Partnership Board Members' Reflections on the Opportunity Areas Programme

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1. Executive Summary

This evaluation draws on interviews with board members and DfE officials across ten (out of the twelve) Opportunity Areas. The programme aimed to improve social mobility through place-based interventions but exposed tensions between aspirations for local empowerment and centralised delivery.

Key Findings

- Locally rooted interventions and coalitions (e.g. Education Alliance for Life Chances (EALC) and Ipswich Social Mobility Alliance (ISMA)) produced stronger, more durable impact than externally imposed programmes. Supportive, not directive, DfE oversight was repeatedly preferred.
- Relationship quality outweighed formal architecture. University-led and co-leadership models anchored continuity; skilled project managers and independent chairs were critical. Some boards, however, felt "tokenistic" where real power remained central.
- Common focuses were early years, school attainment, post-16 transitions and mental health. Locally chosen, contextually adapted activity outperformed pre-specified initiatives. Tension persisted between early-intervention priorities and demands for "quick wins."
- Geography mattered — coastal, rural and post-industrial areas faced distinct barriers (seasonality, isolation, fragmented labour markets). Artificial area groupings sometimes obscured local needs.
- Annual funding was valued, but three-year funding windows (with short extensions) undermined long-term planning, encouraged staff turnover and limited sustainability. Board members called for 5–10+ year commitments (minimum).
- Areas with university partnerships had stronger data and evaluation capacity. Narrow accountability metrics missed wider outcomes (wellbeing, aspiration); Covid-19 further disrupted measurement.
- Acute in rural/coastal contexts; "grow-your-own" models showed promise but are insufficient without long-term investment and transport/career pathways.
- Educational outcomes were intertwined with health, housing, transport and employment. Real systems integration was hampered by the programme's education-only remit and misaligned funding/ accountability.
- Pandemic amplified inequalities but also showed that strong local networks provide crucial resilience. It significantly complicated evaluation and, in some places, reversed earlier gains.
- Most durable legacies were strengthened networks, relationships and methodological learning within government; sustained impact depended on local institutional capacity to take ownership.

Recommendations

- Commit multi-year funding (5–10+ years) and protect programmes from short political cycles.
- Devolve genuine decision-making and allow flexible, locally defined KPIs.
- Invest in university partnerships and local data infrastructure; embed evaluation capacity from the start.
- Prioritise cross-departmental commissioning to address root causes (housing, transport, health, employment).
- Support long-term teacher workforce strategies (grow-your-own, transport/career pathways) tailored to local contexts.
- Reduce DfE staff churn in area teams and promote supportive (not directive) oversight.

Implications

Place-based work can deliver meaningful change (e.g., improved relationships, networks, government learning), but real impact requires structural adjustments in funding, governance, evaluation, cross-government coordination and a recognition that education outcomes reflect broader systemic challenges.

2. Introduction

This report presents an overview of key themes emerging from interviews with 25 partnership board members across 10 Opportunity Areas, conducted between April and August 2025. Oldham and West Somerset were excluded as it was not possible to access participants in these areas. The interviews captured perspectives from a diverse range of board members representing business, education, and health sectors, who shared insights on the design, implementation, governance, and impact of the OA Programme.

Analysis of these interviews revealed several cross-cutting themes that characterise successful approaches within the programme. Board members consistently emphasised the value of locally led place-based interventions that reflect local realities and contexts. They highlighted governance models that effectively balance accountability requirements with trust-based collaboration, alongside shared priorities focusing on Early Years (EY) provision, attendance improvement, post-16 pathways, and mental health support.

However, significant implementation challenges emerged across areas. Board members identified persistent difficulties with short-term funding cycles, workforce recruitment and retention issues, student transience, and ongoing tensions between top-down programme requirements and the need for local flexibility and responsiveness.

Despite these challenges, successful interventions shared common characteristics: strong local leadership, well-established partnerships and networks, robust evaluation frameworks, and effective cross-sector coordination. These success factors appeared critical in translating programme ambitions into tangible local outcomes.

Together, these findings provide a coherent narrative of the OA programme's implementation and establish a foundation for the second phase of research. The insights point toward several key policy implications, including the need for longer-term funding commitments, place-sensitive programme design, strengthened local governance structures, greater inclusion of universities as anchor organisations, and more integrated cross-departmental approaches.

3. Methodology Overview

All 25 interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams between April and August 2025. Previous board members were contacted via email or through LinkedIn to gauge their interest in participating in the research. Those who agreed to participate were provided with an overview of the key question areas to be explored. Consent was obtained for recording and transcription purposes prior to the start of the interview. Microsoft Teams generated transcripts for all interviews, which were reviewed to ensure

accuracy. All data was held securely in password protected files only accessible to the researchers.

3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview format was selected to enable systematic data collection across key themes while providing flexibility to explore emerging topics and individual participant experiences in greater depth. The interviews were informal and remained conversational throughout, with additional probes from the interviewer when appropriate. Interviews typically lasted 45 minutes and focused on four main areas: introductions (recruitment onto the board and roles and responsibilities), governance and delivery (working relationships with DfE, funding and educator autonomy), programme impact and legacy (successes and delivery challenges, key initiatives, collaborations), and final reflections (transitions into PEIA, final reflections on the impact of the OA). See Table 1 for an outline of the interview structure.

Table 1: Interview Structure

Introduction	• Participant role and responsibilities, how they were recruited onto the board, and key working relationships
Governance and Delivery	• How the programme's structure supported or limited delivery • Engagement with the DfE, local communities, and other OA boards • Number of schools involved, how they were recruited & engaged, and role of educators and leadership teams • Delivery challenges and lessons for future initiatives
Programme Impact and Legacy	• Key benefits and long-term impacts • Local priorities and whether objectives were met • Successful or challenging stories
Reflections and Looking Ahead	• Views on the programme's continuation and future relevance • What should be retained or avoided in similar initiatives • Experience with the transition to Priority Education Investment Areas (if applicable) • Final reflections and useful contacts/networks

3.2. Participants

Table 2: Partnership Board Member by Opportunity Area

Opportunity Area	Board Member(s)
Blackpool	Andy Mellor (Education) Dr John Stephens (Education) **Graham Cowley (Business)** Stephen Tierney (Education)

Bradford	Christian Bunting (Education and Health) Duncan Jacques (Education) Kathryn Loftus (Third Sector) Sir Nick Weller (Education)
Derby	Kate Martin (Higher Education) **Kathryn Mitchell (Higher Education)** Neil Wilkinson (Education)
Doncaster	**Professor Chris Husbands (Higher Education)** Professor Samantha Twiselton (Higher Education)
Fenland & East Cambridgeshire	**Tricia Pritchard (Health and Education)** Andrew Campbell (Education) Mark Woods (Education) Andrew Read (Business and Education)
Hastings	Graham Peters (Business) Jessica Stubbings (Government)
Ipswich	Chris Starkie (Government) – also Norwich Jackie Bircham (Education) – also Norwich
North Yorkshire Coast (NYC)	**Sir Martin Narey (Government)**
Norwich	Richard Andrews (Government) **Dr Tim Coulson (Education)**
Oldham	
Stoke-on-Trent	**Professor Liz Barnes (Higher Education)**
West Somerset	

**Bold font = Independent Chair*

Additional interviews with **DfE officials** – Tim Morgan and Alison Wilson

3. Board Member Findings

3.1. Place-based Approaches and Local Leadership

Importance of Local Context

Across the interviews, there was strong consensus that interventions must be grounded in local realities, as opposed to being imposed externally, with many advocating for a place-based approach. One Blackpool board member explained:

> "In terms of deprivation, [Blackpool] is off the scale, bonkers. People outside, particularly politicians in London, fundamentally cannot get it. You have to work there." (Blackpool)

Successful initiatives were those that integrated with existing systems and reflected community contexts, from coastal isolation (Hastings, North Yorkshire Coast), rural deprivation and poor transport infrastructure (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire) to urban challenges (Ipswich and Norwich) and post-industrial decline (Blackpool, Bradford and Stoke-on-Trent). Standardised approaches were often viewed as counterproductive,

whilst locally driven solutions proved more sustainable. One Fenland board member stated: “I think the local place-based approach should definitely be preserved. That was instrumental”.

Asserting Local Priorities

Partnership boards that asserted local priorities and pushed back against total DfE control (e.g., Stoke-on-Trent, Ipswich) were perceived to have achieved stronger, long-lasting impact. Board members from Stoke-on-Trent and Blackpool noted:

> “We were absolutely holding firm [against the DfE] and said ‘No’, we weren’t going to approve projects until they were the right projects.” (Stoke-on-Trent)

> “What you have to do, if you’re doing place-based work, you have to put the resource in the place, and you have to take the risk that the place will use its agency in order to effect improvement.” (Blackpool)

However, one Bradford board member explained how flexibility enabled success:

> “We had the flexibility of how to spend that money within our priorities, and it enabled us to work with our educators and school leaders…we were able to work with the experts in the system [school leaders] and build a response that one, they’d buy into, and two, would work and we’d get traction.” (Bradford).

Those that developed local coalitions, for example, Bradford's Education Alliance for Life Chances (EALC) and the Ipswich Social Mobility Alliance (ISMA), continued activity beyond OA funding. By contrast, top-down delivery models weakened buy-in and undermined engagement.

Relationships with the DfE

External oversight worked best when supportive rather than directive. Where relationships functioned well, board members reported positive experiences:

> “Generally, I found the working relationships with the DfE to be friendly, positive.” (Bradford)

> “We had some fantastic civil servants working with us…top notch people who get it.” (Blackpool)

> “The working relationship with the DfE was really positive, really supportive.” (Hastings)

However, overly controlling approaches reduced motivation and undermined partnership working. Experiences with the DfE varied considerably across areas. Some OAs struggled with Area Delivery Leads they perceived to be unresponsive to local needs, focussed on achieving 'quick wins' (e.g., GCSE outcomes) rather than supporting longer-term investment, such as addressing deeper structural issues, or controlled rather than facilitated conversations. High DfE staff turnover (often three or more leads

over the programme's duration) exacerbated these relationship challenges and created inconsistency in support. Whilst some areas did report positive collaborative relationships with the DfE (notably senior officials), these varied experiences reflected deeper structural tensions within the programme itself.

Structural Conditions

The programme's central ambition to empower local action frequently conflicted with its own operational structures, as predetermined KPIs, rapid timelines, and rigid requirements, set by the DfE, partially constrained the innovation the programme sought to enable. This was captured by one Blackpool board member:

> "In the end, I just said "Do you know what? Keep it [funding]. Don't give it to us…What you describe is just a bureaucracy, and what I'm interested in is impact. You're talking about the impact in the sense of process, and I'm talking about it in the lived lives of people." (Blackpool)

The underlying issue, as one Bradford board member observed was:

> "The DfE tends to drive people towards their own pre-existing projects so they can show impact of those pre-existing projects, rather than identifying what the problem is, what we're trying to address, and what's the best way of addressing it." (Bradford)

These operational contradictions were seen to be compounded by broader structural barriers that limited programme effectiveness. Board members felt that national funding formulas did not consider genuine local needs, academisation policies fragmented local governance, and crucial socio-economic factors such as transport, housing, and employment opportunities which laid beyond the programme's remit. Ultimately, these experiences demonstrated that place-based programmes cannot succeed through centralised design alone; meaningful impact requires that local knowledge fundamentally shapes priorities, design, and delivery from the outset. One Blackpool board member reflected on their positive experience of the OA programme:

> "Generally, I feel very positive about the experience all around and proud that we did make some real change." (Blackpool)

Examples:

- **Stoke-on-Trent:** Rejected top-down schemes (e.g., Careers & Enterprise Company, Teach First) as misaligned with local needs. Locally designed initiatives, co-led by Staffordshire University and Port Vale FC, secured cross-sector credibility and engagement.
- **Blackpool:** Demonstrated that deeply entrenched disadvantage requires whole system responses, particularly around health; its strongest progress came when civil service teams were embedded in community networks,

- **Fenland & East Cambridgeshire:** Showed the limits of a one-size-fits all approach, in areas with widely differing town profiles, rural isolation, and poor transport infrastructure.

3.2. Governance and Collaboration

Effective governance balanced accountability with local ownership through diverse boards spanning education, business, health, and community organisations. Independent chairs were responsible for strategic oversight, ensuring that the board ran efficiently (e.g., meeting targets, staying on track, following budgets). While formal structures provided a framework, the quality of relationships was often seen as more important than institutional arrangement. One Blackpool board member observed: "What was brilliant…and is still brilliant in Blackpool, is the way that people work together" (Blackpool).

Trust as a Foundation for Effective Governance

Trust-building required engagement and understanding of local contexts. In Doncaster, the Deputy Chair's personal approach to school leaders built trust and surfaced critical issues, though persistent tensions with some secondary schools and cross-border MATs continued to undermine collaboration:

> "He [independent chair of Doncaster] felt there was a real toxic relationship between the different secondaries in Doncaster and a real breakdown in relationships and trust, and a lot of blame being thrown around things like exclusions…He wanted me to get under the skin of that. So, I actually spent…just going physically going around these people [school leads], hearing their views on what was working and what wasn't." (Doncaster)

The most effective approach involved embedding local actors, such as universities, further education provides, and MATs, which achieved better trust and more locally appropriate programming. Derby's governance created a safe, accountable space for open dialogue:

> "It wasn't always plain sailing, and that was challenged across the board, local authorities, schools and equally pushed back to the DfE about an understanding. So, it was an appropriate and professional challenge, and that dialogue was really important." (Derby)

Governance Models

University-led models proved particularly effective. University of Derby acted as an anchor institution, which the aim to ensure continuity beyond political cycles:

> "The University of Derby is about social mobility. That's one of their champions; that's on their strap lines. So, it was an incredibly good fit, and it was either an

incredibly well created opportunity, or it was a fantastic unintended consequence that landed." (Derby)

The university's commitment throughout the programme, and beyond the OAs funding was reinforced by the board, as well as the broader ecosystem benefits:

> "The good will of the university was immense, huge, and just resources that they had, you know, the space, the time, the venue." (Derby)

> "We [University of Derby] needed to be an ecosystem for education in a city that wasn't doing well…it's massively transformed how we work as an ecosystem." (Derby)

The importance of including local universities in place-based programmes, particularly for evaluations, were also noted in Fenland & East Cambridgeshire, Norwich, and Ipswich.

Collaborative partnerships also proved successful, particularly where they built on pre-existing networks, as outlined by many board members across Bradford, Ipswich and Fenland & East Cambridgeshire. One Bradford board member noted:

> "We [the partnership board] had to kind of make it up [the priorities]. We came along and had to decide on what the delivery plan would look like. We had to work together to see what would be the best metrics. We have to decide upon the shape of things together." (Bradford)

> "The programme [OA] was a success because of what we did, including some of those things which were not entirely 100% welcome from the DfE, but we work with what we were given." (Bradford)

Co-leadership models, such as Stoke-on-Trent's joint leadership between Staffordshire University and Port Vale FC was seen to secure credibility across sectors.

Board Composition

Some boards, such as Bradford's, found that broad representation diluted focus (e.g., not reflecting Bradford's multi-cultural makeup), whilst others struggled with member fatigue and competing priorities. However, when boards functioned well, they created valuable networks. One Derby board member stated:

> "There were already relationships in place, and they've been able to be developed further as a result of what started as an Opportunity Area…I think that when the Opportunity Area originally came together, it was a group of people who had common values, working in the same sector, but never met" (Derby)

> "What the board did, is bring in different people and different teaching institutions, some I'd personally never come across…t was good to have an

> overview of an education journey and the kind of different nuances that those various stages brought to it." (Derby)

Board members from education backgrounds (e.g., MAT leads, headteachers) noted that despite successes, boards would have benefitted from stronger educational representation to keep priorities aligned with young people's needs.

Leadership and Co-ordination

Effective governance depended on active members with local credibility, passion and time to invest. Board members explained that effective independent chairs needed deep local understandings and respect of the OA location:

> "I couldn't see somebody else in Derby being able to do that with the respect she [independent chair] had so quickly. She was able to mobilise it because it needed somebody who understood, but somebody who had the position to be able to drive that." (Derby)

> "My bit as a chair is that I took the role on as a way to help outcomes. I wasn't there as a passive person, but I learned, and my God I learned loads…I wanted to see improvements for the city." (Derby)

However, chairs from outside education sometimes faced challenges:

> "We had a chair who…didn't come from the education world, he came from banking…So, sometimes there was a little bit of frustration between his understanding of education and school leaders' understanding. But on the other hand, he brought an outside perspective and some challenge which was helpful." (Hastings)

Skilled project managers and programme directors were consistently identified as the difference between ideas and delivery. Norwich credited its project manager and their focussed, functioning board for delivering early literacy and attendance improvements. programme directors met regularly to discuss plans and share best practice. One Fenland & East Cambridgeshire board member reflected on their experience with their programme director:

> "One of the key successes of the opportunity area programme was our appointment of a project lead, a local lead. Now, she was absolutely instrumental in co-ordinating. She was an amazing person." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

However, governance structures sometimes felt tokenistic, rather than empowering, as mentioned by one Fenland & East Cambridge board member:

> "The idea of a board was always a bit lost, because the power and the governance really sat with the DfE. It was more of a kind of stakeholder piece, and there was a lot of hours that it took up, not necessarily for you to have

> actually had a great deal of voice in what happened." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

When independent chairs were distanced, or worked remotely, engagement suffered. Proximity and time commitment clearly mattered for maintaining momentum and relationships.

3.3. Key Priority Areas

Despite variations in approaches, common priorities emerged across all OAs, reflecting shared challenges in education. These were locally tailored to each specific context. Priority areas focussed on:

- **Early Years/Foundation Skills:** Focus on school readiness, early language development, literacy and numeracy
- **School/Attainment Priorities:** Improve teaching quality, raise attainment, reduce exclusions and strengthen school leadership
- **Post-16 & Careers:** Support transitions to further education, training, or work, and broaden career opportunities (raising aspirations)
- **Soft Skills/Mental Health & Well-being:** Develop resilience, mental health support and life skills for young people

However, the selection and focus of these priorities often revealed tensions between local assessment and external expectations.

Early Years and Foundational Skills

Several OAs (Norwich, Bradford, Fenland & East Cambridgeshire, Derby, Blackpool) invested heavily in phonics and early language development, with disciplined implementation combined with targeted coaching producing measurable gains. There was significant tension around prioritising early intervention vs quick wins, as one Fenland & East Cambridgeshire board member explained:

> "The real focus to the opportunity area needed to be with the very youngest children. One of my real issues with it was some of the targets that were being set were things like improving GCSE outcomes within a timeframe where the programme was going to be a three or four year programme, but actually, where it should have been was throwing every last ounce into early years, because otherwise it's just papering over the cracks." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

This tension was reinforced by DfE requirements which was seen to contradict local assessment of needs:

> "We pushed back to the DfE because we gave them a set of targets we thought were the most appropriate for the area, like literacy, phonics, the usual things in early years, and they rejected one of our targets and said, "You can't have all of these in primary schools, there's got to be one for GCSEs". Completely pointless.

> It was a programme that couldn't affect GCSEs." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

Another board member from Fenland & East Cambridgeshire noted that priority-setting:

> "It [priority setting] wasn't in the truest sense, based on an analysis of needs. It was based on a broad sense of urgency around certain things." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

Secondary Outcomes

Where areas did focus on secondary outcomes, they often faced some issues. For example, one Bradford board member explained their pragmatic approach:

> "It was always about trying to make the biggest, a big difference to outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people in Bradford…the decision was made to focus on outcomes in Key Stage 2 and outcomes in Key Stage 4, because they were really poor, and to focus on school improvement, because there were quite a number of schools in a very tricky place…with inadequate judgements [Ofsted]." (Bradford)

These challenges were often compounded by academisation and outcome data for disadvantaged children. One Doncaster board member mentioned that their OA faced similar issues:

> "We focussed on school attainment…There was lamentable highlight variable secondary school attainment. There were teacher recruitment challenges in secondary, and there was a really significant issue with school absence. There was also very clear evidence of off rolling, of schooling looking to get kids off their roll who were not going to flatter their exam results…Those academy chains were very hard work…Post-16 was also tough in relation to secondary because there was over provision." (Doncaster)

Post-16 and Careers, Exclusions and Attendance, and Mental Health

Board members mentioned that targeted interventions in these areas often showed measurable success. Exclusions and attendance interventions in Blackpool and Hastings led to significant reductions in permanent exclusions. Post-16 and careers work, such as Fenland & East Cambridgeshire's revival of Ely College and Derby and Doncaster's strengthen FE links and careers hubs, helped sustain engagement beyond Key Stage 4. Mental health initiatives in Bradford, Norwich, and Fenland & East Cambridgeshire became increasingly important during and after the Covid-19 lockdown, underpinning some improvements in attendance and attainment.

3.4. Place-based Barriers

Board members emphasised that geography was a critical factor in shaping both the challenges young people face in terms of social mobility and the solutions that are

viable. Coastal towns (Blackpool, Hastings, NYC) faced concentrated deprivation and poor transport, while rural areas (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire) suffered isolation and small cohorts of children and teachers. Fenland & East Cambridgeshire board members questioned the rationale for combining two areas with distinct profiles and challenges under a single OA, arguing that this sometimes-obscured specific local needs and diluted the focus of interventions.

Scale and Demographic Complexity

Some OAs faced challenges of sheer scale alongside geographical constraints. One Bradford board member mentioned how the size of the OA was compounded by complex social challenges:

> "We were by any country mile, the biggest of the OAs, and I think we have the majority of children in them, actually, of all of them. I think we have more than 50% of the children and young people because of this size." (Bradford)

> "There are things in Bradford around high levels of child poverty, multi-generational, kind of like economic disengagement, you know, not being in the system…some of the familial structures within some of our communities in Bradford just provide really multi-layered challenges." (Bradford)

Rural Isolation and Infrastructure Challenges

Fenland & East Cambridgeshire faced particularly acute geographical challenges, which creates educational barriers, as a selection of board members explained:

> "We are very isolate. We don't have transport links. The two biggest employers in the town are Purina Pet Foods and the Prince's fish canning factory. Outside that, the next thing is to go and work on agriculture in the fields." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

> "There's very little dual carriageway…there's virtually no train connection, certainly not to the northern edge, many small villages, not a great deal of connectivity." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

> "Within the opportunity area…you've got a zone of extremely sparse rural locality with a high degree of rural deprivation, both financial, cultural, educational opportunity, very generic…Transport becomes a bigger issue as children get older, and those areas are typically unconnected, or poorly connected…these things have a huge impact on the extent to which these communities find themselves isolated and left behind." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

Teacher recruitment challenges were particularly prevalent in these areas: "…it's hard to convince somebody in their 20s, I would imagine, that this is the place for them" (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire). Long travel distances and thin labour markets limited

post-16 access and hindered teacher career development, issues that are also noted in other rural areas, such as Hastings.

Coastal Deprivation and Limited Opportunities

Coastal towns faced their own distinct challenges to post-16 progression, as one Hastings board member explained:

> "Hastings is one of the most deprived areas of the country and obviously within East Sussex…there are significant challenges in the outcomes achieved by young people at all key stages in Hastings, high rates of exclusions, and suspensions, struggles with school attendance, high percentage of children with free school meals." (Hastings)

> "Hastings is a coastal town, so has lower employment rates than elsewhere across Essex. It has poor transport links so going east to west, and poor transport links to London…long standing issues in terms of schools and their performance in Hastings as well." (Hastings)

The isolation within coastal communities, and its knock-on effects to young people's careers was particularly striking:

> "I'm sure, similar to other opportunity areas, is that sort of generational unemployment, generational disengagement with schools and people staying in Hastings, staying very local. Hastings is obviously on the coast, but some of the most deprived estates in Hastings are in the north, and some of those children may have never been to the sea, which is two miles away." (Hastings)

NYC faced similar issues with its tourism-dependent, seasonal labour market influencing aspirations and shaping the types of careers interventions that were effective.

Post-industrial Fragmentation

Some areas faced the challenge of serving fragmented communities with distinct identities, as one Doncaster board member explained:

> "There is Doncaster town, but actually it's a collection of small villages…former mining communities with quite a poor travel infrastructure…a lot of the school communities, the sort of pupils and families are kind of in tiny little silos…all they can see is whatever they consider to be job opportunities on their doorstep, which are really limited." (Doncaster)

However, effective interventions could broaden horizons:

> "But, through some of this [OA] work, they're able to see actually, even staying in Doncaster, without having to sort of move down to London…there is a whole world of work out there that they hadn't even been aware of." (Doncaster)

Derby faced challenges with transient populations (both children and teachers):

> "We do generally have transient communities…transients, in that kind of 15, 16, 17-year-olds that nobody really notices." (Derby)

> "We are dealing with post-19 people who haven't got the attainment they need, they haven't got the English and Maths, they haven't got qualifications that give them good jobs…the barriers are kind of aspirations and good secondary education." (Derby)

Geographical Groupings

Fenland & East Cambridgeshire board members questioned the rationale for combining two areas with distinct profiles and challenges under a single OA:

> "It [the grouping] was a weird marriage from the get-go…It was like they weren't big enough on their own, that you kind of lobbed them together." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

The artificial grouping sometimes obscured specific local needs and diluted the focus of some interventions. Another Fenland & East Cambridgeshire board member questioned the selection process itself:

> "Fenland, obviously, is an area that has its challenges through remoteness and lack of infrastructure. So, I was completely gobsmacked when the first list of approved opportunity areas came out, the very short list, and Fenland wasn't on it, it met all the criteria easily." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

3.5. Funding and Timescales

Across a large majority of board members, the funding that each OA received was considered adequate, as one Bradford board member stated: "The money was welcome…it was really, really, really helpful and paid for some really good stuff". However, many viewed short-term funding cycles as incompatible with tackling generational disadvantage, which created fundamental problems. The initial three-year window, followed by two one-year extensions, created instability, undermined planning, and discouraged long-term investment in people and systems.

Generational Thinking Required

Board members consistently argued that the timeframes were mismatched to the problems they were trying to address. One Blackpool board member captured this in their interview:

> "If I were to do all this again, I would say, the opportunity needs to be for a generation, at the very least, because what I felt towards the end of the programme was that those children who happened to be in school during the life of the opportunity area got a better deal. But, if you followed on from that,

> because you weren't born at a certain time…then you missed out on the benefit that those that had previously gone ahead to you, and that didn't seem right either. It needs to be long-term and sustained." (Blackpool)

This was also echoed by a Bradford board member:

> "We've got a bit sick of short terminism of three years. Five years is great, but what we need is a generational response. We know it will take a generation to actually improve social mobility and life chances." (Bradford)

The mismatch between timeframes and underlying problems (e.g., poverty, housing, transport, health) was particularly stark in areas with deep rooted challenges. Many called for longer projects (10-15+) that exist beyond political cycles to avoid losing momentum:

> "That's the usual problem with these programmes, and it's also the reason why I think that it's essential that their timescales within which they run are not fixed-term Parliamentary periods. They've got to be long-term projects." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

Planning and Continuity Challenges

The short funding cycles created many practical problems. Extension periods often made planning more difficult, as one Blackpool board member explained: "People began to opt out exactly because they couldn't plan [from the third into the extension years]" and "There was quite a bit of late notice programme extension, which didn't help". Doncaster also found similar issues:

> "Without continued funding, longevity and legacy, it's an error. It's just not going to happen. That wasn't helped by the approach…we built the project as a three-year project, that would have a beginning, a middle and an end, which I think is good practice when you've got fixed term…there's not going to be time really to set anything much up." (Doncaster)

The extensions themselves, whilst welcome, created additional problems to planning efforts, as mentioned by one Doncaster board member:

> "You can't fix social mobility, and you can't actually fix embedded under achievements in three years, and then these little extensions, I know they are well meaning, but they just made life harder…the first of those extensions were coincidental with the pandemic at that." (Doncaster)

Staff Turnover and Momentum Loss

Short-term funding cycles contributed to staff turnover (e.g., programme directors, board members) and disrupted progress just as many initiatives were gaining traction. One Blackpool board member explained this fundamental issue in greater detail:

> "...change takes resource. That's just the reality. So, actually, if you're in a position where resources are becoming more pressed, and you take resource away, what's going to happen? Surprise, surprise, people are not going to continue investing in it." (Blackpool)

This created a need for longer interventions to be able to sustain staff (notably school staff) and make a difference at the early years level:

> "It [future place-based programmes] needs to be a longer, much longer intervention, to have the sort of sustained system change we're looking at...it needs to start in the Early Years...having a coherent approach over a longer period of time, changing mindsets...around the way that we educate in secondary. Unless that changes, nothing fundamental will change in terms of results in secondary." (Blackpool)

Evidence and Scaling Difficulties

Several OAs reported that demonstrating long-term impact within such limited timeframes was near impossible. For example, the programme was widely seen as too short to influence GCSE outcomes, and far too short to achieve generational change. Derby experienced this problem directly:

> "We did see improvements in outcomes, which have fallen off a cliff since Covid, which told us that we didn't have enough time...So, a four- or five-year project, which ended up with Covid, wasn't enough to sustain some of the good things." (Derby)

> "The problem with project funding is that it's always short-term. It doesn't allow for length of impact. I think that's the kind of problem you're left with...to sustain projects [mentioned community and parent engagement projects], with that kind of normal adult funding, it's very difficult." (Derby)

Unintended Consequences

Many board members argued that hard-won gains risked reversal due to lack of continued funding and follow-through mechanisms. There was also a concern about creating false expectations. For example, one Doncaster board member mentioned the worry about creating dependency among education settings:

> "You could throw some money at this problem in a short-term way which could create maybe a level of expectation and maybe a bit of learned dependency, a slight de-skilling of these people that once that money was removed, you were actually in a worse position than they were beforehand...that was something that we really did worry quite a lot about." (Doncaster)

Programme Design Scepticism

The time constraints of the OA contributed to broader cynicism about the programme's intentions. One Doncaster board member noted:

> "I think cynicism is one that was probably shared to some extent by all the chairs…scepticism, I guess is a better way of putting it, just in terms of it wasn't a huge amount of money, and the length of time of the projects, even though it was extended from the initial plan, were still pretty short. It didn't feel like it tied up enough to the underpinning problem that all these opportunity areas shared was deep poverty." (Doncaster)

Board members from Fenland & East Cambridgeshire also shared similar doubts:

> "…when you look at the time frames, there was never any chance you were going to be able to make the impact that you were going to be able to make. It was kind of like, here's a quick plaster" (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire board member)

> "If you're going to give me a bunch of cash to try and help some young people, of course, I'm going to take it and spend it, but it's not going to answer the problem long-term…It was a short-term political programme." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

Recommendations for Improvement

Despite these criticisms, board members recognised the programme's potential. For example, one board member from Fenland & East Cambridgeshire explained:

> "It's not a quick fix. That's the important thing. It is really important to build upon the foundation that has been laid by this programme, because there was some really good foundations laid." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

However, as mentioned, board members also called for changes to programme design, including long-term funding commitments of 5-10 years minimum, insulation from political cycles, development of local institutional structures to sustain gains, and better alignment across government departments. Some suggested clearer objectives for short-term programmes:

> "If it's [place-based programme] short-term, let's be really clear about what we'd like the outputs to be, please, because that would have been much easier from the get-go." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

Whilst some acknowledged that short cycles created urgency and political feasibility (e.g., NYC), most concluded that they ultimately compromised the programme's sustainability and long-term impact, with meaningful change requiring sustained commitment that matched the generational nature of the challenges being addressed across all OAs.

3.6. Measurement, Evaluation and Evidence Use

Evidence-informed practice was valued across all OAs, but implementation varied. Some areas struggled to integrate robust evaluation into project design from the outset, making it hard to attribute impact or learn rapidly from initiatives. However, several OAs (e.g., Bradford, Norwich, Fenland & East Cambridgeshire) embedded stronger data systems and local evidence networks, which helped both targeting and sustainability.

Evidence-Based Approaches

Several OAs developed sophisticated approaches to evidence use that extended beyond traditional metrics. Bradford exemplified this comprehensive approach: "The unique thing about Bradford is the connected data systems…" which enabled targeted interventions. For example, the Bradford OA developed the 'Connected Bradford' dataset to track absence patterns, which supported targeted interventions including school health hubs:

> "…it's been a thread for us in Bradford throughout the whole programme…is that we wanted to help schools to be data informed and evidence-led in their decision-making right through…from classroom stuff to whole school initiatives…we wanted them to be informed." (Bradford)

This approach helped to inform Bradford's resource allocation:

> "I think you need a…informed data decision to invest really significant resources in areas where you can complete the work, rather than just scatter the funding." (Bradford)

Blackpool benefited significantly from research school partnerships:

> "The discipline brought by the Research School was incredibly helpful…and the access to data and an intelligent interpretation of it." (Blackpool)

Blackpool's 'Right to Succeed' reading interventions achieved measurable gains (+2.9 reading points) through rigorous programme design and evaluation.

Fenland & East Cambridgeshire's partnership with Cambridge University brought academic expertise directly onto the partnership board, ensuring evaluation was embedded in governance from the outset:

> "The University of Cambridge was instrumental in driving us forward and driving the programme, because what was so important is that impact should be evidence-led and so that has been our mantra." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

> "I think it's massively important that these programmes have recourse to do a proper, full research programme on the locality to try and help everybody understand them from an external perspective, as well as an internal one, and

> also making sure that there's some strong comparison drawn between other learning and understanding gained." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

Norwich also embedded research champions and evidence networks, enabling adaptative practice and continuous improvement through the programme.

Implementation Challenges

Several OAs faced significant challenges in evaluation quality and approach. Blackpool experienced frustrations with external evaluations:

> "There was an evaluation of it [exclusions] done externally. I think it's rubbish…the external evaluation made every single mistake that I'd seen for the past decade." (Blackpool)

> "That was the problem with the evaluation…It evaluated a programme. I'm not sure which one it was, but it wasn't the one that I led. It had just started going off into random areas, all of which I'd head before, and it failed." (Blackpool)

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic also made measuring impact difficult.

Broader Evaluation Challenges

Other OAs struggled with different aspects of evidence use. Ipswich & Hastings mentioned prioritising rapid delivery and community engagement but risked losing valuable learning opportunities due to limited evaluation capacity. NYC faced cultural resistance of evidence-based methods despite a strong leadership for data-driven approaches. Multiple OAs also found that many projects lacked rigorous design from the outset.

Accountability and Measurement

The approach to evidence created ongoing tensions between narrow accountability measures, such as exam results and Ofsted ratings, and broader indicators of success including wellbeing, aspirations, and resilience. Board members (e.g., Norwich & Ipswich programme director) frequently stressed that their most meaningful achievements, such as aspiration and engagement, were often the hardest to quantify using traditional metrics.

University Partnerships as Evaluation Capacity

Universities played pivotal roles in building evaluation capacity, with Fenland & East Cambridgeshire partnering with Cambridge University and Blackpool collaborating with the University of Cumbria, to produce comprehensive programme evaluation. These relationships helped bridge the gap between academic rigour and practical implementation, though tensions remained about evaluation quality and whether formal evaluation outputs captured the full story of programme impact.

Varied experienced with evidence use highlighted the critical importance of embedding evaluation capacity from programme inception rather than treating it as an 'add-on'. Areas with strong university partnerships or existing data infrastructure were better positioned to demonstrate impact and learn from their interventions. However, the tension between accountability measures and meaningful indicators of change remained unresolved, with many board members arguing that the most significant impacts on young people's lives were precisely those that traditional metrics failed to capture.

3.7. Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Persistent teacher recruitment and retention challenges, especially in rural and coastal areas (e.g., Fenland & East Cambridgeshire, NYC, Hastings) constrained programme impact. Board members consistently identified staffing churn as undermining coaching initiatives, CPD, and career development.

Scale of Recruitment and Retention Challenges

The structural barriers to recruitment and retention were acute in certain geographical contexts. One Fenland & East Cambridgeshire board member highlighted the challenges:

> "Recruitment is a nightmare to be able to get people in. If you get them, it's really hard for you to keep them, because there's no career aspiration. If you're in school with only four teachers, you're not getting promoted." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

This was perceived to create a cycle of geographical isolation which was compounded professional isolation and limited career development opportunities. Blackpool also experienced staff churn directly, which undermined continuity in coaching initiatives and CPD programmes:

> "The other thing was transience, not only of children in Blackpool, but also turnover of staff. So, bringing together 12 heads of English, 3 months later, 4 of them were different, so it was really hard." (Blackpool)

Limited Impact of Short-term Interventions

Despite attempts to address recruitment challenges, the timeframes and resources available through the OA programmes proved insufficient for the scale of the problem, according to a selection of board members. For example, Doncaster recognised this limitation:

> "Teacher recruitment and teacher retention was a massive challenge…There's a real limit to what you can achieve in the timescale that we had was to try and grow your own staff in your community." (Doncaster)

One board member from Fenland & East Cambridgeshire was explicit in their assessment of the OA's impact on teacher recruitment and retention:

> "No, it's made no difference in how that [teacher recruitment and retention] works, it's made zero difference…It was chucking a few quid in a massive hole…I think short-term, we probably had an impact on recruitment into positions. I think we spent some money on it, whether that then kept people for the next five years in Fenland, I highly doubt it. But, I think it had a short-term kind of impact." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

Addressing Recruitment Through Local Solutions

Despite these limitations, some board members mentioned that their OAs showed progress through targeted local approaches. Fenland & East Cambridgeshire found that where local MATs invested in grow-your-own (SCITT – School-centred initial teacher training) approaches, retention rates improved, though transport and connectivity issues continued to make recruitment difficult. Doncaster identified leadership development programmes and SCITT activity as accelerators for sustained secondary improvements.

3.8. Cross-Sector Collaboration and Systems Change

All OAs recognised that educational outcomes are deeply intertwined with health, housing, transport and employment. Effective cross-sector collaboration delivered the most lasting benefits but require dedicated capacity and long-term commitment that often exceeded the programme's scope and resources.

Need for Systems Thinking

Board members consistently identified that educational challenges in their areas were symptoms of broad systemic issues requiring cross-sector solutions. One board member from Bradford explained this further:

> "I think this was the irritation we had with the programme. It requires the government to work in a cross-departmental way, which didn't really ever land within the Bradford Opportunity Areas…One of the reasons our children are so disadvantaged is because of housing, transport, the criminal justice system and health inequalities…when you've got that other levels of socio-economic and lifetime inequalities, then that requires a different type of programme. I suppose that when I look back on it [the OA], that's the thing that was increasingly evident. The weakness in the programme is that it didn't look at deeper reasons for poor outcomes for disadvantaged children, young people, and it didn't embrace the really important partnerships that we need to have, which are social care, with health, with the built environment, with transport, with adult skills." (Bradford)

This perspective was also echoed by one board member from Blackpool who was asked about what they would avoid or retain if a similar place-based initiative were to happen again:

> "I'd retain additional funding…I'd retain a focus on place, because I think there are issues that you have which are place-based, but they're not purely educational. Education is just a manifestation of it." (Blackpool)

Examples of Cross-Sector Working

Despite some structural limitations, several areas mentioned achieving meaningful cross-sector collaboration. For example, one Hastings board member spoke about how the OA demonstrated effective multi-agency working:

> "I think the model of Hastings opportunity area worked well in that staff were employed locally and managed locally…it wasn't just education around the table. It was also the district council, the NHS, the volunteering community sectors, employers. I think that ambition and the aim to do that as a multi-agency sort of solution is right. You can't tackle the issues in Hastings just by education. It has to be multi-agency. I think that was the right approach, but I would do it on a bigger scale." (Hastings)

Bradford developed integrated health-education partnerships (e.g., dental hygiene and education projects) and used the 'Connected Bradford Dataset' for cross-sector data sharing. Norwich & Ipswich positioned education within broader economic inclusion agendas, and Hastings' Broadening Horizons created enrichment pathways and increased aspiration through cross-sector coordination. Fenland & East Cambridgeshire developed post-16 collaboration and local evidence networks linking FE, schools and employers to keep students engaged.

Structural Constraints

Despite these successes, the education-focused mandate of the OA limited genuine systems integration. One board member from Doncaster noted that even ministerial support was insufficient:

> "Her [Justine Greening] hands were very tied by the amount of money and government commitment that was available. Really for them to work properly, they needed to be much more cross government and not just involving the DfE. It needed to involve the other departments much more to be longer term." (Doncaster)

Key Barriers

Many board members acknowledged that tackling generational disadvantage required broader interventions but lacked the authority and resources to address root causes. Key barriers included misaligned funding cycles, restrictive accountability frameworks,

data-sharing limitations, absence of shared cross-sector performance metrics, and competing organisational priorities. Building cross-sector relationships was resource intensive and, in many circumstances, depended on knowledge chairs, sustained relationship management and co-ordination capacity. These were many resources that the OAs did not have, as board member and chair roles were not paid, full-time positions.

3.9. Impact of Covid-19

The pandemic both disrupted progress and highlighted the value of strong local networks. Areas with robust partnership infrastructures adapted rapidly, while others saw progress stall or reverse, revealing how pre-existing relationships and systems shaped crisis response capacity.

Networks as Crisis Resilience Infrastructure

Areas with established partnership networks were able to pivot quickly to address immediate community needs during the pandemic. Norwich, Stoke-on-Trent and Bradford leveraged existing networks to deliver welfare, food and parental support. One board member from Norwich reflected on their OAs efforts:

> "Fortuitously, we had all that kind of social scaffolding in place because of opportunity…so we were able to deal with Covid so much easier." (Norwich)

Creative Responses

Some areas developed innovative approaches to maintain support for vulnerable communities during the lockdown. For example, board members from Blackpool and Derby reflected on the approaches their OAs employed:

> "Covid disproportionately impacted on those communities, so we had to be creative in finding ways of dealing with it, and we came up with a number of creative ways." (Blackpool)

> "We ran another project in Derby called Boundary Leapers…targeted at threes to fours, fours to fives, then seven plusses, ad we produced work packs online and literacy books for children…Those who are disadvantaged by their social mobility, are often those who are digitally disadvantaged. So, actually, there was the appropriate resources in the place for that…You could have not predicted that, but actually it gave a resource that Derby could mobilise very quickly." (Derby)

Amplification of Existing Inequalities

To many board members, the pandemic intensified existing challenges. One board member from Fenland & East Cambridgeshire elaborated on how Covid exacerbated existing inequalities:

> "Covid was an amplifier of existing priorities." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

> "It sounds very blunt, but the rich got richer, and the poor got poorer." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

Disruption to Progress and Measurement

According to many board members, the pandemic disrupted both programme delivery and the ability to measure impact. One Derby board member reflected on this dual impact, but recognised that the pandemic responses aligned with their initial priorities:

> "Covid robbed a lot. It definitely stole from the project in terms of what could be seen as direct impacts, and it impacted on legacy too…however, it helped something…Family engagement in Covid was integral to mental health for those who needed social mobility. They were the most vulnerable at that period and maybe that helped them at the time." (Derby)

Some saw Covid's impact on the OAs evaluation as problematic:

> "It [Covid] made it impossible to measure the impact that we had up until that point. Just the face that there's no end tests and the rest of it immediately invalid. When you start looking at Key Stage 4, it's not the same. So, how do you measure it? It was all a bit of a funky mess, wasn't it?" (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

In some areas, progress was seen to stall or reverse. Board members in Derby saw improvements in attendance collapse after schools re-opened, while inequalities in Fenland & East Cambridgeshire widened, demonstrating how the impact of the pandemic varied significantly depending on pre-existing local capacity and partnership strength.

3.10. Legacy Creation and Institutional Embedding

Most OAs left legacies in the form of strengthened networks, relationships, and cultural shifts rather than sustained for specific interventions. However, the durability and significance of these legacies varied considerably depending on local capacity and institutional embedding.

Successful Institutional Transitions

Where local structures took ownership, legacies proved most durable. Bradford's transition exemplified this success, with board members forming the EALC to continue tackling inequalities in mental health, school attendance, and digital access. As one Bradford board member noted:

> "We realised that inequalities had widened in Bradford significantly…we thought we just can't stop working together at this kind of senior strategic partnership." (Bradford)

> "This continuity meant that the OA work [speaking about EALC, Bradford Birth to 19]…it still drives the work of those partnership board members and of lots of teams in Bradford, making the difference where it's most needed." (Bradford)

Derby's university-led model created strong foundations through ongoing platforms and restructured networking:

> "We've had a science week for year nine children, 500 year nines, who were going to go and do triple science, have gone to University of Derby to have an ecosystems event for a day with all sorts of people speaking…So, because you've got that, you've now got that relationship, you've got a platform to work from. It's a legacy." (Derby)

> "There was a real collegiate approach, and one of the biggest legacies for adults is that everyone networks far better…There were talk shops that had very little…We carved those away, and we've sort of cleared the horizon and being able to have key strategic collegiate groups that work both in terms of strategic leadership heads, but around things such as English networks, Maths networks, it's what we call a quality of education network." (Derby)

Many mentioned that the OA resulted in stronger ties between board members, continuation of strategic sub-groups (e.g., Primary Sub-Groups – Derby, and Headteacher Networks – Norwich), creation of evidence networks and research schools/hubs, and collaborations between neighbouring OAs (e.g., Fenland & East Cambridgeshire, Ipswich and Norwich – Eastern Opportunity Areas Hub).

Mixed Successes

Some board members mentioned that their OAs showed partial success in maintaining specific interventions. One Blackpool board member mentioned how their OA showed mixed results, with sustainability remaining uneven:

> "I think the English Hub has seen sustained improvement, but then the English Hub was funded sustainability beyond the Opportunity Area…what we are not necessarily seeing is stuff that we did during the Opportunity Area three years that followed it." (Blackpool)

Several areas struggled to maintain momentum without continued support. One board member from Doncaster explained this further, highlighting the significance of relationship building:

> "I didn't feel like there was a massive legacy there, really, other than people mourning it and wishing it was still there and looking back fondly on the way it gave a real impetus for people to work differently." (Doncaster)

> "I think it [the OA] was much more that the overarching sort of recollection of what I learned from this experience was the importance of those over

> relationships and the importance of having real mechanisms for getting people to work together. I felt like there was enough left of that, that people wished it was stronger." (Doncaster)

Hastings experienced reduced engagement when transitioning to lighter-touch successor programmes, with mixed impact:

> "When the Hastings Opportunity Area stopped, the priority improvement area then came along, but that is a lot less money, and the engagement has not been as good…Some of the relationships between board members and therefore, partners have stayed." (Hastings)

> "I don't think it [the OA] solved all the educational problems in Hastings at all, I think on some very specific areas, it did. So, maths is a good example of that. I think it did bring people around the table, and it helped establish strong partnerships, which have benefitted the town and education going forward." (Hastings)

Derby also showed selective continuation, adopting some practices from other OAs:

> "We had a very broad opportunity to engage in lots of things…We were able to engage with other OAs and projects that they were facilitating. For example, Glasses in Classes was an item from the Bradford OA. We still run that in school. We kept that." (Derby)

Cultural Shifts and Attribution Challenges

Many OAs reported strengthened networks and cultural shifts around social mobility focus and pedagogical improvements. However, areas like Fenland & East Cambridgeshire questioned attribution:

> "I think it [the OA] helped foster and augment relationships, and I think relationships have been helped by the programme. But I would say is that a lot of that was already there…I don't know if I would say the programme could legitimately lay claim to having founded those networks or to sustain them. What it certainly did was help." (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

All OAs reflected that whilst collaboration between the OAs was beneficial, the official twinning initiative introduced late into the programme (2021) had little effect:

> "I think if it [twinning] had been designed in from the beginning, it might have been helpful, but it was a little bit of late thinking." (Doncaster)

Board members reported limited clarity on its purpose, why certain areas were paired, or what the process was intended to achieve. It was largely perceived as an 'add-on', rather than a driver of genuine collaboration or legacy.

4. DfE Official Findings

The interviews with two DfE officials reveal the internal mechanisms, challenges and lasting impact of the Opportunity Areas programme. One official provides an operational perspective, whilst the other provides strategic oversight.

4.1. Hybrid Governance Model

The OA deliberately balanced central government authority with local authority. DfE retained ultimate decision-making power but independent local boards, chaired by credible figures and composed of school leaders, local authorities, and community groups, provided challenge, local intelligence, and convening power. While boards lacked executive authority, their symbolic and practical role in brokering relationships was considered central to the programme's value.

> "Our intention was very much to come to the table strongly and show local leadership but have around the table a very strong local partnership with some autonomy for decision making…it was never meant to be a strict, top-down programme dictating what and when." (DfE Official 1)

Board members were considered as "advisors to government" without executive authority, but ministers "valued the independence of the chairs" and wanted "disruptors" who could provide fresh perspectives beyond existing institutional viewpoints.

For example, the independent chair for the NYC partnership board was appointed due to their distinguished career, deep personal commitment to the area, and strong desire to raise young people's aspirations. Their credibility and ambition lent authority to the board and helped challenge entrenched local attitudes.

4.2. Funding

Each OA received approximately £2 million annually over three years, which was seen as a "drop in the ocean" compared to £60 billion annual government spending on schools, according to one official. Officials pursued precision targeting where interventions were designed to focus on specific cohorts, schools or individual pupils:

> "English does not improve in a classroom unless the teacher who teaches it and the children who are sat there receive that intervention." (DfE Official 2)

For example, in Scarborough, instead of general teacher recruitment support, the DfE team conducted detailed analysis revealing that schools were attracting strong external candidate fields but consistently appointing local candidates due to assumptions about retention – "there was this sort of psychology that people won't stay unless they're already rooted here" (DfE Official 1).

4.3. The “Tilting” Strategy

One official describes "tilting" as re-directing existing DfE programmes towards OAs. Rather than creating entirely new initiatives, the strategy involved ensuring existing resources (e.g., maths and English hubs) were prioritised for these areas to eliminate “cold spots” in provision.

This approach combined this tilting of existing resources with bespoke local solutions funded through area budgets. For example, Scarborough's speech and language therapy programme emerged when primary practitioners identified communication skills as a major barrier, but NHS provision was limited. The area funded training for primary staff to conduct assessments and employed mobile speech therapists to work across multiple schools. This work exemplified how tilting national resources could be combined with locally tailored solutions.

4.4. Diagnostic-Led Intervention Design

Both interviewees emphasised the OAs commitment to deep diagnostic work before intervention design. One official described the initial mandate as understanding “what was preventing children from achieving better life chances” through extensive data analysis, workshops and relationship-building with local stakeholders to understand systemic blockages.

The same official reported emerging success in EY and primary indicators, stating that “we were starting to see real shift in some of the data” including phonics outcomes and good level of development measures, particularly in smaller areas where “you could actually count the children that you needed to focus on”.

4.5. Covid-19 Disruption

The Covid-19 pandemic represented the programme's most significant disruption. One official was reassigned to lead the DfE's vulnerable children unit in March 2020, representing the broader departmental pivot to crisis response.

Delivery models built around local convenors, events and face-to-face collaboration became unfeasible. The official noted that Covid-19 “hit different communities, in different ways”, with disadvantaged areas experiencing disproportionate impacts, fundamentally altering the programme's operating environment and target population needs. However, some OAs may have been better positioned to support vulnerable children and families during lockdowns due to established partnership networks.

4.6. Scale Variations and Implementation Challenges

Differences in geographical area sizes created disparities. One official noted a 100:1 ratio in pupil numbers between Bradford and West Somerset, producing different implementation challenges and limited opportunities for cross-area learning. It also meant that funding was often stretched in large urban contexts, while smaller areas could track and intervene more intensively.

Staffing was also noted as a constraint. One official identified workforce mobility as a persistent barrier: “I remember spending a lot of time upskilling a maths practitioner, and then they've got promotion to a headteacher…People want promotions, people want to retire”. This professional progression undermines programme continuity and sustainability.

Collaboration across areas was limited. While regional clustering was attempted (e.g., Scarborough, Doncaster and Bradford), differences in priorities and challenges restricted scope for shared learning. Both officials were aware of 'Twinning' but unsure of the delivery processes and outcomes.

4.7. Legacies and Institutional Learning

Despite curtailed ambitions, both officials stressed the OAs legacy:

- Local partnerships and networks
- Cultural shifts within the DfE – civil servants required to work directly 'in place'. This relational, place-based model now underpins programmes such as RISE.
- Methodological learning – OAs embedded a stronger focus on fidelity of implementation, targeted intervention, and evidence-informed design.

One official noted: "Fidelity to proven interventions and targeting at the right children, schools, teachers, classrooms" has become embedded in DfE school improvement work.

4.8. Evaluation and Assessment Challenges

One official was sceptical about detecting statistically significant area-level improvements given most funding levels: “It might be very, very surprising if you detected that they'd gone up overall”. The same official also described practical barriers for evaluation research, with programme documentation scattered across “12 areas and central team and across a whole bunch of other people” with no centralised archive and FOI restrictions on ministerial papers. The other official acknowledges that the OA did not fully achieve its original objectives, but attributed this to the pandemic's disruption rather than to design flaws:

> “I don't think it fully achieved its original objectives. I think that's why we had to stay and do priority education areas and expand to that more. I think even if we could evidence, we were on that trajectory, I think the sort of impact of Covid setting children back, particularly in these communities, was a real sort of barrier to achieving some of the objectives and aims.” (DfE Official 1)

The same official also noted that while ministerial changes required re-explanation and adjustment of the programme, there was generally continued commitment across the conservative party (Justine Greening, Damian Hinds, Nadhim Zahawi, Gavin Williamson). Each brought slightly different interpretation of the OA, but support remained consistent.

4.9. Conclusions

According to the DfE officials, the OA illustrated both the potential and limits of place-based policy initiatives:

- Ambitious social mobility goals were set against limited budgets. Success relied on leveraging existing programmes and precise targeting.
- The blend of central authority and local advisory boards fostered meaningful engagement, though tensions over power and accountability were present.
- Staff mobility, ministerial change and pandemic disruption underscored the fragility of short-term place-based initiatives.
- The most durable outcomes were methodological and cultural – shaping how the DfE approaches targeted school improvement, and overall, providing learning for government practice.

However, the need for cross-departmental working in central government, that was flagged by many board members, was not a feature of DfE's interpretation of the OA.

5. Policy Implications

- **Commit to long-term funding (5–10 years):** Short cycles undermined continuity, trust and evaluation. Funding should be insulated from political cycles to enable systemic change.
- **Embed local ownership from the outset:** Local leadership must set priorities through early co-design with community partners, schools and civic bodies, tailored to different place-types rather than generic groupings.
- **Invest in civic infrastructure:** Fund dedicated local roles (e.g. project managers, directors) and embed anchor institutions such as universities, FE colleges and employers as convenors.
- **Shift central government's role:** Act as an enabler of cross-sector collaboration, funding and evaluation, not a director. Reduce staff turnover to ensure stable central–local relationships.
- **Design place-sensitive policy:** Address distinct local challenges (e.g. transport, workforce, post-16 access) and avoid one-size-fits-all approaches.
- **Prioritise cross-sector collaboration:** Educational outcomes are tied to health, housing, transport and employment. Future initiatives need cross-departmental budgets or pooled funding.
- **Build in monitoring and evaluation:** Co-design robust frameworks with universities and local evidence bodies, combining accountability metrics (attainment, attendance) with broader outcomes (aspiration, wellbeing, resilience). Allow time for piloting and scaling.
- **Plan for sustainability and legacy:** Require exit strategies from the outset and embed initiatives within existing structures (schools, FE, LAs, MATs). Support inter-area collaboration from the start rather than as a late add-on.