



University
of Exeter

South-West Social
Mobility Commission

BREAKING GROUND

SWSMC Annual Report 2025

July 2025

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University of Exeter



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Foreword

I am delighted to have been asked to succeed Sir Michael Barber as Chair of the South-West Social Mobility Commission, although Sir Michael is not an easy act to follow. I have been involved with the Commission from its inception and – frankly speaking – nothing is more important to me than trying to improve the futures of the young people who are and will be growing up in the South West in the years to come.

From the statistics in this report, as in our two previous reports, it is evident that we are as a society failing to ensure that our young people have the best possible opportunity to realise their aspirations for themselves as well as for society at large. We can either choose to ignore the facts and do nothing or we can look to try and encourage the changes that will make a difference to the young people growing up here.

There is an economic imperative for this as well as a moral one. These young people are the workforce of the future. Our businesses need a pipeline of highly motivated, highly skilled workers to fill the jobs that exist today and that will be created in the future. I want every young person growing up in the South West to have a line of sight to opportunity; to develop in a way that provides them with the academic, vocational and soft skills required for the world of work and life in general; to have hope; and to believe that they can and will fulfil their potential.

That is why I am delighted to be taking on the role of Chair of the Commission.

Moving forward, I would like our focus and priorities for the next phase of the Commission to be:

- Developing a manifesto for improving opportunity across key domains, with a series of commitments backed by our Commissioners – from housing to health; public transport to parenting;
- Continuing our trialling and scale-up of the innovative models and tools we have developed for the education sector and extending this work into the employment sphere.

The data suggests there is still lots of work to do – but there are some reasons to be optimistic too:

- Plymouth school outcomes have seen transformational change since 2019, from amongst the worst in the peninsula to close to or above national average across the age phases. ‘The Plymouth story’ chapter in this report highlights what can be achieved with collaboration and shared objectives around ‘every child’, together with strong multi-academy trusts.
- The proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ students gaining a Level 2 English and maths qualification by age 19 (essentially GCSE re-takes or alternatives when at college/sixth form) has increased substantially over the past five years – at the national level and in the South West.
- New longitudinal data suggests employment outcomes in the South West are good compared to elsewhere. The region had the highest figures in the country for young adults who had grown up eligible for Free School Meals in employment, an apprenticeship or education at age 28. Wage data suggests earnings for this group of young adults are roughly middling compared to other parts of the country.
- Finally, results from new social mobility questions added to LiveWest’s survey of over 1,000 South-West residents suggest that respondents in the region are much more likely to be optimistic about fairness of opportunity than the general population of the UK.



I am proud of the Commission's achievements to date:

- Catalysing change by others, including helping other organisations to secure over £1 million in funding for projects focused on regional opportunities thanks to the evidence gathered in our reports;
- Developing a South-West first approach to trialling and scaling innovative models and tools, including our university-led Exeter Tutoring Model and Equity Scorecard tool for schools;
- Acting as trailblazers for a regional approach to social mobility.

This year, we were pleased to present to the Department for Education's Opportunity Mission team in London, as they consider how best to approach one of the government's central missions. The Social Market Foundation's 2025 report *Leave to Achieve* meanwhile placed our regional model at the heart of its recommendations. Calling for the establishment of Regional Social Mobility Commissions across the country, it highlighted the South-West Social Mobility Commission (SWSMC) as a case study and blueprint for how such commissions could work nationwide.

We need to continue showing young people the opportunities that are available in the region – and even more so with major new investments in the region that have been occurring. This will be the focus of our 2025 Annual Event.

I look forward to building on the strong foundations laid so far and taking the Commission's work forward into a new phase.

Karl Tucker

Chair, South-West Social Mobility Commission





Executive Summary

Looking at pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) in the South West, the latest data suggests that in some key areas, outcomes might be improving in the post-pandemic era. However, school attendance and primary school outcomes remain critical concerns.

- In the early years, 48% of FSM eligible 5-year-olds in the South West met all Early Learning Goals in 2024 – a shade under the England average of 50% and a significant improvement on the previous year when the region had the worst outcomes in the country (at 46%). This uptick in outcomes is promising, although we need to be cautious in our interpretation of year-on-year changes, as they can reflect natural fluctuation as much as anything else.
- Primary school outcomes show a small year-on-year improvement. 39% of ‘disadvantaged’ 11-year-olds reached expected levels in reading, writing and maths, compared with 38% in 2023.¹ However, this is still well below pre-pandemic levels (46% in 2019) and the South West remains the region with the lowest attainment in the country on this measure.
- At secondary level, outcomes for the cohort of pupils who started secondary school when the pandemic hit appear to be largely unchanged from the year before and in line with 2019 (pre-pandemic) figures. 40% of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils in the South West attained a grade 4 or above in English and maths GCSE, compared with 44% nationally.
- Attendance remains a stubborn challenge: the South West continues to have the worst attendance figures of all regions. 17% of secondary school sessions were missed by FSM eligible pupils in the region last year, compared with 14% nationally.² At primary level, 9% of school sessions were missed by FSM eligible pupils regionally, compared with just over 8% nationally.
- At post-16 level, there appears to have been a bounce back in attainment in 2023 from the very poor 2022 figures we reported on in last year’s Annual Report. This has been followed by a levelling out in 2024.
- 55% of ‘disadvantaged’ students in the South West attained a Level 2 (GCSE-equivalent) qualification in English and maths by age 19 in 2024. This is up from 49% in 2019, tracking the significant improvement in attainment of these qualifications seen nationally (which it should be noted has taken place in the absence of an improvement at age 16). The South West does relatively well in terms of this measure, ranking fifth of nine English regions.
- The picture for Level 3 attainment (which includes A-levels, advanced apprenticeships, diplomas, certificates and National Vocational Qualifications) is not so positive. Roughly a third (32%) of ‘disadvantaged’ students in the South West attained a Level 3 qualification by age 19 – the same proportion as in 2019 and the second-lowest proportion of all regions.
- As in previous years, we see more young people in the South West pursuing employment and apprenticeship pathways than education after their GCSE and 16-18 study. The region continues to have to have the lowest proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ young people progressing to higher education (19%, compared to 29% nationally).
- New longitudinal data capturing the early career outcomes of those who were aged 28 in the 2010s suggests positive results for the South West. The region had the highest proportion of young adults from a Free School Meals background being in sustained employment, an apprenticeship or education at age 28, at 58%.
- Earnings outcomes for the same group of young adults suggest income opportunities in the South West are roughly middling compared with other regions – in line with the East and West Midlands, behind those in southern regions but ahead of those in northern regions.

¹ ‘Disadvantaged’ pupils are defined by the Department for Education as those who have been eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) at any point in the last six years, or who are, or have been, looked after by the local authority.

² According to the Department for Education, a session is equivalent to half a day of school.



Within the South-West peninsula:

- Somerset is a concern across all phases. Early years, primary and secondary outcomes are all well below national and regional averages.
- Plymouth now performs strongly across the phases from the early years through to GCSE – a turnaround from 5–6 years ago when outcomes were amongst the worst in the region. Outcomes for ‘disadvantaged’ children at ages 5 and 11 are above the national average. At GCSE, the proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils gaining a 4 or above in English and maths is the highest in the peninsula, although still slightly below national average; at 41% this represents a rise of almost 10% since 2019 when it was the lowest in the peninsula. Post-GCSE attainment has also risen significantly since 2019 and apprenticeships remain an important pathway in Plymouth.

We explore the improvement in outcomes seen in Plymouth in a later chapter: ‘The Plymouth Story’.

- Torbay presents something of a tale of two halves, with good outcomes for younger age groups that aren’t sustained into secondary school. Early years outcomes are the best in the peninsula and exceed the England average. At the end of primary school, outcomes are still in line with the national average and higher than most other parts of the South West. However, by the end of secondary school, outcomes are well below even the South West average and this trend continues into post-16 study. Notably, absence rates amongst FSM eligible pupils are among the highest in the country – with almost 1 in 5 secondary school sessions being missed.
- Outcomes in Cornwall are, for the most part, slightly better than the South-West average (but below the national average) across the phases, with a few exceptions. GCSE attainment for ‘disadvantaged’ students is a shade under the regional average. Level 3 attainment is the highest in the peninsula, but 16–18 outcomes have declined since 2019. And while Cornwall has fractionally more ‘disadvantaged’ students in the peninsula going on to higher education (20%), it has lower numbers sustaining an education, apprenticeship or employment destination after GCSE and 16–18 study.

- Outcomes in Devon are mixed across the phases. Primary school outcomes are a particular concern, with just 36% of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils reaching expected levels in reading, writing and maths at age 11. However, GCSE outcomes are roughly in line with the South West average and Level 2 English and maths attainment at age 19 is above the regional average (at 56%). Attainment of a Level 3 qualification is lowest amongst peninsula local authorities (at 30%), while progression to higher education (14%) is also amongst the lowest in the region.

The new South-West Opportunity Barometer suggests that **South-West residents are relatively positive about opportunities to progress.**

- 71% of the South-West residents surveyed agreed that everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and hard work will take them, compared with 35% of people nationally.
- More than half (58%) of South-West residents think opportunities to progress are good in their area compared to other parts of the UK, although this figure is lowest for 18–24-year-olds (51%).
- The biggest barrier to young people succeeding in life is a lack of job opportunities (cited by 34% of respondents), followed by low wages (cited by 17%) and poor transport (13%).



At a glance

All indicators show averages and corresponding rankings based on outcomes for those eligible for Free School Meals or identified as 'disadvantaged'. Rank is always shown in terms of best outcomes (i.e. for 'In receipt of benefits – age 28', ranking is from lowest to highest). Arrows show direction of travel relative to previous year's performance.

Indicator – for FSM eligible/ 'disadvantaged'	Year of data	SW rank out of 9 regions	SW average	England average	SW average (+ rank) previous year	Top SW peninsula local authority	Bottom SW peninsula local authority
Expected level of development (EYFS) – age 5	2024	6th ↑	48% ↑	50%	46% (9th)	Torbay (53%)	Somerset (46%)
Expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined) – age 11	2024	9th ↔	39% ↑	46%	38% (9th)	Plymouth (48%)	Somerset (36%)
Grade 4+ in English and maths GCSE – age 16	2024	7th ↔	40% ↔	44%	40% (7th)	Plymouth (41%)	Torbay (36%)
Level 2 in English and maths – age 19	2024 ³	5th ↓	55% ↓	57%	58% (4th)	Plymouth (58%)	Torbay (52%)
Level 3 qualification – age 19	2024 ⁴	8th ↓	32% ↓	39%	34% (7th)	Cornwall (32%)	Devon (30%)
Progression to higher education	2023	9th ↔	19% ↔	29%	19% (9th)	Cornwall (20%)	Somerset (14%)
Sustained education, apprenticeship or employment – age 28	2012 – 2019	1st	58%	-	-	-	-
Average earnings – age 28	2012 – 2019	5th	£16,170	-	-	-	-
In top 50% of earners – age 28	2012 – 2019	5th	31%	-	-	-	-
In top 20% of earners – age 28	2012 – 2019	5th	8%	-	-	-	-
In receipt of benefits – age 28	2012 – 2019	4th	9%	-	-	-	-

³ Note that in last year's Annual Report (2024), we reported on 2022 outcomes for this indicator. In 2023, South West outcomes for this indicator improved significantly. Here we report 2024 outcomes, which have fallen slightly since 2023.

⁴ As above.



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Introduction

The South-West Social Mobility Commission was established two-and-a-half years ago to help address the stark differences in life prospects being faced by children and young people from under-resourced backgrounds across the South-West peninsula.

Young people from under-resourced backgrounds face systematic barriers to opportunity at every life-stage. And these barriers to opportunity vary by place. Across Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, a combination of geographic disconnectedness, a low-wage economy and a lack of impetus for change contribute to the region having some of the lowest education outcomes in the country for learners eligible for Free School Meals.⁵

We believe this needs to change. Our vision is to drive transformational change in education and early career outcomes for these young people, and be a trailblazer for a regional approach to improving social mobility.

To this end, we have 4 life-stage goals:

- **Early Years (0-5):** Every infant develops healthily and meets Early Years foundation goals so that they are ready for school.
- **School (5-16):** Every child finishes school with foundational English and maths, a broad education and a plan for 16-18 study or training.
- **FE/training (16-18):** Every young person is equipped with the skills employers need now and in the future, the qualifications required to progress and a plan for the next three years.
- **Early Career (18-25):** Every adult is working towards a further or higher level qualification or in a job with training that lead to skilled employment with decent pay.⁶

In this third South-West Social Mobility Commission Annual Report we aim to provide:

- **Key outcomes data for the region.** As in previous years, we present an update on the key measures reported upon in previous reports using the latest available data – with the aim of holding the region to account on its social mobility record.
- **The Plymouth Story – a case study of how outcomes in the city have transformed over the past five years.** Education outcomes data from 2019 to 2024 show a clear upward trajectory in attainment for pupils eligible for Free School Meals in Plymouth. Through interviews with those involved in its transformation, we present a story of how improvement across the city was driven.
- **South-West Opportunity Barometer – results from a survey of South-West residents.** Over 1,000 LiveWest residents, mainly those living in social and affordable rented homes, have responded to questions about what they think of opportunities to progress in the region. We have analysed the results and show how opinions vary by age.
- **A new chapter for the Commission.** Exciting changes are afoot in the Commission. We announce a new Chair for the Commission and present our priorities for the next three years. Alongside this, we provide an update on the work we have been doing as a ‘do-tank’ with a ‘South-West-first’ approach – trialling innovative initiatives in the region as proof of concept for wider scale-up.

⁵ The drivers of low social mobility in the region are explored in more detail in our 2022 report *Social Mobility in the South West*, available at: https://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/newsarchive/researchgeneral/Social_Mobility_in_the_South_West_Report.pdf

⁶ We recognise that individual differences may mean this is not possible for every person. However a realistic goal might be 95-100%.



Key outcomes data for the region

Our Annual Report presents a regional and intra-regional comparison of the latest education and early career outcomes for children from under-resourced backgrounds across different age-stages.

We look at a set of key education and early career indicators that align with our four life-stage goals.

For most indicators (for example, GCSE attainment), we look at outcomes data for 'disadvantaged' pupils – a technical term defined by the Department for Education as those who have been eligible for Free School Meals (FSM eligible) at any point in the last six years, or who are, or have been, looked after by the local authority. For some indicators (for example, early years development), we use 'FSM eligible', which will be a slightly narrower subset of the same population.

As outlined in previous reports, FSM is a narrow and binary socio-economic marker that won't capture the full extent of disadvantage being experienced by students and families. Nevertheless, FSM status is still a useful way of capturing outcomes data for a sub-section of learners. This is important because headline outcomes can conceal the poor outcomes being achieved by this group of learners – particularly in the South West. If we don't look at these outcomes separately, we can lose sight of the fact that the education system isn't serving all pupils equitably.

In the academic year 2023-24, 2.1 million pupils were identified as being 'disadvantaged' nationally – 27% of the 7.7 million total pupil population. In the South West, 160,000 pupils were identified as being 'disadvantaged' – 22% of the region's 715,000 total pupil population.

The regional data we present in this report is based on the Office for National Statistics' definition of nine English regions. The South West region has a geographic reach that extends up to South Gloucestershire and across to Wiltshire, meaning

it includes areas beyond the SWSMC's scope of the South-West peninsula. For each measure, we include data for Cornwall, Devon, Plymouth, Somerset and Torbay to show outcomes in the peninsula relative to outcomes in the wider South West.

Early Years (ages 0 – 5)

Expected level of development, age 5

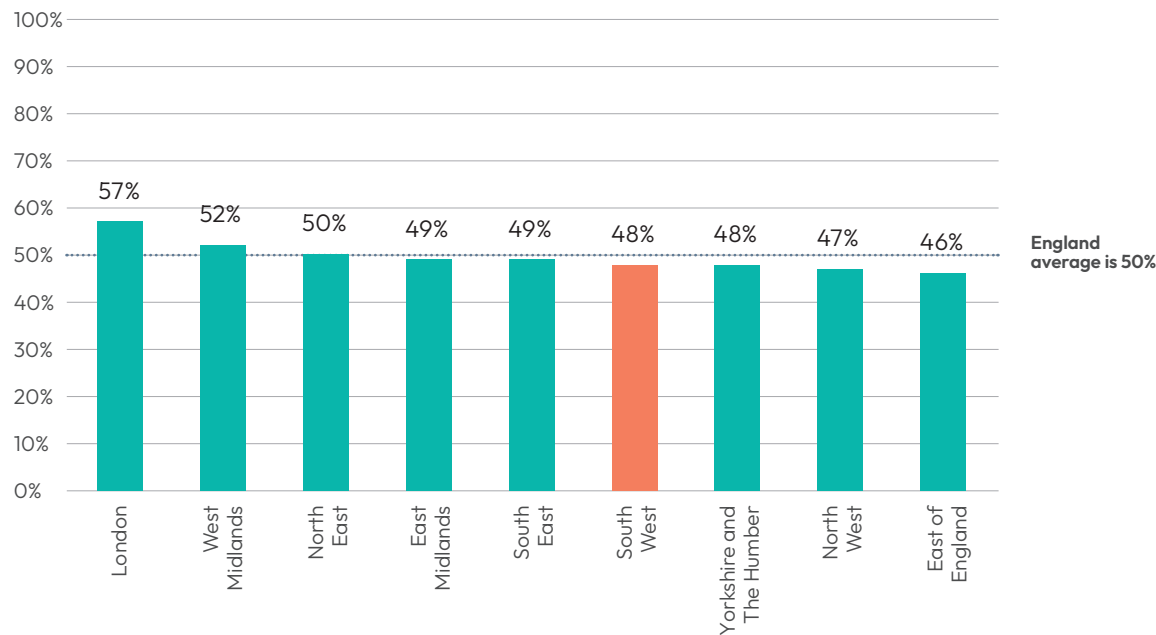
In the early years, a key national and regional outcomes measure is the proportion of children reaching expected levels across a set of specified Early Learning Goals (ELGs). The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) profile is a statutory assessment of children's development at the end of their reception year. Each child is assessed on whether they are meeting the expected level of development against 17 ELGs across 7 areas of learning some of which include: communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; physical development; maths; and literacy.

The SWSMC looks at this outcomes measure for children who are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). In 2024, 48.4% of children in the South West eligible for FSM were at the expected level across all ELGs, up from 46.1% last year. While London (57%) and to a lesser extent the West Midlands (52%) stand out, the South West's outcomes put it in the middle of the remaining seven regions which have outcomes ranging from 46% to 50%. This represents a significant improvement compared with last year when it was ninth of nine regions. This uptick in outcomes is promising, although we need to be cautious in our interpretation of year-on-year changes, as they can reflect natural fluctuation as much as anything else.



Figure 1 Percentage of FSM eligible children at expected level across all Early Learning Goals, by region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025



Within the South West, Torbay (53%) and Plymouth (52%) stand out, both exceeding the national average. Cornwall (50%) and Devon (49%) both exceed the South West average, while Somerset (46%) lags behind.

Looking at parliamentary constituencies (Figure 3), Taunton Deane has a particularly low proportion of FSM eligible children reaching expected levels (38%).

Figure 2 Percentage of FSM eligible children at expected level across all Early Learning Goals, by peninsula local authority

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025

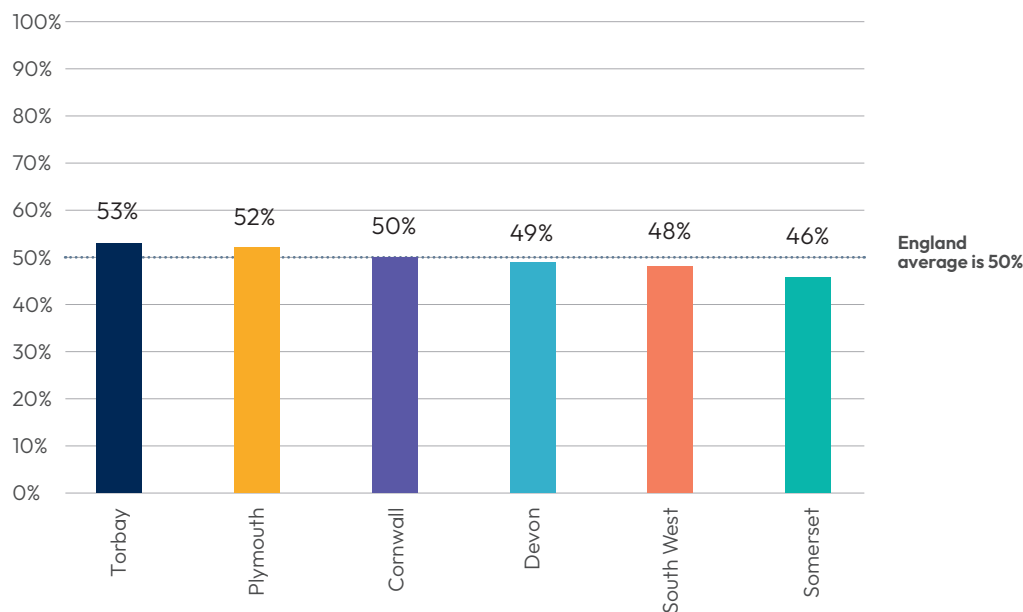
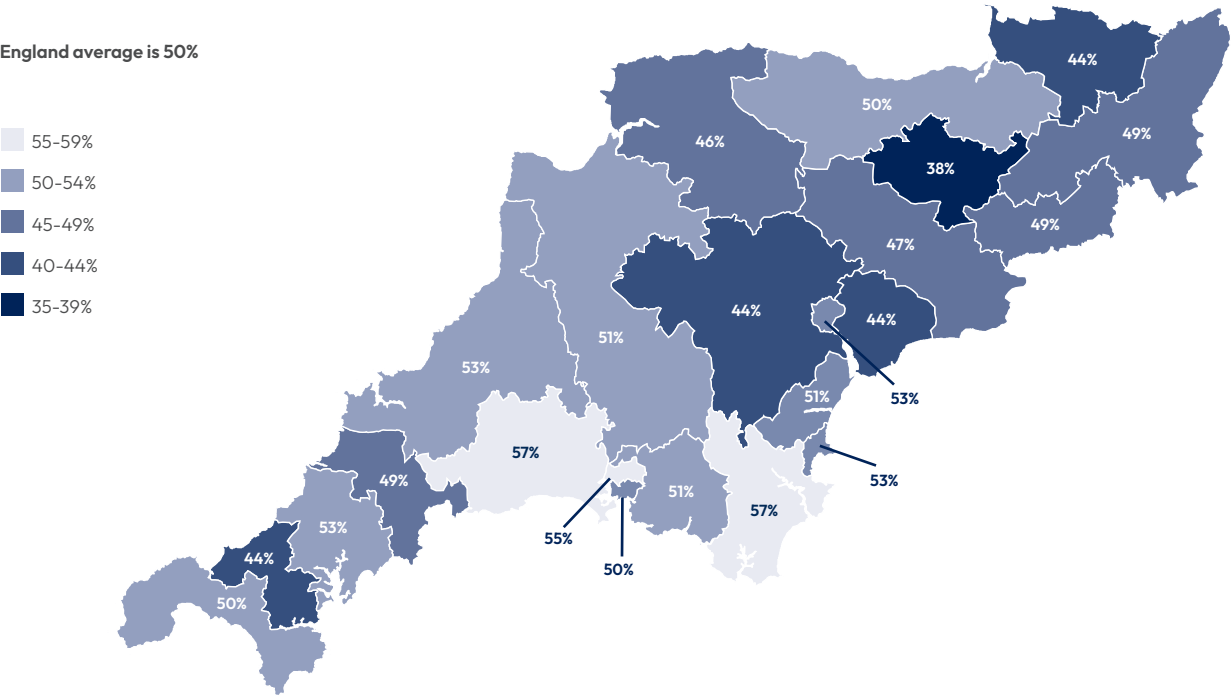




Figure 3 Percentage of FSM eligible children at expected level across all Early Learning Goals, by peninsula parliamentary constituency⁷

Source: Department for Education data, accessed through a Freedom of Information request, April 2025



School (ages 5 – 16)

Primary

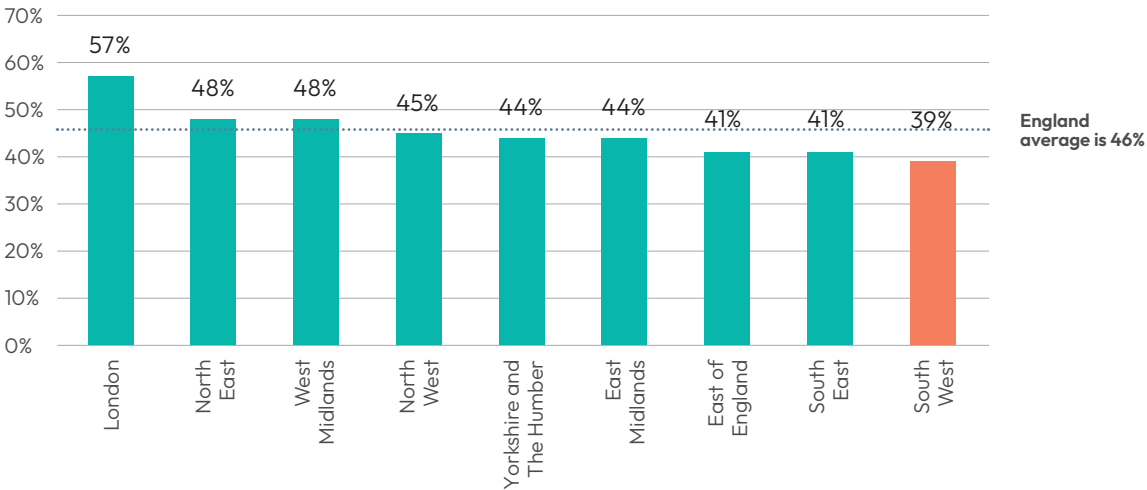
Expected level in reading, writing and maths (combined), age 11

Primary phase attainment for ‘disadvantaged’ pupils⁸ remains a concern for the South West, with only 39% meeting the expected standard across reading, writing and maths (combined). This is the lowest proportion of all nine English regions, and is well below the England

average of 46%. Outcomes for ‘disadvantaged’ pupils remain well below those for all pupils, where 58% of all pupils in the South West and 61% of all pupils nationally meet this standard.

Figure 4 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined), by region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025



⁷ For a list of the names of all South-West peninsula parliamentary constituencies, see Appendix.
⁸ ‘Disadvantaged’ pupils are defined by the Department for Education as those who have been eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) at any point in the last six years, or who are, or have been, looked after by the local authority.

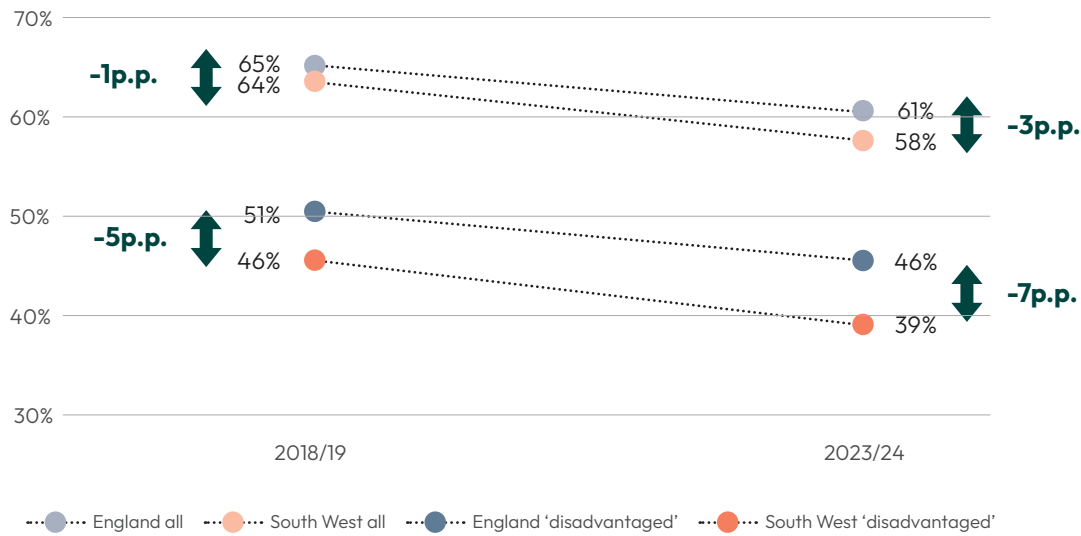


As seen in Figure 5, primary-level attainment remains below pre-pandemic levels, despite small improvements in outcomes since 2021.

The gaps between ‘disadvantaged’ pupils and all pupils have widened, as have the gaps between the South West and England averages.

Figure 5 Percentage of all pupils and ‘disadvantaged’ pupils in England and the South West meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined), in 2019 and 2024

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025



Within the South West, Plymouth (48%) and Torbay (46%) respectively exceed and meet the England average for ‘disadvantaged’ pupils. Devon and Somerset (both 36%) lag the national average by 10 percentage points (p.p.). Since 2019, Devon and Somerset have seen declines of 9p.p. and 8p.p. respectively, widening their previously small gaps with

the South West average, which declined by 7p.p. over the same period. The decline in the England average was smaller, at 5p.p.. Torbay has also seen a large decline (of 8p.p.) on its 2019 figure of 54%. By contrast, Plymouth and Cornwall have seen smaller declines (3p.p. each).

Figure 6 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined), by peninsula local authority

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025

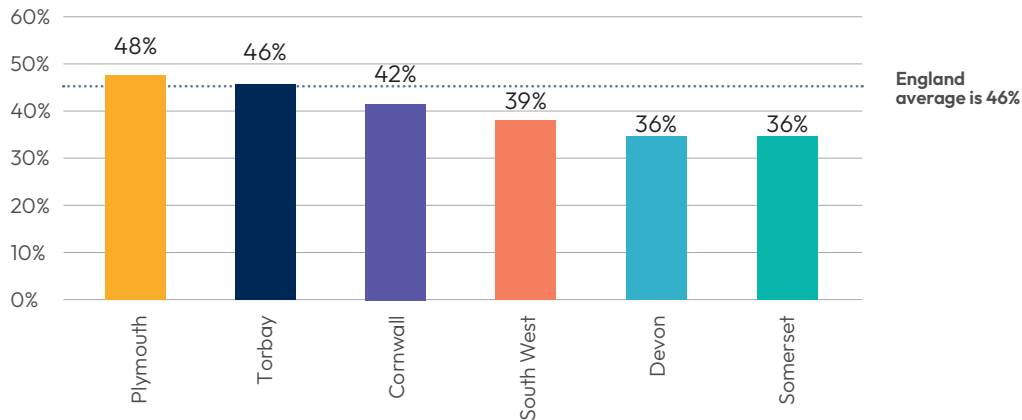
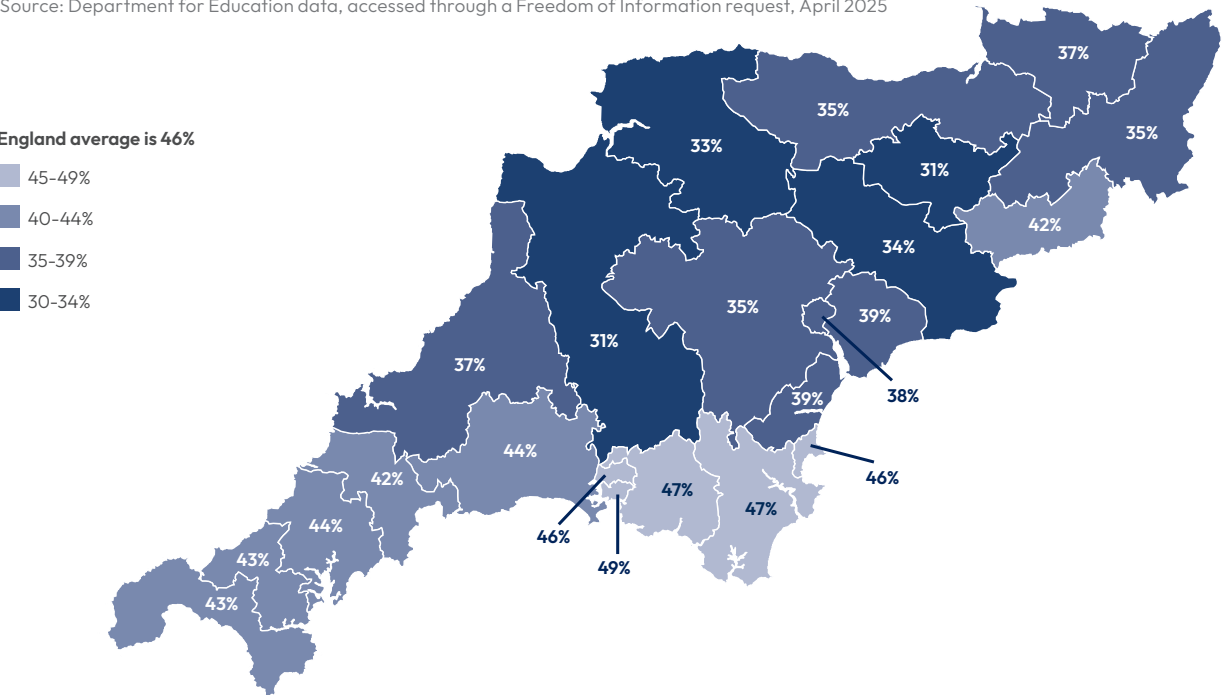




Figure 7, which maps the data for parliamentary constituencies, shows better outcomes for Plymouth, Torbay and southern parts of Devon, and worse outcomes for northern and eastern parts of Devon and Taunton Deane.

Figure 7 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined), by peninsula parliamentary constituency⁹

Source: Department for Education data, accessed through a Freedom of Information request, April 2025



Absence rates – primary

Absence rates are a useful leading indicator correlating with later attainment outcomes and a signal of school belonging. Across the country, absence rates are disproportionately higher for ‘disadvantaged’ pupils, and have risen sharply post-pandemic.

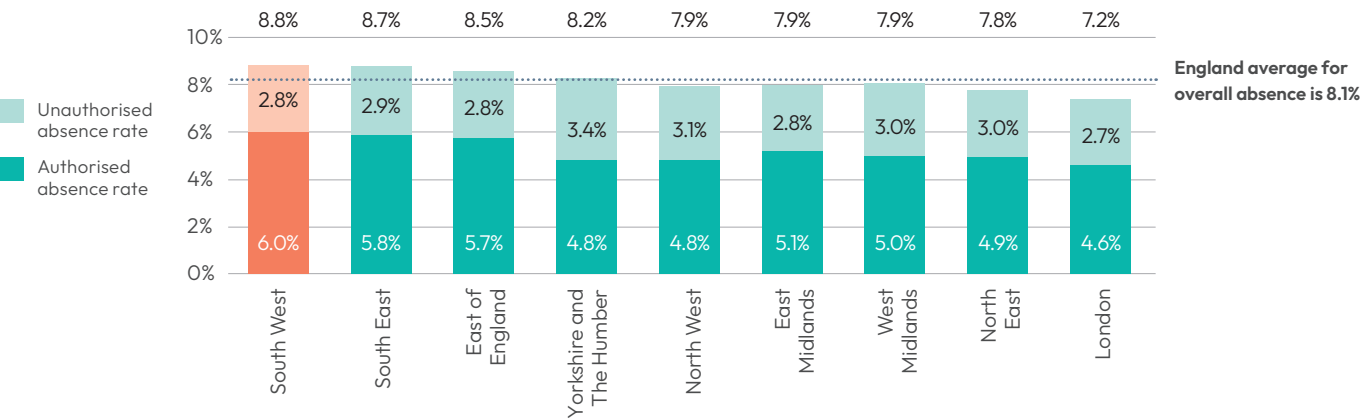
As was the case last year, primary-level absence rates for pupils eligible for Free School Meals are worryingly high in the South West. Overall, almost 9% of school sessions¹⁰ – or 1 in 11 sessions – were missed in the

academic year 2023-24. Absence rates for all pupils were also higher in the South West than elsewhere, at 6.1% compared with a national average of 5.5%.

High absence rates in the region are driven by high rates of authorised (rather than unauthorised) absence – where a school has either given approval in advance for a pupil to be away, or has accepted an explanation offered afterwards as justification for absence.

Figure 8 Authorised and unauthorised absence rates for FSM eligible pupils in state-funded primary schools, by region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025



⁹ For a list of the names of all South-West peninsula parliamentary constituencies, see Appendix.

¹⁰ A school session is equivalent to a half-day (Department for Education).



Within the South West, absence rates were particularly high in primary schools in Somerset, driven by both higher-than-average authorised and unauthorised absence – at 9.2% overall compared with a South-West average of 8.8% overall.

At the parliamentary constituency level (Figure 10), we can see that Bridgwater and West Somerset (10.0%) and Wells (9.6%) have particularly high rates of absence at primary level, while Torridge and West Devon (7.7%), South West Devon and St Austell and Newquay (both 7.9%) have the lowest absence rates in the peninsula.

Figure 9 Authorised and unauthorised absence rates for FSM eligible pupils in state-funded primary schools, by peninsula local authority

Department for Education data, accessed April 2025

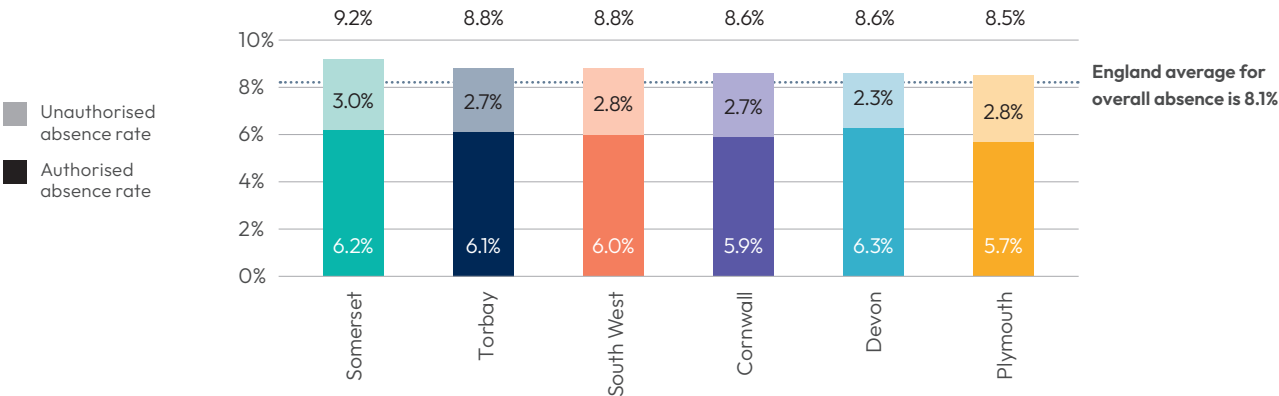
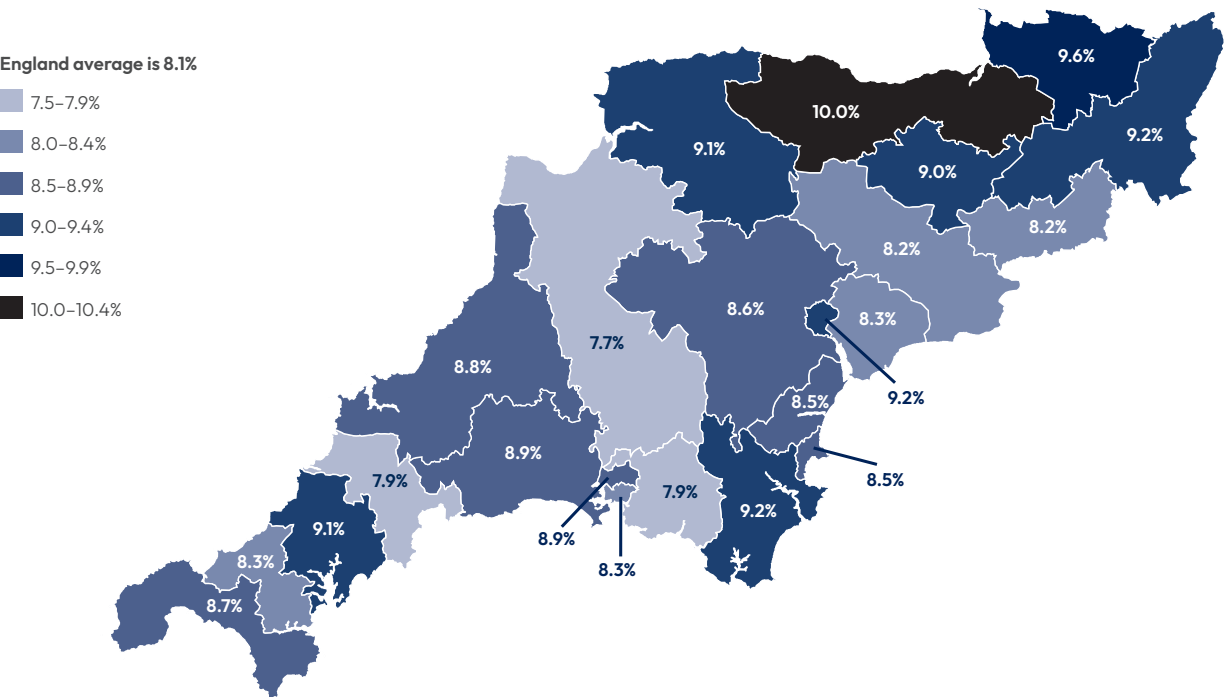


Figure 10 Overall absence rates for FSM eligible pupils at primary phase for the academic year 2023–24¹¹

Source: Department for Education data, accessed through a Freedom of Information request, May 2025



¹¹ For a list of the names of all South-West peninsula parliamentary constituencies, see Appendix.



Secondary

Grade 4+ in English and maths GCSE

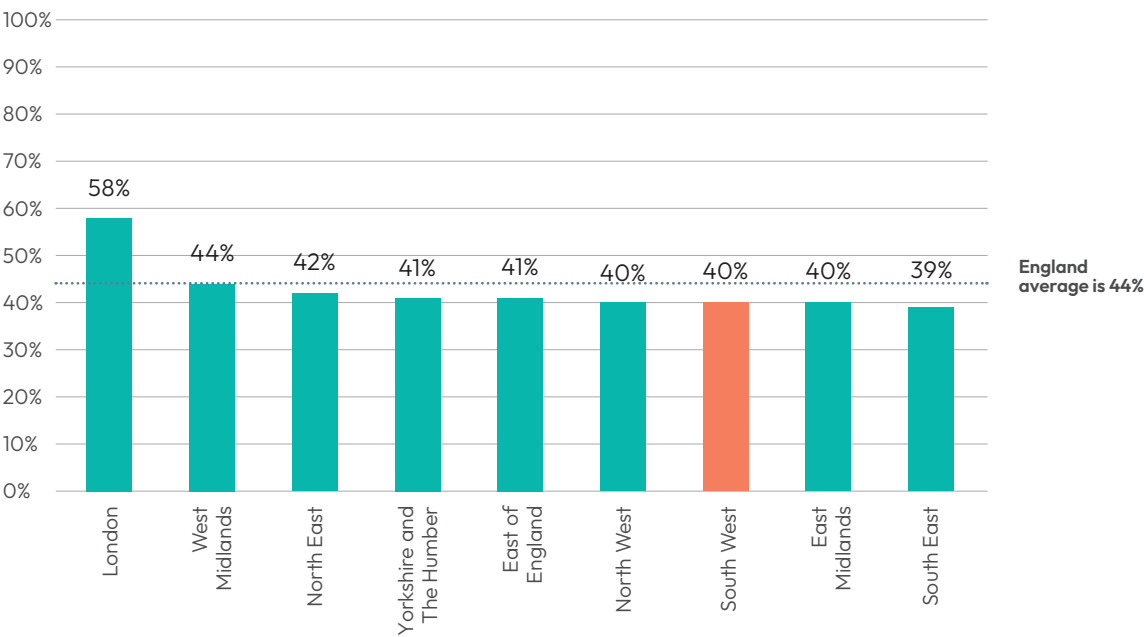
At secondary level, we use the proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and maths GCSE as a key indicator. Achieving these qualifications – and the associated skills – are vital foundational elements for most future pathways.

The South West sits within a cluster of three regions averaging 40% on this measure, and within a cluster of six regions within a percentage point of this either side. In London, many more ‘disadvantaged’ pupils achieve these foundational qualifications (58%), while the West Midlands (44%) and North East (42%) also show slightly higher rates than elsewhere. The fact that outcomes

for ‘disadvantaged’ pupils in London far exceed other regions, both at GCSE and other phases, will be due to a mix of factors including population demographics and resourcing.

National average attainment of 44% for ‘disadvantaged’ pupils compares with a rate of 65% for all pupils. The South West exceeds the national average for all pupils, with a rate of 66%. This indicates a feature of the data that we have highlighted on previous occasions – that headline outcomes for the South West can conceal the poor outcomes being attained by ‘disadvantaged’ pupils.

Figure 11 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and maths GCSEs, by region
Department for Education data, accessed April 2025



Looking at change over time (comparing 2024 with 2019, the last pre-pandemic year) shows some interesting trends. In Figure 12, we can see that 2024 results across England as a whole are slightly down on 2019. The South West – whilst dropping 0.2 percentage points since 2019 – has closed the gap slightly on the England average due to sharper drops (of over 1

percentage point) across most other regions. Only London increased its proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils getting these foundational qualifications (up 1.3 percentage points), therefore pulling further ahead of the rest. The North East (with an unchanged proportion of 41.6%) was the only other region not to see a drop.



Figure 12 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and maths GCSEs, 2019 and 2024, England, London and South West

Department for Education data, accessed April 2025



Figure 13 shows that outcomes for all peninsula local authorities are below the national average of 44%. Outcomes in Torbay and Somerset (both 36%) are especially low.

Figure 14 shows outcomes by peninsula local authority in 2019 and 2024, indicating direction of travel. Here, we can see two contrasting trends. Plymouth has seen

a huge improvement – from 32% in 2019 to 41% five years later – something we go on to explore in our deep-dive chapter. By contrast, Somerset and Torbay, which were both roughly in line with the South-West average in 2019 (at 40%), have seen figures decline. Cornwall and Devon have remained roughly in line with the South-West average.

Figure 13 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and maths GCSEs, by peninsula local authority

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025

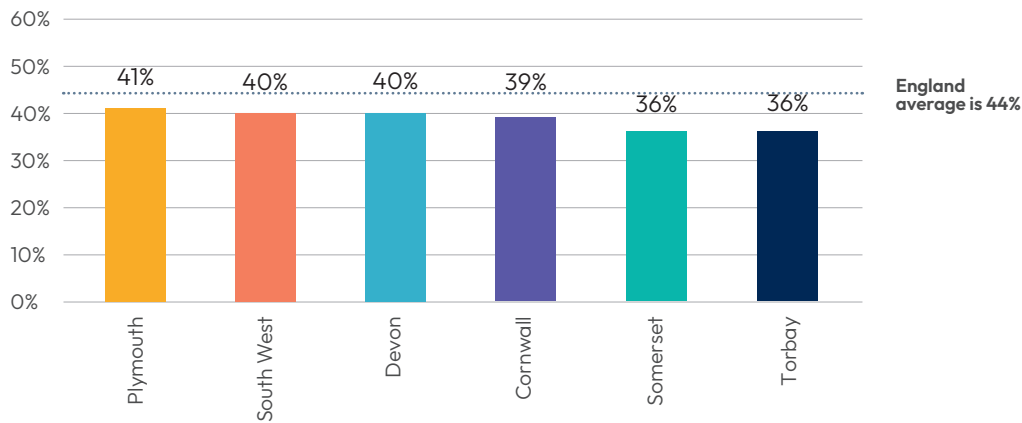
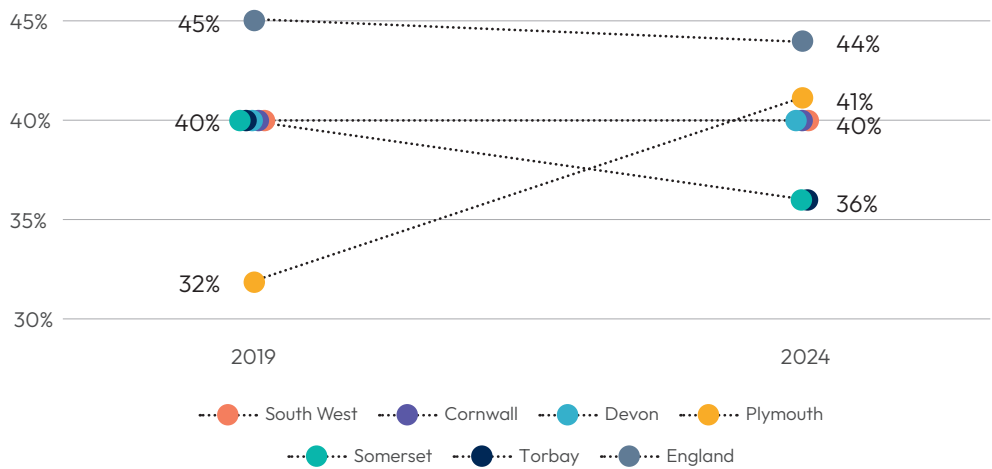




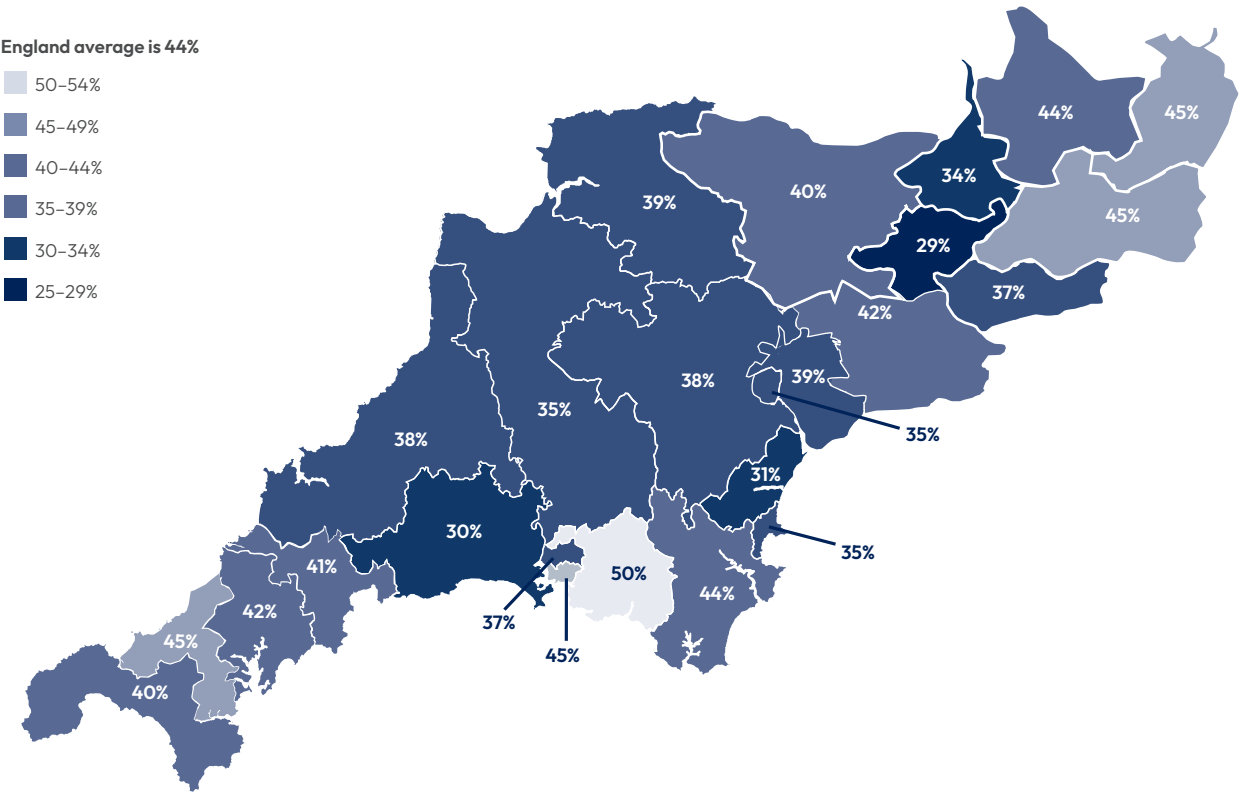
Figure 14 Change in percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and maths GCSEs, 2019 and 2024, by peninsula local authority
Department for Education data, accessed April 2025



Looking at parliamentary constituencies (which, for this indicator, have been cut according to the new 2024 boundaries), we can see that South West Devon has particular good outcomes (with 50% of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils attaining these qualifications). South West Devon is followed by Plymouth Sutton and Devonport, Frome

and East Somerset, and Camborne and Redruth, all of which have outcomes above the national average (45%, compared with 44%). At the other end of the spectrum, outcomes are particular poor in Taunton and Wellington (29%), followed by South East Cornwall (30%) and Newton Abbot (31%).

Figure 15 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and maths GCSEs, by peninsula parliamentary constituency¹²
Source: Department for Education data, accessed through a Freedom of Information request, May 2025



¹² For a list of the names of all South-West peninsula parliamentary constituencies, see Appendix.



Attainment 8 score

Attainment 8 is a Department for Education (DfE) measure that provides an average score based on pupils’ attainment across 8 qualifications including maths and English (which are both double weighted), 3 qualifications that count in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and 3 further qualifications from a DfE-approved list. It gives a sense of pupil attainment across a broader set of subjects, supplementing the picture provided by the English and maths GCSE indicator described previously.

On Attainment 8, the South West sits within a cluster of six regions that all have an average score of 33, rounding to the nearest whole number. Only London (42) and the West Midlands (35) stand out, while the South East lags marginally behind with an average score of 32.

Within the region, Plymouth (34) stands slightly above the South-West average, while Somerset (30) and Torbay (31) lag behind. Cornwall (33) is marginally above the South-West average while Devon (32) is marginally below.

Absence rates – secondary

Secondary level absence rates are higher in the South West than in all other regions. This is true for pupils eligible for Free School Meals (as shown in Figure 16), as well as for all pupils (where the South West has the joint highest overall absence rate alongside the North East).

The overall absence rate for FSM eligible pupils in the South West was 17.0%, compared to an England average of 14.3%. For all pupils, this rate was 9.8% in the South West and 8.9% nationally. As at primary level, high absence rates in the South West are being driven by school authorised – rather than unauthorised – absence.

Within the region (Figure 17), rates are higher than the South-West average across all peninsula local authorities except for Cornwall (16.7%). Absence rates for FSM eligible pupils in Torbay (19.1%) are particularly high, equating to almost 1 in 5 school sessions missed. Across parliamentary constituencies (Figure 18), absence rates vary from a low of 14.0% in St Austell and Newquay to a high of 20.9% in Exeter.

Figure 16 Authorised and unauthorised absence rates for FSM eligible pupils in state-funded secondary schools, by region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025

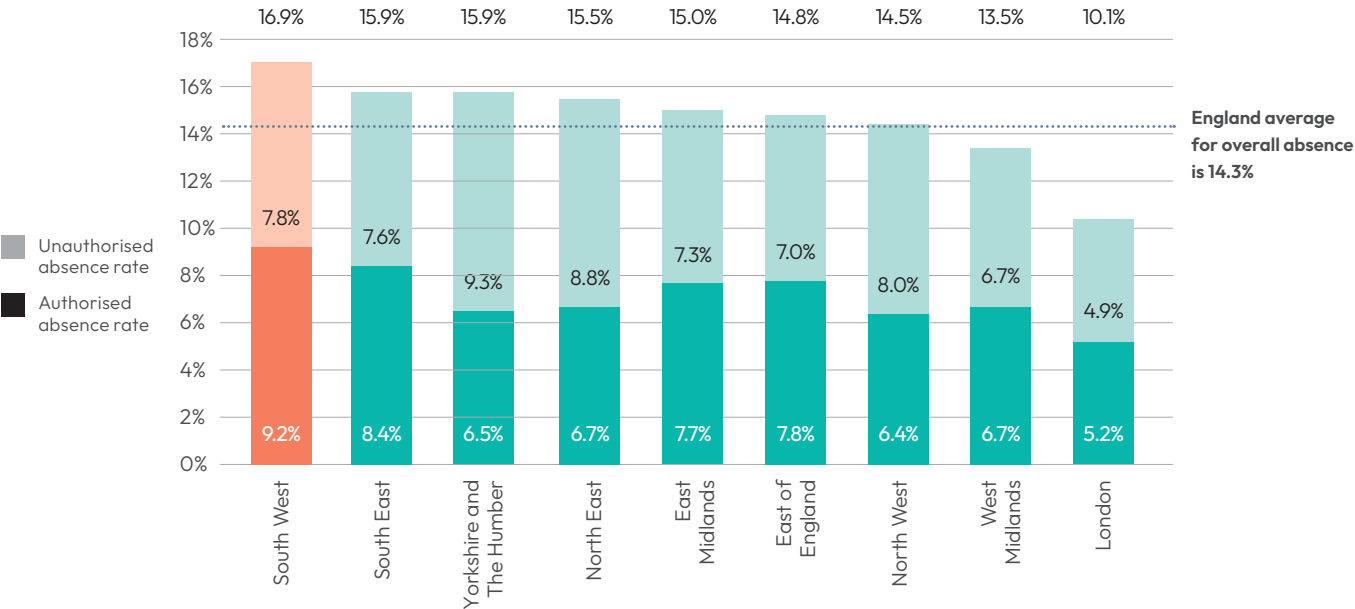




Figure 17 Authorised and unauthorised absence rates for FSM eligible pupils in state-funded secondary schools, by peninsula local authority

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025

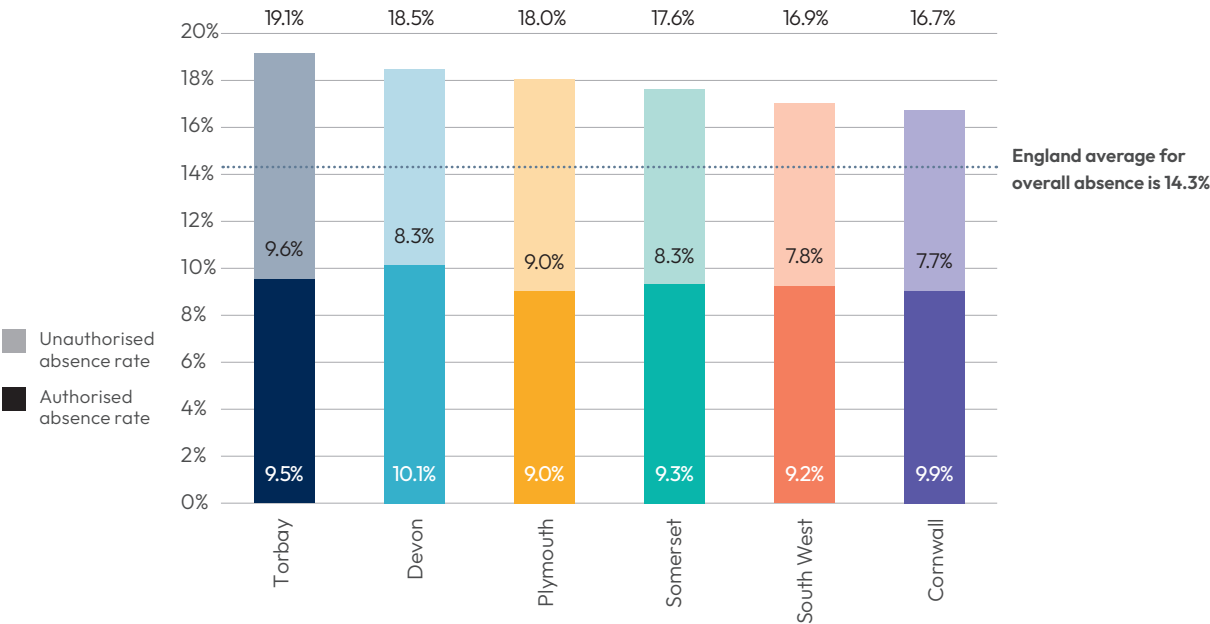
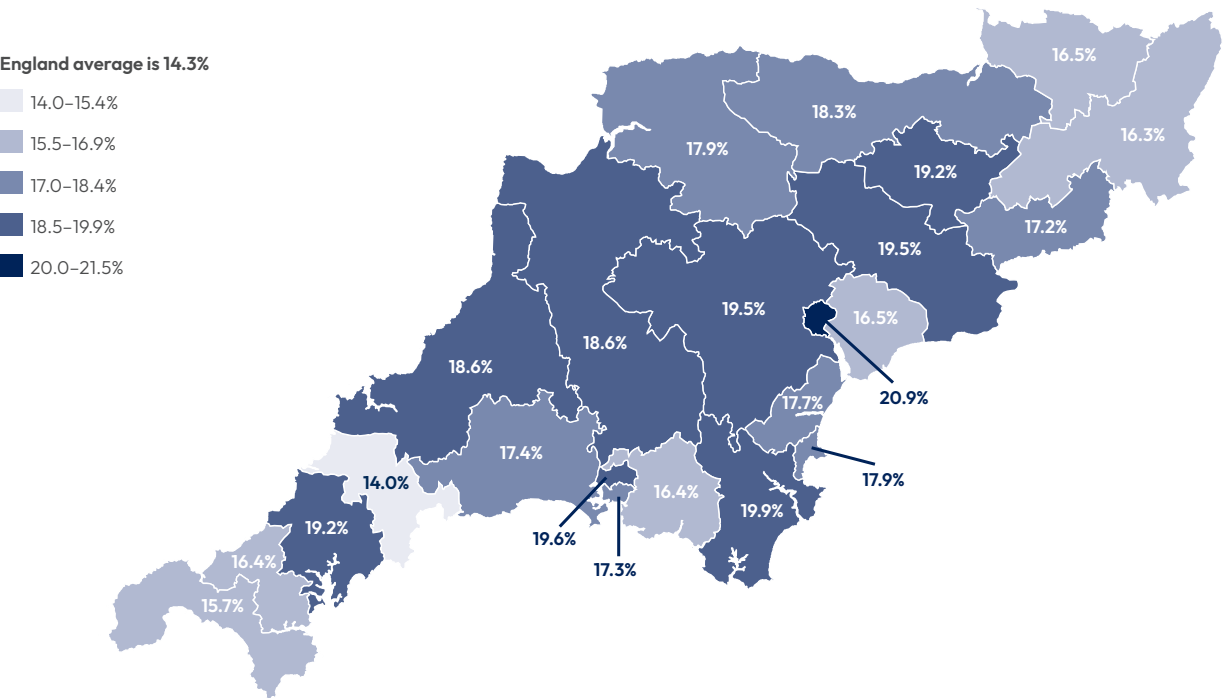


Figure 18 Overall absence rates for FSM eligible pupils at secondary phase for the academic year 2023-24¹³

Source: Department for Education data, accessed through a Freedom of Information request, May 2025



¹³ For a list of the names of all South-West peninsula parliamentary constituencies, see Appendix.



Post-GCSE destinations: education, apprenticeships and employment, and NEET

Destination measures provide information on the success of schools and colleges in helping young people move onto sustained pathways in education, apprenticeships or employment. In the chart below, we show the percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ students continuing to a sustained education, apprenticeship or employment destination in the year after completing key stage 4 study (after year 11) from state-funded mainstream secondary schools.

The South West fares middling compared to other regions in terms of sustained destinations as a whole (at 86% - in line with the England average), but in fact has the second lowest proportion of ‘disadvantaged’

students going on to a sustained education destination (74%), just above the North East (73.9%), and below the England average of 78%. However, the region has the highest proportion of apprenticeship destinations (4%, compared to a 2% England average) and employment destinations (8%, compared to a 6% England average).

Looking at the same data by local authority (Figure 20), we can see that Plymouth has a particularly high proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ students going on to apprenticeships (9%), while Torbay has low figures for apprenticeships and employment, but a relatively high proportion of students going on to education destinations (81%).

Figure 19 Key stage 4 leavers destinations for ‘disadvantaged’ students for state-funded mainstream schools, by region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025

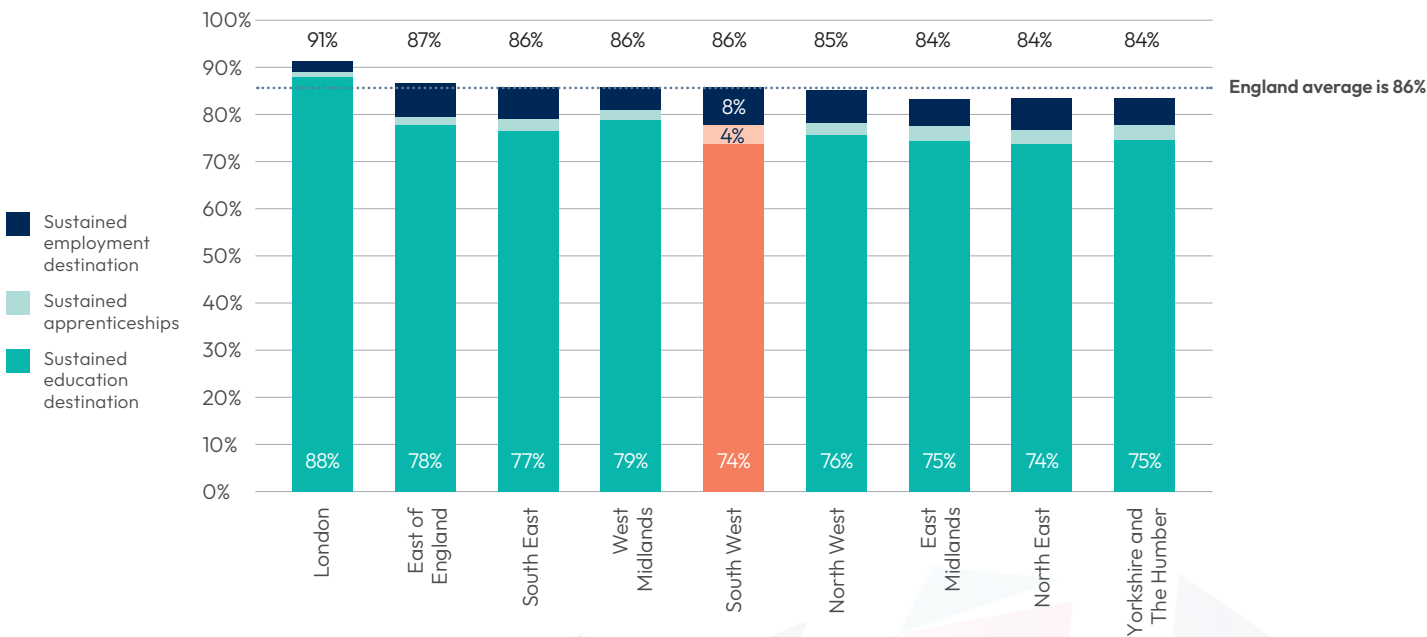
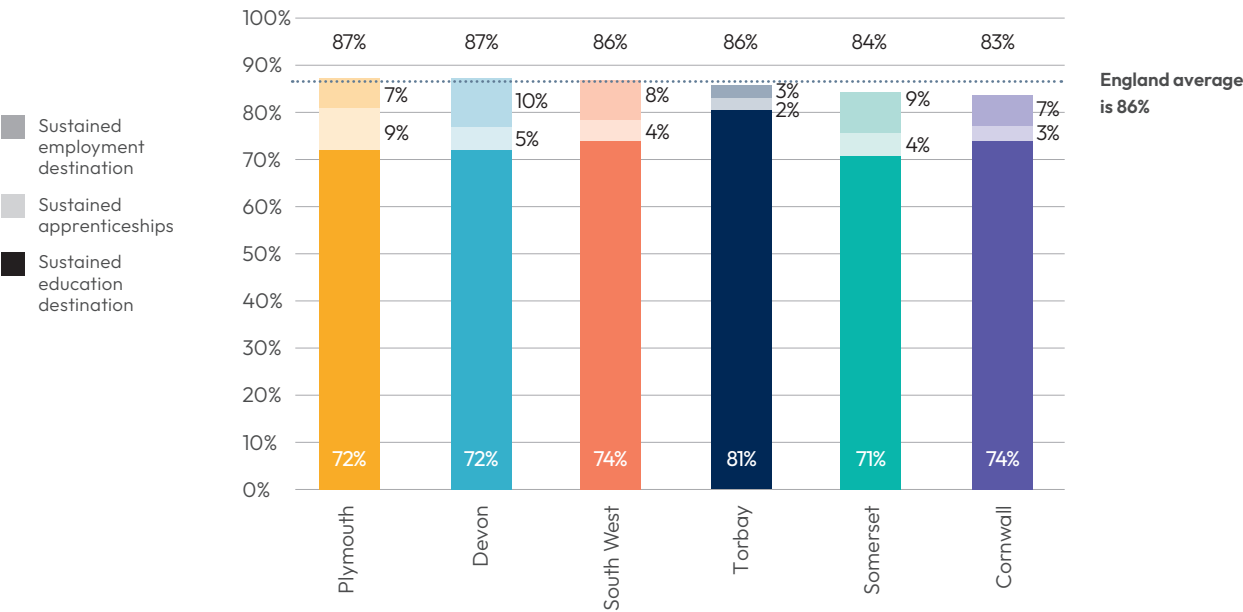




Figure 20 Key stage 4 leavers destinations for ‘disadvantaged’ students for state-funded mainstream secondary schools by peninsula local authority

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025



Looking at figures for 16-17-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) presents a similar picture from a different angle. NEET figures have been rising in recent years – with young people experiencing NEET potentially suffering longer term consequences including health and wellbeing issues and becoming locked out of the labour market.

Figure 21 shows that the South West has a NEET rate of 3.5%, placing it in the middle of 9 English regions. However, peninsula local authorities all have NEET rates that are higher than this South-West average (Figure 22). These range from a low of 4.0% in Somerset to a high of 5.3% in Plymouth.

Figure 21 NEET for all 16-17-year-olds, 2024, by region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025

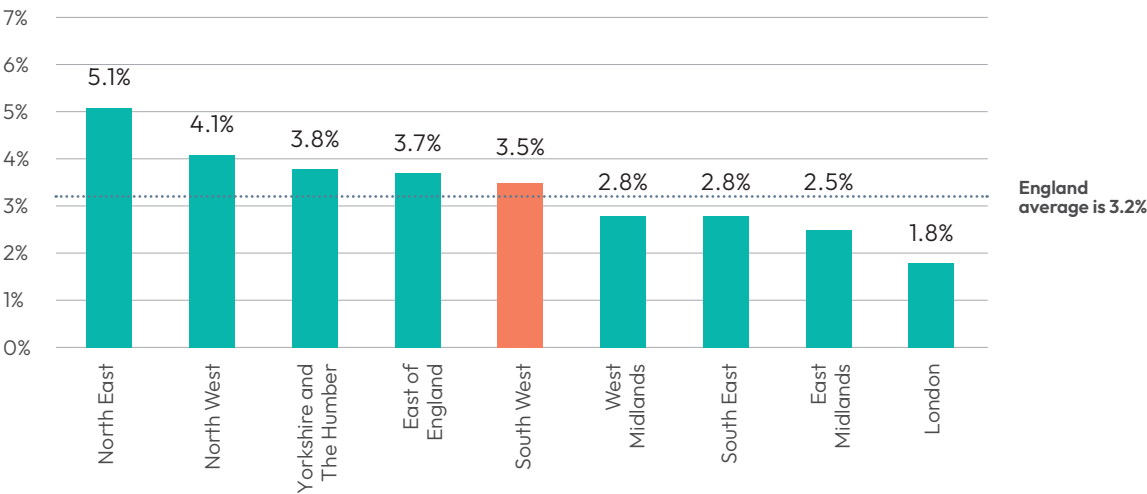
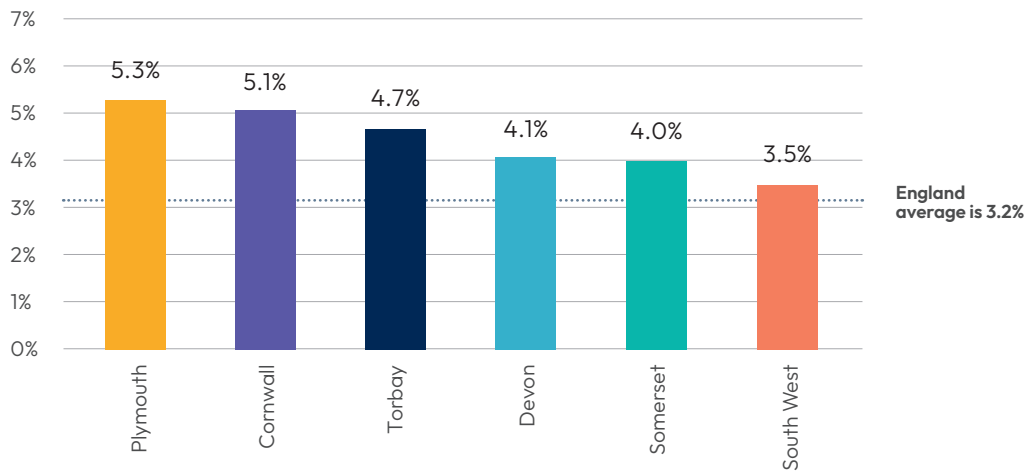




Figure 22 NEET for all 16-17-year-olds, 2024, by peninsula local authority

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025



Ages 16-18

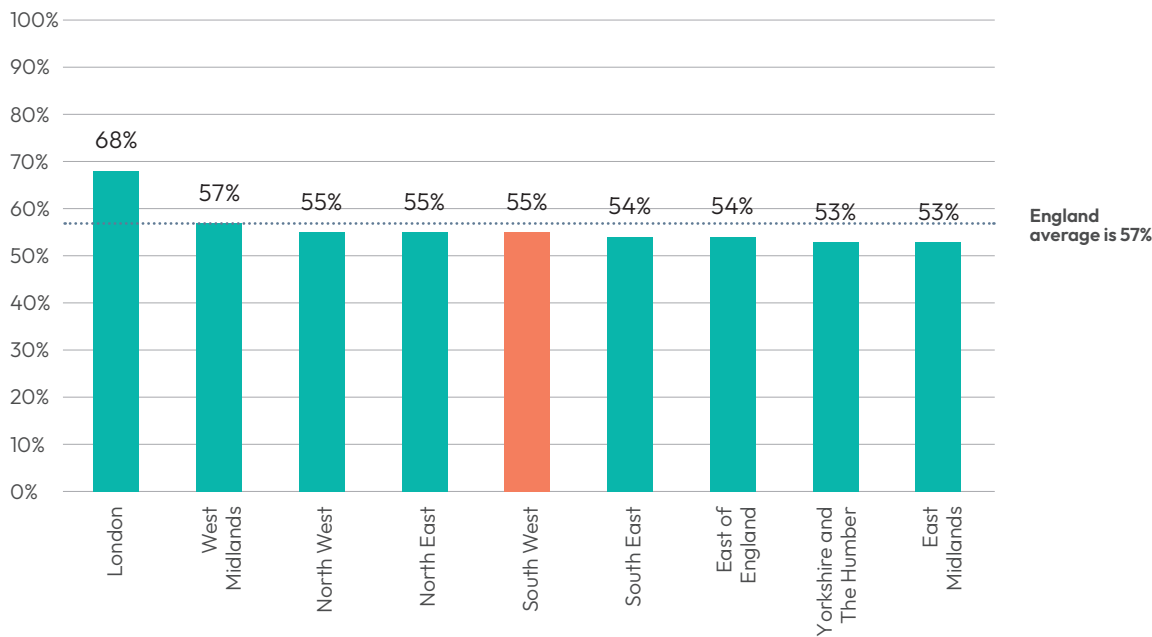
Level 2 English and maths

55% of ‘disadvantaged’ students in the South West gained foundational Level 2 (GCSE or equivalent) English and maths qualifications by age 19 (Figure 23).

This was a similar figure to a number of other regions, with only London significantly ahead, with 68% of ‘disadvantaged’ students gaining these qualifications.

Figure 23 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining Level 2 English and maths by age 19, 2024, by region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2025





Earlier, we showed that the proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ students nationally attaining a grade 4 and above in GCSE English and maths at age 16 has fallen slightly since 2019 – from 45% in 2019 to 44% in 2024. By contrast, the proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining Level 2 English and maths qualifications by age 19 has increased across the country since 2020, although figures have fallen back slightly in 2024. The increase in attainment of these foundational skills and qualifications is positive, given their importance to most later pathways.

2023 represents the first year of ‘normal’ grading since 2019, following centre-assessed grades (CAG) in 2020, teacher-assessed grades (TAG) in 2021 and an attempt in 2022 to find a ‘midpoint’ between 2019 and 2021 grading.

Figure 24 shows how figures for the South West have been somewhat more ‘spiky’ over time than the figures for many other regions. For ease of reading, only the South West, England average and East Midlands data are shown. As can be seen, the East Midlands trajectory broadly follows that of the England average.

By contrast, outcomes in the South West appear to be particularly low in 2022 and then particularly high in 2023. This meant the South West was ninth out of nine regions on this measure in 2022 (as per our Annual Report last year), before jumping up to fourth out of nine regions in 2023. In 2024, there is a suggestion that the fluctuation in outcomes – possibly caused by the grading changes – has eased off, with the region performing in line with its pre-pandemic ranking.

Looking intra-regionally, we can see that outcomes across all peninsula local authorities have improved since 2019, but some by more than others. Plymouth has seen the biggest improvement – from 47% in 2019 to 58% in 2024 – an increase of 11 percentage points. Devon and Somerset have seen increases in attainment over this time period of 6 percentage points each. By contrast, Torbay’s outcomes have improved by only 3 percentage points and Cornwall’s outcomes – whilst significantly better than other peninsula authorities in 2019 (at 55%) – have flatlined since then.

Figure 24 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining Level 2 English and maths by age 19, 2019 - 2024, by selected region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2025

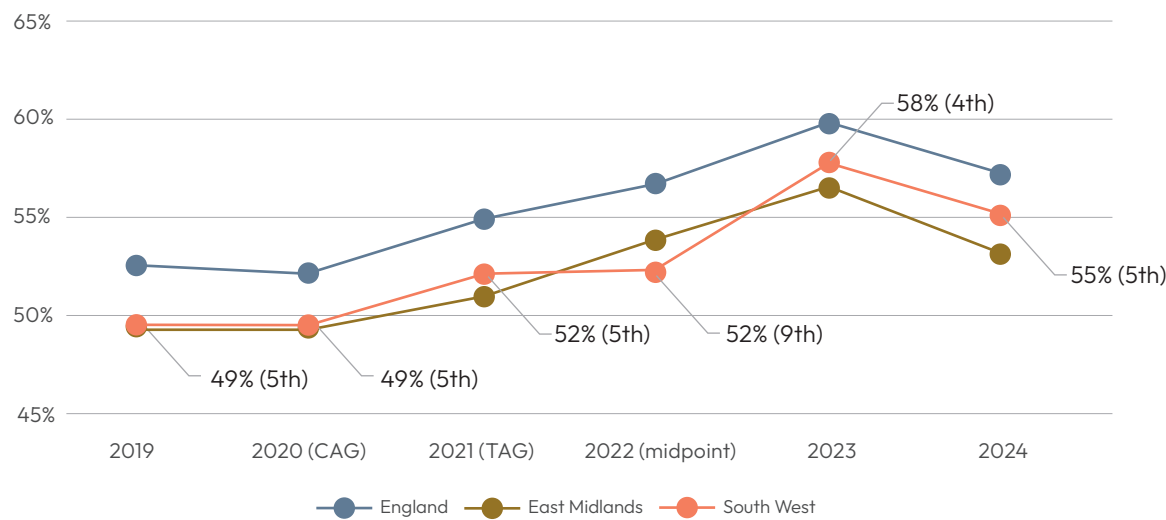
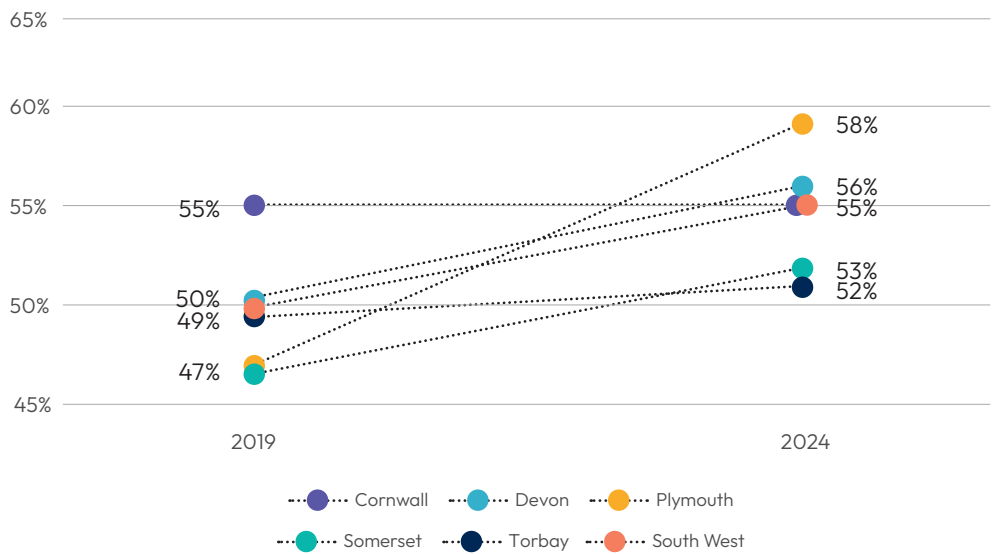




Figure 25 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining Level 2 English and maths by age 19, 2019 and 2024, by peninsula local authority

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2025



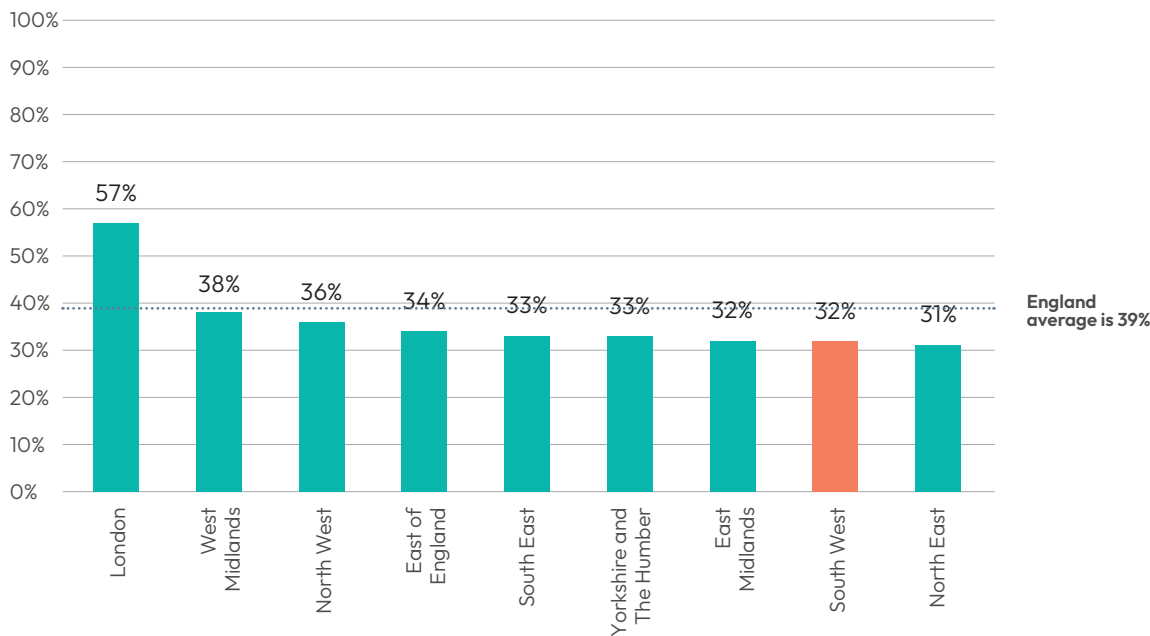
Level 3 qualification (A-levels or equivalent)

We report on the proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining a Level 3 qualification (which includes A levels, T levels, advanced apprenticeships and other equivalent qualifications) by age 19. Last year, we reported a significant decline in these outcomes. In Figure 27, we can see that this was perhaps due to pandemic-related grading changes, with outcomes appearing to have evened out to a degree.

The South West is part of a cluster of regions (including the North East, East Midlands, Yorkshire and The Humber, South East and East of England) which see around one-third of ‘disadvantaged’ students attain a Level 3 qualification by age 19. London stands far ahead, with over half of ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining these qualifications, followed by the West Midlands (38%) and North West (36%).

Figure 26 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining a Level 3 qualification by age 19, by region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2025





As with Level 2 English and maths qualifications at age 19, a look at outcomes over time shows the South West data for Level 3 attainment to be somewhat ‘spiky’. Comparing the South West, England average and East Midlands data again, Figure 27 shows that South West outcomes jumped up in 2021 with teacher-assessed grades, before falling back sharply in 2022. 2023 and 2024 outcomes look more in line with the trendlines for other regions and pre-pandemic figures for the region.

Comparing 2019 and 2024 figures for peninsula local authorities – in Figure 28 – there are two notable trends. Firstly a 4 percentage point increase in ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining a Level 3 qualification by age 19 in Plymouth (from 27% to 31%). Secondly a 4 percentage point decline in Cornwall (from 36% to 32%). Despite the decline, Cornwall remains the local authority with the highest proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining a Level 3 qualification by age 19 (32.4%).

Figure 27 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining a Level 3 qualification by age 19, 2019 – 2024, by selected region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2025

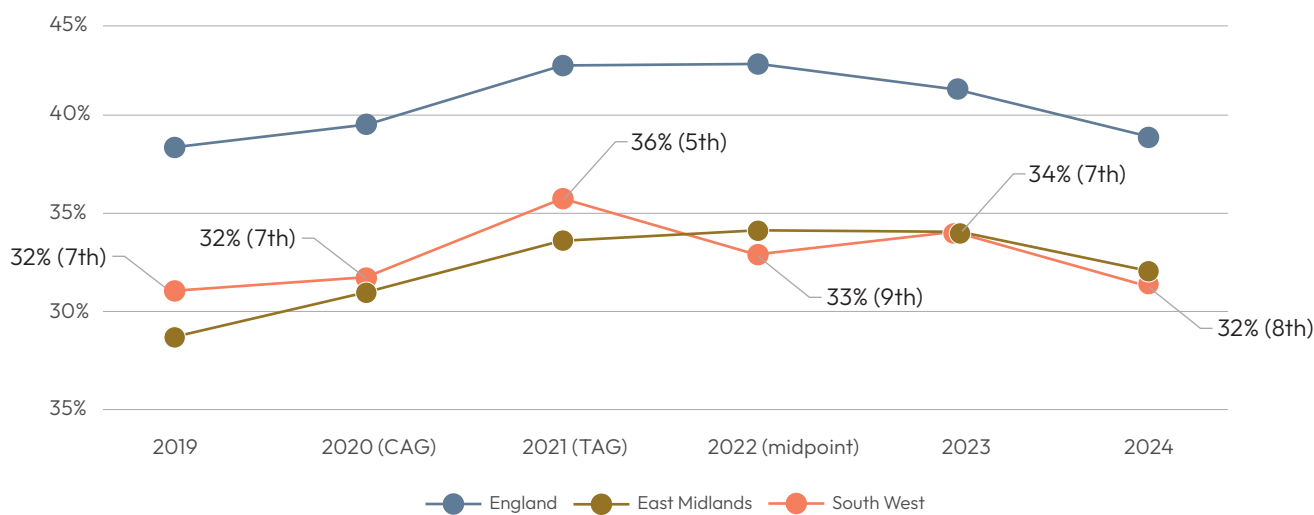
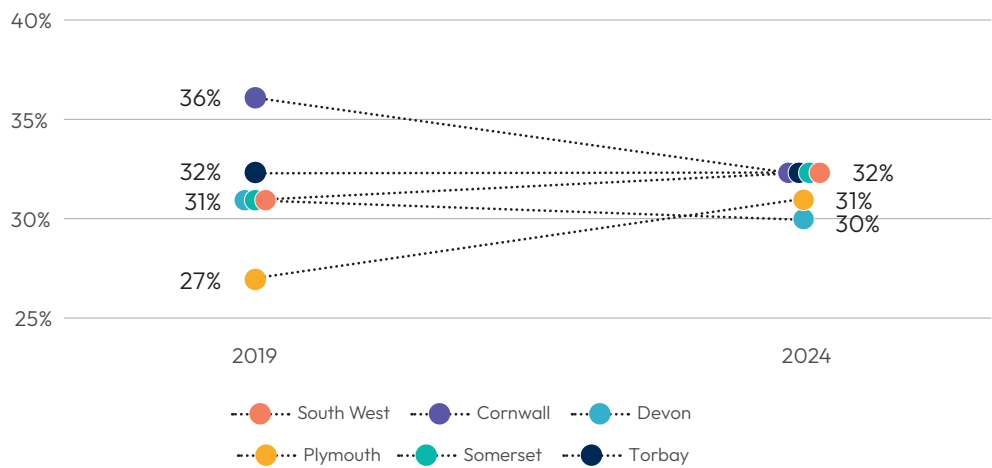


Figure 28 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ students attaining a Level 3 qualification by age 19, 2019 and 2024, by peninsula local authority

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2025





Post 16-18 study destinations: education, apprenticeships and employment

We look at destinations data again, but this time after 16-18 study. As with post-GCSE destinations, the South West sits within a middling group of regions for the proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ young people in a sustained destination overall. However, as before, this is differentiated by the proportions of young people going into apprenticeship or employment destinations compared with education destinations. The region

has by far the fewest ‘disadvantaged’ students going on to an education destination (26%), but the highest proportion going into employment (35%) and apprenticeships (7%).

Within the region, Devon (71%) and Somerset (69%) have higher overall rates of sustained destinations compared with other peninsula local authorities and the South-West average (68%).

Figure 29 16-18 study leavers destinations for ‘disadvantaged’ students, 2023, by region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025

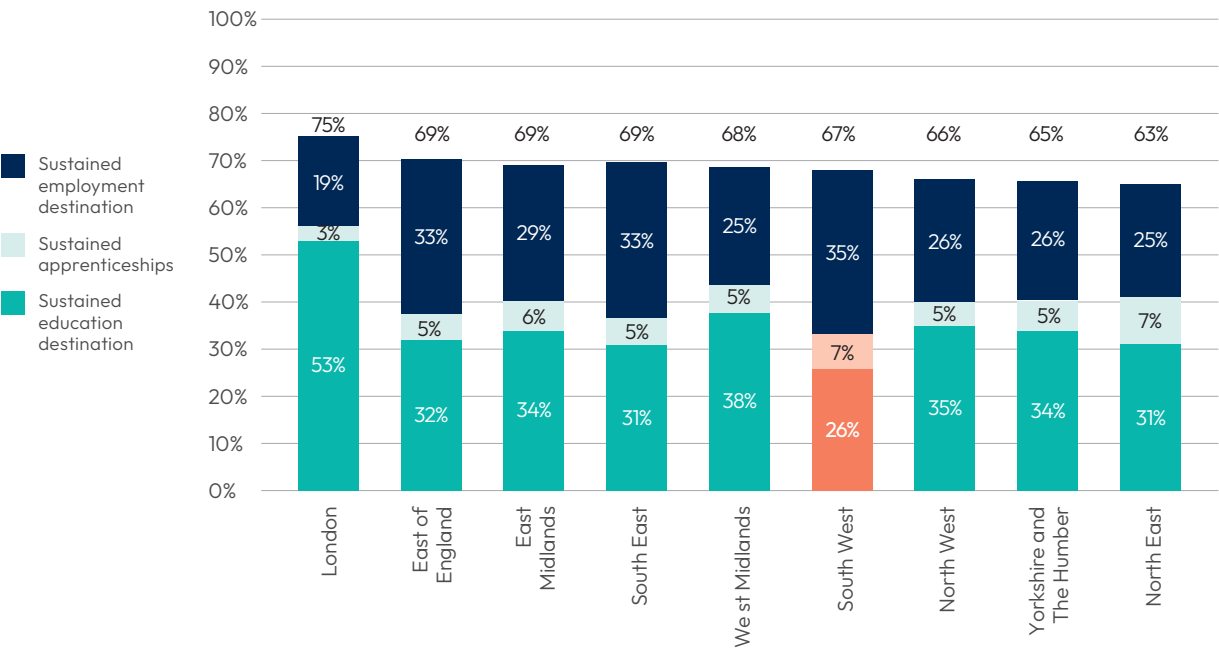
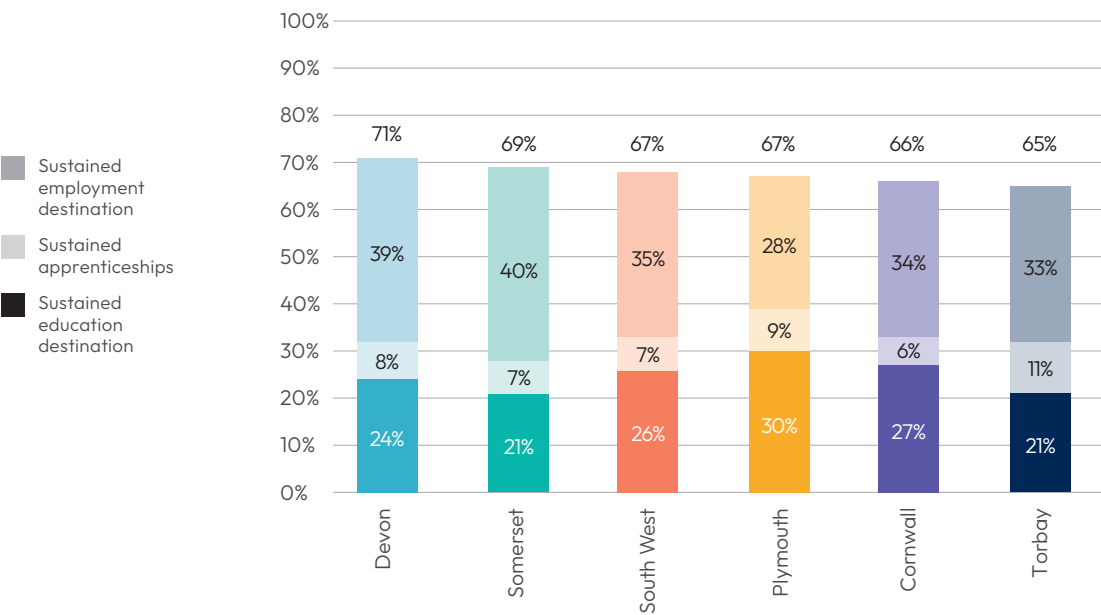


Figure 30 16-18 study leavers destinations for ‘disadvantaged’ students, 2023, by peninsula local authority

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025





Progression to higher education

As in previous years, the proportion of young people eligible for Free School Meals progressing to higher education in the South West is the lowest of all regions, at 19% compared with a national average of 29%. For all young people, the South West had an HE progression rate of 41% compared to a national average of 47%. The South-West rate was slightly higher than the rate in the North East (also 41%) for all young people.

As noted in previous reports, we aren’t advocating for a definitive increase in progression rates since higher education may not be the right option for many young people in the peninsula. However, we report on these rates since low rates of progression to HE can be indicative of barriers to progression created by prior poor attainment.

Within the peninsula, progression rates are highest in Cornwall (20%) and Plymouth (19%) and lowest in Devon and Somerset (both 14%).

Figure 31 Progression to higher education for FSM eligible students, 2023, by region

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025

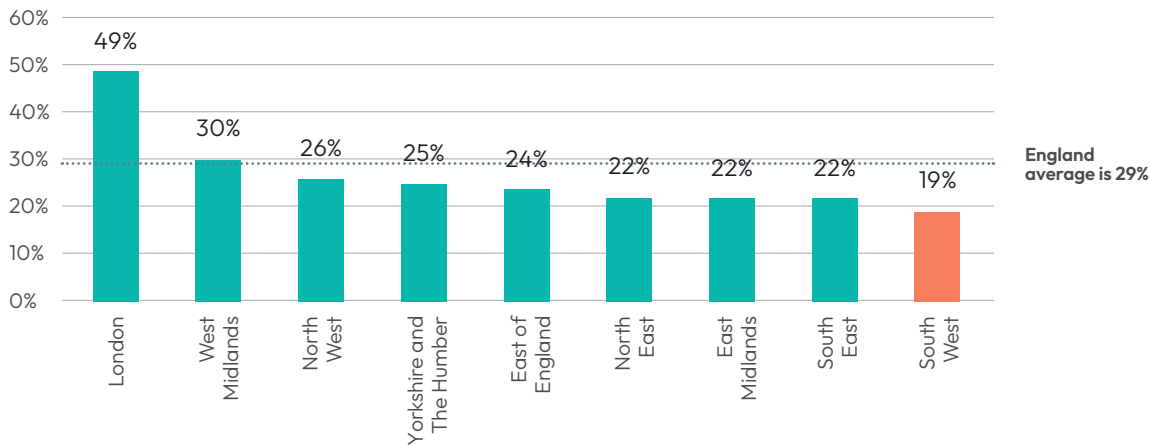
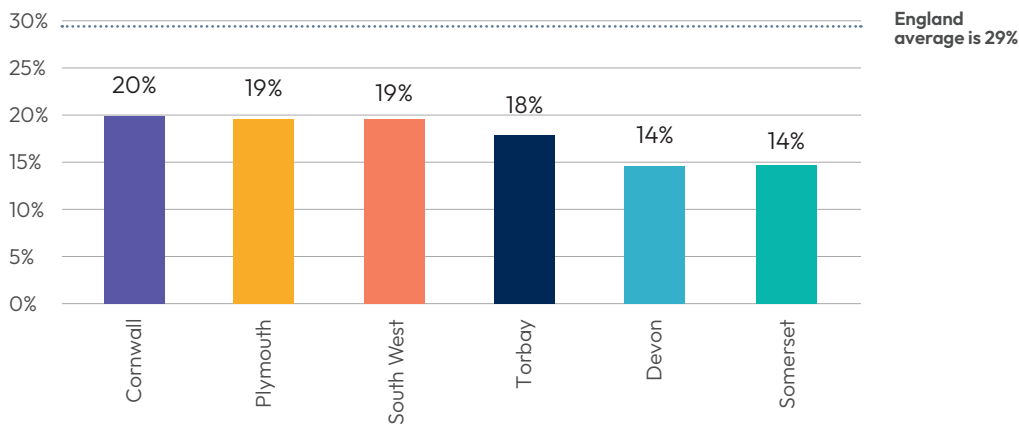


Figure 32 Progression to higher education for FSM eligible students, 2023, by peninsula local authority

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2025





Early career (ages 18 – 25)

While education measures provide up-to-date annual data that can be split by pupils’ socio-economic background and compared across geographies, this is not the case for early career outcomes. Annual employment and earnings statistics can be compared across geographies but don’t include a split by socio-economic background. Meanwhile, where survey data does include this split, numbers of responses can be too small to get geographic splits below the national level.

Data from the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset allows us to make earnings comparisons for young adults who were and were not eligible for Free School Meals when at a state school over a decade earlier. In our 2023 report, we used LEO data to look at the proportion of 25-year-olds earning above the Living Wage between 2012 and 2019.

Further analysis of LEO has been conducted and we can now compare regions by sustained employment/ education, average and higher earnings, and receipt of benefits at age 28, split by whether or not individuals were eligible for Free School Meals in their GCSE year.¹⁴

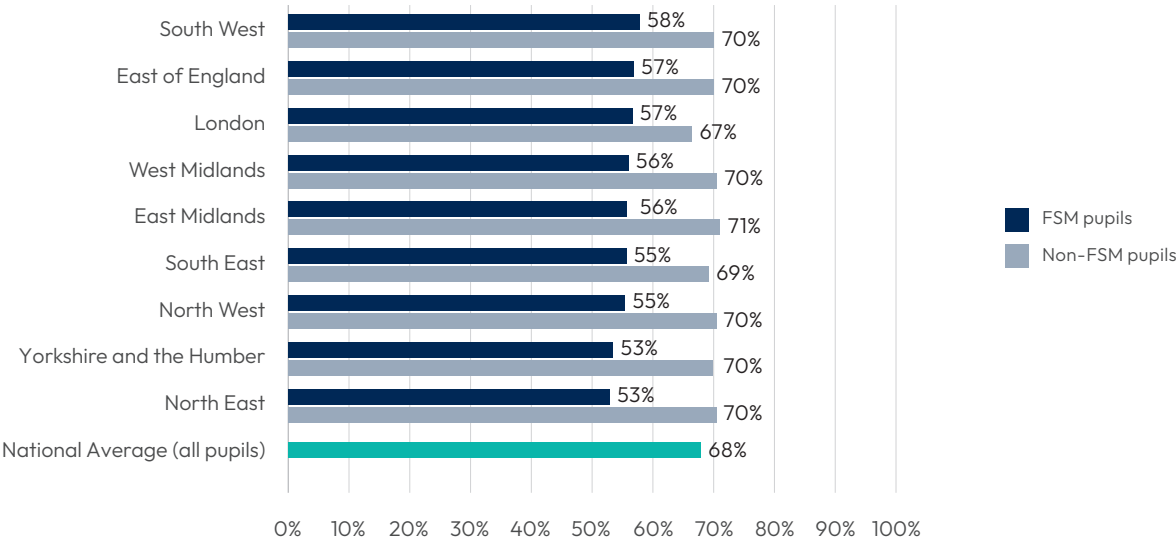
Education and employment at age 28

Figure 33 shows the proportion of pupils who were and were not eligible for Free School Meals between 2002 and 2007 who were in sustained education, an apprenticeship, or employment between 2012 and 2019 when they were aged 28.

Between 53% and 58% of FSM eligible pupils across England were in a sustained destination in young adulthood, compared to between 67% and 71% of their non-FSM eligible peers. Figures did not vary hugely across regions, although the South West had the best outcomes for FSM eligible pupils. 58% of 28-year-olds in the South West who had been eligible for Free School Meals were in a sustained destination, compared to a low of 53% in the North East.

Figure 33 Percentage of FSM and non-FSM pupils in sustained education, an apprenticeship, or employment at age 28, by region

Source: The Sutton Trust’s *Opportunity Index* report, May 2025



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

¹⁴ This analysis has been carried out by The Sutton Trust in their report *The Opportunity Index: The geography of opportunity and social mobility in England*, by Erica Holt-White, Carl Cullinane and Rebecca Montacute, May 2025. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/The-Opportunity-Index.pdf>



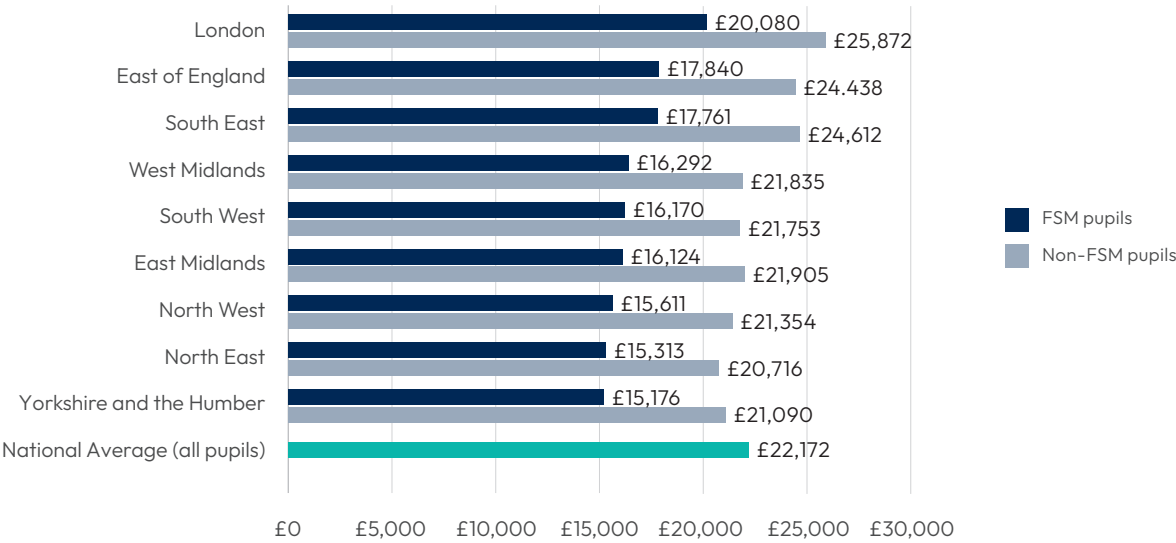
Average earnings at age 28

Using a similar means of comparison, we can look at average earnings (before tax) at age 28. For FSM eligible pupils, national average earnings were £17,030 – an average of £5,799 less than national average earnings for non-FSM eligible pupils (£22,829).

Earnings were highest in London, followed by the East of England and South East, and lowest in northern regions of England. Average earnings for FSM eligible pupils in the South West (£16,170) were in the middle of the range and similar to those in the West and East Midlands.

Figure 34 Average earnings for FSM eligible and non-FSM pupils at age 28, by region

Source: The Sutton Trust's Opportunity Index report, May 2025



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

Top half of earners at age 28

Comparing proportions of higher earners by FSM eligibility and across regions enables us to understand who has access to better-paying opportunities. If there was equality of outcomes between FSM and non-FSM eligible pupils and across regions, we would expect all the bars to be at 50%. Instead, we see that FSM eligible pupils lag their better-off peers in terms of accessing higher earnings in young adulthood. There is also unequal access to higher earnings across regions, with more higher earners in London, the East of England

and the South East and fewer higher earners across northern areas of England.

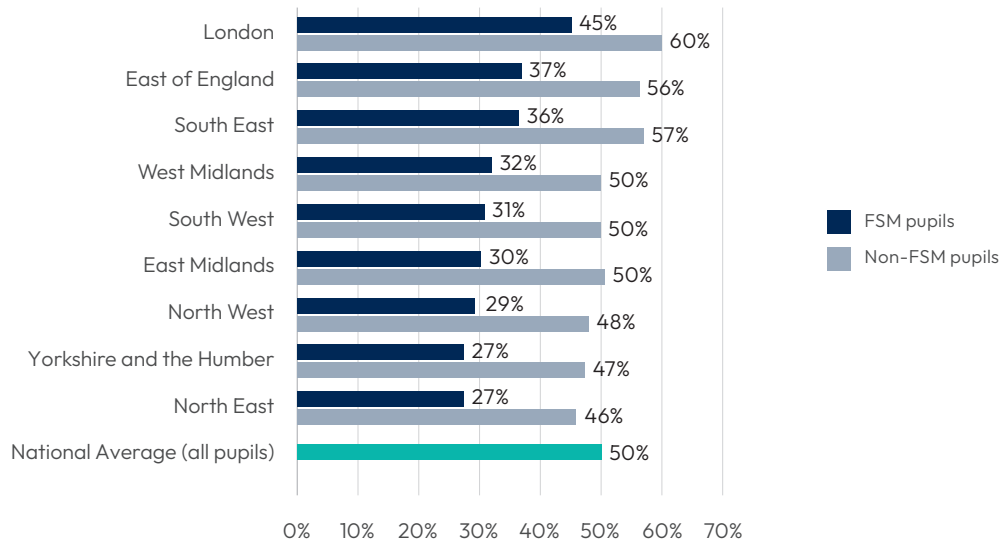
Focusing on those who were eligible for Free Schools Meals who became higher earners, we can see a large variation between regions – from 27% in the North East to 45% in London. The South West lies in the middle of nine regions, with 31% – or just under a third – of these young adults becoming higher earners (compared with 50% of their better-off peers).





Figure 35 Percentage of FSM and non-FSM eligible pupils in top 50% of earners at age 28, by region

Source: The Sutton Trust's *Opportunity Index* report, May 2025



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

Top quintile of earners at age 28

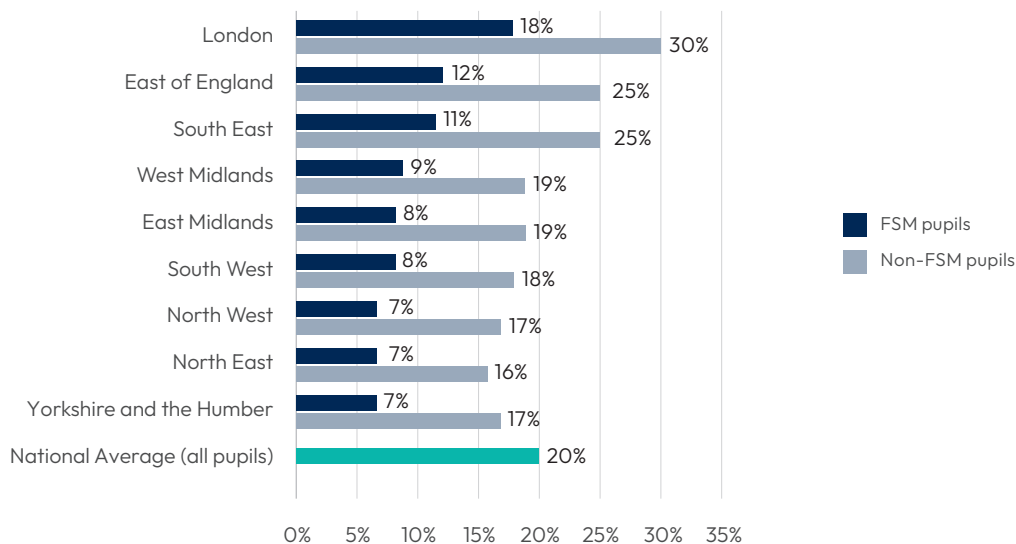
Similarly, we can segment for a set of even higher earners – those in the top quintile of earners at age 28. Young adults who came from poorer backgrounds were roughly half as likely to reach these higher earning positions as their peers from better-off backgrounds, across all regions.

London, the East of England and the South East provide greater opportunity to reach higher earnings, with 25% to 30% of non-FSM eligible pupils attaining

these earnings, compared to a low of 16% in the North East. In London, 18% of FSM eligible pupils became top quintile earners – higher than the proportion of non-FSM eligible pupils attaining these earnings across northern regions of England. The proportion of FSM eligible pupils in the South West placing in the top quintile of earners was 8%, behind other southern and midlands regions, but above regions in the north.

Figure 36 Percentage of FSM and non-FSM eligible pupils in top 20% of earners at age 28, by region

Source: The Sutton Trust's *Opportunity Index* report, May 2025



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

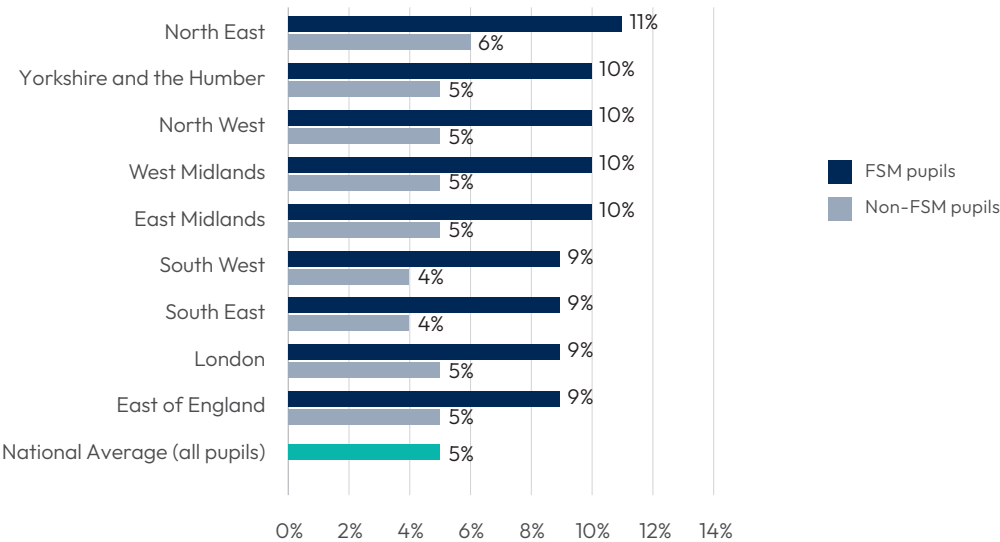


Receipt of benefits at age 28

Figure 37 shows that across all regions, FSM eligible pupils are roughly twice as likely to be in receipt of benefits at age 28 as their non-FSM eligible peers. There is a relatively limited amount of variation by region.

11% of FSM eligible pupils in the North East were in receipt of benefits at age 28, compared with a figure of 9% across all southern regions including the South West.

Figure 37 Percentage of FSM and non-FSM eligible pupils in receipt of benefits at age 28, by region
Source: The Sutton Trust’s *Opportunity Index* report, May 2025



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

Composite Indices

Composite indices combine outcomes measured across a number of indicators with the aim of giving a holistic view of the opportunities for social mobility, comparable across geographic areas. We look at two composite indices which have been created over the past year: the Sutton Trust’s ‘Opportunity Index’ and the national Social Mobility Commission’s ‘Promising Prospects’ Index.

Opportunity Index

The ‘Opportunity Index’ uses an average combined score to compare constituencies across six key indicators for pupils eligible for Free School Meals. These indicators are a combination of secondary and post-secondary education and destinations indicators, and employment and earnings indicators at age 28.

Indicators are:

- Attainment 8 score
- A-Level average points score
- Percentage in sustained education/employment after key stage 4
- Percentage with degree by age 22
- Average earnings at age 28
- Percentage in sustained employment at age 28

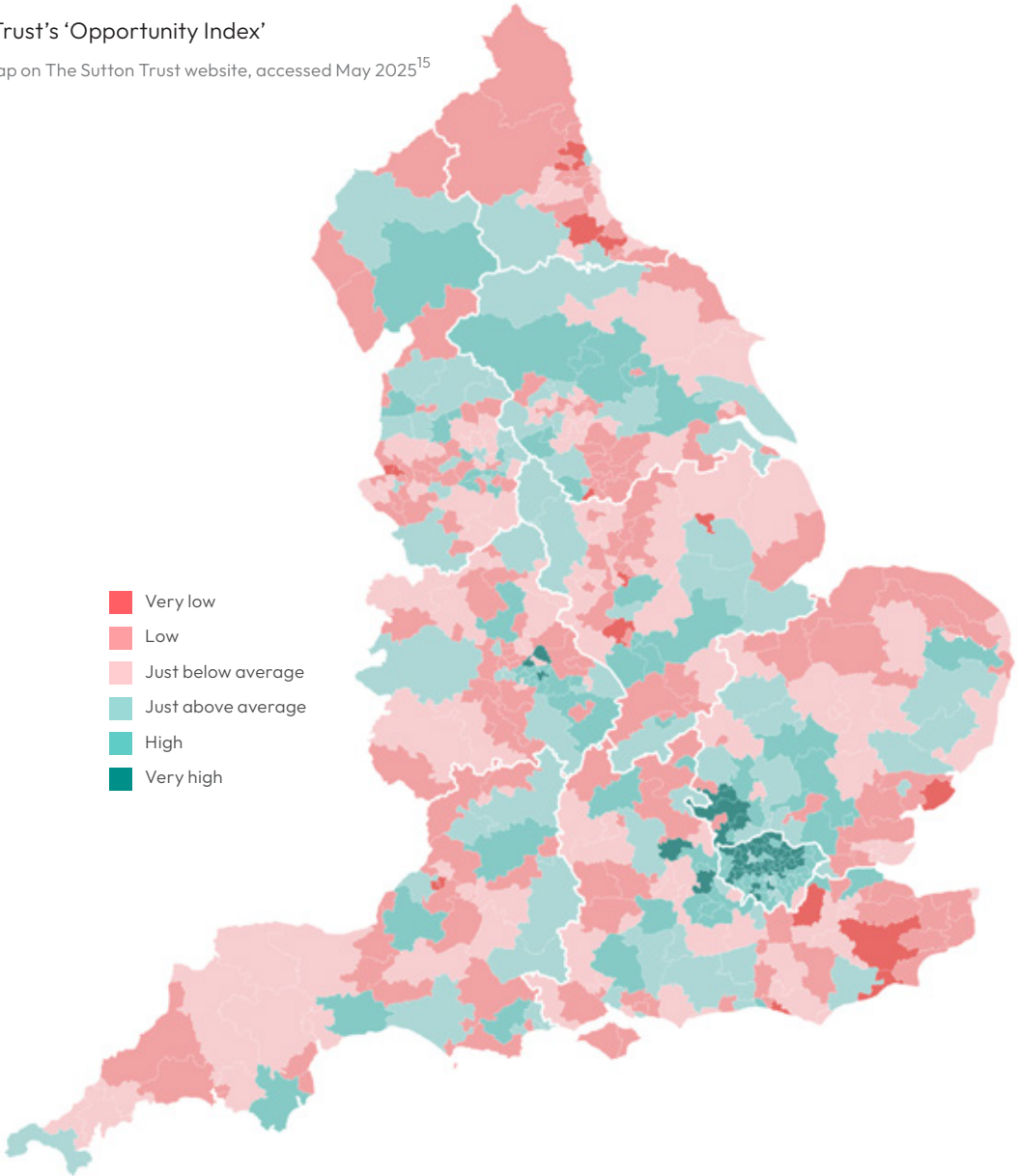
Areas are then ranked on their barriers to opportunity in comparison to the average young person in England.

Looking at England as a whole (Figure 38), it can be seen that ‘high opportunity’ areas are mainly located in London and the Home Counties, while ‘low opportunity’ areas are frequently, though not exclusively, coastal. Most of the South-West peninsula is characterised by just below average and low opportunity areas, with some pockets of higher opportunity.



Figure 38 The Sutton Trust’s ‘Opportunity Index’

Source: Interactive online map on The Sutton Trust website, accessed May 2025¹⁵



Promising Prospects Index

In a similar vein, ‘Promising Prospects’ is a composite index of ‘intermediate outcomes’ developed by the government’s Social Mobility Commission that intends to convey a sense of life prospects for young people in different parts of the country. It brings together four measures for ‘young people’ aged 25 – 44 based on level of education, occupational position and earnings. These are:

- Proportion of young people with a university degree
- Proportion of young people working in professional-class jobs
- Proportion of young people working in working-class jobs
- Mean hourly earnings

The index adjusts for socio-economic background, and measures how well young people from similar backgrounds do in education and the labour market across 203 upper-tier local authorities.

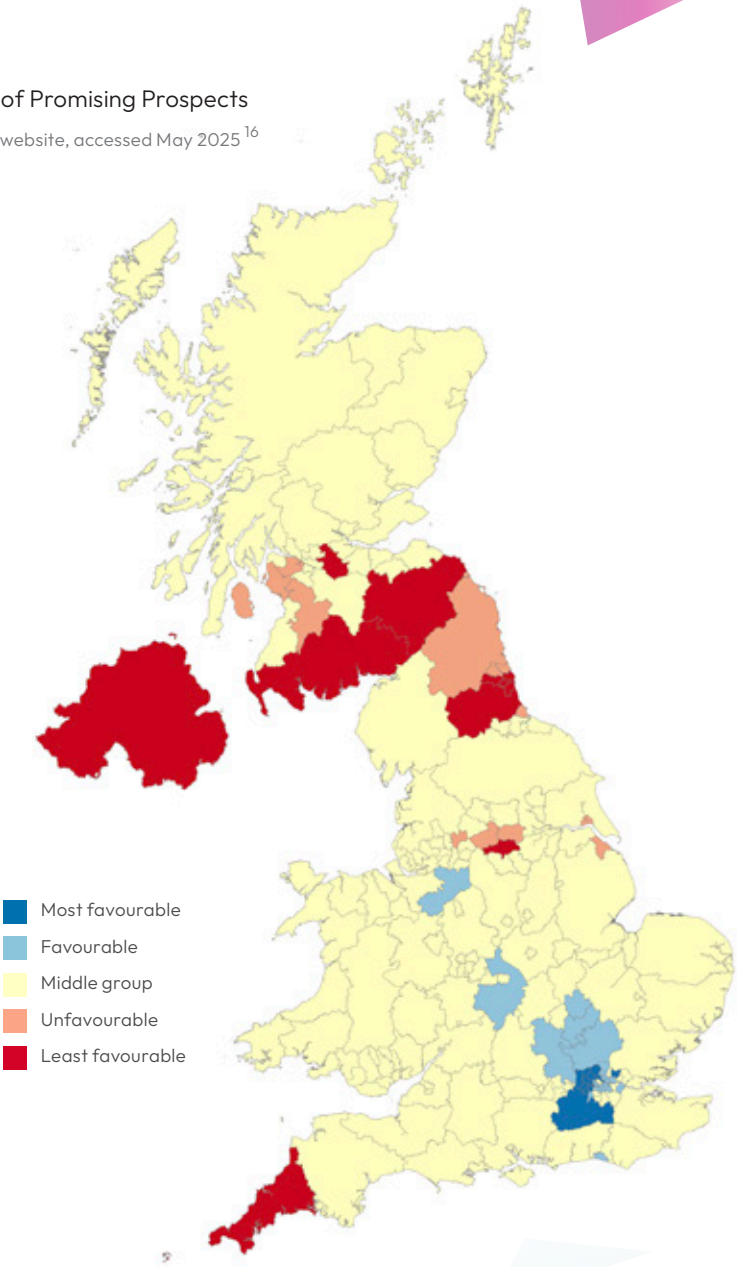
The findings are that most local authorities have similar levels of social mobility as measured by this index of intermediate outcomes, with a few areas – again, mainly in London and the Home Counties – with more favourable prospects, and a few areas with less favourable prospects. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly is one of the areas that ranks amongst the least the favourable for young people’s education and labour market prospects.

¹⁵ This is available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/opportunity-index-interactive-map/>



Figure 39 The Social Mobility Commission's Index of Promising Prospects

Source: Online visualisation on the Social Mobility Commission website, accessed May 2025 ¹⁶



¹⁶ This is available at: https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/intermediate_outcomes/composite_indices/promising_prospects/latest



The Plymouth Story

Navigating Change in Plymouth's Secondary Schools

Summary

- Secondary attainment outcomes in Plymouth – for both ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘non-disadvantaged’ pupils have transformed since 2019, when they were the lowest in the peninsula.
- In 2019, just 32% of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils in the city gained a grade 4 or above in GCSE English and maths; in 2024, this had risen to 41% – meaning outcomes are roughly in line with the national average.
- According to case study participants, the key drivers of this transformation in outcomes have been:
 - Academisation of the city’s secondary schools – which brought in new leadership and staff with an outward focus and high expectations for their pupils;
 - A place-based project that engendered trust and collaboration between civic leaders in the city (in particular, amongst trust leaders and with local authority officers);
 - A recognition amongst leaders that the place-based project’s objective of supporting ‘all children in Plymouth’ meant addressing inclusion as a priority – in particular, working together to reduce exclusions and off-rolling.
- Beyond the improvement in attainment outcomes, the work has created a cohesive, collaborative, self-directed school system that is ambitious and optimistic about the future for the city’s children.

1. Local context

Plymouth is the most populous city in Devon, with a population of 264,700 in 2021.¹⁷ It is a unitary authority and port city with a rich naval heritage and deep-rooted communities. The city is home to 19 secondary schools and 70 primary schools, serving a community of approximately 37,578 children and young people from reception until the end of Year 13.¹⁸

The city also has high levels of socio-economic deprivation. It ranks among the 20% most deprived local authority areas in England, with two areas of the city in the most deprived 1% of areas nationally. In the academic year 2023/24, 26% of secondary pupils were FSM eligible, compared to 25% nationally.¹⁹

2. Burning platform: low secondary outcomes

In 2020, Plymouth’s secondary education system was widely regarded as underperforming. Characterised by low levels of attainment and high levels of exclusion together with persistent disadvantage, the city’s schools faced significant structural and cultural challenges. This was the ‘burning platform’²⁰ for the creation of the Plymouth Secondaries Project, a place-based initiative led jointly by the Department for Education (DfE), local multi-academy trusts (MATs) and Plymouth City Council.

¹⁷ Office for National Statistics, 2022 Census.

¹⁸ Plymouth City Council website, accessed April 2025.

¹⁹ Department for Education data, accessed April 2025.

²⁰ Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth’s *Plymouth Place-Based School Improvement Evaluation Report*, January 2023. By Blandford, S., Gibson, S., Munn, G., Shute, J. and Casson, W.



Prior to the intervention:

- GCSE outcomes lagged behind national averages: in 2019, fewer than a third (32%) of 'disadvantaged' pupils achieved a grade 4+ in English and maths, compared to 45% nationally. For all pupils, this proportion was 57% compared with 65% nationally (see Figure 40).
- Exclusion rates for non-FSM eligible pupils had been rising: rates in Plymouth rose from 0.05 exclusions in 2015/16 to 0.23 exclusions per 100 pupils in 2018/19 – surpassing South West and national rates (0.16 in the South West and 0.14 nationally). Exclusions rates for FSM eligible pupils in Plymouth were relatively low between 2015/16 and 2018/19 – at roughly half the South West average (around 0.35 in Plymouth, compared with around 0.70 in the South West) (see Figure 41).
- Suspensions surge for FSM eligible pupils: whilst rates of suspensions for FSM eligible pupils in Plymouth were below regional and national averages in 2015/16 (18.18 suspensions per 100 pupils), a steep surge occurred in 2017/18. By 2018/19, Plymouth's rate (45.03 suspension per 100 pupils) was almost double the national average (28.90), indicating escalating issues with inclusion (see Figure 42).
- Pupil mobility was also high, according to our interviewees: this was driven by off-rolling practices and inadequate Alternative Provision (AP) pathways.
- Attendance was poor: in 2018/19, overall absence²¹ for FSM eligible pupils in secondary schools reached 9.7% compared to 9.2% nationally, but 10.2% in the South West region. For non-FSM eligible pupils, the overall absence rate was 6.0%, compared to 5.5% nationally and 5.8% in the South West region.

The education system was described as fragmented and inward-looking by leaders, with a lack of shared purpose and coordinated leadership across schools and trusts.

“Seven or eight years ago, Plymouth was not a good place to be educated... People were too inward looking, and the same leadership was being cycled around the region. Plymouth has coastal characteristics, half the land mass, and is further from significant developmental areas in terms of education than other areas, making it a perfect storm of challenge. There were lots of excuses, but also opportunities...”

— Will Smith, CEO, Greenshaw Learning Trust

3. Key drivers of change: academisation and collaboration

Lucy Livings, the Department for Education's Regional Director for the South West, who instigated the Secondaries Project, describes the work as happening at 'the right moment'. Academisation was occurring, supporting on-the-ground school improvement, at the same time as the government was supporting more localised approaches via its 'levelling-up' agenda. The place-based project built trust between civic leaders, ensured school and trust leaders took accountability for 'every Plymouth child', unlocked some of the government funding that had become available for this type of work, and enabled individual school improvement efforts to be part of a collaborative city-wide strategy.

Academisation

- Early academisation happened in Plymouth between 2011–2014, reflecting national academisation policy, especially for high performing and faith-based schools. Mostly academically selective or religious schools became academy converters or sponsor-led academies.
- Between 2017–2020, community comprehensive schools began to integrate into MATs in Plymouth. Key MATs began expanding, for example, Westcountry Schools Trust took in several schools in 2017 (e.g., Coombe Dean, Hele's, Plymstock) and Reach South Academy Trust and Ted Wragg Trust started acquiring schools by 2020.
- More recently, larger MATs such as Ted Wragg Trust and Greenshaw Learning Trust have grown rapidly, demonstrating a consolidation trend in the city. By 1st June 2025, Plymouth will no longer have any local authority maintained secondary schools.²²

²¹ Absence rate is the total number of sessions missed due to absence for all pupils as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions for all pupils. One session is equal to half a day.

²² Department for Education (2025), Sir John Hunt Community Sports College (2025).



Key actions taken by MATs to drive improvement included:

- Changes to school leadership – to set a culture of high expectations and bring in fresh ideas, addressing a tendency to be inward-looking and perhaps complacent.
- Changes to staff more generally – to address issues of low churn and ‘recycling’ between schools. MATs with a presence outside of Plymouth were able to bring in leaders and staff from elsewhere.
- Implementing tried and tested strategies for school improvement – including strategies around behaviour, literacy and lesson structure. Thanks to the place-based project, these strategies were then shared across other schools and MATs.

Leaders that we spoke with agreed that early joiners to MATs have made the most significant improvement.

Collaborative Leadership

In conjunction with academisation, the place-based Plymouth Secondaries Project was being run. At the heart of the work was a simple but powerful principle: place-based working must serve all children in Plymouth, not just those in individual schools or MATs. In the next section, we describe the project in more detail. Overall, however, the single most valuable outcome of the project that leaders we spoke with agreed upon was the trust and collaboration engendered by the project.

The key elements of collaboration were:

- A mutual agreement between all school and MAT leaders that their key overall concern would be ‘all children in Plymouth’ rather than just the children in their schools.
- In practice, this meant MATs opening their school improvement work to others, as well as agreeing to support inclusion across the city. This included sharing data for contentious issues – on things like exclusions and off-rolling practices – and openly discussing and challenging school practices deemed to be not in the interest of all children. Trust was vital to this process.
- MATs also described working closely with Plymouth City Council to improve ways of working and increase the capability of the City Council for the longer term.

As a result of these actions, a culture of ‘supportive challenge’ replaced compliance-based accountability – described by one leader as ‘accountability without hierarchy.’

“ We were explicit: collaboration isn’t fluffy. It’s about doing what we know makes a difference, together. ”

— **Will Smith**, CEO, Greenshaw Learning Trust

“ You can’t teach children who are constantly moved, excluded, or disengaged. Inclusion became the work. ”

— **Dean Ashton**, CEO, Reach South Academy Trust

“ Now, Plymouth is a place where people want to work together. Inclusion isn’t an afterthought; it’s the main thing. ”

— **Anna Mills**, Phase 2 Project Leader





4. The Place-Based Intervention: Project Phases and Strategy

Phase 1: Diagnostic and Engagement (2019–2021)

Phase 1 of the work was led by Tony Bloxham, a respected former headteacher appointed by the Department for Education, together with Chrysta Garnett from the Teaching Schools Council who provided vital implementation capacity. Tony began with a simple but powerful strategy: listening. The first phase of the work focused on:

- Building trust between civic leaders in the city through extensive school visits and convening;
- Identifying system-wide issues, initially around secondary school GCSE attainment outcomes including leadership gaps, curriculum fragmentation and poor inclusion practices;
- Organising school improvement Continuing Professional Development (CPD) – some of it external, using Tony’s personal connections. For example, on one occasion, Tony took ten headteachers to Bristol to see and feel how outstanding schools work in practice. Tony suggested that headteachers in Plymouth knew what they wanted to do, but needed courage and permission to do it;

- Getting key MATs including Greenshaw Learning Trust, Ted Wragg Trust, Westcountry Schools Academy Trust and Reach South Academy Trust to be willing to act beyond their institutional interests. Cross-trust behaviour and curriculum reviews for example have led to more consistent standards;
- Developing a portal as a centralised platform for leaders and educators across the city to offer shared resources for others to access, including teacher training and support materials;
- Sourcing pots of funding to facilitate the offer of MAT-led CPD to teachers and leaders in other schools and trusts, as well as initiate other joint improvement projects;

To make the work sustainable, it was also felt that the placed-based approach had to involve and embrace all phases – so work was done to coordinate transition, support maths at primary and engage in joint curriculum planning.

“ It was like a tapestry – beautiful on the front, chaotic behind. But what mattered was we were doing it together. ”

— Tony Bloxham

The model for school improvement that provided a central reference point for the work was from a framework designed by Professor Louise Stoll.



Phase 2: Strategic Integration (2022–2024)

Anna Mills, a local secondary school leader with contextual knowledge, took on the work after Tony and expanded its remit, moving towards integrated, multi-phase planning. Phase 2 included:

- A city-wide strategic plan integrating secondary, primary and special schools. Whilst initially this was too unwieldy, it gradually became focused around inclusion;
- All MATs signing an Inclusion Pledge, committing to shared responsibility for vulnerable learners. This was facilitated by data-sharing towards a city-wide inclusion scorecard to track real-time exclusions, attendance and mobility;
- Restructuring of the Plymouth Fair Access Panel (FAP) to support shared responsibility for mid-year admissions and managed moves. A sense of ‘open dialogue’ between schools and MATs was acknowledged by leaders;
- Collaboration with the Universities of Plymouth and Marjon – for example, working on the “Are We Included?” project as an evidence-based intervention to overcome mobility, disadvantage and to improve attendance and reduce permanent exclusion of key groups;
- Setting up a trust-led strategic group to drive priorities, with MAT CEOs and local authority officers co-owning priorities.

Anna’s work was deliberately transitional, building structures to make the work self-sustaining. By 2024, a trust-led steering group had formed, and inclusion was a recognised city-wide priority.

“ The biggest takeaway was asking: where must we come together to make the biggest difference? ”

— Anna Mills

Phase 3: Embedding and Sustainability (2024–Present)

Now led by the Ted Wragg Trust, the focus is on long-term coordination, delivery and ensuring sustainability. This includes:

- A dedicated member of Ted Wragg Trust staff to attend local authority education and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) strategy meetings;
- Shared governance, which has stabilised around a twelve-member steering group, with representation from MATs, the local authority and SEND leaders;
- A voluntary trust levy which funds shared initiatives, reinforcing mutual investment;
- An increased focus on integration with health, social care and post-16 services;
- Renewed efforts to expand Alternative Provision (AP) capacity and promote inclusive pedagogical practices. For example, trusts are piloting the offer of short-term AP placements within mainstream schools.

“ We’ve shown we can find solutions. The question now is how we sustain and scale them. ”

— Moira Marder, CEO, Ted Wragg Trust



5. Impact

Attainment

- The proportion of pupils achieving grade 4+ in English and maths GCSEs rose from 57% in 2019 to 66% in 2023/24, peaking at 72% in 2021 (see Figure 40).
- For 'disadvantaged' pupils, outcomes rose from 32% in 2019 to 41% in 2024, overtaking South West averages and approaching national benchmarks (see Figure 40).

Although all regions saw a peak in 2021 (possibly due to teacher-assessed grades), and a sharp decline as exams were reintroduced, the post-COVID plateau appears to be around 65% nationally, suggesting a stabilisation in performance for all pupils.

Inclusion

- The MAT leaders we spoke with reported that exclusion rates have declined. The data suggests that this appears to be the case for the rate of permanent exclusions for non-FSM eligible pupils, which has fallen from 0.23 exclusions per 100 pupils in 2018/19 to 0.10 in 2022/23. However, this is not the case for FSM eligible pupils, where rates of both permanent exclusions and suspensions have risen since 2019 (see Figure 41).²³
- Plymouth's permanent exclusion rate for FSM eligible pupils in 2022/23 (0.77 exclusions per 100 pupils) was above the national average (0.60), although slightly below the South West regional average (0.82).
- Suspension rates for FSM eligible pupils in Plymouth (63.01 per 100 pupils) were well above the national rate (45.58) in 2022/23 although roughly in line with the South West regional average (63.49). For non-FSM eligible pupils, the suspension rate in Plymouth (15.06) is also above the national (11.06) and South West (13.97) rates (see Figure 42). However, some trusts have reported reductions in suspension rates.
- According to the leaders we spoke with, off-rolling practices have reduced due to increased scrutiny and cross-trust cooperation. However, as illustrated in the Universities of Plymouth and Marjon's 2023 evaluation, pupil mobility in Plymouth's secondary schools increased in 2020/21 and 2021/22, following a fall in 2019/20 (see Figure 43).²⁴

Collaboration across the system

MATs now regularly share knowledge, resources and leadership expertise.

6. Persistent Challenges

Despite significant progress and a sustained culture of collaboration, core challenges remain:

1. Attendance

- As elsewhere in the country, absence rates have increased significantly in the post-pandemic era – and rates in Plymouth remain higher than national and regional averages.
- In the 2023/24 academic year, the overall absence rate for FSM eligible pupils in state-funded secondary schools was 18% in Plymouth, compared to an average of 17% across the South West and 14% nationally. The overall absence rate for all pupils was 11% in Plymouth, compared with 10% across the South West and 9% nationally.
- In state-funded secondary schools in 2023/24, the percentage of persistent absentees (10% or more of school missed) who were FSM eligible was higher in Plymouth (53.5%) than in the South West (50.2%) and England (43.3%). This was similar for non-FSM eligible pupils, with Plymouth (24.1%) higher than the South West (21.2%) and England (18.8%).

2. Exclusions and Pupil Mobility

- As noted above, rates of exclusions and suspensions remain higher than regional and national averages, and pupil mobility continues to disrupt continuity of learning. As elsewhere in the country, there are also rising numbers of pupils opting for elective home education (EHE).
- Despite this, there is growing consensus that while inclusion remains a difficult challenge, positive shifts in culture, leadership, pedagogy and new behaviour strategies are beginning to take effect and are creating more inclusive conditions for learning.

3. AP and SEND Capacity

- Coordination between education, health and care services is improving but not yet embedded.

²³ Department for Education data, accessed in May 2025.

²⁴ Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth's *Plymouth Place-Based School Improvement Evaluation Report*, January 2023. By Blandford, S., Gibson, S., Munn, G., Shute, J. and Casson, W.



7. Lessons for System Reform

Plymouth’s experience offers key lessons for regional and national policy:

- Trust-building between key leaders is not a precursor to the work, it is the work – and it takes time. For Plymouth, national interest in place-based work came about after work had already begun in building trust between leaders. This was the right timing because Plymouth already had a head-start on this work.
- Strong MATs can act as civic leaders, with responsibilities extending beyond their own schools – such as in sharing CPD, auditing other schools’ practices and supporting the work of the local authority. It can be beneficial if MATs have more than one school within the geography of the place-based work, as it can allow them to be more invested and offer more trust capacity to the work.
- External support works best when enabling, not directive. The Department for Education’s light-touch, partnership-based role was widely praised.
- Shared accountability mechanisms can build ownership and transparency without central mandates – as seen with, for example, the data sharing, scorecard and levies.
- Focusing on ‘doing a few things well’ is more realistic and effective than trying to do everything.

8. Looking Ahead

As Plymouth looks to the future, stakeholders are considering the following priorities:

- Sustaining a culture of collaboration, alongside collaborative governance and funding mechanisms;
- Deepening integration with other services, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), early help and post-16 education, and engaging broader health, social care and community partners;
- Deepening local pride and aspiration – asking ‘what do we love about our community, and how do we make our young people excited about their futures?’;
- Investing in leadership;
- Driving down persistent absence especially for ‘disadvantaged’ groups;
- Expanding high-quality AP and SEND pathways;
- Thinking about how Plymouth’s approach might inform other regional or national work.

As Plymouth’s leaders reflect, the greatest legacy of the project may not be just improved GCSE results, but the emergence of a confident, self-directed city-wide system. Where once there was fragmentation and deficit thinking, there is now trust, ambition and a shared belief in every child’s potential. Today, Plymouth is increasingly recognised as a collaborative and outward-looking city for education. Secondary outcomes are improving, leadership capacity is growing and inclusion is seen as central. As one leader commented: ‘Working in Plymouth has been a joy.’

Figure 40 Percentage of ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘non-disadvantaged’ pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and maths GCSEs between 2019 and 2024, in England, South West and Plymouth

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2025





Figure 41 Rate of permanent exclusions (per 100 pupils) for FSM eligible pupils and non-FSM eligible pupils between 2015/16 and 2022/23, in England, South West and Plymouth
Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2025

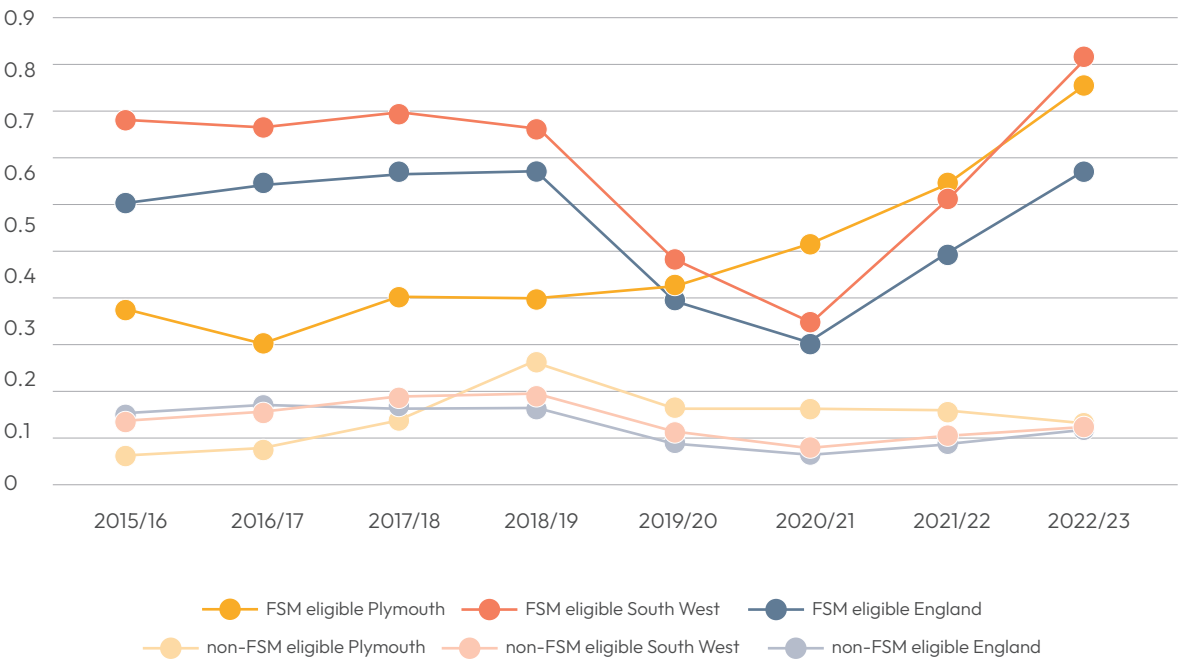


Figure 42 Rate of suspensions (per 100 pupils) for FSM eligible and non-FSM eligible pupils between 2015/16 and 2022/23 in England, South West and Plymouth
Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2025

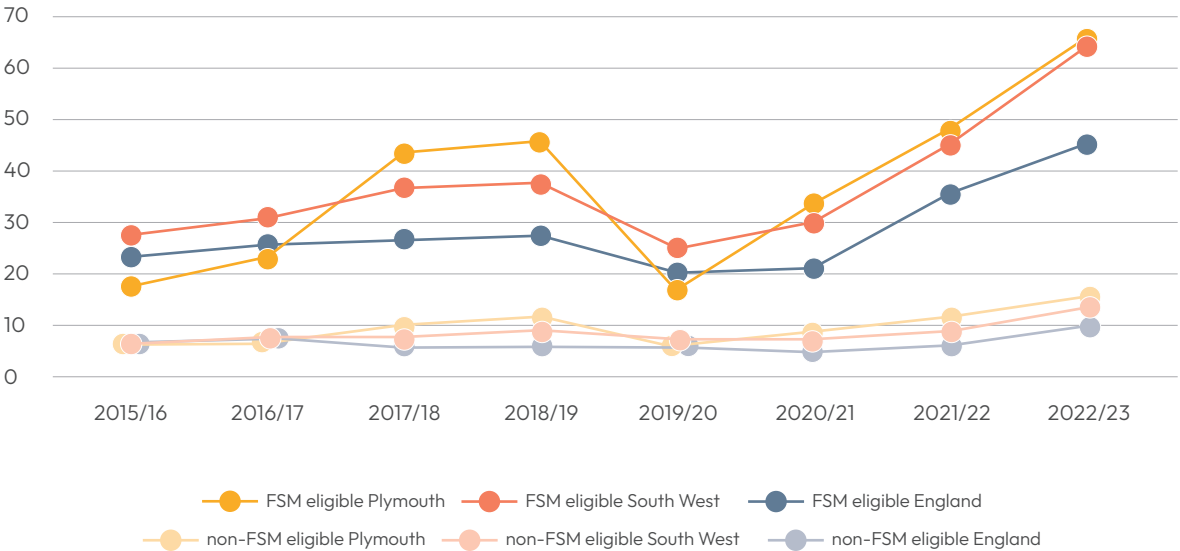
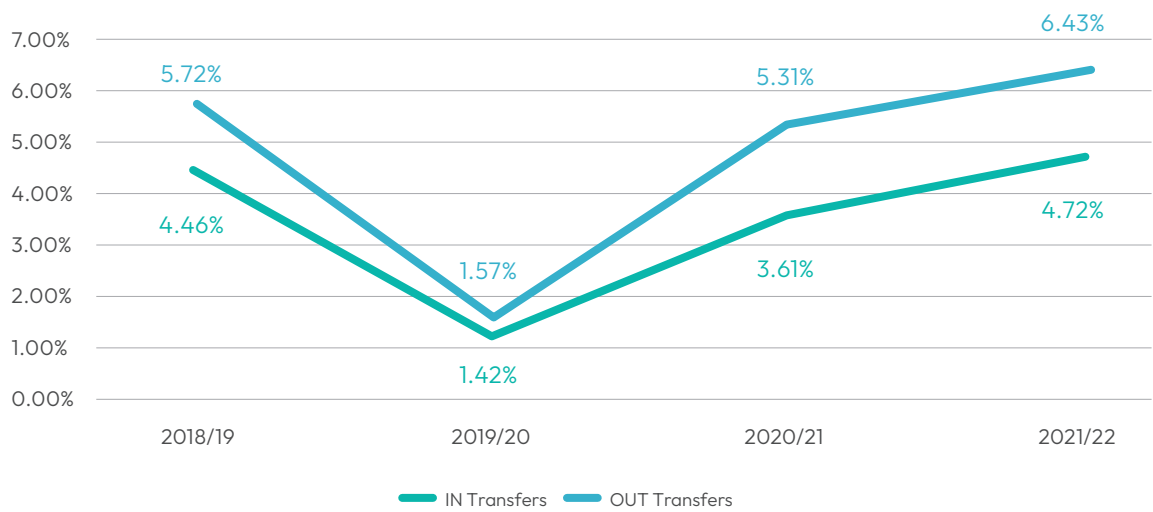




Figure 43 In-year transfers (as % of total population across all 19 Plymouth secondary schools) between 2018/19 and 2021/22

Source: Plymouth Place-Based School Improvement Evaluation Report²⁵



25 Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth's *Plymouth Place-Based School Improvement Evaluation Report*, January 2023.
By Blandford, S., Gibson, S., Munn, G., Shute, J. and Casson, W.



The South-West Opportunity Barometer

Results from a survey of South-West residents

This year, we collaborated with housing association LiveWest to survey over 1,000 South-West residents about their opinions on social mobility and opportunity in the region. The results are in, and we see:

- Very positive views from our South-West residents about fairness of opportunity, compared to the national population: 71% of our South-West residents agreed that everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and hard work will take them, compared with 35% of people nationally.
- More than half of South-West residents think opportunities to progress are good in their area, but this figure is lowest for 18-24-year-olds. 58% of all residents said local opportunities were good, compared with 33% who said they were poor. For 18-24-year-olds, 51% said opportunities were good, while 43% said they were poor.
- Lack of job opportunities is thought to be the biggest barrier to young people succeeding in life: 34% of those surveyed said this was the biggest barrier. This was followed by low wages (cited by 17%) and poor transport (13%). 18-24-year-olds were the most likely age group to cite transport as an issue (21%).

About the survey

LiveWest is a housing association that own and manage over 40,000 homes across the South West, from Cornwall to Gloucestershire. Since 2020, LiveWest has carried out their customer lifestyle and experience survey, 'Slice of Life'. The survey invites respondents to share their views and experiences in their day-to-day lives, including their experience of living in their neighbourhood and community, financial situation, and health and wellbeing, amongst other areas. Their ambition is to get a clearer understanding of their customers and the challenges they are facing, so that they can focus on making improvements to support their customers.

This is the fourth time LiveWest have carried out this research, and this year, they have partnered with the South-West Social Mobility Commission (SWSMC) to add three social mobility questions to their survey.²⁶

For comparability of findings, it is worth underscoring that this is a survey of a particular subset of residents in the South West – mainly those living in social and affordable rented homes (c.90%) as well as those in shared ownership homes (c.10%) – rather than the general population of the South West. This corresponds with the SWSMC's interest in understanding the views of those who may have come from under-resourced backgrounds. The South West geography captured by the survey is slightly larger than the area covered by the SWSMC, but around 75% of respondents will be residents of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset (including Plymouth and Torbay).

The survey was carried out by IFF Research, a member of the Market Research Society, in May 2025 with a random sample of 1,100 LiveWest customers. All interviews were conducted by telephone and participation in the research was voluntary. The sample was representative of the region, tenure and age of the LiveWest customer base. In June 2025, LiveWest shared with the SWSMC aggregated results for the three social mobility questions, to include in this report. No details were included in the results which could identify any respondent.

In the following analysis, we used data split by age bands. These are: (1) seven bands starting at age 18-24 followed by ten-year bands up to a 75+ band; (2) three bands of 18-34, 35-64 and 65+. It is worth noting that the 18-24 age band has the smallest number of respondents (37), in line with the age profile of LiveWest's customer base.

²⁶ For more detail on LiveWest's Slice of Life Survey and associated reports, see: <https://www.livewest.co.uk/about-us/research-reports>



Findings

Fairness of opportunity

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and hard work will take them?

Our sample South-West population are optimistic about fairness. 71% of all respondents agreed that everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and hard work will take them (with 20% of this number strongly agreeing). This compares with just 35% of people who agreed with this statement in the latest national survey that asks the same question.²⁷

Figure 44 All respondents - South-West residents

Source: LiveWest Slice of Life survey, May 2025

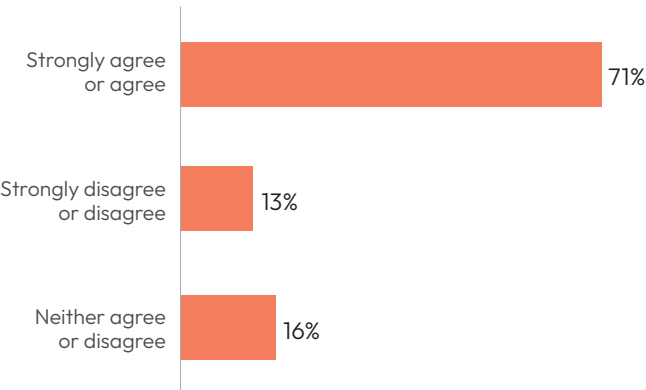
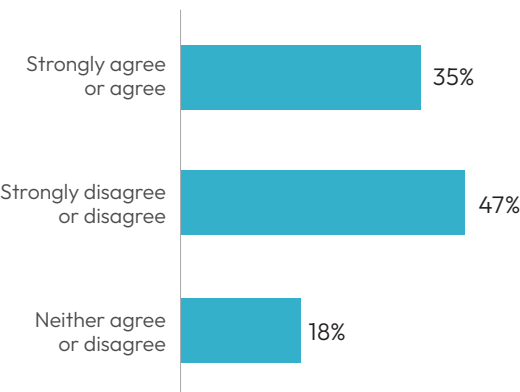


Figure 45 All respondents - national

Source: Office for National Statistics' Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, April 2025



We can't know the underlying cause of the large difference between the results, but possible reasons – any or all of which could be contributing factors – are:

- There may be less unfairness of opportunity or less obvious unfairness of opportunity in the South West compared to elsewhere in the country. A possible factor in this could be the predominance of more rural contexts as compared with more densely packed urban environments where people may see more clear instances of unfairness around them.
- There may be less awareness of unfairness of opportunity in the South West compared to other parts of the country, or amongst our sample population compared with the general population. What people perceive to be fair or unfair may also differ in different contexts. In our later question (question 3) we asked people about the biggest barrier to young people progressing. Lack of job opportunities was the most popular answer, which some people may see as unfair and others may see as just the way things are. By contrast, the more obviously unfair 'discrimination', for example, was cited by very few people as the biggest barrier.
- Residents in social or affordable rented homes (the majority of our sample population) may be more positive about fairness of opportunity than the general population – perhaps in comparison to those struggling to access decent housing for example.
- People may be more positive about fairness when speaking with another person (LiveWest's survey was conducted by telephone) rather than when completing a survey alone (the national one was online self-completion).

27 This national survey is the Office for National Statistics' Opinions and Lifestyle Survey. The survey is conducted with approximately 5000 people on a monthly basis and the figures in the chart come from its April 2025 dataset – the latest available data at the time this report was written. Respondents are a cross-sectional sample of the general population in Great Britain. One methodological difference of note is that the survey relies largely on online self-completion. Accessed in May 2025 at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/datasets/publicopinionsandsocialtrendsgreatbritainsocialmobility>



In the national survey, young people were much more pessimistic than older people: only 23% of the youngest age band (16–29-year-olds) agreed with the statement that ‘everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and hard work will take them’. By contrast, in LiveWest’s survey, young people were more optimistic than average. Both 18–24-year-olds (the youngest age band) and those aged 65 and over were positive about fairness of opportunity, with 81% of respondents in both of these age bands agreeing with the statement. Those in the middle age bands were the least optimistic in LiveWest’s survey.

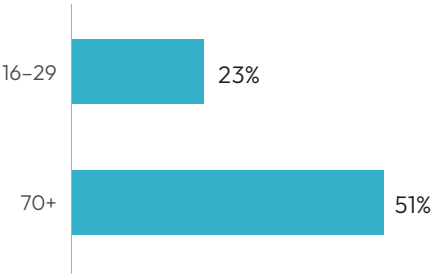
Figure 46 South-West residents who strongly agree or agree with the statement, by selected age band

Source: LiveWest Slice of Life Survey, May 2025



Figure 47 National sample who strongly agree or agree with the statement, by selected age band

Source: Office for National Statistics’ Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, April 2025



28 This survey was the national Social Mobility Commission’s Social Mobility Barometer 2021. The total sample size was 4693 UK adults, with 432 from the South West. Accessed in May 2025 at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-barometer-2021#:~:text=MS%20PowerPoint%20Presentation>

Opportunities locally vs elsewhere in the UK

Question: Considering the area you live in, compared to other parts of the UK, do you think the opportunities available for people to progress are...?

Our sample South-West population are more likely than not to think that opportunities locally are good. 58% said either ‘very good’ or ‘fairly good’, compared with 33% who said either ‘fairly poor’ or ‘very poor’. These results are similar to – but a little more positive than – those from a previous national survey from 2021 (see overleaf), where 50% of general respondents in the South West said either ‘very good’ or ‘fairly good’.²⁸

Figure 48 All respondents – South-West residents

Source: LiveWest Slice of Life Survey, May 2025

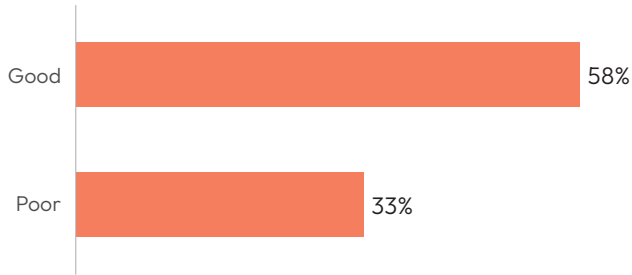
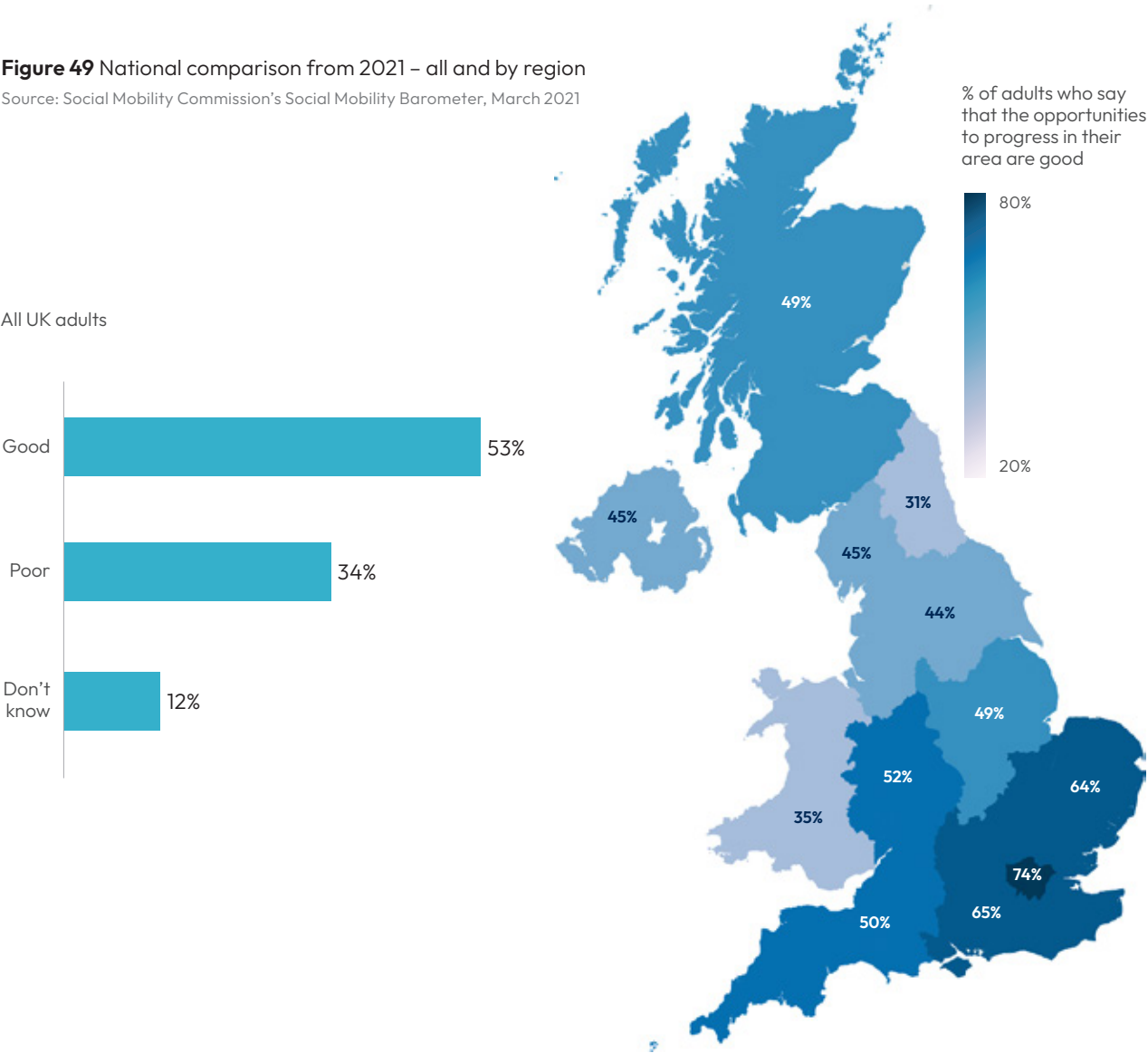


Figure 49 National comparison from 2021 – all and by region

Source: Social Mobility Commission’s Social Mobility Barometer, March 2021



There wasn’t a huge amount of variation across age bands, but the youngest band (18–24-year-olds) were the most likely age group to think opportunities in their area were poor and the least likely to think they were good. 43% chose ‘fairly poor’ or ‘very poor’, while 51% stated ‘very good’ or ‘fairly good’. This perhaps lines up with transport being a barrier for this younger band, as seen in results for the next question.

28 This survey was the national Social Mobility Commission’s Social Mobility Barometer 2021. The total sample size was 4693 UK adults, with 432 from the South West. Accessed in May 2025. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-barometer-2021#:~:text=MS%20PowerPoint%20Presentation>

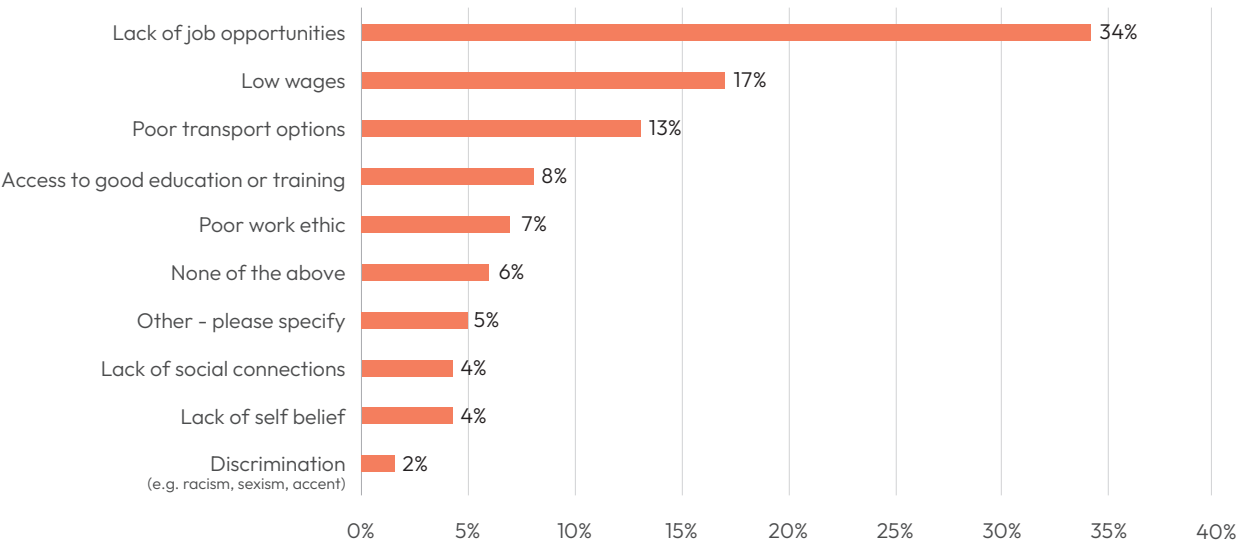


Local barriers to young people succeeding in life

Question: Which, if any, of the following do you think is the biggest barrier for young people in your area to succeed in life?

Figure 50 All respondents – South-West residents

Source: LiveWest Slice of Life Survey, May 2025



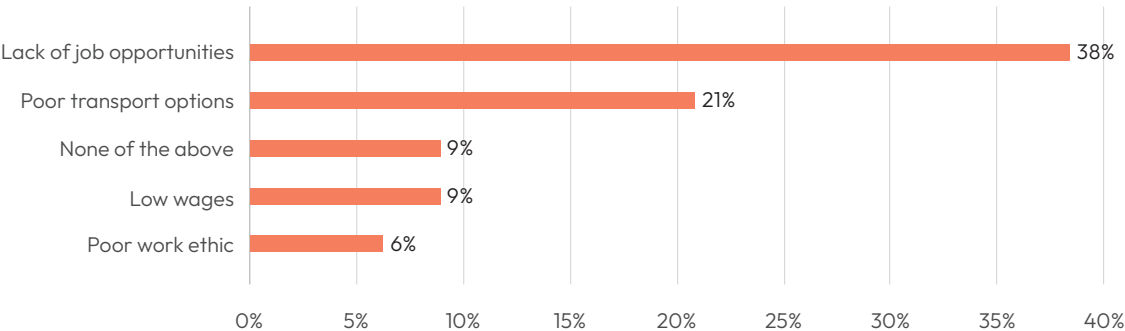
Lack of job opportunities (cited by 34% of respondents) was by far the biggest perceived barrier to progression for young people. This was followed by low wages (cited by 17% of respondents) and poor transport (cited by 13%). All the other suggested barriers were chosen

by fewer than 10% of respondents, nor were any ‘other’ barriers raised as particularly important.

Lack of job opportunities being the biggest barrier to progression aligns with results from a 2024 Sutton Trust national survey.²⁹

Figure 51 18–24-year-olds – 5 biggest barriers

LiveWest Slice of Life Survey, May 2025

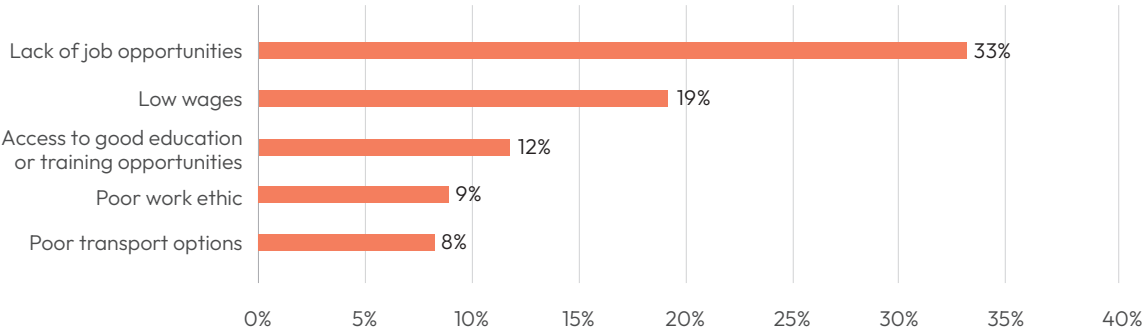


²⁹ In that survey, poor work ethic (29%), access to good education (29%) and lack of self-belief (26%) amongst other things all scored highly – however a key difference was that respondents in that survey were asked to select up to three barriers, whereas we asked for the [one] ‘biggest barrier’ only, so the results are not comparable. From the Sutton Trust report *Social mobility and opportunity: What the public thinks*, Kevin Latham, May 2024. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Social-mobility-and-opportunity-1.pdf>



Figure 52 25-34-year-olds - 5 biggest barriers

LiveWest Slice of Life Survey, May 2025



In terms of variation between age bands, 18-24-year-olds were by far the most likely group to cite transport as a barrier to progression for young people (21%) – perhaps because their own experiences of relying on public transport or other people for transport made this issue front of mind for some of them. 18-24-year-olds – alongside the 65+ band – were most likely to see lack of job opportunities as an issue too (38%). By contrast, the youngest age band were least likely to cite low wages as an issue (9%) – probably in relation to their lower expectations and income needs relative to other age bands.

25-34-year-olds, by contrast, were least likely to cite transport as a barrier (8%). This slightly older set of adults were the most likely of the age bands to say that access to good education or training opportunities was the biggest barrier for young people (12%).

Conclusion

These survey findings provide important, up-to-the-minute insights into people’s perceptions of social mobility and opportunity in the region. Overall, they suggest positive views about fairness in the region, but a lack of job opportunities as the biggest barrier to young people progressing locally.

We hope to continue to collaborate with LiveWest in subsequent years, meaning that we would be able to track changes in opinion over time. This should give insights into how stable perceptions around fairness, opportunities and barriers are, and how they might be affected by big events or changes in the national or regional context.





A new chapter for the Commission

We are excited to be starting a new phase in the life of the South-West Social Mobility Commission – with Karl Tucker assuming the role of Chair from Sir Michael Barber. With the Commission now firmly established, we are going to be focusing this second phase on developing a manifesto for improving opportunity across key domains, with a series of commitments backed by our Commissioners – from housing to health; public transport to parenting. We will do this while continuing our trialling and scale-up of the innovative models and tools we have developed, and extending this work into the employment sphere.

As a member of the advisory board for the Commission's founding report *Social Mobility in the South West*, Karl came up with the idea for the South-West Social Mobility Commission. As Chair of the Great South West partnership and Chair of Yeovil Valley Limited, he brings to the Commission links with the South West business community. This is complemented by his commitment to supporting opportunities for young people – as Chair of South Bristol Youth and a governor at Yeovil College.

Having established two high-impact, evidence-informed schemes with real promise of improving outcomes for thousands of children and young people, we intend to extend this approach to the employment sphere. Karl is well placed to support this objective and will ensure our employer work meets a genuine need in this space.

We are immensely grateful to Sir Michael for his authoritative leadership over the initial set-up phase of the Commission. Sir Michael has been instrumental in the Commission's establishment as a purposeful, credible voice with influence and convening power in the region and beyond. During this first phase, beginning in 2023, we welcomed on board eleven new Commissioners representing different sectors from across the South-West peninsula; established our vision and goals; convened over 200 civic and business leaders at our two Annual Events; and held civic leaders to account through the data presented in our Annual Reports. The work of the Commission has helped catalyse action by others in the region – something we describe in further detail below.

After two and a half years in role, Sir Michael is taking a step back in the Commission as his responsibilities in central Government increase. However, we are pleased to say that he will be continuing his association with the Commission as Honorary Patron.

We are immensely grateful to both Sir Michael and Karl, to all of our Commissioners and funders, and to our supporters and colleagues, without which none of this work would be possible.

Progress update

The Commission's work has evolved into what we call a 'do-tank' with a South-West-first approach, developing:

- (1) Practical, evidence-based research reports and recommendations; and
- (2) Pragmatic, impactful models and tools, which we trial regionally before wider scale-up.

We believe that with a small team this is the most effective way of supporting our objective of driving transformational change in education and early career outcomes for children and young people from under-resourced backgrounds across the region and acting as trailblazers for a regional approach to improving social mobility.



Our Annual Reports

Our Annual Reports remain vital to our purpose – as well as holding civic leaders to account, they have catalysed action by other organisations across the region and acted as an evidence base for funding.

Over £1 million in funding that we know of has been secured by other organisations for projects focused on regional opportunities thanks to the evidence gathered in our reports.



Young Enterprise has used the findings and recommendations from the *Social Mobility in the South West* report extensively as evidence of need in proposals for funding in the region. One such proposal resulted in funding of over £800,000, with a clear objective of improving social mobility for young people within the South West. The report really helped us as a national charity to maintain a focus on the causes of poor social mobility, both in terms of levelling up nationally between regions as well as inter-regionally, and how we work with partners to address this.”

— **Hannah Cook, Young Enterprise**



The Colyton Foundation is a charity with the goal of ensuring all children from under-resourced backgrounds in the South West have the opportunity to attain highly at school and access higher education. The work of the South-West Social Mobility Commission has been hugely valuable in supporting our activities as a social mobility charity working in the region. The Commission’s research and reports have directly informed our theory of change, particularly our ‘cradle to career’ approach. Being able to cite the evidence provided by the Commission’s research of low attainment and HE progression in the region has played an important role in securing funding from partners (currently c. £100,000) to deliver the ‘Your Future Story’ student support programme. The Commission has further supported the Foundation directly by providing platforms for us to publicise our activities, and through the expertise and advice of the Commissioners and Executive Team. The establishment and growth of the Colyton Foundation has undoubtedly been greatly facilitated by the work of the SWSMC.”

— **Nick Wakeling, The Colyton Foundation**



I have found the reports written by the South-West Social Mobility Commission to be an invaluable resource when raising awareness around the context of educational disadvantage in the South West and South Coast of England. In particular, their 2024 annual report ‘Turning the Tide’ and the key outcomes data and graphics within it, have been an essential resource to explore with school and system leaders from across the region, to stimulate data-informed, up to date discussions, with the information provided in a clear and accessible way for busy school leaders to digest. A real asset to the current educational landscape.”

— **Charlotte Orpin-Wright, EEF**



I run a non-profit aiming to fund author visits to under-privileged schools in the South West and [the SWSMC’s] ‘Turning the Tide’ report ... has been very helpful in writing a grant application as firm (and shocking) evidence for our case for support.”

— **Anna Wallace-Hare, Author Visit Coach**



Annual Event – Creativity in the Classroom, October 2024³⁰

Last year's SWSMC Annual Event highlighted the importance of creative skills in preparing young people for future challenges and supporting social mobility. Bringing together around 100 educators, policymakers and community leaders, the event was held at the University of Exeter's Penryn Campus in Cornwall and expertly hosted by Kate Kennally, SWSMC Commissioner and CEO of Cornwall Council.

Kate opened the event with an inspiring introduction and SWSMC Commissioners each spoke about their commitment to social mobility – setting the stage for a day focused on fostering creativity in education to improve outcomes in the region.

Creativity was defined broadly, encompassing skills like problem-solving, collaboration, imagination and play, idea-generation, idea development and risk-taking. Experts discussed how to embed these in the classroom to support students from under-resourced backgrounds in particular; and how educators, business and the community could work together to support development of these skills to better prepare students for future job markets.

A highlight of the day was a youth-led interview where Bella Dash from North Devon, together with Rosalia Day and Jaime Thompson from Cornwall College, interviewed Lee Elliot Major, Professor of Social Mobility at the University of Exeter. They discussed

how educators can bring creative practices into the classroom to engage all students, especially those from under-resourced backgrounds, touching on issues such as remote learning, equity in the classroom, and changes they'd like to see in education policy.

Subsequent speakers included:

- Sarah Childs from Penryn College setting out a framework for introducing creativity in schools through her work on the Penryn Creative Collaboratives project.
- Jonathan Bishop and students from Broadclyst Community Primary School virtually showcasing how technology can be used creatively in primary education.
- Rob Bosworth from Cornwall College Group setting out what world-class further education in Cornwall might look like.
- Professors Tim Quine from the University of Exeter and Emma Hunt from Falmouth University discussing with Alice Thomson from The Times how the higher education sector is preparing young people for a changing workplace.

The event inspired new thinking and sparked new connections between participants.

SWSMC Annual Event in Cornwall, October 2024



³⁰ This summary has been adapted from an SWSMC blog post, available here: <https://swsmc.substack.com/p/social-mobility-teaching-and-creativity>.



Heart of the Community report³¹

In January 2025, we published a new report looking at the transformative potential of local ‘cradle-to-career’ partnerships and how school leaders can lead them to success.³²

The Reach Foundation’s Cradle-to-Career Partnership is a burgeoning network of schools across the South West and nationwide working to address locally specific issues associated with poverty and deprivation. Among other things, schools frequently set up community hubs that offer a range of family support services in one place, signpost families to locally available support, and convene community leaders and organisations to address gaps in local provision.

As school leaders avow, this external focus on community is not instead of a focus on teaching and attainment outcomes. Rather, it recognises that parental and community involvement are crucial to those outcomes.

School-centred cradle-to-career models was one of the recommendations in our 2022 report *Social Mobility in the South West*, and we conducted this research to add to the evidence base around their impact. In particular, our concern was with whether this approach could be replicated elsewhere – in other parts of the country and without The Reach Foundation team driving the work.

The report focuses on four schools/trusts as case studies for this work: Holyrood Academy in Chard, Somerset; Cranbrook Education Campus in Cranbrook, Devon; King’s Oak Academy in Kingswood, Bristol; and Thrive Co-operative Learning Trust’s schools in the HU3 postcode area of Hull.

The report suggests that, whilst it is still early days in terms of seeing an impact on outcomes, there are promising signs that these schools and trusts’ cradle-to-career work has the potential to help transform lives. This is being evidenced by a range of measures like reductions in referrals to acute help services and the individual stories of parents’ lives that have been changed through this work.

The reason why these models have the potential to be effective is clear: there are probably few professionals more knowledgeable about what is happening in communities around the country than head teachers. Combining ‘frontline’ knowledge (of individual pupils, parents/carers and other community residents) with the influence to convene service providers and community leaders, head teachers are ideally placed to be

‘community connectors’. They can effectively join up services and systems around families’ needs, so they better respond to specific challenges on the ground.

Schools, meanwhile, are a near-universal touchpoint for families. They have unique potential to cultivate sustained relationships with families across many years at a depth that can ensure children are supported from birth through to adulthood. Relationships – especially those with parents – are understood as having transformational potential in individuals’ lives, supporting better mental and emotional health and empowering people to help themselves, their families and others in the community.

Our report suggests eight key enablers to building a successful cradle-to-career (C2C) model:

- 1. Right time:** It being the right time in a school’s journey – in particular, having achieved school stability and a strong record on teaching and learning, and C2C aligning with current school and trust priorities.
- 2. Trust buy-in:** Having a supportive trust or local authority that is on board with C2C priorities and potentially puts in place support, structures and funding.
- 3. Civic mindset:** The head teacher or C2C lead developing and inculcating in staff the belief that they can and should help change their community context.
- 4. Big picture thinking:** The head teacher or C2C lead believing in the benefit of taking time out from the everyday to reflect on wider objectives beyond narrow school attainment measures.
- 5. Intentionality:** Being clear on the ‘why’ behind every action to ensure the C2C model fits the school and community context.
- 6. Entrepreneurialism:** Being opportunistic and not being afraid to make asks; accepting that progress will be non-linear.
- 7. Right staff:** Gaining staff buy-in; having the right people involved; having consistency of staffing and continuity plans for if staff leave.
- 8. Showing impact:** Finding different ways to demonstrate impact given the long-term and holistic nature of the endeavour; using ‘wins’ as proof of concept.

31 This summary has been adapted from an opinion piece which appeared in Schools Week on 24th January 2025, available here: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/how-to-deliver-a-cradle-to-career-service-in-every-community/>.

32 *Heart of the Community: A study of The Reach Foundation’s Cradle-to-Career Partnership*. Sim, A. and Elliot Major, L., January 2025. Available at: <https://southwestsocialmobility.com/wp-content/uploads/Heart-of-the-Community-a-study-of-The-Reach-Foundations-Cradle-to-Career-Partnership.pdf>.



While doing this work is not easy, school leaders described the required mindset shift as empowering. In difficult times, school leaders can move from feeling like victims of circumstance to appreciating how their unique position can help nurture the energy, talents and opportunities within their communities.

Of course, school leaders will be concerned about how they can be expected to take on this additional work. Operating in a climate of squeezed school budgets, they are often already plugging gaps in the welfare system. And there is an added risk that if schools prove successful in developing their own cradle-to-career models without government support and alongside welfare cuts, future governments will continue to underfund schools and wider services.

School-led cradle-to-career work is not an alternative to better-funded public and third sector services. But it is a vital change to better address the complex, chronic issues associated with disadvantage like social isolation, which existing systems deal with poorly. We propose that together with better-funded public services, this could create a real difference to families' lives and to children's life chances.

The Equity Scorecard

The Equity Scorecard is a pioneering SWSMC tool aimed at levelling the education playing field and improving outcomes for pupils facing additional barriers to their learning. Designed to help impact the school system at scale, it has the potential to improve outcomes for hundreds of thousands of pupils.

The Scorecard is a practical self-evaluation tool that helps schools turn the principles of equity into measurable action. Comprising a range of self-reflection questions and examples of innovative practice, it is designed to help schools evaluate how well they serve pupils from under-resourced backgrounds both inside and outside the school gates, assessing both material and cultural barriers to learning. By embedding an equity mindset, the Scorecard helps teachers ensure every child – regardless of background – is given a genuine opportunity to thrive.

Having launched the Scorecard in a report in December 2024,³³ we have started a trial with 20 schools in the South West. This will enable us to evaluate and refine the Scorecard ready for wider South West and national scale-up in the autumn. The toolkit is proving incredibly popular with school leaders, who face stubborn gaps in school achievement and increasing dislocation with many parents and communities, amid strained budgets.

The work has also been highly influential in national and international education policy helping to shape the next Ofsted framework for example, alongside discussions on disadvantage policy across the four nations of the UK, and in other countries across the world.

In addition to our scale-up plans, we are also looking at ways to help schools and multi-academy trusts build on use of the Scorecard, such as by offering dedicated training on equity via a new professional development programme.

Professor Adam Watt, Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor for the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Exeter, opens the Equity in Education mini-conference, May 2025



³³ *The Equity Scorecard: A New Approach to Assessing Educational Equity in Schools*, Brooks, B., Sim, A. and Elliot Major, L., December 2024. Available at: https://southwestsocialmobility.com/wp-content/uploads/The-Equity-Scorecard_final.pdf



University-led tutoring

University-led tutoring is the ‘win-win-win’ scheme: improving the literacy of struggling school pupils, all while undergraduates gain valuable skills and potentially degree credits for impactful community work, enabling universities to fulfil their civic mission and creating a pipeline for future teachers.

Continuing trials this year have yielded really positive results. Tutoring has continued at the University of Exeter through the ‘Learning for Teaching’ module and with our UniConnect partners – Next Steps South West, North East Uni Connect Programme and GROWS (Gloucestershire) – through paid student ambassadors.

Hundreds of pupil tutees have improved their literacy levels on average by 33% and undergraduate tutors have been overwhelmingly positive about their tutoring experience. The scheme has attracted widespread national policy and media attention.

Our focus for national scale-up is supporting embedding of the programme within the curriculum of other universities, potentially benefitting thousands of young people nationwide. We are currently working with Bath Spa University, University of Worcester and University of York to support the creation of modular programmes at these institutions, and aim to build an off-the-shelf toolkit to help set up tutoring across the university system. Universities UK has highlighted our tutoring programme as an exemplar of social mobility work in higher education and has committed to promoting the scheme across the university sector.

We are meanwhile exploring whether undergraduate tutoring could be part of a more general approach to ‘service learning’ in universities, in which undergraduates contribute to the community as part of their degrees. We are doing this initially with colleagues at the University of Exeter, as part of planning for a new curriculum at the university.

Concurrently, we are developing further tutoring options. We have already started work on a secondary school reading comprehension programme, and a primary reading for pleasure scheme. Multiple strands will likely boost the attraction of the programme to undergraduates with different interests.

We are grateful to all of the supporters of the tutoring programme: in particular Lisa Roberts, Vice Chancellor and President of the University of Exeter, and our colleagues, partners and funders.

Programme benefits

- **Targeted support:** delivered well, one-to-one or small group tutoring is one of the best education bets known to improve outcomes for school pupils struggling in the classroom
- **High quality training:** delivered in partnership with schools and teachers, a fully specified content and pedagogy ensures tutor consistency
- **Undergraduate credits:** student tutors gain degree credits, key employability and life skills, and enable universities to give back to their local communities
- **Cost-effective, scalable and sustainable:** the tutoring scheme incurs minimal costs to universities and is provided free to pupils and schools
- **Teacher pipelines:** undergraduate tutors may consider a future career in teaching, or equally important, realise it’s not for them

Aims over the next 3 years

- Continue working with existing and new partners to improve outcomes for hundreds of pupils across the country who are falling behind, amid growing concerns about stark attainment gaps in schools.
- Provide undergraduates across a range of universities with an opportunity to gain experience and skills from tutoring, contributing to the greater good and considering a career in teaching.
- Build on our successful literacy programme to develop a suite of secondary and primary programmes across key subject areas.
- Develop a toolkit for embedding undergraduate tutoring in other universities and advocate a wider service-learning model enabling thousands of students to be credited for their community work.

Tabitha Elwell is a final year History undergraduate at the University of Exeter. Last year, she took the 30-credit School of Education 'Learning for Teaching' module, which included a tutoring placement. Tabitha was a student tutor to a group of three pupils at St James School in Exeter.

“

I discovered the Learning for Teaching module through a friend, who had also looked into it. I was a gap assistant on my year out which I had loved, however I had to do a lot of learning on the job – so a chance to learn some of the theory behind teaching and gain an insight into a PGCE was very attractive.

The benefits of the school tutoring route are many: [in particular] it provided me with a chance to give back to the local community as an ambassador of the university. It seems completely counterproductive to have universities full of educated, motivated individuals training to be teachers who are unable to gain actual experience. This tutoring route is the beginning of correcting this wrong.

Although I was nervous as to how much the children would enjoy a grammar course, the genuine delight that they had in having adults who were solely dedicated to giving them 1-on-2 or 1-on-3 attention for an hour, made all of us feel really appreciated and confirmed the positive impact we were having. It definitely helped improve my confidence by

providing me with opportunities to implement theory into practice.

The reason I chose Learning for Teaching was primarily employability, in terms of discovering more about teaching for a future career. The volunteering also enhances my CV and provides me with an interesting experience to talk about passionately at interviews. Moreover, the module is delivered to the highest standard: the lecturers (as teachers themselves) are fantastic at supporting us which has meant that I have achieved my highest marks in this module out of my entire degree by a significant margin.

Learning for Teaching has reaffirmed my love for teaching. It has highlighted the level of care and detail that goes into any teacher training and as such has made me keener on a university PGCE route as opposed to TeachFirst, which whilst being fantastic doesn't offer the levels of support that a university-led PGCE provides.”

Tutoring 'mini graduation' event held at the University of Exeter's Streatham Campus, May 2025





Sophie Mora is an undergraduate student at the University of Exeter. She has participated in the tutoring as a student ambassador through Next Steps South West.³⁴

“

I first found out about the tutoring programme in the summer term of 2024, when the local schools who had participated in the scheme that academic year came to the University of Exeter for a graduation ceremony. Working as a student ambassador for this event enabled me to learn about the Crafting Accurate Sentences Tutoring programme from school-staff as well as understand how the pupils were able to progress academically throughout the course. When I saw the programme advertised on the ambassador calendar, I was keen to get involved.

As an English student myself, I recognise the benefits of studying English and also the challenges that come with teaching this. I chose to take part in the tutoring because I saw the role as an opportunity to use and expand my skillset in communication, adapting to different age groups and to demonstrate my passion for the subject. There have been many transferrable skills involved in being a tutor, such as time management between my study and the programme and adaptability in both adjusting to each student's strength and rearranging groups when other ambassadors were absent, which will be beneficial in future career choices. However, the biggest factor in choosing to become a tutor was the opportunity to gain experience in teaching English at secondary school level. I am considering applying for a PGCE after I complete my BA English, and being a tutor enabled me to take a proactive approach to informing any future decision.

I would highly recommend the CAST programme and thoroughly enjoyed my time teaching the programme. Having the preprepared slides and syllabus plan not only provided me with a good structure but it also demonstrated how to teach each concept in a way that was accessible to the students. I gained an insight into how lesson plans and teaching programmes are created whilst having the flexibility to adapt certain exercises to best suit my pupils. This proved beneficial as it provided me with the confidence to successfully deliver the programme. I enjoyed having small groups each week, which allowed for me to get to know my pupils better and the programme also reminded me of grammatical structures that I have not consciously thought about for a few years! It was very rewarding to see my pupils become more confident and relaxed throughout the programme and to see the development in their work.

Since finishing the programme, I have been conducting greater research on the PGCE process and feel more excited about secondary school teaching as a potential career choice. The tutoring programme enabled me to compare secondary-level teaching with my previous work experience in a primary school, and I was pleasantly surprised that I enjoyed my experience in a secondary school more. Whilst I am still considering other options, the tutoring programme has given me some classroom experience that I can hopefully develop through future work experience roles, alongside the other previously mentioned transferrable skills which will enhance employability.”

³⁴ As noted, we have been working with UniConnect partners including Next Steps South West for several years to offer tutoring via student ambassadors who receive payment for their time, rather than degree credits. The tutoring is known by the name of the programme, which is the Crafting Accurate Sentences Tutoring programme, or CAST.



Calum Moore is an undergraduate student at the University of Plymouth. He has participated in the tutoring as a student ambassador through Next Steps South West.



I first found out about the tutoring programme in an email addressed to general student ambassadors in December in 2022. The programme sounded different to traditional student ambassador work and appealed to me.

It was in its infancy at this point. I applied thinking at the time that it was a good opportunity and to make use of a lot of spare time that I had in first year. At that time, I was considering teaching as a viable career option, so I thought tutoring was a good way of assessing that option on a much smaller scale. Additionally, it also provided good work experience if I needed it.

I thoroughly enjoyed the experience and have since done multiple CAST sessions throughout my undergraduate studies. I still stand by my initial statement I made, that these sessions are rewarding in observing the improvement and confidence in an individual's ability. I think it makes a difference.

Although my career choices have since changed, tutoring hasn't swayed my decisions, it's allowed me to explore my decisions further."

The Tech Frontier: one year on

Just over a year on from the publication of The Tech Frontier report, two exciting programmes are underway that are trialling the idea of 'Centralised Work Experience' – one of the report's key recommendations.

Centralised work experience involves groups of young people engaging in pre-designed, immersive projects led by employers or social enterprises at a centralised location. There are a number of potential benefits:

1. Typical employer-based work experience weeks can result in a high workload for smaller employers – and a lack of capacity can sometimes lead to less than inspiring experiences.
2. Low numbers of available opportunities can mean it isn't a level playing field – with family social connections helping to secure sought-after work experiences.

Centralised work experience programmes, by contrast, can specifically target students from under-resourced backgrounds and support social mobility.

This academic year, Speakers for Schools in Somerset and the Devon and Cornwall Careers Hubs have been conducting funded trials of this approach, with the aim of getting more young people from under-represented

backgrounds across the South West into tech careers.

Former Commission team member Henry Jones has moved to Speakers for Schools to lead their Somerset trial. The trial forms part of Speakers for Schools' 'IntoTech' programme, a £2.5M five-year national programme funded by the Hg Foundation. Four work experience weeks, each planning to impact 30 students, are set to be run in Somerset in 2025.

Meanwhile, we supported the Devon and Cornwall Careers Hubs to win £125,000 in funding from a Careers & Enterprise Company programme sponsored by Salesforce. Piloting of tech workshops and centralised work experience has already begun, with the aim of reaching over 1500 students over the course of the next two years.

Between them, these trials aim to inspire thousands of young people across the South-West peninsula into tech careers. If proved successful, this model of centralised work experience could be further replicated over subsequent years. And of course, it need not apply only to tech careers.

This is another example of how the SWSMC's work is catalysing change led by others across the region.



Early Years update

The publication of our early years report – ‘A Plan for Early Action’ – has had direct influence on policymaking and practice in the South West as well as the North East of England. More broadly, the report influenced public debate upon publication, with features in local and national media.

The report’s central recommendation was for the creation of Early Action Groups led by local councils to bring together all the organisations involved in early years service provision. It also made recommendations around an increased role for health visitors, engaging multi-academy trusts and schools to support with early years workforce development, and making nutritional guidelines mandatory rather than voluntary.

In the South West, the report’s recommendations are informing work by local government and education partners:

- Devon County Council have used the list of recommendations as a checklist against which to assess current provision;
- Cornwall Council and NHS partners have been identifying ‘gaps’ based on the recommendations, and Children’s Services officers have noted that their service area does not specifically consider nutrition;
- Cornwall Association of Primary Heads (CAPH) and Cornwall Education and Learning Trust (CELT) have been promoting and adopting the recommendations amongst the settings across which they work.

In the North East, the newly renamed Cabinet Member for Children’s Services, Child Poverty and Skills cited the report during a meeting of Council when discussing wider issues around child poverty and disseminated the report among Children’s Services staff. Council plans to establish a Child Poverty Taskforce echo the report’s central recommendation to form an Early Action Group, and the wider contents of the report have been credited with providing new insights and suggestions for this work.

Over the next year, Dr Antony Mullen – the author of the report – will continue to identify opportunities to influence local government and support new and existing partners to make use of the report – either by fully adopting its recommendations or by implementing specific suggestions to improve discrete areas of practice.

Trailblazers for a regional approach

Beyond our work in the South West, our broader aim is to serve as a trailblazer for a regional approach to improving social mobility. This year, we were pleased to present to the Department for Education’s Opportunity Mission team in London, as they consider how best to approach one of the government’s central missions. The data in our Annual Report clearly shows that the Opportunity Mission needs to be thought about in regional terms, given that each region has its own unique challenges – for example, NEETs in the North East. We have also engaged with other localities who, inspired by our work, are exploring how to develop similar initiatives in their own regions.

The Social Market Foundation’s 2025 report *Leave to Achieve* placed our regional model at the heart of its recommendations. The report calls for the establishment of Regional Social Mobility Commissions across the country – highlighting the South-West Social Mobility Commission (SWSMC) as a case study and blueprint for how such commissions could work nationwide.³⁵

We’re also proud that many of the recommendations from our 2022 report *Social Mobility in the South West* are now becoming a reality nationwide—from reforms to the Ofsted framework to sharpen its focus on disadvantage, to the creation of RISE teams (Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence) which help spread effective practice and foster peer-to-peer learning among schools. (See overleaf for our 2022 recommendations.)

35 *Leave to achieve: How universities can contribute to social mobility in their region*, by Dani Payne, June 2025. Available at: <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Leave-to-Achieve-June-2025.pdf>



Our 2022 recommendations³⁵

1. School-centred cradle to career (C2C) models

2. A university-led tutoring service

3. Sharper focus on disadvantage

- a. A focus on disadvantage in initial teacher education
- b. An imperative for school leaders to reduce their school disadvantage attainment gap through changes to the Ofsted framework
- c. Ongoing school engagement with pupil and community disadvantage assisted by a data-driven scorecard
- d. A regional drive to instil best practice in schools and academy trusts led by Regional Schools Commissioners
- e. A concerted effort to improve the school-home interface by engaging parents in different ways

4. Post-16 skills reform

- a. South West peninsula to become a hub of technical education, including apprenticeships
- b. Potential actions include flexible learning options and travel assistance

35 From the 2022 report *Social Mobility in the South West* Sim, A. and Elliot Major, L.



Conclusion

This year has seen encouraging progress in the drive to improve social mobility across the South West—from rapidly improving outcomes for ‘disadvantaged’ pupils in Plymouth, to strong momentum behind key SWSMC initiatives. In particular, the launch of The Equity Scorecard has been a resounding success, receiving wide support from school practitioners both in the region and nationally. We look forward to tracking its impact as take-up continues across the school system.

Beyond the region, the SWSMC is increasingly seen as a model for place-based reform, helping to tackle locally specific barriers to opportunity. We continue to share our learning and experience with partners across the country who are exploring similar models.

We remain committed to being a ‘do tank’ with a South-West-first mindset — making pragmatic, evidence-informed recommendations and trialling high-impact tools that can be scaled nationally. As we welcome a new Chair, we are excited to build on the strong foundations laid so far and continue our mission to make opportunity a reality for all.



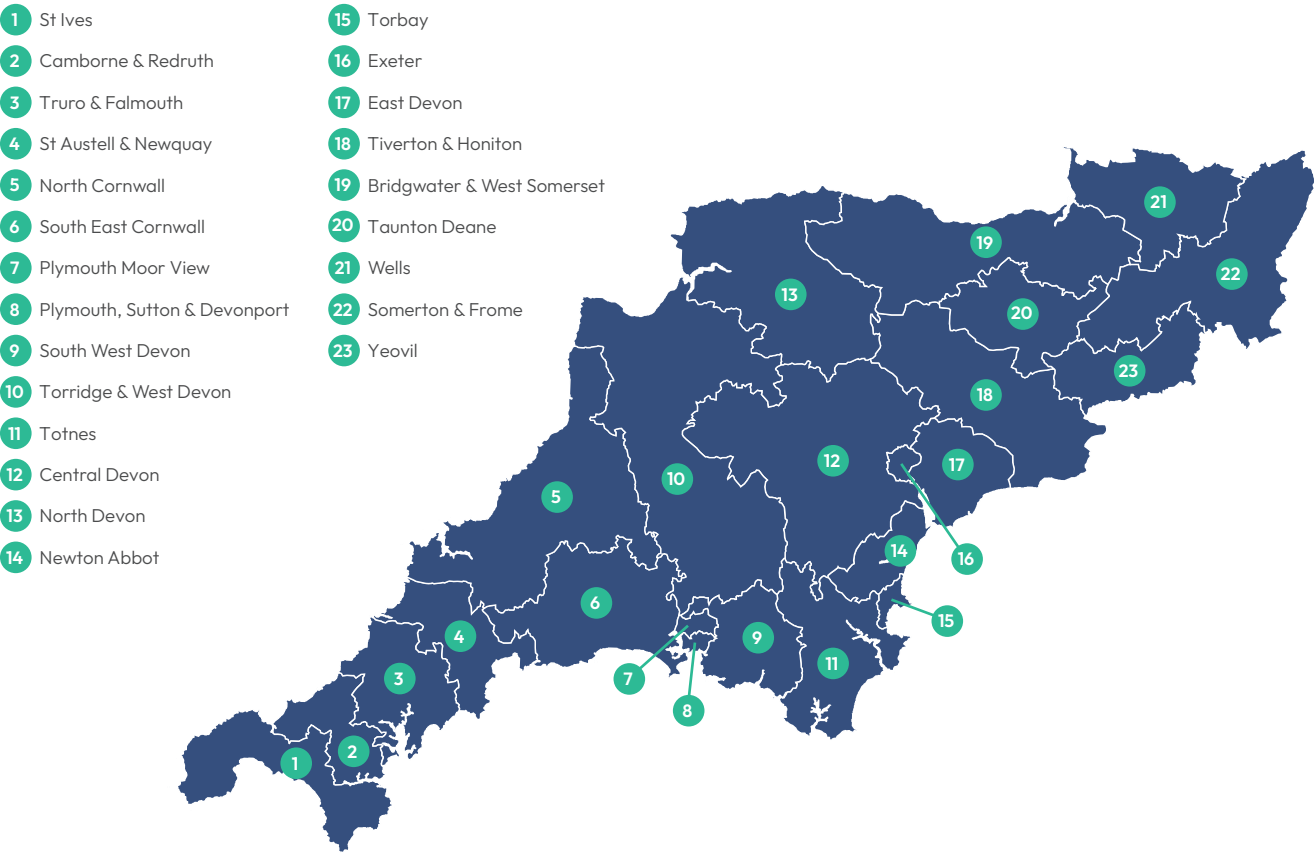


Appendix

South-West peninsula parliamentary constituencies

2010-2024 boundaries

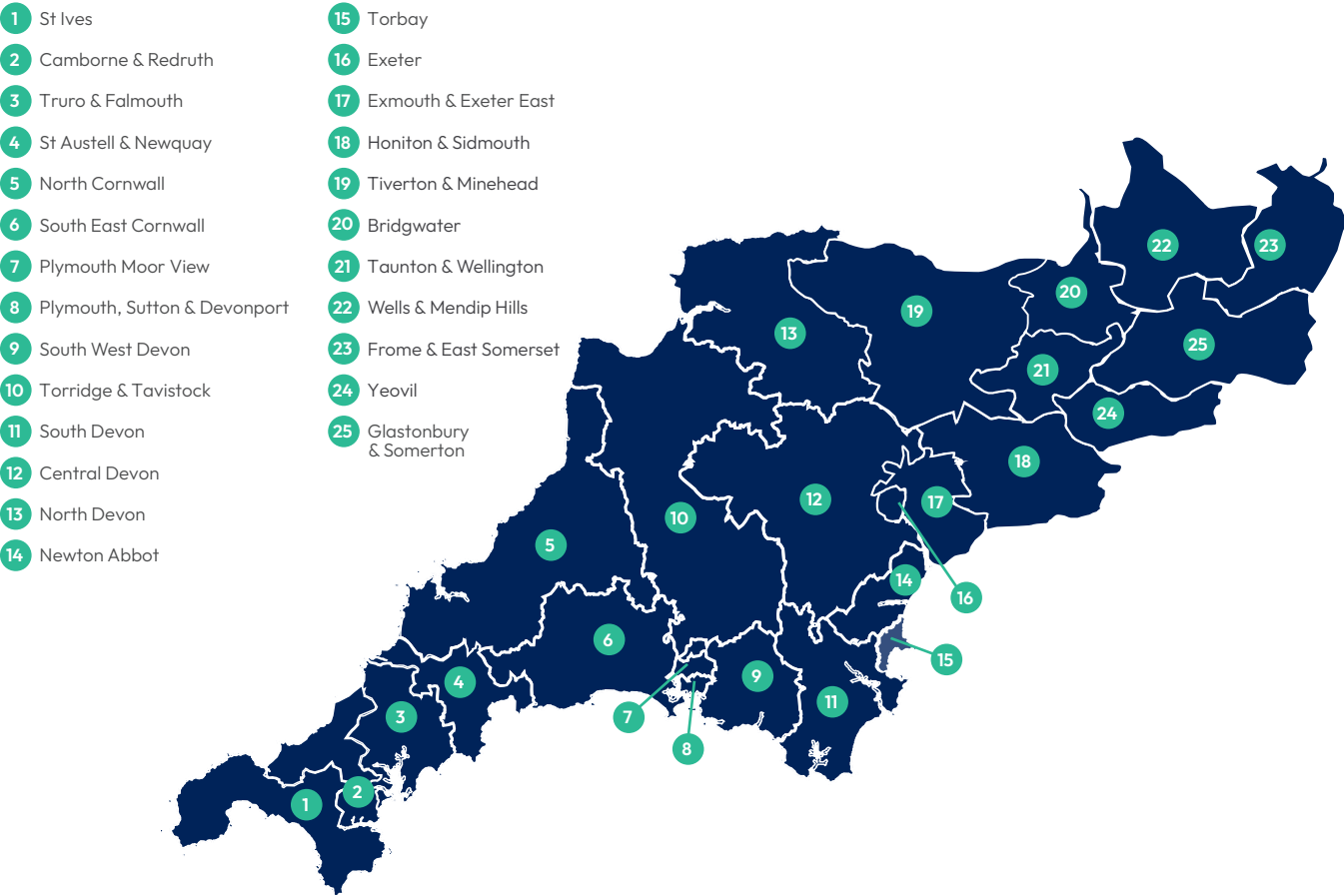
All of the parliamentary constituencies referred to in this report, bar those used in the section on GCSE English and maths attainment, are those that were in effect from the 2010 boundary review to the general election of 2024.

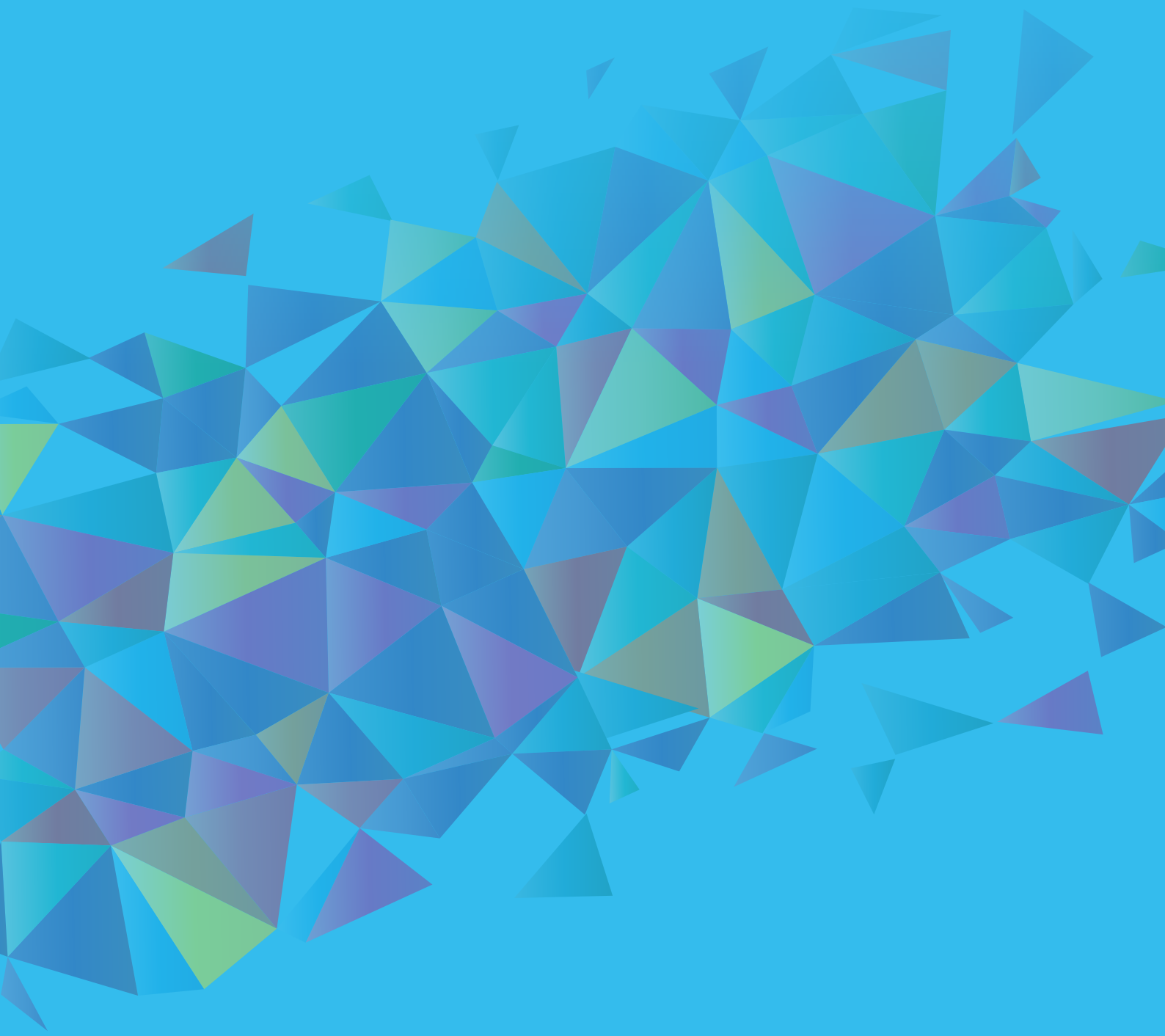




2024-present boundaries

The parliamentary constituencies referred to in the section on GCSE English and maths attainment are those that were in effect from the general election of 2024.





University
of Exeter

South-West Social
Mobility Commission