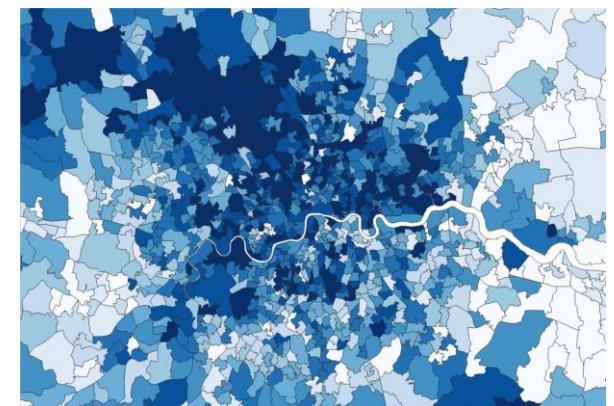
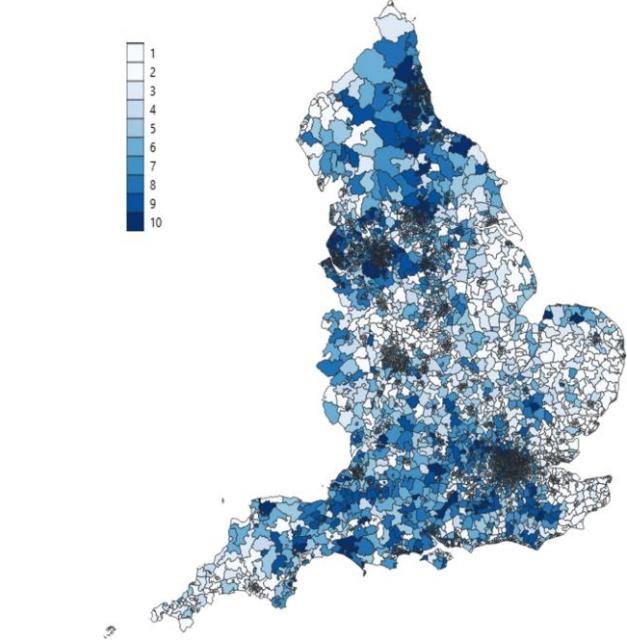
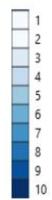

Place-based collaboration for widening participation: What can we learn from the *Opportunity Areas* programme?



Dr Jo Davies, University of Bath

The Geography of Access to HE

- Disadvantaged young people in more peripheral places (especially coastal and rural areas) are less likely to progress to HE. My own research has shown that this is especially the case for 'elite' universities.
- Urban disadvantaged youth living in London have much higher progression rates to 'elite' universities than similarly disadvantaged peers in more peripheral places.
- The UK's unequal spatial distribution of 'elite' universities, and the capital's greater concentration of WP activity and sophisticated WP infrastructure (including multiple partnerships between schools and the third and private sectors – facilitated by the capital's high economic capital and elite career pathways) are all likely to play important roles in the capital's higher elite university progression rates for disadvantaged youth.
- Whilst successive government interventions (e.g. POLAR, Uni Connect), and university and third sector WP initiatives have helped to broaden and increase HE access for disadvantaged youth, significant spatial disparities remain.
- One of the most recent government policy interventions seeking to address the UK's longstanding spatial divides in access to education and work is the *Opportunity Areas* programme (2017-2022).



The *Opportunity* *Areas* programme



5-year programme (2017-2022). Focussed on 12 social mobility 'cold spots': post-industrial, rural, coastal



3 programme-level aims: (1) to close the educational attainment gap between areas; (2) to ensure high quality post-16 education choices across geographic areas; and (3) to address geographic inequalities in career choices and transitions



Steered by Education Partnership Boards, overseen by DfE, to invest in evidence-based interventions



Some insightful evaluations already conducted – but no quasi-experimental large-scale quantitative/qualitative work

From the Centre to the Periphery

Learning from the *Opportunity Areas* programme to steer new policy development that addresses regional inequality



Stage 1: Use of linked administrative data (NPD, LEO) and household survey data (Understanding Society) to isolate the impact that the OA programme had over and above what was happening to outcomes in comparable areas.



Stage 2: Selection of 6 'paired' fieldwork sites to explore the mechanisms driving any identified impacts in stage 1 through in-depth research with those designing, delivering and receiving the intervention.



At the heart of the evaluation is a series of knowledge exchange activities. Key stakeholder engagement to-date includes our project launch event in Dec 2024 in Derby, a series of interviews (27 total) with OA board chairs and members and a community event held in Bradford in June 2025, the first in a programme of 'Periphery Speaks' events.



The evaluation will produce evidence on what mechanisms are impactful in closing gaps in education and skills, helping shape the design and delivery of ongoing and future area-based interventions.

Learning from the *Opportunity Areas* programme: Emerging themes

Local ownership and understanding is vital

- Boards valued the freedom to design and adapt interventions that suited their communities. There were sometimes tensions between board and DfE priorities.

“What you have to do, if you’re doing place-based work, is place the resource in the place” – Board Member (Blackpool)

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

Long-term funding commitment required

- Boards were affected by funding limitations, bureaucratic delays, and lack of long-term security.

“We were told to plan for sustainability but change needs resource. That’s just the reality” – Board Member (Blackpool)

“Project funding...it’s always short term. It doesn’t allow for length of impact” – Board Member (Derby)

Network sustainability is key

- Pre-existing networks supported project planning and momentum. Ongoing networks are a key legacy in many former OAs (e.g. Bradford Education Alliance for Life Chances, Ipswich Social Mobility Alliance)

“If you want to travel fast, go alone. If you want to travel far, go together...That’s the business about collaboration” – Board Member (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)

Learning from the *Opportunity Areas* programme: Emerging themes

Universities have a vital role to play

- Universities emerged as key partners in some OAs, supporting evidence-led interventions and providing convening power. However, some OAs appear to have had less university involvement, perhaps due to competing funding priorities.

“The University of Derby is about social mobility...it was an incredibly good fit, and it was either an incredibly well created opportunity, or it was a fantastic unintended consequence that landed” – Board Member (Derby)

Decision-making should be evidence-led

- Many board members emphasised using evidence-based approaches, especially learning from Research schools. Challenges were however raised, including time delays in data compilation (DfE) and difficulties sharing data between stakeholders.

“The discipline brought by the Research school was incredibly helpful...and the access to data and an intelligent interpretation of it” – Board Member (Blackpool)

Programme design must be adaptable to place

- The OA programme design was perceived to enable and hinder success, depending on geographical and contextual factors. In the Fenland & East Cambs OA, there was a forced combination of distinct regions. Other rural OAs noted that rural isolation and infrastructure deficits were not sufficiently considered. Conversely, city-based OAs like Derby and Bradford found it easier to coordinate schools and deliver interventions due to proximity and density.
- *“It was a weird marriage from the get go” – Board Member (Fenland & East Cambridgeshire)*
