Evaluating the Impact of the Opportunity Areas Programme on Educational Outcomes

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Executive Summary

The Opportunity Areas (OA) programme was launched by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2016 as a place-based policy intervention designed to improve social mobility in twelve identified areas of England. These areas were selected on the basis of the 2016 Social Mobility Index (SMI), which highlighted entrenched inequalities in educational outcomes and progression opportunities. The programme aimed to raise educational attainment, improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, and strengthen collaboration across schools, local authorities, and community stakeholders.

Central to the OA mission was a targeted focus on disadvantaged groups—particularly pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and looked-after children. Local delivery plans in all OAs pledged to prioritise the needs of these groups, underpinned by the assumption that narrowing the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils would lead to wider improvements in overall results and in the long-term social mobility of these communities.

The evaluation presented here provides a descriptive analysis of educational outcomes in OAs between 2014 and 2023. The report examines identifiable patterns of improvements in attainment and other key indicators, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, relative to national trends.

Methods

This project drew on secondary data from the annual School Census and related datasets published by the DfE. These datasets provide publicly accessible information on a wide range of indicators, including pupil characteristics, attainment across key stages, attendance, persistent absence, and exclusions. National estimates were also available, providing a benchmark for comparison.

Data were downloaded for the years 2014–23, covering the period before and after OA implementation in 2016. The analysis focused on KS1, KS2, and KS4 attainment, measured through average point scores (APS) and the proportion of pupils achieving expected standards in reading, writing, and mathematics (RWM). Additional disaggregation was undertaken to highlight outcomes for disadvantaged groups, particularly FSM pupils and looked-after children.

The analysis was descriptive, using comparisons between OA averages and national estimates. Graphical representations were used to highlight year-on-year changes, with the year 2016–17 identified as the turning point when OA interventions began.

Key Findings

KS1 Performance

KS1 results provided some early indicators of OA intervention effects. In certain areas, there were small signs of improvement in the years immediately after 2016, with disadvantaged pupils showing progress relative to national levels. However, these triggers at KS1 and KS2 did not translate into corresponding improvements at KS4, where attainment remained stubbornly below national averages.

KS2 Attainment

Across the OAs, pupils consistently underperformed relative to national averages in achieving the expected standard in RWM. Bradford, Stoke-on-Trent, Derby, Doncaster, and Oldham showed a persistent pattern of underperformance compared with national levels. Some OAs, including Ipswich, North Yorkshire Coastal, and Norwich, briefly narrowed the gap and even exceeded national averages in 2016–17, suggesting possible early programme effects. However, these improvements were short-lived, with most OAs showing a renewed divergence from national trends from 2018–19 onwards.

Analysis of disadvantaged pupils (FSM and looked-after children) revealed similar trends. In some OAs (e.g., Derby, Doncaster, Bradford, and Fenland & East Cambridgeshire), disadvantaged pupils slightly narrowed the attainment gap relative to the national average. Oldham, Ipswich, Hastings, and Stoke-on-Trent briefly exceeded national FSM averages in 2017–18, but this proved unsustainable, as performance declined again in 2018–19.

KS4 Attainment (Attainment 8)

At KS4, OA areas generally followed national trends but consistently lagged behind in attainment. Unlike at KS2, there were fewer signs of narrowing the gap, and in many areas, no "trigger effect" was observed in 2016–17. While Norwich exceeded the national percentage for FSM pupils in 2016–17, most other OAs failed to show evidence of sustained improvement for disadvantaged pupils at KS4. Ipswich initially improved after 2016, but this trend reversed by 2018–19.

The impact of Covid-19, and subsequent disruption to education, appears to have widened gaps further, with all OAs falling behind national averages during and after the pandemic years.

Attendance and Absence

Rates of absence and persistent absence were consistently higher in OAs compared to national figures. Although some areas showed modest reductions in absence following OA implementation, the overall trend was one of continued underperformance relative to national benchmarks. This gap widened again after 2018–19, with persistent absence rates remaining a significant barrier to attainment.

Exclusions

Exclusion rates presented a mixed picture. Some OAs succeeded in bringing rates closer to national averages for short periods, but exclusions generally remained higher in OAs than nationally. In many cases, temporary improvements reverted to higher-than-average levels by the end of the study period.

Conclusions

The evidence suggests that while the OA programme may have generated short-term improvements in certain indicators, these effects were not sustained. In KS2, some areas demonstrated early narrowing of the gap with national averages, and in a few cases exceeded them. However, these gains were reversed by 2018–19. At KS4, no clear programme effects were observed, with attainment in OAs consistently trailing behind national outcomes.

The lack of sustained impact raises important questions about the ability of place-based programmes to deliver long-term change in entrenched disadvantage. Although OAs received additional funding and, later, extensions to mitigate the impact of Covid-19, there is limited evidence that the programme achieved stability or durability in results.

One explanation lies in the complexity of addressing deep-rooted socioeconomic inequalities through school-focused interventions alone. While schools play a critical role, wider structural factors such as poverty, health inequalities, and labour market conditions continue to shape educational outcomes. Moreover, the reliance on locally tailored work plans, while promoting ownership, also meant that interventions varied widely in quality and intensity, making consistent impact across OAs difficult to achieve.

The OA programme represented an ambitious attempt to address social mobility challenges by targeting disadvantaged communities with coordinated support. The analysis of School Census data between 2013 and 2019 shows that:

- KS2 attainment showed some early improvements in certain OAs, with disadvantaged pupils narrowing the gap with national averages in 2016–17. However, these gains were not sustained beyond 2018–19.
- KS4 attainment (Attainment 8) showed little evidence of improvement, with most OAs consistently underperforming compared with national averages, even after targeted interventions.
- Disadvantaged pupils (FSM and looked-after children) remained a central focus of OA work plans, but long-term improvements for these groups were limited.
- Attendance and exclusions continued to present challenges, with OAs performing below national averages throughout the period. COVID-19 disruption exacerbated existing inequalities, widening the gap between OAs and the national average despite extensions of funding.

The OA programme highlights both the potential and the limitations of place-based education policy. While it provided targeted resources and fostered collaboration in disadvantaged areas, the evidence from this analysis suggests that it did not deliver lasting improvements in attainment or equity. Future policy interventions may need to adopt a more holistic approach, combining school-focused initiatives with wider strategies addressing poverty, health, transport infrastructure, and community resilience to achieve sustainable change.

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Introduction

The Opportunity Areas (OA) programme was launched in October 2016, initially identifying six areas, with a further six added in January 2017. The policy aimed to concentrate local and national efforts on a shared goal: to improve social mobility in the parts of the country where it is most limited. The programme was led by the Department for Education, with strategic focus, data informed initiatives, and engagement of local partnerships toward helping disadvantaged children and young people achieve their potential. It adopts a place-based approach, engaging the education system, examining the entire pipeline of education from early years through to employment, in targeted local areas at district levels.

Geographically focused policy intervention allows specific regions to be identified for tailored initiatives, designed to enhance outcomes and close persistent gaps that hinder broader national progress (Power et al. 2005). Such targeted approaches are commonly seen in sectors like urban planning (Rhodes et al. 2005), healthcare (O'Dwyer 2007), disaster response (Sanderson 2017), and conflict recovery (Keen et al. 2022), where prolonged economic stagnation and systemic disadvantage have caused certain groups in populations to fall significantly behind (Haase and McKeown 2003). The Opportunity Areas programme applied similar principles to education and social mobility, recognising that place matters when addressing entrenched inequalities (Lupton 2009).

The OA programme constituted education-led initiatives where major funding was invested in tackling challenges in schools that persistently had higher intake of disadvantaged pupils and had lower educational outcomes. The OA programme adopted the approach of partnerships by local board members facilitated by the Department of Education (DfE). The selection and implementation of educational programmes and interventions were guided by analyses of school census data, OA board members' local knowledge and experiences of challenges in the regions, and advisory guidance from education experts and DfE leads. The programme evaluation design included matched areas with similar inequalities and challenges. The DfE documents include extensive coverage of the policy mechanisms implemented in the form of process evaluation findings (Department for Education 2018, Scandone et al. 2022).

Methods

This analysis draws upon secondary data derived from the annual School Census datasets published by the Department for Education (DfE) in England. The School Census is the most comprehensive source of information on schools, pupils, and educational outcomes in England, collected annually from all state-funded schools. The datasets include a wide range of indicators covering pupil characteristics, levels of disadvantage, attendance, exclusions, and academic attainment across different key stages of schooling. The School Census data are publicly accessible and provide a reliable basis for examining trends at both school-level and aggregated regional or national levels.

For the purpose of this study, publicly available datasets covering the period from 2013 to 2023, excluding 2019-20 as period of pandemic for which the DfE did not publish any school level data. The annual school census data files were downloaded directly from the DfE's website. This period was selected to provide sufficient time-series data both before and after the launch of the Opportunity Areas (OAs) programme in 2016. By examining data over this seven-year span, it is possible to observe patterns over the years and assess any shifts in outcomes that coincided with or followed the implementation of OA funding and interventions. Data for the twelve OAs were extracted and compared against corresponding national estimates. National-level figures were included for each indicator to serve as a benchmark, enabling a comparative assessment of OA trajectories in relation to broader educational trends across England.

The indicators of interest included academic attainment at Key Stage 1 (KS1), Key Stage 2 (KS2), and Key Stage 4 (KS4), measured through Average Point Scores (APS) and the percentage of pupils achieving expected levels in core subjects such as reading, writing, and mathematics. Additional data on school attendance, persistent absence, and exclusions were also analysed, as these factors are closely linked to pupil attainment and progression. Disaggregated indicators were used where available, particularly those relating to pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and looked-after children, given that the OA programme specifically prioritised raising outcomes for disadvantaged groups.

Alongside school census data, this study also incorporated contextual information from the Social Mobility Index (SMI) published by the DfE. In 2016, the SMI was used to identify and rank areas of the country according to levels of educational opportunity and social mobility, which in turn informed the designation of the twelve OAs. Data from the SMI provides a useful contextual background by highlighting the entrenched inequalities that the OA programme sought to address. These data were accessed from the DfE's publicly available reports and databases.

The data analysis proceeded by compiling time-series trends for each OA and for national figures between 2014 and 2023. Graphical representations were produced to visualise changes and to highlight the year 2016–17, marking the point at which OA funding and interventions commenced. This allowed for a before-and-after comparison of trends, particularly with regard to academic outcomes and indicators of disadvantage. The analysis was descriptive in nature, focusing on identifying patterns of change, divergences between OAs and the national average, and any evidence of convergence or divergence over time.

While this approach offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The analysis relies entirely on aggregated data, which restricts the ability to examine individual-level pupil trajectories or control for background variables such as socioeconomic status beyond the broad proxies of FSM eligibility or looked-after status. This limits the extent to which causal claims can be made about the relationship between the OA programme and pupil outcomes. Second, the descriptive approach adopted here can highlight associations and changes over time but cannot fully disentangle OA effects from other policy initiatives or wider contextual factors operating simultaneously. The School Census data, while comprehensive, are published annually and may mask short-term fluctuations within academic years. The DfE data draws on a strict policy of data suppression where the total counts in aggregation do not meet the data protection policy. Schools with a small pupil population suppress information on indicators of disadvantage. Finally, since the OAs varied in their local strategies and interventions, aggregated OA-level trends may not capture localised successes or challenges within individual schools.

Despite these limitations, the use of nationally standardised and publicly available datasets ensures transparency, comparability, and robustness. By drawing upon the same data sources used for national monitoring and accountability, this analysis situates the OA programme within the wider policy landscape and provides a credible basis for examining whether disadvantaged pupils in OA areas experienced measurable improvements relative to national patterns.

Indices of social mobility

The selection of areas for targeted policy schemes and resource investment is a matter of concern, as these policies are interventions for larger groups and have the potential to reshape existing structures and mechanisms that drive outcomes (Raffo et al.2014). Implementing policy-based interventions has the potential risks to geographical demographic characteristics. Therefore, selection of areas based on informed data and carefully calculated measures is expected to minimise risk (Haase and McKeown 2003) and increase transparency and fairness in the allocation of resources (UNDP 2025). In England, local areas and districts are governed by Local Authority administrative units, responsible for managing and allocating resources to support local provisions and social development.

Opportunity Areas were selected on lowest rankings of two indices that used indicators available on regional level educational data combined with information with department of work and pensions (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2015). These indices based ranking approach allows for accounting aggregates of multiple contributing factors, depending on the availability of data from administrative sources. The purpose of using administrative data for ranking is to make it evidence-led and easy to identify target areas for policy implementation and resource investment. The indices shaped initiatives implemented in the selected "Opportunity Areas" programme and served as a basis for promoting collaboration between schools in successful and underperforming regions.

The Achieving Excellence Areas (AEA) analysis, developed by the Department for Education, used two sets of indicators to identify areas of chronic and persistent underperformance in state-funded mainstream schools in England. These indicators were assessed at the local authority district level.

1. Average attainment 8 score for local authority
2. Average of Progress 8 score local authority
3. Average Point Score Reading, Writing, Maths
4. Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 Value Added Score
5. Primary pupils per primary phase Teaching School
6. Secondary pupils per secondary phase Teaching School
7. Initial Teacher Training providers coverage
8. Percentage of primary pupils in a school with good or outstanding leadership
9. Percentage of secondary pupils in a school with good or outstanding leadership
10. Pupils per lead or outstanding sponsor academy

The first five sets focused on educational standards, consisting of equally weighted indicators that were combined to produce an overall score reflecting the quality of education outcomes in an area. The second set measured the capacity to improve, using six equally weighted indicators to generate a score that reflected the area's potential for educational improvement. By analysing both current performance and the potential for progress, the AEA analysis identified regions most in need of targeted support and intervention.

AEA ranking examined all Local Authority Districts (LADs) in England, encompassing approximately 326 LADs. Each LAD received scores based on both the five educational standards indicators and the six capacity-to-improve indicators. These were combined to produce composite rankings, allowing the DfE to identify and prioritise areas with the most persistent underperformance in state-funded mainstream schools. A composite indicator summarised multiple individual indicators into a single score from 1 to 6. This approach allows the Department for Education (DfE) to give an overall assessment of an area's performance in a specific domain—either educational standards or capacity to improve—at the Local Authority District (LAD) level. The composite ranked 326 LAD in 6 ranks where the weak areas with weak education standards and least capacity of improvements ranked 6 and the strong areas ranked 1. The grouping resulted in 32 LADs receiving rank 6 of which 12 were in Opportunity Areas in 2016.

The Social Mobility Index (SMI) is a formula-based ranking system designed to assess and compare local areas based on the educational and long-term life outcomes of disadvantaged children living in the areas and are recorded in the administrative data. The SMI formula ranks areas based on how well the existing structures support chances of disadvantaged children and young people to reach their maximum potential and likely to improve lifelong success. The SMI is structured as a suite of indicators that are thematically linked to four key life stages that are early years, school, youth and adulthood. The following section gives details of the indicators employed in the SMI formula.

Early Years

Quality of early years provisions and education show relationship with children's educational outcomes at primary key stage level (Ulferts et al. 2019). Low-quality and poorly monitored universal education provision could also have negative impacts on children's social-emotional wellbeing, and life satisfaction (Siddiqui et al. 2025). Access to high quality early years provision is seen as initial drivers of narrowing the disadvantaged gap (Melhuish and Gardiner 2018, Baker et al. 2014). In SMI, quality of early years provision is judged on the following basis:

> 1) Quality of Early Years Provision (% of non- domestic childcare providers rated 'outstanding' or 'good' by Ofsted)
>
> 2) % of children eligible for FSM achieving a 'good level of development' at the end of Early Years Foundation Stage

These indicators are meant to reflect the overall quality of formal early years settings, such as nurseries and pre-schools that operate outside the home (i.e., not childminders or family daycare). Ofsted, the official education standards body in England, inspects these providers and gives ratings ranging from 'inadequate' to 'outstanding' based on its observations. However, the existing evidence has shown that accounting for family

socioeconomic background, Ofsted school quality rating shows a negligible relationship with pupils' academic performance and well-being (Von Stumm et al. 2021). The evidence has also shown that early year's provision rated 'outstanding' and 'good' are mainly in the regions of lowest child deprivation (Gombaro et al. 2015).

School

Socioeconomically disadvantaged children are most likely to fall behind their peers and fail to reach the expected learning levels by the end of primary and secondary key school stages (Gorard and Siddiqui 2019). In general, schools in geographical areas of high levels of socioeconomic poverty show lower attainment of pupils. In SMI, the following four measures of attainment at school level are used as indicators of disadvantaged areas:

1) % of children eligible for FSM attending a primary school rated 'outstanding' or 'good' by Ofsted
2) % of children eligible for FSM achieving at least the expected level in reading, writing and maths at the end of Key Stage 2
3) % of children eligible for FSM attending a secondary school rated 'outstanding' or 'good' by Ofsted
4) Average attainment 8 score for pupils eligible for FSM

Socioeconomically disadvantaged children are known to have less access to high quality schools (Gamsu & Donnelly 2021, Brown and Siddiqui 2025). Pupils' segregation by poverty in schools is the most common reason for schools failing to meet quality standards and associated challenges such as low teacher retention rate and high level of pupils' exclusion from schools. The concern is that disadvantaged pupils segregated in schools do not receive high quality learning experience and exposure to effective learning pedagogy (Siddiqui and Gorard 2025, Rawlings et al. 2023). School segregation by poverty is mainly driven by structural inequalities such as cost of housing and residential schemes (Hussain 2023) and less effective transport networks (Michalidis et al 2024). Policy initiatives such as school choice and Pupil Premium funding have been implemented to make schools less segregated by poverty, as defined by pupils' FSM status, have wider access and acceptability in schools (Gorard and Siddiqui 2019).

FSM pupils have persistently shown wide attainment gaps in key stage performance results. At the end of primary school, a high proportion of FSM pupils fail to achieve expected learning levels and transition to secondary schools without readiness to grasp secondary curriculum (Jerrim 2017). The regions of higher socioeconomic poverty show wide key stage attainment gaps in learning of FSM pupils when compared with their non-FSM counterparts. Key stage 2 and Key stage 4 attainment of FSM pupils can be a robust indicator for identifying the most challenging geographical areas for targeted social mobility policies and interventions (Sutherland et al. 2015).

Youth

Completion of secondary school phase and then continuing education or training for further learning and development are indicators of assessing young people's success that open several pathways for life-long opportunities and career options (Shah et al. 2010, Archer et al. 2014). The evidence has shown persistent gaps in continuation status of young people from low-income family background and have been identified as FSM pupil in their school education phase (Gorard 2018). In the geographical regions of high socioeconomic deprivation young people are less likely to stay in education or training and are more likely to be unemployed. In SMI, the following measures are included to assess the status of youth at regional level:

1)% of young people eligible for FSM that are in education, employment or training (positive destination) after completing KS4
2) Average points score per entry for young people eligible for FSM at age 15 taking A-level or equivalent qualifications
3) % of young people eligible for FSM at age 15 achieving 2 or more A-levels or equivalent qualifications by the age of 19

Young people's aspirations to pursue further study or receive additional training tend to become more solid and well-defined toward the end of their secondary schooling (Khattab 2014). This period often marks a crucial

turning point when students begin to make concrete decisions about their educational and career paths. However, research and data suggest that these aspirations are strongly influenced by students' academic attainment and overall school experiences (Siddiqui et al. 2019). Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to continue their educational journeys beyond compulsory schooling (Hupkau et al. 2017). Lower academic achievement, limited access to guidance and support, and a lack of exposure to higher education opportunities can all contribute to reduced aspirations and diminished progression among FSM pupils. This highlights the persistent gap in educational outcomes and ambitions that exists along socioeconomic lines.

Geographical areas with higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage have a prevalence of young people not in education and employment, and low attainment at Key Stage 4 level is a major barrier in progression towards existing educational opportunities and future career options (Luke et al. 2024). Including attainment outcomes at Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 for pupils eligible for FSM, can provide a meaningful indication of the extent and patterns of social mobility, particularly in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation.

Higher education participation data can highlight disparities in access and progression, but it provides only a partial view of the full picture (Hayward and Hoelscher 2011). These statistics often focus on traditional, full-time university participation and may overlook alternative pathways into tertiary education, such as part-time study, vocational training, apprenticeships, or professional qualifications pursued after the Key Stage 5 phase. As a result, young people—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—who follow non-traditional routes may be underrepresented in participation figures. This limitation can obscure a more nuanced understanding of post-18 education choices and risks reinforcing narrow assumptions about what successful transitions into further education look like

Adulthood

Adulthood can be meaningfully assessed through a combination of labour market and housing indicators, as they reflect key dimensions of local prospects for upward mobility (Causa and Johansson 2010). The SMI included the following indicators relevant with adulthood phase of life for identifying the target local areas and districts for policy intervention.

1) Median weekly salary (£) of employees who live in the local area, all employees (FT and PT)
2) Average house prices compared to median annualised weekly salary of employees who live in the local area
3) % of people that live in the local area who are in managerial and professional occupations (SOC 1 and 2)
4) % of jobs that are paid less than the applicable Living Wage Foundation living wage
5) % of families with dependent children who are owner occupiers (including shared and full ownership)

The SMI included three indicators of labour market outcomes: median income levels, the share of low-paid employment, and the proportion of jobs in managerial and professional occupations. These measures provide insight into the quality of employment opportunities available to residents following the completion of their education. Two housing-related indicators, housing affordability and the percentage of families with dependent children who own their homes, as a way to assess broader living standards and the potential for individuals to achieve long-term goals such as stable housing and home ownership.

The data used to assess these measures were sourced from the 2011 national census, which provides valuable insights into various social and economic factors. However, a significant limitation of this dataset is the incompleteness of information regarding adults who did not enter the workforce, remained unemployed, or were privately employed and unregistered in the housing market (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2015). These individuals are often excluded from the census data, which can skew the accuracy of the analysis. Attempting to fill in these gaps by using neighbouring statistics or aggregate data could lead to misleading results, as it fails to account for the specific socio-economic characteristics and circumstances of those missing from the dataset (Wickersham et al. 2024, Boliver et al. 2015). This could result in an

overestimation of certain outcomes, such as employment rates or housing stability, and underestimate the challenges faced by those on the margins of the economy (Boliver et al. 2022).

Opportunity Areas (OA) 2016-17

The Opportunity Areas were selected based on lowest rankings across SMI and AEA composite indices. Table 1 shows 12 OAs selected from the list of 32 identified areas that have significant challenges towards upward social mobility targets. The non-selected areas in the 4th column of Table 1 are also lowest ranked in the composite indices and therefore can form the comparison group for assessing the impact of OA programmes. In these indices, a higher rank number corresponds to lower opportunities for individuals to improve their socioeconomic position.

Table 1. Comparators

Opportunity Areas	SMI Rank (324 Districts)	AEA Rank (326 Local Area Districts)	District Name	SMI Rank (324 Districts)	AEA Rank (326 Local Area Districts)
West Somerset	324	295	Corby	321	314
Norwich	323	285	Wellingborough	320	310
Fenland and East Cambridgeshire	319	319	Waveney	318	323
Blackpool	316	313	Nottingham	310	284
North Yorkshire Coastal	312	311	Crawley	309	300
Derby	303	316	Breckland	306	321
Doncaster	301	322	South Derbyshire	304	293
Stoke-on-Trent	298	299	Barnsley	300	290
Oldham	294	307	Great Yarmouth	297	320
Ipswich	292	315	East Northamptonshire	296	301
Hastings	282	298	Northampton	295	302
Bradford	277	317	King's Lynn and West Norfolk	293	308
			Sandwell	291	274
			Northeast Lincolnshire	288	304
			Weymouth and Portland	287	288
			Forest Heath	285	277
			Chesterfield	283	273
			Tamworth	279	283
			Bolsover	274	296

SMI identification of OA in the lowest ranking is the basis of policy implementation at the local level. The demographic characteristics of these regions differ, and the specific challenges they face in meeting educational targets can also vary. OA programme intended to address long-term educational challenges with a local focus, evidence informed interventions, and financial investment in priority areas.

Table 2 presents characteristics of the selected OAs. The selected areas are geographically spread across England, and from a mixed range of classification categories such as urban, rural, industrial and coastal regions.

Table 2. OA geographic and economic classification

Area	Region	Urban/Rural	Coastal	Industrial/Post-Industrial	Characteristics
Blackpool	Northwest	Urban	Yes	Post-Industrial	Former seaside resort economy, now in decline
Bradford	Yorkshire and The Humber	Urban	No	Post-Industrial	Historic textile industry, now services and tech
Fenland and East Cambridgeshire	East	Rural Market Towns	No	Mixed / Agricultural	Largely agricultural economy
Derby	East Midlands	Urban	No	Industrial / Mixed	Strong engineering and rail industry base (e.g. Rolls-Royce)
Doncaster	Yorkshire and The Humber	Urban	No	Post-Industrial	Former coal mining and rail centre
Hastings	Southeast	Urban	Yes	Post-Industrial	Fishing and seaside tourism in decline
Norwich	East	Urban	No	Mixed	Admin, education, and some high-tech industries
North Yorkshire Coastal	Yorkshire and the Humber and Northeast	Mixed (towns in rural area)	Yes	Post-Industrial / Tourism	Tourism, fishing legacy, limited industry
Oldham	Northwest	Urban	No	Post-Industrial	Former textile mill town, now services and light industry
West Somerset	West	Mixed: Rural & Small Urban	Partly Coastal	Mixed / Rural / Declining Industry	Some tourism, agriculture, public sector
Stoke-on-Trent	West Midlands	Urban	No	Post-Industrial	Famous for pottery industry, now services and distribution
Ipswich	East	Urban	Yes (Near coast)	Mixed / Port / Services	Historical port town, now focused on services and tech

In the fourth year of the programme, OAs were strategically paired with a different local area which shared similar level of educational challenges. This pair was perceived as a twin partner to OA for sharing learnings and practices after four years of implementing OA. The twinning approach in the OA programme was intended to be a collaborative mechanism, pairing areas that shared similar socio-economic challenges to share learning, expertise, and programme strategies more effectively. This design was intended to drive impactful outcomes through peer-to-peer learning and support. Table 3 shows OAs and twin partners.

Table 3. Twin areas

OA	Twin	Twin SMI rank
Blackpool	Blackburn with Darwen	161
Bradford	Knowsley	171
Fenland & East Cambridgeshire	King's Lynn and West Norfolk	293
Derby	Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire	210
Doncaster	Sheffield, Rotherham Barnsley	212 167 300
Hastings	Portsmouth	166
Norwich	Great Yarmouth	297
North Yorkshire Coastal	Bridlington	--
Oldham	Tameside	315
Somerset West	Dorset	--
Stoke-on-Trent	Rotherham	167
Ipswich	Felixstowe	--

Table 3 shows OAs and twin partners. The DfE process evaluation reports indicate very minimal participation and collaboration of twinned partners (Scandone et al. 2022). Therefore, for the purpose of evaluation twin areas form the comparators for assessing the impact of OA programme.

The OAs received overall SMI ranks and within four categories of life phases the areas were ranked in terms of relevant opportunities accessible to disadvantaged groups. Table 4 shows ranks in each of the four categories. The highest rank means that in the specific category, the disadvantaged group has the lowest access to opportunities.

Table 4. SMI ranking of OA areas (2016)

Local Authority Name	SMI Overall rank	Early years	School	Youth	Adulthood
Blackpool	316	247	282	237	313
Bradford	277	256	310	91	204
Derby	303	322	283	126	81
East Cambridgeshire	311	208	314	319	73
Fenland	319	136	324	276	247
Hastings	282	89	271	321	272
Ipswich	292	181	317	92	279
Norwich	323	250	311	308	307
Oldham	294	321	202	61	283
Stoke-on-Trent	298	227	248	322	232
West Somerset	324	323	212	71	324

Derby, Oldham, and West Somerset were identified as the most challenging areas in early years provisions in terms of quality standards judged by Ofsted and FSM children not achieving a good level of development in early years and foundation stages. Hastings, while still ranked low in early years provision, performed relatively better than the other OAs.

Fenland, East Cambridgeshire, Bradford, and Ipswich were identified as having particularly challenging primary and secondary school provision, where FSM pupils are not benefiting fully from education and are

less likely to achieve expected attainment levels in Key Stage assessments. In these areas, FSM pupils are also less likely to attend outstanding schools, indicating a high level of segregation by poverty in schools.

Stoke-on-Trent, Norwich, Hastings, and East Cambridgeshire exhibit some of the highest rates of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). In these areas, FSM pupils consistently underachieve in post-16 qualifications, limiting their access to further education, training and higher-value career pathways and constraining their long-term socio-economic mobility.

Hastings, Blackpool, and Norwich were identified as facing the most significant adulthood challenges, reflected in a combination of low median weekly earnings, high house price-to-income ratios, and a low proportion of residents in managerial or professional occupations. These areas also have a high share of adults on jobs paying below the living wage rate and a lower proportion of families with dependent children who are owner-occupiers, indicating persistent economic disadvantage and limited long-term financial stability for residents. In contrast, Derby and East Cambridgeshire perform relatively better on these adulthood opportunity indicators compared with other OAs, suggesting stronger local labour market conditions and household economic stability.

While interpreting SMI ranking it is important to note that the correlation between SMI overall rank with the ranks in four life phase categories is low. See Table 5

Table 5. Correlation

Life phases	Correlation with SMI Overall rank
Early years	0.23
School	0.01
Youth	0.23
Adulthood	0.16

The low correlations between each life phase and the overall Social Mobility Index (SMI) rank reflect the fact that the SMI is a composite measure drawing on multiple domains, so no single phase strongly determines the total score. Variation in performance across phases means some areas do well in one stage but poorly in others, diluting the relationship between any one phase and the composite. Differences in the indicators used, data variability, and the restricted range of scores within low-ranked OAs further reduce correlation strength. The near-zero correlation for the school phase suggests that, in this dataset, school outcomes vary largely independently of the SMI rank, with early years and youth measures having more influence on the overall index.

School contexts of Opportunity Areas in 2016-17

When the 12 OA was implemented in 2016-17, they varied considerably in terms of the number and size of schools within their boundaries. Larger LAs such as Bradford (280 schools), Norwich (244 schools), and Doncaster (166 schools) contained a significantly higher number of primary and secondary schools, while smaller districts such as Hastings (16 schools) and the North Yorkshire Coast (71 schools) had far fewer. Overall, the 12 OAs together encompassed 1,501 schools, of which 1,173 were primary and 328 were secondary. It is important to note that, despite these large differences in the number of schools and therefore in the overall population size, each OA was allocated a broadly similar “ballpark” level of funding and policy attention. This meant that small OAs with relatively few schools, like Hastings, were resourced on a comparable scale to much larger areas, creating an imbalance in the proportional reach of the programme.

Table 6. Number of schools in OA 2016-17

Opportunity Areas	No of Schools	Primary	Secondary
Blackpool	50	38	12
Bradford	280	218	62
Fenland &East Cambridgeshire	85	65	20
Derby	130	98	32
Doncaster	166	134	32
Hastings	16	13	3
Norwich	244	196	48
North Yorkshire Coastal	71	57	14
Oldham	118	92	26
West Somerset	94	72	22
Stoke-on-Trent	131	100	31
Ipswich	116	90	26
Total	1501	1173	328

Across the three years of the programme, £72 million was allocated to OA schools. Spread equally across all 1,501 schools, this would amount to roughly £15,989 per school per year. However, not all schools participated in the funded programmes, as the initiative was designed to target low-performing schools through an application process. When adjusted for the fact that only a subset of schools received funding, the per-school allocation was substantially higher, likely in the range of £32,000–£48,000 per year depending on the proportion of schools involved. This reflects the programme's aim to concentrate resources on the most disadvantaged schools rather than distributing funds evenly across all institutions.

The table below presents Early Years outcomes for pupils in Opportunity Areas (OAs), measured in terms of the proportion of FSM-eligible pupils achieving at least the expected Early Learning Goals, the percentage of pupils achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD), and the average point score. National averages are provided for comparison

Table 7. Characteristics Early Years and Foundational Stage 2016-17

	No. Pupils	% FSM Achieving at least expected Early learning Goals	% Good Level of Development	Average Point Score
Blackpool	1711	53	66	33
Bradford	7796	57	68	34
Derby	3504	47	68	34
Doncaster	3725	52	70	34
Oldham	3379	50	63	32
Stoke-on-Trent	3380	53	66	33
North Yorkshire	6196	49	67	33
Ipswich Suffolk	8301	54	70	34
Norwich Norfolk	9715	51	66	32
Hastings East Sussex	5663	58	73	37
West Somerset	5960	53	65	34
Fenland and East Cambridgeshire	7633	45	70	34
National	669864	54	70	35

In most OAs, FSM pupils' outcomes were below the national average, particularly in the percentage achieving Early Learning Goals. For example, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire (45%) and Derby (47%) had the lowest proportions of FSM pupils reaching expected levels, compared to the national average of 54%. A few areas performed closer to or above national averages. For instance, Hastings (58%) exceeded the national figure in FSM achievement and also reported the highest Good Level of Development (73%) and average point score (37). Areas such as Oldham (50% FSM, 63% GLD) and Norwich (51% FSM, 66% GLD) were among the weakest performers, highlighting persistent early years disadvantage.

Overall, while some OAs such as Hastings and Doncaster showed strengths, the data indicates that many OAs were starting from a position of disadvantage compared to national averages in early learning, justifying their inclusion in the OA programme.

At the point of implementation of the Opportunity Areas programme in 2016–17, the schools within each OA displayed wide variation in Ofsted inspection outcomes. The table below summarises the number of schools in each OA by Ofsted rating (Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement, and Inadequate), alongside those not yet inspected or without an applicable judgement. These figures provide an important baseline for understanding the quality of provision at the start of the programme and highlight that many OAs had disproportionately high numbers of schools judged as "Requires Improvement" or "Inadequate" compared with national patterns.

Table 8. Percentage of schools in Ofsted ratings 2016-17

	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate	Not Applicable or Not received a judgement	Total Number
Blackpool	9	61	16	2	11	44
Bradford	9	41	14	6	30	193
Derby	11	48	13	6	22	162
Doncaster	11	43	17	9	20	166
Oldham	17	48	13	3	19	114
Stoke-on-Trent	12	51	9	2	26	211
North Yorkshire Coastal	6	56	11	5	23	66
Ipswich	12	41	14	5	28	109
Norwich	16	53	7	0	24	230
Hastings	13	50	13	6	19	16
West Somerset	8	58	7	7	19	84
Fenland and East Cambridgeshire	3	47	16	16	28	89
National	16	52	9	3	20	26328

Nationally, around 16% of schools were Outstanding, whereas in most OAs this proportion was much lower (e.g., Blackpool 9%, Hastings 13%, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire 3%). Most schools nationally were judged Good (52%), but in several OAs this share was lower, particularly in Hastings (50%) and Ipswich (41%), where fewer schools reached this standard. By contrast, the proportion of schools rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate was higher in many OAs compared to the national averages of 9% and 3% respectively. For example, Doncaster (26% Requires Improvement, 9% Inadequate) and Fenland and East Cambridgeshire (16% Requires Improvement, 16% Inadequate) had particularly high proportions of weaker schools. These figures show that Opportunity Areas were characterised by a concentration of schools performing below the national quality benchmark, justifying their selection for targeted intervention.

The table presents data on pupil numbers and Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility across the 12 Opportunity Areas (OAs) in 2016–17, compared with the national average. It shows wide variation in school size and levels of disadvantage across areas.

Table 9. OA School population characteristics

	Opportunity Area (2016-17)	No. of Pupils Primary School 2016-17	No. of Pupils Secondary School 2016-17	FSM Pupils Primary % 2016-17	FSM Pupils Secondary% 2016-17
1	Blackpool	12911	7110	28	27
2	Bradford	66422	38719	20	20
3	Fenland & East Cambridgeshire (Ely, Wisbech, March, Chatteris)	10175	7762	18	20
4	Derby	26058	16910	17	19
5	Doncaster	29435	18400	17	17
6	Hastings	2912	637	30	41
7	Norwich	21214	21540	18	19
8	North Yorkshire Coastal (Whitby, Scarborough and Filey)	6709	5816	25	26
9	Oldham	26714	16606	17	19
10	Somerset West (Dulverton, Taunton, Minehead, Watchet and Wellington)	44984	29947	11	9
11	Stoke-on-Trent	25676	13523	20	18
12	Ipswich	179687	15026	18	17
	National	4998768	3307528	15	14

Bradford and Doncaster had some of the largest pupil populations, while Hastings was a much smaller OA, with fewer than 3,000 primary and 700 secondary pupils. FSM eligibility provides a clear marker of socioeconomic disadvantage: nationally, around 15% of primary pupils and 14% of secondary pupils were eligible for FSM in 2016–17. In contrast, several OAs had significantly higher levels of FSM eligibility. Blackpool stands out with 28% of primary and 27% of secondary pupils eligible for FSM, highlighting very high levels of deprivation. Hastings also showed elevated FSM rates (30% in primary, 41% in secondary), as did Stoke-on-Trent (22% primary) and North Yorkshire Coastal (20% primary, 18% secondary). By contrast, some OAs such as Derby, Doncaster, and Oldham had FSM levels closer to or only slightly above the national average. Overall, the data underline that OAs were not uniform in terms of disadvantage: while all were targeted for support, the intensity of socioeconomic challenges, as captured by FSM eligibility, varied considerably across areas.

To assess the availability of school-level indicators across Opportunity Areas, we reviewed publicly accessible DfE datasets on attendance, exclusions and suspensions, FSM eligibility, and attainment (KS1, KS2, KS4). The table below summarises the extent to which these data are available for each OA, distinguishing between those covering entire local authorities and those defined as smaller towns or districts within larger authorities.

Table 10. Availability of school census data

Opportunity Areas	Attendance	Exclusions	FSM	Attainment KS1, KS2, KS4
Blackpool	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bradford	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fenland & East Cambridgeshire	No	No	No	Yes
Derby	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Doncaster	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hastings	No	No	No	Yes
Norwich	No	No	No	Yes
North Yorkshire Coastal	No	No	No	Yes
Oldham	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
West Somerset	No	No	No	Yes
Stoke-on-Trent	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ipswich	No	No	No	Yes

The Department for Education (DfE) school census provides publicly accessible data containing detailed information on schools, reported at different levels of geography including regions, local authorities, and towns. For this study, we downloaded data covering the years 2013/14 to 2022/23 (excluding the COVID-19 years), focusing on schools located within the local authorities and towns designated as Opportunity Areas (OAs). Among the OAs, six are whole local authorities (Blackpool, Bradford, Derby, Doncaster, Oldham, and Stoke-on-Trent) while the remainder are smaller towns or districts (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire, Hastings, Ipswich, Norwich and West Somerset) situated within larger local authority areas. A limitation is that certain indicators—particularly attendance and exclusions—are not published at the level of small towns or districts. While it is possible to extract data on key stage attainment and FSM eligibility for these smaller areas from within the larger local authority files, equivalent data on attendance and exclusions cannot be separately identified. This creates a gap in the analysis for OAs that are towns or districts, which in turn affects the robustness of direct comparisons across Opportunity Areas. Specifically, while full local authority OAs have a complete dataset across all indicators, town- or district-level OAs have only partial data coverage, making cross-area comparisons less consistent and potentially limiting the strength of conclusions that can be drawn.

Socioeconomic disadvantaged and school outcomes

FSM eligibility (FSM) in schools

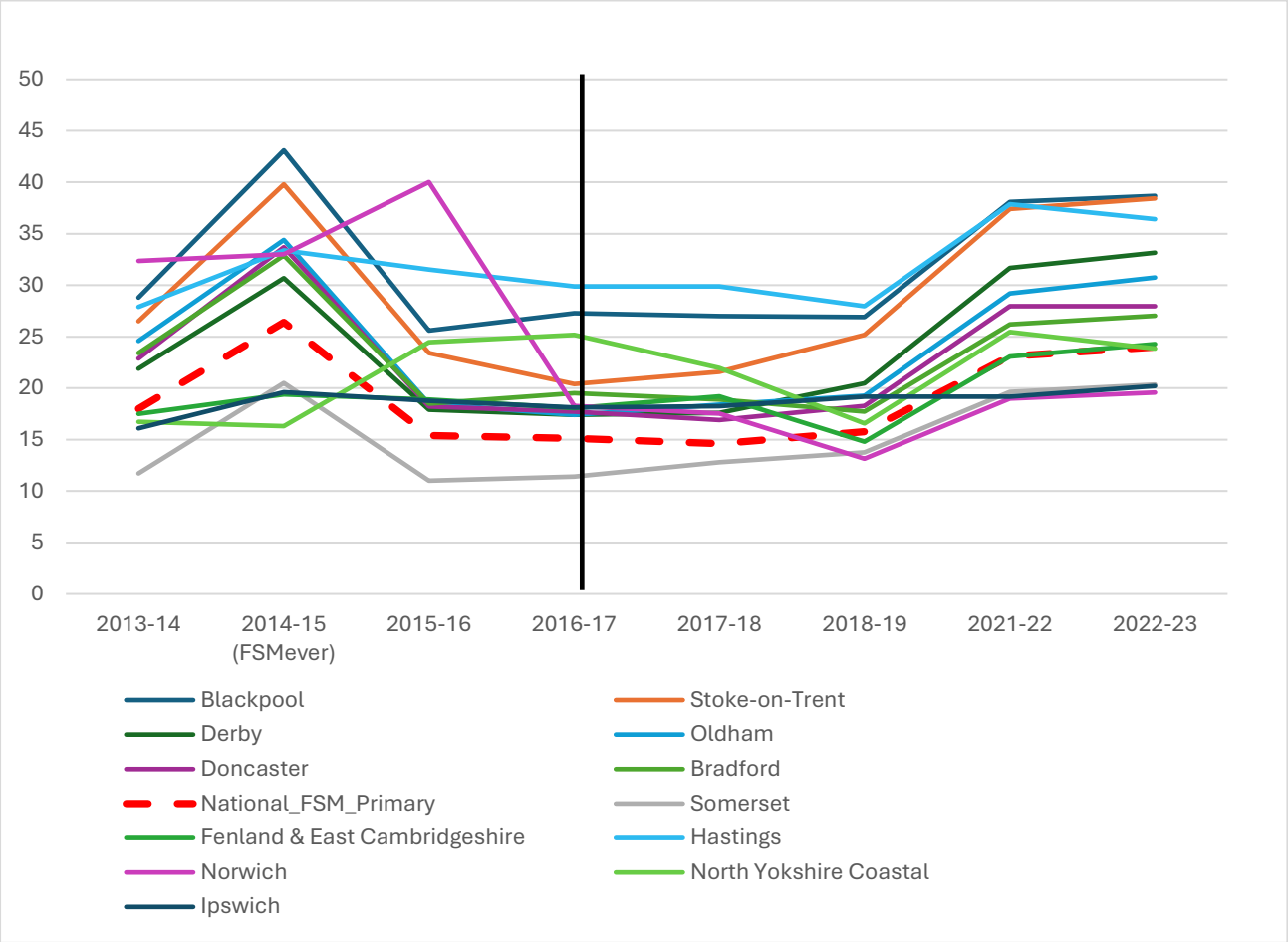
In the context of school improvement initiatives, eligibility for FSM is one of the most important indicators used to identify pupils and target needs for academic improvement. FSM eligible pupils are indicated by school staff to local authority for the free school meal cost provision in the school budget. Local authorities check for this eligibility by accessing data from Department for Work and Pensions which records household income data to ensure social benefits payments to eligible people and families who meet the criteria of receiving any kind of social welfare benefits (Department for Education 2025). Identification of FSM eligibility is based on official records therefore rigorous measure of household poverty that likely impact on pupils' academic outcomes (Gorard and Siddiqui 2019).

FSM rates are particularly elevated in places where wider socio-economic activity is weak and local economies offer limited employment and production opportunities, reflecting how structural economic disadvantage translates into concentrated educational need. FSM ever is recorded in the school census indicating if pupils in the last six years have ever been on FSM status.

The graph below compares FSM eligibility rates in OAs with the national FSM eligibility figures, illustrating the extent of concentrated disadvantage in these areas. These are longitudinal trends of FSM pupils recorded

in school census data from 2014-2023. The two years of Covid 2019-21are excluded from these graphs because the available census data for the Covid years did not present the required details.

Figure 1. Percentage Primary FSM



This line graph shows the proportion of primary school pupils who have been eligible for FSM pupils in each of the OAs, compared with the national average (red dashed line), from 2013–14 to 2022–23. FSM is consistently higher in OAs compared with the national primary average. The national line sits much lower across all years, indicating that these areas serve more disadvantaged communities.

Before the OA programme (2013–2016), some areas such as Doncaster, Blackpool, Derby, and Oldham had particularly high FSM proportions, peaking at over 35–40%. There is a visible drop across most areas in 2015–16, after which levels stabilise around 2016–18. This may reflect changes in data collection or eligibility policy. From 2018–19 onwards, FSM proportions rise again across nearly all OAs, with Blackpool, Stoke-on-Trent, and Hastings consistently at the top end (above 35% by 2022–23).

In contrast, areas like West Somerset and Fenland & East Cambridgeshire remain lower, closer to (though still above) the national line. By 2021–22 and 2022–23, nearly all OAs show a sharp increase, widening the gap again between disadvantaged areas and the national average.

The graph highlights that Opportunity Areas were chosen in places with persistently higher levels of disadvantage, as measured by FSM eligibility. While all areas show fluctuations, the long-term trend reinforces that socioeconomic disadvantage is concentrated in these OAs, justifying targeted school improvement initiatives.

Figure 2. Percentage Secondary FSM

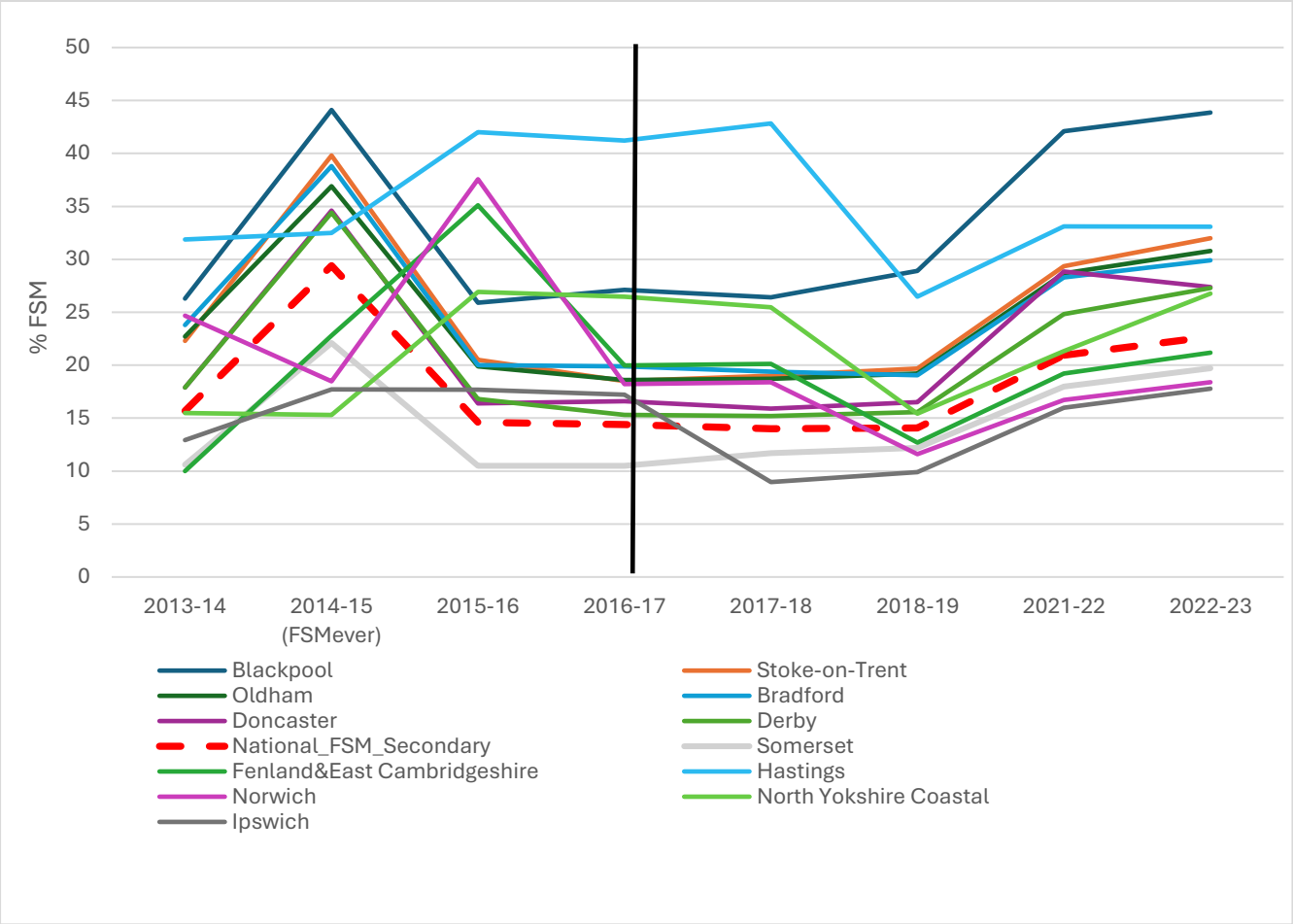


Figure 2 shows the percentage of FSM in secondary schools in OAs and overall percentage of FSM at national level. FSM eligibility is higher in Opportunity Areas compared to the national average. The national FSM rate (red dashed line) stays much lower throughout the time period, highlighting that pupils in OAs face greater socioeconomic disadvantage. In some OAs (e.g., Blackpool, Bradford, Hastings), FSM eligibility is consistently 10–20 percentage points higher than the national rate.

Hastings and Blackpool stand out as having the highest FSM rates over the period, often exceeding 40%. Somerset and Fenland & East Cambridgeshire are at the lower end, closer to national averages, though still above them. Other areas like Stoke-on-Trent, Oldham, Derby, and Doncaster fall in the middle range but show similar upward trends.

Like in the primary school graph, there's a noticeable spike in 2014–15 in several areas (e.g., Blackpool, Derby, Bradford, Hastings). From 2015–2018, FSM rates dropped or levelled off in many OAs, with some (e.g., Norwich, Ipswich, Doncaster) seeing quite steep declines. From 2019 onwards, FSM rates began to rise again across nearly all OAs, with a particularly sharp increase between 2020–21 and 2022–23. By 2022–23, all OAs had FSM rates above the national average, with many converging at around 30% or higher.

The overall message is clear. These Opportunity Areas were chosen in places where disadvantage is structural and long-term. The consistently higher FSM eligibility compared with national averages demonstrates why targeted interventions were considered necessary.

The two graphs together show a consistent pattern of higher levels of disadvantage in the Opportunity Areas (OAs) compared with the national average. Both in primary and secondary schools, the percentage of pupils FSM eligible is substantially above the national rate across the whole time period.

Although there are some fluctuations between years—most notably a spike around 2014–15 and a dip between 2016–18—the overall trend is clear: FSM rates remain persistently higher in the OAs, reflecting structural

socioeconomic disadvantage. In both primary and secondary data, some places such as Blackpool, Bradford, and Hastings consistently show the highest FSM eligibility, highlighting deeply embedded deprivation. Other areas, such as Fenland & East Cambridgeshire, Somerset, and Ipswich, are relatively closer to the national average but still display higher levels of disadvantage than schools nationally.

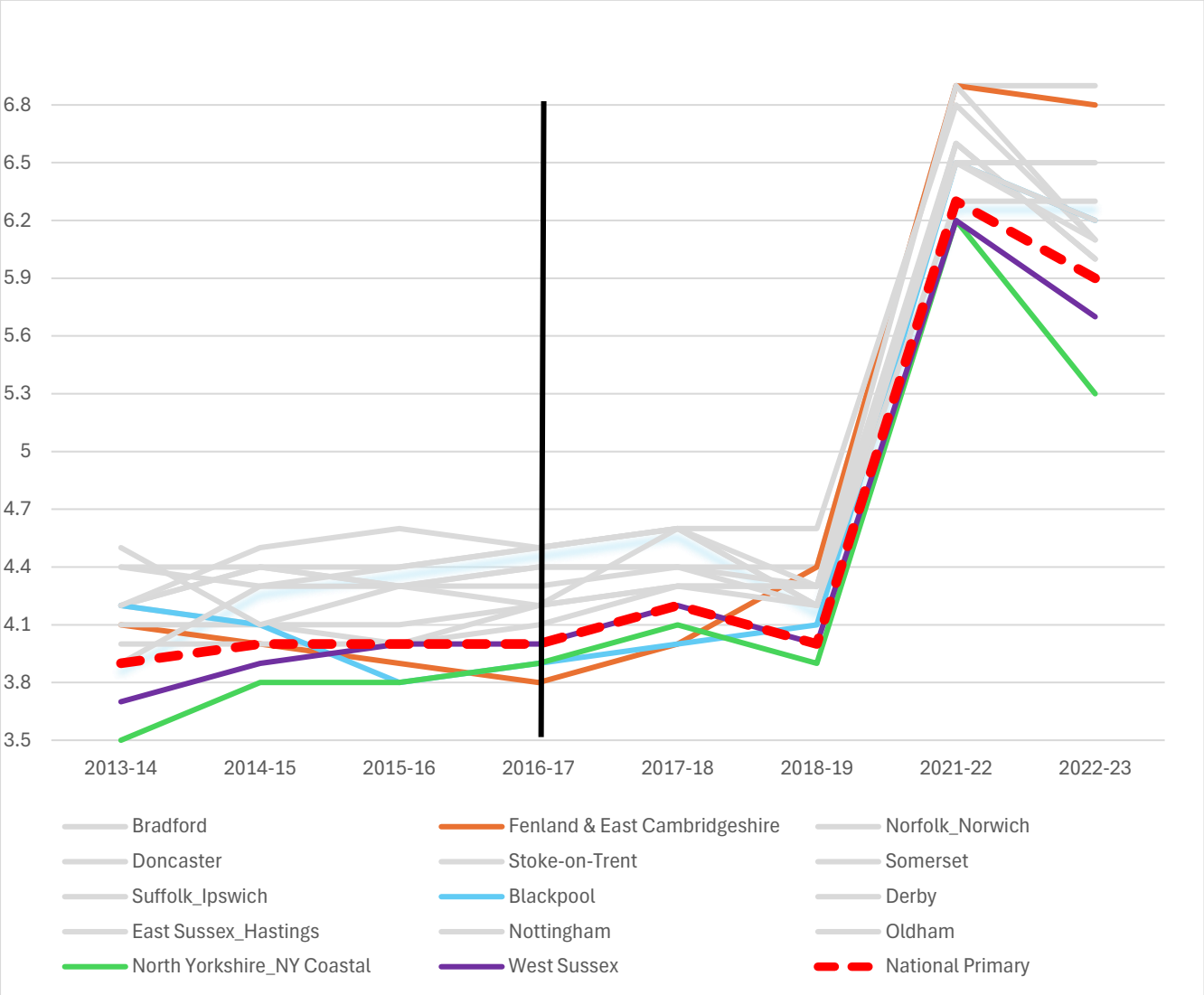
Taken together, the data underline that children in OAs are more likely to face socioeconomic barriers from the start of schooling through to adolescence. This persistent inequality across both primary and secondary education demonstrates why these areas were selected for targeted interventions and policy attention.

Attendance in schools

Attendance at school is a legal requirement for all children of compulsory school age (5 to 16). Parents can face fines or prosecution if their child has unauthorised absences. In practice, schools and local authorities expect pupils in all school phases to maintain at least 95% to 97% attendance across the school year.

The line graph shows the percentage of school absence in the OAs compared with the national average over time. Coloured lines highlight the three OAs where patterns of absence changed notably after 2016–17, while the grey lines represent areas where absence rates remained relatively stable and closely aligned with previous trends.

Figure 3. Percentage Primary School Absence



The graph reveals a divergence in absence patterns after 2016–17 for three OAs in particular. Fenland & East Cambridgeshire – Absence levels rose after 2016–17, moving further above the national average and suggesting a growing challenge in school attendance. Blackpool – already a high-absence area, Blackpool shows a clear worsening trend post-2016–17, with absence rates consistently outpacing the national figures by a significant margin. North Yorkshire Coastal – This area also shows a distinct upward shift after 2016–17, with absence rates exceeding the national average and widening the gap over time.

By contrast, the OAs shown in grey maintained broadly consistent patterns, tracking closer to their earlier trajectories. However, in 2018-19 these areas came closer to national average showing some improvements in reducing school absence but still not meeting the expected levels of school attendance as compared to the national average.

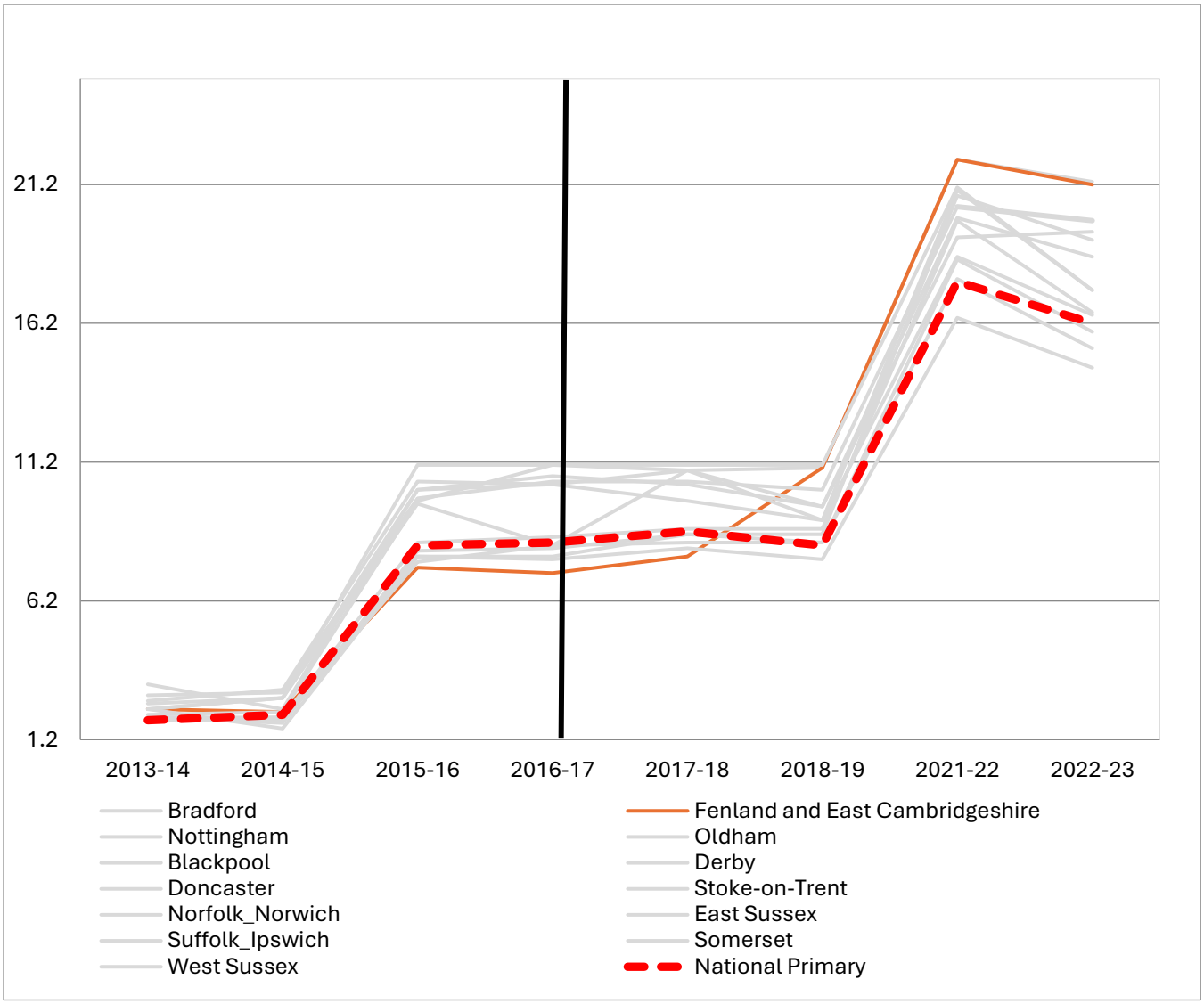
Overall, the graph demonstrates that while school absence is a concern across all OAs, Fenland & East Cambridgeshire, Blackpool, and North Yorkshire Coastal face particularly entrenched attendance problems, which became more pronounced after 2016–17. The later years (2020–22 and 2022–23) reflect the impact of Covid-19, which disrupted earlier progress beginning to reflect in 2018-19. The narrowing of attendance gaps evident in 2018–19 dissipated, and absence rates across OAs broadly reverted to older patterns, with wider gaps between local areas and the national average re-emerging.

Overall, the graph suggests that while some improvement in attendance was emerging in 2018-19 of the OA programme, structural challenges in a few areas, compounded by the effects of Covid-19, limited the sustainability of progress.

Persistent absence from school is a widely used indicator of disadvantage and educational risk, offering further insight into the characteristics of OAs both before and after the OA programme was implemented. Pupils are officially classified as persistently absent if their overall attendance falls below 90%. In practice, this equates to missing at least 38 sessions in a school year (equivalent to 19 full school days, based on 190 days × 2 sessions per day).

The graph below presents trends in persistent absence (percentage of pupils) across primary schools in OAs, compared with the national average for the same measure.

Figure 4. Percentage-Primary School Persistent Absence

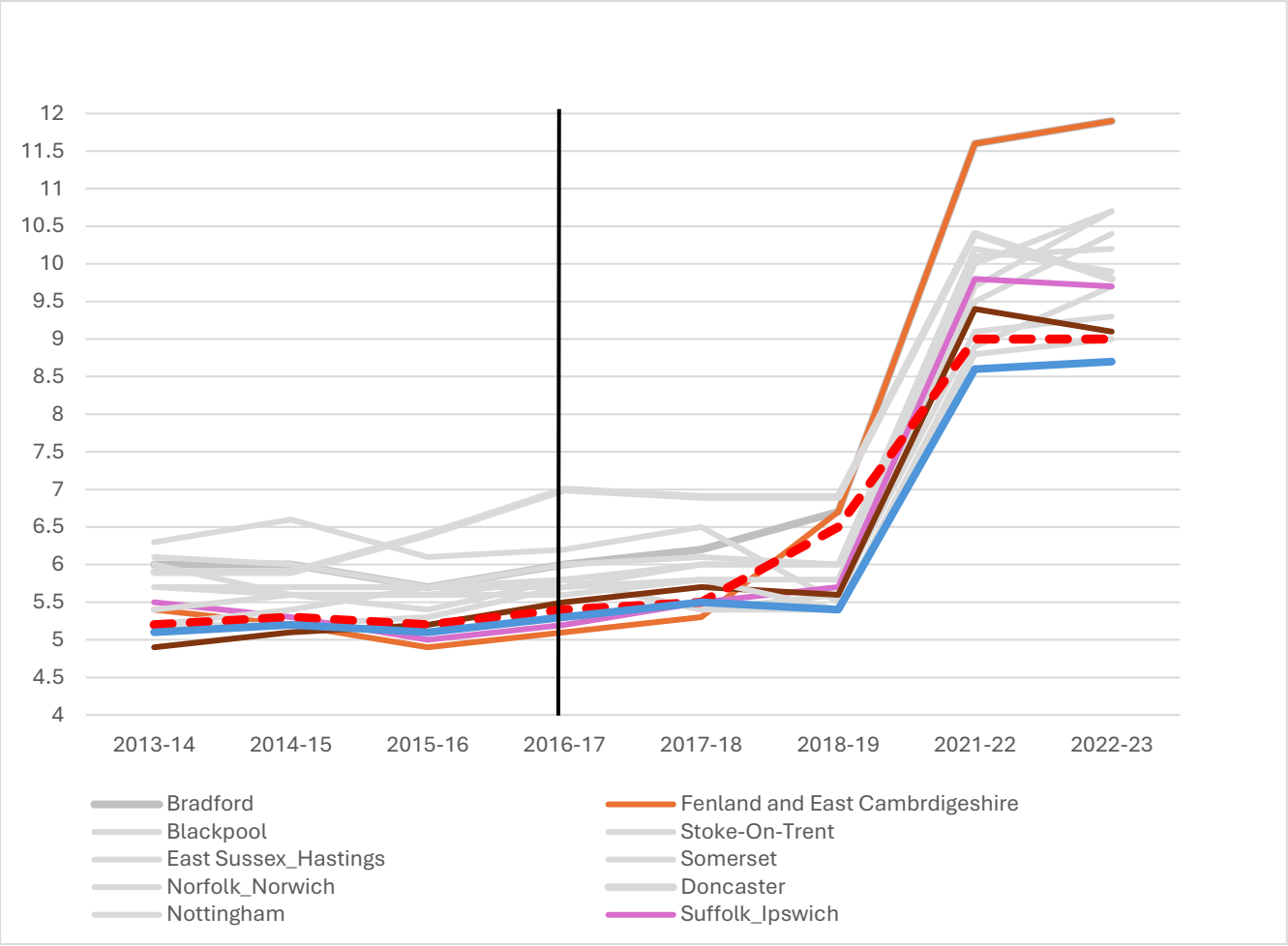


The graph shows that, with the exception of Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, most OAs displayed relatively stable trends in persistent absence across primary schools. Importantly, no OA demonstrated a marked improvement in reducing persistent absence following the launch of the programme. However, by 2018–19, most OAs (other than Fenland and East Cambridgeshire) managed to narrow the gap in persistent absence compared with the national average, even though they did not reach parity. In contrast, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire worsened during this period, recording higher rates of persistent absence and diverging further from the national trend.

The picture changed after Covid-19 disruptions, as the narrowing trends observed in 2018–19 largely dissipated. Post-pandemic all OAs moved back towards wider gaps in persistent absence, showing that the fragile improvements before 2020 could not be sustained in the face of pandemic-related challenges.

The graph below presents the percentage of school absence in secondary schools across OAs, with the national average marked by the red dashed line. Areas that experienced notable changes in absence trends after the 2016–17 introduction of the OA programme are highlighted with coloured lines, while the other OAs remain in grey.

Figure 5. Percentage Secondary School Absence

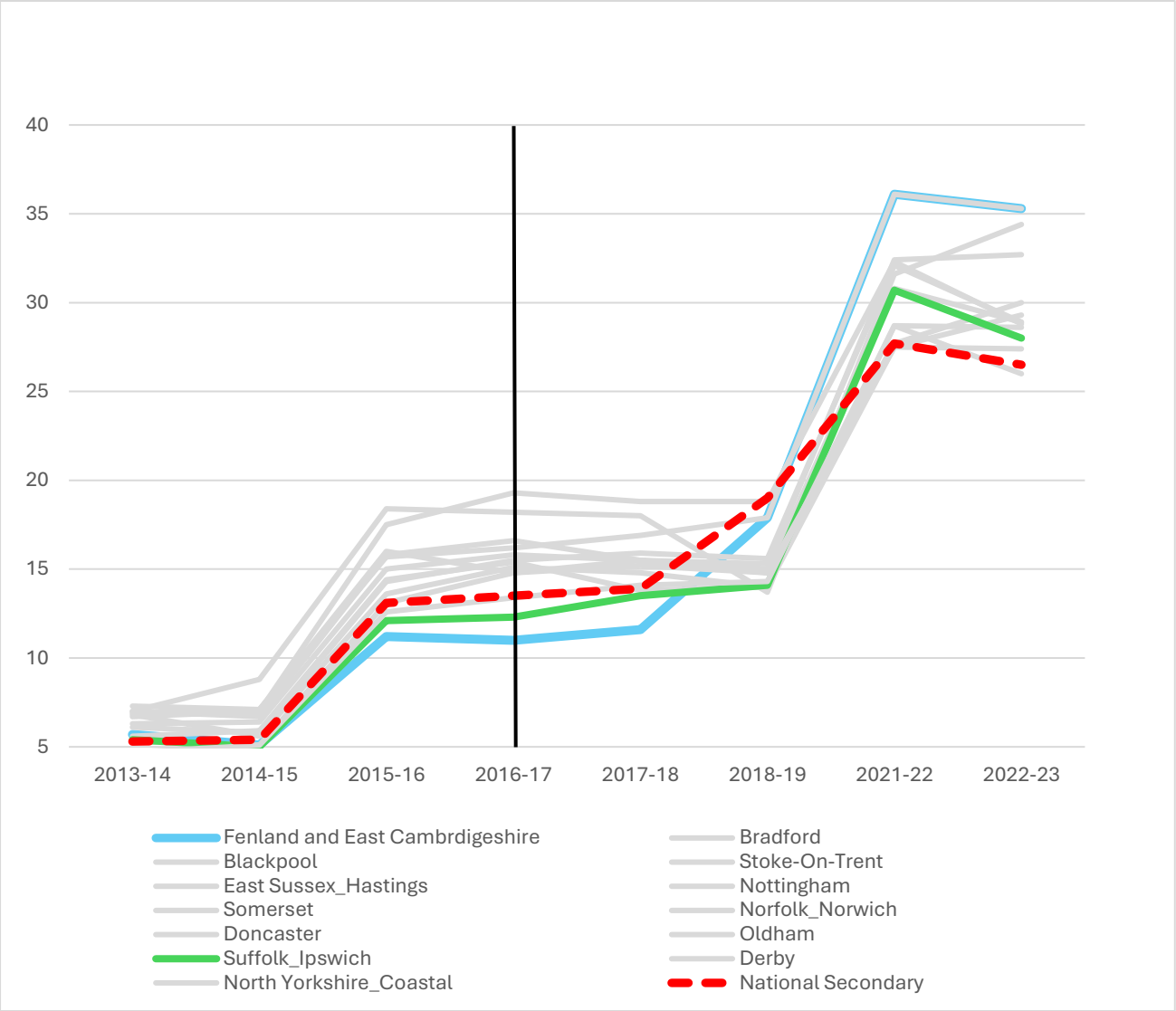


The trends indicate that most OAs slightly narrowed the gap in secondary school absence by 2018–19, moving closer to the national average. This suggests a modest improvement in attendance during the early years of the OA programme. However, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire stand out as an exception, where absence rates actually worsened compared to the national average, highlighting continuing challenges in pupil attendance for that area.

Following the disruptions caused by Covid-19, the situation in secondary schools shifted significantly. The narrowing trends in persistent absence seen in 2018–19 largely disappeared. In the post-pandemic period, all OAs returned to wider gaps in persistent absence, indicating that the modest improvements achieved before 2020 were not resilient enough to withstand the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Persistent absence in secondary schools is a major concern, as it can negatively affect pupils' attainment and other educational outcomes. The graph illustrates trends in persistent absence across secondary schools, comparing the performance of different local areas (OAs) with the national average for the same measure.

Figure 6. Percentage Secondary School Persistent Absence



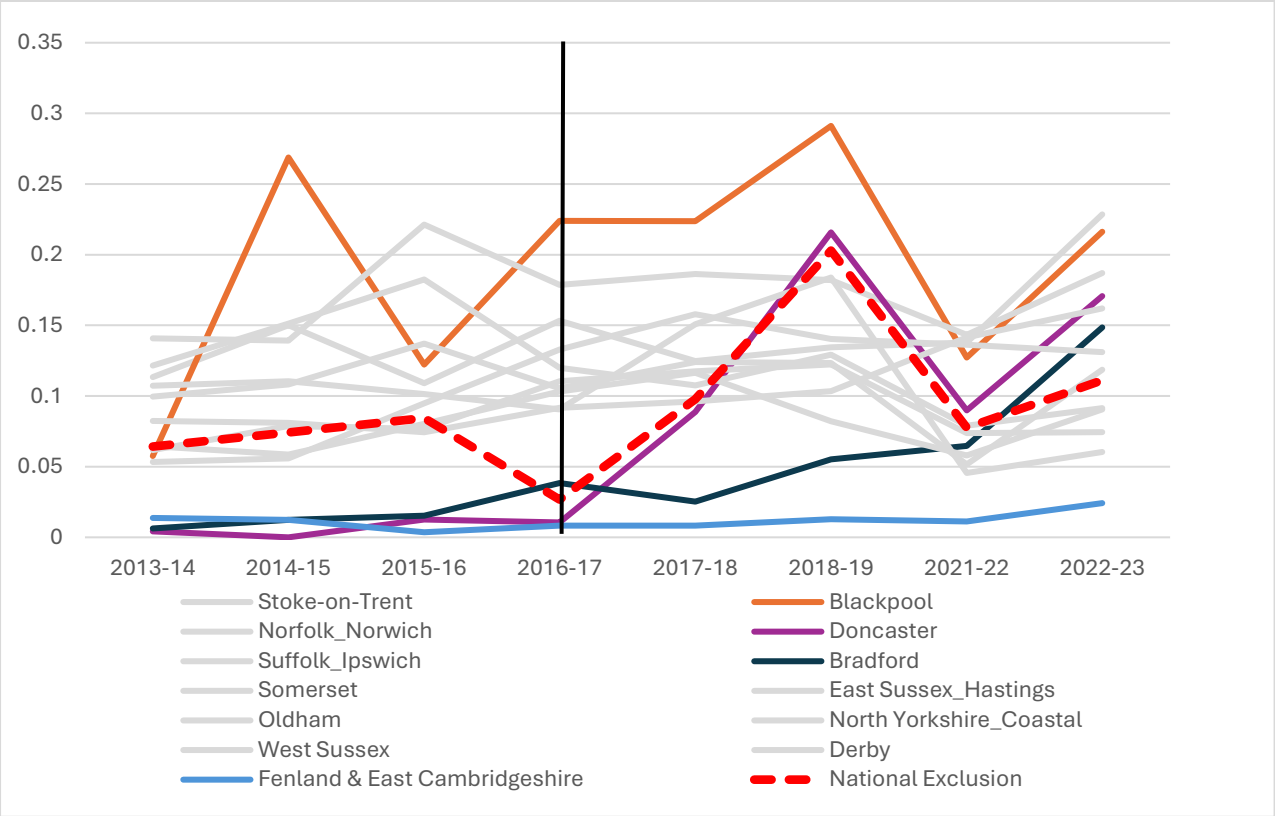
It is evident that secondary schools in most OAs significantly narrowed the gap in persistent absence, with many achieving rates below the national average by 2018–19. The red dashed line for 2018–19 sits above all other lines, highlighting this improvement. Exceptions include Fenland, Cambridgeshire, and Ipswich, which experienced drastic changes in 2018–19 and beyond and did not achieve the same level of improvement in persistent absence as other OAs. These reductions in persistent absence can be seen as a reflection of improvements in OAs. However, the gains were not sustained following the disruptions caused by COVID-19.

Permanent School Exclusions

A pupil can be permanently excluded from a school register where there is a lawful basis and school governing body takes action of a pupil exclusion, in response to their persistent breach of behaviour policy in the school and/or there is a risk of harm to life and educational welfare of other pupils or staff members. Schools with higher exclusion rates often face greater challenges, including lower pupil performance, increased staff absenteeism, and a learning environment that may hinder pupils' achievement and aspirations. Disadvantaged areas of high child poverty are likely to have schools with high rates of permanent exclusion.

The graph below shows trends in permanent exclusion percentages in OAs compared with the national trend (red dashed line) for all schools from 2013–14 to 2022–23, excluding the two pandemic years. OAs that exhibited stable patterns are shown in grey lines, while OAs that did not maintain the same trends as others are highlighted in coloured lines. The year 2016–17 marks the start of the OA programme implementation

Figure 7. Percentage Permanent Exclusions



School exclusions showed marked reductions in 2018–19, with most OAs recording lower permanent exclusion rates than the national average, except for Blackpool. While the exclusion gap narrowed for Blackpool, it did not decline in 2018–19 to the same extent as in other OAs. Bradford exceeded the national rate in 2016–17 but returned to lower levels in subsequent years. In contrast, Doncaster experienced increases in permanent exclusions throughout this period and did not follow the downward trend seen in other OAs. Following the Covid-19 years, all improvements reverted to previous patterns, with gaps widening again relative to national trends, indicating that the gains achieved before the pandemic were not sustained.

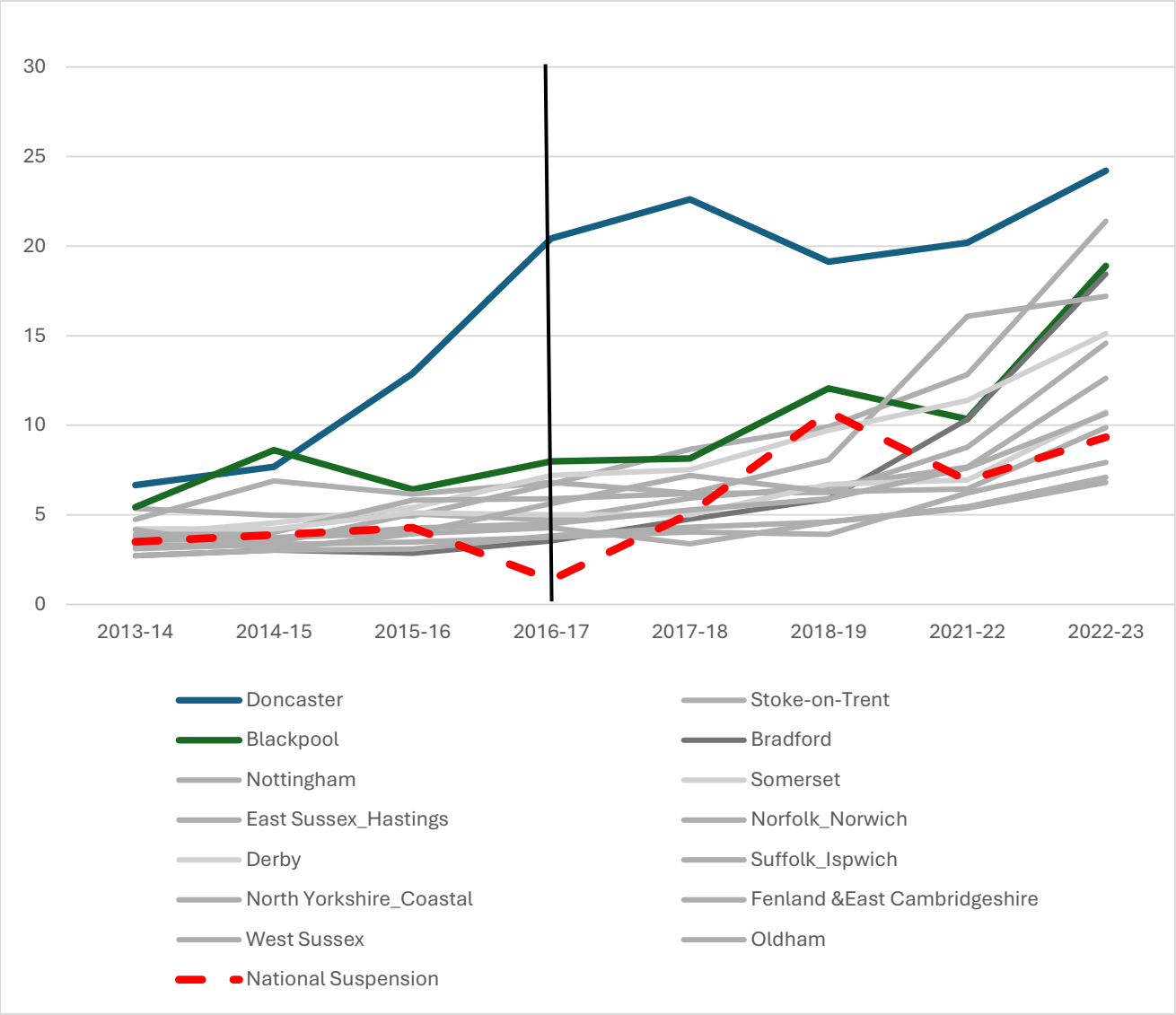
Suspensions

Pupils can be suspended from attending school for a fixed time period of up to 45 days in an academic year. This is a temporary removal from attending school on disciplinary grounds of disruptive behaviour causing risk to safety of others in the schools and pupils' educational well-being.

Suspension is a significant challenge for schools already facing difficulties. When pupils are suspended, they miss valuable instructional time, which can disrupt their academic progress and contribute to lower achievement levels. This not only affects individual students but also impacts overall school performance metrics. Frequent suspensions may also signal deeper issues within the school environment, such as inadequate support systems, behavioural management challenges, or gaps in pastoral care.

The graph below shows patterns of suspensions in OAs before and after the policy implementation in 2016-17. For comparison there is a red dashed line which shows national percentage of suspensions. All OAs that show stable patterns are in grey lines. The OAs that show different trends from other OAs are coloured lines.

Figure 8. Percentage Suspensions



In 2016–17, all Opportunity Areas (OAs) recorded suspension rates above the national average, with Blackpool and Doncaster consistently exceeding national levels. That year marked the peak for both areas. By 2018–19, Blackpool and Doncaster had narrowed the gap, aligning slightly closer to the national suspension rates. Although the national rate increased during this period, other OAs showed greater stability, with some even reducing suspensions relative to national trends. However, following the COVID-19pandemic, these improvements were not sustained. Suspension rates in the OAs reverted to previous patterns, and the gap with national averages widened once again, highlighting the fragility of pre-pandemic progress.

Key stage academic attainment

Ket Stage 1

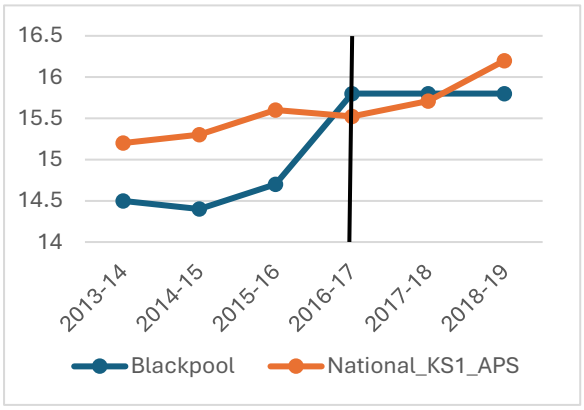
Academic attainment at Key Stage (KS1) is taken at the end of primary school year 2 when pupils are aged 6-7 years old. Teachers assess all pupils in standardised tests of reading, writing, and mathematics. A common way to summarise KS1 attainment is through the Average Point Score (APS) across these subjects. APS provides a numerical indicator of how well pupils in a school or area perform relative to national averages, allowing for straightforward comparisons.

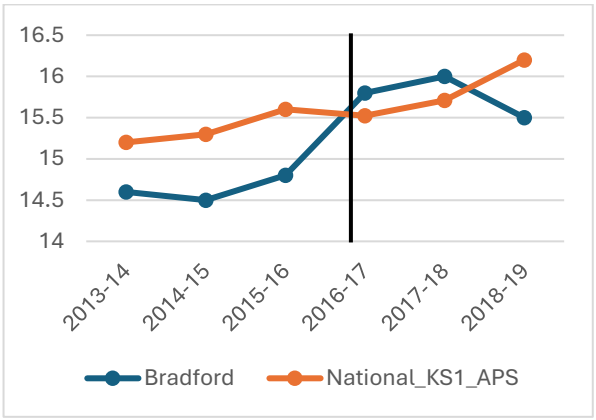
The twelve graphs present the trends in Key Stage 1 (KS1) Average Point Scores (APS) for each OA between 2014 and 2019. In every graph, the OA's APS is plotted against the national APS for the same years, providing a direct comparison of local attainment to national performance.

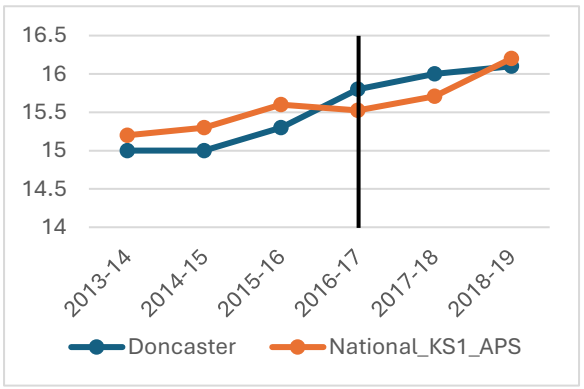
For OAs that are part of larger Local Authorities (LAs), an additional line is included showing the APS for the wider LA. This adds a third level of comparison, enabling us to see not only how the OA performs relative to national averages but also how it compares with other schools in its immediate local authority context.

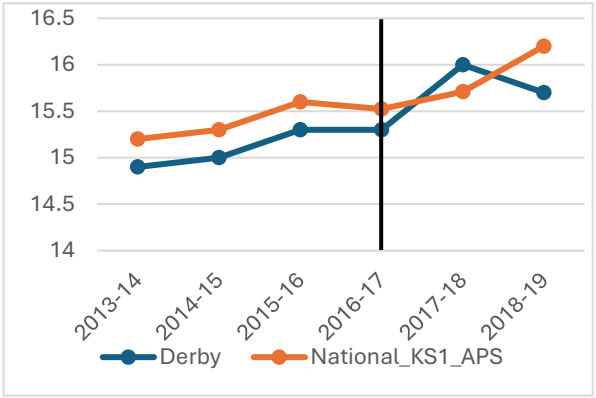
This layered approach highlights both the persistent attainment gaps between OAs and the national average, and whether OAs are underperforming relative to their own local authority. It also allows patterns to be tracked over time, including any shifts that might be associated with the implementation of the OA programme after 2016–17. In each of the twelve graphs, a black vertical line at 2016–17 marks the year of the implementation of the OA programme. This line acts as a reference point, enabling comparison of attainment trends before and after the programme began.

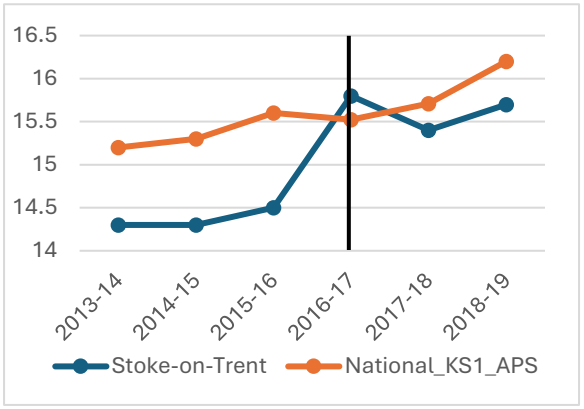
Figure 9. KS1 average for each OA

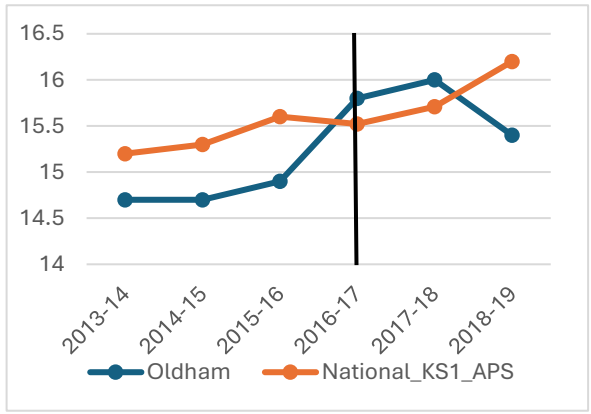


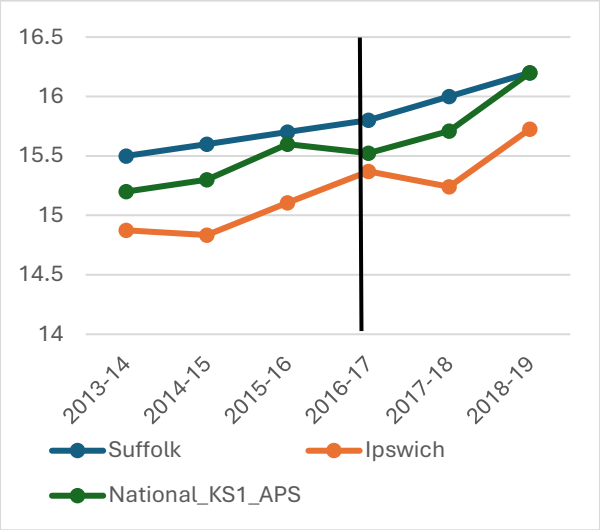


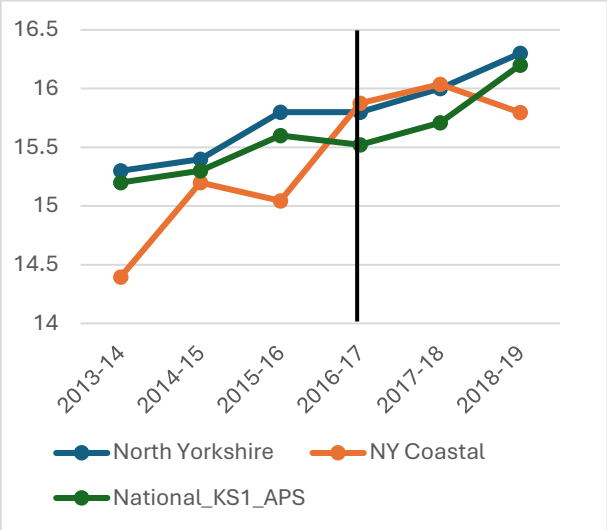


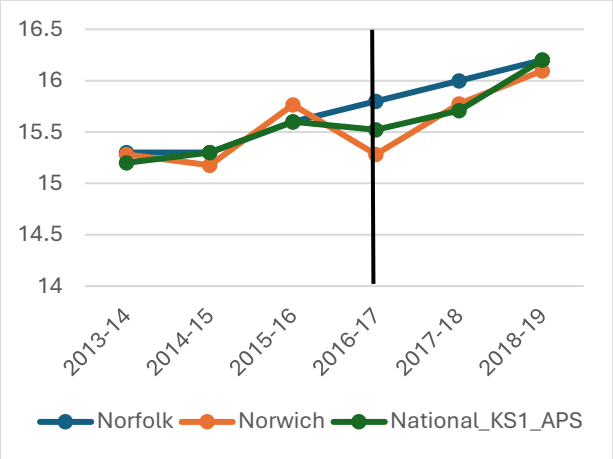


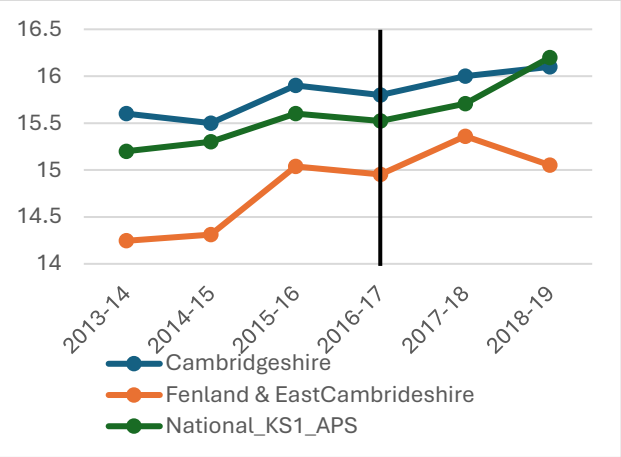


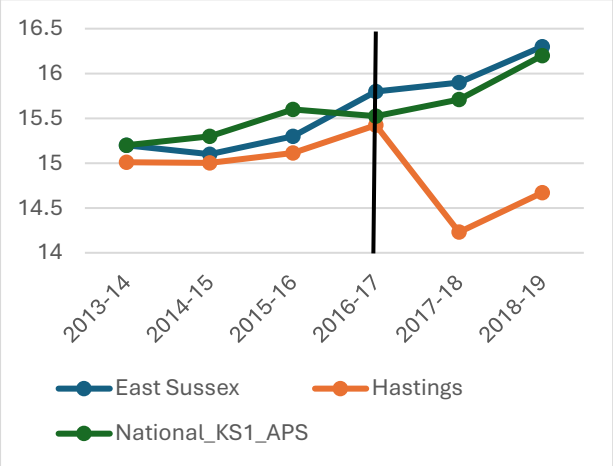


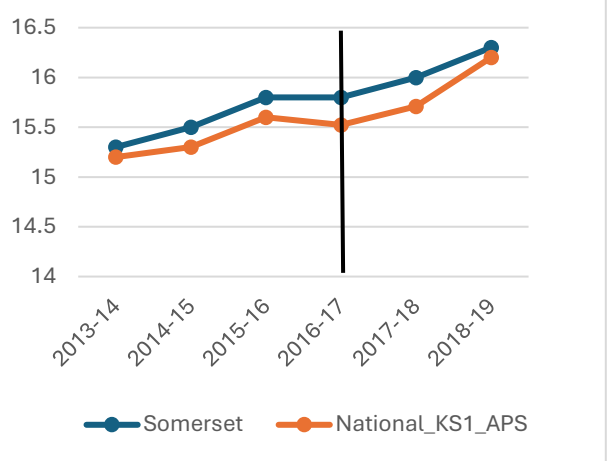












The KS1 APS trends across the OAs show a varied picture when compared to the national average.

Blackpool, Bradford, Derby, Doncaster, Stoke-on-Trent, and Oldham all demonstrated continued improvement in KS1 attainment that followed their pre-existing upward trend. In 2016–17 these five OAs exceeded the national average, maintaining this position in 2017–18 before experiencing a decline in 2018–19.

Ipswich, North Yorkshire Coastal, and Norwich showed signs of narrowing the attainment gap with the national average. Among these, North Yorkshire Coastal performed above the national average up until 2017–18, before falling back in 2018–19. Fenland and East Cambridgeshire also made some progress by slightly narrowing the gap, though they remained below the national average throughout the period. Hastings followed

a different trajectory: after an upward trend until 2016–17, it saw a sharp decline post-implementation, resulting in a widening gap with the national average in KS1 attainment.

The trend before 2016–17 (the black line) shows a general pattern of steady improvement in KS1 attainment. The introduction of the OA programme in 2016–17 appears to have provided a boost, as many areas not only continued their upward trend but, in several cases, outperformed the national average in the immediate years following implementation (2016–17 and 2017–18). This suggests that the OA programme may have acted as a short-term trigger for acceleration in improvement. Ipswich and Hasting are the exceptions to this trend, as they decline in the year 2017-18.

However, the gains were not sustained beyond 2017–18. By 2018–19, most OAs experienced a decline in attainment, with performance slipping closer to or below the national average. Since 2018–19 was the year immediately before COVID-19, the decline cannot be attributed to the pandemic, but rather suggests that the initial boost from the OA programme was temporary and not structurally embedded.

Key Stage 2

Academic attainment at Key Stage 2 (KS2) is measured at the end of primary school Year 6, when pupils are aged 10–11 years old. Pupils are assessed through standardised national tests in English reading, writing, and mathematics. These tests are externally marked by trained assessors to ensure reliability and comparability across schools.

1. Average Point Scores (APS): a numerical score that reflects pupils' overall attainment across reading, writing, and mathematics. This provides a continuous measure that allows for fine-grained comparison with the national APS.

2. Percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard: a categorical indicator showing the proportion of pupils who achieve the expected level in all three subjects. This measure allows for comparison with the national percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard.

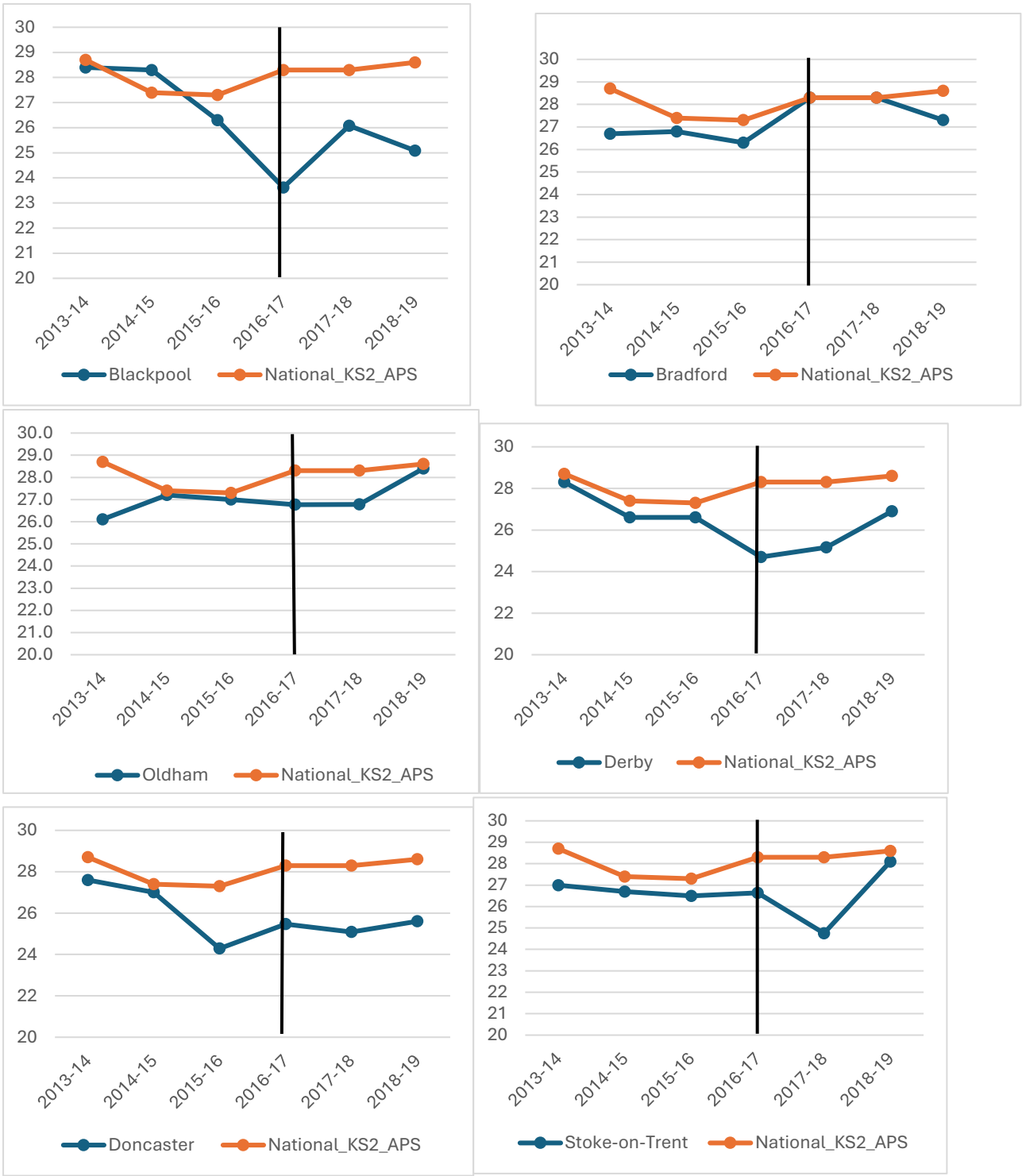
Both indicators, APS and the percentage of pupils meeting expected standards, provide complementary ways of comparing the performance of OAs with national benchmarks. APS gives a more detailed picture of attainment differences, while the percentage measure shows how far each OA is from ensuring that most pupils reach the required standard in KS2.

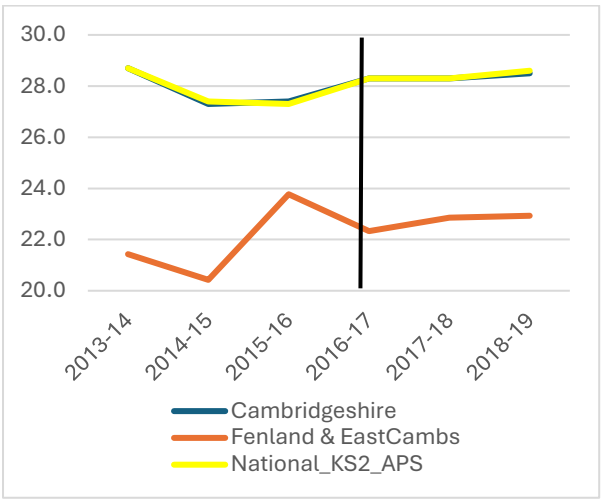
KS2 Average Point Scores (KS2 APS)

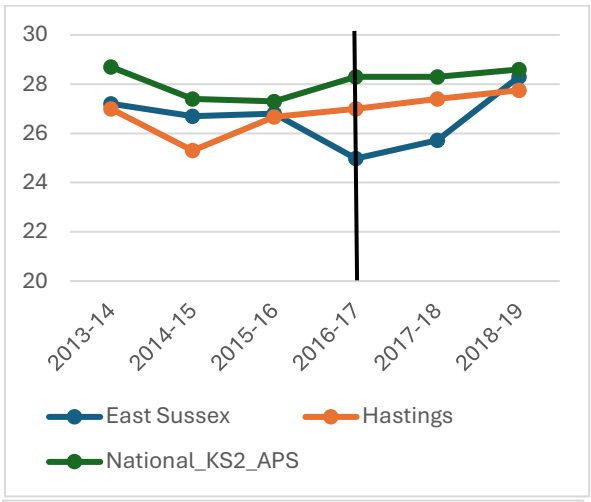
The twelve graphs present the longitudinal trends in KS2 Average Point Scores (APS) for each OA between 2014 and 2019. In every graph, the OA's APS is plotted against the national APS for the same years, providing a direct comparison of local attainment to national performance.

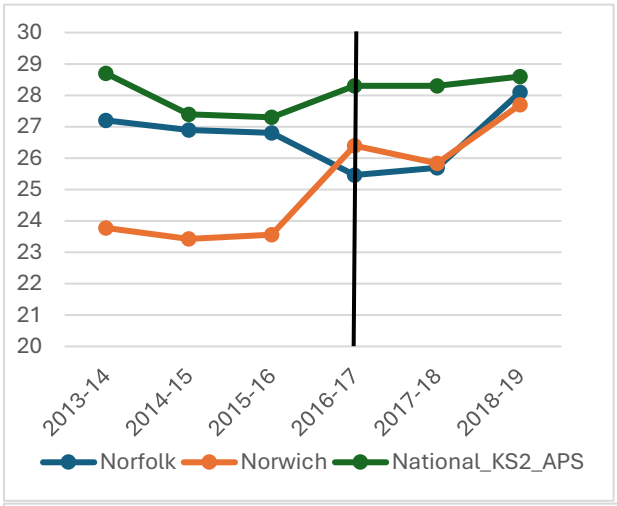
For OAs that are part of larger Local Authorities (LAs), an additional line is included showing the APS for the wider LA. This adds a third level of comparison, enabling us to see not only how the OA performs relative to national averages but also how it compares with other schools in its immediate local authority context.

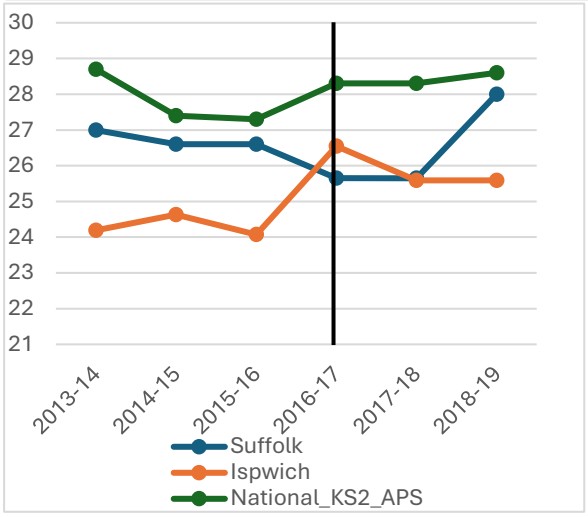
Figure 10. KS2 average for each OA

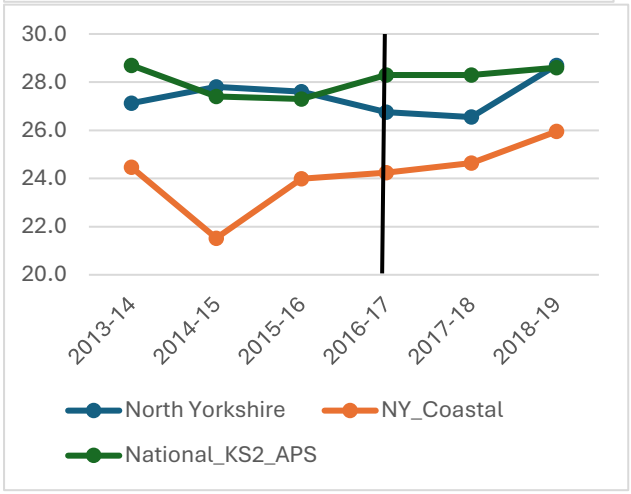


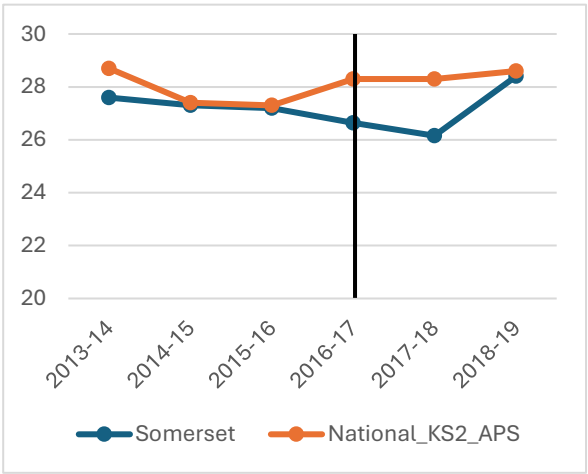












At Key Stage 2 (KS2), the overall picture across the OAs was one of long-standing underperformance when compared with national averages. Prior to the implementation of the OA programme in 2016–17, several areas including Blackpool, Derby, Doncaster, and Oldham had been experiencing a steady decline in Average Point Scores (APS) since 2014–15. These gaps with national APS were already wide and remained so through 2017–18, suggesting deep-rooted challenges in raising attainment.

The introduction of the OA programme in 2016–17 appears to have provided a short-term boost, slowing or even reversing the downward trajectories in some areas. For example, Derby began to narrow its gap and showed signs of an upward trend by 2018–19, while Stoke-on-Trent and Oldham also reduced their gaps with the national average more noticeably in that year. Bradford temporarily closed the gap with the national APS between 2016 and 2018 before falling back again in 2018–19. Similarly, areas with lower baseline performance

such as Norwich, Ipswich, and Hastings demonstrated visible improvements after 2016–17, in some cases exceeding their respective Local Authority averages and reducing the gap with national APS.

Despite these encouraging shifts, the improvements were not consistently sustained. By 2018–19, the narrowing of gaps in many OAs had either plateaued or reversed. Ipswich, for instance, improved its performance compared with Suffolk LA and narrowed the national gap but reached a stable rather than improving trend by 2018–19. Doncaster continued to demonstrate a persistent and wide gap both before and after 2016–17, while Fenland and East Cambridgeshire showed only limited progress in narrowing differences with national APS.

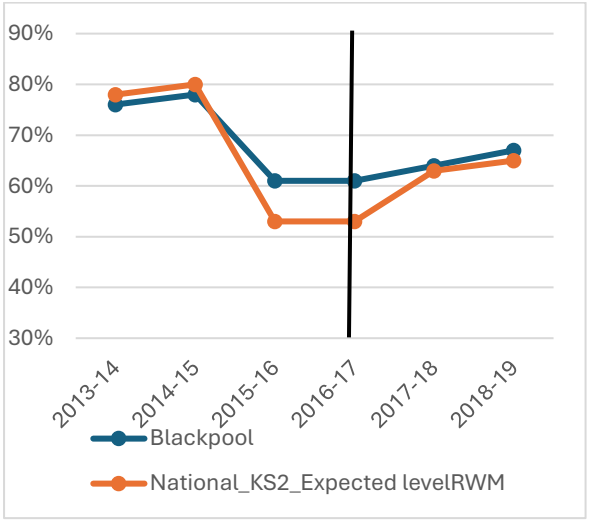
Taken together, these patterns suggest that the OA programme may have had a "trigger effect." The funding and targeted support appear to have initiated improvements in some areas, helping them to catch up with or surpass their Local Authority averages and narrow the national gap. However, these changes proved difficult to maintain in the longer term, as the improvements began to fade by 2018–19. Since this was the year immediately prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the subsequent decline cannot be attributed to the disruption of school closures. Instead, the evidence points to the challenge of sustaining progress beyond the initial boost, indicating that deeper structural changes were needed to secure lasting improvements in KS2 attainment.

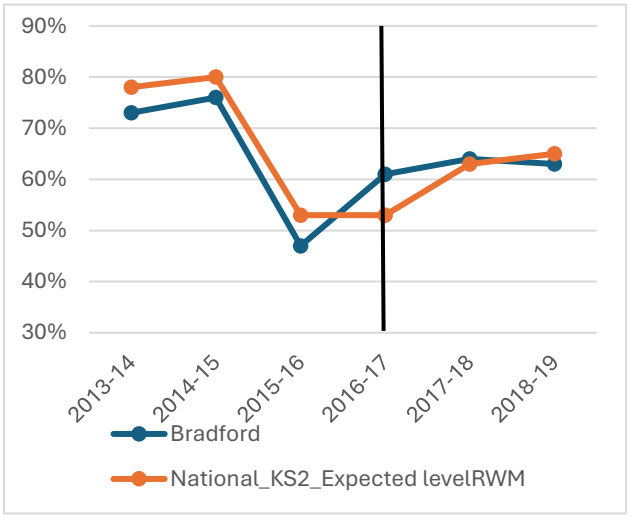
KS2 Expected level in Reading, Writing and Math (RWM)

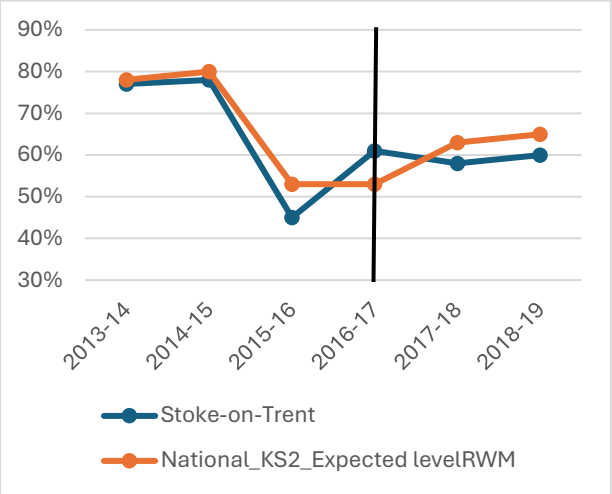
The KS2 expected levels refer to the standard of attainment that pupils are expected to reach by the end of Key Stage 2. Pupils achieving expected levels in all three areas of learning in reading, writing, and Math are included in the school percentage.

The graphs below present the trends of OAs in terms of the percentage of pupils achieving the expected levels at Key Stage 2. Each OA is compared against the national percentage of pupils meeting expected standards, which provides a benchmark for interpreting relative progress. In addition, for larger Local Authorities (LAs), a third comparison line is included, allowing another level of contextual analysis.

Figure 11. KS2 Expected level in RWM for each OA.



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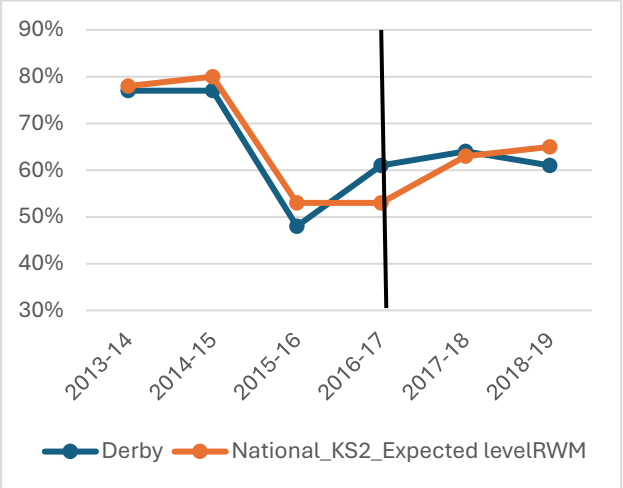
2013-14
2014-15
2015-16
2016-17
2017-18
2018-19
Stoke-on-Trent
National_KS2_Expected levelRWM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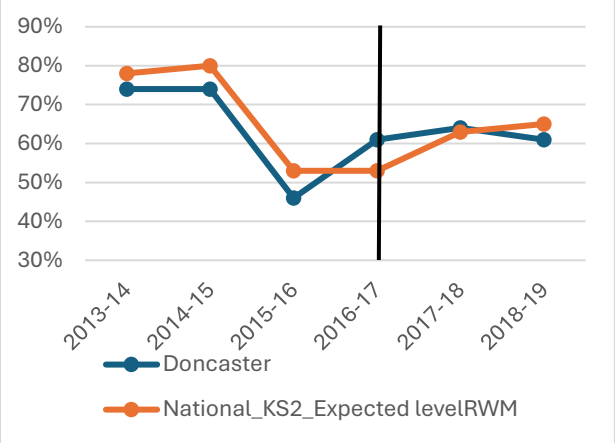
2018-19
Derby
National_KS2_Expected levelRWM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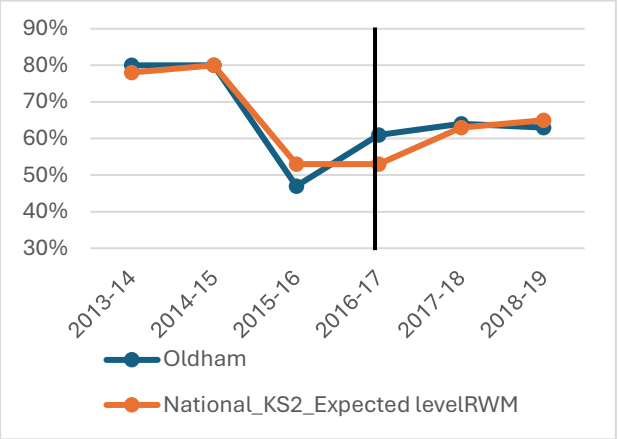
Doncaster
National_KS2_Expected levelRWM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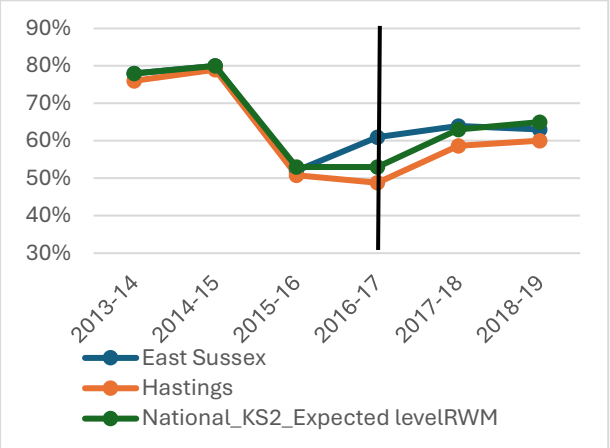
Oldham
National_KS2_Expected levelRWM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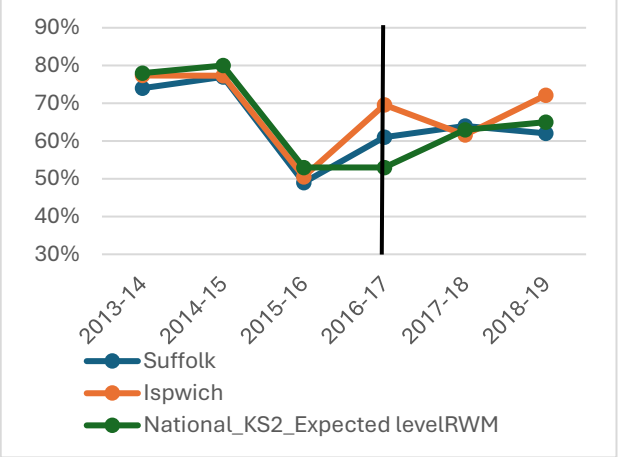
East Sussex
Hastings
National_KS2_Expected levelRWM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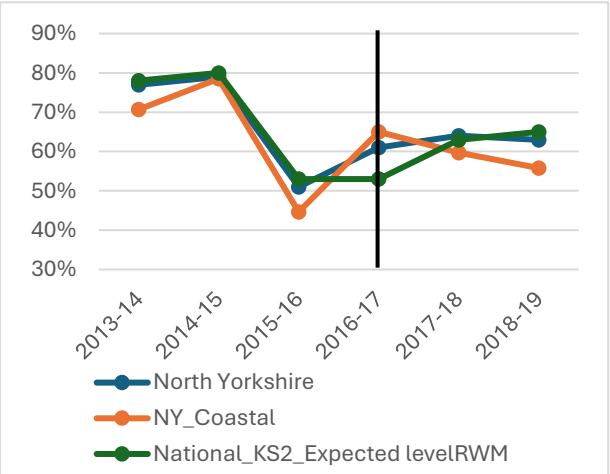
2017-18
2018-19
Suffolk
Ispwich
National_KS2_Expected levelRWM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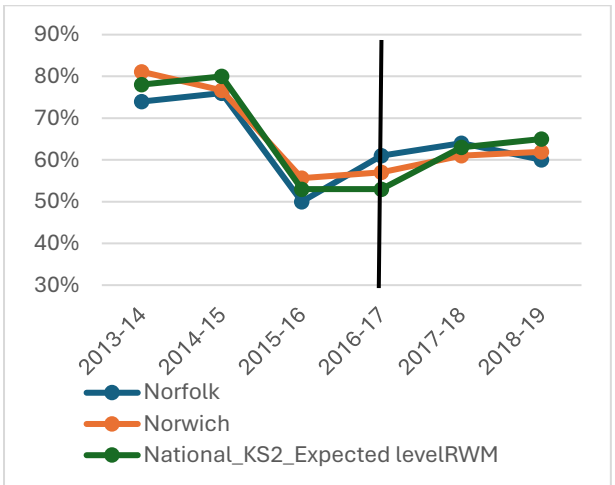
North Yorkshire
NY_Coastal
National_KS2_Expected levelRWM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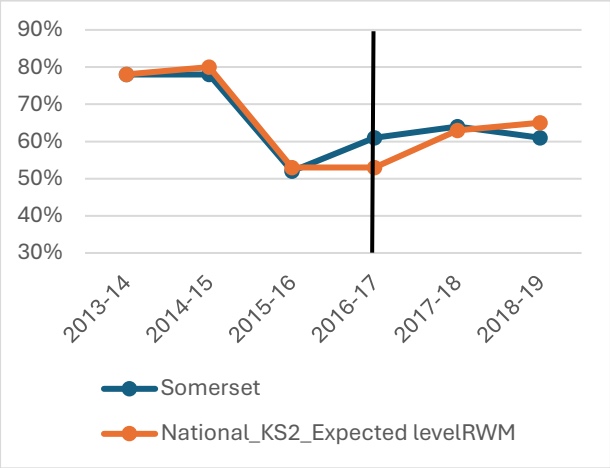
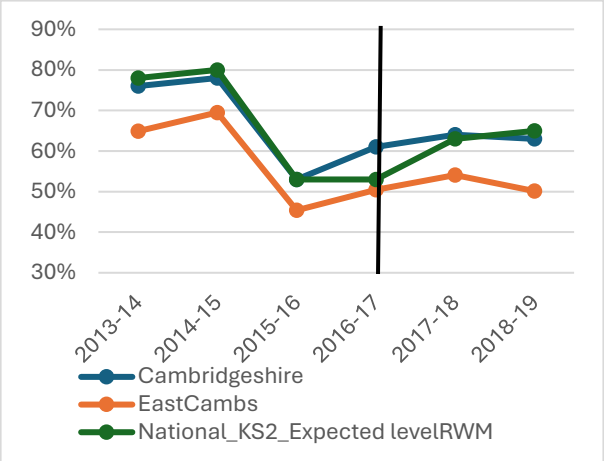
2018-19
Norfolk
Norwich
National_KS2_Expected levelRWM





Bradford, Stoke-on-Trent, Derby, Doncaster, and Oldham showed a consistent pattern of underperformance, with fewer pupils achieving the expected levels compared to the national average. An upward trend began around 2015–16 and, importantly, in 2016–17, the year marked by the black implementation line, these OAs even exceeded the national percentage of pupils meeting expected standards. This progress was sustained through 2017–18, suggesting that the OA programme may have provided an additional boost during its initial years. However, by 2018–19, the gap with national attainment began to re-emerge, indicating that the early gains were not fully sustained.

Ipswich, North Yorkshire Coastal, and Norwich also demonstrated noticeable improvements around the 2016–17 implementation point. All three narrowed the gap with the national percentage, and both Ipswich and North Yorkshire Coastal even exceeded the national average in 2016–17. Yet, in the years that followed, this positive trend reversed, and performance fell back below national levels. Similarly, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire narrowed the gap at the time of implementation, but this improvement was modest; the gap never fully closed and by 2018–19 the difference with national outcomes had widened again.

Overall, the black implementation line (2016–17) appears to mark a turning point where most OAs showed either accelerated progress or a temporary closing of the attainment gap. However, these improvements proved difficult to sustain, and by 2018–19, just before the COVID-19 disruption, performance in many OAs had slipped back, suggesting the OA programme acted as a short-term trigger rather than a lasting solution.

Both APS and RWM show that many OAs started from a position of underperformance compared with the national average. In both measures, improvements can be observed around 2016–17 (the OA implementation year), with some OAs temporarily closing or even exceeding national performance. However, declines or widening gaps reappeared by 2018–19, suggesting that early momentum could not be sustained.

KS2 APS declined consistently from 2014–15 in Blackpool, Derby, Doncaster, and Oldham, with wide gaps compared to the national average. Some recovery occurred in 2018–19, when the gaps narrowed, particularly for Derby, Stoke-on-Trent, and Oldham. Ipswich, Norwich, and Hastings showed improvement, in some cases exceeding their LA averages, but did not fully close the gap with national APS.

Overall, KS2 APS trends reflect gradual change, showing how pupils scored on a continuous scale of attainment.

Bradford, Stoke-on-Trent, Derby, Doncaster, and Oldham showed an upward shift around 2015–16 and 2016–17, with several OAs exceeding national averages at the time. This improvement was short-lived, with gaps re-emerging by 2018–19. Ipswich and North Yorkshire Coastal even exceeded the national percentage in 2016–17, but performance fell back in subsequent years. Fenland and East Cambridgeshire narrowed the gap but never reached national levels.

Unlike APS, the RWM percentages show sharper turning points: a more visible spike around 2016–17, followed by a clearer decline in 2018-19.

KS2 APS captures overall attainment more gradually, showing long-term decline in several OAs but with some narrowing gaps by 2018–19. KS2 RWM expected levels shows more dramatic short-term boosts (especially around 2016–17), but also sharper reversals afterward. This suggests that while the OA programme may have helped more pupils cross the threshold into "expected levels," it did not lead to sustained improvements in average performance across the full distribution.

Key Stage 4

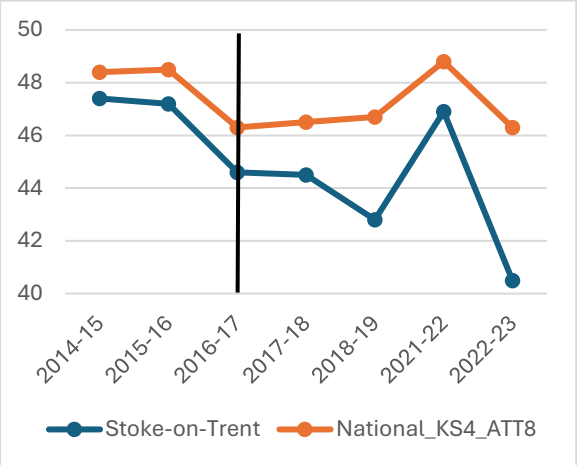
Average Attainment 8 score

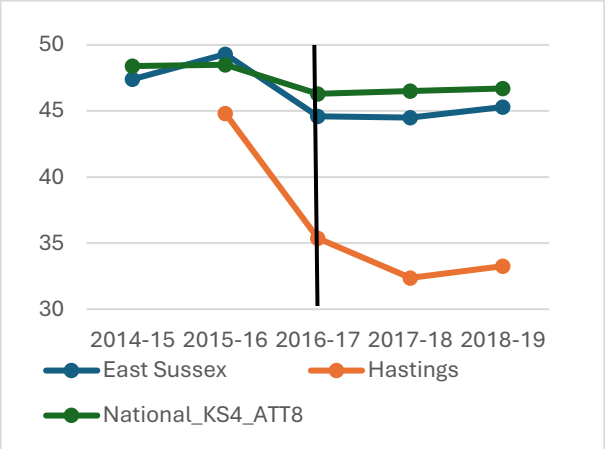
A national standardised assessment takes place for all pupils at the end of Key stage 4 (secondary phase) school in year 11 when they are 16 years old. Attainment 8 is a performance based on calculation of a pupil's average achievement weighted across eight qualifications (English, Math, Three EBacc subjects – chosen from sciences, computer science, geography, history, and languages. Three additional subjects – which can be further EBacc subjects or other approved academic, arts, or vocational qualifications). Attainment 8 are raw scores based on grades achieved by a pupil in each of the 8 subject qualifications.

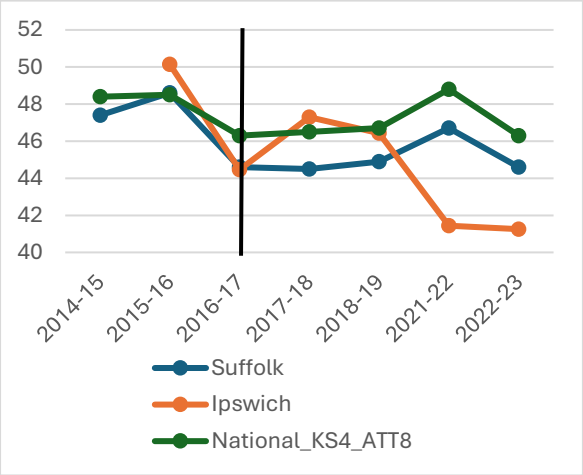
Attainment 8 performance results are published by the DfE like other key stage results at school, local authority and national level. Attainment 8 score provides a broad measure of academic achievement across core and optional subjects. It helps compare performance between schools, across regions, and among different pupil groups.

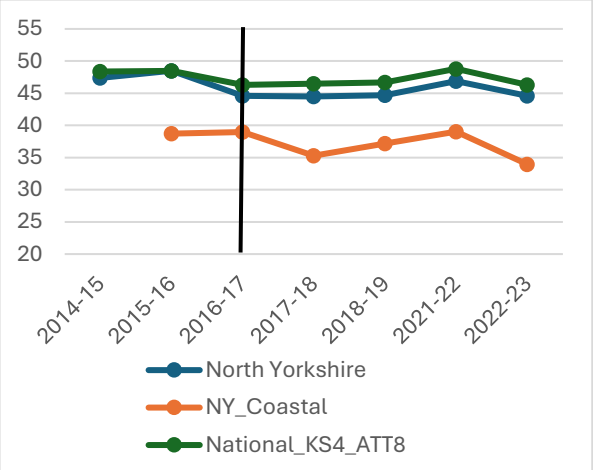
The graphs below present the trends of OAs from 2014-23 in terms of average attainment 8 scores at Key Stage 4. Each OA is compared against the national average of Attainment 8, which provides a benchmark for interpreting relative progress. In addition, for larger Local Authorities (LAs), a third comparison line is included, allowing another level of contextual analysis. Attainment 8 as a progress measure was fully implemented in 2016 therefore some areas did not have the score available for earlier years.

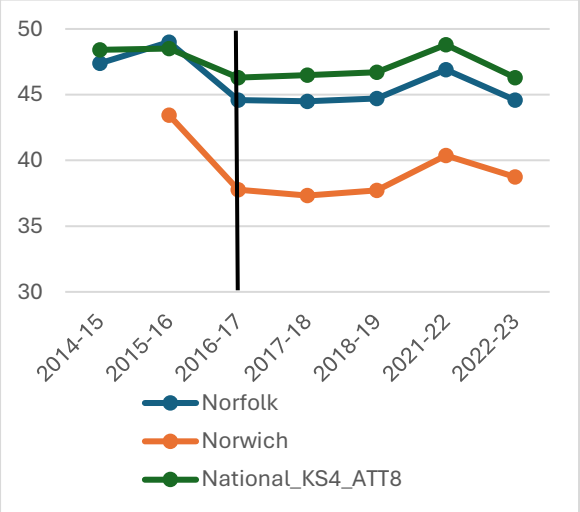
Figure 12. KS4 average attainment 8 scores for each OA

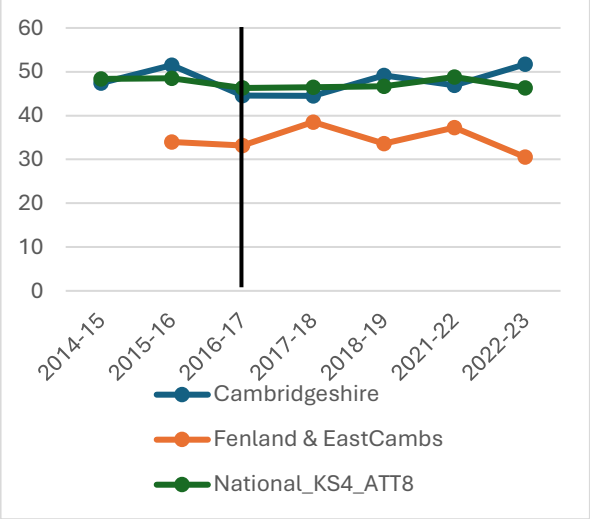












When comparing outcomes across different key stages, a clear distinction emerges. At KS1 and KS2, several OAs showed evidence of a trigger effect around the time of the programme's implementation in 2016–17. Many OAs temporarily narrowed the gap with national averages, with some even exceeding national performance for a short period. However, these gains were not sustained, and by 2018–19 most OAs had reverted to underperformance compared with the national trend.

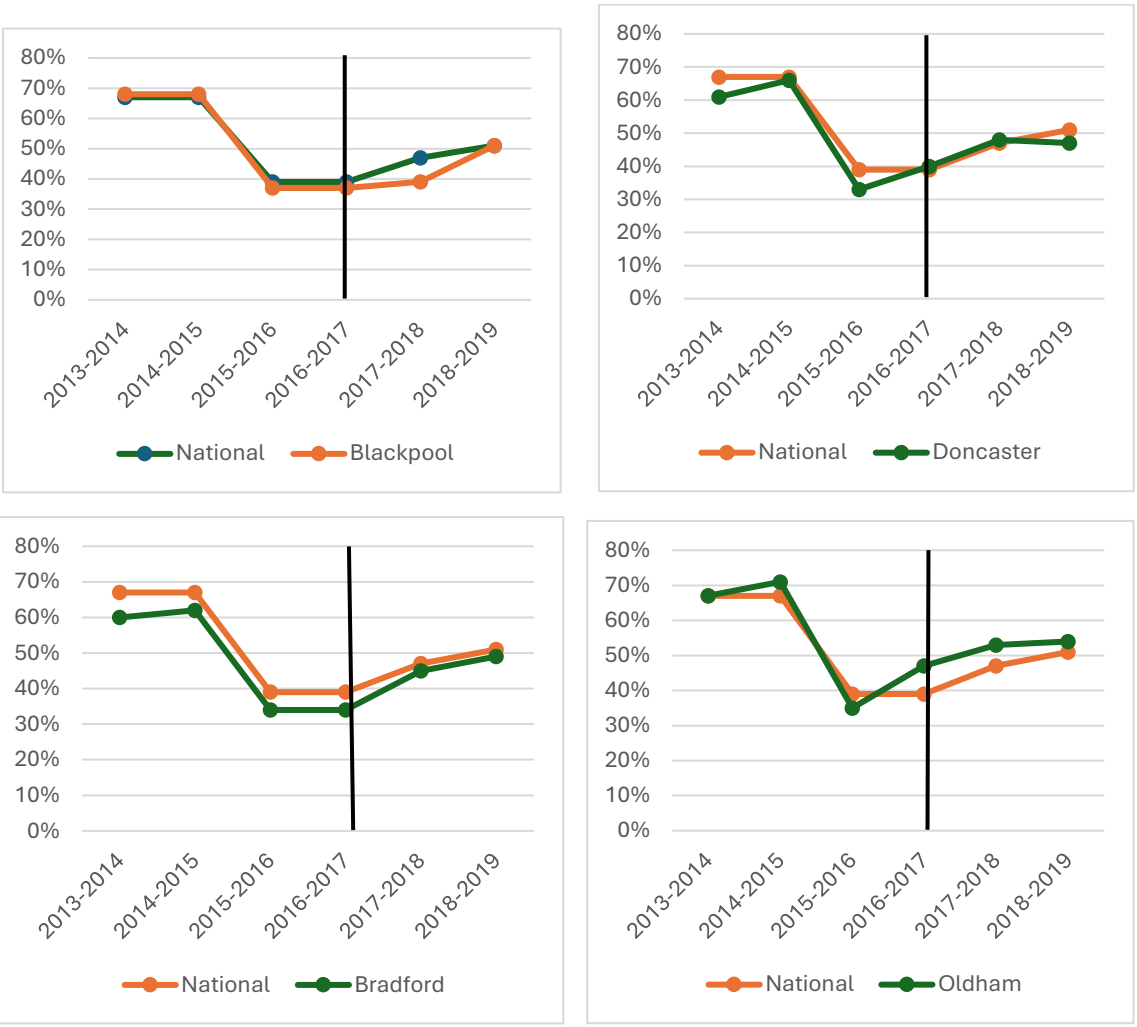
By contrast, at KS4 (Attainment 8), the same pattern was not observed. The OAs broadly followed national trends but maintained a consistently wide gap throughout, with no evidence of the temporary boosts or trigger effects seen at primary level. While Ipswich showed a brief improvement after 2016, this was short-lived and did not significantly shift the overall trajectory.

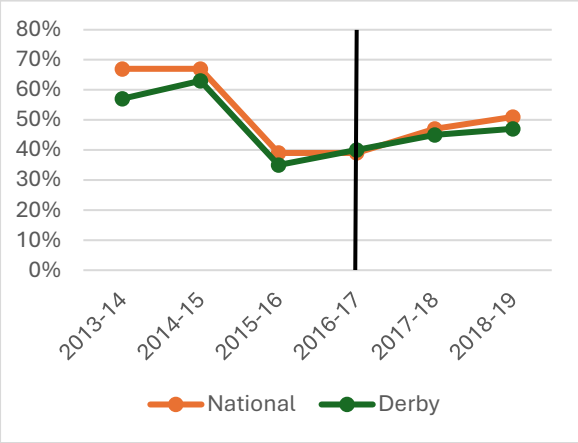
Academic attainment of disadvantaged pupils

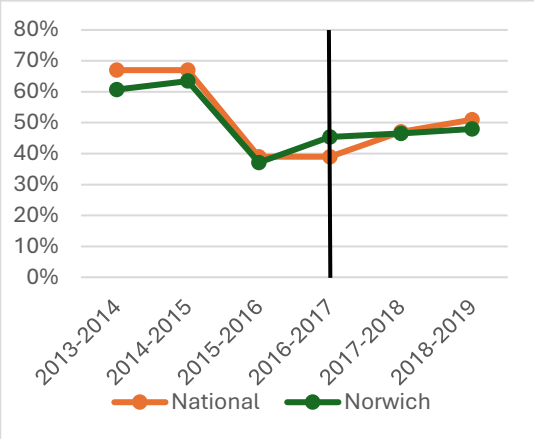
One important way of evaluating the impact of the OA programme is to examine the patterns in trends of FSM pupils and looked-after children and assess whether there were measurable changes in their outcomes compared with national benchmarks. Since these groups were the core targets of OA interventions, their progress offers a direct test of whether the programme's bottom-up approach succeeded in narrowing entrenched inequalities. By comparing performance before and after the implementation year of 2016, it is possible to assess whether the OA support helped accelerate improvements in disadvantaged pupils' attainment.

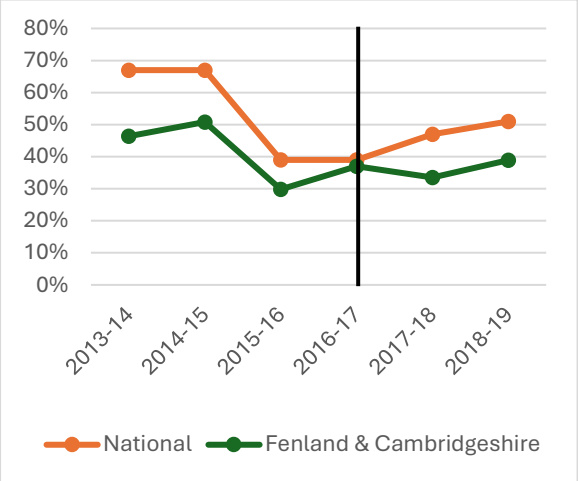
The graphs below present these trends for KS2 performance, showing the percentage of FSM and looked-after pupils achieving expected levels in reading, writing, and mathematics, benchmarked against national comparisons.

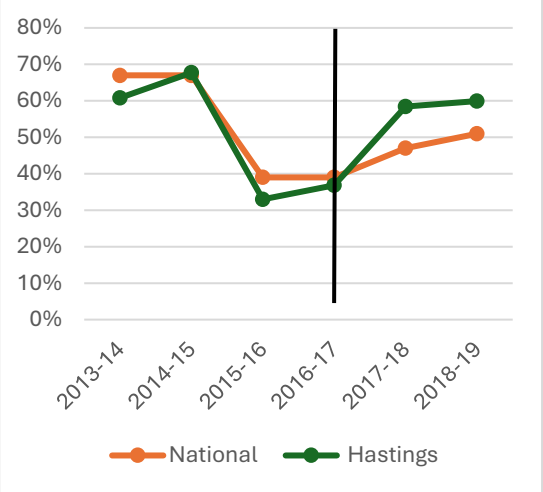
Figure 13. KS2 percentage of FSM and looked-after pupils achieving expected levels in RWM for each OA

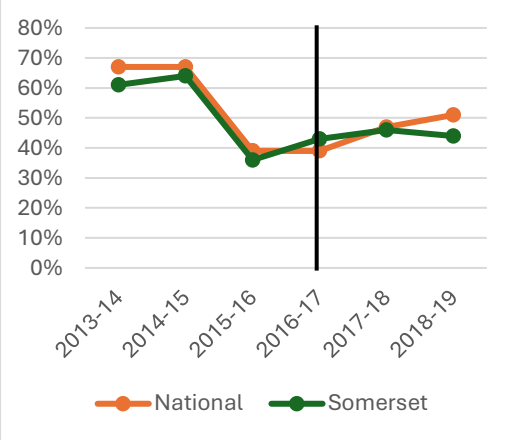


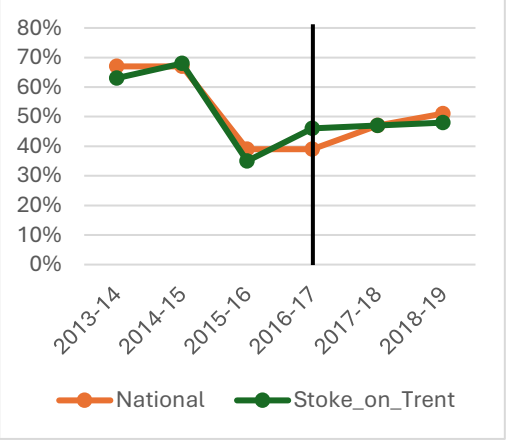


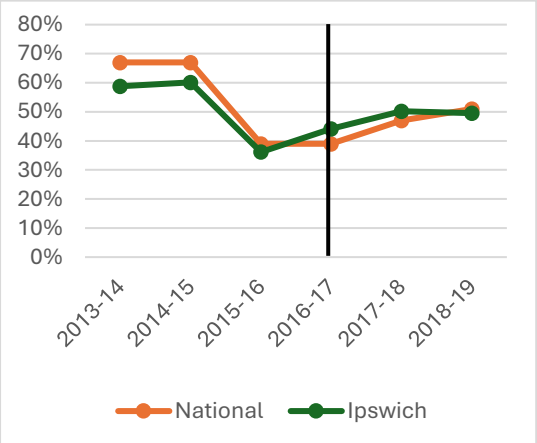


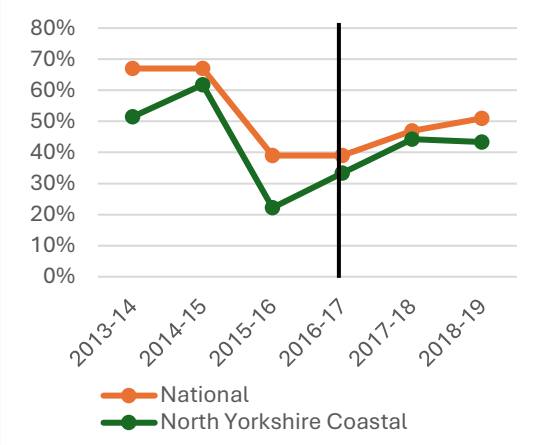












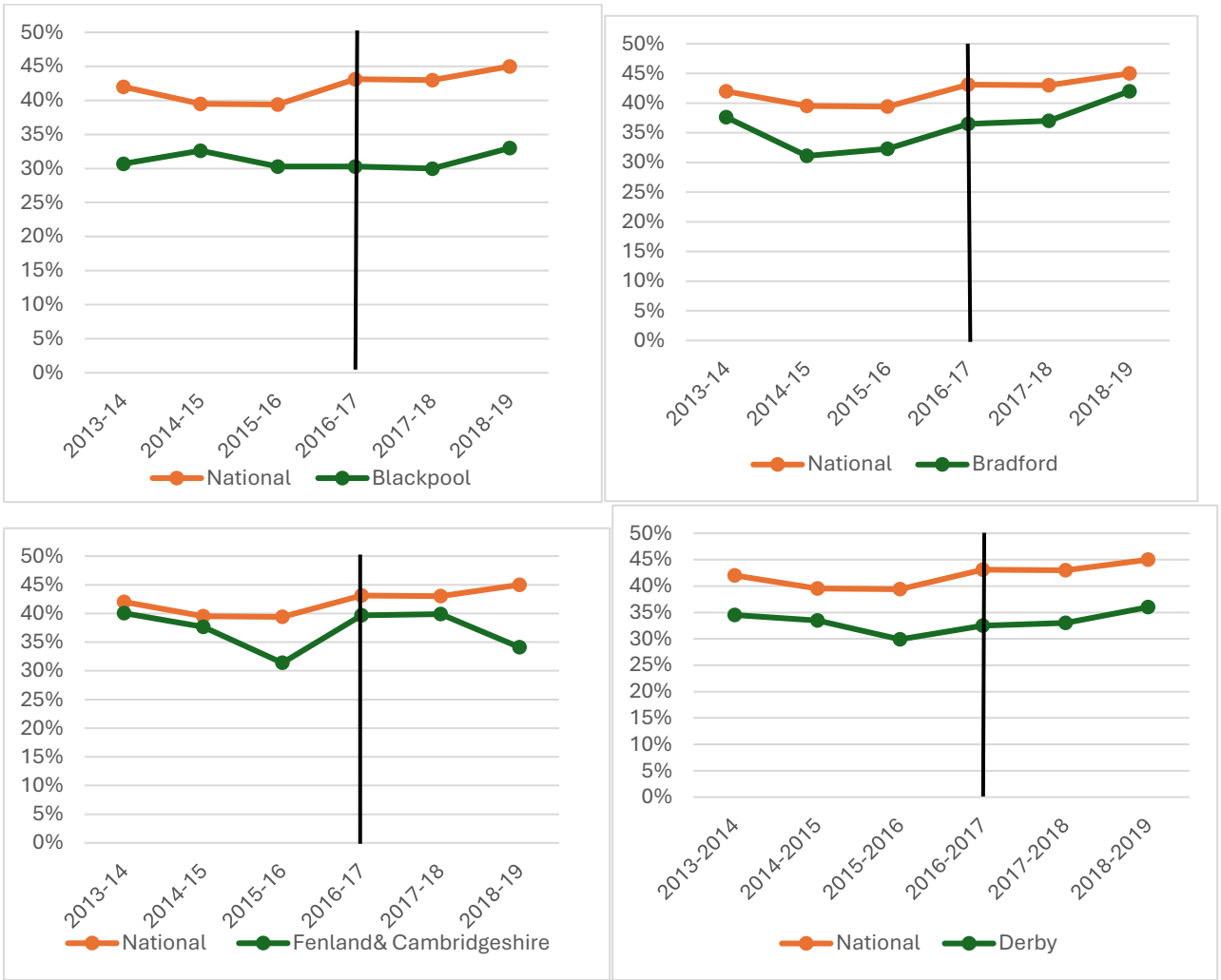
At KS2, the performance of disadvantaged pupils showed some signs of improvement in a number of OAs, particularly in the years immediately after the OA programme was introduced. In Derby, Doncaster, Bradford,

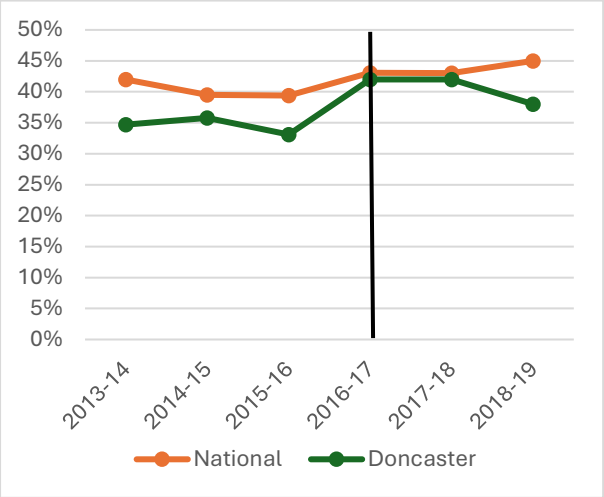
Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, and North Yorkshire Coastal, disadvantaged pupils slightly narrowed the gap with the national percentage of pupils achieving the expected levels in reading, writing, and mathematics. In contrast, OAs such as Oldham, Ipswich, Hastings, and Stoke-on-Trent performed more strongly and even exceeded the national percentage, but this was only for a short period around 2017–18. OAs (Blackpool, Derby, Doncaster, Bradford, Somerset), although they did not improve their attainment, they halted a downward trend that was present prior to the implementation.

By 2018–19, however, the pattern changed across all OAs: the earlier progress could not be sustained, and all areas experienced a downward trend relative to national figures. This suggests that while the OA programme may have provided an initial boost for disadvantaged pupils, the improvements were not stable in the longer term.

The graphs below present these trends for KS4 performance, showing the percentage of FSM and looked-after pupils achieving expected levels in reading, writing, and mathematics, benchmarked against national comparisons.

Figure 14. KS4 percentage of FSM and looked-after pupils achieving expected levels in RWM for each OA

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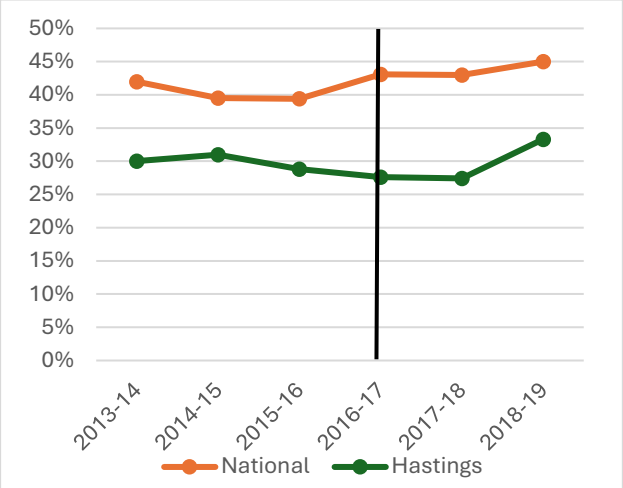
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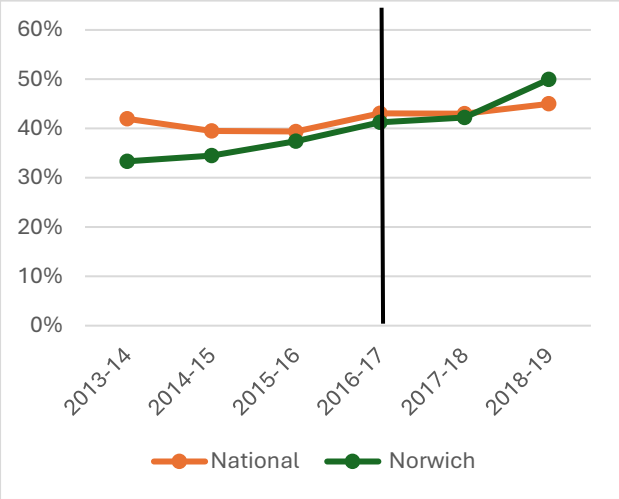
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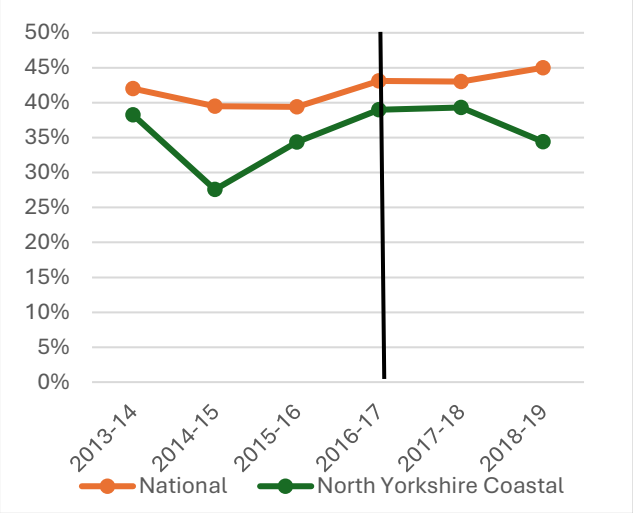
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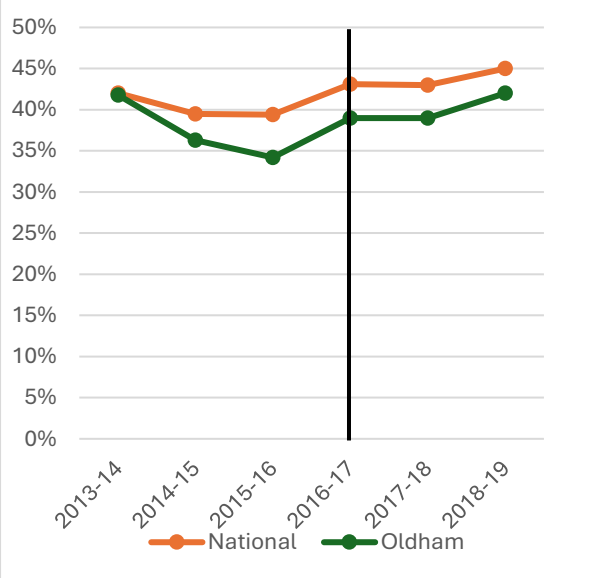
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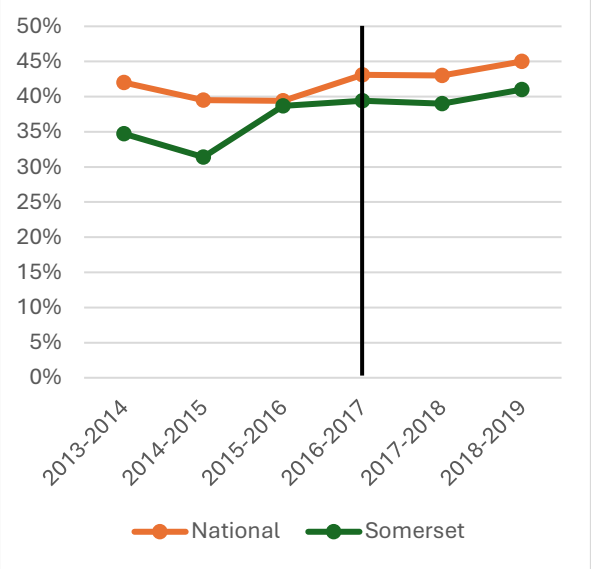
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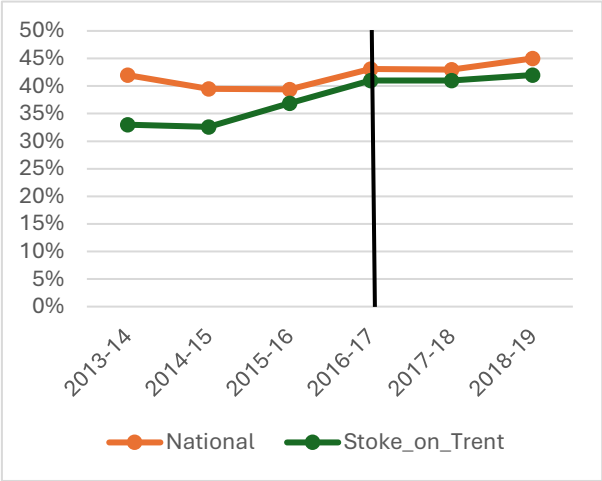
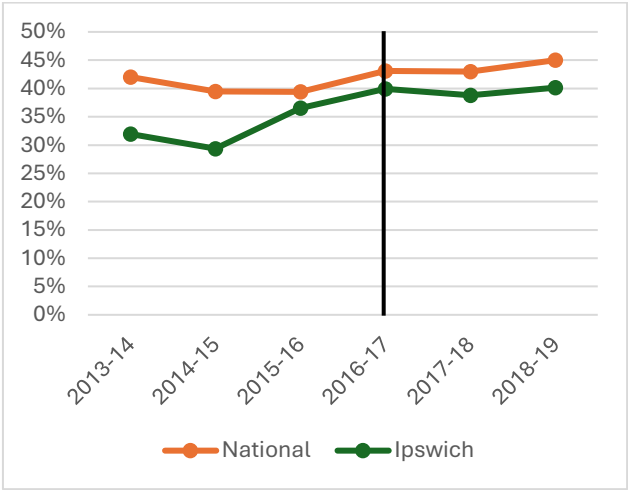




At KS4, the performance of disadvantaged pupils showed very limited signs of improvement compared with national figures. In Doncaster, Fenland & East Cambridgeshire, North Yorkshire Coastal, Norwich, and Stoke-on-Trent, the attainment gap narrowed slightly in 2016–17. Norwich in particular performed relatively strongly, even exceeding the national percentage of disadvantaged pupils achieving expected standards. However, these improvements were short-lived and not consistent across other OAs. The majority of areas did not show any meaningful signs of narrowing the gap with the national percentage of FSM and looked-after children at KS4. This contrasts with the more noticeable, though temporary, trigger effects observed at KS2, suggesting that the OA programme had much less visible impact on disadvantaged pupils' outcomes at KS4.

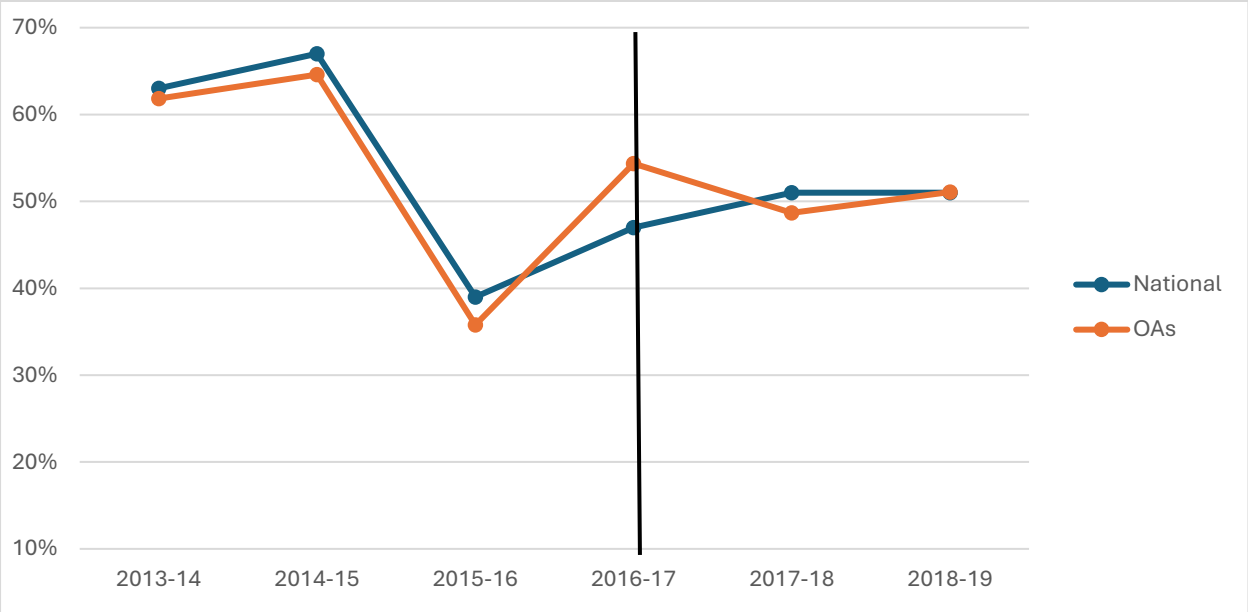
In contrast, at KS2 there were clearer, though still temporary, signs of progress. Several OAs demonstrated a "trigger effect" after 2016–17, with disadvantaged pupils briefly narrowing the gap with national averages and, in some cases, even exceeding them. This improvement was not sustained, as most areas showed decline again by 2018–19, but it nonetheless suggested that the OA programme may have had some short-term positive impact in primary outcomes. At KS4, however, such effects were much weaker and more uneven, indicating that disadvantaged pupils' progress in secondary schools was less responsive to the OA interventions than at earlier key stages.

Aggregate Analysis of Expected Levels Read, Writing, Maths Across Opportunity Areas

In addition to examining each OA individually, an aggregated analysis was carried out to capture the overall picture across all OAs. This approach averages the percentage of pupils achieving the expected levels in reading, writing, and mathematics (RWM) at KS2 and the percentage of pupils achieving the expected standard at KS4. These aggregated results provide a clearer indication of the collective progress of OAs and allow for direct comparison with national averages over the period 2013–2019.

To ensure disadvantaged groups were also accounted for, the same aggregated analysis was conducted separately for pupils eligible for FSM. This helps assess whether the OA programme, with its explicit focus on supporting disadvantaged pupils, had any measurable effect on closing the attainment gap. By presenting aggregated outcomes for both the overall pupil population and FSM pupils at KS2 and KS4, this analysis offers a balanced perspective on whether OAs demonstrated sustained improvement compared with national benchmarks, and whether disadvantaged pupils benefited proportionately from the interventions introduced after the programme's launch in 2016

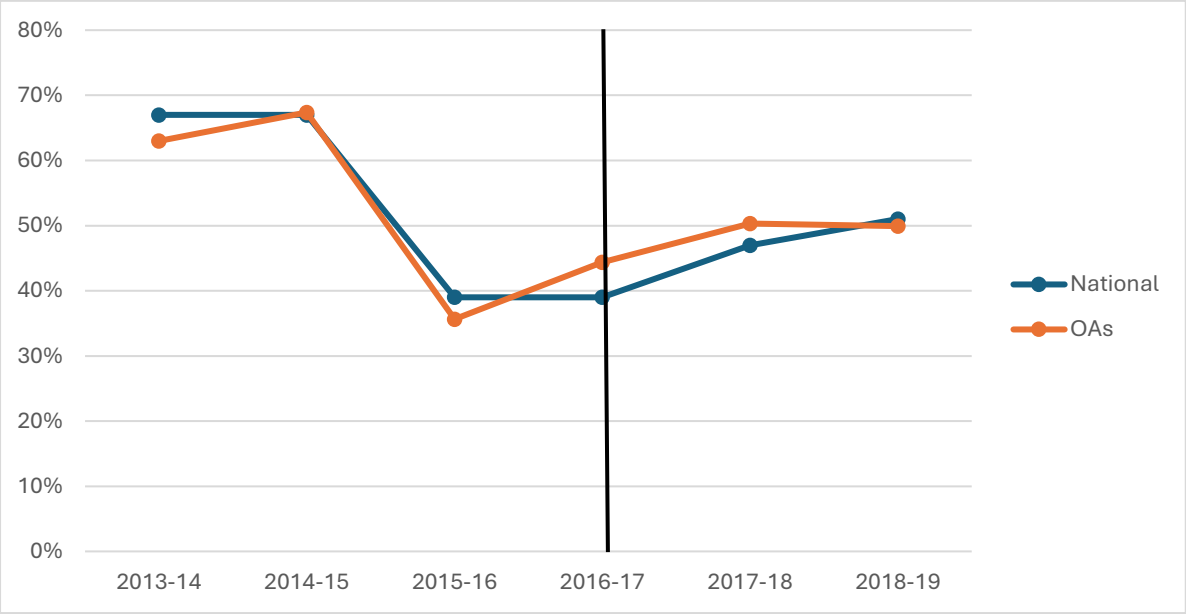
Figure 15. Aggregate Percentage of KS2 meeting expected levels RWM.



The aggregated KS2 percentages of pupils achieving the expected standards show broadly consistent patterns across the years, with OAs typically performing around 2% to 3% below the national level. However, in 2016–17, the year of OA implementation, there was a notable spike, with OAs performing around 7% above the national average. This improvement, however, was not sustained. By 2017–18, the trend reverted to its previous pattern, with OAs once again falling behind national levels, indicating that the spike in 2016–17 may reflect a short-term effect rather than a sustained change**.**

The next figure presents the cohort trends of FSM pupils in KS2 achieving the expected standards in reading, writing, and mathematics (RWM).

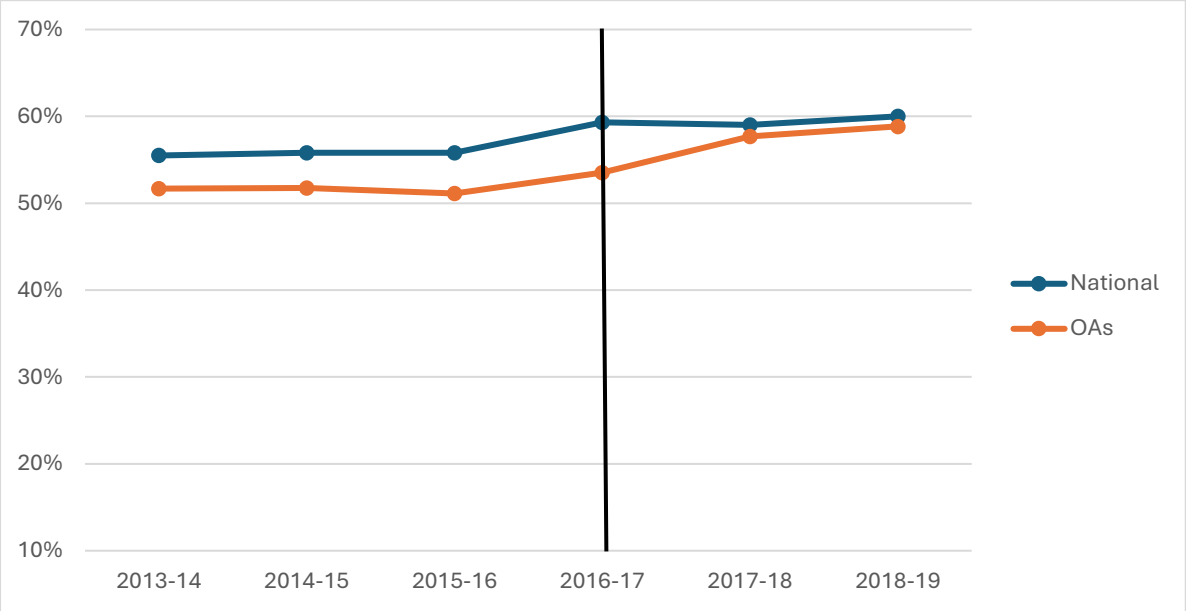
Figure 16. Aggregate Percentage of FSM KS2 meeting expected levels RWM.



The aggregated percentage of FSM pupils in OAs achieving the expected standards in reading, writing, and mathematics exceeded the national percentage in 2016–17, suggesting a short-term boost linked to the introduction of the OA programme. However, this improvement was not sustained, as by 2018–19 the gap had reverted to earlier patterns, with OAs once again falling behind national averages. This indicates that while the OA programme may have provided an initial uplift for disadvantaged pupils, the effect did not translate into a lasting or consistent improvement.

The next figure presents the patterns in trends of pupils in KS4 achieving the expected standards in reading, writing, and mathematics (RWM).

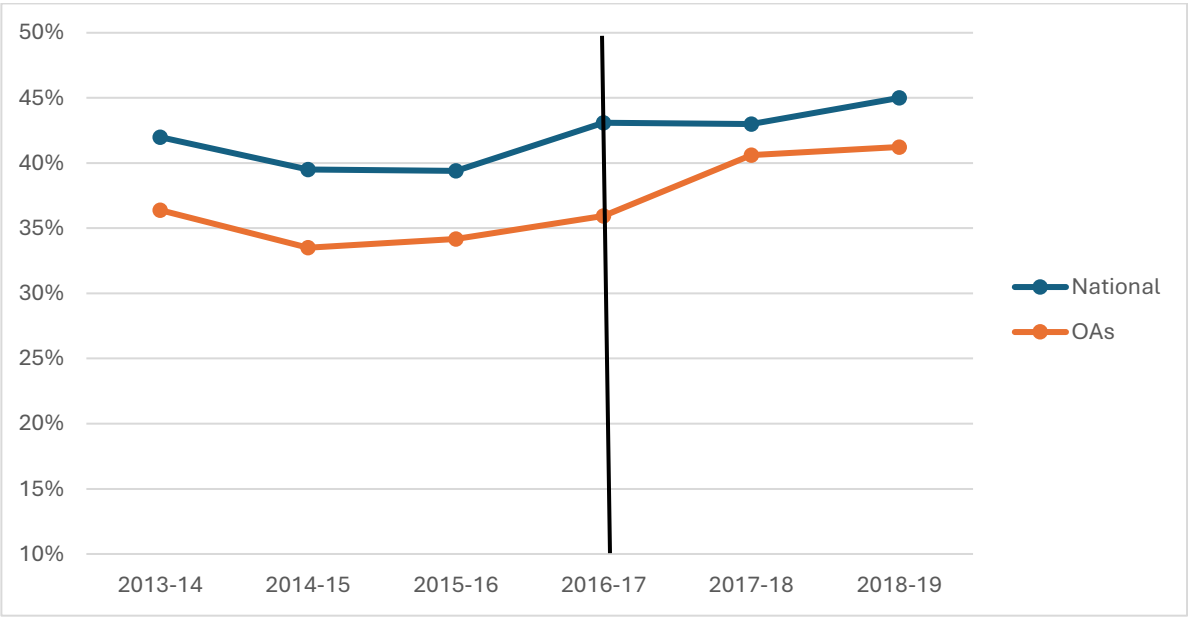
Figure 17. Aggregate Percentage of KS4 meeting expected levels.



At KS4, the aggregated percentage of pupils in Opportunity Areas achieving the expected levels shows a somewhat different pattern compared to KS2. Following the introduction of the OA programme in 2016–17, the gap with national attainment appears to have narrowed. Importantly, this improvement was not only a short-lived spike but was maintained through to 2018–19, suggesting that at the secondary level the programme may have supported more consistent progress in pupil outcomes. However, it is also worth noting that the gap was not entirely closed, and while the relative position of OAs improved during this period, they continued to perform below the national average.

The next figure presents the cohort trends of FSM pupils in KS2 achieving the expected standards in reading, writing, and mathematics (RWM).

Figure 18. Aggregate Percentage of FSM KS4 meeting expected levels RWM.



For pupils eligible for FSM in OAs, the aggregated results at KS4 show a narrowing of the gap with the national average after the OA programme was introduced in 2016–17. By 2018–19, this gap had reduced to

around 4%, indicating some progress in improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. However, the national benchmark was never fully reached, and FSM pupils in OAs continued to perform below their peers nationally. This suggests that while the OA programme may have contributed to some gains for disadvantaged pupils at KS4, the improvements were limited and not sufficient to close the gap entirely.

Conclusion

Analysis of absence and exclusions shows that OAs consistently recorded higher levels of pupil absence and school exclusions compared with national averages. Persistent absence remained a significant challenge across almost all OAs, with disadvantaged pupils and those with FSM status particularly affected. Similarly, rates of fixed-term and permanent exclusions were above national levels in several OAs, highlighting continuing issues around behaviour management, engagement, and wider socio-economic challenges in these areas.

While some short-term improvements were noted in particular years, there is little evidence of a sustained downward trend in absence or exclusions over the lifetime of the OA programme. This pattern suggests that despite targeted funding and interventions, structural barriers affecting pupil engagement and inclusion remained difficult to shift. The persistence of these issues may also help explain the limited improvements observed in academic outcomes, especially at KS4, as attendance and exclusion are closely linked with attainment.

When comparing outcomes across different key stages, a clear distinction emerges. At KS1 and KS2, several OAs showed evidence of a trigger effect around the time of the programme's implementation in 2016–17. Many OAs temporarily narrowed the gap with national averages, with some even exceeding national performance for a short period. However, these gains were not sustained, and by 2018–19 most OAs had reverted to underperformance compared with the national trend.

By contrast, at KS4 (Attainment 8), the same pattern was not observed. The OAs broadly followed national trends but maintained a consistently wide gap throughout, with no evidence of the temporary boosts or trigger effects seen at primary level. While Ipswich showed a brief improvement after 2016, this was short-lived and did not significantly shift the overall trajectory.

One possible explanation for this difference is that younger pupils in KS1 and KS2 are more immediately responsive to targeted interventions, such as teaching support, literacy and numeracy programmes, and early curriculum enhancements. These inputs may have temporarily lifted performance at primary level, but the gains were fragile and difficult to sustain without longer-term systemic support.

At secondary level (KS4), outcomes are shaped by a wider and more complex set of factors. Pupils' prior attainment, school resources, teaching quality, curriculum breadth, and local socioeconomic challenges all interact more strongly. These factors may blunt the impact of short-term interventions, meaning that secondary performance is harder to shift. Moreover, the OA programme design may have concentrated more heavily on early years and primary interventions, leaving secondary schools less supported by comparison.

Although all OAs received a three-year funding extension designed to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 and to embed collaboration as a long-term support mechanism for disadvantaged areas, there are no clear signs of stability or sustained improvement in KS4 outcomes. This suggests that while the OA programme may have provided short-term impetus at earlier stages of schooling, its impact diminished over time, and it was not sufficient to transform long-term attainment patterns at secondary level.

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