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Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP  
Chair  
Education Select Committee

## **OPPORTUNITY AREAS**

You asked the Minister for Children and Families, Vicky Ford MP, to write to you regarding the Opportunity Areas. However, it was agreed that I should write, as the OAs form part of my portfolio.

### **Overview**

As you know, the OAs are 12 areas with historically poor educational attainment and low social mobility; they form part of my Department's contribution to the Government's ambition of *levelling up*. We invested £72m in the OAs over the first three years of the programme (2017-20), and are investing a further £18m this year. This note details some of the things we have invested in and the impact we are having. However, it is important to explain upfront that the OAs are not just 12 sets of initiatives. Each one is taking a place-based approach to achieving lasting culture and system change. The changes in each area are chosen to respond directly to the specific local context. They are co-designed by local leaders, and therefore have longer-lasting buy-in from them. The aim in each area is not just to run a successful set of one-off initiatives but to strengthen the local system's capacity to sustain and improve itself in the longer term.

This place-based approach is even more important in the context of Covid. It is clear that the education of disadvantaged children has been affected worse by school closures than the education of their peers. A tailored, place-based approach will help to ensure that all areas of the country recover fully, and build upon the gains made in recent years. In regard to Covid, the OAs are both ensuring that the nationwide catch-up measures work as effectively as possible, in what are some of the most deprived parts of the country; and augmenting them in some cases for the most disadvantaged children within those areas.

With that wider perspective in mind, I am highlighting four key elements of the work.

Firstly, a key focus of the work in every OA is to improve the quality of teaching. That has involved significant investment, in every OA, in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers, including the EEF-accredited training the Government has delivered through the network of Research Schools; funding the accelerated roll-out of National Professional Qualifications; and investment in subject-specific training such as the Maths Mastery programmes. It has also involved work to improve teacher recruitment and retention in deprived areas.

Secondly, we are focussed across the OAs on improving support for and effectiveness of early years provision. As you are aware, much of the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers at KS2 and KS4 is apparent even before they start school. So CPD for early years providers, and schemes to identify and address early speech and language needs, are a key feature of our work in almost all the OAs. Between them, early years work and school improvement (of which improving teaching is a key part) account for around 60% of the OAs' total funding.

However, we know that many of the barriers that prevent children and young people from achieving their potential originate outside of school. So a third key area of our work is wider projects which will help children and young people engage with and get the most out of school. These include projects on mental health, attendance, transition points (e.g. between primary and secondary school), and extra-curricular activities (including during school holidays).

Finally, and cutting across all of these, an important priority for us is to share the learning from the OAs with other areas facing similar challenges. This is not just about sharing successful projects – although that is important; it is also about sharing the *approach*. I explain more about this in the final section of this letter.

### **Disadvantaged white pupils**

The context for your request was your committee's inquiry into left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The OAs were selected from among the worst performing areas on the Social Mobility Commission's 2016 Social Mobility Index, which had been designed to be independent and objective. So the OAs are all, by definition, social mobility cold spots – places that feel left behind. Within each OA, many of the initiatives are particularly focussed on the most disadvantaged in that area – the most left behind people. The OA programme is therefore tightly targeted on some of the people in the country who feel most left behind, and sits squarely within the Government's wider programme to level up opportunity.

## Impact of the OAs

The impact of the OAs can be demonstrated in a number of ways: improvements in key measures; innovation; sharing learning with other areas; and sustainable fundamental culture change. I am also commenting on value for money. Formal evaluation work is ongoing and will report at a later date. Some of this evaluative work has of course been disrupted by the Covid-19 crisis, but once it is completed, I will of course share it with you.

### **1. Improvements in key measures**

The OAs were announced in the 2016/17 academic year. In setting their initial targets, they took either the 2015/16 or 2016/17 data as their baseline. Delivery started from September 2017 and was ramped up considerably from September 2018. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, many performance measures were not available for 2019/20. Our evaluation programme will track this data over a longer period in due course, as well as assessing the extent to which the programme was directly responsible for these improvements. But many of the early data, from 2018/19, showed performance on a positive trajectory. For example:

- **Early years outcomes for disadvantaged pupils improved in 9 of the 12 OAs.** The greatest changes in FSM children achieving a Good Level of Development, between 2016/17 and 2018/19, was in areas that prioritised the early years: West Somerset (+14ppts) Derby (+10ppts) and Oldham (+5ppts).
- West Somerset has already met its target to increase the Good Level of Development among five-year-olds to above the national average. The proportion of children achieving the expected levels in the early learning goals in West Somerset increased from 57% in 2015/16 to 73% in 2018/19. This was above the 2019 national average of 72%.
- **Phonics results for all pupils improved in 10 of the 12 OAs.** The greatest improvements in pupils meeting the expected standard in phonics, between 2015/16 and 2018/19, were being made in: West Somerset (+9ppt), Hastings (+5ppt), Derby (+4ppt) and Scarborough (+4ppt).
- In Derby, the OA has been supporting schools in the city to develop successful phonics programmes so that children can communicate effectively at a young age. The results are striking: some 83 percent of Year 1 pupils met the expected standard in phonics in 2018/19, higher than the national average for the first time. That means those young children are developing crucial early reading skills, setting themselves up to learn, to communicate and to have the confidence to succeed.
- **Key Stage 2 combined attainment data for all pupils improved between 2016 and 2019 by more than the national rate in 10 of the 12 OAs.**

- In maths, for example, between 2016 and 2019, on average the OAs saw a 11.8ppts rise in maths outcomes at KS2. This was 2.9 ppts higher than the increase in England overall.

As mentioned in the Northern Powerhouse Partnership's submission to the committee, DfE also did some work to compare progress in the OAs with some non-OA areas that were similar in some key respects. Once again, there were some encouraging signs of progress:

- In Oldham, the proportion of all children achieving a good level of development – a key early years metric – rose 4 percentage points in the academic year to 2018/19 to 68.1%. Over the same period, neighbouring Rochdale saw a slight decrease of -0.2 percentage points to 66.2%.
- In Doncaster, at Key Stage 1, they recorded a 1.4 percentage point increase to reach 79% of children achieving the expected standard in phonics in 2018/19. In contrast, nearby Rotherham saw a decrease of -0.9 percentage points on that measure over that period.
- In Bradford, the proportion of pupils who achieved the expected level in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 rose 2.1 percentage points to 62.7% in 2018-19, which was twice the increase seen in Birmingham over the same period – a rise of 1 percentage point to 62.3%.

## **2. Innovation**

A key strength of the OAs is their ability to test new ideas. Where these are successful, DfE is looking to share them with other parts of the country.

### *Teacher recruitment*

A good example of this is teacher recruitment. As you know, this is a problem in many parts of the country, with schools often relying on supply teachers and agency staff. Many of the OAs also noticed a trend whereby applicants only came from teachers already in the area – so filling a post at one school often created a vacancy elsewhere in the area.

To address this, the North Yorkshire Coast OA launched an innovative project where teacher recruitment was centralised through a single consultancy service. The OA funded a bespoke marketing campaign to promote the area as a great place to live and work, and schools received support from a recruitment expert with extensive experience in the industry. Financial incentives were offered for some hard-to-fill posts (EBacc subjects and primary school leadership posts), along with a re-location package to applicants from outside of the area. The project has been a resounding success – filling 207 teacher and support role vacancies across 43 schools. Of particular note is the fact that 38 of those teachers and support

professionals, and 13 new Teach First trainees, came from outside the area. The project has greatly reduced the overall level of spend on supply and agency staff over the past 18 months.

Teacher recruitment and retention projects have been run in a number of the OAs, including Bradford, Stoke-on-Trent, Ipswich, and Fenland and East Cambridgeshire. We are about to publish details of all these projects so that areas across the country can learn from them, and will gladly send a copy to your committee. This shows the value of the OAs in trialling new ideas and then sharing the learning from them.

### *Glasses in Classes*

The Minister of State for School Standards, Nick Gibb, referred to this project in the hearing with the committee on 9 February 2021. It is an innovative project working to solve a significant problem.

All children in Bradford receive an eyesight test in their Reception year. The results are shared with families but not with schools. Our data found that 2,500 children in Bradford do not get the glasses they need, and that schools are unaware of their uncorrected eyesight issues. In many cases, children were perceived to have problems with reading – provoking the wrong, expensive, educational response – rather than a problem with eyesight.

Our Glasses in Classes project involves a data sharing agreement, so that schools know which children have failed their eye test, and provides two pairs of glasses – one for home, and one kept in the classroom. A £1m EEF grant is now funding a trial of this across 100 Bradford schools, testing the impact on children's literacy.

We are waiting for the externally verified results from the trial but we do know there has been year-on-year progress. At the start of the programme, pupils were 9 percentage points behind the national average in reading at KS2. That gap narrowed to 4ppts in 2018 and 2ppts in 2019.

In the coming months we hope to expand the programme to 5 more areas, reaching 1,000 more pupils. If successful it will then be rolled out more widely.

### *Early Identification of Autism*

Another innovative project – also from Bradford – has identified a way to use the Early Years Foundation Score Profiles (EYFSP), which all children receive, to support swift identification across neurodevelopmental areas, including autistic spectrum disorders. This allows multidisciplinary intervention planning and suitable education provision to be put in place earlier.

Schools have bought into this as they are aware that these children are struggling in the classroom but don't know the underlying causes. By bringing the support to the children in the school, they are saving time and resources through reducing duplication of effort, and ensuring that children receive the correct support earlier. After a successful trial in 10 schools, we are

expanding this trial to 100 schools and we hope to extend in to 6 more areas in 2021-22, in close partnership with the Department of Health & Social Care and NHS England. Again, as we become increasingly confident in helping local areas to adopt effective operational implementation, we have national roll-out in view.

### *Mental Health and Wellbeing*

We are also running a number of innovative mental health and wellbeing projects across the OAs.

In Ipswich, for example, we are supporting 36 schools to implement University College London's SWERL Programme ('Supporting Wellbeing and Emotional Resilience through Learning') to improve engagement and attendance. SWERL provides a consistent framework for schools to conduct a detailed audit of their approach to supporting pupils' wellbeing and resilience, and to develop bespoke improvement plans tailored to each school's needs and context, drawing on evidence of what works. We are now offering this to all schools in Felixstowe as part of our twinning work (see below), again with an eye to wider roll-out.

In Stoke-on-Trent we piloted giving early intervention support for FE students with "lower level" mental health issues that didn't meet the threshold for a counselling or safeguarding intervention. This proved hugely successful. The number of students referred to formal counselling fell from 495 in 2018/19 to just 142 in 2019/20. This also greatly reduced the demands on teachers to give support in low level emotional wellbeing situations.

Meanwhile in Derby, our Emotionally Healthy Schools project has ensured that every school in Derby now has a fully-trained Designated Lead for Mental Health, leading to better strategic planning for mental health and emotional well-being, including signposting additional support for schools and families.

### *Alternative Provision (AP)*

Another area where the OAs have been trialling new approaches is in alternative provision (AP), where our focus is on improving outcomes for children and young people who attend AP, by ensuring greater support in school, and improving the type of AP on offer.

Whilst the Government supports head teachers to use their powers to issue suspensions and expulsions in response to poor behaviour, we are clear that expulsion should be used as a last resort. We are therefore pursuing an ambitious programme of work on school behaviour and to rapidly improve the availability of good Alternative Provision (AP), so children at risk of suspension or expulsion receive a high-quality education and support suited to their individual needs.

We recognise that AP and expulsion are also expensive. My Department estimates that alternative provision costs around £18K per pupil, per year, on average. We estimate that expulsion, in today's prices, has a lifetime cost of

around £88K per pupil – including costs to the police, social services, the NHS, and education services. This means that innovative OA interventions that focus on reengaging pupils in their learning, within their own schools, offer better value for taxpayer money. While the expulsion figures for the following projects need to be treated slightly cautiously (given that we don't yet know the impact of Covid), we are seeing encouraging signs of progress.

For example, Blackpool's 'Team around the School' project has worked with around 200 pupils at risk of disengagement or expulsion. 84 pupils have now graduated from that programme and only two of them have since been expelled. Figures provided by the local authority suggest that expulsions in secondary academies in Blackpool fell from 56 to 13 in just one year.

North Yorkshire has expanded internal AP and provided tailored CDP to teachers to improve their approach to behaviour management. An early evaluation has found an 82% reduction in expulsions in Scarborough and a 15% reduction in pupils being suspended.

And in Hastings, St Leonards Academy has been piloting the use of in-house AP provision, with an intensive 6-week course designed to re-engage pupils in education and reduce their risk of expulsion. Early data suggests that 28 of the 40 key stage 3 participants involved have been successfully re-engaged back into mainstream lessons.

You said at the session on 9 February that you and the committee would be interested in visiting Hastings at some point to see this project for yourself. I would be delighted to help arrange that for you, and to accompany you; I suggest you might also want to invite members of Yvette Cooper's Home Affairs committee to accompany us.

### **3. *Sharing learning***

Your committee's report on the OAs in 2019 highlighted the importance of sharing the learning from the programme with other areas. This remains a key objective for the programme.

In 2018, my Department published a set of case studies setting out the range of work across the 12 areas, with information and tips for other areas interested in copying those programmes. We are now following that up with a series of thematic guides, which will set out what we have done in response to a series of common policy challenges. We will start to publish these shortly; again, I shall be pleased to arrange for officials to send copies to your committee. I referred above to our upcoming guide on teacher recruitment and retention, which will detail the successful projects we've run across five different OAs on that. Other guides will cover our work on early years, attendance and behaviour, and careers advice.

In addition to this, at my request each of the 12 OAs has now been twinned with one or more non-OA areas facing similar challenges, and is directly sharing their learning with them. I have agreed with officials to set £1m aside from the budget for this year to help with this. For example, I referred to a

mental health project in Ipswich which we are sharing with Felixstowe. Other twinning projects go right across the age range, from Norwich's work on improving speech and language in the early years, to give children the best chance of succeeding in school, which is now being shared with Breckland and Great Yarmouth; to Blackpool's work on careers advice, which is now being shared across Lancashire.

I would like to flag one particular example. In the Stoke-on-Trent and Blackpool OAs, we are using the pulling power of local football clubs to reach young people who have been hit hardest by the pandemic. They are being offered mental health and wellbeing support by Stoke City FC, Port Vale FC, and Blackpool FC. With the support of Staffordshire University, which is training student mentors, the clubs are reaching out to pupils aged 11 to 19 who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or at risk of falling out of education, employment or training. They are working to help those young people stay engaged in education so they can catch up on lost learning and raise their aspirations. Our twinning programme means that each football club is now working with another in a different area to set up similar mentoring schemes and help even more young people.

#### **4. Culture change**

The Government is determined to leave a lasting legacy in the OAs – in a way, this should be our greatest ambition. The independent evaluation into the setting up of the programme, published by NFER in 2018, noted the strength of our analysis of the problems facing each area, and the way we were bringing local partners together to deliver change<sup>1</sup>. In particular, it noted:

*Within each OA, initial processes and systems helped to define clear areas of need and how these will be addressed.*

*The programme helped to foster and promote collaboration in a number of ways, including closer working with DfE and by engaging with a cross-sector of local stakeholders from early years, schools, businesses, charities and others.*

*Local stakeholders, working alongside DfE teams, were passionate and committed to increasing their local young people's social mobility and were keen to maintain the initial progress made in improving their outcomes. Partnership boards were committed to ensuring the programme has a 'lasting legacy' within local areas.*

The fact that every one of the 12 areas now wants to continue the work – with or without DfE's involvement – is a testament to the enduring changes we have brought about together. And it is striking that many more areas now want to learn from the approach. The *twinning* work and our best practice sharing guides are amongst early next steps in responding to that ambition.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/implementation-of-opportunity-areas-an-independent-evaluation/>

## **5. Value for Money**

Beyond mainstream spending, the Government will have spent an additional £90m across the 12 OAs during the period 2017-2021. Whilst the full evaluation is not yet available, my predecessor Ministers and I have encouraged officials to have a keen eye to VfM. I wanted to offer an early flavour of the kinds of return we are hoping to see from the taxpayer's investment.

For example, the Bradford autism pilot scheme has demonstrated the potential for early detection and assessment of Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) in young children. This can lead to earlier intervention, with improved outcomes and quantifiable benefits. The average lifetime costs associated with autism have been estimated at between £1.7m and £3.6m per individual (2020/21 prices). The trial we are running will cost only £2.7m, and is aiming to identify 175 individuals. The scope for a huge financial benefit from it is obvious.

Likewise, even without cast iron attribution of causality, the direct and indirect savings from reductions in expulsion rates greatly exceed the estimated costs of the programmes we've been trialling. And the Glasses in Classes pilot is another good example of this – a relatively low-cost intervention that has the potential to boost educational performance, which, if realised and sustained, could have a significant monetizable impact via lifetime employment and productivity effects, as well as associated wider benefits (e.g. on health, wellbeing, crime etc).

One of the central ambitions in twinning and the good practice guides is to drive out even greater value, adding to the benefits of nationwide implementation of reforms wherever possible.

In addition, the OAs are also attracting match funding from local authorities and securing additional investment from other organisations. For example, the Stoke-on-Trent OA has attracted £400K in match funding from the local authority to fund a multi-agency approach to safeguarding, supporting parents, and keeping families together. The project is linking every primary and secondary school in the city with a social worker and an educational psychologist, to help identify children and families at risk of running into difficulties, and to train school staff in spotting these early signs. The learning from this project is in turn informing the development of Stoke-on-Trent's early help system.

To give another example, the Blackpool OA has secured £364K match funding from the organisation Right to Succeed to support a KS3 literacy project. The project aims to improve the literacy capability of all 11-14 year olds across the town, which has been a major factor in academic underperformance.

These types of project – and there are many other examples – show the wider benefit of the OAs in galvanising and facilitating local action by other bodies.

I am pleased that that the committee – and you personally – have continued to take a keen interest in the OA programme. I am looking forward to meeting with you on 18<sup>th</sup> March to discuss it, so that we can discuss the approach and next steps in more detail, and so that I can share my vision for the future of the programme.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

**Michelle Donelan MP**  
**Minister of State for Universities**