Moving on from GCSE 'failure':
Why the English education system must do better at post-16 transitions

Ruth Lupton, Stephanie Thomson, Sanne Velthuis, Lorna Unwin

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Background and rationale

- GCSE always a 'watershed' in a divided system.

- In most years around 40 per cent do not reach contemporary GCSE benchmarks.

- Recent years: stronger focus on English and maths GCSE pre- and post-16, and concerns about progress of those without.

- But little known about experiences and outcomes for 'lower attainers' and what would help them progress better.

- Not tackled in 2021 White Paper *Skills for Jobs*, with its focus on adults and higher technical education.

- Wider context: multiple 'cascading' imperatives to equalise opportunities for progression: Brexit, inequalities, 'levelling up', 'building back better' post COVID

This research… and what it contributes

- Focuses on 'lower attainers' – those without 9-4/A*-C in English and/or maths GCSE.

- Describes them by what they <u>have</u> achieved… thus illuminating the heterogeneity within the group.

- Links pre- and post-16 by identifying groups of learners with different achievement at end of Key Stage 4 (NPD), and following their different post-16 trajectories and attainment (ILR, NPD and NCCIS).

- Illuminates these experiences through qualitative research.

- Reports on and unpacks geographical variation:
  - Reporting at region, city-region and LA level
  - Locality case studies of structures, opportunities and practices (including entry requirements)

Quantitative analysis and locality case studies
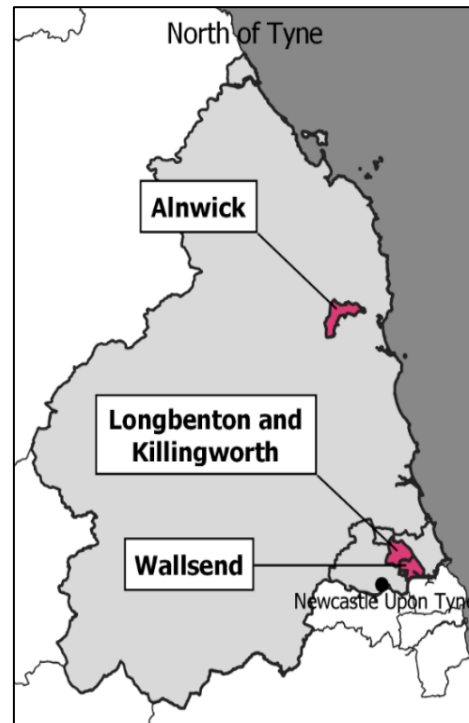
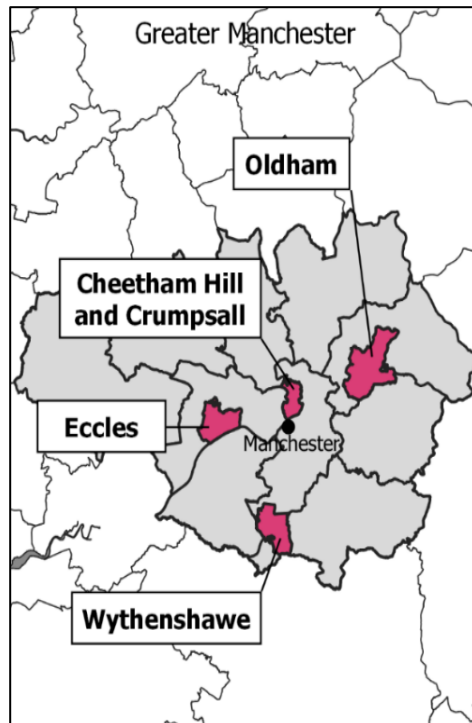| GCSE Cohorts Quantitative Analysis (5) |
| --- |
| 2013 |
| 2014 |
| **2015** |
| 2016 |
| 2017 |

Locality case studies (7)

Greater Manchester
- Oldham
- Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall
- Eccles
- Manchester
- Wythenshawe

North of Tyne
- Alnwick
- Longbenton and Killingworth
- Wallsend
- Newcastle Upon Tyne

Post-16 providers within...

30 minutes	45 minutes	60 minutes
• 1 FE site offering limited provision • 3 school sixth forms (all with a religious ethos)	• 4 FE colleges over 8 sites • 4 sixth form colleges • 5 school sixth forms (of which 3 have a religious ethos) • 1 grammar school • 1 UTC	• 4 FE colleges over 8 sites • 4 sixth form colleges • 5 school sixth forms (of which 3 have a religious ethos) • 1 grammar school • 1 UTC

Post-16 landscape type

Abundant provision, mix of FE college, sixth form college and religious school sixth forms

Opportunity sets

- Actual courses and apprenticeships within 60 mins travel time.
- Analysed by entry requirements (for each opportunity identified)
- To determine which opportunities are available to which learners

Qualitative research (all in the 7 localities)

Focus Groups	One to one interviews
8 groups	12 young people
47 participants	From among those in the focus groups
All 'lower attainers'	
Aged 16-19 (majority 16 or 17)	
Activities:	**Activities:**
Maps of provision Hypothetical friends	Discussion and timelines

Name: Luke
Age: 16
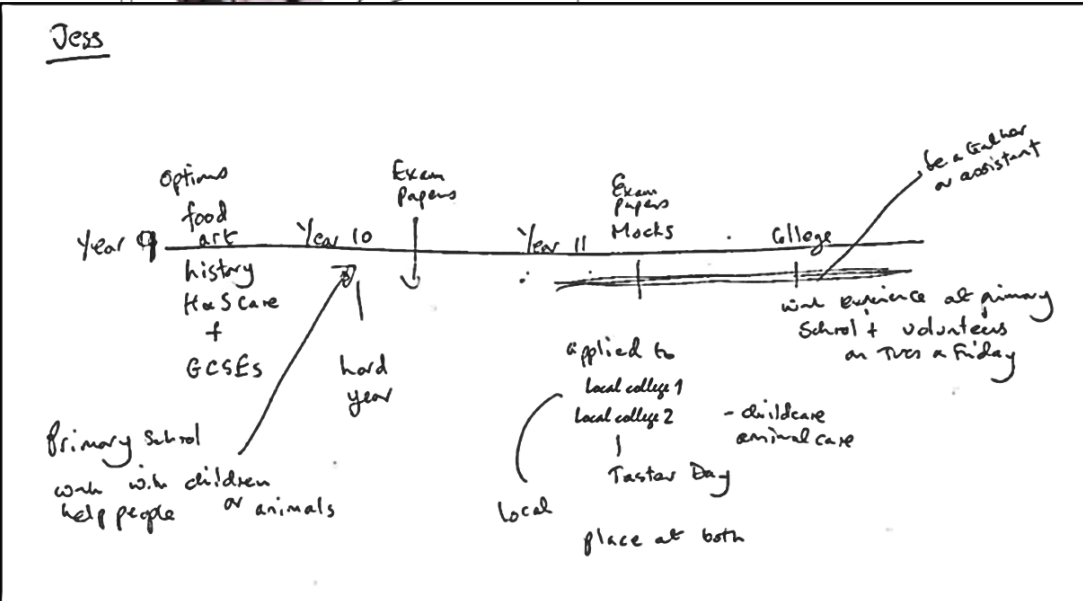
I'm interested in technology and construction and would like to get a job so I can earn money.

Predicted GCSE grades

English language: 1
English literature: 2
maths: 2
Science: 1
German: 1

ICT: 2
RE: 3
Design an
Technolog
Business s

Name: Afrah
Age: 16

I'd like to work in a hospital or a GP surgery.

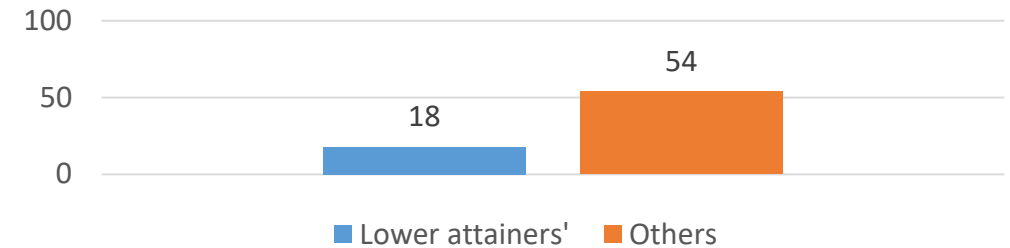Jess

Also 18 exploratory interviews with professionals in the localities, and advice from local panels

Experiences of moving on from KS4 for 'lower attainers'

- Much more complex landscape of provision: more providers, options, Levels.

- Far more learners move institution.

- Less predictable provision.

- Apprenticeships in short supply and hard to get.

- Entry requirements vary for similar courses and apprenticeships.

- But often specify English <u>and</u> maths GCSE, so much is inaccessible.

% in school sixth forms, 2015 cohort

18   54

■ Lower attainers'   ■ Others

Level 3 Opportunities in Case Study Localities

Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall   Eccles   Oldham   Wythenshawe   Alnwick   Longbenton & Killingworth   Wallsend

▨ Inaccessible to any 'lower attainer'

■ Potentially accessible to some 'lower attainers'
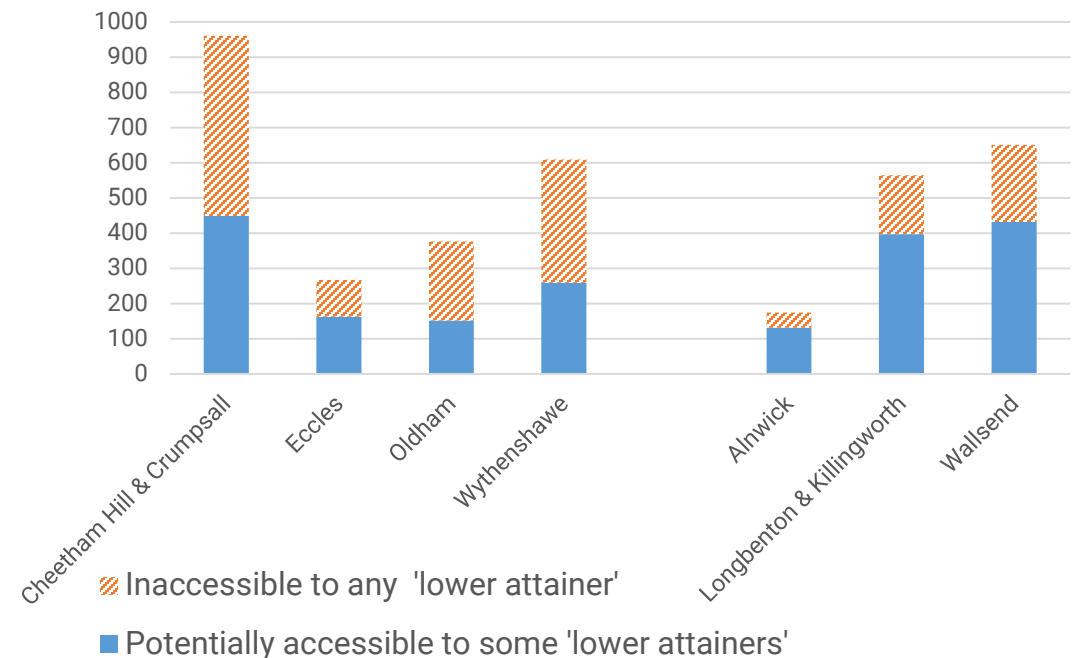
Experiences of moving on from KS4 for 'lower attainers'

- Decisions made in a 'pressure cooker' environment

- Many young people have a sense of failure.

- Some need more time to make decisions.

- Many need more support.

- ..and an approach to advice and guidance that focuses on what they can do not on their academic failures.
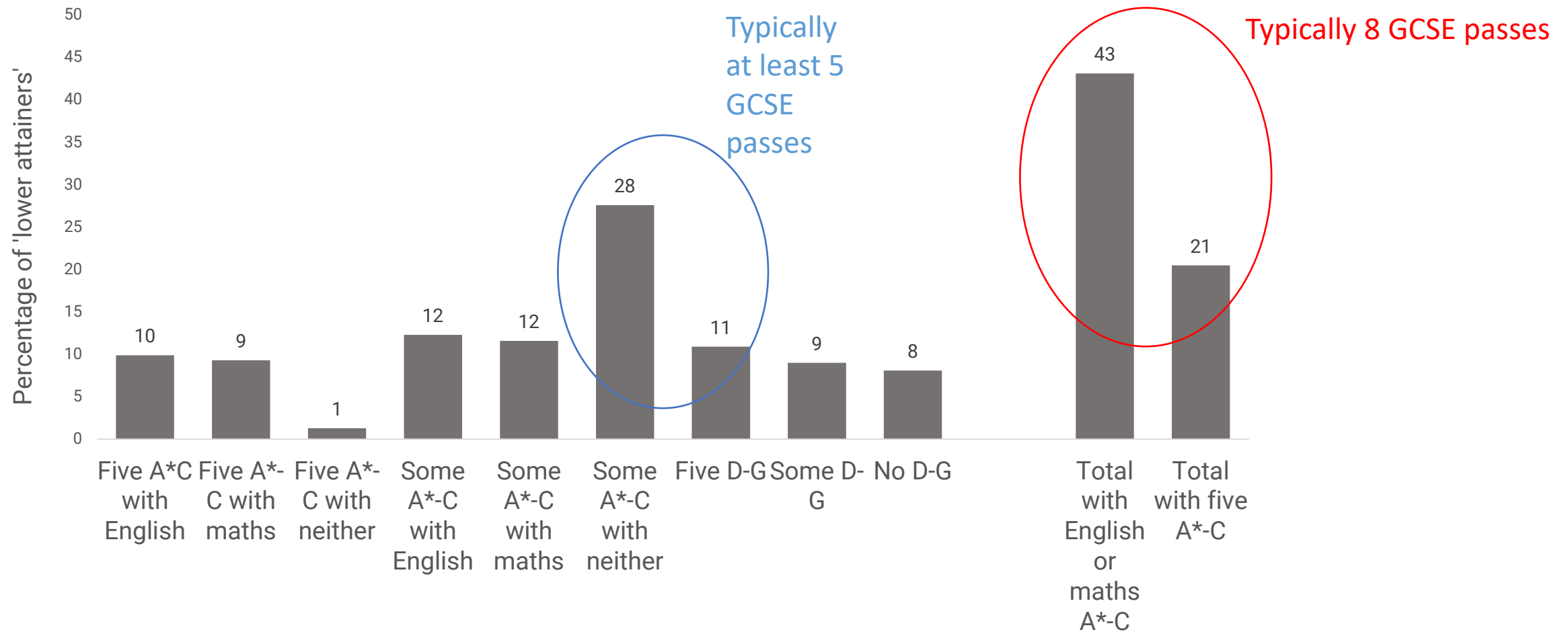
> There's loads of pressure about it. They're just constantly asking you what you want to do. Like, if you know what you want to do. So you feel like you've just really got to choose something. …. you just have to rush and pick something.

> I had to push the cadets out of the way just for the moment and concentrate on the exams. But that didn't go too well for me. Because it kind of baffled me, and messed with my head. Then it got to the end of year 11. And I had to make a decision, about college or a job.

> So basically the people that knew they would achieve everything, they got the most help, but it should have been the people, who, you know, weren't achieving that got the most help. But it was the complete opposite.

> I got, I think, one [careers advice] meeting, and I got told, well in your mocks you achieved too low, you're not going to get the right grades, so don't think too high of yourself. You're thinking too far up the ladder than where you actually are. So it just made you feel like crap, basically

A diverse group with varied attainment

Percentage of 'lower attainers'

Category	Value
Five A*C with English	10
Five A*-C with maths	9
Five A*-C with neither	1
Some A*-C with English	12
Some A*-C with maths	12
Some A*-C with neither	28
Five D-G	11
Some D-G	9
No D-G	8
Total with English or maths A*-C	43
Total with five A*-C	21

Typically at least 5 GCSE passes

Typically 8 GCSE passes

Source: National Pupil Database 2015 cohort. Excludes learners in independent schools.
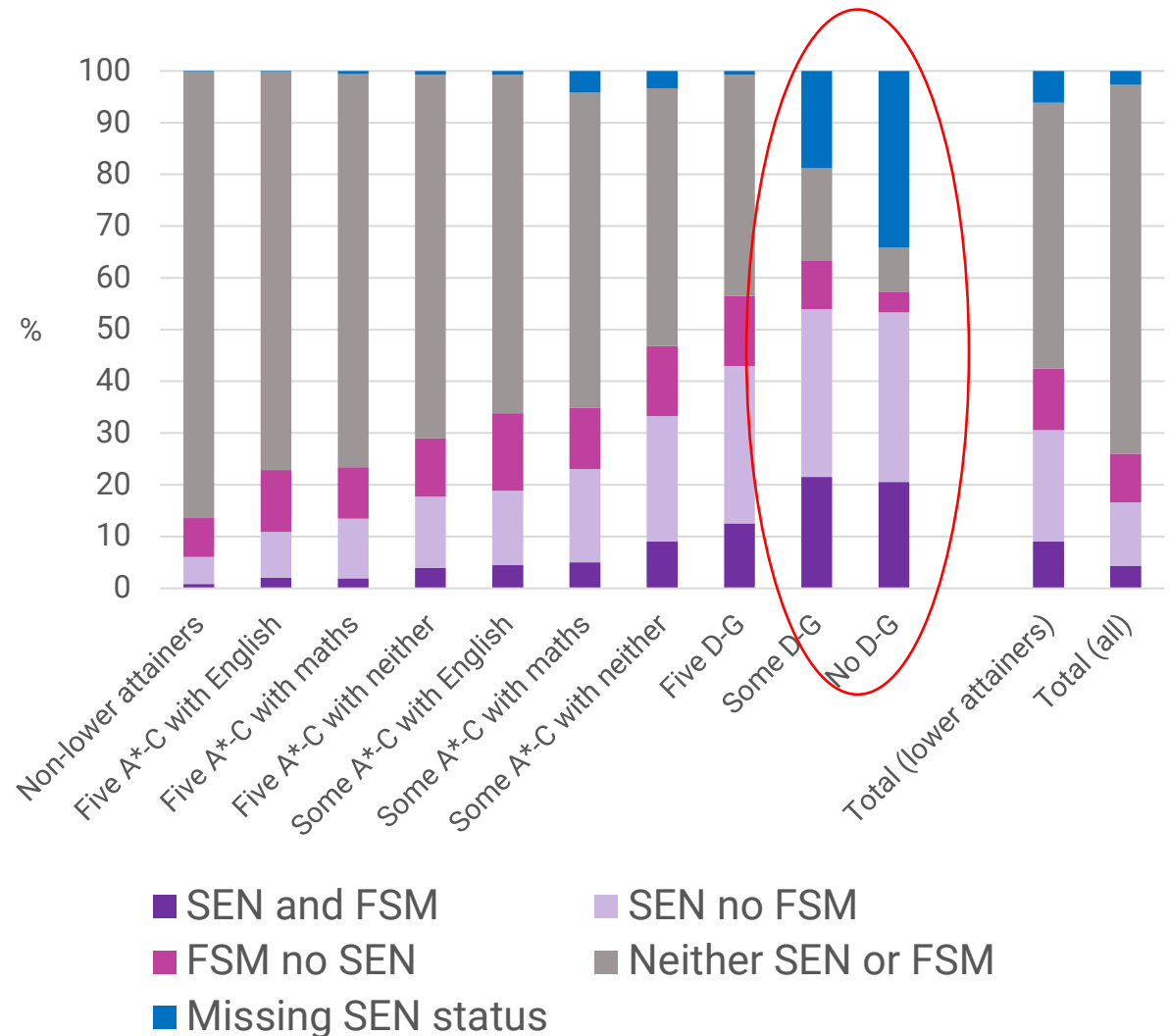
A minority with very low attainment and significant disadvantage

- Around 17% either with no GCSE passes or fewer than five passes at any grade (i.e. Below Full Level 1)

- Equates to around 7% of whole cohort (2 per class of 30)

- These young people can experience a limited KS4 curriculum

- And face significant disadvantage

Box 14: Illustrative subject and attainment profile: Some D-G

English, maths and science	Other academic
English Language F	ELQ Band C in maths
Maths F	Other vocational
Core Science F	ELQ Band C in Building/Construction
	Functional Skills at Level 2 in Basic Communication
	Level 1 VQR in Preparation for Work

English GCSE grades: 10% D; 17% E; 35% other; 37% did not enter
Maths GCSE grades: 8% D; 10% E; 60% other; 23% did not enter

Legend:
- SEN and FSM
- SEN no FSM
- FSM no SEN
- Neither SEN or FSM
- Missing SEN status

Source: National Pupil Database 2015 cohort. Excludes learners in independent schools.

Achievements between 16 and 19

	% achieving a least one Level 3		% achieving at least one Level 2	
	16- 18	**16-19**	**16-18**	**16-19**
'Lower attainers'	34	41	71	75
Others	89	91	94	96

Substantial variation by prior attainment. Graph shows % achieving at least one qualification at Level 2 and 3 between age 16 and 18/19 for first seven groups (value labels for age 19)
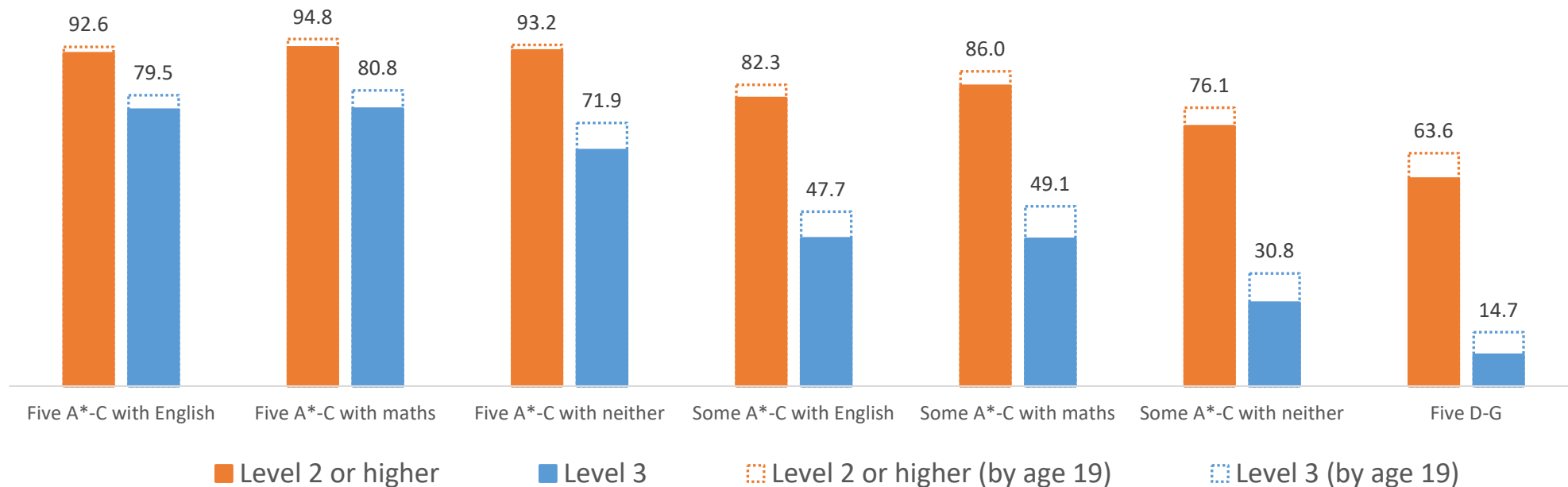
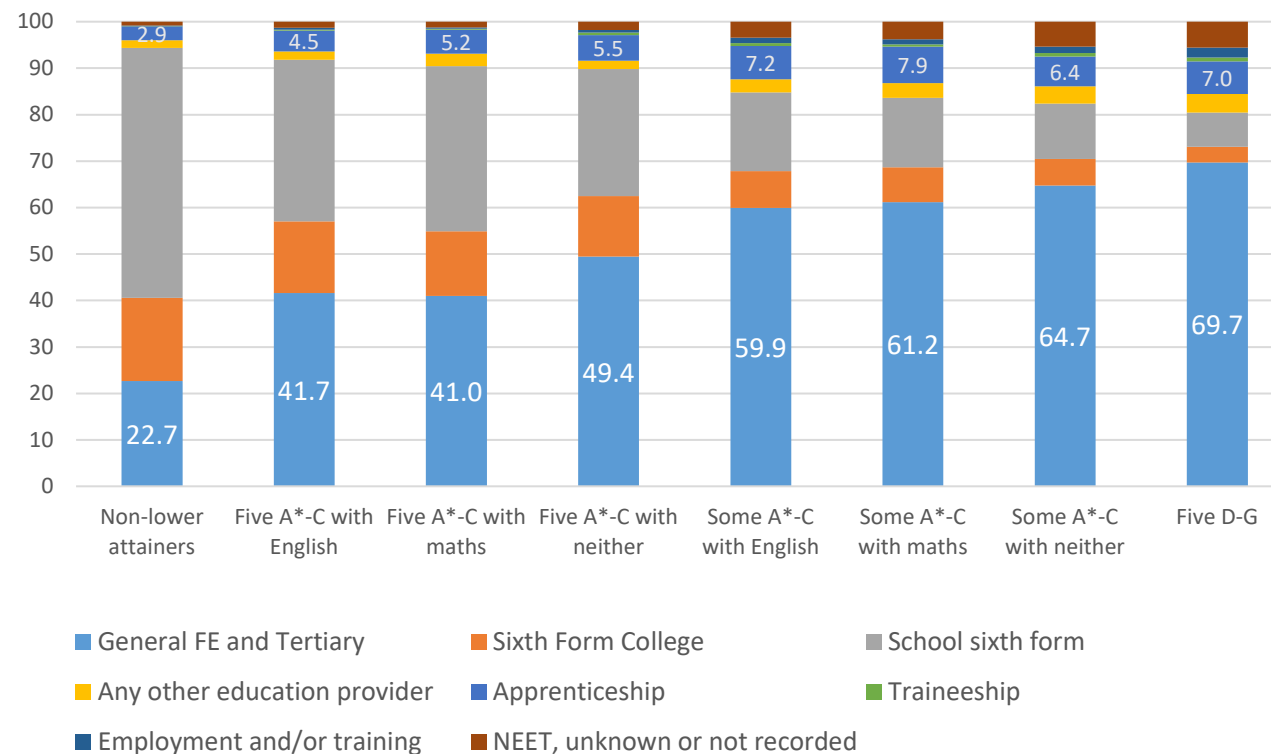# Achievements between 16 and 19 for the lowest attainers at KS4
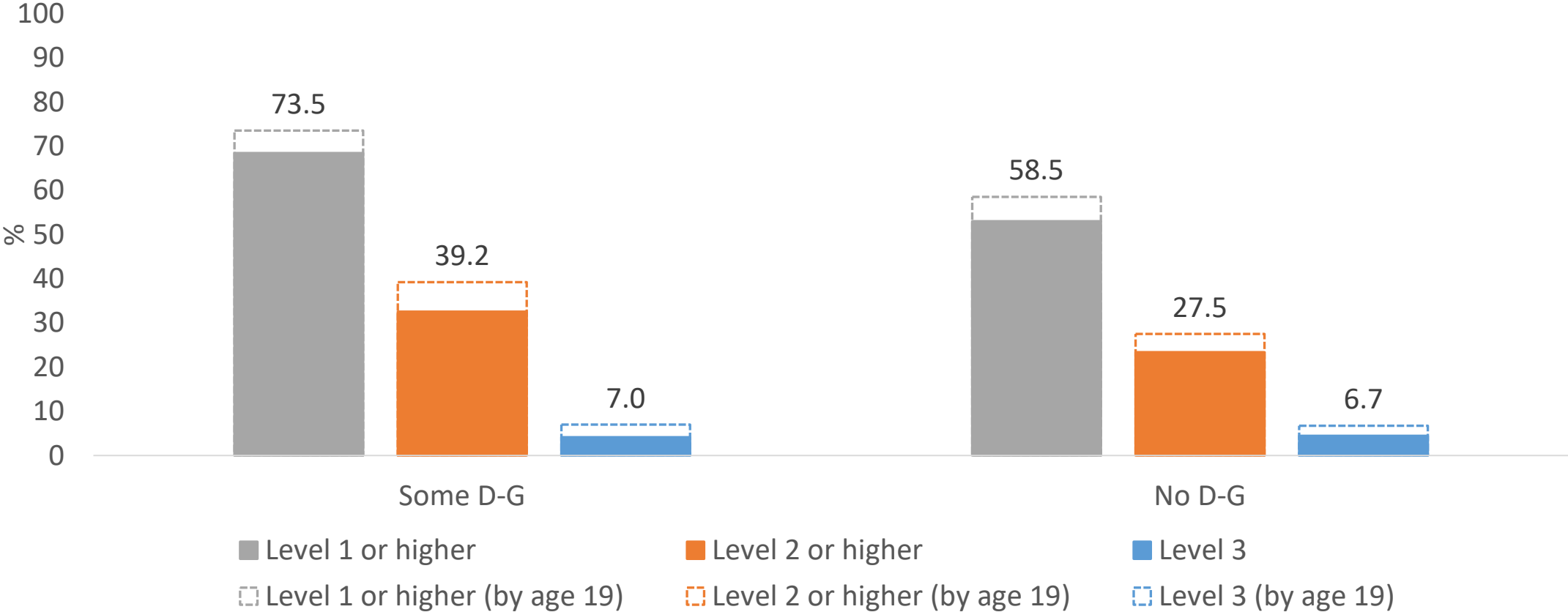
Transitions, progression and stumbling blocks (1)

Destinations after KS4

- FE college the majority destination

- Apprenticeship only a little more common among 'lower attainers' than others – and markedly less so for those eligible for FSM

- For lower two groups (not shown):
  - High levels of NEET, unknown or not recorded (29% for lowest group)
  - More varied provision, including special school sixth forms

Post GCSE destinations, groups with five or more passes, 2015 cohort

Legend:
- General FE and Tertiary
- Sixth Form College
- School sixth form
- Any other education provider
- Apprenticeship
- Traineeship
- Employment and/or training
- NEET, unknown or not recorded

Transitions, progression and stumbling blocks (2)

Starting at a lower level

- Overall a quarter of lower attainers start Y12 at Level 1 or below

- Considerable proportions start at lower levels than their existing achievements

- Not necessarily a problem and important in some occupational areas.

- Sometimes because of 'settling down'; 'finding their feet'; working out what to do or because studying English and maths takes up a lot of time.

- Some young people felt that their time was wasted/they were being held back

Level of learning in Year 12, by category, 2015 cohort

| Category	Entry Level	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Unable to determine
Five A*-C with English	0.1	2.7	16.3	78.8	2.2
Five A*-C with maths	0.1	4.1	17.0	77.0	1.8
Five A*-C with neither	<0.5	5.5	38.2	53.7	<3.0
Some A*-C with English	0.7	11.7	49.9	32.1	5.7
Some A*-C with maths	0.9	15.3	49.3	29.3	5.2
Some A*-C with neither	4.6	27.2	50.3	11.6	6.5
Five D-G	7.7	42.7	37.5	3.5	8.6
Some D-G	18.2	37.3	20.6	2.5	21.4
No D-G	21.9	20.2	11.2	2.9	43.7

Already have full level 2

Already have some level 2 quals

Transitions, progression and stumbling blocks (3)

Where you start matters for where you end up

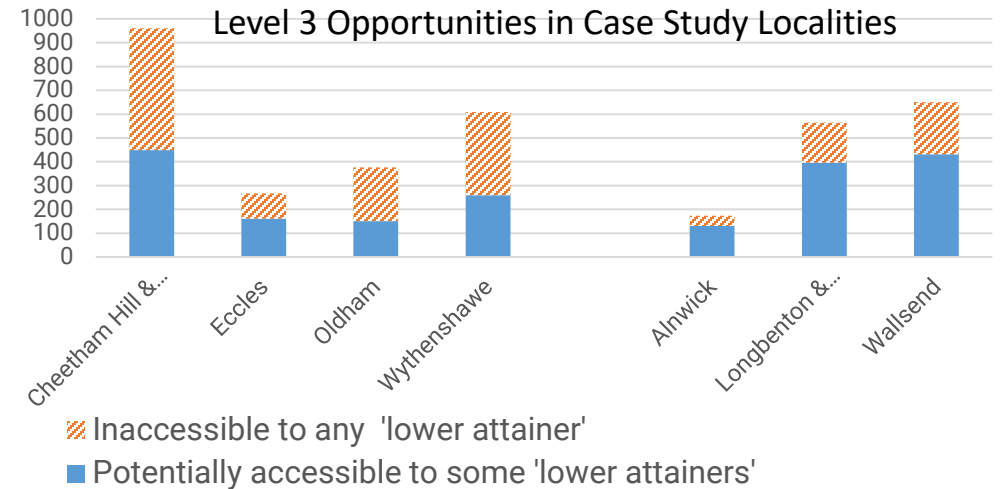Highest level of qualification achieved by 18, by main level of learning entered in year 12.

'Some A*-C with neither' category

Main level of learning at the start of year 12

- Entry Level or none
- Level 1
- Level 2
- Level 3
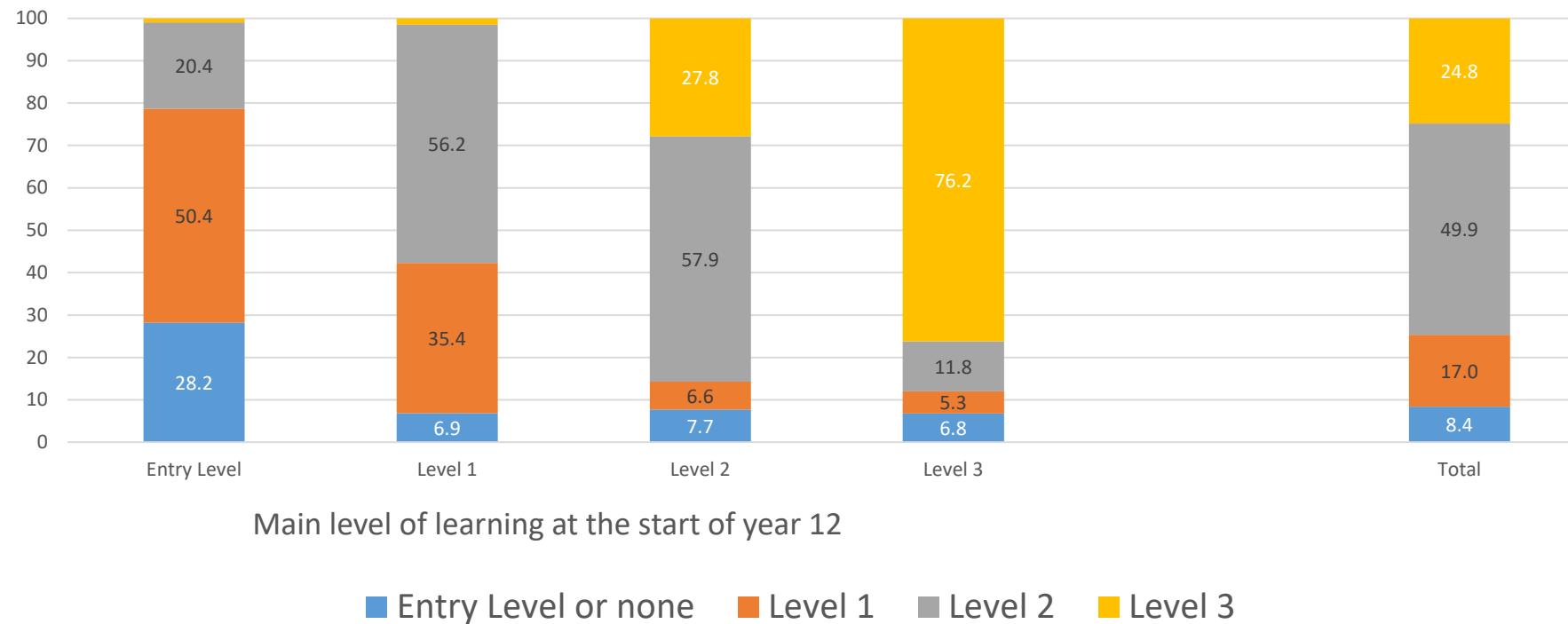
Transitions, progression and stumbling blocks (4)

Substantial local variation

- We already saw substantial variation in accessibility of Level 3 provision between localities.

- Due to a combination of provision structure and practice.

- For example, in some our localities with higher proportions of places in school sixth forms, more Level 3 opportunities were academic (more accessible to 'lower attainers').

- Differences between areas in achievement in the 16-19 phase are mainly explained by prior attainment and differences in starting levels (which are influenced by provider types).

Level 3 Opportunities in Case Study Localities

Categories: Cheetham Hill &…, Eccles, Oldham, Wythenshawe, Alnwick, Longbenton &…, Wallsend

Legend:
- Inaccessible to any 'lower attainer'
- Potentially accessible to some 'lower attainers'

Y12 Destinations for Five A*-C with English, 2015

	London	Newcastle city Region	Greater Manchester
FE college	31	55	51
6th Form college	15	11	29
School 6th form	45	22	10
Apprenticeship	2	6	5

Conclusions and Recommendations (1)

- Our findings challenge the assumption that it is purely lack of attainment in English and maths that is holding back 'lower attainers'. It is also a lack of co-ordinated and accessible opportunities to develop and progress. Including the need for more time and support for young people who have to make the most complex decisions, from the least advantageous starting point, at the youngest age.

- There needs to be a **major policy shift**, pre- and post-16, away from a narrow focus on English and maths achievement and towards progression for all.

- We argue for:
  - A 3-year integrated Upper Secondary Phase
  - Extended transition programme (beyond T levels)
  - Additional funded support for the lowest attainers
  - Changes to curriculum and accountability measures in KS4, to recognise wider learning and build towards post-16 pathways

Conclusions and Recommendations (2)

- There is significant local variation in structures and practice, some of it desirable. But very little capacity for local coordination.

- Government should increase the capacity and funding of local areas to:
  - analyse their local situation;
  - construct post-16 progression routes that align with pre-16 provision, transport arrangements and local labour market needs;
  - standardise practice in entry requirements, and in particular ensure that grade 4 in English and maths is only specified when really necessary;
  - establish effective and equitable careers information, advice and guidance services;
  - provide contingency and stimulus funding.

- The White Paper enables some of this, but there is no role for the local state, and a focus on adults not on post-16 progression or links to the school system.

Thankyou for listening!