

Green shoots of hope? Increased optimism about future study and work in England's Opportunity Areas

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The UK government's Opportunity Areas programme, which ran from 2017 to 2022, targeted 12 social mobility 'cold spots' across England. Since 2024, researchers from the universities of Bath, Bristol and Durham have been conducting a £1.5 million evaluation of this intervention.

This evaluation examines the effects that the programme had on these geographic places and how future area-based interventions can be best designed and implemented.

This first policy brief uses nationally representative survey data to look at how the intervention affected young people's hopes and confidence for their future lives in terms of education and work.

Key points

- Nationally, over the last 15 years, there has been a downward trend in optimism in young people (King's Trust, 2025).¹ There is a further important regional dimension to this trend, with young people in London more confident about their futures than those living outside the capital (Stavrou, 2025).² This is likely due to their higher educational outcomes and greater job prospects and access to opportunities (Holt-White, Cullinane and Montacute, 2025).³
- Our research gives some cause for hope. Using Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis – a statistical technique that enables the causal impact of a policy to be estimated – it shows that young people in areas that received support as part of the Opportunity Areas (OA) programme have bucked the national downward trend and exhibit *increased* optimism for future study and work since the programme's introduction. This is especially true of their perceived likelihood of gaining training or a university place and of successfully finishing these. For both of these measures, we observe an increase of around 15 percentage points (pp) on average (on a self-assessed scale from 0-100%) in the OAs relative to the similarly disadvantaged comparison (non-OA programme) areas.
- As the national downward trend in optimism is particularly marked in the comparison areas (CAs), this study/work optimism boost is particularly pertinent, suggesting that the programme may have played an important mitigating role.
- The strongest optimism boost is observed in post-industrial and coastal areas targeted by the OA programme. As with the broader OA trends, these increases are particularly apparent for young people's perceived likelihood of gaining training or a university place (average 17 pp increase for those in coastal OAs and 15 pp increase for post-industrial OAs relative to similar non-programme areas) and of successfully finishing these (average 18 pp increase in coastal OAs, 17 pp increase for post-industrial OAs). There is also a notable increase in their perceived likelihood of finding a suitable job (15 pp for individuals in coastal OAs, 10 pp for those in post-industrial OAs).
- The data we draw on come from the UK Household Longitudinal Study 'Understanding Society', the largest longitudinal household panel study of its kind with a nationally representative sample of approximately 40,000 households. Our research focuses only on responses from the period 2009-2024 for individuals aged 16-21.

1 King's Trust (2025). The King's Trust TK Maxx Youth Index 2025. Available here: <https://www.kingstrust.org.uk/about-us/news-views/youthindex2025>

2 Stavrou, A (2025). Young people outside London fear they'll 'never succeed' as regional optimism hits new low. The Independent, 27 February. Available here: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/kings-trust-youth-index-survey-london-portsmouth-young-people-b2697782.html>

3 Holt-White E, Cullinane C and Montacute R (2025). The Opportunity Index. Report for the Sutton Trust. Available here: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/the-opportunity-index/>

- The data we use provide only a measure of young people's expectations, so at this point we cannot say whether the increased optimism observed among young people in OAs is related to increased life chances. Future research within the [From the Centre to the Periphery](#) project will seek to explore the associations between this increased optimism and later outcomes. We will also seek to build greater understanding of the factors driving this optimism boost, generating important insights for raising young people's optimism elsewhere.
- The increased study/work optimism observed in young people living in OAs suggests that place-based interventions can play an important role in building young people's confidence about their futures.
- The especially marked divides in optimism between young people living in OAs and those in the similarly disadvantaged comparison areas, however, underscore the need for future social mobility initiatives to reach disadvantaged young people across all areas, not just those in selected OAs. This could be achieved by greater use of Free School Meal (FSM)-focused interventions.
- The more subdued study/work optimism in rural OAs and the particularly pronounced downward trend in optimism in the comparison areas further highlight the pressing need to address the structural barriers to opportunity for young people living in more peripheral places, including poor infrastructure and more limited education and employment prospects.

Introduction

There is no doubt that addressing the major geographic divides that have long mired the UK remains one of the biggest public policy challenges of our time. Over recent decades, successive governments have repeatedly poured money into new policy programmes aimed at growing local economies. These programmes have had limited, if any, success.

Since 2024, researchers from the universities of Bath, Bristol and Durham have been carrying out a major evaluation of the Opportunity Areas programme, a £108 million place-based intervention that was designed to tackle geographic divides in education and skills in England. Announced in 2016, it ran from 2017 to 2022 and focused on improving young people's outcomes in 12 social mobility 'cold spots', a mix of post-industrial, rural and coastal areas across the country.

Area-based initiatives of this kind have a long history in the UK, from Harold Wilson's Education Priority Areas in the 1960s, to New Labour's swathe of programmes during the 1990s. But there is a long-standing policy debate

about the relative merits of place-based (targeting particular places) versus people-based (targeting particular groups across all places) initiatives.

For the first time, we use a quasi-experimental methodology to assess the impact of the Opportunity Areas programme, seeking to isolate the effects of the intervention from other mitigating factors and produce findings on the causal effect of the policy. In doing so, we will build an evidence base on what works in area-based interventions and how future policy programmes should be designed, delivered and developed.

Like any other intervention, its impact can be considered across multiple possible outcomes – for example, educational attainment, school attendance, social mobility, earnings, health, and crime. In this first of a series of policy briefs, we use nationally representative survey data to consider how the intervention affected young people's hopes for the future and their perceived confidence in doing well educationally and in the world of work.

Policy context

Over the last 15 years, optimism among UK youth for their futures has been in decline. Moreover, there is an important regional dimension to this trend, with the 2025 edition of the King's Trust's Youth Index⁴ – an annual research report measuring the attitudes and expectations of young people aged 16-25 in the UK – indicating that optimism in the regions has hit a new low. Comparably, young people in London are more optimistic about their financial futures, job prospects and mental health than the national average (Stavrou, 2025).⁵

The UK is one of the most spatially unbalanced advanced economies in the world, with striking regional disparities between London and the South East and the rest of the country with regard to job opportunities and earnings. For example, the average annual wage in London is almost £20,000 higher, and in the South East nearly £13,000 higher, than in the UK's lowest-paid localities such as Burnley, Huddersfield and Middlesbrough (Centre for Cities, 2025).⁶

4 King's Trust (2025). The King's Trust TK Maxx Youth Index 2025. Available here: <https://www.kingstrust.org.uk/about-us/news-views/youthindex2025>

5 Stavrou A (2025). Young people outside London fear they'll 'never succeed' as regional optimism hits new low. The Independent, 27 February. Available here: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/kings-trust-youth-index-survey-london-portsmouth-young-people-b2697782.html>

6 Centre for Cities (2025). Cities Outlook 2025. Available here: <https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/cities-outlook-2025/>

There are similarly stark geographic gaps in education. For example, nearly 60% of workers and job seekers in London hold degree-level qualifications (in several boroughs the figure is over 70%), compared with fewer than 30% of people in coastal towns like Blackpool, post-industrial places such as Doncaster and rural localities like North East Lincolnshire.⁷ These spatial disparities in education and employment are likely to play significant roles in the lower levels of optimism observed among young people living outside London.

The Opportunity Areas programme was one government intervention aimed at tackling these geographic imbalances, and our [From the Centre to the Periphery](#) project is a three-year mixed-methods evaluation of the programme's impacts. This policy brief focuses on our analysis of [Understanding Society](#) data for the period 2009-2024 (pre and post the introduction of the intervention) and explores our findings of increased optimism for future study and work among young people living in OAs (in stark contrast to findings of decreases nationally and especially in areas with similarly entrenched deprivation). This suggests that the programme may have had an important role in mitigating against similar decreases in optimism in the OAs.

Methodology

This research draws on data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study 'Understanding Society' from the period 2009-2024 for individuals aged 16-21. It compared responses to questions measuring young people's expectations from individuals living in the 12 opportunity areas (OAs) with those observed nationwide and among individuals living in 19 similar social mobility cold spots.

When designing the OA programme, the Department for Education (DfE) created a longlist of 32 areas, selecting those in the weakest performing sextiles of both the Social Mobility Commission's Social Mobility Index (SMI) and the DfE's own Achieving Excellence Areas (AEA) index. This list was later narrowed down by the DfE and 13 Local Authority Districts (LADs)⁸ were selected as OAs, targeting a mix of coastal, post-industrial and rural areas spread throughout England. The 19 areas we compare against in this brief, referred to as 'comparison areas' (CAs), are those from the DfE longlist that were not selected to be OAs. As they are areas with similarly

⁷ Office for National Statistics (2023): Workforce qualification levels across England and Wales data: Census 2021. Available here: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/datasets/workforcequalificationlevelscrossenglandandwalesdatacensus2021>

⁸ One opportunity area, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, contained two LADs.

entrenched deprivation to those targeted by the OA programme, they offer a good point of comparison – the trends we observe there are likely to be reflective of those we would expect to see in the OAs had they not been in receipt of the intervention.

This policy brief focuses on our analysis of responses to four questions:

- How likely is it that you will gain training or a university place in your preferred field?
- How likely is it that you will successfully finish your training or university studies?
- How likely is it that you will find a job in your field?
- How likely is it that you will be successful and get ahead?

These questions form part of the ‘Young Adults’ module of the Understanding Society main survey and are asked of individuals aged 16–21. For each of these questions, individuals are asked to rank how likely it is that the event in question will happen on a scale from 0% to 100%, where 0% means ‘No chance of happening’ and 100% means ‘Totally likely to happen’. These questions are included in the ‘Young Adults’ module every two years, so within our responses some individuals have answered these questions more than once. Most individuals in our sample have answered them only once (approximately 50%) or twice (approximately 30%).

Table 1. Understanding Society questions and numbers of observations

Questions (A-D)	Total obs.	OA obs.	CA obs.	Total obs. across OAs & CAs	Obs. nationwide (excl. OAs)
A - How likely is it that you will gain training or a university place in your preferred field?	14,552	801	714	1,515	13,751
B - How likely is it that you will successfully finish your training or university studies?	16,419	898	779	1,677	15,521
C - How likely is it that you will find a job in your field?	16,702	908	800	1,708	15,794
D - How likely is it that you will be successful and get ahead?	17,387	944	854	1,798	16,443

Given the focus of the Opportunity Areas programme on post-industrial, coastal and rural areas, responses by place type were also explored within our OA/CA comparisons.

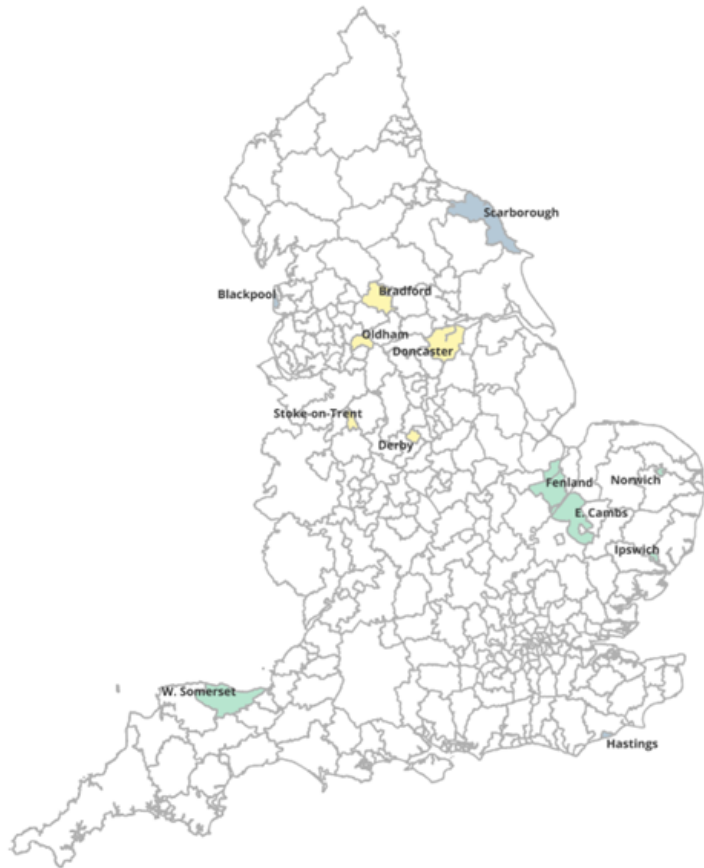
Table 2. Number of observations by question (A-D) and place type

Place type	Question			
	A	B	C	D
OA - Rural	85	95	95	106
CA - Rural	170	173	176	198
OA - Coastal	107	120	125	131
CA - Coastal	119	136	130	145
OA - Post-industrial	609	683	688	707
CA - Post-industrial	425	470	494	511
Total	1,515	1,677	1,708	1,798

The maps on the following page show the place type and locations of the 12 OAs and 19 CAs.

The analyses we present use a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) approach, a statistical method that enables estimation of the causal effect of a policy – in our case an area becoming an OA – on respondents’ answers to the four likelihood questions (A-D). We do this by comparing the changes in responses between those living in OAs and those living in our CAs before (2009-2016) and after (2017-2024) the implementation of the Opportunity Areas programme. The key idea is that the change observed in the CAs is a good approximation of the change we would have seen in the OAs without the programme, so the difference in the observed differences over time between the areas should isolate the effect of the programme.

Opportunity areas map



Comparison areas map



Maps made with QGIS. Coastal = blue, rural = green, post-industrial = yellow.

Opportunity areas mitigated the national downward trend

Comparing young people's responses to the four future likelihood questions (A-D) for the period 2009-2016 (before implementation of the OA programme) and 2017-2024 (after implementation of the programme) identified a consistent trend. Optimism for three of the four expectations rose on average across young people living in OAs in the post-implementation period compared with a notable decrease in optimism on average for all expectations in the same time period for those living in the 19 CAs. Question D, 'being successful/getting ahead', was the exception to the trend for OAs, where it remained stable.

The optimism boost in OAs was especially true of young people's perceived likelihood of gaining training or a university place and of successfully finishing these. For both of these measures, we observed a nine percentage

point increase on average in the OAs, which coupled with the observed five to six pp falls in the CAs gave policy effect estimates of around 15 pp for these outcomes. Both these outcomes have a standard deviation of just over 30 pp and so these estimated effects of the programme represent an effect size of approximately half a standard deviation, which is a large effect.

Mean likelihood scores for individuals living in opportunity areas and comparison areas pre and post the introduction of the OA programme



Conducting the same comparisons on a national scale (OAs versus the rest of England) also revealed lower optimism on average for each of the measures in the second period for those living outside OAs. This suggests that the fall in optimism seen in the 19 CAs is reflective of a broader trend across the country. Indeed, this nationwide pessimism trend is mirrored in other data sources looking at young people's attitudes and expectations. For example, in the annual King's Trust Youth Index, in which a sample of young people (4,285 in 2025 index)⁹ are asked to provide happiness and confidence ratings in nine domains, we observe a three point drop in the average overall index score across the post-OA implementation period

9 King's Trust (2025). The King's Trust TK Maxx Youth Index 2025. Available here: <https://www.kingstrust.org.uk/about-us/news-views/youthindex2025>

compared with the pre-period.¹⁰ Pertinently, of the nine domains measured by the King's Trust Index, the decreases seen in young people's emotional health are particularly striking with a six point drop in the average score for 'emotional health – confidence' and an eight point drop in the average score for 'emotional health – happiness' observed across the post-period compared with the pre-period.

Importantly, while the trend of increased pessimism observed in our analysis of Understanding Society data in the second period is seen across the country, it is nevertheless more marked across the 19 CAs (average 4.5 pp drop in CAs versus 1.6 pp drop nationwide in perceived likelihood of gaining training/university place; average 6.8 pp drop versus 1.6 pp drop in perceived likelihood of successfully finishing studies; average 4.4 pp drop versus 0.7 pp drop in perceived likelihood of finding a suitable job; average 6.6 pp drop versus 3.9 pp drop in perceived likelihood of being successful). As the 19 CAs are similar to the localities involved in the OA programme, it is particularly interesting that not only do we see an increase in optimism in OAs across each of these likelihood measures in the post-implementation period, but this happens in spite of a nationwide drop in optimism across each measure in the same time period, which is particularly marked in similar localities. This suggests that the OA programme may have had an important role in mitigating similar decreases in optimism in the OAs.

A further element of the [From the Centre to the Periphery](#) research to date has been a series of interviews (25 in total) with chairs and board members from the independent Opportunity Area boards. There is emerging evidence from these interviews that one of the most important roles played by the Opportunity Areas programme was to bring providers supporting young people across a wide range of domains (e.g. education, mental and physical health, poverty, youth voice, community) within each local area to partner with each other in the common goal of improving young people's lives. It could be that this place-based holistic collaborative working has had this particularly powerful effect on boosting young people's confidence about their futures. Moreover, as Douthwaite and Brown (2025)¹¹ highlight in a recent report focused on NEET (young people not in education, employment or training) prevention in South West England, we must be aware of the importance not just of support itself being available to young people but of young people's 'sense of feeling cared for, understood and supported'. It may also be then that this holistic collaborative working within the OAs helped to ensure this for the young people engaged in the programme, enabling them to have this confidence. This is a topic that we will seek to explore further within the second qualitative phase of our research.

10 The pre-OA implementation period for the King's Trust index was 2009-2015 only (no index was produced in 2016), the post-OA implementation period was 2017-2025 – so one more year is available here compared with our Understanding Society data.

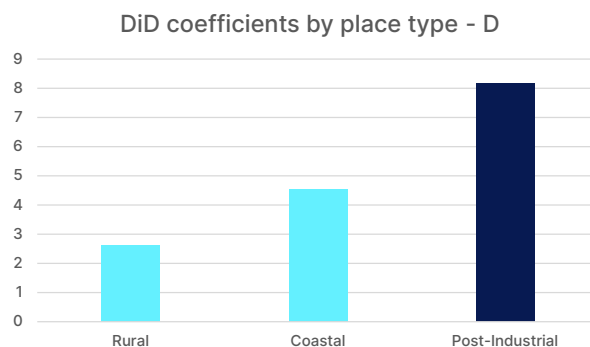
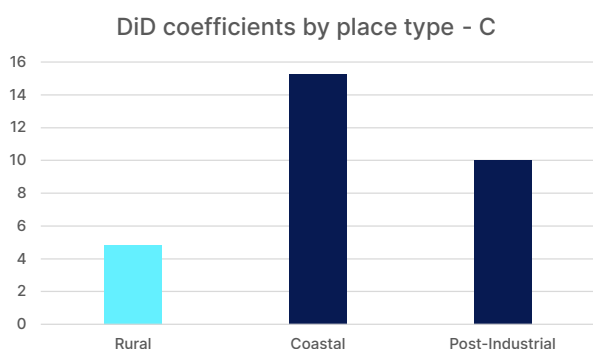
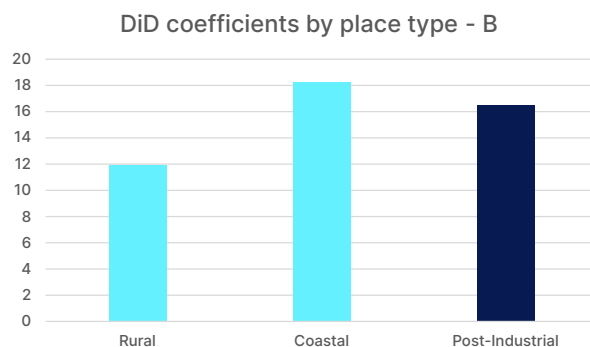
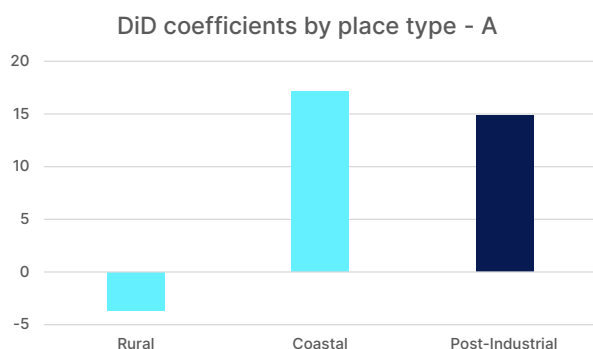
11 Douthwaite and Brown (2025). Engaging Young People in Employment, Education or Training. Priority Policy Actions from the Southwest. Available here: <https://www.connectedbelonging.co.uk/assets/docs/Engaging%20Young%20People%20in%20Employment%20Education%20or%20Training%20Priority%20Policy%20Actions%20from%20the%20SW%20UoB.pdf>

Post-industrial and coastal areas performed better than rural

Dividing the opportunity areas and comparison areas by place type (coastal/rural/post-industrial) showed that the increasing optimism observed across OAs is driven mainly by the coastal and post-industrial OAs. In the case of rural OAs, increases in optimism are generally much smaller, and in the case of question A (likelihood of gaining training or a university place) optimism in rural OAs actually marginally declines between the time points. While both coastal and post-industrial OAs have similar patterns in terms of increased optimism (compared with coastal/post-industrial CAs), the only statistically significant increase for coastal OAs is for question C (likelihood of finding a suitable job). The non-significance of the increases for coastal areas for the other likelihood questions are likely due to the relatively small numbers of observations here (coastal OA obs = 131, coastal CA obs = 145). For post-industrial OAs, increases are statistically significant for all four likelihood questions.

The following charts plot the DiD coefficients¹² (the average score increase for individuals in OAs relative to CAs post the introduction of the OA programme) by place type (rural/coastal/post-industrial) for each of the four likelihood questions. Lighter blue shading shows where the coefficients are not statistically significant.

Difference in Difference (DiD) coefficients by place type



¹² The regression models control for a quadratic trend in the year of interview, plus the gender, ethnicity, age and income of the respondent.

There is emerging evidence from our interviews with Opportunity Area chairs and board members that there were greater challenges in implementing certain activities or achieving impact in rural OAs compared with coastal/post-industrial OAs due to their dispersed populations. Many young people in these OAs live in villages or towns where there are not many further or higher education options available (and poor transport links to those that do exist nearby) and limited career opportunities locally. As further highlighted by Douthwaite and Brown (2025)¹³ in their report on NEET prevention, a lack of ‘travel training’ – support for young people lacking the skills and confidence to navigate convoluted public transport commutes – can also affect young people’s options for further education, training and work. It may be that this was also an issue for some of the young people that the rural OAs supported. There were thus some greater intrinsic challenges to improving study/work opportunities in rural OAs, which might help explain why more muted study/work optimism is observed among young people here. This is a topic that we plan to explore in greater depth in the second qualitative phase of our research.

Key implications

- The Understanding Society data we draw on in this policy brief provide only a measure of young people’s expectations, so at this stage we cannot say whether the increased optimism observed among young people in OAs is related to increased life chances. It could just be a feel-good factor that fades, or it may be a critical change that stays with these young people and leads to better outcomes.
- As part of the [From the Centre to the Periphery](#) project, we will look at attainment for different groups, a key factor in shaping young people’s future expectations. However, while we are keen to avoid a focus on the deficit model of ‘aspirations’, the increased optimism we have observed is unlikely to be due to any potential improvements in attainment alone, so building understanding of other possible factors, including young people’s capacity to aspire, will be vital.
- Further investigation into the drivers of the national downward trend in young people’s confidence about their futures is needed, and will form part of the second qualitative phase of the [From the Centre to the Periphery](#) project. This research will explore the factors behind the contrasting increased optimism observed in OAs, bringing important insights into how to raise young people’s optimism elsewhere.

13 Douthwaite and Brown (2025). Engaging Young People in Employment, Education or Training. Priority Policy Actions from the Southwest. Available here: <https://www.connectedbelonging.co.uk/assets/docs/Engaging%20Young%20People%20in%20Employment%20Education%20or%20Training%20Priority%20Policy%20Actions%20from%20the%20SW%20UoB.pdf>

- Our findings highlight the importance of longitudinal data for tracking how young people's study and work expectations over time affect their later outcomes. The Department for Education should consider routine collection of these data from all young people through schools, enabling these outcomes to be better studied.
- Our findings of increased study/work optimism in young people living in OAs suggest the positive impacts that place-based working can have for building young people's confidence about their futures.
- However, the particularly marked disparities in optimism between young people living in OAs and those in the similarly disadvantaged CAs highlight the need for future social mobility initiatives to reach disadvantaged young people across all areas, not just those in selected OAs. This could be achieved by strengthening FSM-focused interventions.
- The more muted study/work optimism in rural OAs and the especially marked downward trend in optimism in the CAs further highlight the urgent need to address the structural issues hindering opportunity for young people living in more peripheral places, including poor infrastructure, unequal employment prospects and wage disparities.

Acknowledgements

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The data used in this report are from the UK Household Longitudinal Study, 'Understanding Society'. The views and analysis presented in this report are those of the authors, as are any errors or omissions.

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