils on average. The score was lowest in the East Midlands and North East at 27. North West, South East and South West have average scores of 29, while 28 is the average score for both the East of England and the West Midlands.

For applied general qualifications, scores were again highest in Yorkshire and the Humber, as well as the North West (31), compared to a national average for all pupils of 32. Scores were lowest in both the East of England and the South East, at 28. The North East and West Midlands have an average score of 30. The East Midlands, London and the South West have average scores of 29.

Post-18

Higher education

On average, 29% of pupils progressed to a sustained higher education institution following Key Stage 5, with non-FSM pupils almost twice as likely to do so than those eligible for FSM (31% v 16%). For FSM pupils only, the highest rate was seen in London at 28% - almost three times as high as the rate in the South East and South West (10% in both regions). The progression rate gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils was highest in the South East, at 20 percentage points, and lowest in London at 12 percentage points.

Just over 1 in 4 (or 27% of) FSM pupils from London achieved an undergraduate degree by age 22, just 2 percentage points lower than the national average for all pupils (29%) (Figure 5). Only 1 in 10 FSM pupils from the South West have a degree by age 22 (making it the region with the lowest figure), as do 11% of those from both the South East and North East. The gap in university attendance between FSM and non-FSM pupils was largest in the South East at 21 percentage points (11% vs 32% respectively) and smallest in London at 12 percentage points (27% vs 39%).

All bar one of the top 20 ranked constituencies for FSM pupils on this measure were in London; the exception being Birmingham Perry Barr (32% of FSM pupils had a degree by age 22). 15 of the lowest ranked 20 constituencies were in the South West or South East of England – the proportion of FSM pupils with a degree was at least 23 percentage points lower than the national average for all pupils in all 20 constituencies.

FSM pupils from the highest ranked constituency Stratford and Bow were more than 10 times more likely to have a degree by age 22 compared to the lowest ranked constituency of Bristol North West, at 41% and 3% respectively.

Figure 5: Percentage of FSM and non-FSM pupils with an undergraduate degree by age 22, by region
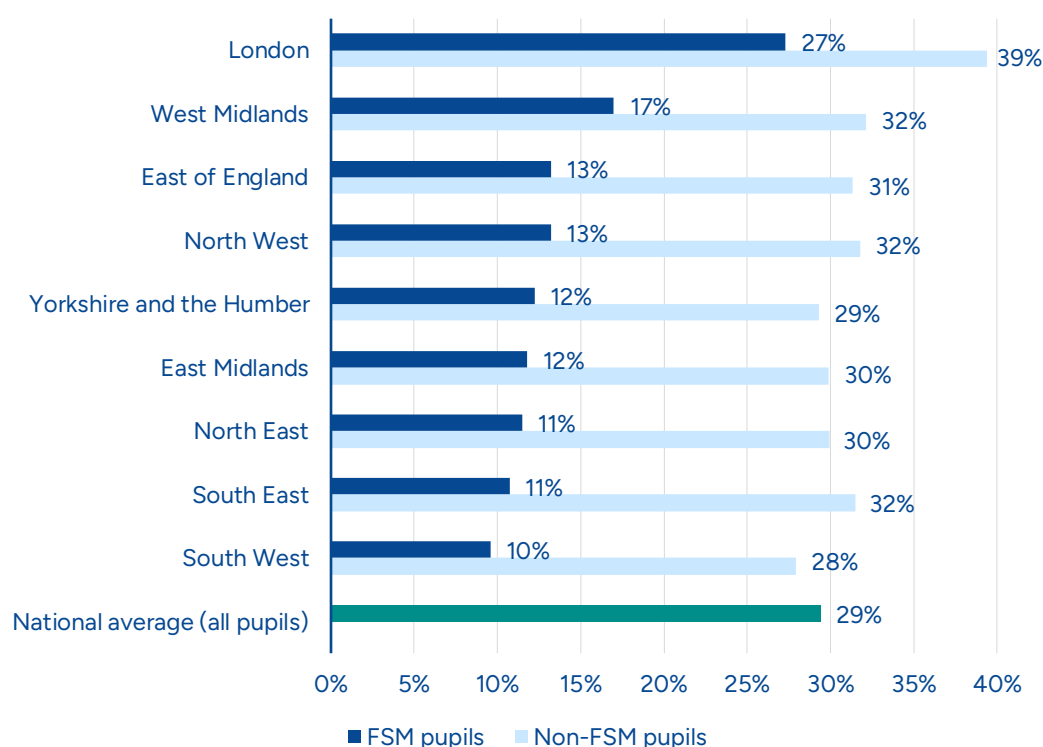

Note: Data from the 2011/12 to 2013/14 GCSE cohorts, captured at age 22

Employment

Sustained education or employment

53% of FSM pupils from the North East as well as Yorkshire and The Humber had reached sustained education, apprenticeship, or employment by age 28 (Figure 6). This compares to 68% for all pupils in England on average. 58% from the South West were in sustained destinations by age 28. The North East had the largest gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils at 18 percentage points (53% vs 70% respectively) while London had the smallest gap of 10 percentage points (57% vs 67%). Sevenoaks (South East) had the lowest proportion of FSM pupils in employment, education or training by age 28 of 43%, compared to the highest rate of 70% in Bicester and Woodstock (South East).

Figure 6: Percentage of FSM and non-FSM pupils in sustained education, an apprenticeship, or employment at age 28, by region
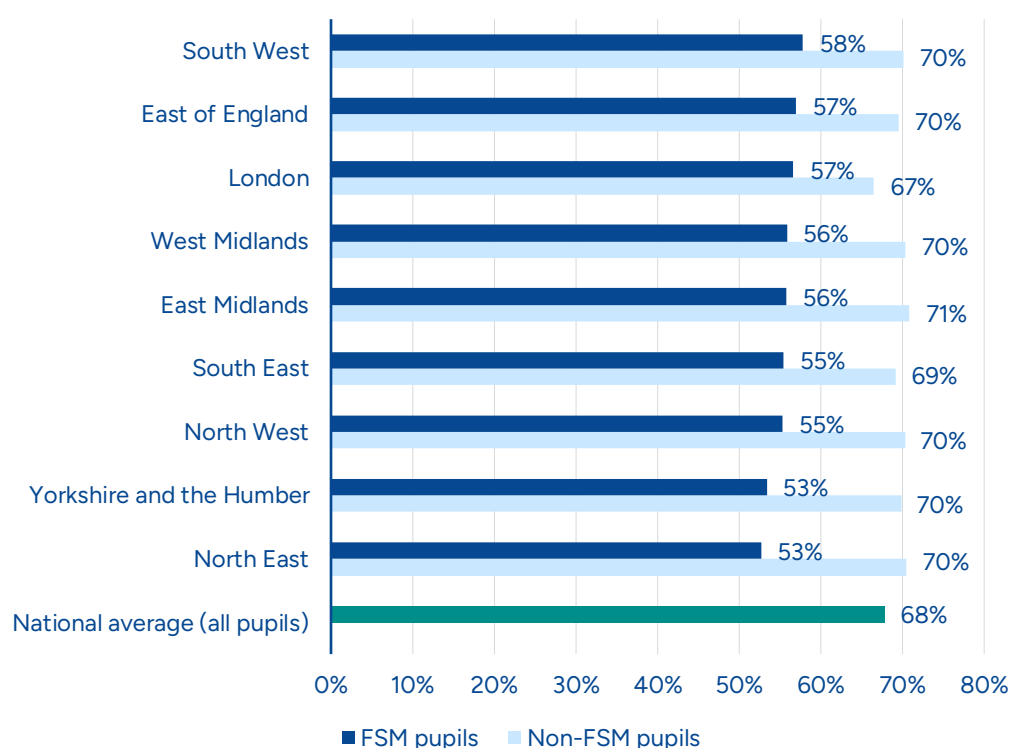
Note: Data from 2001/02 to 2006/07 GCSE cohorts, captured at age 28

When considering who reached this status by age 23, London ranked highest at 55% compared to 48% for the North East. At age 26, London and the South West ranked highest (both at 56%) with the North East still the lowest ranked region at 50%.

Focusing specifically on employment, by age 28, 58% of FSM pupils in the South West were in sustained employment, compared to 53% in both the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber. These figures compare to a national average for all pupils of 68%. Despite this, Yorkshire and the Humber has three of the 20 constituencies with the highest proportion of FSM pupils in sustained employment: Harrogate and Knaresborough (65%); York Outer (65%); and Skipton and Ripon (64%).

Income mobility

Using income data from LEO, earnings for those who attended a state school have been ranked to analyse who becomes both top (20%) and middle (50%) earners as adults. The scale of the LEO dataset, along with combining multiple cohorts to maximise statistical power, allows the most fine-grained geographical analysis of income mobility to date.

Nationally, FSM pupils are half as likely to be in the top 20% of earners at age 28, at 10% compared to 21% of non-FSM pupils. There are also stark geographical differences. An FSM pupil in Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner is six times more likely to become a top earner compared to Leeds East (25% v 6%). 48 of top 50 constituencies on this measure are in London, or areas of the South East adjacent to London, highlighting the economic power of the capital. The remaining two are in the West Midlands. However the South East also contains 11 of the bottom 50, demonstrating the level of inequality in the region. Only 4% of FSM pupils in the lowest ranked five constituencies become a top earner, and 5% do for constituencies 6 to 20. All 20 of these areas are no further south than the Midlands.

Looking at regions overall, 18% of FSM pupils from London make it into the top 20% of earners, while only 7% of those from the North East do, as well as the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber (Figure 7). Unlike in educational outcomes, London has an above average gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils of 12%. Again, the gap is largest in the South East at 14%.

1 in 10

FSM pupils end up in the top 20% of earners by age 28, compared to 1 in 5 non-FSM pupils.

Figure 7: Percentage of FSM and non-FSM pupils in top 20% of earners at age 28, by region
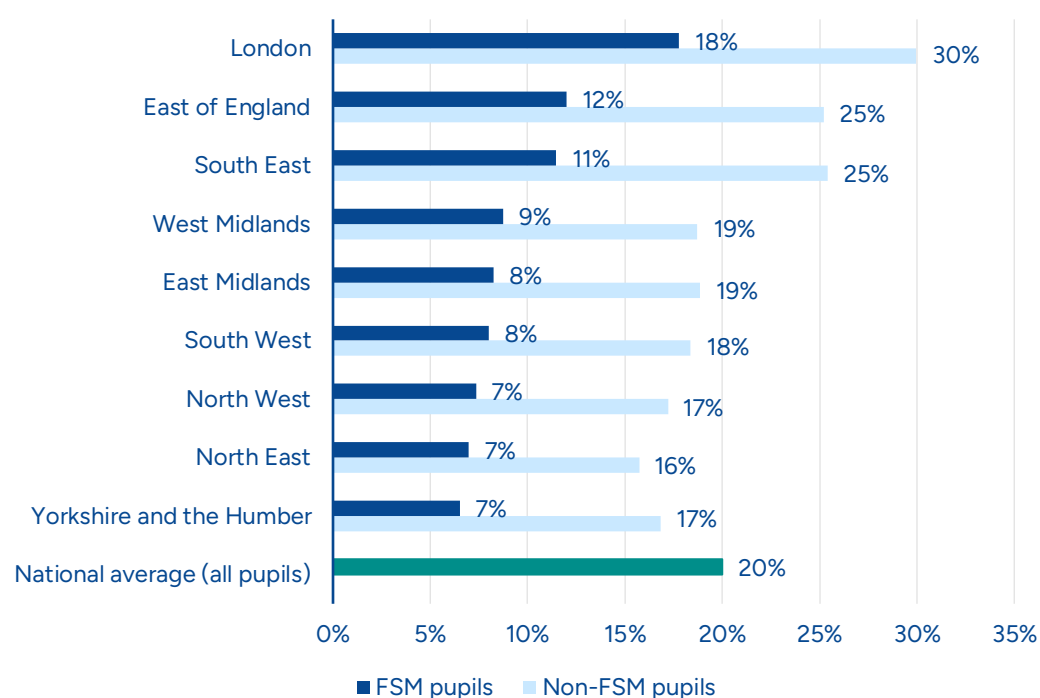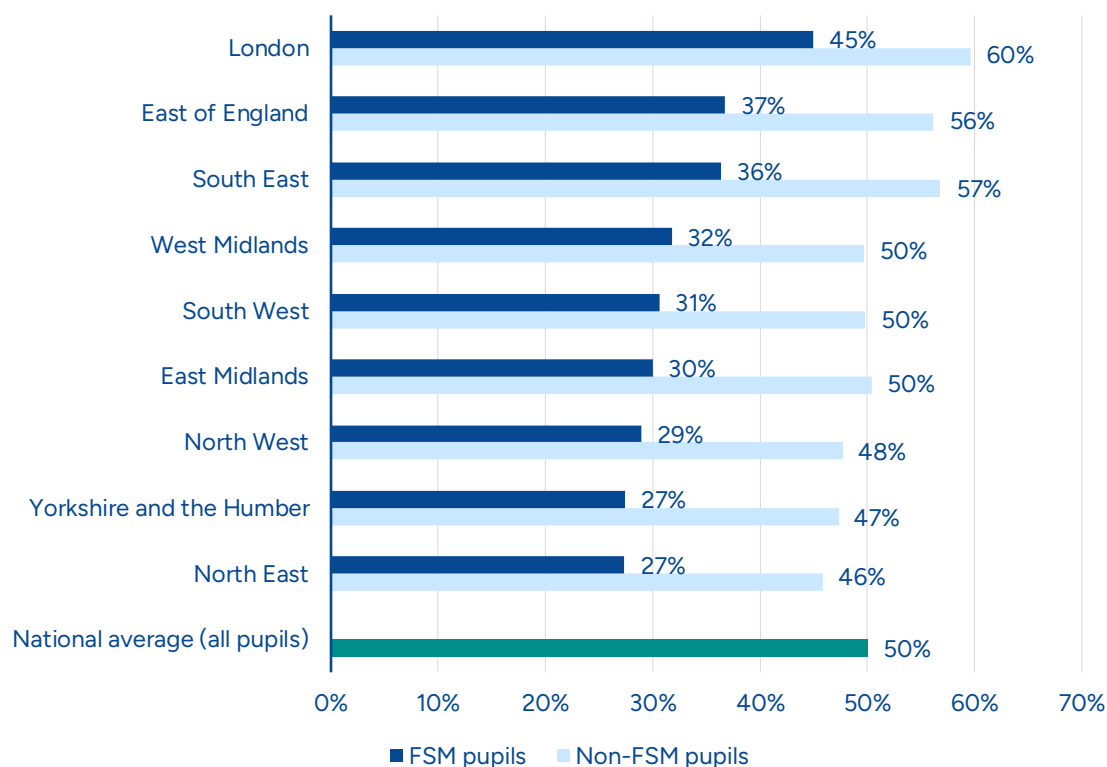

Note: Data from the 2001/02 to 2006/07 GCSE cohorts, captured at age 28

While work on income mobility often focuses on those who become the highest earners, social mobility isn't just about that. It's also about giving those from poor backgrounds an opportunity to have a good quality of life. We also looked at who earned above the median wage. Non-FSM pupils are 1.5 times more likely to become an above average earner (52% compared to 34% of FSM pupils). The region with the highest proportion is London, at 45%, and the lowest 27% in both the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber (Figure 8). The gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils is smallest in London, at 15%, but ranges between 18% and 20% in all other regions. FSM pupils are furthest behind compared to national average in the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber, at 23 percentage points.

While 54% of FSM pupils from Brentwood and Ongar (the highest ranked constituency on this measure) fall in the top 50% of national earners – that is to say more likely than the typical person nationally – only 20% of FSM pupils from Leeds East (the lowest ranked constituency) do so.

Figure 8: Percentage of FSM and non-FSM pupils in top 50% of earners at age 28, by region

Region	FSM pupils	Non-FSM pupils
London	45%	60%
East of England	37%	56%
South East	36%	57%
West Midlands	32%	50%
South West	31%	50%
East Midlands	30%	50%
North West	29%	48%
Yorkshire and the Humber	27%	47%
North East	27%	46%
National average (all pupils)	50%	

■ FSM pupils ■ Non-FSM pupils

Note: Data from the 2001/02 to 2006/07 GCSE cohorts, captured at age 28
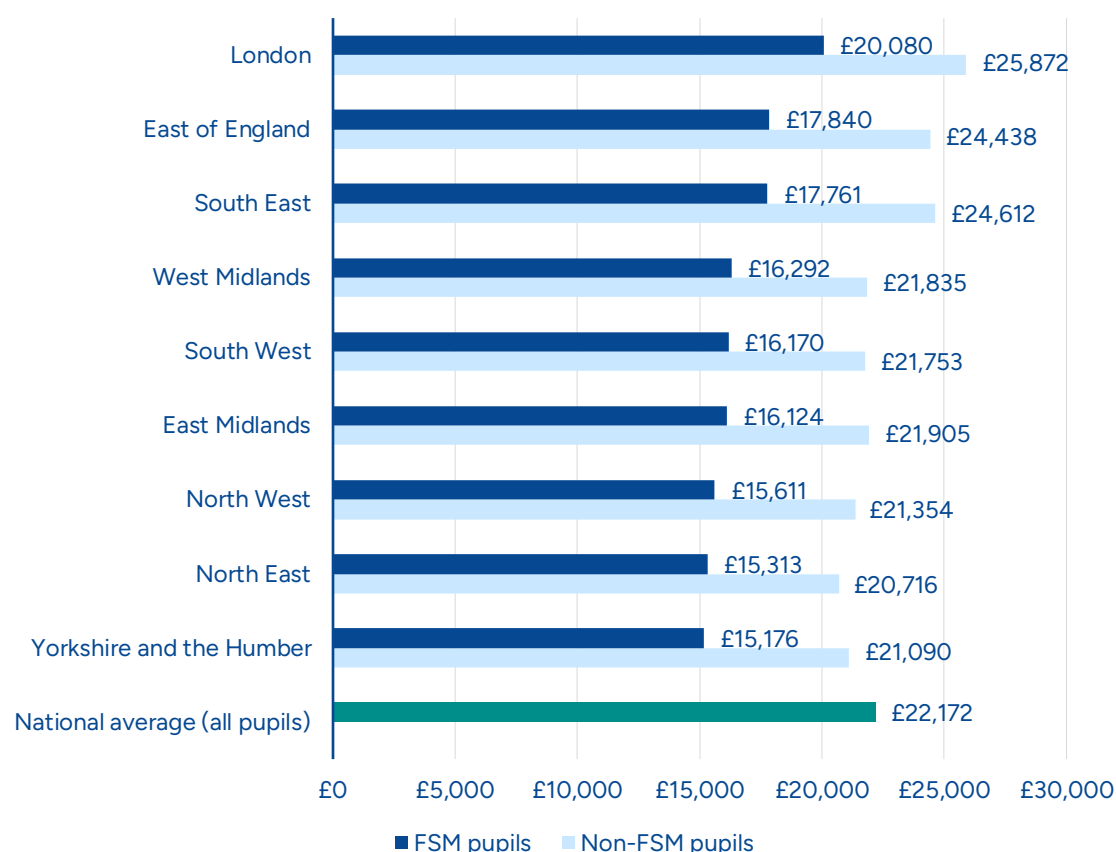
Average earnings

Nationally, average earnings (before tax) at age 28 for FSM pupils are £17,030, compared to £22,829 for non-FSM pupils – an earning gap of £5,799. This gap appears to widen with age – the gap is £3,096 at age 23 and £4,891 at age 26. This is different than the patterns seen in employment, where gaps appear consistent across cohorts at age 23, 26, and 28. Findings here reflect existing evidence of a socio-economic gap when comparing parental occupation and incomes of professional earners.

As shown by Figure 9, average earnings at age 28 are lowest for FSM pupils in Yorkshire and the Humber, at £15,176, and highest in London, at £20,080. £22,172 is the average for all pupils in England.

Average earnings for FSM pupils in London are £2,240 higher than for those in the East of England (the region with the second highest figure). The gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils in London of £5,792, not far off the national average gap of £5,799. The North East has the smallest gap of £5,403 compared to the largest gap of £6,851 in the South East.

Figure 9: Average earnings for FSM and non-FSM pupils at age 28, by region

London
FSM: £20,080
Non-FSM: £25,872

East of England
FSM: £17,840
Non-FSM: £24,438

South East
FSM: £17,761
Non-FSM: £24,612

West Midlands
FSM: £16,292
Non-FSM: £21,835

South West
FSM: £16,170
Non-FSM: £21,753

East Midlands
FSM: £16,124
Non-FSM: £21,905

North West
FSM: £15,611
Non-FSM: £21,354

North East
FSM: £15,313
Non-FSM: £20,716

Yorkshire and the Humber
FSM: £15,176
Non-FSM: £21,090

National average (all pupils)
£22,172

■ FSM pupils   ■ Non-FSM pupils

Note: Data applies to 2001/02 to 2006/07 cohorts

13 of the constituencies with the highest earnings for FSM pupils are in London. In six constituencies, FSM pupils are actually earning more on average than their non-FSM counterparts. 15 of the 20 constituencies with the lowest average earnings for FSM pupils at age 28 have earnings that are at least £8,000 below national average. None of these constituencies are further south than the midlands.

FSM pupils from the highest ranked constituency of Chatham and Aylesford have an average salary at age 28 that is just over twice as much as that of FSM pupils from the lowest ranked constituency of Leeds East, at £27,466 and £13,252 respectively.

Considering differences between male and female FSM pupils, there is national earnings gap at age 28 of £4,739 (whereby males are more likely to earn this much more than females). The gap is £5,436 for all pupils. The earnings gap between male and female FSM pupils is the largest at £6,231 in the South East and smallest in London at £3,466. While female FSM pupils on average earn the least in the North East (£12,140), male FSM pupils earn the least in Yorkshire

and the Humber (£17,282). In London, females eligible for FSM are more likely to be socially mobile into the top 20% of earners (within their own gender) than men, the opposite of all other regions.

In the highest ranked constituency for FSM earnings overall of Chatham and Aylesford, male FSM students earn on average around £24,000 more than females. While in the lowest ranked area for overall FSM earnings, Leeds East, the gap is around £4,900. The gender earnings gap tends to be narrowest in London constituencies, but one notable outlier is Clapham and Brixton Hill; here, female FSM pupils earn on average £4,558 more than male FSM pupils who, at £14,497, have the lowest average earnings for FSM males in the country.

Benefits

11% of FSM pupils in the North East are in receipt of benefits at age 28, compared to a national average of 5% for all pupils. FSM pupils are more likely to be in receipt of benefits in all nationals compared to their non-FSM counterparts (as shown in Figure 10). At least 1 in 10 FSM pupils are in receipt of benefits in 245 constituencies, and no constituencies have a figure for FSM pupils that is below national average for all pupils.

Figure 10: Percentage of FSM and non-FSM pupils in receipt of benefits at age 28, by region
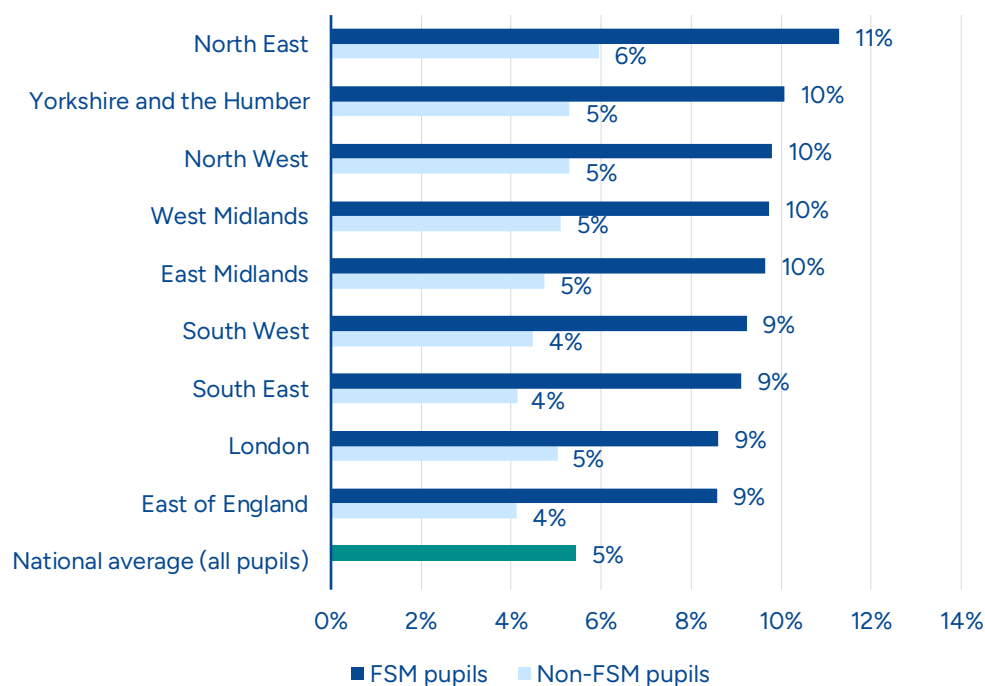
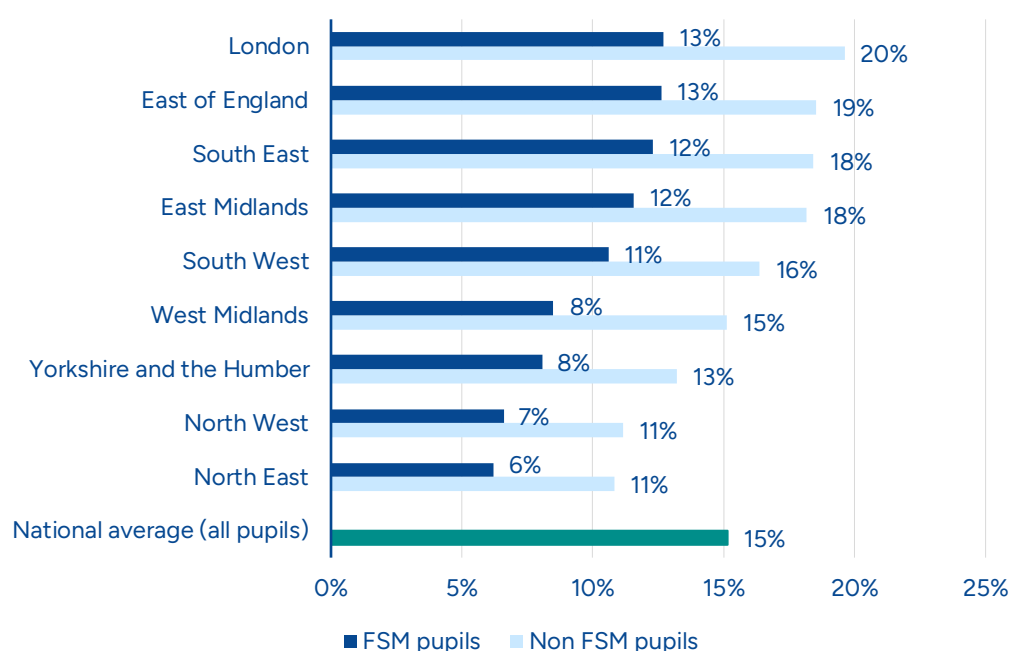Note: Data applies to 2001/02 to 2006/07 cohorts

Geographical mobility

Geographical mobility and the perceived need to leave certain types of areas in order to succeed has been a topic of significant concern. Data from this report show that patterns of geographical mobility are not as straightforward as often assumed. In particular, it is London that has the highest proportion of young people leaving the region.

13% of FSM pupils from London and the East of England have moved regions (from where they completed their key stage 4 qualifications) by age 28, compared to only 6% of those from the North East (Figure 11). FSM pupils are less likely to move than their non-FSM counterparts in all regions, with the gap between the two groups ranging from 5% in the North East; North West; and Yorkshire and the Humber, and 7% in the East Midlands, London and the West Midlands. All 20 constituencies with the lowest proportion of FSM pupils who leave their region fall in the North East (7); North West (8); and Yorkshire and the Humber (5). There was more of a geographical mix when considering constituencies who saw the most movement out of their region, but no North East or North West constituencies were within the top 20 – although Richmond and Northallerton in Yorkshire and the Humber had the third highest figure of 33% of FSM pupils leaving the region by age 28, which was the same figure seen in Epping Forest (East of England).

Over a third (37%) of FSM pupils educated in Brentwood and Ongar leave their region of the East of England by age 28, compared with the constituency where fewest leave of Manchester Central, where 3% leave the North West.

Figure 11: Percentage of FSM and non-FSM pupils who have moved regions by age 28, by region

Region	FSM pupils	Non FSM pupils
London	13%	20%
East of England	13%	19%
South East	12%	18%
East Midlands	12%	18%
South West	11%	16%
West Midlands	8%	15%
Yorkshire and the Humber	8%	13%
North West	7%	11%
North East	6%	11%
National average (all pupils)	15%	

■ FSM pupils   ■ Non FSM pupils

Note: Data from the 2001/02 to 2006/07 GCSE cohorts, captured at age 28

Looking more closely at shorter moves away from one's "home" constituency, FSM pupils from London were the most likely to have moved constituencies by age 28, at 66%, compared to 39% of those from the North East. This likely reflects the density of London and churn between areas within London. These figures compare to a national average of 52% for all pupils. FSM pupils are six percentage points less likely to move constituency compared to non-FSM pupils in the South East (47% vs 53% respectively), while in the West Midlands FSM pupils are two percentage points more likely to move, at 53% compared to 51% of non-FSM pupils.

Differences by Area Characteristics

Geography

As the analysis above has suggested here are significant geographical divides in opportunity in England. 48 of the top 50 constituencies in our Index are urban in nature. But as are 30 of the bottom 50. Simple urban and rural categories hide a more complicated picture. Using the House of Commons Library/Centre for Towns classification sheds more light, particularly on the divide between London and other cities. As shown in Table 4, while London dominates the top 50, 21 of the bottom 50 come from non-London cities, while

25 are based around towns. Only 4 town-based constituencies make the top 50. Rural areas tend to fall in the middle.

Table 4: Opportunity Index ranking, by town and city classification

Town and city group	Average rank	% of constituencies in group in Top fifty	% of constituencies in group in Bottom fifty
Core City (London)	61	56%	0%
Village or smaller	282	0%	4%
Medium Town	288	2%	11%
Small Town	315	2%	4%
Large Town	319	1%	9%
Core City (outside London)	323	5%	31%
Other City	327	4%	15%

Geographical mobility

In general, areas where more people left their region in their twenties scored higher on the Opportunity Index. Those where the highest proportion of FSM eligible young people moved away ranked on average 203, compared to 352 in the areas where fewest moved (Table 5). Differences were less dramatic than other measures however. The main differentiation was in the bottom of the ranking, rather than the top, where 23 of the bottom 50 ranked areas were areas with fewest FSM pupils leaving.

Table 5. Opportunity Index ranking, by geographic mobility

Geographic mobility group	Average rank	% of constituencies in group in Top fifty	% of constituencies in group in Bottom fifty
1 – Least mobile	352	6%	21%
2	281	9%	9%
3	281	9%	6%
4	243	9%	4%
5 – Most mobile	203	13%	6%

Ethnicity

As shown in Table 6, areas with higher rates of ethnic minority young people tended to score higher. In areas with the highest numbers of ethnic minorities, the average ranking was 114, in the lowest it was 348. Areas with high numbers dominate the top fifty. The bottom fifty is more evenly spread, but tends to have areas with lower numbers of ethnic minority young people. The picture using English as an additional language as a measure is very similar. While London is a significant driver of this relationship, as many of the areas with high rates of ethnic minorities are in the capital, the association is still clear if you take London out of the equation. For all constituencies, the correlation between ethnic minority rate and the Opportunity Index score is 0.672. With London excluded, it is 0.338.

Table 6: Opportunity Index ranking, by ethnic diversity

Ethnic diversity group	Average rank	% of constituencies in group in Top fifty	% of constituencies in group in Bottom fifty
5 – Highest ethnic diversity	114	44%	3%
4	262	2%	8%
3	323	1%	13%
2	311	0%	10%
1 – Lowest ethnic diversity	348	0%	12%

Deprivation and Child poverty

Areas with higher levels of deprivation tend to have lower levels of opportunity for those who live there. For example, looking at child poverty, in areas with the lowest child poverty rates, the average ranking was 181, in the highest, it is 330 (Table 7). 31 of the bottom 50 constituencies for opportunity are in areas in the top 40% for child poverty. Looking at area deprivation using the Index of Multiple Deprivation tells a similar story. However, London has some areas with high deprivation which also score well. When removing London, the correlation of area deprivation with Opportunity Index score rises from 0.193 to 0.361.
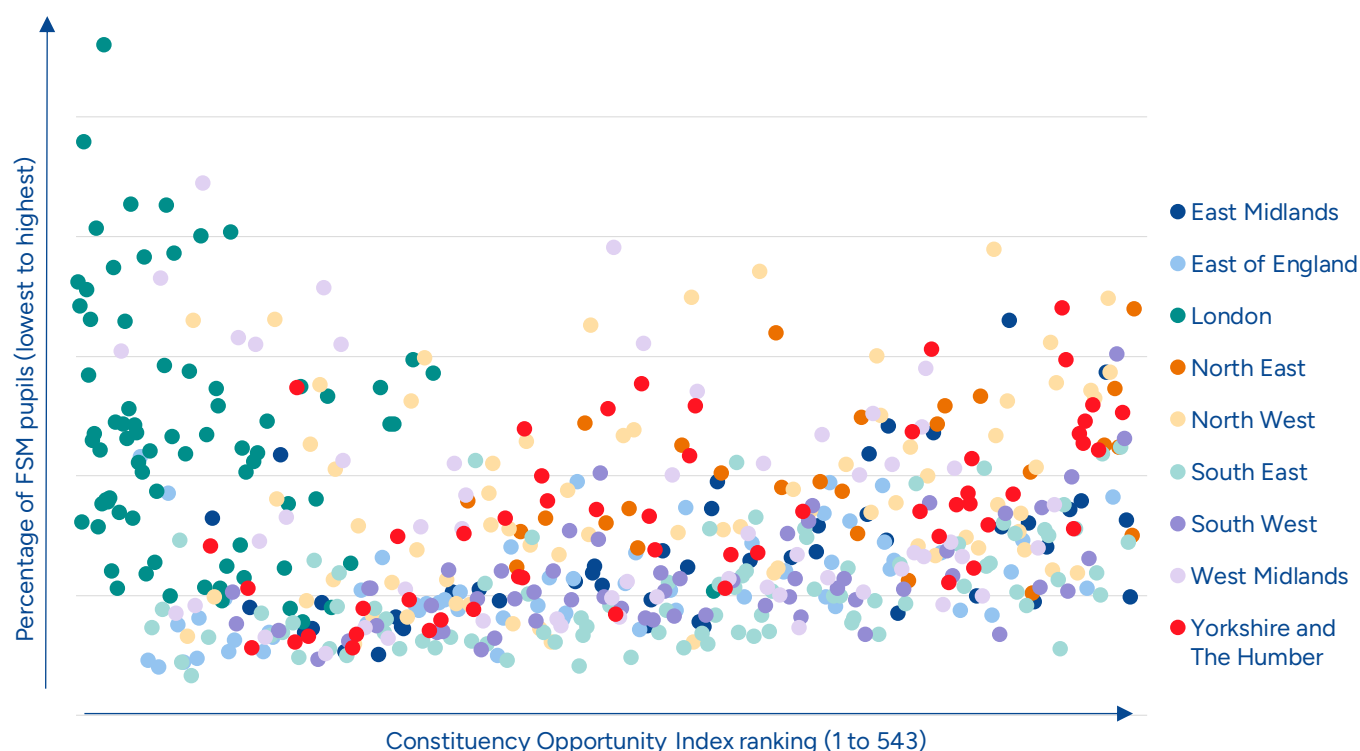
Table 7: Opportunity Index ranking, by child poverty

Child poverty group	Average rank	% of constituencies in group in Top fifty	% of constituencies in group in Bottom fifty
1 – Lowest child poverty	181	12%	2%
2	259	7%	7%
3	262	12%	8%
4	327	10%	11%
5 – Highest child poverty	330	5%	18%

Almost all subdomains of the Index of Multiple Deprivation are correlated with the Opportunity Index score, including income, employment, health, education, skills and training, barriers to housing and services, and the living environment. The one exception, interestingly, is crime. However, with London removed, there is a negative correlation, albeit weak.

A U-shaped correlation pattern appears when looking at the Opportunity Index and proportion of FSM pupils in each constituency. As shown by Figure 12, London-based constituencies (in the dark teal colour) are concentrated at the higher end of the Opportunity Index, but many areas are concentrated in the top left of the scatterplot, showing they also have a high share of FSM pupils in their constituency. In the top right section of the plot, more constituencies from the North of England are concentrated, indicating they have lower rankings on the Index but high proportions of FSM pupils in their area.

Figure 12: Opportunity Index ranking, by proportion of FSM pupils in the constituency

Legend:
- East Midlands
- East of England
- London
- North East
- North West
- South East
- South West
- West Midlands
- Yorkshire and The Humber

Y-axis: Percentage of FSM pupils (lowest to highest)

X-axis: Constituency Opportunity Index ranking (1 to 543)

Health

Levels of health in a constituency are also strongly associated with life chances. Using a measure of disability (long-term illness which limits daily activities) as a proxy for the health of the local population, in the areas with lowest disability levels the average ranking was 100 (Table 8). In areas with the highest, the average was 396. 44 of the top 50 have among the lowest levels of disability. 22 of the bottom 50 have the highest. A similar pattern is seen when looking at the Health Deprivation measure within the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Again, London is part of the story here, but not the full story. The correlation of poor health with Opportunity Index score is -0.621 for all constituencies, and -0.473 outside London.

Table 8: Opportunity Index ranking, by levels of disability

Disability group	Average rank	% of constituencies in group in Top fifty	% of constituencies in group in Bottom fifty
1 – Lowest levels of disability	100	41%	0%
2	238	4%	6%
3	305	2%	10%
4	320	0%	10%
5 – Highest levels of disability	396	0%	20%

Opportunity Index and UK Parliament

41 of the top 50 constituencies were won by the Labour Party in 2024, with 5 by Conservative, 3 Liberal Democrat and 1 Independent. 40 of the bottom fifty were also won by Labour, with 6 conservative, 2 Liberal Democrat and 2 Reform UK. The average ranking of the 5 seats won by Reform was the lowest, at 423, with Labour the next closest on 285. As Table 9 shows, Labour are over-represented at both ends of the opportunity spectrum. 12% of their seats are in the top fifty and the bottom fifty, compared to 4% and 5% respectively for the Conservatives. Seats with lower levels of opportunity were more likely to change hands in 2024. In particular, the average rank of seats Labour gained from the Conservatives was 315, and Reform 424 (all their seats were new).

Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Holborn and St Pancras constituency is ranked 50th, Leader of the Opposition Kemi Badenoch's North West Essex constituency is ranked 99th, Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey's constituency in Kingston and Surbiton is 75th, while Reform UK leader Nigel Farage's constituency Clacton is ranked 532nd. The Green Party's co-leaders Carla Denyer and Adrian Ramsay represent constituencies ranked 206 and 149 respectively.

Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education, represents Houghton and Sunderland South, ranked 464, while her opposite number Laura Trott (a Sutton Trust programme alumna) represents Sevenoaks, ranked 540th.

Table 9: Opportunity Index ranking, by party

Party	Seats	Average rank	% of constituencies in group in Top fifty	% of constituencies in group in Bottom fifty
Independent	5	129	20%	0%
Liberal Democrats	65	232	5%	3%
Green	4	252	0%	0%
Conservatives	116	256	4%	5%
Labour	347	285	12%	12%
Reform UK	5	424	0%	40%

Discussion

The findings presented here show clearly that opportunity in this country is heavily shaped by both individual socio-economic factors *and* geography. It is not just the circumstances of your own family that shape your life chances, but also importantly the part of the country where you grew up.

While universally, students from lower income families (measured here by FSM eligibility) fare worse in education and employment outcomes than their better-off peers, barriers to opportunity are also heavily impacted by place. Indeed, all of the top 20 constituencies on our Opportunity Index are in London, whereas no London areas even fall into the lowest ranked 200 constituencies. While 41% of low-income students going to school in Stratford and Bow in London go on to university, just 3% do the same in Bristol North-West. And low income pupils from Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner in London are six times more likely to be in the top 20% of earners by age 28 than the same group of students from Leeds East.

And while there are some notable successes outside of London and the surrounding areas - for example Birmingham Perry Barr, Birmingham Yardley, Altrincham and Sale West (on the outskirts of Manchester) or Manchester Rusholme, all of which score well in the Opportunity Index – opportunity remains far too concentrated in the country's largest city.

Findings here echo similar results from work in the US, in which Raj Chetty's team found that opportunities for social mobility there are also highly geographically segregated. While the chance of a child reaching the top of the income distribution when starting in a family at the bottom is just 4% in Charlotte in North Carolina, the figure is 13% in San Jose in California.[5] Across Western countries, there are deep regional divides in opportunity.

What can be done to widen opportunity?

The Opportunity Index shows the considerable scale of the challenge ahead for the government's Opportunity Mission. While there have been some positive initial announcements as part of that mission, for example an increase in the Early Years Pupil Premium, much more substantive change is needed to address the stark divides shown in this research.

In the education system

As seen in the findings outlined here, young people from lower income homes underperform in the education system, with considerable regional variation in their outcomes. There should be a renewed national focus from government on closing the attainment gap between lower-income children and their peers, taking geographic place into account.

These gaps open up early, before children have even started at school. High quality early education, accessible to all, would help to prevent these gaps from opening. However, existing early education and childcare entitlements are not available to many children in lower income families. Equalising access to these hours, by making at least 20 hours of provision available to all three- and four-year-olds, alongside efforts to improve quality, would do a great deal to widen opportunity. More information on options for reform of early education, as well as other wider support for young children, can be found in our recent policy briefing.

Looking at the school system itself, a change that could be made at no additional cost to government is rebalancing the National Funding Formula back towards schools serving the most disadvantaged communities, while also taking persistent disadvantage into account to address entrenched poverty. Alongside this funding change, incentivising the best teachers to work in the most disadvantaged schools, funding for evidenced based interventions like tutoring, restoring pupil premium funding in real terms and expanding it to cover students in post-16 institutions would all help to even up opportunities for children and young people from poorer homes. But children cannot learn effectively if they're hungry. While the government's ongoing rollout of breakfast clubs is positive, more needs to be done to end hunger in schools. Expanding free school meal eligibility to all children on Universal Credit would be a cost-effective way to widen eligibility to the children that need it. For

more detail on how the attainment gap can be closed in schools, see our [recent policy briefing](#).

Looking to later parts of a young person's time in education and training, steps should be taken to increase the supply of apprenticeships at all levels – with a particular focus on lower income young people. This should include incentives for employers to increase supply, to make taking on an apprentice more appealing to employers, particularly targeted at young apprentices. Finally, in higher education, the government should redouble efforts on university access, with a strong focus on socio-economic disadvantage. Renewed efforts should include stronger regulatory expectations, including the use of targets, and making a greater range of levers available to the Office for Students (OfS) to act where universities are not making sufficient progress.

In the wider economy

As well as education policy changes, any strategy to promote social mobility must also create the economic and social conditions necessary for opportunity to thrive. A wide range of international evidence shows that it is more difficult to be socially mobile in a more unequal society.[6] Areas with higher levels of deprivation tend to have lower levels of opportunity for those who live there, as do areas with higher levels of poor health. Such findings add important context on the many factors that shape social mobility outside of the education system, including factors not explored here, such as social capital.[7] Addressing these challenges requires an economy-wide approach to creating a fairer society, which should include tackling child poverty, health inequalities and economic growth. Some of these issues are explored in greater detail in the Sutton Trust's policy briefing on social mobility which accompanies this report.

Data here clearly shows the dominance of London in the country's economy, and subsequently the impact this has on opportunity. It has also shown that moving away is associated with higher chances of social mobility for those from lower income homes. While young people from all backgrounds should have the option to move to follow opportunities, and that mobility should, as far as is practicable, be enabled (for example, by government providing adequate maintenance support for undergraduate students to allow them to live away from home), it should not be a *requirement* for social mobility. Young people should not be forced to move far away from their communities to have access to opportunity - and if they are, it will always act as a limit for those unable or unwilling to leave their families and wider networks, which will in turn prevent the country from benefitting from their talent and potential. While it may be reasonable for a young person to move or commute from a small village or town outside of Leeds into the city centre – requiring them to move almost

"Any strategy to promote social mobility must also create the economic and social conditions necessary for opportunity to thrive. It is more difficult to be socially mobile in a more unequal society."

200 miles to seek out opportunity in London should not be the only route for those looking to get on.

Social mobility can only improve nationwide if there is a more even spread of economic opportunity across the country. The example of London shows that higher levels of opportunity and mobility can be achieved in this country. Exactly how to spread economic growth more evenly is a topic of wide-ranging debate. Some have argued that increased devolution, if done in the right way, could aid regional growth.[8] Others have made the case for increased regional investment,[9] including in public transport,[10] to help more people access available economic opportunities. To truly break down the barriers to opportunity, significant investment is needed in education and elsewhere, particularly in the most deprived parts of the country. Without this, the prospects of the current and even future generations of young people will be limited.

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