



SOUTH-WEST
SOCIAL MOBILITY
COMMISSION



University
of Exeter

Place Matters: Understanding Opportunity and Social Mobility in the South West

SWSMC Annual Report 2026



Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to receive funding from a core group of key supporters for this work, without which none of this would be possible. These include:

- Cobalt Trust
- Cornwall Council
- Devon County Council
- Great South West
- Persimmon Foundation
- Somerset Council
- University of Exeter

We are also extremely grateful to receive funding for specific projects, including our tutoring, cradle-to-career, and tech careers work. Supporters include:

- Hg Foundation
- Rank Foundation
- ESRC Impact Acceleration Account

- University of Exeter Policy Support Fund
- UPP Foundation
- Quilter Foundation
- Fiona Forbes
- Tim Wilkinson
- Melody Dougan

We are engaging with other potential supporters for this important work. If you are interested in supporting the work of the Commission, please get in touch with us: a.sim@exeter.ac.uk.

We would like to thank colleagues at the University of Exeter for their support in providing contributions to this report – in particular Neil Harrison, Kerry Chappell, Ursula Crickmay, Luke Graham, George Tarling, Chris Playford, and Catherine Hurcombe.



Foreword

By Karl Tucker

Chair of the South-West Social Mobility Commission

This year's report paints a mixed picture of opportunity across the South West.

While there are some encouraging signs, particularly in relation to employment and participation among young adults, the data continue to reveal significant challenges for children and young people from under-resourced backgrounds. Educational attainment remains below national expectations, attendance and inclusion continue to be concerns, and London continues to outperform every other region across many of the indicators featured in this report.

One finding that particularly concerns me is the data on early years development. Less than half of children in parts of the South West are reaching the expected levels across the 17 early learning goals by the age of five. We have seen declines in Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, only modest improvement in Somerset and no change in Cornwall.

These figures should concern all of us. The foundations laid in the earliest years shape children's later experiences in education and, ultimately, their opportunities in life. While there is no single explanation for the social mobility challenges facing our region, I believe early years development is one of the most important areas requiring our attention.

The report also highlights wider issues that demand action. Rising levels of severe absence, continuing educational inequalities and significant differences

in outcomes between communities remind us that opportunity is increasingly shaped by place. At the same time, the South West presents an interesting paradox: despite weaker educational outcomes than many parts of the country, the region performs relatively well on several measures of employment and participation in adulthood.

There has been much in the news recently about the number of young people aged 16-24 who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs). Undoubtedly, there are many factors that are driving this and, as Alan Milburn's initial report suggests, the societal model we have today is failing our young people.

As a Commission, we will be holding a series of conversations across the region this summer to better understand the drivers behind these patterns. We want to hear directly from young people, parents, educators, employers and communities about the barriers they face and the opportunities they see.

In the autumn, we will report on what we learn and set out practical actions that can help improve opportunities. The projects highlighted throughout this report demonstrate that progress is possible when schools, colleges, universities, employers and communities work together. Our challenge now is to build on these efforts and ensure that every young person, regardless of where they grow up, has the opportunity to lead decent and productive lives.

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Executive Summary


Each year, we provide a geographic comparison of education and destinations data for pupils from under-resourced backgrounds, as measured by their eligibility for free school meals.¹ This year's analysis points to four overarching findings.

London continues to pull away



London continues to pull away from every other region. It remains the strongest-performing region across all of our key education indicators and has widened its lead in early years development and primary attainment. The West Midlands remains the next strongest-performing region, while outcomes across most other regions including the South West cluster together at a significantly lower level.

The South West remains near the bottom of national rankings



The South West remains one of the weakest-performing regions educationally. It ranks near the bottom of England on almost all key indicators. At primary level, just 41% of pupils eligible for free school meals reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, the lowest regional figure in the country and below pre-pandemic levels.

Attendance and inclusion remain major challenges



Although overall absence rates have improved over the past year, severe absence remains stubbornly high. Across South West secondary schools, one in ten pupils eligible for free school meals missed at least half of the school year, up from fewer than 4% before the pandemic. Suspension, exclusion and elective home education rates also remain among the highest in England, raising important questions about school engagement, belonging and access to education.

A South West paradox



The South West presents a striking paradox. Despite relatively poor educational outcomes, the region performs well on labour market measures. It has the lowest overall NEET rate in England (for all young people) and the highest proportion of former free school meal pupils in sustained employment or education by age 28. However, adult earnings remain only average, and substantial inequalities persist within the region, with stronger employment outcomes concentrated in parts of Somerset and southern Devon.

The need for a regional approach

Taken together, the findings highlight the growing importance of place in shaping young people's opportunities. While the South West faces persistent challenges in attainment, attendance and inclusion, the data also reveals considerable variation within the region. This underlines the need for a regional approach to opportunity: one that recognises the distinct challenges facing different communities and builds on local strengths. The projects highlighted throughout this report offer practical examples of clearer pathways to opportunity.

¹ Note that this year we have decided to show most indicators for pupils eligible for free school meals, rather than 'disadvantaged pupils' (which includes those who have been eligible for free school meals in the last six years and children who have been looked after by the local authority). While figures for most indicators are typically very similar for FSM-eligible pupils and disadvantaged pupils, care should be taken if comparing figures in this report with ones from previous reports.

At a glance

All indicators show averages and rankings based on outcomes for those eligible for free school meals. 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. The grey boxes indicate where we reported on these figures in last year's Annual Report.

Indicator – for FSM eligible	Year of data	SW rank out of 9 regions	SW average	England average	Top region	SW average (+ rank) previous year	Top SW peninsula local authority / constituency	Bottom SW peninsula local authority / constituency
Expected level of development (EYFS) – age 5	2025	8th ↓	47% ↓	50%	London (58%) ↑	48% (6th)	Cornwall (50%)	Devon (45%)
Expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined) – age 11	2025	9th ↔	41% ↑	48%	London (59%) ↑	39% (9th)	Plymouth (52%)	Devon (38%)
Grade 4+ in English and maths GCSE – age 16	2025	8th ↓	40% ↔	44%	London (56%) ↓	40% (7th)	Plymouth (45%)	Torbay (35%)
Level 2 in English and maths – age 19	2025	7th ↓	48% ↓	52%	London (64%) ↓	55% (5th)	Devon (50%)	Torbay (39%)
Level 3 qualification – age 19	2025	9th ↓	30% ↓	37%	London (55%) ↓	32% (8th)	Cornwall (32%)	Torbay (23%)
Progression to higher education	2024	9th ↔	19% ↔	29%	London (48%) ↓	19% (9th)	-	-
Sustained education, apprenticeship or employment – age 28	2012 - 2019	1st	58%	-	South West (58%)	-	-	-
Average earnings – age 28	2012 - 2019	5th	£16,170	-	London (£20,080)	-	-	-
In top 50% of earners – age 28	2012 - 2019	5th	31%	-	London (45%)	-	Wells and Mendip Hills / Honiton and Sidmouth (38%)	Camborne and Redruth (23%)
In top 20% of earners – age 28	2012 - 2019	5th	8%	-	London (18%)	-	Wells and Mendip Hills (13%)	Camborne and Redruth (4%)
In receipt of benefits – age 28	2012 - 2019	4th	9%	-	East of England (9%)	-	-	-

Featured initiatives

In this year's report, we highlight a range of initiatives that are helping to improve opportunities for children and young people across the South-West peninsula:

South-West Social Mobility Commission

- **Equity Scorecard** – supporting schools to embed evidence-informed approaches to educational equity.
- **University-led Tutoring** – mobilising university students to provide structured tutoring support for pupils in local schools.
- **Annual Event** – bringing together practitioners and policymakers to strengthen pathways to opportunity.

University of Exeter School of Education

- **Creativity Action Research Resource** – a free resource helping schools develop creative skills across the curriculum.
- **Exam Centre Project** – widening access to GCSE qualifications for young people who are out of school, electively home educated or at risk of becoming NEET.
- **Digital Detox Research** – exploring the benefits and drawbacks to banning phone use in post-16 classroom settings.

University of Exeter Centre for Social Mobility

- **Coastal Communities Research** – examining how place shapes occupational opportunities and social mobility outcomes.

#BeeWell

- **Young People's Wellbeing** – using large-scale survey evidence to help schools, communities and public services improve young people's wellbeing.

Community conversations

Together with local partners, we have recently been running a series of community conversations – in Bridgwater, St Austell, Minehead, Redruth, Plymouth and Barnstaple. The conversations bring together practitioners, parents and young people to discuss how we can improve opportunities for young people in each area, building on what's already working well.

We will be publishing a report later in the year with the aim of sharing good practice and identifying priorities to facilitate better collaboration and join-up of efforts. Our Annual Event in the autumn will also bring together practitioners and decision-makers to start catalysing action on the findings.



Early Years (ages 0–5)

Expected level of development at age 5

Across the country, roughly half of the 50,000 children eligible for free school meals at the end of their Reception Year met the expected level of development across all 17 Early Learning Goals. This compared with 67% of all children. The 50% figure for children eligible for free school meals was unchanged from last year.

Regional differences increased as London pulled further ahead, with 58% of children eligible for free school meals reaching expected levels of development (up from 57% last year). Outcomes in the West Midlands (52%) trail those in London by six percentage points but are four to six percentage points above the other seven English regions (on 46%–48%). Year-on-year outcomes in the South West slipped back by one percentage point, down to 47%, from 48% last year.

Within the South-West peninsula, outcomes in Somerset have seen a small year-on-year improvement, up to 47% (from 46%), while Devon has seen the biggest year-on-year change, down to 45% (from 49%). Torbay and Plymouth have also seen declines to 49% (from 53% and 52% respectively). Cornwall figures remain unchanged, in line with the England average.

Outcomes vary significantly when looking at smaller geographies (Figure 2). In South East Cornwall, 61% of children eligible for free schools meals met the expected level in all early learning goals, while in St Ives, Tiverton and Minehead, and South West Devon, fewer than 40% did so.

Figure 1 Percentage of children who were eligible for free school meals at expected level across all early learning goals, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

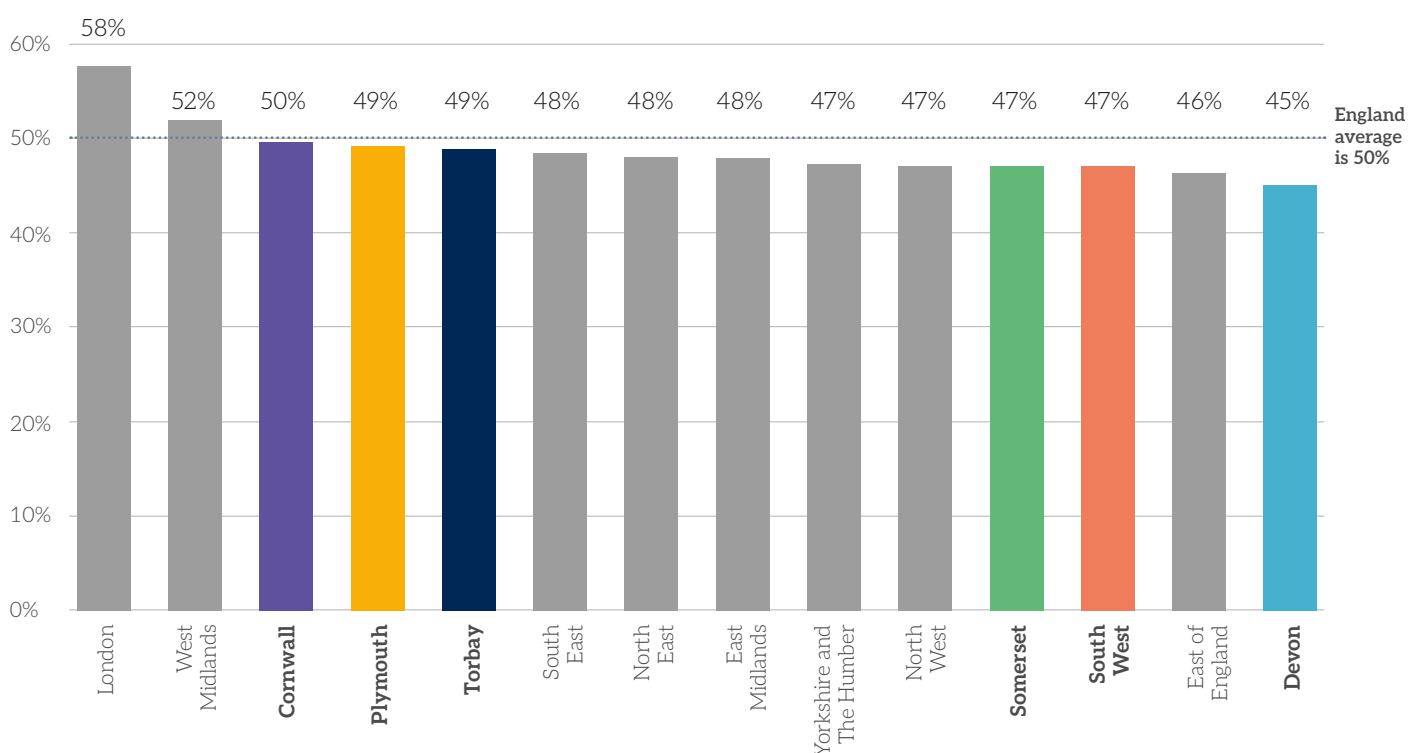
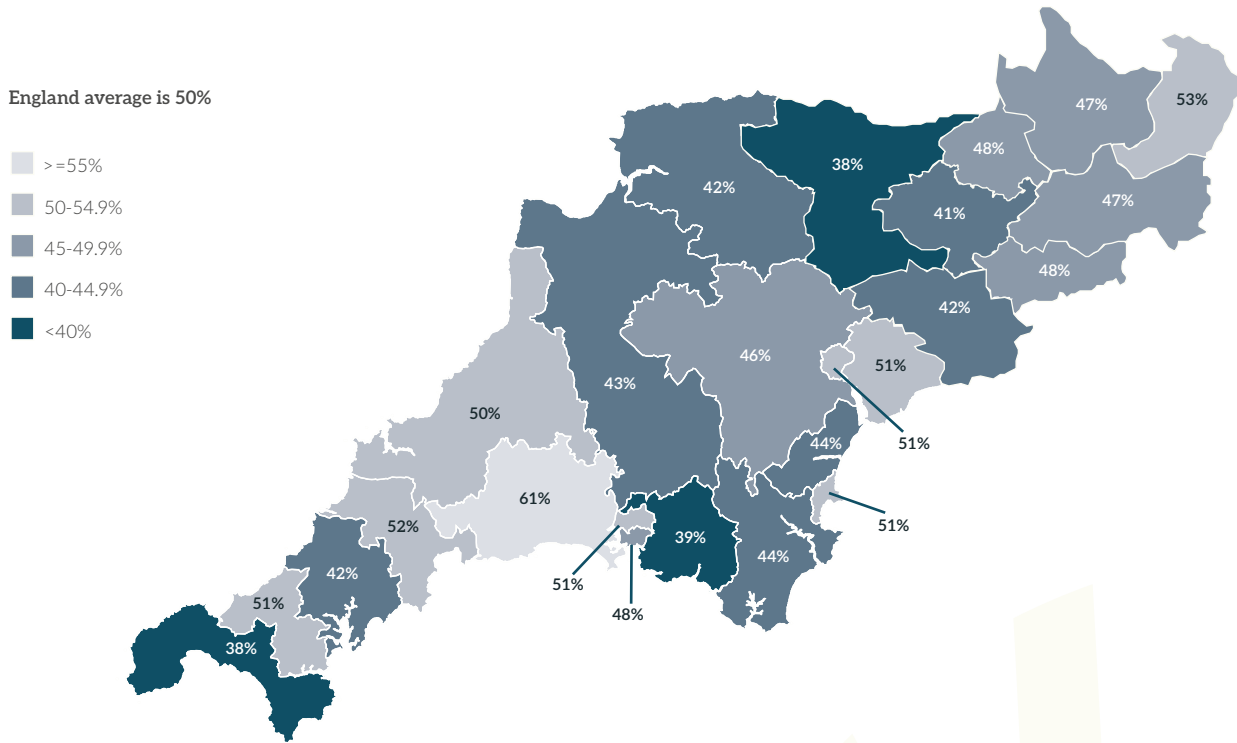


Figure 2 Percentage of children who were eligible for free school meals at expected level across all early learning goals, by peninsula parliamentary constituency, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed through a Freedom of Information request, April 2026.
 Note: Parliamentary constituency information shown here is based on the location of the provider.



School (ages 5–16)

Primary

Reading, writing and maths at age 11

Just under half (48%) of 11-year-olds eligible for free school meals reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined) across England in 2024/25. This represents an improvement of two percentage points on the previous academic year and brings numbers back in line with the percentage reaching expected standards in 2018/19. The proportion of all 11-year-olds reaching the expected level in these three subjects was 62%.

The South West continues to perform poorly on this indicator, with just 41% of pupils eligible for free school meals reaching this level – two percentage points below pre-pandemic figures. Looking within

the South-West peninsula reveals a more mixed picture. Outcomes in Plymouth are above the national average, those in Cornwall and Torbay are slightly below, while outcomes in Somerset and Devon lag significantly behind. Looking at outcomes since 2018/19 (Figure 4), Cornwall and Plymouth have seen the biggest improvement over the past five years, while Torbay has seen the biggest decline.

Figure 5 shows a breakdown of outcomes by peninsula parliamentary constituency. Outcomes span a large range – from 56% in Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport to 23% in Tiverton and Minehead. Generally, outcomes are better in Plymouth, eastern Cornwall and southern Devon, and worse across the northern parts of Somerset and Devon.

Figure 3 Percentage of pupils eligible for free schools meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined), by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

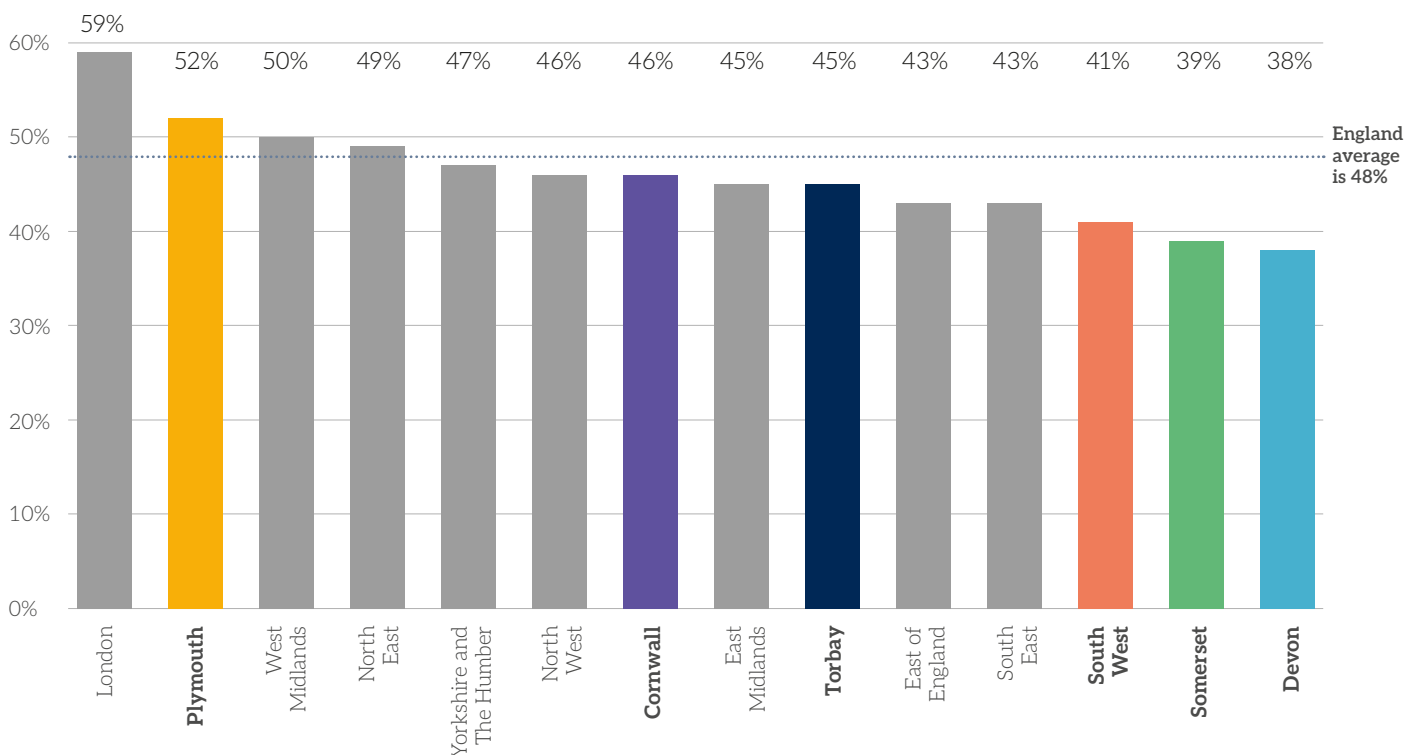


Figure 4 Percentage of pupils eligible for free schools meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined), by peninsula local authority and England average, 2018/19 to 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

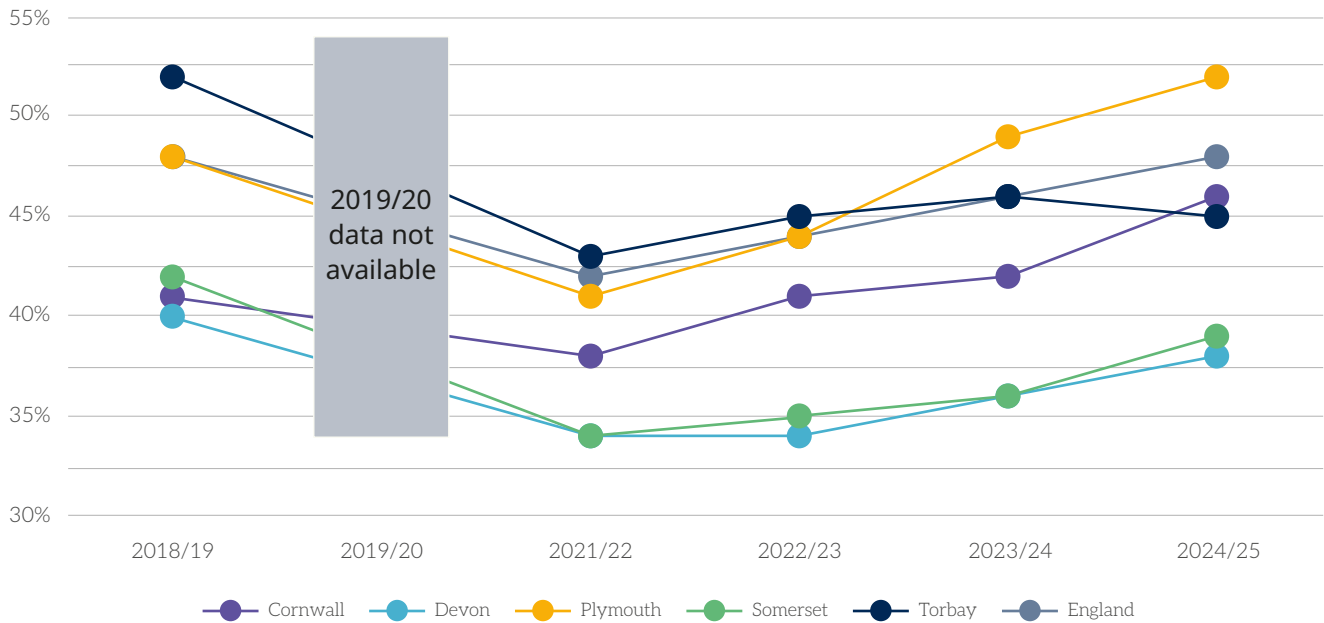
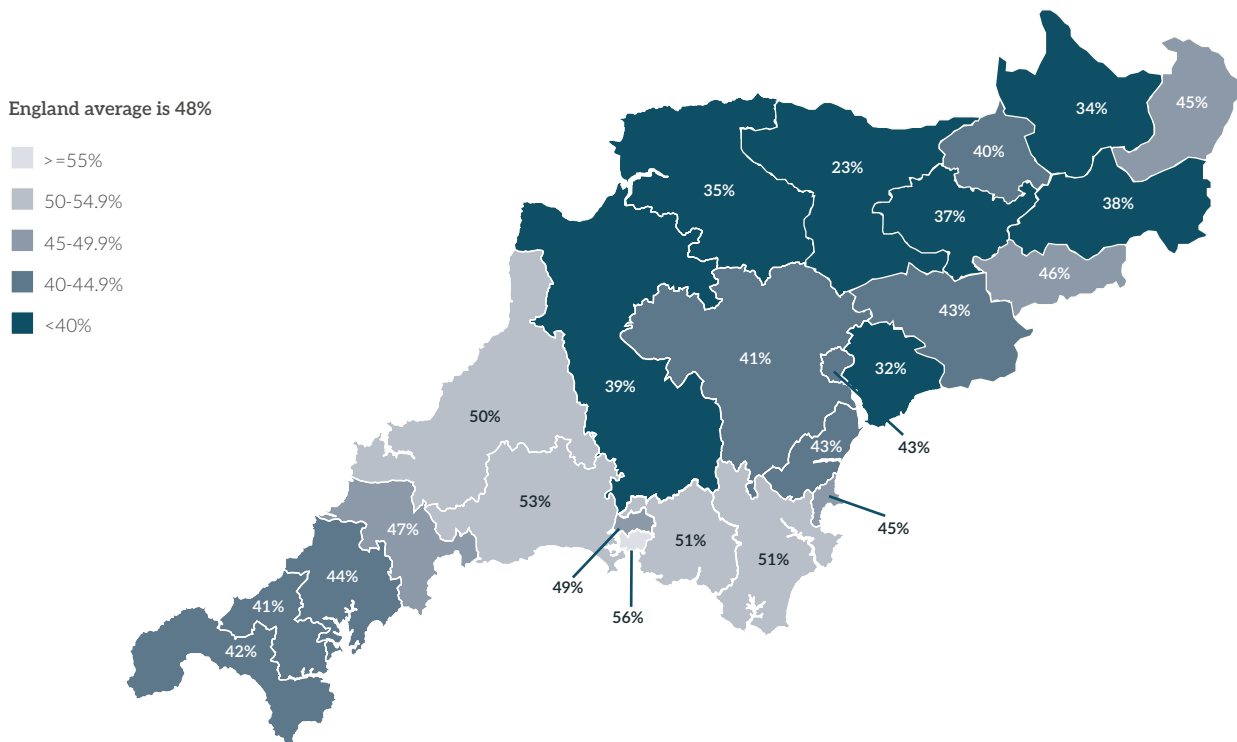


Figure 5 Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined), by peninsula parliamentary constituency, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed through a Freedom of Information request, April 2026.

Note: Parliamentary constituency information shown here is based on the location of the provider.



Absence

School attendance is important for children’s learning, development and wellbeing, and is strongly linked to attainment. Absence rates are therefore a useful leading indicator for later attainment outcomes.

Overall absence

Absence rates are higher among primary-age pupils eligible for free school meals than all pupils (7.8% compared with 5.2% respectively across England in 2024/25).

Encouragingly, across most of the South-West peninsula absence rates for pupils eligible for free school meals have come down at a higher rate than the national average in the past year (see Figure 7). While last year, every peninsula local authority had rates higher than the national average, this year

rates in Torbay and Cornwall matched those for England as a whole (Figure 6). Plymouth and Devon had absence rates just above the national average, at 8.0% and 8.1% respectively. Rates in Somerset were still relatively high, at 8.8%.

As in previous years, overall absence rates across the peninsula were driven largely by 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 6 Overall, authorised and unauthorised absence rates for primary pupils eligible for free schools, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

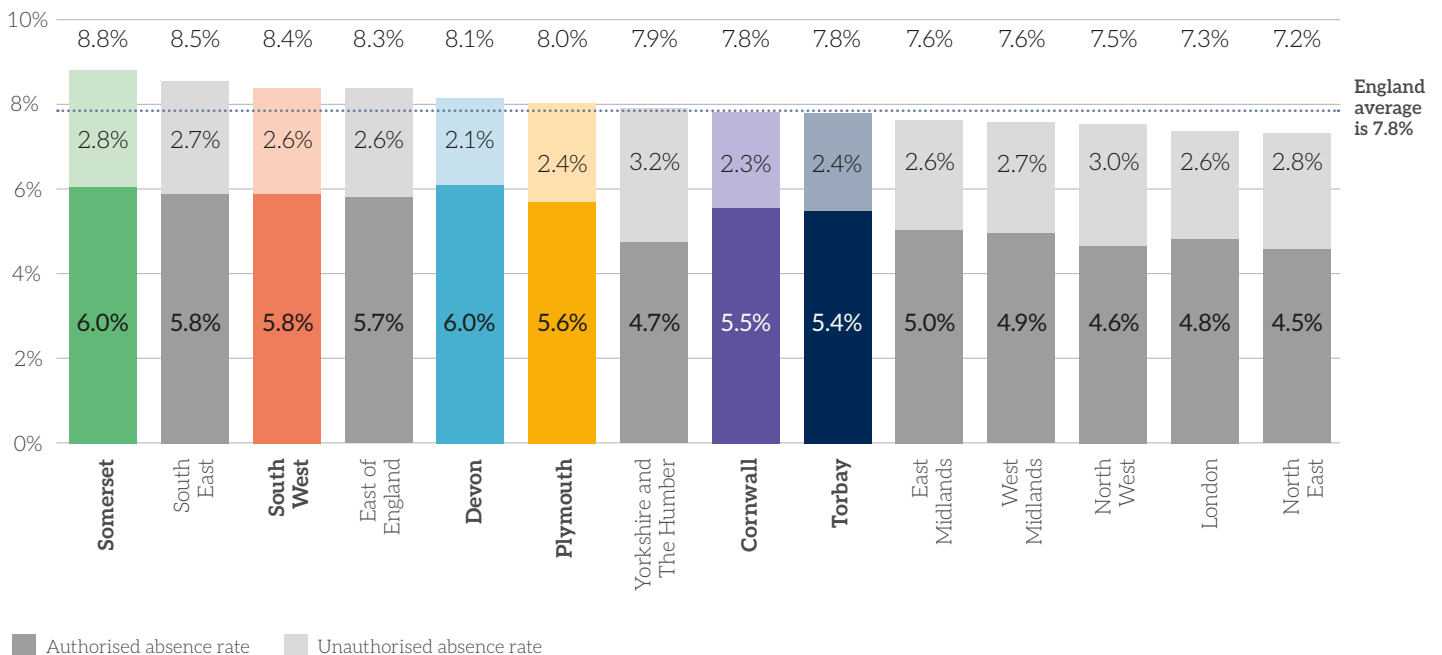
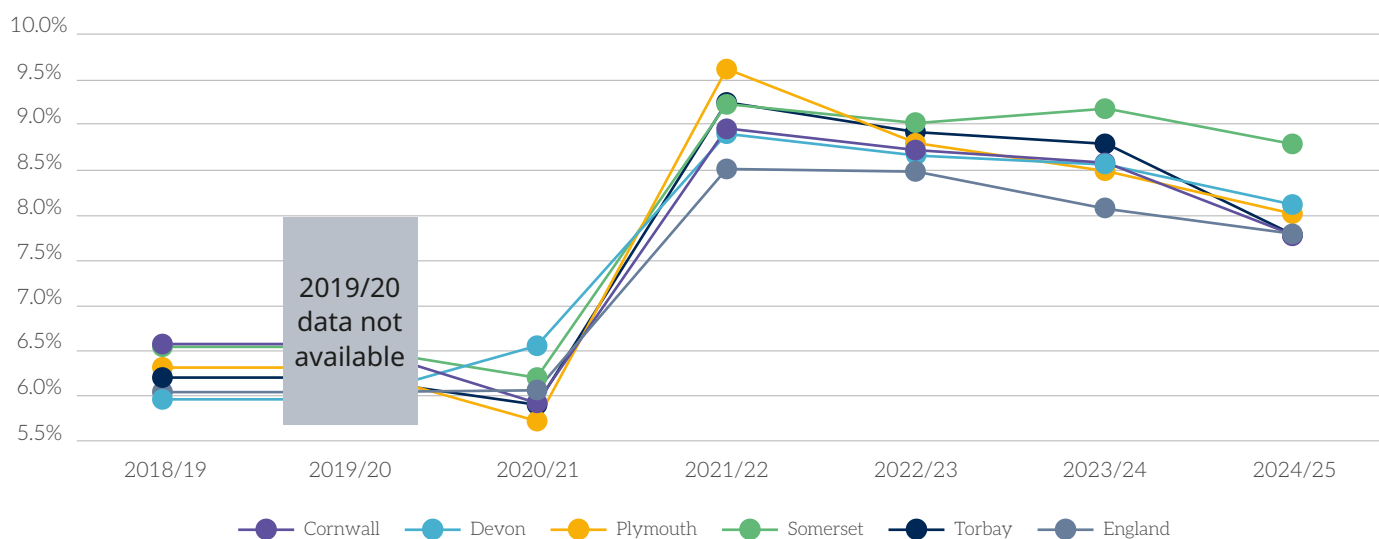


Figure 7 Overall absence for primary pupils eligible for free schools, by peninsula local authority and England average, 2018/19 to 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



Persistent absence

Another way of looking at attendance is to track the numbers of pupils missing a significant amount of school. Persistent absence is the term used when a pupil misses 10% of school sessions or more.

Pupils eligible for free school meals are much more likely to be persistently absent compared with those not eligible for free school meals. In 2024/25, the percentage of persistent absentees in England was 13% across all primary-age pupils. For pupils eligible for free school meals, it was almost double that figure: 25% or one in every four primary-age pupils.

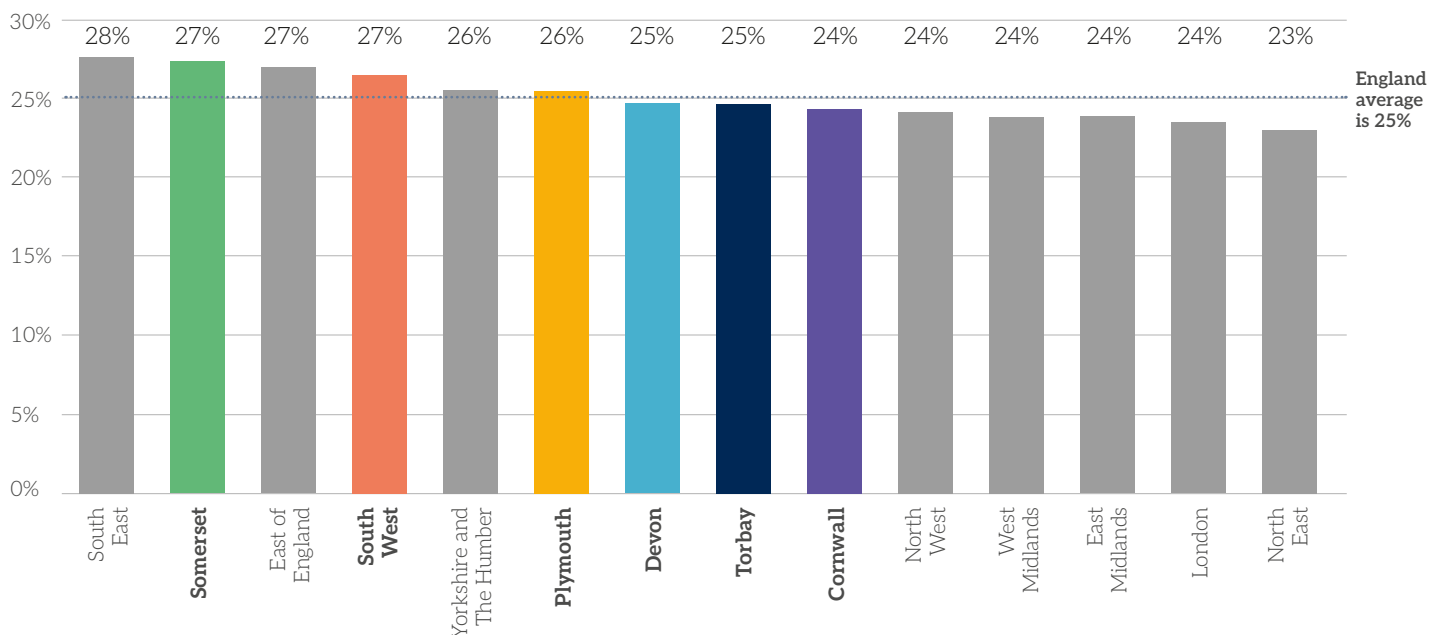
As with overall absence, peninsula local authorities made significant strides in reducing persistent absence at primary level in 2024/25. Cornwall, Torbay and Devon now have persistent absence rates just below the national average, while Plymouth rates are marginally above. Somerset figures remain somewhat higher at 27%.

This represents a significant improvement from 2021/22, when persistent absence spiked across the country, but particularly so in the South West. With the disruption caused by the pandemic, all peninsula local authorities saw higher rates than the national average of 31% – with the highest being 36% in Plymouth. While absence rates have been falling since then, rates across the peninsula remained significantly higher than the national average in 2022/23 and 2023/24.

Despite the improvement in 2024/25, it is worth noting that persistent absence rates across the country remain higher than they were pre-pandemic. In 2018/19, the England average for pupils eligible for free school meals was 18% and peninsula local authorities varied within a fairly narrow range – from 17% in Devon (lowest) to 20% in Cornwall (highest).

Figure 8 Percentage of FSM-eligible persistent absentees, primary, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



Severe absence

Severe absence is when a pupil misses 50% of school sessions or more. As with persistent absence, pupils eligible for free school meals are more likely to be severely absent compared with those not eligible for free school meals. However, the link between FSM eligibility and severe absence rates is not as strong. In 2024/25, the percentage of severely absent pupils at primary level in England was 0.9% across all pupils and 1.3% for pupils eligible for free school meals.

Peninsula local authorities are doing less well on this measure. Rates of severe absence are higher than the national average in all areas, ranging from

1.5% in Torbay and Plymouth to 2.2% in Somerset (Figure 9).

Severe absence shows a slightly different trend over time to overall absence and persistent absence (Figure 10). Unlike overall absence and persistent absence, severe absence did not spike in 2021/22 and drop in the following years. Instead, after a jump up in 2020/21, it has been on a mostly steady rise. Most of the peninsula has seen a larger rise than the national average. Torbay was the only peninsula local authority to record a drop over the past year – down to 1.5%, from 1.7% in 2023/24.

Figure 9 Percentage of FSM-eligible severely absent pupils, primary, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

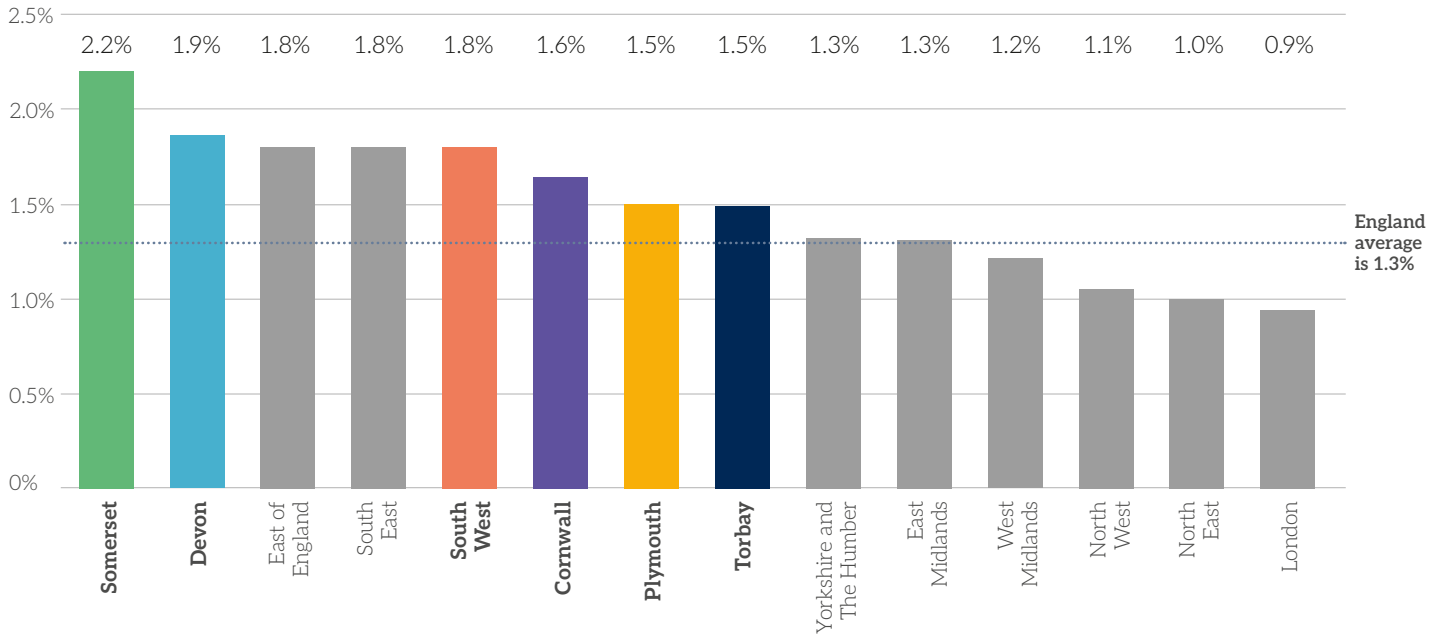
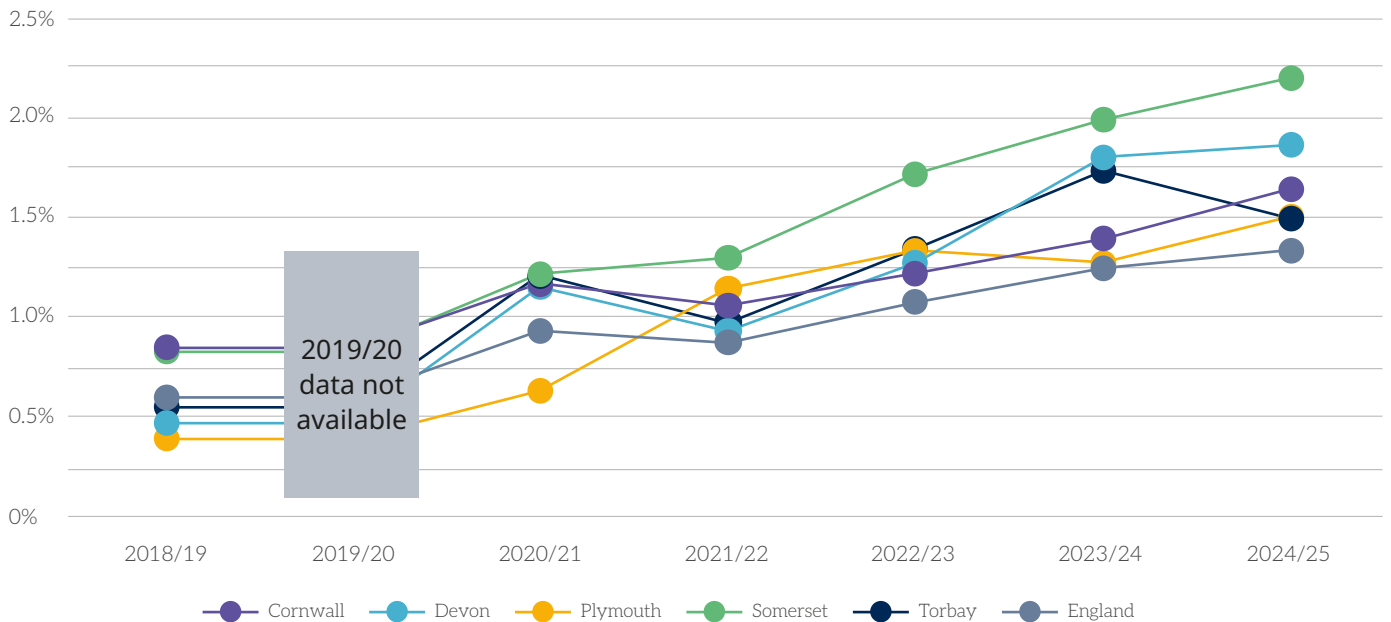


Figure 10 Percentage of FSM-eligible severely absent pupils, primary, by peninsula local authority and England average, 2018/19 to 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



Secondary

English and maths GCSE at grade 4 or above

Our key indicator for secondary outcomes is English and maths GCSE at grade 4 (a 'standard pass') or above, as this is frequently the minimum requirement for college courses, apprenticeships and employment. Young people who do not achieve a grade 4 in English and maths must continue studying these subjects.

Last summer, 44% of pupils eligible for free school meals gained a grade 4 or above in English and maths GCSE across England. This compares with 65% of all pupils. It means that a majority of pupils eligible for free school meals (56%) will need to re-sit at least one of English and maths GCSE.

Outcomes for pupils eligible for free school meals were below national average in all peninsula local authorities except for Plymouth (45%). Outcomes were particularly poor in Somerset and Torbay

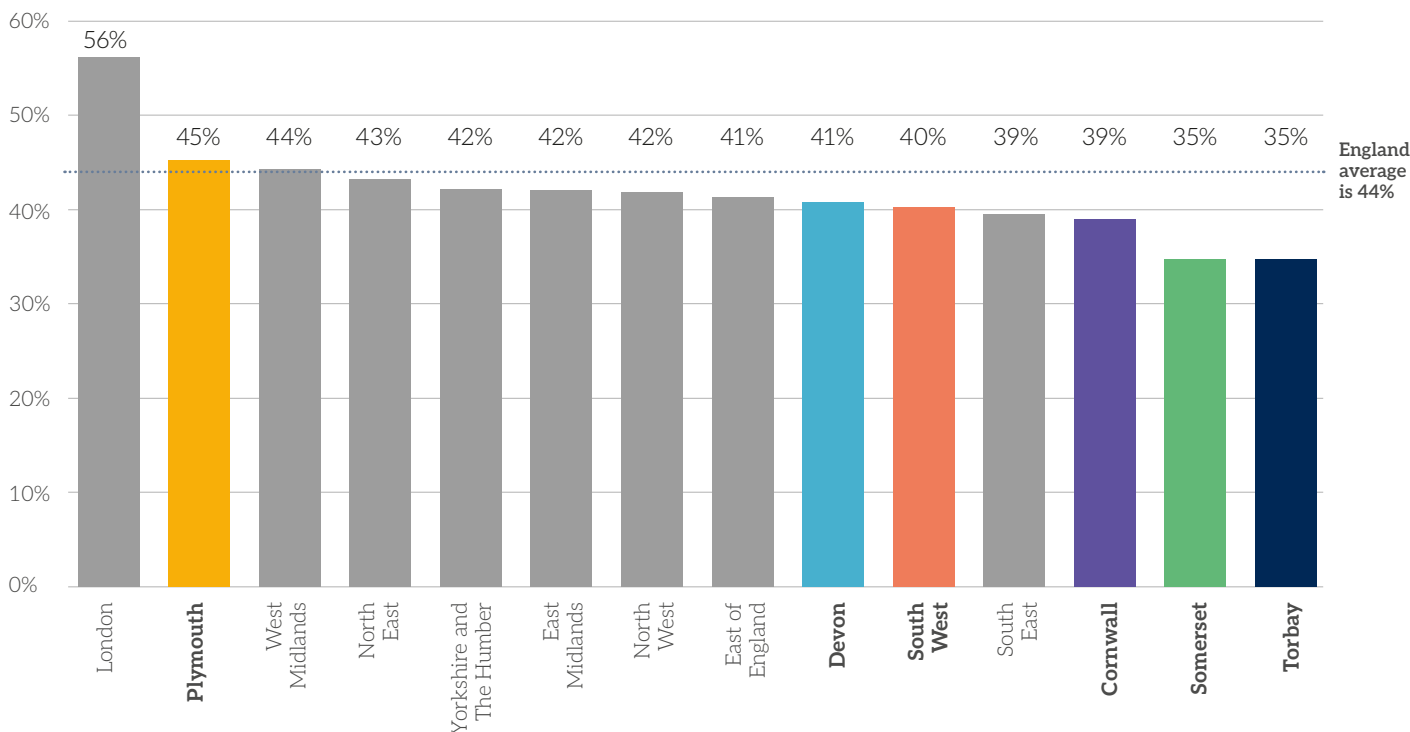
where just over a third of pupils (35%) attained these qualifications (Figure 11).

Looking at outcomes since 2018/19 (Figure 12), we can see that Plymouth has seen a huge improvement, up from 29% in 2018/19 to 45% in 2024/25. Devon has seen a significant improvement (from 34% pre-pandemic to 41% last year), while Somerset has seen a decline (from 37% to 35% over the same period). Figures in Torbay and Cornwall are very similar to what they were pre-pandemic, up one percentage point on 2018/19 in Cornwall and down one percentage point in Torbay.

Across smaller geographies (Figure 13), we can see large variation – from 59% of pupils gaining these qualifications in South West Devon last year to fewer than half that number (28%) in Taunton and Wellington.

Figure 11 Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals achieving grade 4 or above in English and maths GCSEs, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



The Equity Scorecard

This year marked an important milestone for the SWSMC's Equity Scorecard, moving from a regional pilot across South West secondary schools to the beginning of a wider national rollout.

Developed through collaboration between schools and the Commission, the Equity Scorecard supports schools in reflecting on how effectively they serve pupils from under-resourced backgrounds and those facing additional barriers to learning. Rather than acting as an accountability framework, it is designed as a practical tool to help schools identify priorities and strengthen their approaches to equity.

During 2024/25, 20 secondary schools across the South-West peninsula took part in the pilot programme. School leaders reported that the Scorecard helped shape curriculum planning, pastoral support and family engagement strategies. It also encouraged more joined-up discussions about disadvantage, helping schools move beyond isolated interventions towards whole-school approaches to improving outcomes and belonging.

Feedback from participating schools informed a revised version of the Scorecard, including clearer evidence-informed prompts, expanded research summaries, milestones for monitoring progress and practical guidance for embedding equity within school improvement planning.

The programme has now entered a national scale-up phase involving more than 100 schools, supported through webinars, peer learning and collaborative implementation. At the same time, 25 primary schools across the South West are trialling a Primary Equity Scorecard, with the aim of supporting a wider national rollout from 2026/27.

A highlight of the year was the Equity Scorecard Showcase Event, which brought together school leaders, trusts and regional partners to share learnings from the pilot and discuss how schools can strengthen belonging, opportunity, attendance and attainment.

The next phase of the programme will focus on evaluating and refining the Primary Equity Scorecard, while continuing to support wider adoption of the framework across schools nationally.

English and maths GCSE at grades 5 or above and Average Attainment 8 score

While English and maths at grade 4 and above is the key indicator we look at, other indicators can help supplement our understanding of GCSE attainment. Below, we show two further indicators:

- English and maths at grade 5 or above, known as a 'strong pass'. This is the government's headline measure.
- Average Attainment 8 score, out of a possible score of 90. This measures attainment across 8 qualifications including English and maths, which are double weighted, 3 EBacc qualifications and 3 further GCSE qualifications or technical awards. It provides a more rounded picture of attainment.

Just over a quarter (26%) of pupils eligible for free school meals achieved a grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE across England. This compares with 45% of all pupils. In Figure 14, we can see that most peninsula local authorities perform below the national average, following a similar pattern to English and maths GCSE at grade 4 and above.

The national average Attainment 8 score for pupils eligible for free school meals was 35 in 2024/25. This figure has been unchanged for the past 3 years and is the same as it was in 2018/19. It is 11 points below the national average Attainment 8 score for all pupils of 46. Average Attainment 8 scores for pupils eligible for free school meals in South-West peninsula local authorities are below national average, ranging from 34 in Plymouth to 31 in Somerset and Torbay (Figure 15).

Figure 14 Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals achieving grades 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

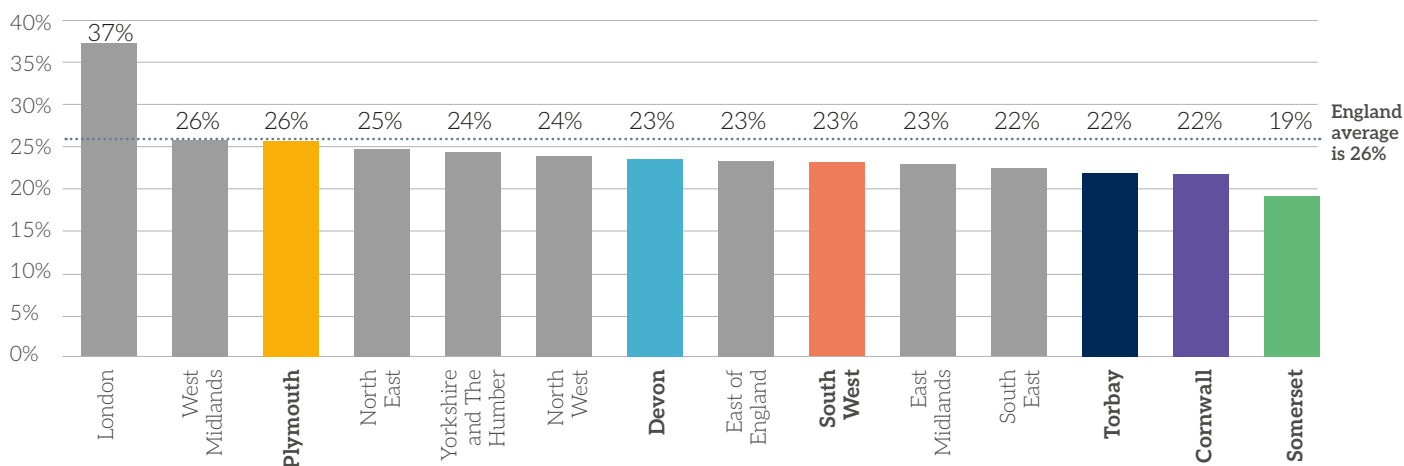
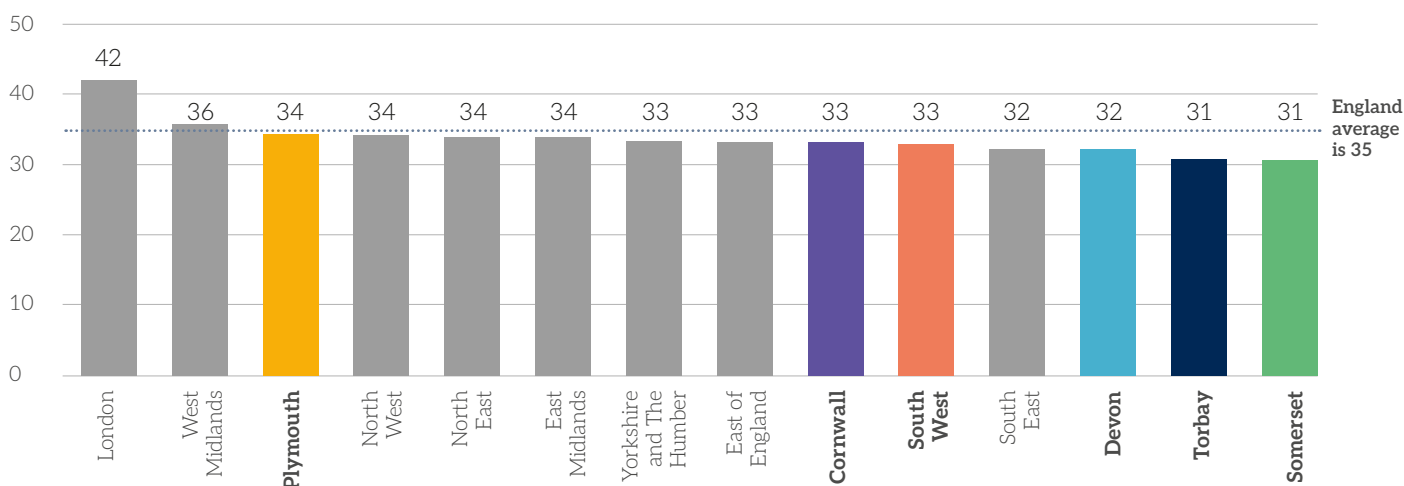


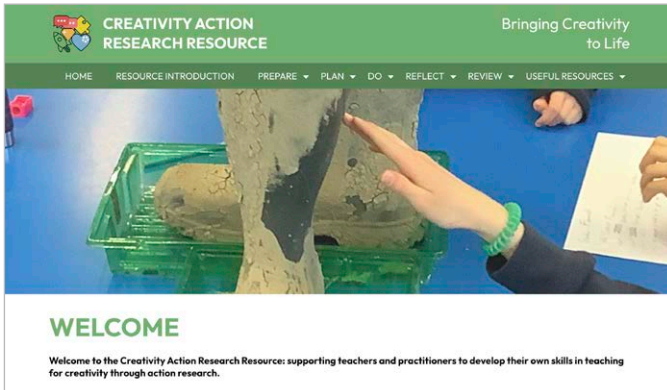
Figure 15 Average Attainment 8 scores for pupils eligible for free school meals, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



Creativity Action Research Resource

In July 2026, the University of Exeter School of Education is launching the Creativity Action Research Resource, a free online resource designed to help teachers develop creative skills across the curriculum through action research.



Available at creativityactionresearch.co.uk, the resource builds on the findings of the five-year Penryn Creativity Collaborative (PCC), which brought together schools, industry partners and researchers to explore how teaching for creativity can help prepare young people for a rapidly changing workforce. PCC was the South West pilot of the national Creativity Collaboratives programme, funded by Arts Council England with support from the Freelands Foundation.

Creative skills and social mobility

As highlighted by SWSMC's 2024 Annual Event, creative skills are crucial in preparing young people for future challenges and supporting social mobility. Research from PCC highlighted strong demand from employers for creative skills and found that teaching for creativity can support young people's aspirations, confidence, resilience and awareness of local opportunities. The project showed how creative approaches to learning can help young people develop the skills and experiences needed to navigate future education and employment pathways.

The project identified five interconnected creative skills:

- Dialogue and collaboration
- Generating new ideas that matter
- Being imaginative and playful
- Honing and developing ideas
- Empowered action

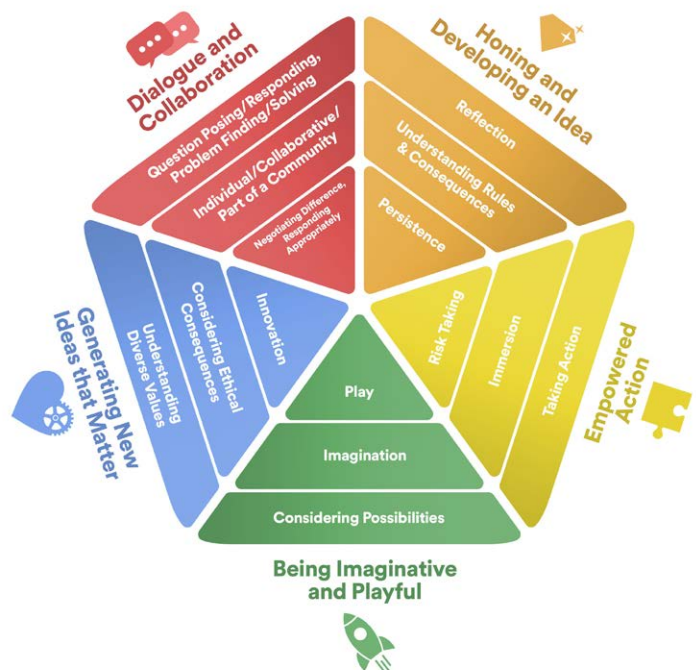
Supporting teachers to develop creative practice

The resource was developed by Professor Kerry Chappell and Dr Ursula Crickmay, together with teachers from Penryn College. It supports practitioners in designing and carrying out small-scale action research projects focused on creativity within their own classrooms.

The approach has been used across a wide range of subjects and settings, including English, mathematics, science, humanities, engineering, early years education and outdoor learning. Through action research, teachers are encouraged to test, refine and embed creative approaches that are relevant to their pupils and contexts.

Funded through an Economic and Social Research Council Impact Accelerator Account grant, the resource is available free of charge. It contains 11 modules, offering flexible pathways that can be completed over different timescales, from short introductory programmes through to longer professional learning projects.

Schools and practitioners interested in further support can contact the University of Exeter team at k.a.chappell@exeter.ac.uk.



Absence

Overall absence

Looking at attendance in the same way as we did for primary phase, we can see that absence rates at secondary phase are roughly double those for younger pupils. The absence rate for all secondary pupils was 8%, while secondary pupils eligible for free school meals missed 13% of school sessions in 2024/25.

South-West peninsula local authorities are doing less well on attendance at secondary phase, with all having higher-than-average absence rates for pupils eligible for free school meals – ranging from 15%-17% (Figure 16).

On a more optimistic note, 2024/25 is the first year in which absence rates appear to have started falling, with particularly sharp falls in Torbay and Cornwall (Figure 17). Gaps to national average remain wide, however, having increased when absence rates surged in 2021/22.

Figure 16 Overall, authorised and unauthorised absence rates for FSM-eligible pupils, secondary, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

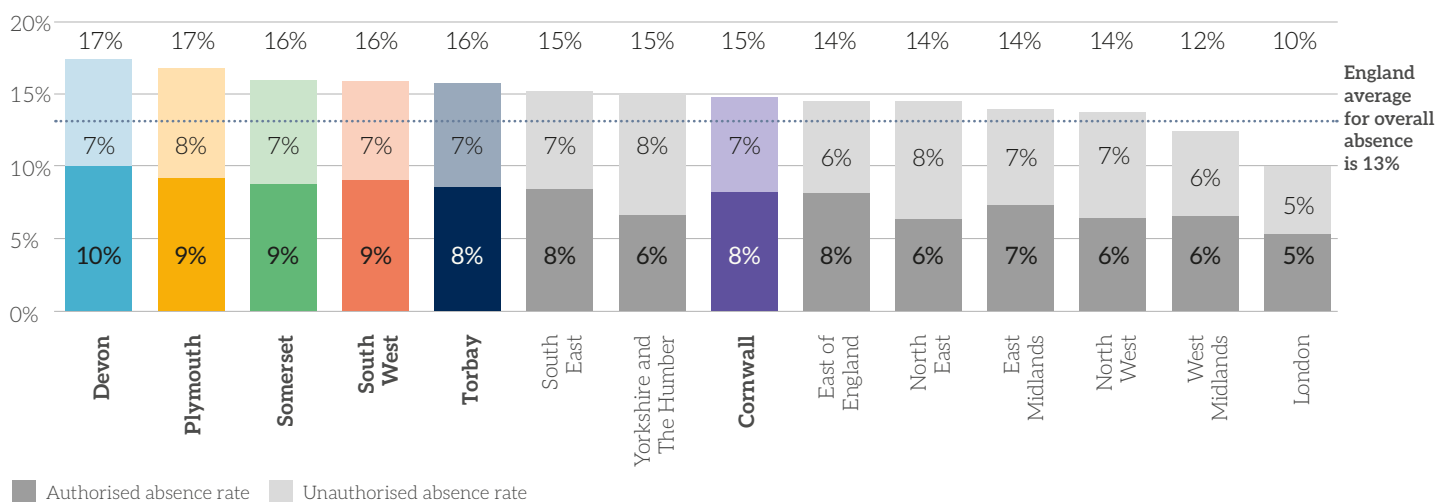
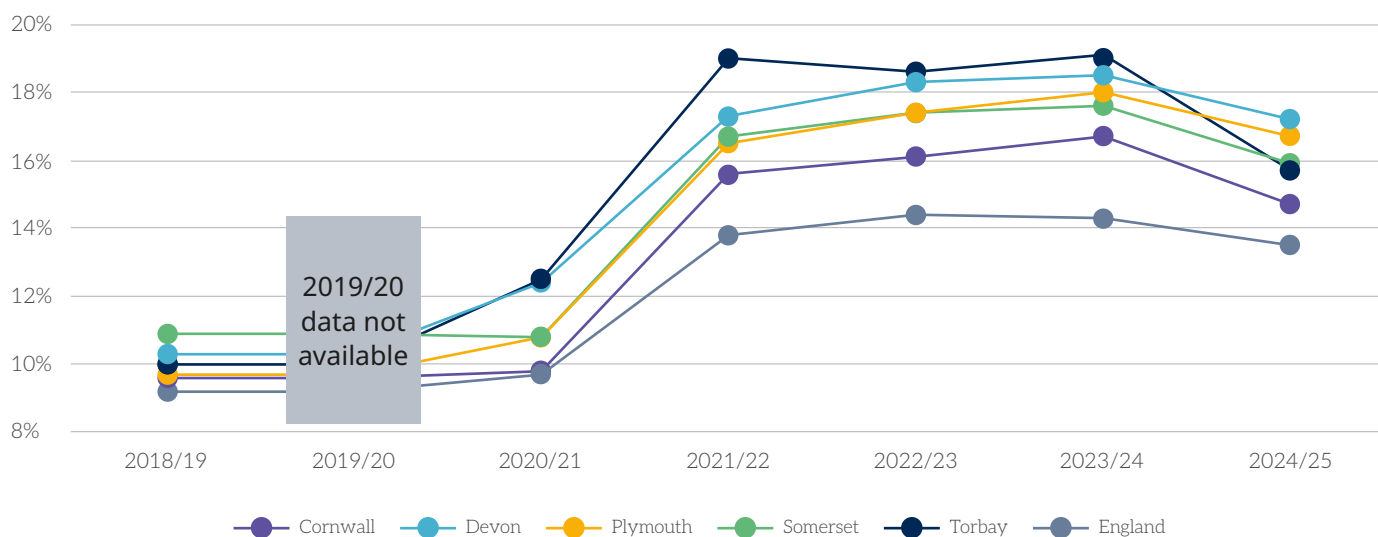


Figure 17 Overall absence for FSM-eligible pupils, secondary, by peninsula local authority and England average, 2018/19 to 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



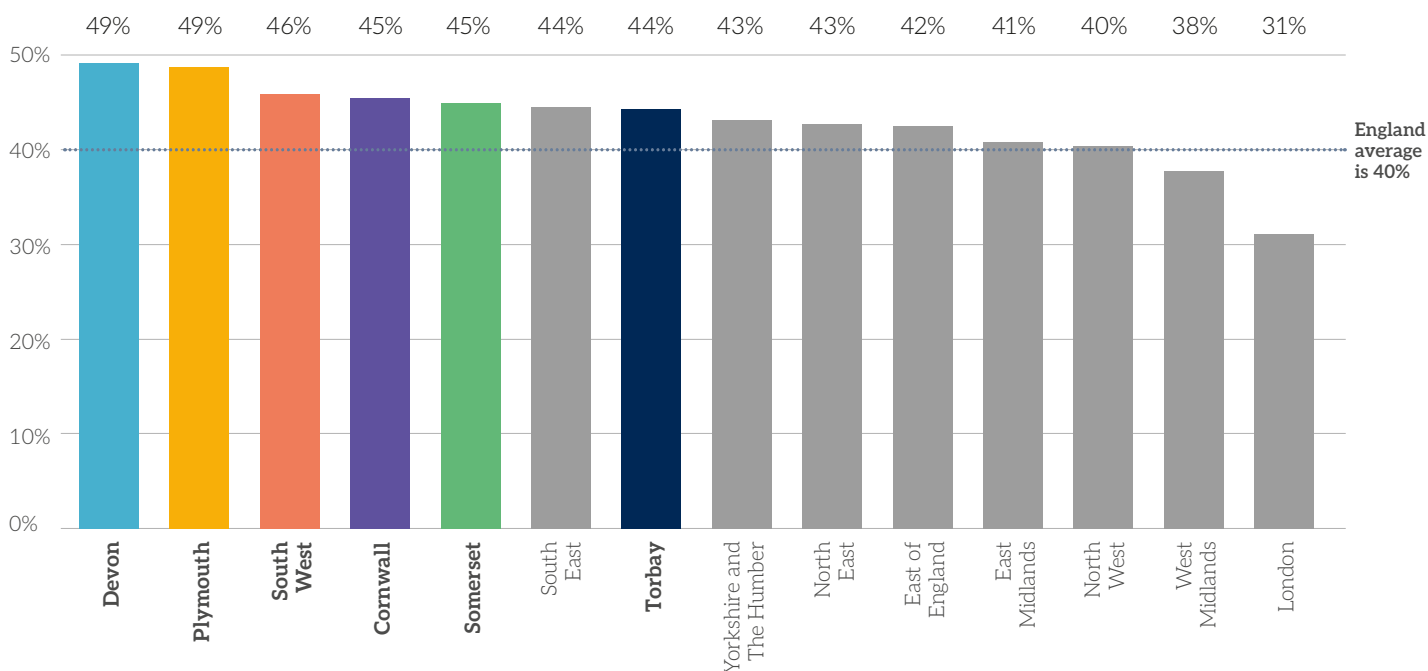
Persistent absence

Almost one in two secondary pupils eligible for free school meals (49%) missed at least 10% of school sessions in Devon and Plymouth in 2024/25 (Figure 18). Figures in Torbay, Somerset and Cornwall were slightly lower, ranging from 44%-45%, but were still above the national average of 40%. This compares with a national average of 23% for all pupils (around one in four pupils).

As with primary phase, persistent absence rates show a similar trend over time to rates for overall absence. While persistent absence for pupils eligible for free school meals across the peninsula was above the England average (of 29%) in 2018/19, when rates soared in 2021/22 the increase was even higher for peninsula local authorities. Since then, rates have been slowly falling, and peninsula local authorities managed a bigger drop in 2024/25 than the national average, particularly Torbay, which saw figures fall from 54% to 44%.

Figure 18 Percentage of FSM-eligible persistent absentees, secondary, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



Severe absence

Severe absence is significantly higher at secondary phase than at primary. The South West is the worst-performing region in the country for pupils eligible for free school meals. Rates across the peninsula range from 9% in Cornwall to 12% in Devon – all above the England average of 7% (Figure 19). This means that one in every eight pupils eligible for free school meals in Devon missed at least half of the last school year (compared with one in 14 nationally). Looking at all pupils across the country, 4% were severely absent – roughly one in a class of 25 pupils.

they were between 3% and 5% across the peninsula) – but dropped for the first time last year. Torbay in particular achieved a steep drop in the number of its pupils eligible for free school meals who were severely absent, from 13% to 10% (Figure 20).

As with severe absence at primary phase, rates had been on a continual increase since 2020/21 (when

The continuing high figures show the long-lasting effects of the pandemic on attendance for a significant minority of pupils – with pupils eligible for free school meals particularly affected. As we go on to discuss, school absence is linked with later labour market inactivity, so tackling absence has important consequences both for the future as well as the present.

Figure 19 Percentage of FSM-eligible severely absent pupils, secondary, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

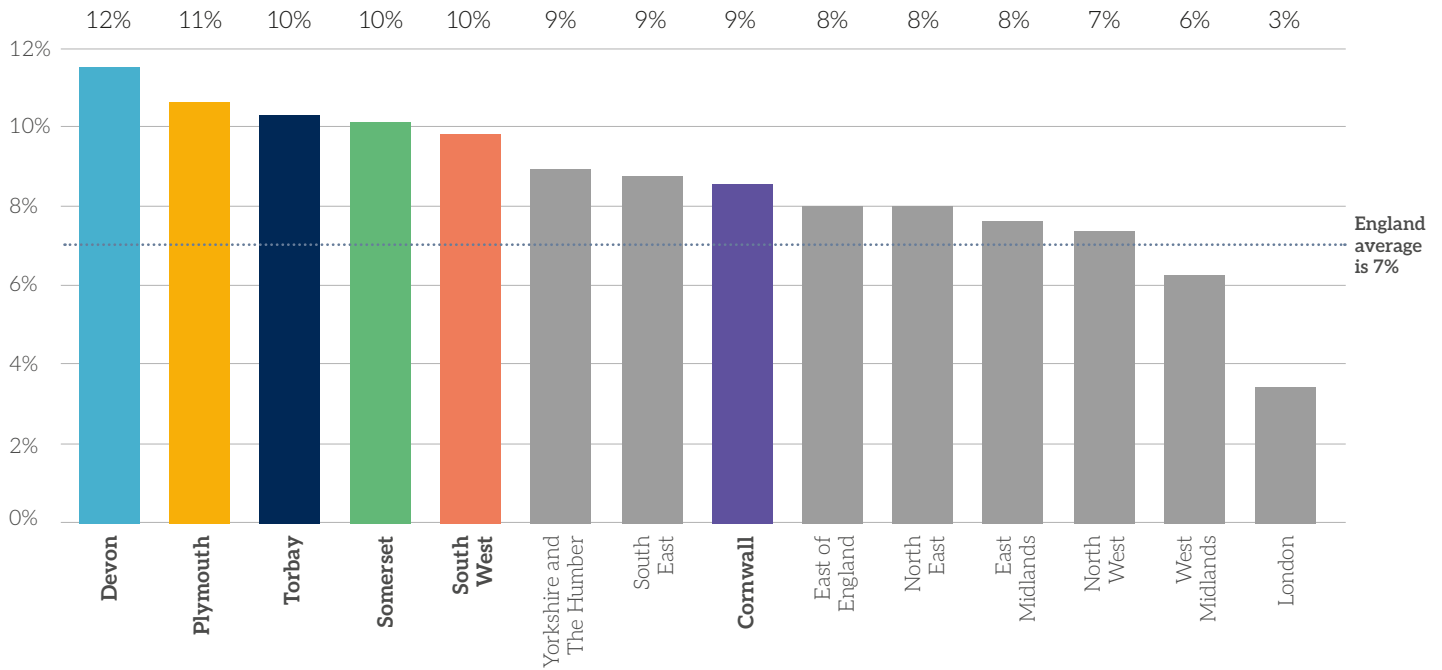
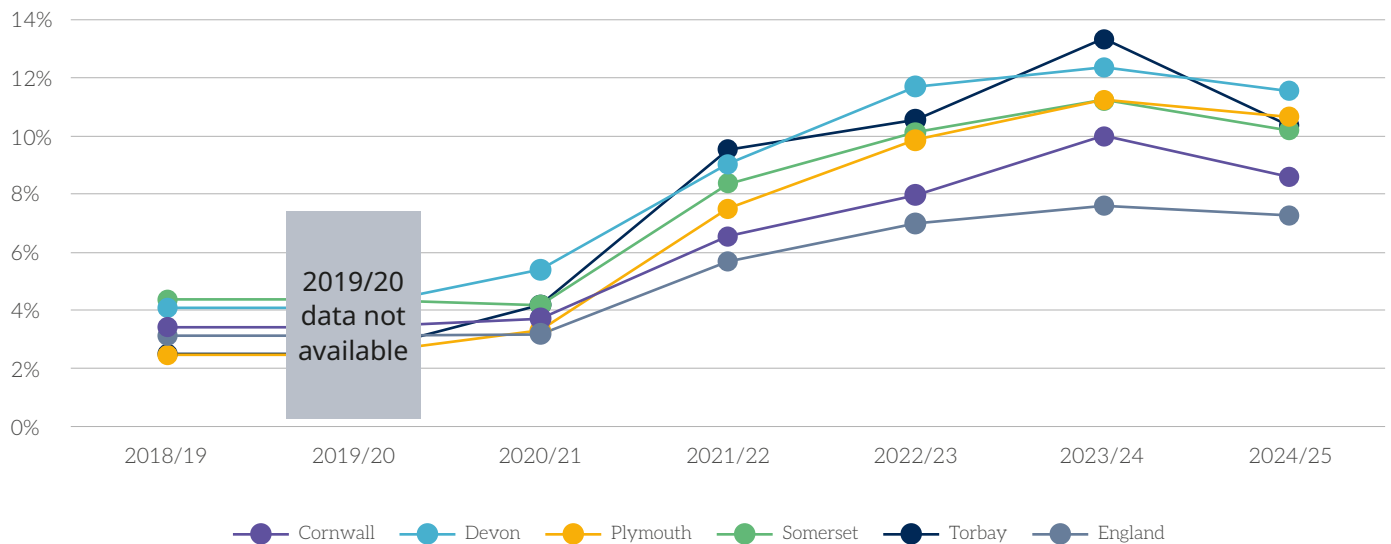


Figure 20 Percentage of FSM-eligible severely absent pupils, secondary, by peninsula local authority and England average, 2018/19 to 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



#BeeWell: Making young people's wellbeing everybody's business

#BeeWell is a place-based programme that works with young people, schools and a coalition of partners across local government, health services and the voluntary sector to improve young people's wellbeing. Using an annual survey co-designed with young people, the programme gathers evidence about what affects wellbeing and what can be done to improve it.

Since 2021, #BeeWell has listened to almost 200,000 young people across Greater Manchester and Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton (HIPS), working with around 320 schools. The programme is now entering a new phase of expansion, supported by funding from The National Lottery Community Fund, and is exploring opportunities to work with new areas, including the South West.

LOCAL GOVT. & HEALTH SYSTEM

- [The Greater Manchester Strategy outlines how the city-region will act upon #BeeWell insights.](#)
- [Trafford Council](#) have detailed how they are acting upon the data in a 'You Said, We Did' resource to young people.
- Embedding data into needs assessments for youth services.
- [GM Police and Crime Plan: Standing Together](#) uses #BeeWell insights.
- [Raising Rochdale](#): Children and Young People's Partnership plan
- Supporting SEND Ofsted inspections.

SCHOOLS

#BeeWell provides schools with bespoke dashboards and one to one support to focus their wellbeing initiatives where its needed most, [examples of schools acting on their data](#) include:

- [Improving school belonging through relationships](#)
- Develop [culture opportunities](#) available to young people.
- [Focussed support for year groups](#) identified in the data.
- [Responding to discrimination.](#)
- Sharing learning with other #BeeWell schools on key themes, for example [anti-bullying](#).

YOUNG PEOPLE

- [Leading responses to their local #BeeWell data](#), including artistic responses, creating videos, campaigns
- [Writing letters and directly sharing their wellbeing experiences](#) with the Department for Education
- [Launching the everyday success project](#), using the data to explore what success means in GM.
- [Writing articles](#) to support other young people.
- Youth-led commissioning through the [GM & HIPS](#) steering groups
- [Analysing research](#) from the #BeeWell data.
- [Sharing findings with councils & politicians](#)
- [Representing #BeeWell at the Fair Education Alliance youth Summit](#)

ACTING ON #BEEWELL



We have over 100 Coalition Partners committed to improving wellbeing. Actions taken include...

- Creative responses to the survey data through [music & drama](#).
- [A campaign looking at physical activity and wellbeing.](#)
- [School-based projects with Girlguiding in HIPS, supporting girls' self-esteem](#)
- [Leveraged investment into Youth Alliance GM to coordinate response.](#)
- [School projects on wellbeing and arts, with Curious Minds & Company Chameleon.](#)
- [A community of practice to support organisations working with young people.](#)

COALITION OF PARTNERS

Turning insight into action

A distinctive feature of #BeeWell is its focus on translating evidence into practical action. Schools receive bespoke dashboards with wellbeing data specific to their school, helping them identify priorities and respond to the needs of their pupils. Local authorities, health partners and community organisations use neighbourhood-level insights to inform decision-making and coordinate support.

Research from #BeeWell highlights the importance of school belonging, positive relationships with staff and supportive school environments in promoting wellbeing, attendance and future participation. Longitudinal studies show a positive reciprocal relationship between school belonging and wellbeing over time, while school pressure and

dissatisfaction with attainment are associated with poorer wellbeing outcomes.

Young people at the centre

Young people play a central role in shaping the programme through youth steering groups that contribute to decision-making, research priorities and communications. This commitment to listening to young people and acting on what they say remains at the heart of #BeeWell's approach.

By combining robust evidence with local action, #BeeWell demonstrates how place-based partnerships can help schools, communities and public services better understand and respond to the factors shaping young people's wellbeing.

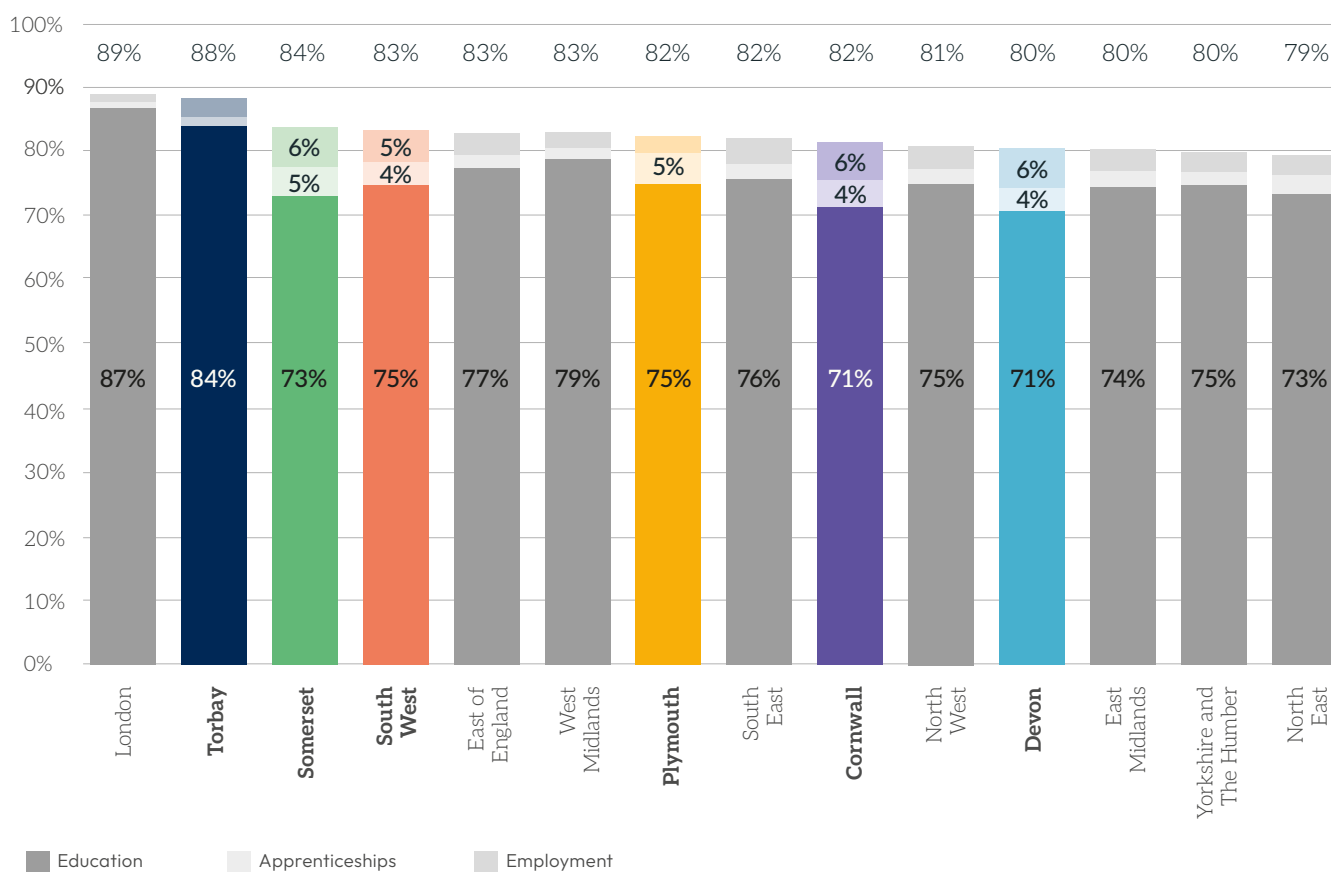
Post-GCSE destinations

Across England, 83% of disadvantaged pupils² were in a sustained destination in the year following their GCSEs. This compares with 92% of all pupils. Figures have declined slightly over the past five years (from 95% for all pupils in 2018/19), but the decline has been more significant for disadvantaged pupils (from 87% in 2018/19). Of the 83% of disadvantaged pupils in a sustained destination in 2024, the vast majority (78%) were in education, while 2% were in an apprenticeship and 3% in employment.

In the South-West peninsula, Torbay had the highest proportion of disadvantaged pupils in a sustained destination (88%), largely driven by those carrying on in education (84%). Somerset also had an above-average proportion of disadvantaged pupils in a sustained destination (84%), but with a larger proportion in employment (6%) and an apprenticeship (5%). Overall sustained destinations were marginally below national average in Plymouth and Cornwall (both 82%) and a little lower in Devon (80%). Apprenticeships were an important factor in Plymouth (5%) while employment was significant in Cornwall and Devon (both 6%).

Figure 21 Percentage of FSM-eligible GCSE leavers in a sustained education, apprenticeship, or employment destination, 2023 leavers in 2024 destinations.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



² The Department for Education defines disadvantaged pupils as pupils who have been recorded as eligible for free school meals in the past 6 years and children who have been looked after by a local authority or other state care.

School inclusion

This year, we are reporting on suspensions and permanent exclusions because they provide a key measure of pupil inclusion, behaviour, and access to education across the school system. Rates of school exclusion for pupils eligible for free school meals are high across the South-West peninsula, and in many cases gaps to the national average are widening – raising important concerns for social mobility in the region. Permanent exclusion represents a critical break in a child’s educational pathway, often associated with poorer attainment, reduced engagement, and longer-term risks of disengagement from education, employment and training.

Rates of both suspensions and permanent exclusions are expressed as rates per 100 pupils. Data is usually reported by academic term and full academic years.

We are also reporting on rates of elective home education. Elective home education describes a choice by parents to provide education for their children at home or in alternative settings instead of sending them to school full-time. While there are many reasons why a young person may be electively home educated, rising numbers of EHE may indicate issues around school inclusion. In the most recent national figures, mental health was cited as the reason for EHE in 14% of cases. Dissatisfaction with various elements of school, not being able to access a place or a preferred school, and risk of exclusion accounted for a further 17%. By contrast, philosophical/preferential reasons accounted for 14% of EHE and lifestyle reasons a further 9%. In a large proportion of cases, reasons are unknown (19%) or not given (12%). Rates of EHE across the South-West peninsula are amongst the highest in the country.

In this year’s report, we present rates of EHE for all children (rather than only for children eligible for free school meals, as per our other indicators). This is because the data on EHE for those in receipt of free school meals is not currently available. However, the Department of Education will start collecting this data for the first time in the 2025/26 EHE summer census and we will therefore be able to show rates of EHE for those eligible for free school meals in our next Annual Report.

Primary suspensions

In primary schools across England, suspension rates for pupils eligible for free school meals are over five times higher than they are for all pupils. In 2023/24 (the last full academic year for which we have data), rates were 5.9 suspensions per 100 pupils for those eligible for free school meals, compared with 1.1 suspensions per 100 pupils for all pupils.

Amongst pupils eligible for free school meals, suspensions were higher than the national average across all peninsula local authorities, and particularly high in Somerset, where the rate was more than double the England average (12.5 suspensions per 100 pupils) (Figure 22).

Looking over time, we can see that rates declined slightly between 2018/19 and 2019/20 before increasing steadily from 2020/21 (Figure 23). Rates are now higher than they were pre-pandemic, and show no sign of coming down.

Somerset stands out as having consistently higher rates than other peninsula areas, alongside a sharper rise in recent years. Plymouth also shows a sharper increase over the past couple of years. Having started at a lower level in 2018/19, rates in Plymouth reached comparable levels to those in Devon, Torbay and Cornwall in 2023/24.



Figure 22 Suspensions rate for primary-age pupils eligible for free school meals, by region and peninsula local authority, 2023/24.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

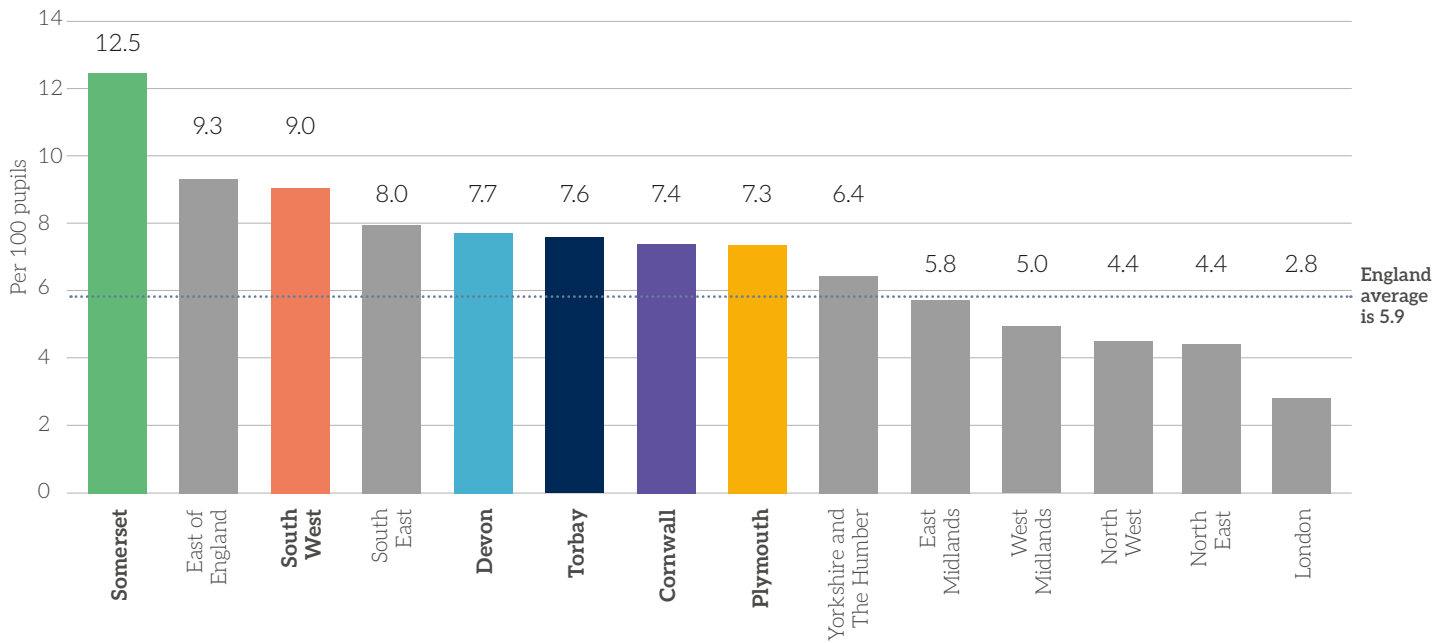
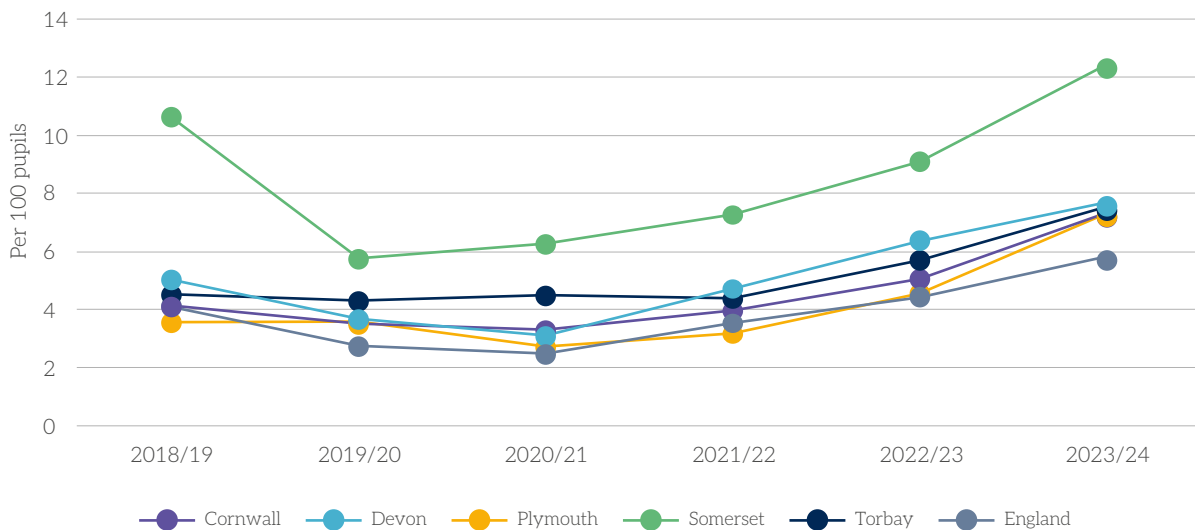


Figure 23 Suspensions rate for primary-age pupils eligible for free school meals, for England and peninsula local authorities, 2018/19 to 2023/24.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



Primary exclusions

Rates of permanent exclusion for primary-age pupils eligible for free school meals are 9 times higher than rates for all pupils, across England. In 2023/24, the exclusion rate for all primary pupils was 0.01 per 100 pupils; for pupils eligible for free school meals it was 0.09.

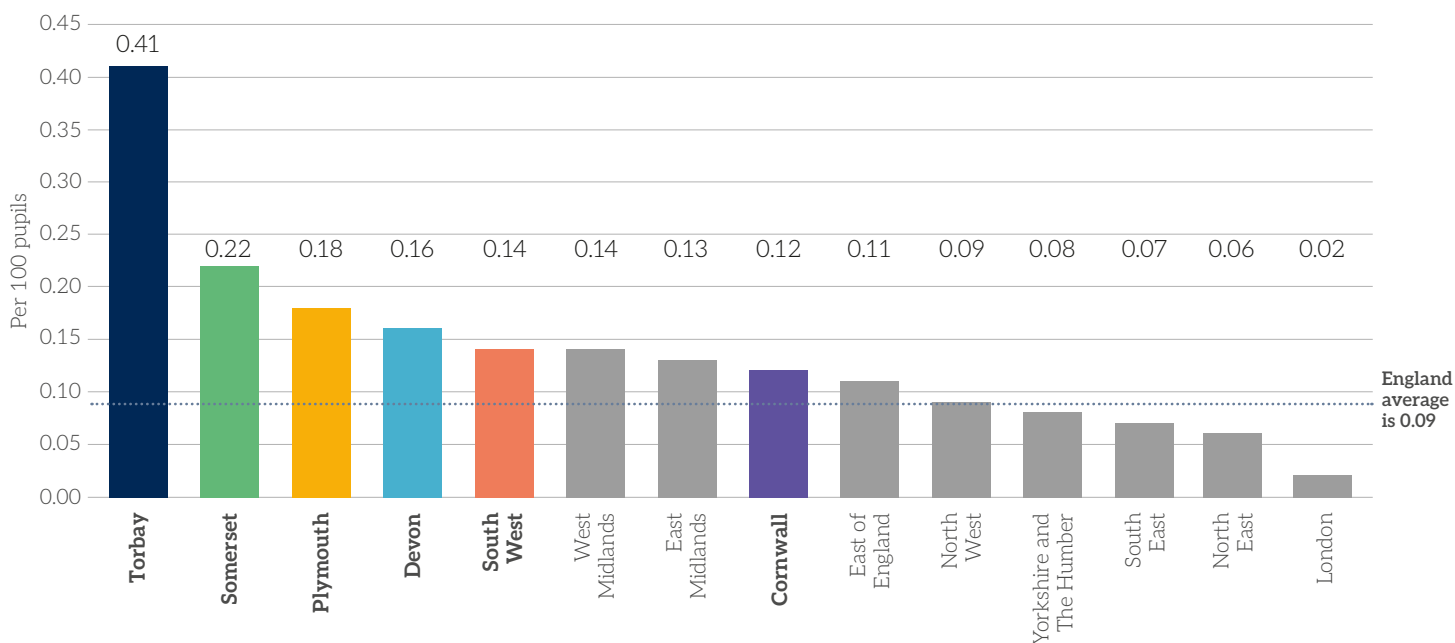
All peninsula local authorities have higher-than-average permanent exclusion rates, and rates are significantly higher than average in many areas (Figure 24). In Torbay, rates are over four times the national average, while in Somerset they are

more than twice the national average. In Torbay, this exclusion rate means that one in every 250 primary-age pupils eligible for free school meals was permanently excluded from school in 2023/24.

Looking at rates since 2018/19, we can see that rates in the South West and nationally fell to a low point in 2020/21 but have been increasing steadily each year since. Torbay stands out as having a particularly marked rise in 2023/24, up from 0.23 in 2022/23. Somerset and Plymouth also show notable increases, while Devon and Cornwall follow more moderate upward trends.

Figure 24 Permanent exclusions rate for primary-age pupils eligible for free school meals, by region and peninsula local authority, 2023/24.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



Secondary suspensions

Suspension rates for secondary pupils eligible for free school meals in the South-West peninsula are significantly higher than the national average – averaging over 100 suspensions per 100 pupils in Devon, Torbay, Cornwall and Somerset, compared with a rate of 56 per 100 pupils across England in 2023/24 (Figure 25). Plymouth had a slightly lower rate at 76 per 100 pupils. These figures compare with a rate of 12 suspensions per 100 pupils for all pupils across England.

Suspension rates for secondary pupils eligible for free school meals have been increasing across the country since the pandemic (Figure 26). Cornwall recorded a particularly sharp increase in 2023/24, while Devon also saw a sharp rise in 2022/23. Torbay has also recorded faster than national average growth since 2020/21. Growth in suspensions in Somerset and Plymouth are more in line with the rate of growth nationally, although they both continue to have higher-than-average rates overall.

Figure 25 Suspensions rate for secondary-age pupils eligible for free school meals, by region and peninsula local authority, 2023/24.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

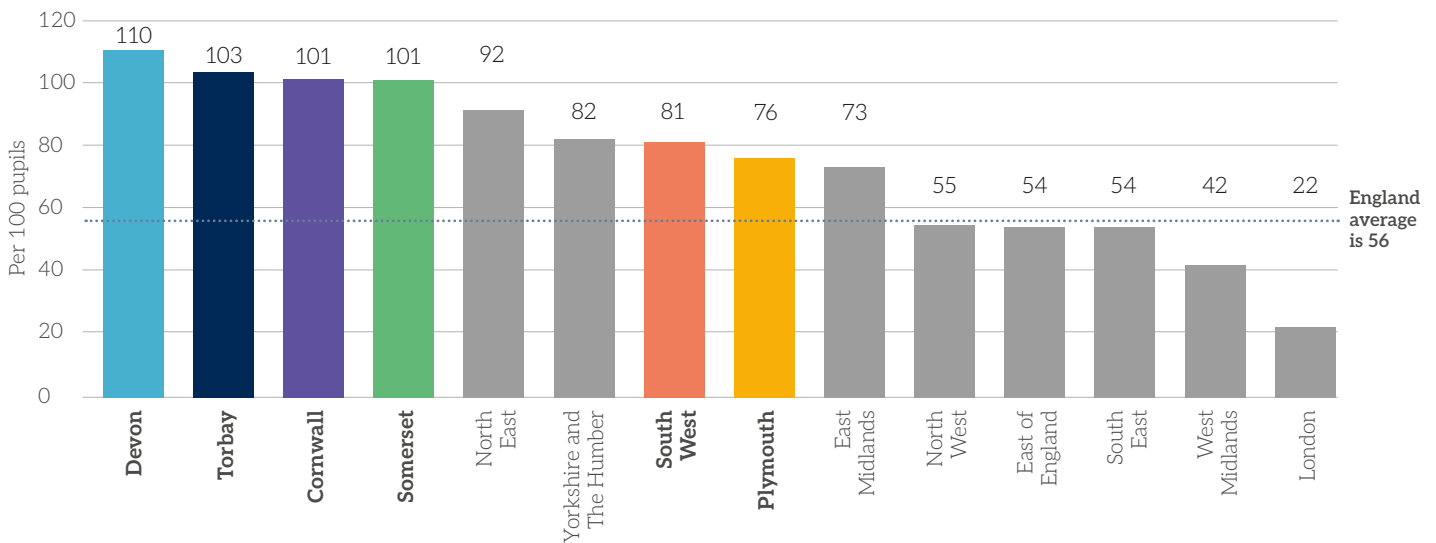
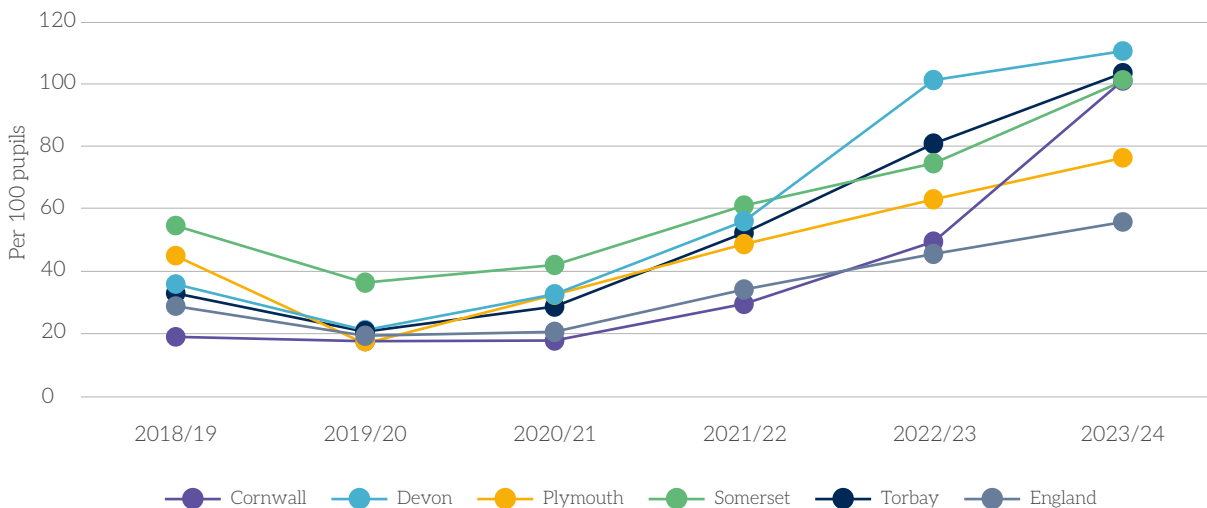


Figure 26 Suspensions rate for secondary-age pupils eligible for free school meals, for England and peninsula local authorities, 2018/19 to 2023/24.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



Secondary exclusions

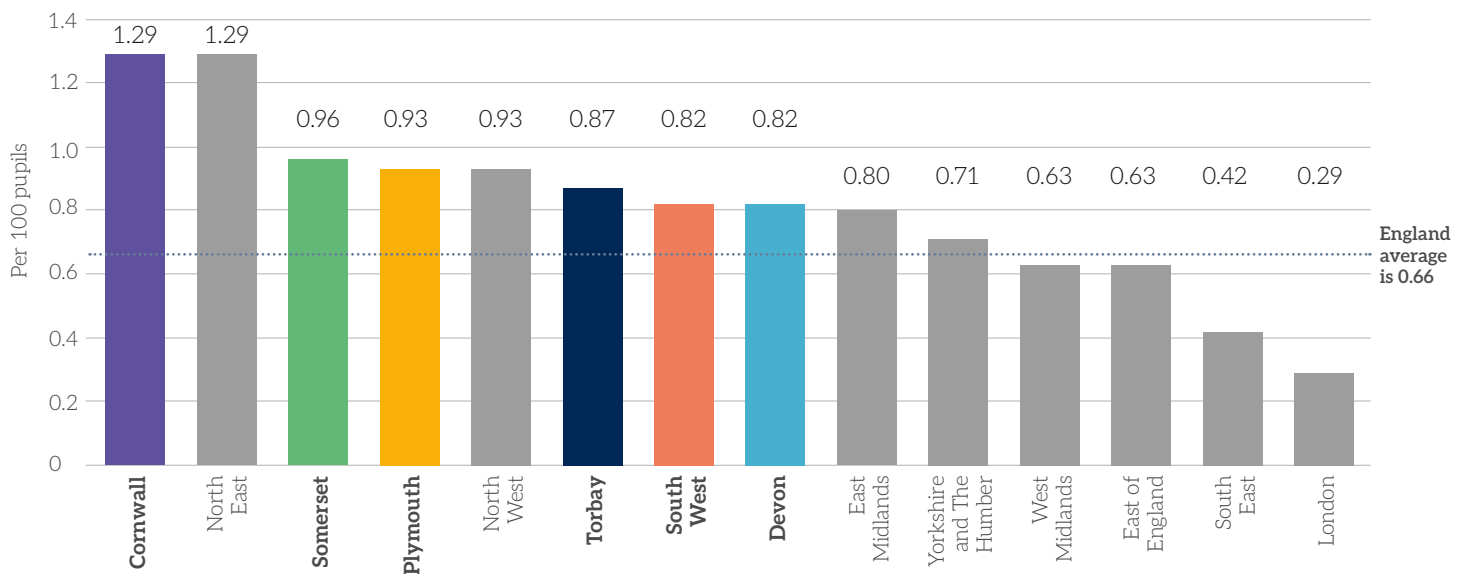
Permanent exclusions are more common at secondary than at primary phase. But as with primary, the rate of permanent exclusions for pupils eligible for free school meals is higher than the national average across all South-West peninsula local authorities. Rates are particularly high in Cornwall at 1.29 exclusions per 100 pupils – almost double the national average of 0.66 per

100 pupils. The national rate for all pupils is 0.12 per 100 pupils.

While rates fluctuate significantly year on year, peninsula local authorities have been fairly consistent in having higher exclusion rates than the national average for pupils eligible for free school meals, particularly in the post-pandemic context.

Figure 27 Permanent exclusions rate for secondary-age pupils eligible for free school meals, by region and peninsula local authority, 2023/24.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



Elective home education

Rates of elective home education (for all children) have been increasing: from 1% across England in 2022/23 to 1.5% in 2025/26 (Figure 29). Rates in the South-West peninsula have risen by more than the national average over the same period and peninsula local authorities currently have many of the highest rates of EHE in the country (Figure 28). Cornwall (2.9%) ranks 3rd highest of 153 local authorities for EHE – behind only the Isle of Wight (4.1%) and Blackpool (3.1%). Somerset (2.9%) ranks 4th; Torbay (2.8%) is 5th; Devon (2.7%) is 7th; and Plymouth (2.0%) is 18th.

Figure 28 (right) Rate of EHE for all children at census date by local authority, autumn term 2025/26.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.

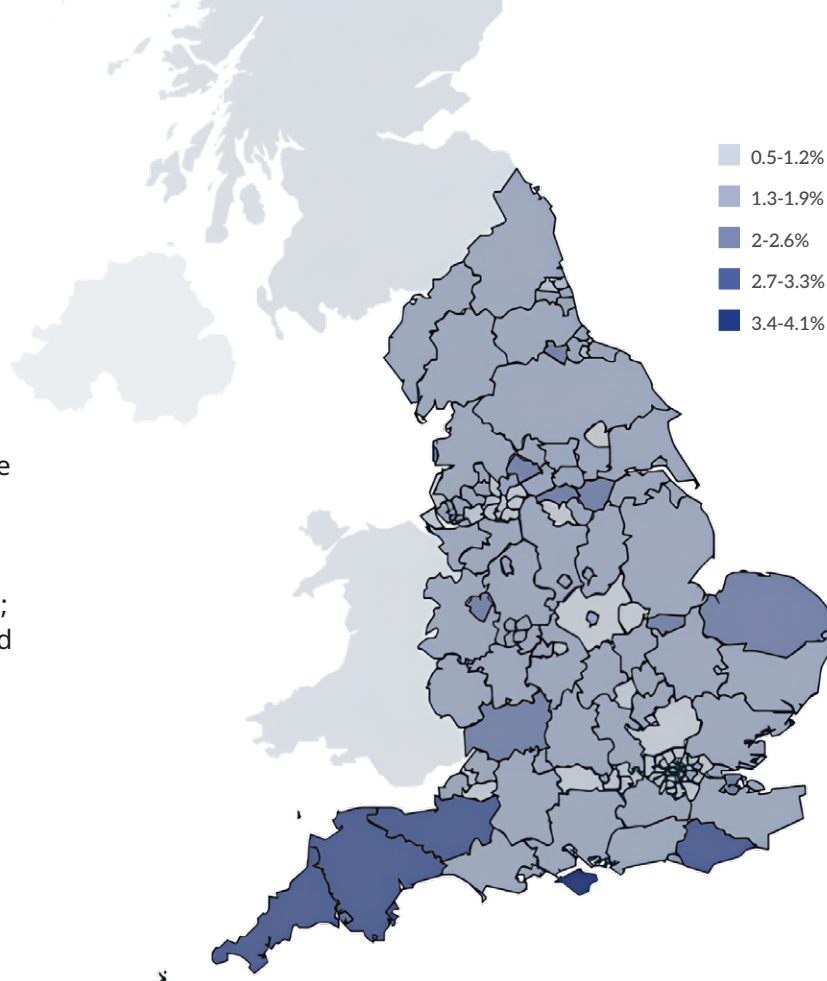
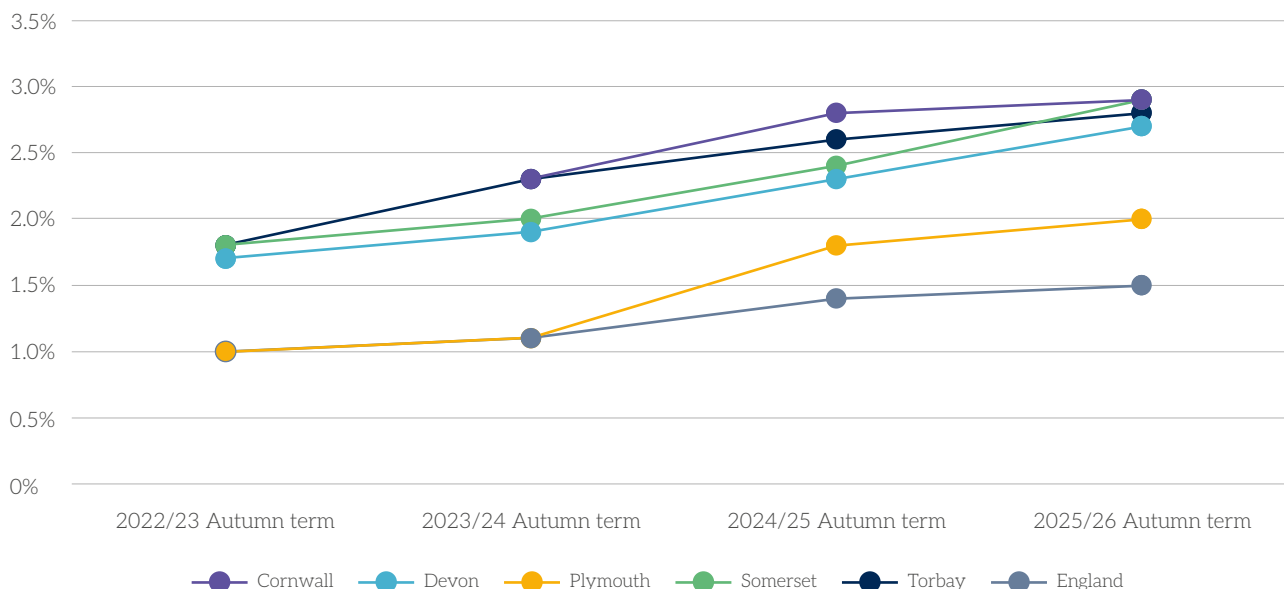


Figure 29 Rate of EHE for all children at autumn census date, by England average and peninsula local authorities, 2022/23 to 2025/26.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



Exam Centre Project supporting NEET, not in school and EHE pupils

In Devon, more than 5,000 young people are out of school, among the highest rates in England. Many are classified as elective home educated, while others are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Without school access, these young people often face significant barriers to sitting GCSE examinations, as there are currently no dedicated exam centres in Devon or Cornwall for private candidates.

Led by Dr Luke Graham and colleagues in the University of Exeter School of Education, the Exam Centre Project was established to address this gap, removing financial and site-based barriers that can prevent young people from gaining essential qualifications and progressing into further education, training or employment.

The project brings together the University of Exeter, Exeter College, Devon and Cornwall Councils, exam board AQA, and home education networks to provide a collaborative service for young people who might otherwise be excluded from formal qualifications. Using university facilities as a neutral and supportive setting, the project enables pupils to sit GCSE and mock examinations free of charge.

Early results are encouraging. Initial analysis from 2026 suggests that pupils improved by around two GCSE grades in English and mathematics between mock examinations and final assessments. The project has also helped establish progression routes into further education, including links with Exeter College.

The need for this provision is clear. Many young people involved have experienced significant disruption to their education, while others face financial barriers to accessing examinations. For some families, the cost of travelling long distances to exam centres and paying entry fees can exceed £3,000.

Demand for the project has exceeded expectations. Since its launch, more than 300 applications have been received for future examination places, highlighting both the scale of unmet need and the potential of the model to support some of the region's most vulnerable young people.

Further education and training (ages 16–18)

Level 2 English and maths by age 19

As described earlier, young people who do not achieve a grade 4 or above in English and maths GCSE at age 16 are required to re-take these qualifications. The proportion of students achieving a Level 2 English and maths qualification by age 19 includes those who achieved these qualifications at age 16 and those who achieved them at later ages up to the age of 19. Across England, just over half (52%) of students eligible for free school meals achieved Level 2 (GCSE or equivalent) qualifications in English and maths by age 19. This compares with close to three-quarters (73%) of all students.

In the South West, just under half (48%) of students eligible for free school meals gained these important

qualifications. Figures were slightly above the South-West average in Devon (50%) and similar to the average in Plymouth and Cornwall (both 48%). Numbers were substantially lower in Somerset (42%) and Torbay (39%). Within the South-West peninsula, figures were particularly high in Exeter, where 61% of students eligible for free school meals achieved these qualifications (Figure 31).

We do not show time series data here, as figures are still not back to pre-pandemic levels. Those aged 19 in 2024/25 were the first cohort to take normal exams at every age from 16 to 19. However, they received more lenient grading at age 16 as part of a package of support provided as a result of the pandemic.

Figure 30 Percentage of students eligible for free school meals achieving Level 2 English and maths by age 19, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2026.

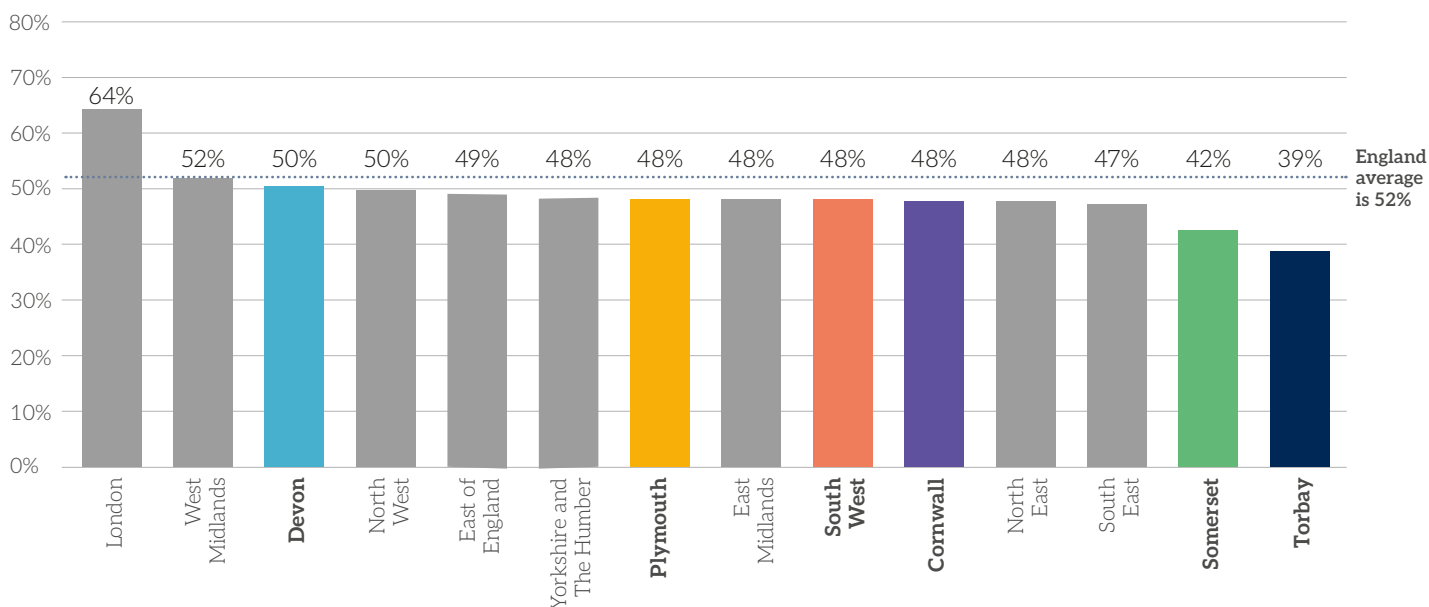
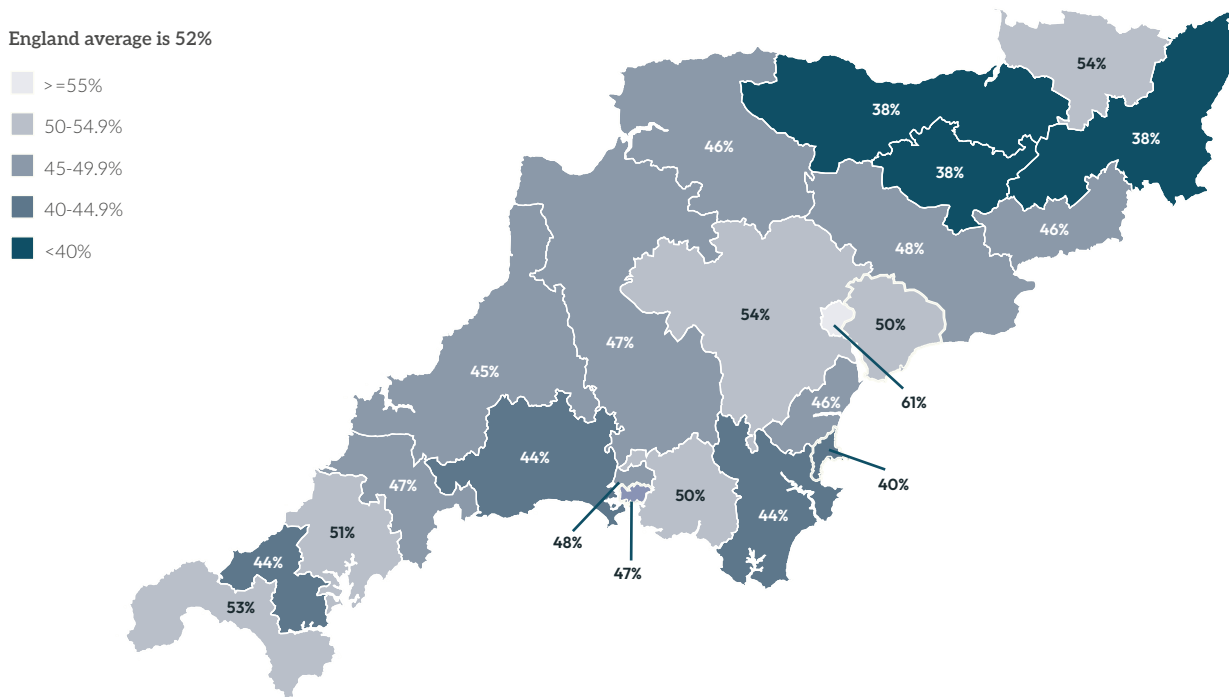


Figure 31 Percentage of students eligible for free school meals achieving Level 2 English and maths by age 19, by peninsula parliamentary constituency, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2026.

Note: Parliamentary constituency information shown here is based on the location of the provider.



Level 3 qualification by age 19

Level 3 qualifications represent advanced learning whether through vocational, technical or academic pathways. They include A levels, T levels, advanced apprenticeships and other equivalent qualifications.

Level 3 attainment by age 19 is back to pre-pandemic levels. Across England, 61% of all 19-year-olds and 37% of 19-year-olds eligible for free school meals had achieved a Level 3 qualification. London is an outlier, with over half (55%) of 19-year-olds eligible for free school meals having achieved this level. The South West ranked worst of all regions on this measure, although it was joined by two other regions (the North East and South East) on 30%, with the East Midlands and Yorkshire and The Humber only one percentage point higher.

Within the peninsula, Cornwall (32%) and Devon (30%) had figures below the national but above the regional average. Plymouth (27%), Somerset (26%), and Torbay (23%) had significantly lower numbers

(Figure 32). Looking at smaller geographies, we can see that figures were low across all Somerset constituencies except for Wells, which had comparable outcomes to East Devon, Truro and Falmouth, and St Ives (Figure 34).

In Figure 33, we compare pre-pandemic 2018/19 figures with the most recent figures from 2024/25. For all students, the percentage attaining a Level 3 qualification across England was 60% in 2018/19 and marginally higher at 61% in 2024/25. For students eligible for free school meals, there has been bigger rise across England: from 35% in 2018/19 to 37% in 2024/25. Within the peninsula, Devon has seen a similar increase (from 28% pre-pandemic to 30% in the latest data); while Plymouth has seen an even greater rise (from 24% to 27%). Over the same period, Cornwall figures have remained flat at 32%; Somerset has seen a slight decline (from 30% to 28%); and Torbay has seen a sharp decline (from 29% to 23%).

Figure 32 Percentage of students eligible for free school meals achieving a Level 3 qualification by age 19, by region and peninsula local authority, 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2026.

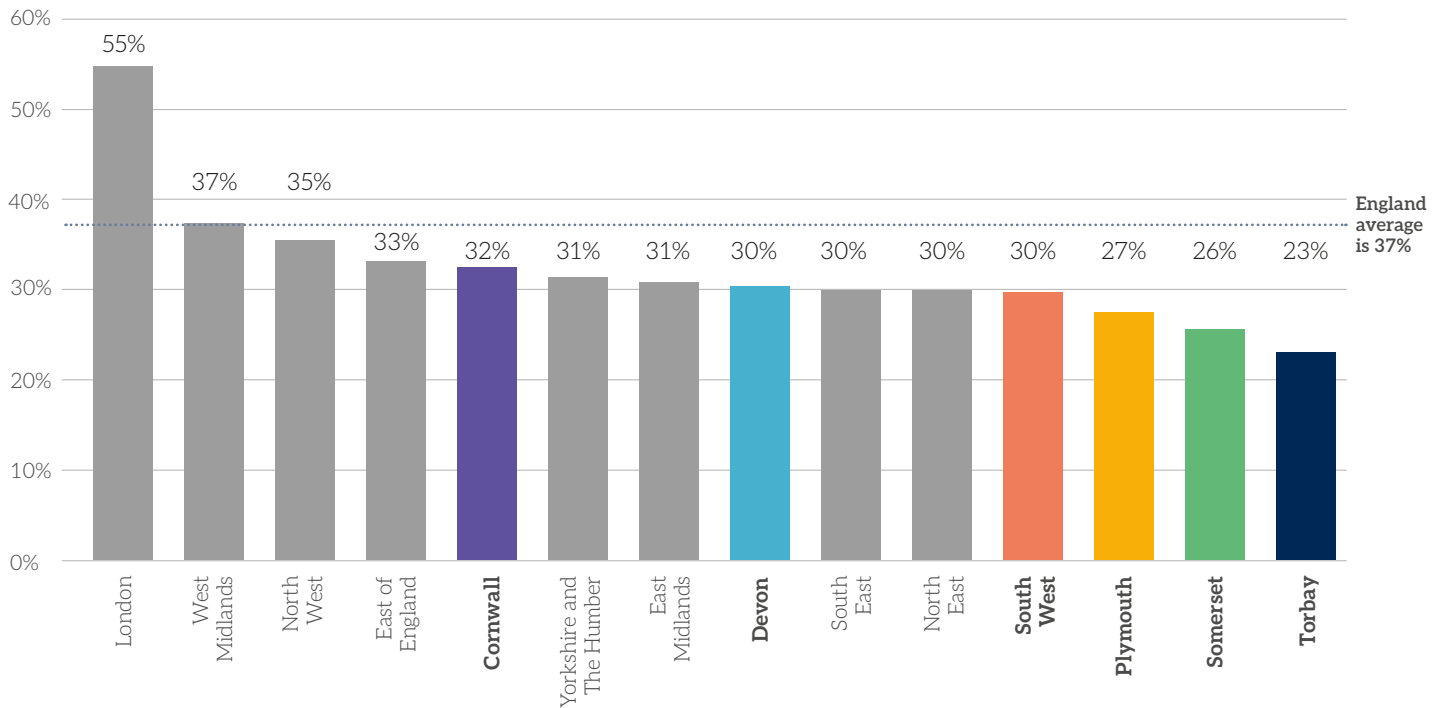
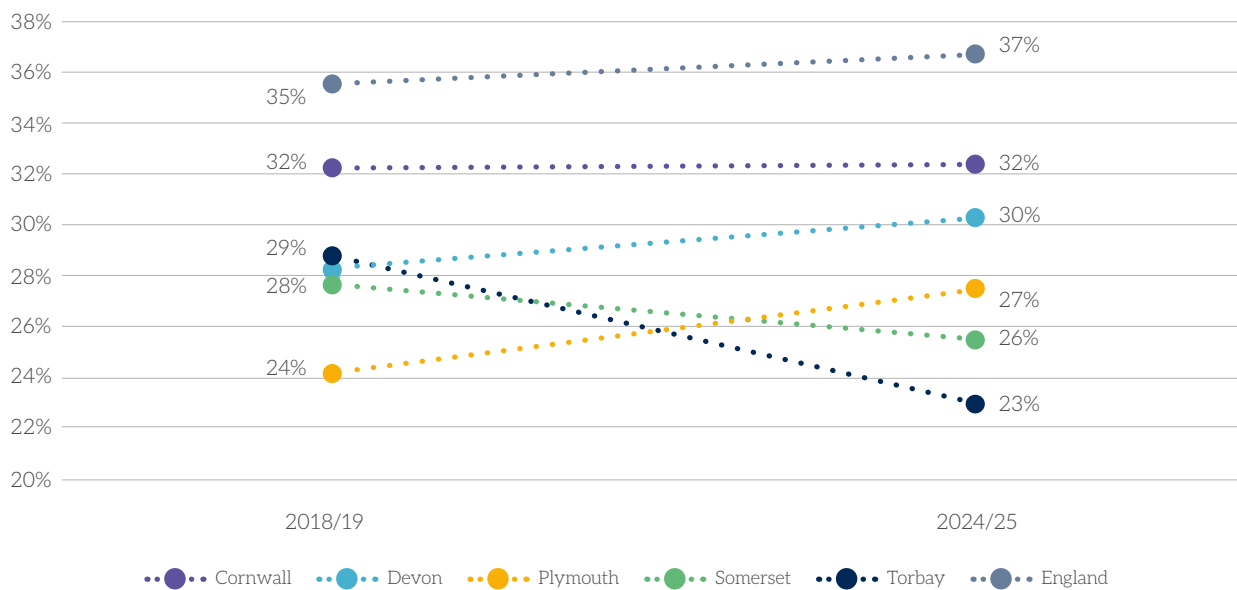


Figure 33 Percentage of students eligible for free school meals achieving a Level 3 qualification by age 19, in England and peninsula local authorities, 2018/19 and 2024/25.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed May 2026.



No One Ban Fits All: Evaluating Exeter College's Digital Detox initiative

Research led by Dr George Tarling with Isabel Hallam, Jason Hill, Nicholas Bremner and Holly Sampson at the University of Exeter and James Wilson and Gemma Abson at Exeter College, examined the impact of a classroom phone ban introduced across selected college faculties.

The Digital Detox initiative was designed to reduce classroom distractions and improve students' focus and engagement with learning. Against a backdrop of growing national debate about phone use in education, the study explored how the initiative was experienced by both students and staff, and whether its effects varied across different groups of learners.

What the research found

Early findings suggest that the Digital Detox had clear benefits for many students. Positive effects were reported across all faculties, particularly in relation to concentration, classroom atmosphere and participation in learning activities. These benefits were especially evident among students on foundation-level courses, where many learners reported feeling calmer, more focused and better able to engage in lessons.

Students also described more cohesive classroom environments, with fewer interruptions and greater opportunities for discussion and collaboration. Some reported becoming more independent learners,

spending more time reasoning through problems rather than immediately turning to their phones for answers.

Why implementation matters

The study also found that the effects of phone restrictions were not uniform. For some students, phones play an important role in managing daily responsibilities, including travel arrangements, family commitments and caring responsibilities. Others viewed phones as practical learning tools that supported note-taking, research and lesson participation.

The research highlights the importance of implementation. Students' experiences were shaped not only by the policy itself but by how it was explained, applied and adapted in different classroom contexts. Findings suggest that attention, trust and student agency are closely connected, and that successful approaches need to balance improved focus with students' sense of autonomy and responsibility.

The project is continuing as researchers work with Exeter College to refine the initiative and contribute to wider discussions about the role of phones in post-16 education.

The study is funded by the University of Exeter Participatory and Engaged Research Fund.

Post-18 destinations

Across England, 68% of disadvantaged pupils³ were in a sustained destination in the year following 16-18 study. This compares with 79% of all pupils. Among disadvantaged pupils, just over a third (35%) were in a sustained education destination; just over a quarter (27%) were in employment, and 6% were in an apprenticeship.

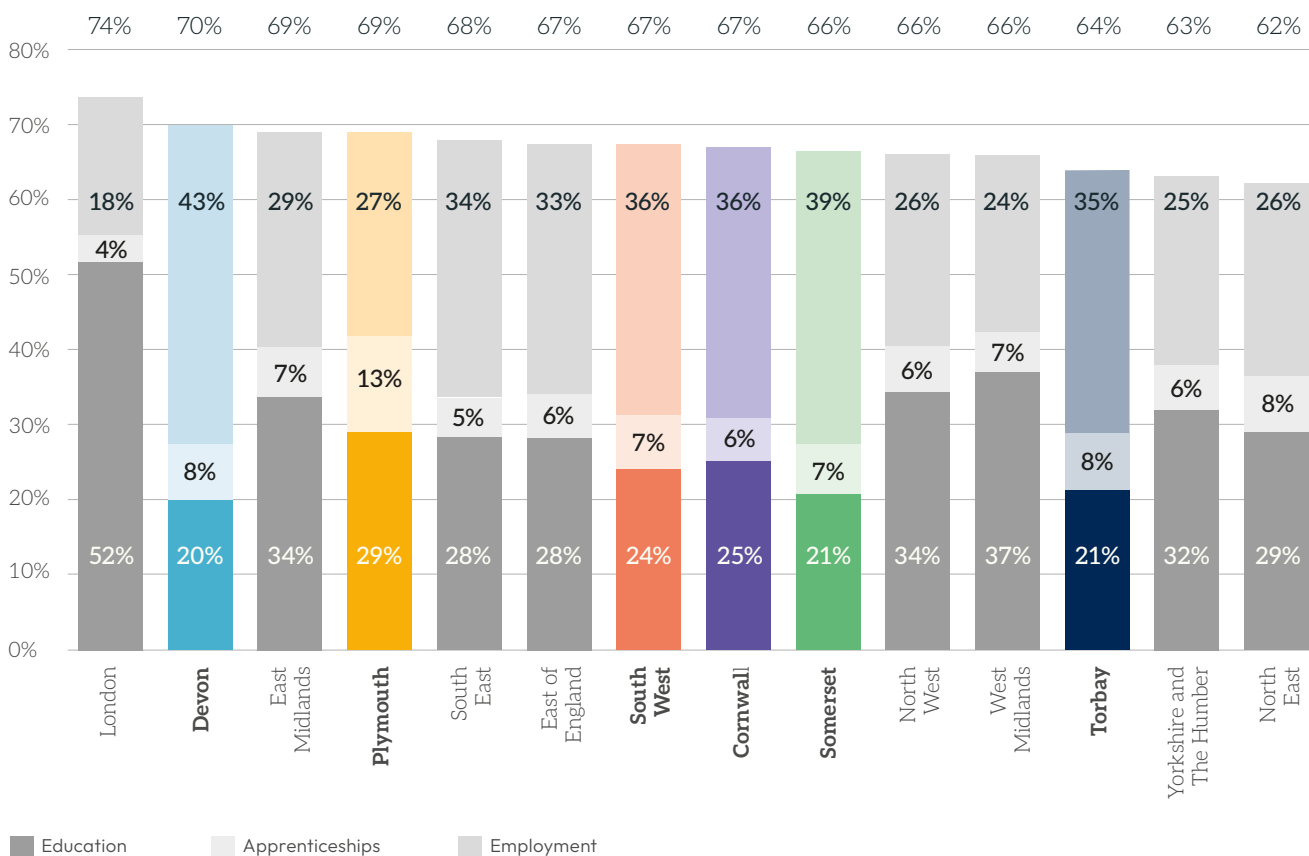
In the South-West peninsula, Devon (70%) and Plymouth (69%) had a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils in a sustained destination than the national average. Devon had a much higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils in employment

(43%), as did Somerset (39%), than the national average (27%). Plymouth had a much higher proportion in an apprenticeship (13% compared with a national average of 6%). Overall sustained destinations were marginally below national average in Cornwall (67%) and Somerset (66%), and a little lower in Torbay (64%).

Looking at smaller geographies, we see significant variation across the region (Figure 36). While 79% of disadvantaged students sustained a destination in South East Cornwall and East Devon, only 57% did so in Bridgwater and West Somerset, and 59% in North Devon.

Figure 35 Percentage of disadvantaged 16-18 leavers in a sustained education, apprenticeship, or employment destination, by region and peninsula local authority, 2023 leavers in 2024 destinations.

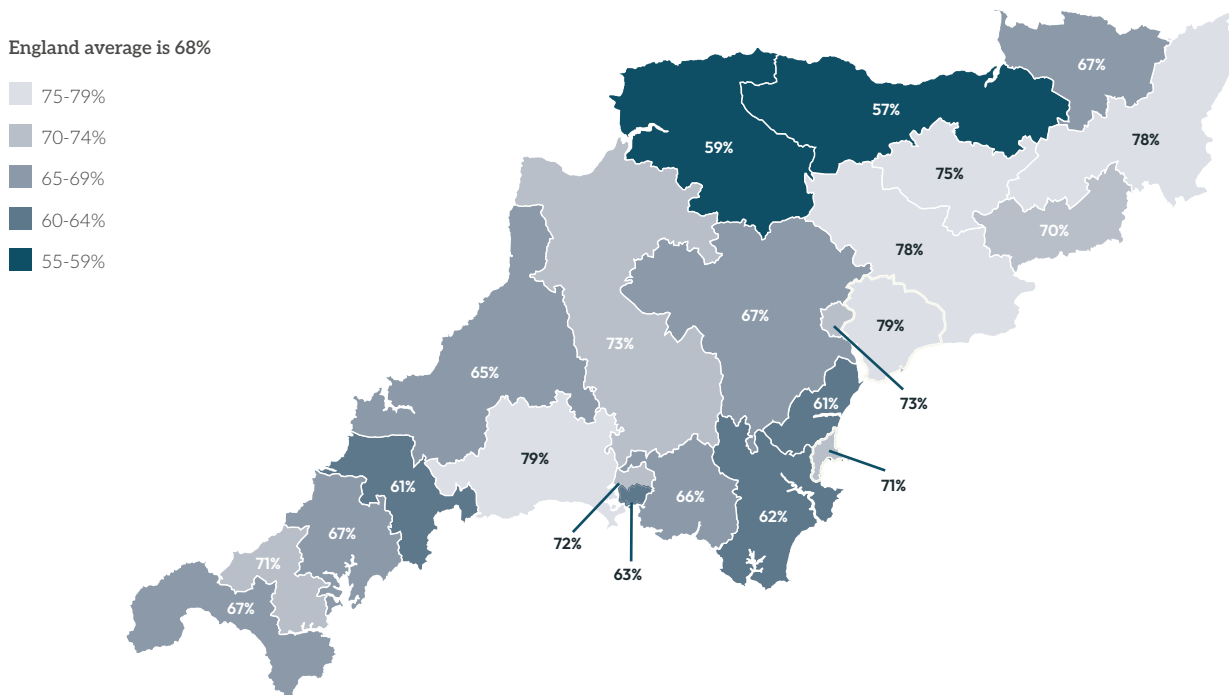
Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



³ The Department for Education defines disadvantaged pupils as pupils who have been recorded as eligible for free school meals in the past 6 years and children who have been looked after by a local authority or other state care.

Figure 36 Percentage of disadvantaged 16-18 leavers in a sustained education, apprenticeship, or employment destination, by peninsula parliamentary constituency, 2023 leavers in 2024 destinations.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed through a Freedom of Information request, May 2026.
 Note: Parliamentary constituency information shown here is based on the location of the provider.

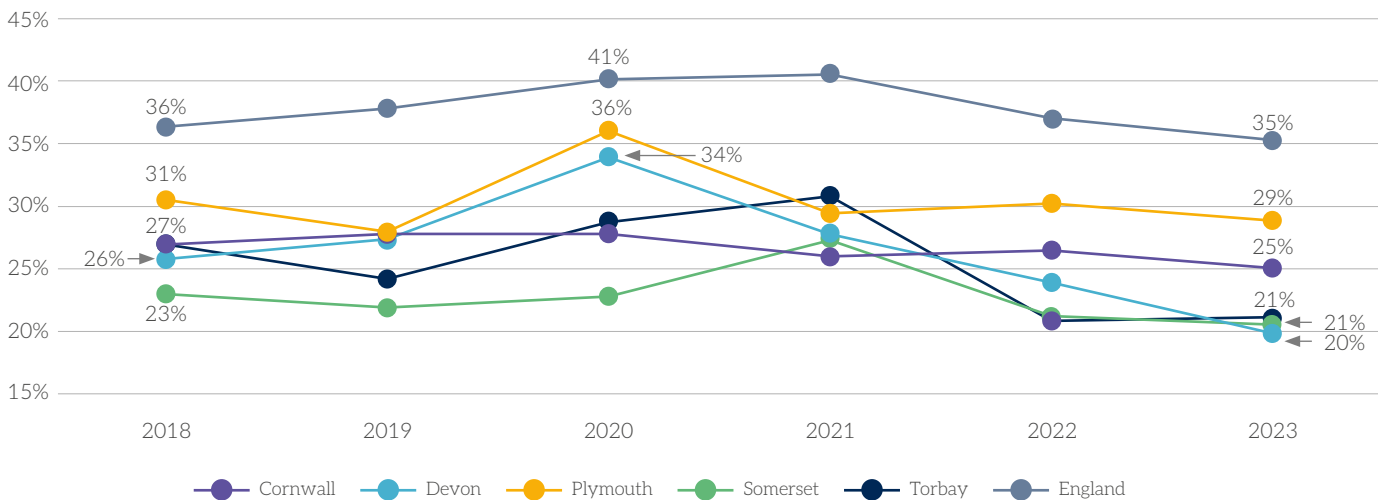


Zooming in on education destinations, we can see that rates for disadvantaged leavers have fluctuated significantly over the past five years. 2020 disadvantaged leavers in Devon, Torbay and Plymouth, and 2021 leavers in Somerset, were much more likely to enter an education destination than the cohort before them – perhaps unsurprisingly

given that employment options would have been disrupted due to the pandemic. However, Cornwall did not see the same big shifts. In the years since, numbers have fallen back – with a particularly dramatic fall in numbers in Devon, from a high of 34% for 2020 leavers to 20% for 2023 leavers.

Figure 37 Percentage of disadvantaged 16-18 leavers in a sustained education destination, England average and peninsula local authority, 2018 to 2023 leavers.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



University-Led Tutoring

SWSMC's University-led Tutoring programme continued this year as an example of what can happen when universities become active civic partners within local education ecosystems.

Working closely with schools across the region, the programme continues to connect university students with children and young people who benefit from additional academic support, while also creating meaningful opportunities for tutors to develop confidence, empathy and a deeper understanding of educational inequality. Delivery by UniConnect partners – Next Steps South West, Wessex Inspiration Network and GROWS – has allowed us to evaluate the model and continue to deliver to pupils across the UK.

Feedback from schools, tutors and pupils continues to be overwhelmingly positive. Schools have particularly valued the consistency of the tutoring relationships and the way the programme supports pupils who may not always see themselves as successful learners. Undergraduate tutors have reported increased confidence, stronger communication skills and a deeper understanding of educational inequality and place-based disadvantage.

Alongside the continued success of the original literacy programme, this year has marked an important phase of development and diversification. In response to feedback from schools and growing demand for flexible interventions, the Commission has developed three new tutoring programmes:

- a primary reading-for-pleasure programme;
- a secondary reading comprehension programme;
- a secondary mathematics programme.

All tutoring programmes have now been redesigned into six-week models that fit more naturally within a school half-term cycle, making delivery more manageable for schools while maintaining intensity and consistency for pupils. The shorter structure also enables universities and partners to scale participation more effectively across the academic year.

The development of these new strands reflects the Commission's wider ambition to build a suite

of tutoring programmes capable of supporting different stages of children's educational journeys, while widening opportunities for undergraduate participation across different subject interests and career pathways.

National interest in the programme has continued to grow. Building on earlier collaborations with institutions including the University of Worcester, work is continuing to support wider adoption of university-led tutoring models across the higher education sector. Universities UK has continued to highlight the programme as an exemplar of civic and social mobility practice. Looking forward, we are continuing work to expand this model into other universities, HE providers, UniConnect partnerships, and initial teacher training providers, including South West Teacher Training (SWTT).

More broadly, the programme continues to contribute to a growing conversation around service learning and the civic role of universities. By embedding tutoring within undergraduate experiences, universities are able not only to support local communities, but also to help students develop a stronger sense of social responsibility, belonging and connection to place.

A celebration event in May 2026 brought together tutors, pupils, schools and partners to recognise the achievements of everyone involved and to reflect on the growing potential of university-led tutoring as both an educational and civic intervention.



Early career (ages 18–25)

Not in employment, education or training

The number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) has become a growing national concern as recent figures reached almost one million nationwide (957,000 in October to December 2025). This equates to 12.8% of all people aged 16 to 24, and 15.2% of those aged 18 to 24.⁴ This means one in every eight young people isn't participating in education or the labour market, with that number likely to be around one in four young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Concerns have been triggered by the increase, a rise of around two percentage points since 2019. Comparisons with other countries show that this trend is not universal – over the same period, many countries have seen flat or even declining NEET rates.⁵

The increase is being driven in part by the state of the labour market (which it is estimated accounts for just over half of the rise) and in part by worsening health, particularly mental health conditions resulting in a person becoming economically inactive.⁶ In the October to December 2025 period, 411,000 young people were unemployed (i.e. looking for work) while 547,000 were economically inactive (i.e. not looking for work).⁷

As can be seen in Figure 40, NEET rates (shown for all young people) vary significantly across the country.⁸ The South West has the lowest rate of all regions – at 10% – while rates in the North East reach 21%. This is good news for the South West as youth economic

inactivity not only has implications in the present but also has a scarring effect, increasing the chances of being unemployed or having lower earnings later in life.

That said, there are a number of risks for the South-West peninsula in relation to NEET:

- Not having a Level 2 qualification is known to be the biggest risk factor in a young person not participating in education or the labour market.⁹ As we have reported on, the proportion of young people eligible for free school meals who have attained a Level 2 in English and maths by age 19 is lower in the South West than the England average and particularly low in Torbay (39% of young people) and Somerset (42%).
- Poor mental health is an increasing driver of economic inactivity nationally. In our 2022 report *Social Mobility in the South West*, we noted that peninsula local authorities had higher-than-national-average rates across a variety of child and adult mental health indicators.¹⁰
- Missing a lot of school is known to be linked to later economic inactivity.¹¹ High absence rates across the South-West peninsula, particularly for pupils eligible for free school meals, is therefore a red flag, and in particular the rise in severe absence.

The recent interim Milburn Review diagnoses several structural drivers for the rising national NEET rate:

- A decline in entry-level roles caused by multiple factors including reduced high street retail opportunities (a first job for many); a shift away

4 Figures from the Office for National Statistics, accessed May 2026.

5 Clegg, A., Cominetti, N., Diniz, J., Judge, L. and Stone, I. (2026) Lost in transition: an examination of why the UK NEET rate is high and rising. Resolution Foundation, April 2026.

6 Clegg, A., Cominetti, N., Diniz, J., Judge, L. and Stone, I. (2026) Lost in transition: an examination of why the UK NEET rate is high and rising. Resolution Foundation, April 2026.

7 Figures from the Office for National Statistics, accessed May 2026.

8 As NEET figures come from the Labour Force Survey rather than whole population data, a breakdown at the regional level by individuals who had been eligible for free school meals is not possible due to small sample sizes. This is problematic since, as we have highlighted in previous reports, the South West often fares reasonably well when looking at outcomes for all young people, but this often masks poor outcomes for young people from under-resourced backgrounds. That said, LEO data, which offers a breakdown by free school meal eligibility, suggests that the South West also performs best of all English regions in terms of former free school meal pupils in work, training or education at age 28 (see next section in this report).

9 Crowley, J., Addario, G., Khriakova, E. and Breedvelt, J. (2023) Risk factors for being NEET among young people, National Centre for Social Research, December 2023. Meanwhile, analysis by Impetus finds that qualifications act as a protective factor, and are especially important in reducing the NEET likelihood for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Baloch, A. (2025) Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage, Impetus Research briefing, 10 May 2025. Note also however that the recent Milburn Review suggests qualifications may not have as protective an effect as they previously did. Department for Work and Pensions (2026) Young people and work: interim report, Independent report, published 28 May 2026.

10 Sim and Elliot Major (2022) *Social Mobility in the South West*.

11 Education Policy Institute (2026) Five charts that explain the rise in NEET rates, Blog [online], 12th March 2026.

from the ‘Saturday job’; and employers shifting to using older workers as work demands increase and young people present with less work-readiness;

- An education system focused on attainment but not on the transition into employment and later outcomes; educational inequalities; poorly funded FE and vocational options; and a decline in entry-level apprenticeships;
- A fragmented health system configured for treatment not participation; and
- A welfare system that fails to prioritise early intervention; doesn’t provide practical help to support sick or disabled people into work; and locks young people into greater permanence on benefits.¹²

It is possible that labour market structures in the South West encourage youth participation to a greater extent than elsewhere. In our 2022 report *Social Mobility in the South West*, we described the prevalence of seasonal cash-in-hand work in sectors like hospitality and agriculture, and a high proportion of self-employment, together with strong community ties. While we noted some of the downsides to these

types of work, they may also present routes into employment for young people at a time of declining entry-level opportunities. As mentioned earlier, apprenticeship routes are also strong in parts of the region, especially Plymouth.

While NEET figures in the South West are more positive than elsewhere, there is still much that can be done. A recent South West-focused report argued for the need to:

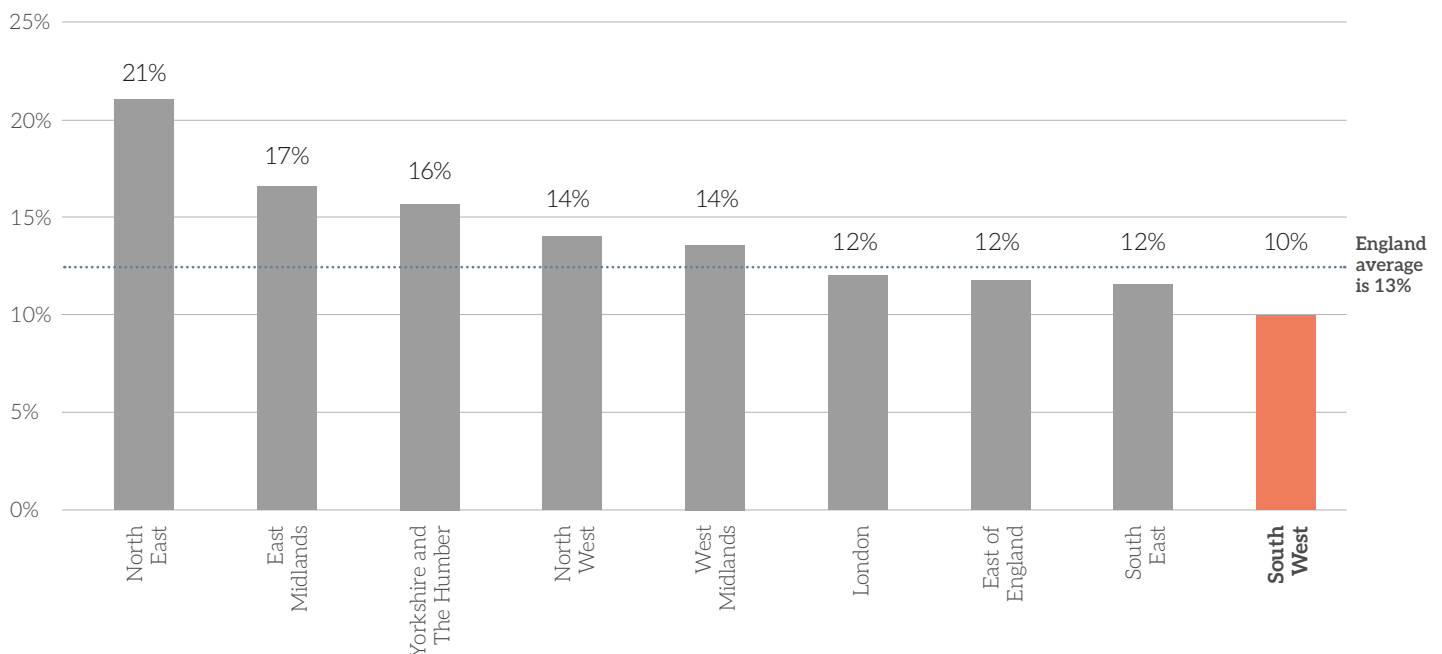
- tackle siloed working by for example identifying a trusted lead professional to act as an advocate for young people and families and help coordinate and navigate support from multiple agencies;
- develop accessible, engaging post-16 progression pathways; and
- champion young person-centred approaches in educational settings to increase belonging.

For young people, feeling cared for, understood and supported was critical to making change.¹³

A Tackling NEET Toolkit is available at: connectedbelonging.co.uk.

Figure 40 Percentage of all 16-24-year-olds not in education, employment, or training, by region, 2025.

Source: Department for Education data, accessed April 2026.



12 Department for Work and Pensions (2026) Young people and work: interim report, Independent report, published 28 May 2026.

13 Douthwaite, A. and Brown, C. (2025) Engaging Young People in Employment, Education or Training. Priority Policy Actions from the Southwest, University of Bath, Department of Education, August 2025.

Earnings at age 28

In our 2023 and 2025 Annual Reports we reported on data from the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset. This dataset uses earnings data linked to data from the national pupil database, enabling 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. Note that this data is somewhat historic in nature – it covers individuals who were doing their GCSEs between 2001/02 and 2006/07 and looks at their earnings in the period from roughly 2012 to 2019.

In our 2023 report, we showed a regional comparison of the proportion of 25-year-olds who had and hadn't been eligible for free school meals who were earning above the Living Wage. In our 2025 report, we reported the proportion of individuals who had and hadn't been eligible for free school meals who at age 28 were in a sustained employment/education destination, had average or higher earnings, or were in receipt of benefits. The South West fared well for FSM-eligible learners in a sustained destination at age 28, ranking first of nine regions – corroborating the positive indications around NEET figures. For earnings and benefits, the South West ranked roughly in the middle of nine regions, behind other southern and midlands regions but above northern regions.

This year, we show a further geographic breakdown: earnings data at the parliamentary constituency-level. Figure 41 shows the proportion of individuals who had been eligible for free school meals who were in the top 50% of earners at age 28, while Figure 42 shows the proportion of these same individuals who were in the top 20% of earners. If earnings opportunities were equally distributed across the country and irrespective of background, we would expect all the numbers in Figure 41 to

be 50% and in Figure 42 to be 20%. Across the country, most areas record numbers below 50% and 20% respectively for individuals who had been eligible for free school meals, reflecting the lower earnings associated with coming from a low-income background. However, in some areas, and especially in London, numbers are close to the 50% and 20% mark respectively, reflecting the geographically uneven distribution of higher earnings and potential for social mobility.

In Figure 41, we can see that several Somerset constituencies have close to 40% of former free school meal recipients in the top half of earners at age 28 nationally. The lowest-ranking constituency was Camborne and Redruth, where just under a quarter (23%) of individuals who had been eligible for free school meals went on to be in the top half of earners. Higher earnings were generally more likely across parts of Somerset and southern Devon than across Cornwall, northern Devon, Plymouth and Torbay. In Figure 42, we can see geographic similarities, with several parts of Somerset and southern Devon having higher proportions of top quintile earners among former free school meal recipients. Camborne and Redruth again has the lowest proportion, but North Cornwall and South East Cornwall fare better.



Research into social mobility for young people growing up in coastal areas

Research led by Dr Chris Playford, with Professor Anna Mountford-Zimdars and Professor Neil Harrison, examined how place shapes occupational opportunities for young people growing up in coastal communities.

Previous research has shown that educational and occupational mobility tends to be lower in coastal and rural communities than in urban areas. Given the importance of coastal communities across the South West, this study explored how geography influences young people's employment opportunities in early adulthood.

What the research found

The study found that young people who grew up in urban coastal areas were less likely to enter higher managerial, professional and administrative occupations by age 25 than those growing up in urban inland areas. This remained true even after accounting for family background, educational attainment, local deprivation and the availability of professional jobs.

The research also found that moving region between adolescence and early adulthood was associated with a greater likelihood of entering professional

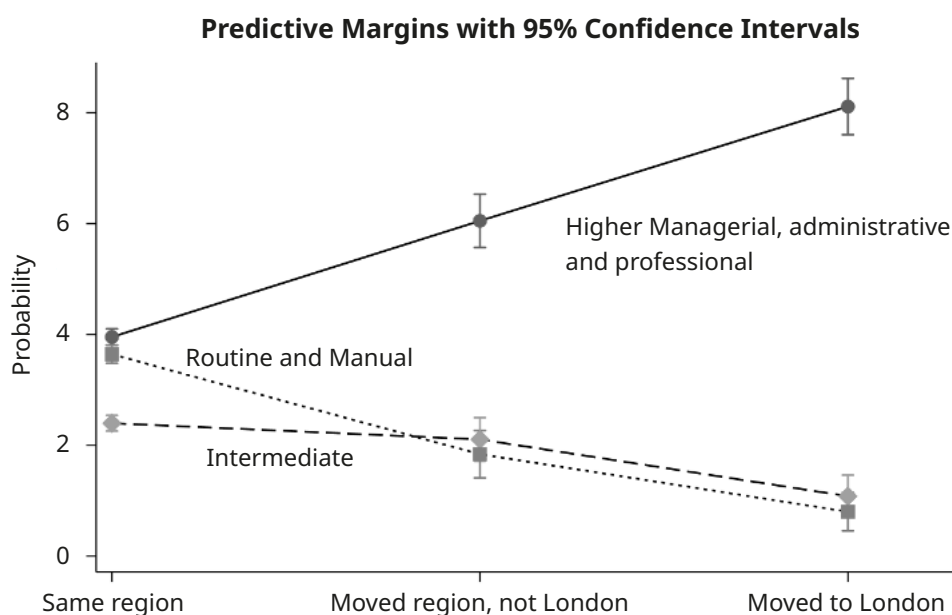
occupations. However, those who moved were more likely to come from more advantaged educational and family backgrounds, suggesting that mobility itself is not equally available to all young people.

Why this matters

The findings suggest that geography continues to shape life chances in ways that cannot be explained solely by educational attainment or socioeconomic background. For many young people growing up in coastal communities, access to professional employment opportunities remains more limited than for their peers elsewhere.

The research raises an important question for policymakers and local leaders: should young people have to leave their communities to access opportunity, or can more pathways to skilled and professional employment be created within coastal areas themselves? Understanding how place shapes opportunity will be critical to improving social mobility across the South West and beyond.

The study, *Moving for opportunities? The occupational destinations of 25-year-olds from rural and coastal areas in England*, was published in the *Journal of Youth Studies* in 2026.



Estimates from model 3
Data: Next Steps, n = 4,893, survey weighted

Composite indices

Composite indices combine a number of indicators with the aim of giving a holistic view of the opportunities for social mobility, comparable across geographic areas.

Below, we show a range of composite indices created by the national Social Mobility Commission. These are:

'Promising Prospects' for 25- to 44-year-olds, seen as an intermediate social mobility outcome, and measured by:

- Net levels of a university degree among young people in each area after controlling for socio-economic background (SEB)
- Net percentages of 25- to 44-year-olds in professional class jobs in each area after controlling for SEB
- Net percentages of 25- to 44-year-olds in working class jobs in each area after controlling for SEB
- Mean hourly earnings among 25- to 44-year-olds in each area after controlling for SEB

Conditions of childhood, seen as a driver of social mobility, and measured by:

- Parental income
- Distribution of parental education
- Distribution of parental occupation – data on parents in working class and professional occupations

Labour market opportunities for 16- to 29-year-olds, seen as a driver of social mobility, and measured by:

- Data on young people in working class and professional occupational levels
- Data on labour market earnings for 16- to 29-year-olds

Innovation and growth, seen as a driver of social mobility, and measured by:

- Postgraduate education
- Occupations in the 'new economy'
- Gross value added per capita

For each indicator, UK local authority areas are put into seven groups of variable sizes:

- Most favourable
- Favourable
- Upper middling
- Middling
- Lower middling
- Unfavourable
- Least favourable

As can be seen in Figure 43, in the latest period, South-West peninsula local authorities are in the lower middling group for most indices. Exceptions to this are: Cornwall is deemed to have unfavourable labour market opportunities for young people, while Devon and Plymouth are grouped as unfavourable in terms of promising prospects. These two areas have both seen a decline in promising prospects from the period 2018 to 2020 when they were upper middling and middling respectively. Conditions of childhood are ranked as middling in Devon and Somerset, while labour market opportunities for young people are ranked middling in Plymouth and Somerset.



Figure 43 Social Mobility Commission State of the Nation: data about social mobility in the UK.

Source: <https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/>, accessed in May 2026.

		2000 to 2005	2006 to 2011	2012 to 2017	2018 to 2020	2021 to 2024
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	Promising prospects	-	-	-	Unfavourable	Lower middling
	Conditions of childhood	Lower middling	Middling	Middling	Lower middling	
	Labour market opportunities for young people	Unfavourable	Lower middling	Lower middling	Unfavourable	
	Innovation and growth	Lower middling	Lower middling	Lower middling	Lower middling	
Devon	Promising prospects	-	-	-	Upper middling	Unfavourable
	Conditions of childhood	Middling	Middling	Middling	Middling	
	Labour market opportunities for young people	Middling	Lower middling	Lower middling	Lower middling	
	Innovation and growth	Middling	Middling	Middling	Middling	
Plymouth	Promising prospects	-	-	-	Middling	Unfavourable
	Conditions of childhood	Lower middling	Lower middling	Lower middling	Lower middling	
	Labour market opportunities for young people	Middling	Middling	Middling	Middling	
	Innovation and growth	Lower middling	Middling	Lower middling	Lower middling	
Somerset	Promising prospects	-	-	-	Middling	Lower middling
	Conditions of childhood	Middling	Middling	Middling	Middling	
	Labour market opportunities for young people	Lower middling	Middling	Lower middling	Middling	
	Innovation and growth	Middling	Middling	Middling	Lower middling	
Torbay	Promising prospects	-	-	-	Middling	Lower middling
	Conditions of childhood	Unfavourable	Lower middling	Lower middling	Lower middling	
	Labour market opportunities for young people	Lower middling	Lower middling	Middling	Lower middling	
	Innovation and growth	Lower middling	Unfavourable	Lower middling	Lower middling	

SWSMC Annual Event 2025: Building a line of sight to opportunity

The Commission's 2025 annual event, *Building a Line of Sight to Opportunity*, brought together educators, employers, researchers, civic leaders and community partners to explore one of the defining challenges facing many young people across the South-West peninsula: how opportunity becomes visible, tangible and accessible.

On the day, young people from UCS College Group in Taunton told us how they have experienced a narrowing of horizons – not because of a lack of talent or aspiration, but because pathways into future education, employment and careers are too often fragmented, hidden or geographically distant. They also remarked on the lack of emphasis on skills and work experience in their secondary education.

The event created space for collective discussion around how schools, employers, universities and civic institutions can work together to strengthen those pathways and help young people build clearer connections between education and future possibility.

Contributors shared examples of partnership working that are helping to build stronger local opportunity ecosystems – from mentoring and careers engagement to place-based collaboration between education and industry. A recurring theme throughout the day was the importance of relationships, representation and belonging in shaping how young people imagine their futures.

The event also reinforced the Commission's wider commitment to systems leadership rooted in place. Improving social mobility in the South West is not simply about individual aspiration; it is about ensuring that communities, institutions and employers work together to create environments in which opportunity can genuinely be seen, reached and sustained.

Looking forward to autumn, our 2026 annual event in Plymouth will showcase the findings from our community conversations, bringing together key decision makers from across the peninsula to catalyse action.

Conclusions

This year's report paints a complex picture of opportunity across the South West. Educational outcomes for pupils from under-resourced backgrounds remain among the weakest in England, and challenges around attendance, inclusion and school engagement continue to affect too many young people. At the same time, the region performs relatively well on several measures of employment and participation in early adulthood, demonstrating that educational outcomes alone do not tell the whole story.

A recurring theme throughout the report is the growing importance of place. Opportunities vary not only between regions but also within them, with significant differences visible across local authorities and parliamentary constituencies. Understanding and responding to these place-based patterns will be essential if we are to improve social mobility.

The projects highlighted in this report demonstrate that practical action is possible. Schools, colleges, universities, local authorities and community organisations are already working together to strengthen belonging, improve attendance, widen access to qualifications, support wellbeing and create clearer pathways into education and employment.

The challenge ahead is to build on these examples and develop a stronger regional model of opportunity: one that recognises local circumstances, values a broad range of talents and ensures that every young person can fulfil their potential, regardless of where they grow up.

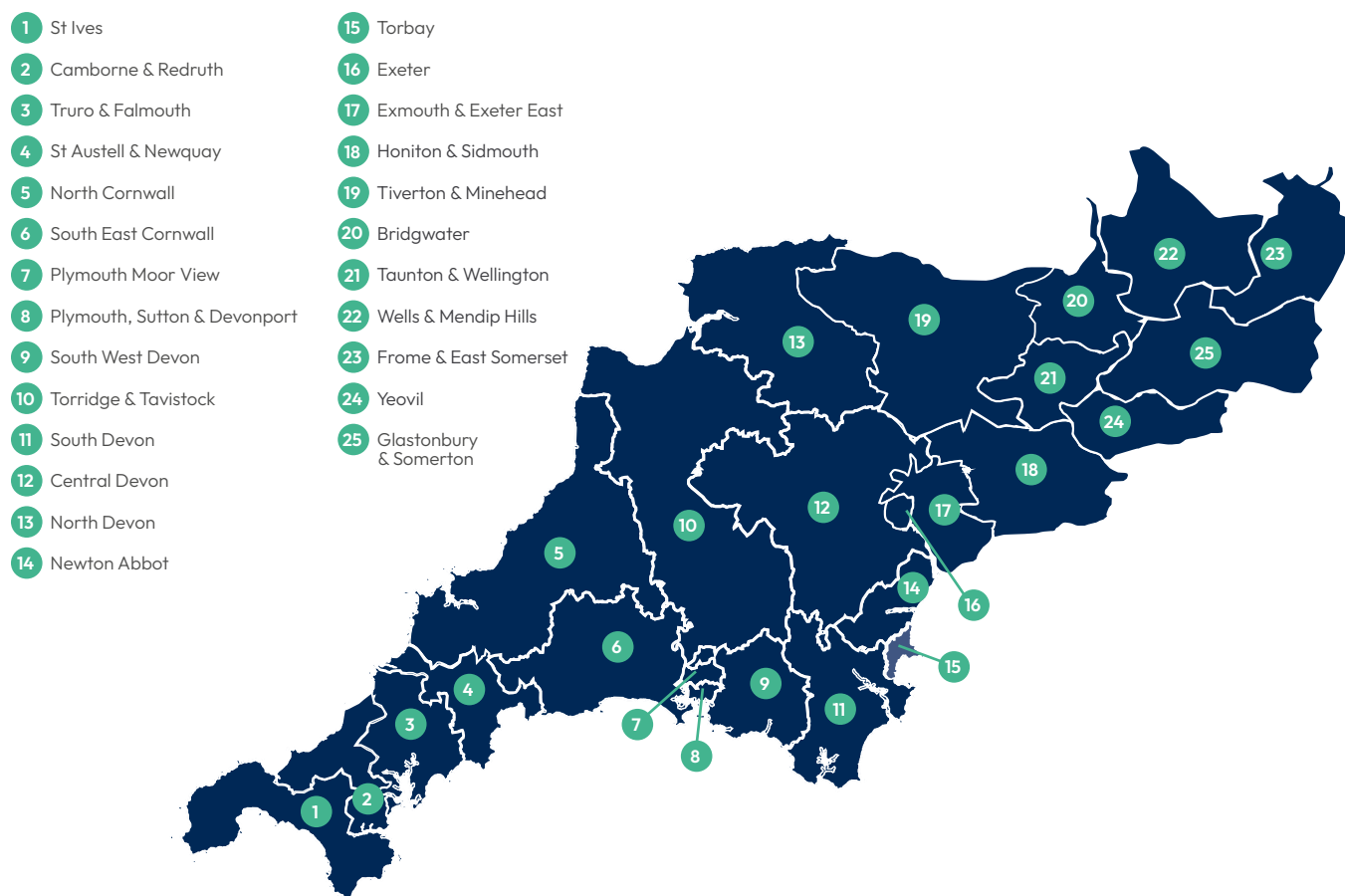


Appendix

South-West peninsula parliamentary constituencies

2024-present boundaries

All of the parliamentary constituencies referred to in this report, bar those in Figures 31, 34, 36 and 39, are those that were in effect from the general election of 2024.



2010-2024 boundaries

The parliamentary constituencies referred to in Figure 31 (Level 2 English and maths by age 19), Figure 34 (Level 3 qualification by age 19), Figure 36 (16-18 leavers in a sustained destination), and Figure 39 (Progression to higher education) are those that were in effect from the 2010 boundary review to the general election of 2024.

