Moving on from initial GCSE 'failure':

Post-16 transitions for 'lower attainers' and why the English education system must do better

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1. Introduction

This report is about young people who do not achieve the benchmark of grade 4 (formerly C) in both English and maths when they take their GCSE examinations at the end of Key Stage 4 (around age 16). In 2019, 40 per cent of young people (in all schools) in England missed this mark of achievement. We refer to them as 'lower attainers' because, each year, their GCSE results place them at the lower end of their cohort's profile of achievement. Yet, as this report will show, there are large differences in their achievement profiles. Understanding more about the experiences, progression, and further learning outcomes of this heterogeneous group of young people matters to every area of England.

These young people, once the 'poor relations' of policies focused on widening access to higher education, have recently come much more into the political spotlight. Concerns about low productivity and the need for a post-Brexit 'skills revolution', about enduring educational inequalities and low social mobility, and about the problems of 'left-behind' people and places have all led to an increasing recognition that post-16 opportunities and outcomes need to improve for young people who are not immediately bound for A Levels and university (Williamson, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has further highlighted educational inequalities, as well as causing rapid economic contraction in areas of the labour market where 'lower attaining' young people might typically find an initial employment and training foothold. As we wrote this report, emergency funding and measures had already been announced, while a government White Paper on reforms to Further Education (FE) was awaiting publication.

Yet, despite these concerns, surprisingly little is known about 'lower attainers' and what happens to them after their GCSEs. The focus on driving up academic achievement has led to a situation in which missing the GCSE grade C/4 threshold in English and maths is often represented as 'failure' or as leaving school with 'nothing' (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Little attention has been given to the wide variety of attainment below the threshold, the characteristics and circumstances of different learners, and the differing options open to them. Research and policy tend to focus either on the school system or on the post-16 phase, not on the connections between them. And while it is increasingly realised that a competitive market results in widely varying local provision, the detail of these local variations, and the extent of their impact, are not well known or understood.

In this context, this report aims to provide a deeper understanding of achievement and trajectories for 'lower attainers' at GCSE in order to help policy-makers both at the national and local levels to better understand the critical system factors (both pre- and post-16) that will improve opportunities and success for these learners.

After a review of the existing literature and policy context (section 2) and description of the study's methodology (section 3) the report makes four new and important contributions by:

- **analysing who the GCSE 'lower attainers' are and** providing detailed national and subnational analysis of attainment profiles and characteristics, in order to identify the groups who need different approaches pre-GCSE and/or different options and pathways post-16 (section 4);

- **providing evidence of the post-16 destinations of 'lower attainers' with different levels of GCSE and equivalent attainment,** and **new insights into the complexities of transition and 'choice'** (section 5);
- **demonstrating the extent of local variation in structures of provision and destinations**, in order to inform local policy responses and suggest where devolved powers might most usefully be exercised (section 6);
- **describing and analysing progression and attainment in the post-16 phase**, identifying who makes more or less successful transitions and whether and how this varies from place to place (section 7).

By integrating analysis of attainment at 16, subsequent transitions, and post-16 educational outcomes, and showing how and why these play out differently in different places, we provide a unique and detailed account of the experience of 'lower attaining' young people. Supported by detailed appendices and a web-based resource for local analysis, the report provides a robust evidence-based foundation for policy-making on this enduring and important issue for English education and training. Section 8 summarises our key findings and makes recommendations for policy.

2. 'Lower attainers' and their post-16 options: the existing system, evidence and policy responses

2.1.   GCSE 'success' and its enduring importance

In England, for at least the last century, performance in public examinations at age 15/16 has been critical to future trajectories and life chances, whether this was attainment of the School Certificate, gaining five good passes at 'O' Level (or since 1988, GCSEs) or more recently attaining higher grades in English and maths GCSE.

The later outcomes of individuals who miss the key benchmarks tend to be much poorer than those of young people who do not. Many studies have associated low GCSE attainment with poorer labour market outcomes and identified a 'scarring' effect from which young people find it difficult to recover (Bell & Blanchflower, 2010; Crawford et al., 2011; Ralston et al., 2016; Thompson, 2017). More specifically, it has also been demonstrated that narrowly missing out on key benchmarks can have a critical impact despite differences in levels of attainment being very small. Machin et al. (2018) show that those who fail to reach a grade C/4 in English by just a few marks have an increased chance of dropping out, a lower chance of starting a Level 3 qualification within 3 years, and a decreased chance of starting university. Attainment in English and maths at 16 is also thought to influence later labour market outcomes (see Dickerson et al., 2020).

This might suggest that it is reaching an absolute standard at GCSE which is crucial. The more people that reach the standard, the fewer will have poor outcomes later on. However, history suggests that problems faced by 'lower attainers' are a product of their relative position on the attainment spectrum, not just their absolute attainments. Box 1 reviews attainment thresholds and the proportion of learners reaching them in the twenty years to 2017. It shows that the proportion of learners achieving five A*-C grades at GCSE (or their equivalent in other recognised qualifications) rose from 45.1 per cent to 56.8 per cent between 1997 and 2005. However, in 2005, the level of attainment deemed to constitute 'success' was changed such that the five A*-C grades needed to include English and maths. This change brought the success rate back down to 44.7 per cent. Success on this new measure then also rose (reaching 53.5 per cent in 2016), as did success on the narrower measure of grade C in both English and maths GCSEs (regardless of other subjects) which was introduced in that year. In 2017, numerical grades (9-1, with 9 as the highest) replaced the letter grades with grade 4 (equivalent to the old 'C' grade) designated as a 'standard pass' and grade 5 designated as a 'strong pass'. Grade 5 was adopted as the new threshold and so once again the proportion 'succeeding' on the English and maths measure fell back to 39.6 per cent.

As attainment rises overall, therefore, success measures are periodically redefined, dividing the cohort into successes and failures in roughly constant proportions over time. And in every period, those not meeting the key benchmark of the day are seen as having fallen short, which shapes their post-16 trajectories and opportunities. The way in which thresholds of success are defined means there are always 'lower attainers', perhaps partly explaining Anders and Dorsett's (2017) finding that the proportion of young people in a 'concerning' labour market situation after leaving school has risen in the last 30 years

despite increases in average qualification levels. Attainment thresholds are 'temporary settlements' (Gale, 1999). They reflect contemporary perceptions of individual skill needs and national-level economic competitiveness, but they are also the outcome of continuing battles over subject hierarchies, what constitutes important knowledge, and the competing functions of education. Thresholds play a key role in the tension between the political goals of widening opportunity and increasing upward social mobility and sorting young people into future roles which protect established social divisions.

Box 1: Changes in the threshold for success at GCSE, 1997 to 2017

Date	Threshold (as captured by headline indicators and targets)	% reaching threshold	% reaching previous threshold
1997	5 A*-C GCSE or equivalent	45.1	N/A
2005	5 A*-C GCSE or equivalent including English and maths	44.7	56.8
2016	C or above in English and maths GCSE	59.3	53.5
2017	5 or above in English and maths GCSE (although 4 remains threshold for avoiding resits and for entry to many courses/apprenticeships)	39.6	59.1

We are not implying that English and maths are unimportant. Literacy and numeracy are essential in their own right as well as being building blocks for every other subject. Our aim is to draw attention to where these thresholds of success and failure are drawn and how they work in practice in determining access to further education, training and work. We argue that as well as focusing on the achievement of particular absolute standards, governments must also focus on making sure that the system ensures progression and opportunities for those who do not reach particular benchmarks at the first attempt as well as those who do. Otherwise, as the Secretary of State for Education recently put it, they risk "writing off people who have a tremendous potential to contribute to our society" (Williamson 2020).

2.2. 'Lower attainers' and what is known about them

For the purposes of this report, we follow the current practice of prioritising English and maths in the definition of GCSE success, and define 'lower attainers' as those who do not 'succeed' in meeting the expected benchmark in both English and maths GCSEs at the end of Key Stage 4, regardless of their success in other subjects.

We focus on grade 4 (formerly C), rather than grade 5. This is because, although grade 5 is the new standard for school performance tables, grade 4 remains the effective passport to A Levels and equivalent Level 3 courses and apprenticeships, reflecting the long history of regarding this as a 'good' pass.[1] Since 2014, grade 4 has also determined whether young people need to continue to study English and maths and sometimes re-sit the GCSE exams

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[1] Grade A-C was regarded as a good pass in O Levels (expressed as number grades) from 1951 to 1987 and in GCSEs from 1998.

as a condition of the funding of their post-16 study. Our concern is to improve understanding about who does not achieve a grade 4 and what happens to them afterwards.

It is evident from a review of the existing evidence that these 'lower attainers' have not been the prime focus of much existing research.[2] Some factors about their characteristics can be inferred from previous research looking at the relationships between pupil characteristics and GCSE attainment in English and maths as well as from published DfE data. This shows that characteristics associated with low GCSE attainment in English and maths (as well as generally) include **having special educational needs (SEN)** (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; de Coulon et al., 2017; DfE, 2018), **economic disadvantage** (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; DfE, 2019b; Gorard and Siddiqui, 2019), **being in local authority care** (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Fletcher, Strand and Thomas, 2015), **being born in the summer** (Crawford, Dearden and Greaves, 2013; de Coulon et al., 2017; Gorard, 2018), **leaving or entering school at an unusual time of year** (Strand and Demie, 2006) and **having low prior attainment** (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). There is also evidence that **gender** is associated with low attainment in English and maths (see DfE, 2019b) with boys more likely to have low attainment in these subjects than girls. These characteristics are frequently associated with low attainment on other measures too and at other stages of education.

Other characteristics seem to have a negligible association with GCSE attainment in English and maths specifically; for example, **EAL (English as an additional language) status** and **ethnicity**. The proportion of EAL students and students from different ethnic groups with low attainment in English and maths was roughly similar to the proportion with higher attainment[3] (de Coulon et al., 2017). There is evidence, however, that Black students are disproportionately likely to be in lower tiers in general which, for English and maths usually means being entered for lower level papers, hence restricting the grade they can possibly get (Strand, 2012; Taylor et al., 2019).

In addition to these single characteristics, some combinations of characteristics are particularly associated with low attainment in GCSE English and maths. For example, there is evidence that the attainment gap between pupils on **Free School Meals (FSM)** and those not on FSM is bigger for White pupils than for other ethnic groups (Kingdon and Cassen, 2010; Strand, 2014; DfE, 2019a). There is particular policy concern about the attainment of White British boys on FSM, who are consistently among the lowest performing groups on most attainment indicators including English and maths (DfE, 2020b).

It is well known that GCSE attainment rates vary markedly across the country. For example, in summer 2019, 80.1 per cent of young people in state-funded schools in Trafford in Greater Manchester (the highest performing authority on this measure) achieved a grade 9-4 pass in English and maths. In Knowsley (the lowest), 40.8 per cent did so (DfE, 2020a), hence the number of 'lower attainers' in any one area will vary. However, the focus of most published analysis is on the proportions reaching the GCSE thresholds in different places, not the characteristics or trajectories of those who do not.

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[2] A notable exception is Cassen and Kingdon (2007).

[3] A problem with the EAL indicator is that it does not distinguish levels of fluency which are known to make a difference to attainment – particularly in English (Demie and Strand, 2006) – and so it may be that a better indicator would show there are differences.

In this report, we add substantially to this evidence base by providing a comprehensive picture of the overall attainment profiles of young people who miss the English and maths benchmarks. In other words, we don't just look at the characteristic of those who have 'failed' but at what they *have* achieved, a vitally important contribution given concerns about the 'writing off' of people who have much to contribute. Our own analysis of published data shows that not all 'lower attainers' in English and maths have low attainment generally – in 2015 around a quarter of them had achieved 5 or more 'good' GCSEs (grades 4/C or above) and a further 55 per cent had at least 5 GCSE passes (at grade 1/G or above) (Velthuis et al., 2018). Of the 'lower attaining' group, around 56 per cent missed the 4/C benchmark in both English and maths whilst the other 44 per cent obtained the benchmark grade 4/C in one of these subjects (Velthuis et al., 2018).[4] There is some other evidence that 'lower attainers' may have different subject entry patterns *and* subject performance to the rest of the cohort (Parameshwaran and Thomson, 2015; Playford and Gayle, 2016), but the heterogeneity of attainment among this group has not been well explored and is a key contribution of the current work.

2.3.   The English post-16 system

As we have discussed, GCSEs act as a critical watershed in the English education system. The young people who are the focus of this report then enter a complex post-16 landscape that has undergone many changes since GCSEs were introduced. As we wrote this report, the current government was preparing a new Further Education White Paper. It is important, therefore, for any study of this kind to set its findings and analysis within this context of both change and continuity.

From 1976 until 2013, compulsory education in England ended at 16 when most young people had completed a course of study leading to 'O' Levels/CSEs or, from 1988, GCSEs or equivalent examinations. This changed with the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) policy, which came into effect in a phased way between 2013 and 2015. This means that young people are now required to remain in some form of education or training until the age of 18. Specifically, they can meet this requirement in one of three ways: a) remaining in full-time education (in a school or college); b) starting an apprenticeship or traineeship; or c) spending 20 hours per week working or volunteering whilst in part-time education or training. Young people can officially leave school during what is referred to as Year 11 on the last Friday in June if they are 16 by the end of the summer holidays. The English national curriculum is divided into 'key stages', with Key Stage 4 covering Years 10 and 11. The majority of young people take all their GCSE examinations (and equivalent qualifications), which assess performance in national curriculum subjects, towards the end of Year 11.

The RPA brought into sharper relief the question of the purpose of an externally examined watershed examination at age 15/16 (Pring et al., 2009; Halfon, 2019), but it did not create a clearly defined and integrated upper secondary system. Unlike many other European countries, the English post-16 'phase' has remained more complex particularly in relation to

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[4] Some of these achievements will be recognised in some of the other measures currently in use - the Ebacc, 'Attainment 8', and 'Progress 8'. We recognise that C/4 in English and maths is not the only measure of GCSE success. However, it worth noting that English and maths are also double-weighted in these measures, reflecting the priority given to them in the current system.

vocational and technical pathways and the diversity of providers (Robinson & Dominguez-Reig, 2020; Spours et al., 2018).

A further way in which the English education and training system is organised is through the allocation of 'levels' to courses, apprenticeships and qualifications (see Box 2). The purpose is to achieve clarity over the equivalence between qualifications in a complex system. However, the levels obscure the size (learning hours) of qualifications, such that some Level 2 qualifications (for example) involve a lot more learning and take more time than others, even some at higher levels.

A further complication is that the official terminology also includes the notion of 'full Levels', denoting achievement of a range of qualifications at that level. Thus, individual GCSEs are classified as being at 'Level 2', but a 'full Level 2' refers to the attainment of five GCSEs at a minimum of grade 4/C. As we discussed at the start of this section, governments also regularly adjust the value of different subjects and grades at GCSE, providing another set of distinctions within the 'Levels', though this is not reflected in the 'Level' terminology. A 'full Level 2', therefore, refers to five or more GCSEs in any subjects and remains a currency used in some sets of government reporting. Yet current school performance measures prioritise English and maths rather than a combination of any five subjects.

Box 2: Qualification levels in England

Learners in England have the option of taking qualifications at different levels:

> 'Entry-level' qualifications – the lowest level of qualification, usually providing an introduction to an area of education.

> Level 1 qualifications – GCSEs at grades D-G (1-3), Level 1 certificates, awards and diplomas in vocational subjects, grades 1-3 in external Music examinations.

> Level 2 qualifications – GCSEs at grades A*-C (9-4), Level 2 certificates, awards and diplomas in vocational subjects, grades 4-5 in external Music examinations.

> Level 3 qualifications – A Levels, AS Levels, Tech Levels, Applied Generals, Level 3 certificates, awards and diplomas in vocational subjects, grades 6-8 in external Music examinations.

With combinations of these qualifications, learners are defined as having achieved: 'full Level 1' if they have qualifications equivalent to five GCSE passes; 'full Level 2' if they have qualifications equivalent to five GCSEs grades C/4 or above; or full Level 3 if they have qualifications equivalent to two A Levels.

GCSE higher attainers generally have the option of entering the post-16 phase at Level 3 through full-time education in a school sixth form, a sixth form college or a general Further Education (FE) college. They are likely to be studying towards academic Advanced Level (A or AS Levels) qualifications or vocational qualifications (VQs), such as Applied Generals, Tech Levels and, from September 2020, the new T Levels. Some students may combine A Levels with a VQ. Some may also start an Advanced (Level 3) or Intermediate (Level 2) apprenticeship. The two-year post-16 phase in school sixth forms or sixth form colleges is

labelled as Key Stage 5 (Years 12 and 13) indicating its continuity with the pre-16 school system. The value and purpose of A Levels and some Level 3 VQs is widely understood and the pathways are largely predictable. Alongside these routes, however, and most often pursued by 'lower attainers', there is a raft of other programmes and qualifications at different levels provided by a plethora of organisations of varying sizes and structures, including: large general FE colleges; land-based colleges; art, design and performing arts colleges; specialist designated colleges; national specialist colleges (for people with learning disabilities); independent training providers; employer training providers; Local Authority providers; and Third Sector providers. Here the terms Key Stage 5 and Years 12 and 13 are less often used, indicating discontinuity with the school system, although learner attainment is included in the government's Key Stage 5 statistics.

How these two post-16 sub-systems come together in any given place varies substantially, largely as a result of decisions made under previous waves of education reforms. In some areas, many schools have sixth forms, while in others there are separate sixth form colleges and/or general FE colleges. The extent to which sixth forms and sixth form colleges offer vocational courses and FE colleges offer A Levels varies from place to place. A recent Association of Colleges (AOC) survey showed that 41 per cent of colleges surveyed from various areas of England offered no A levels at all, but the others did, to a varying extent (AOC, 2017). Structural changes happen all the time, for example through college-to-college mergers or independent training providers becoming part of a college grouping. From 2016 to 2018, in an attempt to rationalise FE college provision, government instigated a series of Area-Based Reviews, though, as Spours et al. (2018) point out in their study of what happened in London, college governing bodies were under no obligation to accept the recommendations.

This complexity is amplified by the funding arrangements. Overall, government spending on post-16 education and training has been falling in real terms since 2009/10, although student numbers have been rising, and with slightly bigger reductions in the FE sector (15 per cent) than in school sixth forms (12 per cent) (Belfield, Farquharson and Sibieta, 2018; Britton, Jack, Farquharson and Sibieta, 2019). The post-16 system operates as a quasi-market, with autonomous institutions offering similar and different types of provision and funded according to student numbers (DBIS, 2016). This creates competition between institutions; for example, school sixth forms wanting to retain students rather than signpost them towards apprenticeships. All providers need to operate in financially viable ways, responding to changes in central government funding rules, and this shapes what they offer (for example not being able to run courses with small numbers of learners). Thus, provision structures can change quickly. The 2017 AOC survey, for example, reported that that 60 per cent of colleges who offered A Levels had to cancel planned provision for the following year, mainly because of lack of demand making class sizes unviable. Although, in some areas, providers will liaise and collaborate in particular ways, with local authorities playing convening roles, there are no mandated local coordination arrangements to ensure that the market ensures progression and equity for all groups of learners and alignment with local labour market demand. This latter issue is most salient for vocational provision, given its more proximal links to local employment.

Unlike their higher attaining peers, therefore, the majority of 'lower attaining' 16-year-olds find themselves required to navigate their way through a landscape that continues to be described as chaotic and bewildering even by professionals who work in it (AOC, 2020).

2.4.   Post-16 destinations and decisions: existing evidence

There is some published research on the pathways taken by 'lower attainers' (see, for example, Rodeiro & Williamson, 2019; Hupkau et al., 2017; de Coulon et al., 2017) and our own analysis of official data for this project (Velthuis et al., 2018). This research shows that 'lower attainers' are:

- most likely to be in an FE college rather than other settings.
- less likely to be in a school sixth form or sixth form college than the rest of the cohort.
- more likely to be in an apprenticeship route than the rest of the cohort.
- more likely to be in a work-based training route.
- less likely to have a sustained destination (for 6 months in the year after Key Stage 4).

However, research to date has not focused on the different pathways and destinations followed by different learners within the overall 'lower attainer' group.

In theory, these destinations are determined by learner 'choices' in the post-16 marketplace. There is evidence that a complex set of factors influences the decisions young people make. These include prior attainment, local labour market conditions, access to resources, awareness of the options, peer group attainment and proximity to providers (Barrett, 1999; Ashworth and Evans, 2001; Furlong, 2005; Archer, DeWitt and Wong, 2014; Battiston et al., 2020) and the same is true of youth transitions globally (Billett and Johnson, 2012). Dickerson et al. (2020) show that parental background, household composition, the gender and ethnicity of the young person, their stated aspirations to attend university, and any tendency towards risky behaviours, each exert a statistically measurable influence over the type of post-16 pathway followed. Nonetheless, all these factors combined have only a limited ability to explain the pathway taken by a young person suggesting that post-16 decisions are shaped to an important extent by unmeasurable determinants.

In their influential study of young people, Hodkinson et al. (1996) proposed that they made decisions about the post-16 phase within a 'horizon for action' in which they had some agency, but came up against structural constraints, including the options available locally and their awareness and understanding of them. They connected this to the sociological concept of 'habitus' which seeks to capture the ways in which social, cultural and economic capital form the social world within which decision making takes place (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013). Atkins (2016) reminds us, however, that chance also plays a part. It is also important to avoid conceiving a young person as a totally independent actor – a consumer in a post-16 marketplace. There is plenty of evidence (including in this report; see section 5) that young people in general do involve others in their decision-making, including parents/guardians, schoolteachers, college and training provider staff, careers advisers and friends (Foskett and Hesketh, 1997; Heath, Fuller and Johnston, 2010; NatCen Social Research and SQW, 2016). Work experience, internships and work placements are also useful in decision-making

(NatCen Social Research and SQW, 2016). There is some evidence that these decisions are made with both institutional factors (such as a provider or, in the case of apprenticeships, employer's reputation, or wanting to stay in the school sixth from) and course factors in mind, and that young people also consider the proximity of a provider and the associated transport costs (Foskett and Hesketh, 1997; Unwin and Wellington, 2001; Foskett, Dyke and Maringe, 2008; NatCen Social Research and SQW, 2016).

In our study, we explored how these different processes and influences operate for 'lower attainers' whose 'choices' may, on the one hand, be considered to be wider (with a vast array of different subjects and occupational areas available), but on the other hand, to be narrower because of their lower prior attainment. Understanding how young people with lower attainment navigate the complex landscape of post-16 provision is crucial in understanding why they end up where they do.

2.5.   Local variation in provision and its effects: existing evidence

Surprisingly little research to date has explored spatial variations in post-16 provision and its effects. Our own analysis for this study (Velthuis et al., 2019) gave an indication of the scale of these differences at the city region level.[5] In London, nearly half of post-16 providers are school sixth forms, compared with just over a tenth in Greater Manchester, where the sixth form college and FE college sectors are much larger. There are differences within city regions too. Additionally, beyond the basic structure of provision, local areas have different courses on offer in similar types of provider, different labour markets and other important differences (e.g. in local transport options or availability of bursaries), which will affect post-16 pathways (Allen et al., 2016). It is known that young people in schools with sixth forms, in single sex schools and those in schools where 'staying on' is more common, are all more likely to enrol in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges rather than FE colleges (Crawford et al., 2011; Meschi et al., 2014). However, to what extent this affects the destinations of 'lower attaining' young people specifically is not established.

There is also some evidence that the choices of higher attaining young people can have an effect on the structure of provision more generally – potentially affecting what is available for 'lower attainers' who may have less choice. In London, for example, post-16 travel-to-learn patterns have a 'centrifugal quality' with many learners travelling outwards and more than half of learners in provision outside their own borough. Providers such as FE colleges located in inner London are then vulnerable to financial pressures from lower numbers and unable to offer as wide a selection of courses (Watson and Church, 2009).

As well as the structural differences in provision, other work suggests that there are spatial differences in young people's aspirations related to local labour markets and the working experience of those living there (Kintrea, Clair and Houston, 2011). This could affect choices as, particularly in cities, 'outward looking' horizons for action build up around areas where there has been a lot of regeneration or inward migration (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013). Hodgson and Spours (2013, 2015) suggest that imagining an 'ecological' model of young people's opportunity can help to understand the choices available to them and how they navigate these. They distinguish between 'low opportunity progression equilibria' – where

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[5] See Appendix B for an explanation of the city region geography.

the educational institutions are not well integrated with the community and focus on attainment rather than progression, and 'high opportunity progression eco-systems' where progression and collaborative working are prioritised and the focus is on next steps for young people, particularly outside the institution. This may help us to understand why, for example, some young people's high employment aspirations clash with their local 'imagined futures' (Evans, 2015).

2.6.   Outcomes within the post-16 phase for 'lower attaining' young people: existing evidence

As we indicated earlier in section 1, it is well-established that labour market outcomes for the 'lower attaining' group tend to be less good than for the rest of the cohort. There is less research on the progress and achievements of different learners within the post-16 phase.

Our own analysis of published data found that a sizeable proportion of 'lower attainers' each year were not able to build on their successes from school and progress to a higher level of learning by 19. For example, despite around 80 per cent of 'lower attainers' having at least 'full Level 1' when they left school in 2012/13 and 2013/14, only 64 per cent of these learners obtained 'full Level 2' by age 19 (Velthuis et al., 2018). Similarly, Hupkau et al. (2017) report that most of those who undertake Level 2 qualifications at age 17 do not progress to a higher level of learning beyond this. In addition, de Coulon et al. (2017) show that 21 per cent of learners studying below Level 2 in their post-16 phase ultimately become NEET (not in education, employment or training). One of the key aims of our research was, therefore, to examine more closely the outcomes of different groups of learners, how this relates to their immediate post-16 destinations and if/how these patterns are locally variable.

2.7.   Recent policy changes and their effects

The issues raised in this section are not by any means unknown to government. They have been the subject of repeated waves of both espoused and enacted policies.

The most significant recent reforms were those initiated after the Wolf Review of Vocational Qualifications (Wolf, 2011), which attempted to reduce the complexity and increase the quality of VQs both pre- and post-GCSE. It was made mandatory for young people who had not gained a grade C/4 in English and maths to continue to study those subjects and resit the GCSE examinations or be assessed for Functional Skills qualifications (see Box 3).

Box 3: GCSE-related reforms following the 2011 Wolf Review

A reduction in the number of qualifications approved for inclusion in school performance tables.

A maximum of two approved non-GCSE/IGCSE qualifications per pupil allowed to be counted in performance tables.

Each approved qualification to count as equivalent to maximum one GCSE, regardless of size.

As a condition of funding for post-16 providers, from August 2014 students who had not achieved a grade A*-C in English and maths GCSE should continue to study these subjects for a further two years. From August 2015, those achieving a grade D were required to study for GCSEs in these subjects rather than alternative qualifications.

Following these reforms, there has been some improvement in success rates for learners resitting GCSEs, but these remain low (Maughan et al., 2016; Velthuis et al., 2018). This is in line with international evidence that 'remediation interventions' (such as repeating English and maths) in tertiary education are generally unsuccessful (Van Effenterre, 2017). There is also evidence that the reforms have had the effect of depressing attainment levels for lower-attaining and disadvantaged learners (Burgess and Thomson, 2019; Children's Commissioner, 2019), while the increasing focus on English and maths in the secondary school curriculum (accelerated by the introduction of the E-Bacc and 'Progress 8' measure) is also limiting curriculum and qualification breadth (Parameshwaran and Thomson, 2015; Neumann et al., 2020).

Reform of vocational options has continued. The 2016 Skills Plan began a process of consolidating qualifications (both classroom-based and employment-based) into fifteen broad occupational pathways as well as reducing their number, while Functional Skills qualifications have also been reviewed. The first phase of the new Level 3 'T Level' qualifications has started this autumn, but is likely to be out of reach for most of the learners we consider here unless they are accepted on to the T Level Transition Programme. This one-year, full-time course is aimed at students "who are not yet ready to start a T Level but have the potential to progress onto one" (ESFA, 2020, p. 6). Unlike in some other European countries (e.g. Ireland and Denmark) where an optional 'transition year' is offered to all young people who want more time to consider their post-compulsory options, the Transition Programme is connected to one pathway. A key question will be how well the new English programme works, both as an 'access route' to a new pathway and as a vehicle for young people to improve their attainment, and also as a test bed for developing a more expansive transition year. We return to the potential value of a transition year in section 8 of this report.

There have also been several changes to apprenticeship policy, including the shift from Apprenticeship Frameworks to Apprenticeship Standards, the establishment of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, and the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy. Apprenticeships might in theory be an attractive and appropriate option for some 'lower attainers'. However, there has been a steady decline in the number of under-19 apprenticeship vacancies since 2015/16, particularly at Intermediate Level (Level 2). This means that those apprenticeships which are available to young people often impose more stringent entry requirements – a situation we discuss in more detail in section 6. An increasing percentage of the money generated by the Levy is being utilised to pay for

degree-level qualifications taken by adults already employed in a firm rather than providing a route into employment for school leavers. This practice of employee 'conversion' has taken place since 2006 when funding was made available for apprenticeships for people aged 25 and above (Fuller and Unwin, 2017). The impact of the 'Opportunity Guarantee' announced in July 2020, including cash boosts for employers for hiring apprentices and increased funding for Level 2 and Level 3 courses, remains to be seen. The continuing impact of Covid-19 on the economy has meant some apprentices have been placed on furlough or been made redundant, with fears that some employers may not continue to offer apprenticeships over the medium- and long-term (see Sutton Trust, 2020).

Accompanying these changes have been attempts to improve careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG), an area of policy and practice that has been criticised for being underfunded and inconsistent in terms of quality and accessibility for many years (for details, see Long et al., 2020). The 2017 Careers Strategy extended support for careers leaders in schools and established 20 careers 'hubs' to support activity linking across schools, colleges and universities. In 2018, it became mandatory for every state school to provide access for training providers and colleges to pupils aged eight to thirteen to provide information and advice about technical education and apprenticeships (Hochlaf and Dromey, 2019). Since 2018, schools and colleges have been required to implement the Gatsby Benchmarks for Good Careers Guidance and Ofsted has the duty to comment on Careers Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG) in its inspection reports. Evidence of progress suggests, however, that there is still considerable room for improvement. The 2020 Youth Voice Census found the percentage of young people reporting access to a careers adviser in school had dropped by eight points since 2019 to 59 per cent and in colleges, by three percentage points to 44 per cent (Youth Employment UK, 2020). The Education Select Committee and the Local Government Association (LGA) have criticised the continuing overlap of responsibilities between the Careers and Enterprise Company (established in 2015 to support links between schools, colleges and employers) and the National Careers Service (established in 2012 to provide CIAG to anyone from age 13). The LGA (2019) has called for a locally commissioned and delivered all-age careers service to end the fragmentation of provision. In section 6 of this report, we provide evidence from young people and professionals at local level about the continued problems with the current national strategy.

As we noted earlier, the English post-16 system continues to be characterised by central government regulation (qualifications, funding and inspection) and institutional autonomy (courses offered, entry requirements, partnership arrangements and workforce composition), with a limited role for local and combined authorities. Keep (2016) argues that, over the past 30 years, there has been a process of "incremental centralisation, adopting the view that the centre always knows best" (p.6). Moreover, centralisation has brought with it a neglect of the wealth of expertise and experience among stakeholders at the local level, which in turn has eroded the levels of trust found in other national systems where there is a greater emphasis on partnership between national and local actors. However, the devolution of responsibility for the Adult Education Budget in some places has renewed debates about the roles that combined authorities could play in a more decentralised post-16 system, enabling greater coherence with adult education and training. As we concluded our study, debates about the nature and pace of devolved powers gained added saliency in the light of the Covid-19 crisis.

In summary, then, ensuring more effective post-16 transitions for those not immediately bound for higher education has been a significant area of policy activity in recent years, but one in which it has been hard to make significant progress. The findings and analysis presented in this report contribute, therefore, to the building of the evidence base required to help anticipate the effects of current reforms as they work through, highlighting additional needs that remain to be addressed, and providing a baseline for understanding the impact of the pandemic on the 2020 and subsequent cohorts.

3. Unpacking the problem: data and methodology

3.1.   Overview

Our study employed a mixed-methods approach involving quantitative data analysis and qualitative fieldwork with young people and professionals. It explored both the national situation with regards to the transitions and progress made by 'lower attainers' in the 16-18 phase, as well as the links between attainment, opportunities, transitions and outcomes at the local level.

3.2.   Quantitative analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD) and Individualised Learner Record (ILR)

To answer questions about who are the 'lower attainers', their destinations after Key Stage 4 (KS4), and the progress they make in the 16-18 phase, we used the National Pupil Database (NPD), Individualised Learner Record (ILR) and National Client Caseload Information System (NCCIS): individual-level datasets containing details of all children and young people in education or training in England (Box 4).

By linking the NPD to the ILR we constructed a dataset that allows us to follow young people from the end of KS4 in Year 11, when they sit their GCSE exams, up to the end of the post-16 phase. We looked at progress and attainment both up to age 18 and age 19, recognising that some young people, particularly 'lower attainers', take three years over this phase.

Box 4: Administrative datasets

> The National Pupil Database (NPD) and Individualised Learner Record (ILR) are administrative datasets based on information provided by schools, colleges and other education and training providers.
>
> The NPD contains data on pupils in the English school system up to the end of KS4. For KS5, it has data on learners across a range of provision types, depending on the level and size of qualifications entered. Prior to 2015, this was mostly limited to learners entering AS/A levels and equivalent qualifications (mostly in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges, with some learners in FE colleges or other education providers). In more recent cohorts, learners across a broader range of qualifications have been included, but some remain outside of the scope of the NPD, notably apprentices.
>
> The ILR contains data on learners in general FE colleges, sixth form colleges, and independent training providers. Importantly it also includes learners on apprenticeship programmes.
>
> The National Client Caseload Information System (NCCIS) contains information on post-16 activity of young people and is collected at a local authority level on a monthly basis.

Our data covers five cohorts of young people (see Table 3.1).

The first cohort completed KS4 in the 2012/13 academic year and is referred to as the 2013 cohort. The last completed KS4 in the 2016/17 academic year and is referred to as the 2017 cohort.

Our analysis mainly centres around the 2015 cohort in state-funded schools. This was the second cohort affected by the reforms following the Wolf Review and also the second required to remain in education and training to age 18. This cohort completed the post-16 phase sufficiently long ago that data on their post-16 trajectories and attainment was available in the ILR at the time of analysis. Using the other cohorts, we were able to analyse:

- the effects of the 'Wolf reforms' on 'lower attainers' (comparing 2013 and 2014 cohorts to the 2015 cohort);
- the profiles of 'lower attainers' in subsequent (2016 and 2017) cohorts;
- the post-16 trajectories of learners in the 2016 cohort (this not yet being available for 2017).

We had hoped also to include KS4 data for the 2018 and 2019 GCSE cohorts. However, the DfE was not able to make this data available in the timescale of this report.

Table 3.1: Cohorts included in the quantitative analysis

Cohort	Number of learners	Completed Key Stage 4 in…	Completed Key Stage 5 in…	Included in Key Stage 4 analysis (section 4)	Included in post-16 analysis (sections 5, 6 and 7)
2013	595,909	2012/13	2014/15	✓	✓
2014	582,294	2013/14	2015/16	✓	✓
2015	576,132	2014/15	2016/17	✓	✓
2016	563,972	2015/16	2017/18	✓	✓
2017	548,053	2016/17	2018/19	✓	

A main feature of the analysis is that we show the heterogeneity of the overall group of 'lower attainers' (those without grade C/4 in English and maths at KS4) by separating them into nine categories based on their attainment profile. Details of this classification are provided in section 4.

We report our analysis at national and regional levels, and also for city regions (England's major cities and their surrounding areas), in recognition of devolved responsibilities for adult education, skills and industrial strategy, and increasing strategic collaboration over education, careers guidance and apprenticeships. Learners were allocated to a region or city region on the basis of where they lived during Year 11, rather than where they went to school, as is sometimes the case with statistics about school leaver destinations. For about 7 per cent of 'lower attainers' (and around 3 per cent of learners overall), information about area of residence was not available. Missing address information was especially prevalent among learners in the lowest of the attainment categories.

Accompanying the report, we have produced a web-based data tool to provide subnational breakdowns at the following levels:

- Region, to align with standard subnational reporting of education data.
- City region and also combined authority (CA).[6]
- Local Education Authority (LEA), in recognition of responsibilities for educational provision, special educational needs and young people classified as NEET.

Education data are not normally reported at city region or combined authority level, making it difficult to compare major urban areas or for CAs to take a strategic view based on a picture of what is happening across their area as a whole. Analysis at this spatial scale is thus a particularly important new contribution of this report.

3.3. Quantitative analysis of local opportunity sets

To understand the complexities of transitions and how they vary depending on where a young person lives, we collected and analysed data in seven localities. These were areas smaller than a whole local authority area which, from consultation with local actors, we understood to have identities as distinct places. This enabled us to address the question "what opportunities are available to someone who lives in xx place?', recognising that this would often vary within local authority area depending on geography and transport.

The seven localities are all within the two CA areas of Greater Manchester (GM) and North of Tyne (NoT).[7] These areas both have elected mayors and some devolved powers and interests in education and skills. They have shared urban characteristics but also differences in terms of their labour markets and geography. GM is almost entirely urban, while NoT contains rural Northumberland as well as the urban local authorities of Newcastle and North Tyneside. They also have different structures of post-16 provision – GM having a strong sixth form college sector and NoT having more provision in school sixth forms (Velthuis et al., 2019). Thus, they enabled the selection of a wide range of localities for analysis while enabling us to consider the potential roles of city region authorities.

Within the two CA areas, we selected localities which had:

- a variety of post-16 provision structures;
- different patterns of settlement and transport infrastructure;
- different population composition and proportions of young people who were 'lower attainers'.

They are Oldham, Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall, Eccles, and Wythenshawe in GM, and Alnwick, Longbenton & Killingworth, and Wallsend in NoT. We drew their boundaries based on physical boundaries, such as the edge of housing estates or roads, and the boundary definitions of local professionals with whom we consulted. More details of the localities are provided in Appendix B, as well as in section 6.

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[6] See Appendix A for definition of city region geographies.

[7] Greater Manchester CA covers the ten local authority areas of Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan. North of Tyne CA brings together the three local authorities of Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, and Northumberland.

For each locality, we calculated which providers (FE colleges, sixth form colleges, school sixth forms, and training providers)[8] were likely to be spatially accessible to young people based on journey times via public transport. These calculations are the populated-weighted averages of the travel times from all neighbourhoods (defined by Middle Layer Super Output Area or MSOA) in a case study locality. We then collected data from each of these providers' websites to catalogue the actual courses and traineeships offered to potential applicants for the 2018/19 academic year[9], according to their websites. Data on apprenticeship vacancies, taken from the national 'Find an Apprenticeship' website, was also gathered.[10]

In this way we are able to describe 'opportunity sets' for young people in different places. We deliberately use the term 'opportunity sets' rather than 'choice sets' to emphasise that young people's decision-making after KS4 is not always the active process that the word 'choice' implies. One particular issue is that a young person is not able to 'choose' an option that they are not aware of.

Box 5: Opportunity sets

The opportunity sets we use in this report are a version of the 'choice sets' used in previous research (Allen et al., 2016; Gibbons & Vignoles, 2012).

We amended this approach to suit the post-16 context in four key ways:

1.   The opportunity sets we constructed are based on the complete set of opportunities that young people, theoretically, have available to them in their local area rather than those they are observed to attend in administrative data.
2.   We used travel times on public transport (rather than distance) to identify opportunities within a realistic travelling time (60 minutes for urban areas and 90 minutes for rural areas). Travel times were calculated using the Google Maps API.
3.   We used entry requirements to determine accessibility of opportunities at the course/apprenticeship level rather than provider level, since entry requirements for courses and providers vary. More information on our interpretation of entry requirements can be found in Appendix C.
4.   We included apprenticeships and traineeships as well as courses.

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[8] Fee-paying providers were excluded since these are not open to all young people.
[9] By necessity, this is a later academic year than the one covered by our main quantitative analysis of the opportunities actually taken up. There had been no major changes (for example provider closures) in these localities so it is very likely that the opportunity sets for 2018/19 are a good indication of the extent and type of provision typically available in these localities, even though the exact opportunities are likely to vary a little from year to year. Opportunities could only be included if there were advertised. Traineeships were particularly hard to find and it may be that there were traineeships and some other opportunities that were not included because they were not advertised.
[10] Apprenticeship data was captured at three points: November 2018, and March and May 2019. The latter had higher entry requirements. Since 94 per cent of school leaver apprentices enrol in or before November, we include the November data in our opportunity set analysis as a better reflection of what is on offer at the point of transition for most young people.

These opportunity sets present a uniquely detailed picture of the typical options available to all young people in these areas, which in turn allowed us to analyse the ways in which provision structure and practices within providers shape what is on offer for 'lower attaining' young people specifically.

3.4.   Qualitative data collection and analysis

In the final part of the study, we collected and analysed qualitative data on how young people experienced the transition from school into the post-16 phase. This helped to bring to life the issues explored in the administrative data at national level, whilst building on existing qualitative work on young people's experiences and perspectives. Founded on our detailed analysis of the actual opportunity sets in the case study areas, it also enabled us to understand how the differences between places came to matter in young people's post-16 trajectories. We gained ethical approval from the University of Manchester and consent from the young people and professionals who all participated on a voluntary basis.

This research was carried out in the seven case study localities within GM and NoT. Initially, we conducted 18 exploratory interviews with professionals working in post-16 education and local government, and we were informed by similar discussions with our local advisory panels. These served to help us understand local provision and the history and rationales underpinning it, local services and practices (e.g. transport subsidies or services to identify and support NEETs) and other local issues that professionals identified. We also held a focus group with CIAG professionals in GM.

We then conducted and tape-recorded focus groups and interviews with young people in each of the case study localities. A total of 47 'lower attaining' young people took part in the groups. They chose pseudonyms for themselves, and throughout the report we refer to them by these made-up names, or occasionally by the term 'participant' where it was not possible to identify a particular young person's voice from the recording or where they provided only their real name.

Box 6: Focus groups with young people

> **Number of focus groups:** Eight (four in GM including two in one locality where it proved difficult to recruit young people on the first occasion; four in NoT).
>
> **Participants:** Young people aged 16 to 19 who did not achieve grade 4 in English and/or maths GCSE at the end of Key Stage 4, and who were engaged in various forms of post-16 education.
>
> **Focus group sites:** The focus groups were organised through post-16 education providers – a combination of general FE colleges and smaller providers – and held on their premises with students currently attending the provider in question.
>
> **Number of participants:** Each focus group had between two and 13 participants, with an average of six participants per focus group. The total number of focus group participants was 47.

Most of the participants were aged 17, although some were younger or older (see Figure 3.1). The gender balance of participants was slightly skewed towards male learners (25 out of 47 participants). Most participants who provided their ethnicity identified as White British, although there were five participants who declared other ethnicities.[11] This is broadly in line with the characteristics of young people with lower attainment in England (see section 4).

Figure 3.1: Age, gender and ethnicity of participants in focus groups with young people
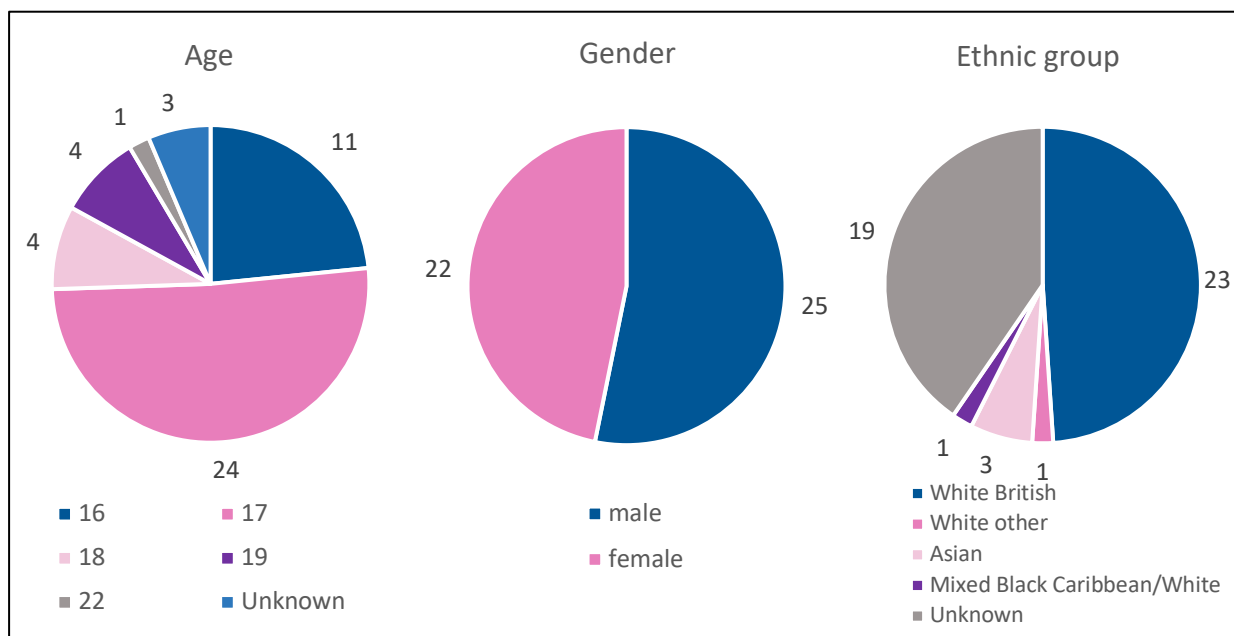
The focus groups were organised around a series of activities designed to encourage participants to think and talk about their experiences of deciding what to do after Year 11, their transition to post-16 learning, and their perception of the range of education and training opportunities that were available in their local area.

The first activity was designed to elicit young people's knowledge and perceptions of post-16 providers in their area, as well as to find out which of these they had considered attending, and why. Loosely based on a method employed in research into young people's 'spatial horizons' (White and Green, 2015), this involved young people adding all the education and training providers they knew of onto a map of their local area. In the second activity, participants assessed options and gave advice to 'hypothetical friends' (profiles of young people in Year 11 created by the research team). These hypothetical friends were all 'lower attainers' in the sense that they were predicted not to achieve grade 4 in English and/or maths, but apart from this common feature had varying levels of (predicted) attainment, and different subject combinations and interests. Figure 3.2 shows two examples.

Participants engaged in a conversation about what they would advise their hypothetical friends to do after Year 11, if they lived in their local area. Through this, we were able to explore the sorts of opportunities that participants felt were accessible to young people with

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[11] 19 of the participants did not provide their ethnicity.

lower attainment, as well as their opinion of local education and training providers, courses, and apprenticeships. The advice for the hypothetical friends naturally flowed into discussions of participants' own decision-making process in relation to their post-16 transition, and the issues they may have encountered during this time.

Figure 3.2: Hypothetical friends exercise – Luke and Afrah

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 and Technology: 3
Business studies: 3

Name: **Afrah**

Age: **16**

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

Predicted GCSE grades

English language: 2
English literature: 3
maths: 4
Core science: 3
Health and social care: 4

Geography: 2
RE: 4
IT: 3
Business Studies: 3

Lastly, we conducted 12 one-to-one interviews with a selection of the young people who had participated in the focus groups. These explored individual experiences in more detail. To facilitate discussion, we asked young people to draw a timeline starting from the point at which they had first started thinking about what they were going to do after Year 11, up to the present. Timelines have been proven to facilitate recall and encourage a richer discussion (Adriansen, 2012; Kolar et al., 2015). They were also useful in helping us piece together the events that had led to a young person ending up in their current destination. During this process, some young people chose to draw their own timeline and others asked the researchers to act as a 'scribe' whilst they talked through their timeline. Figure 3.3 shows an example, in this case drawn by the researcher.

Figure 3.3: Example of a timeline
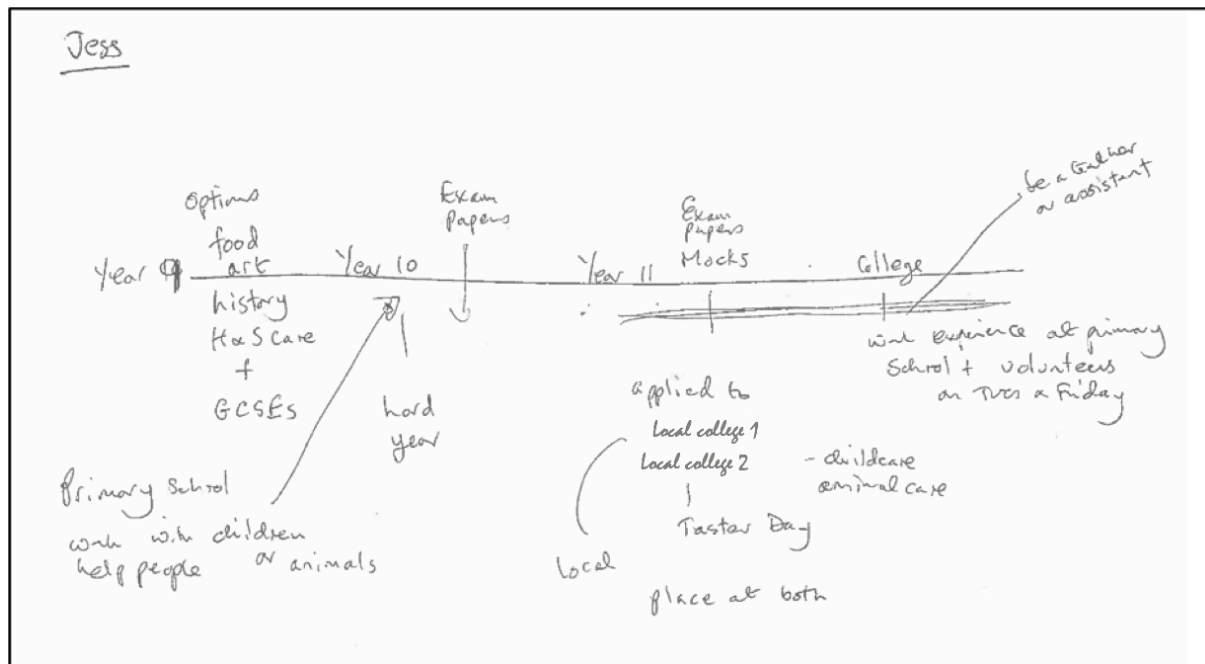
In combination, the use of multiple datasets and cohorts, national and local analysis and quantitative and qualitative data provides a uniquely rich and detailed picture of the experiences of young people with lower GCSE attainment whose circumstances and pathways are often invisible in headline analyses.

4. Key Stage 4 achievement and diversity among 'lower attainers'

4.1. Overview

In this section we explore the characteristics of GCSE 'lower attainers' – those who did not achieve grade 4/C or above in English and maths. We look at:

- their attainment profiles at Key Stage 4 (KS4), both in English and maths and in other subjects;
- their characteristics: gender, ethnicity, Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility, and special educational need (SEN).

In this section, as well as in the next two, we focus particularly on the 2015 cohort. At the time of analysis, this was the most recent cohort that we were able to follow until age 19, which means we are able to present data on their KS4 attainment, their initial post-16 transition (in section 5), and their outcomes at both age 18 and 19 (in section 7). This cohort completed their GCSEs under the previous alphabetical GCSE grading scheme, so we refer to those grades instead of the new numerical grades. In the second part of the section, we explore how the size and composition of the 'lower attaining' group has changed over time.

4.2. Diversity in attainment

4.2.1. Classifying 'lower attainers'

The analysis in this section, and in much of the rest of the report, is structured around a classification of 'lower attainers' on the basis of their attainment profile. This has two dimensions. The first is attainment in English[12] and maths GCSE, distinguishing young people who:

- achieved A*-C in English, but not maths;
- achieved A*-C in maths, but not English;
- achieved A*-C in neither English nor maths.

The second is wider attainment, since young people without A*-C in English and/or maths will vary in their achievements in other academic and vocational subjects, GCSEs and equivalents. We distinguish between young people with:

- five or more GCSEs at A*-C (or equivalent qualifications) which may or may not include English and/or maths. These young people have achieved full Level 2 (see Box 2 in section 2 for definitions of levels);
- one to four GCSEs at A*-C (or equivalent qualifications) which may or may not include English and/or maths;
- no GCSEs at A*-C (or equivalent qualifications).

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[12] Consistent with DfE statistics and conditions of funding, a C/4 in either English Language or English Literature is counted as having C/4 in 'English'

We further break down the last category (no GCSEs at A*-C or equivalent) into those with:

- five or more GCSEs at D-G (or equivalent qualifications). This is equivalent to full Level 1;
- one to four GCSEs at D-G (or equivalent qualifications);
- no GCSEs at D-G (or equivalent qualifications) – although they may have achieved some small Entry Level or Level 1 qualifications that are not equivalent to a full GCSE).

The classification produces nine categories of learners, shown in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Classification of 'lower attainers' into nine categories

	Number of GCSEs at A*-C/9-4 (or equivalent qualifications)		
	5 or more	**1 to 4**	**none**
Grade C/4 in **English** but not maths	*Five A*-C with English*	*Some A*-C with English*	-
Grade C/4 in **maths** but not English	*Five A*-C with maths*	*Some A*-C with maths*	-
Grade C/4 in neither **English nor maths**	*Five A*-C with neither*	*Some A*-C with neither*	*No A*-C*

Number of GCSEs at D-G/3-1 (or equivalent)		
5 or more	**1 to 4**	**none**
Five D-G	*Some D-G*	*No D-G*

4.2.2. The distribution of 'lower attainers' by category

Table 4.1 shows the number and proportion of 'lower attainers' in each category in the 2015 cohort. About one fifth (21 per cent) were in the *Five A*-C attainment* categories, achieving five 'good' GCSEs or equivalent and thus having achieved full Level 2. The vast majority of these learners also achieved a grade C/4 in either English or maths.

Around half of 'lower attainers' (52 per cent) were in the *Some A*-C attainment* categories: achieving at least one, but fewer than five, GCSEs at grade A*-C (or equivalent). The proportion of young people in these categories who achieved a grade C in either English or maths was much lower than among young people in the *Five A*-C* categories, with more than half of this group not achieving grade C in either subject. Nonetheless, nearly half did. Thus, there was a substantial proportion of young people who did not achieve five or more 'good' GCSEs, but still managed to achieve a C or above in either English or maths (24 per cent of 'lower attainers', or 10 per cent of all young people in the 2015 cohort).

Taking these two groups together, we can see that just over two-fifths (43 per cent) of the 'lower attaining' group had achieved a C or above in either English or maths, fairly evenly divided between those achieving the grade in English, but not in maths, and those achieving it in maths, but not in English.

Finally, the *No A*-C* attainment categories represented about 28 per cent of 'lower attainers'. Of these, over a third (11 per cent of 'lower attainers' and 5 per cent of all learners) achieved five or more GCSE or equivalent passes (full Level 1), and a slightly smaller proportion achieved between one and four passes. Just over 8 per cent of 'lower attainers' (4 per cent of all learners) achieved no GCSE or equivalent passes.

Table 4.1: Percentage of 'lower attainers' who belong to each attainment category, 2015 cohort

Category	n	% of 'lower attainers'	% of total cohort
Five A*-C with English	24,610	9.9	4.3
Five A*-C with maths	23,123	9.3	4.0
Five A*-C with neither	3,129	1.3	0.5
Total with Five A*-C	*50,862*	*20.5*	*8.8*
Some A*-C with English	30,464	12.3	5.3
Some A*-C with maths	28,807	11.6	5.0
Some A*-C with neither	68,516	27.6	11.9
Total with Some A*-C	*127,787*	*51.6*	*22.2*
Five D-G	26,915	10.9	4.7
Some D-G	22,365	9.0	3.9
No D-G	19,959	8.1	3.5
Total with No A*-C	*69,239*	*27.9*	*12.0*
Total	247,888	100	43.0

Source: National Pupil Database. Excludes learners in independent schools. Attainment categories defined as in Figure 4.1 and include equivalents.

Two key points emerge from these findings:

- First, the vast majority of young people who do not achieve a higher grade (i.e. C or above) in both GCSE English and maths nevertheless have substantial achievements: a higher grade in one or the other subject; five higher grades without English or maths; or five lower grades. They are not 'failing' or 'leaving school with nothing'.

- Second, there is a group of young people (around 20,000 or 1 in 29 of the whole cohort in 2015) who complete their secondary schooling without having achieved any passes at GCSE or equivalent, as well as a similar sized group who have some GCSEs at lower grades, but without achieving at least five passes (i.e. full Level 1) – a traditional marker of a broad general education. Evenly distributed, these two groups together would equate to roughly two young people in a class of 30.

4.2.3. Subjects and achievements in more detail

Illuminating these points further, Figure 4.2 shows the average number of GCSE and iGCSE[13] passes for each category. Young people with five higher grade GCSEs or equivalent, but who missed out on either maths or English GCSE typically had an average of eight GCSE passes, only one fewer than the average for non-lower attainers (i.e. young people who did achieve grade C in both English and maths). Even those who gained neither subject at a higher grade *and* had fewer than five higher grade passes tended to have at least five passes (at any grade). The only two groups with very few GCSE passes (fewer than 2) were the bottom two.

Figure 4.2: Average number of GCSE passes and proportion entering at least one GCSE, by 'lower attainer' category, 2015 cohort
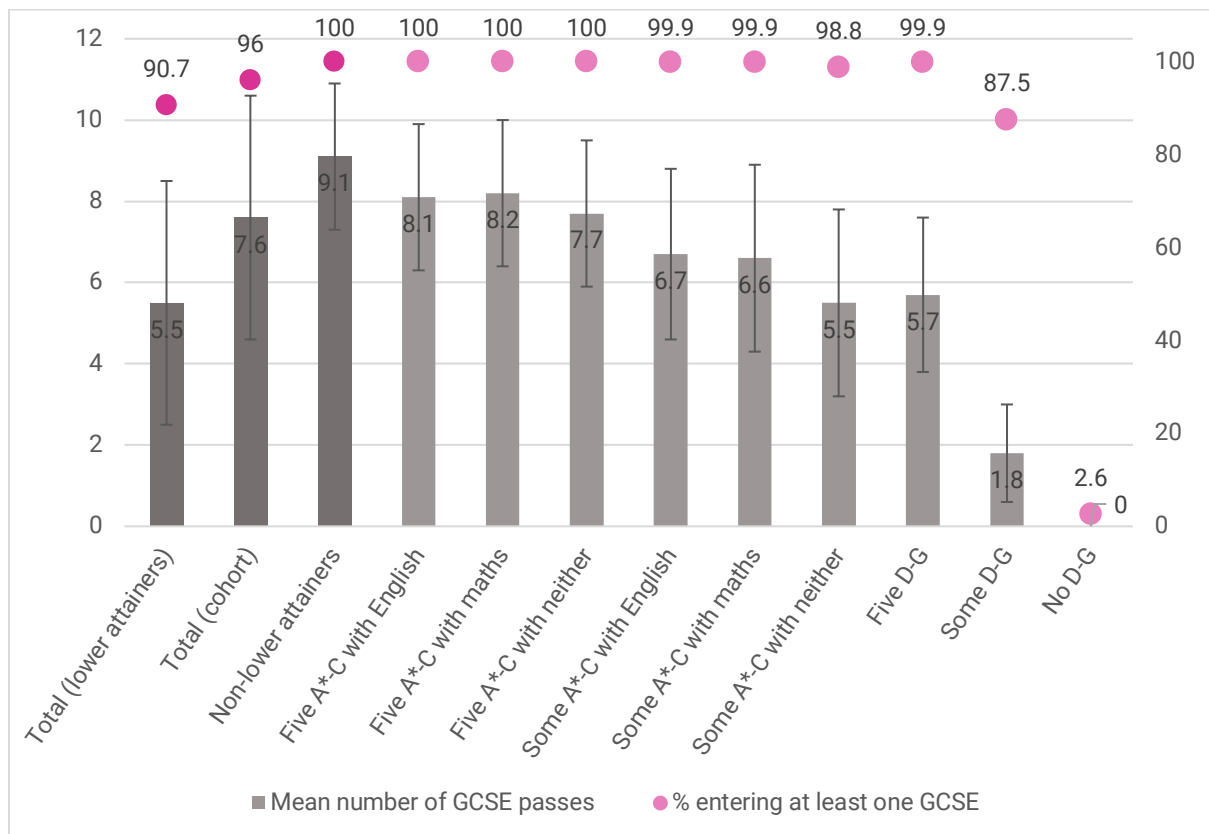
Source: National Pupil Database, KS4 pupil and KS4 exam datasets for 2015 (includes iGCSEs). Notes: Excludes young people in independent (non-special) schools. Error bars represent the standard deviation.

Figure 4.2 excludes vocational equivalents since these have different 'pass' thresholds making analysis of the total number of passes difficult. However, we know that 80 per cent of 'lower attainers' entered at least one VQ; compared with 66 per cent of other students), the mean number being 1.9. The most commonly entered subject was Computer Appreciation/Introduction (31 per cent of 'lower attainers'), followed by Applied Sciences (23 per cent) and Sports Studies (12 per cent). Around 10 per cent of 'lower attainers', mainly in the lower three categories, entered for VQs in Basic Communication Skills and Mathematics (Numeracy).

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[13] International General Certificate of Secondary Education - an English language based examination recognised as being equivalent to the GCSE for the purposes of recognizing prior attainment.

Putting these together, Box 7 to Box 13 show illustrative subject and attainment profiles of each category. These profiles are based on analysis of the average attainment and subject entry within each category. There will of course be substantial variation within each category, in particular within the biggest category, 'Some A*-C with neither', where GCSE passes ranged from four to eight, and non-GCSE qualifications from one to five. The exact subjects entered will also differ between young people in each category. However, the profiles give a flavour of the routes that different young people take through school and the range of subjects with which they are equipped upon leaving. We also analysed actual grades in English and maths GCSE, to understand how far from the required C grade learners in each category typically were, and these findings are summarised in each box.

For comparative purposes, we note that amongst non-lower attainers, almost 90 per cent entered English Literature as well as English Language, and about four-fifths did either History, Geography, or both. Just over a third took separate GCSEs in Physics, Biology and Chemistry, with most of the remaining learners taking Core Science alongside Additional Science. About two-thirds did a Modern Foreign Language. Other commonly taken GCSE subjects included Religious Studies (53 per cent), Art and Design (about 28 per cent), IT (26 per cent) and Design and Technology (24 per cent), and young people in this group typically also took one or two vocational subjects.

Turning now to 'lower-attainers', we look first (Box 7 to Box 13) at the first seven categories (those who, as Figure 4.2 shows, passed five or more GCSEs on average, at any grade).

Box 7: Illustrative subject and attainment profile: Five A*-C with English

English, maths and science	*Other academic*
English Language B	History B
English Literature C	Religious Studies D
Maths D	Art and Design C
Core Science C	*Other vocational*
Additional Science D	BTEC First Award in Health Studies
	OCR Level 2 Cambridge National Certificate in Small Business Management
Maths GCSE grades: 84% D; 11% E; 5% other or did not enter	

Box 8: Illustrative subject and attainment profile: Five A*-C with maths

English, maths and science	*Other academic*
English Language D	Geography B
English Literature D	Media Studies B
Maths C	Business Studies C
Core Science C	*Other vocational*
Additional Science C	Level 2 BTEC in Applied Sciences
	Level 2 VQR in Computer Appreciation/ Introduction to Computers
English GCSE grades: 87% D; 6% E; 7% other or did not enter	

Box 9: Illustrative subject and attainment profile: Five A*-C with Neither

English, maths and science	*Other academic*
English Language D	Geography D
English Literature C	Art and Design C
Maths D	Physical Education B
Core Science C	*Other vocational*
	BTEC First Award in Applied Sciences
	BTEC First Award in Business Studies
	OCR Level 1/2 Cambridge National Certificate in Health Studies

English GCSE grades: 87% D; 6% E; 7% other or did not enter
maths GCSE grades: 78% D; 14% E; 8% other or did not enter

Box 10: Illustrative subject and attainment profile: Some A*-C with English

English, maths and science	*Other academic*
English Language D	History C
English Literature C	Music D
Maths E	*Other vocational*
Core Science D	Vocational GCSE in Catering
	BTEC First Award in Speech and Drama
	Level 1 VRQ in Sports Leadership

Maths GCSE grades: 61% D; 21% E; 18% other or did not enter

Box 11: Illustrative subject and attainment profile: Some A*-C with maths

English, maths and science	*Other academic*
English Language D	Geography D
English Literature E	Design Technology C
Maths C	*Other vocational*
Core Science D	BTEC First Award in Applied Sciences
	Level 2 Functional Skills in Computer Appreciation/ Introduction to Computers
	Level 2 VRQ in Personal Finance

English GCSE grades: 71% D; 17% E; 12% other or did not enter

Box 12: Illustrative subject and attainment profile: Some A*-C with neither

English, maths and science	*Other academic*
English Language D	Sociology D
English Literature E	Religious Studies C
Maths E	*Other vocational*
Core Science F	BTEC First Award in Business Studies
	Level 1 OCR Cambridge National Certificate in Computer Appreciation
	Level 2 Functional Skills in English

English GCSE grades: 56% D; 25% E; 19% other or did not enter
Maths GCSE grades: 40% D; 21% E; 39% other or did not enter

Box 13: Illustrative subject and attainment profile: Five D-G

English, maths and science	*Other academic*
English Language E	Design and Technology E
English Literature F	History G
Maths F	*Other vocational*
Core Science D	BTEC First Award in Public Services
	Level 1 VQR in Self Development
	Level 1 Functional Skills in maths

English GCSE grades: 39% D; 36% E; 25% other or did not enter
Maths GCSE grades: 25% D; 21% E; 54% other or did not enter

Summarising findings for these categories, we find that:

- Subject profiles for 'lower attainers' who achieved full Level 2, but not maths and/or English GCSE at A*-C, were fairly similar to those of people who did achieve higher grades in both subjects. The 'lower attainers' were somewhat less likely to have done a Modern Foreign Language and slightly less likely to have done a single science, but the main difference between these learners and non-lower attainers was that they tended to achieve lower grades across a reasonably similar set of subjects. Few got A*s and As and most grades were Bs, Cs and Ds. The vast majority achieved a grade D in the subject (English/maths) that they were then obliged to resit. On average, non-lower attainers achieved one GCSE at grade A*, two A's, three B's, three C's and one D.

- The majority of 'lower-attainers' who achieved a C in either English or maths but not five higher grades also achieved a D in the subject (English/maths) they were obliged to resit, although there was a minority, particularly in maths, with F grades or lower.

- However, among those who achieved neither five higher grades nor a C in English and maths, grades in English and maths tended to be substantially lower, in maths in particular, indicating that maths GCSE is a struggle for many with this overall level of attainment or below.

- In terms of subject profiles, those following a more 'arts/humanities' style route – for example taking English literature, history, art and design, music or drama – tended to be slightly more successful in English than maths, regardless of their overall grade profile. Those taking more 'maths/science related' subjects, including Geography, Business Studies or IT and separate sciences (although this was relatively unusual), tended to be more successful in maths rather than English. This is consistent with research findings that young people with moderate attainment can be divided into a group tending to do better in maths and sciences and a group tending to do better in English and humanities (Playford and Gayle, 2016). These subject orientations were less marked among young people who did not achieve a C in either English or maths.

- Even towards the lower end of the attainment spectrum, substantial numbers of young people completed at least some Ebacc subjects. For instance, in the 'Some A*-C with neither' category, over a third had done Core Science alongside Additional Science, a third either History or Geography, and a quarter a Modern Foreign Language (MFL). MFL was less common among young people who achieved no GCSEs at A*-C, but nevertheless achieved five GCSEs at D-G. Young people in this

category were instead more likely to have done Design and Technology, IT, Physical Education or Music.

The picture for the lowest two categories (Box 14 and Box 15) is, however, rather different. GCSEs in Ebacc subjects such History, Geography, French or German, or separate science GCSEs, were almost never taken by young people in these categories. Based on their qualification entries, it appears that their curriculum instead tended to consist of three or four GCSEs and several Vocationally-Related Qualifications, ELQs or sometimes Level 1 BTECs. In the 'Some D-G' group, GCSE grades achieved tended to be Es, Fs and Gs, often with at least one U. Only one in 10 achieved a D grade in English, and even fewer achieved a D in maths. About a third of young people in this category completed Functional Skills in either English or maths instead of GCSEs.

In the lowest attainment category ('No D-G'), very few GCSEs were taken. Fewer than 1 in 10 learners even entered English or maths GCSE, with learners tending to do Functional Skills instead. Young people in this category tended to have passed several smaller non-GCSE qualifications – typically Entry Level Vocationally-Related Qualifications or ELQs.

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	

Box 15: Illustrative subject and attainment profile: No D-G

English, maths and science	*Other academic*
None	GCSE Design and Technology (Food Technology) U
	Other vocational
	Level 1 Functional Skills in English
	Functional Skills in maths
	ELQ Band B in Multimedia
	ELQ Band C in Science
	Level 1 VQR in Self Development
English GCSE grades: 0% D to G; 5% U; 95% did not enter	
Maths GCSE grades: 0% D to G; 8% U; 92% did not enter	

4.3.   Characteristics of 'lower attainers'

Figures 4.3 to 4.5 show the composition of each 'lower attainer' category by eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) in Year 11, and also by whether they have an identified SEN.

These data demonstrate that the majority of 'lower attainers' are neither eligible for FSM nor have an identified SEN. This is important in reminding us that not achieving grades A*-C in maths and English is widespread – around two-fifths of young people. Socio-economic disadvantage does not automatically confer low attainment nor is low attainment confined to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, young people with these disadvantages are over-represented among 'lower attainers' (in this cohort 21 per cent of 'lower attainers' were FSM eligible compared with 8 per cent of non-lower attainers and 31 per cent of 'lower attainers' had SEN compared with 6 per cent of non-lower attainers).

Moreover, in each case there was a steady gradient across the categories – the lower the attainment, the greater the proportion with each indicator of disadvantage. The exception is the lowest attainment category (with no GCSE passes) which appeared slightly less disadvantaged than the 'Some D-G' category with 1 to 4 passes.

In the lowest attaining two categories together, more than half of young people had an identified special educational need, and just under two-thirds had either identified SEN or FSM or both. Proportions with more significant SEN, as indicated by a statement or EHC plan, were also significantly higher in these last two categories, and this is further indicated by the kinds of institution attended by young people in these groups. For both groups there were also high levels of 'missing SEN status' which may suggest interrupted schooling or recent arrivals. While we cannot establish the detail from the data available in the NPD/ILR, it is likely that many of these young people face immense challenges outside school.

While 96 per cent or more of learners in the top seven categories studied for GCSEs and equivalents in mainstream schools, this fell to 62 per cent for the 'Some D-G' group (with 15 per cent in special schools and 23 per cent in Pupil Referral Units, other alternative provision or the FE sector), and just 37 per cent for learners in the 'No passes' category (with 24 per cent in special schools and 32 per cent in Pupil Referral Units, other alternative provision or the FE sector). Students in these lower two categories were also much more likely to have moved school during KS4 – 13 per cent in the 'Some D-G' category, and 16 per cent of those in the 'No passes' category had done so compared with just 4 per cent of learners overall.

Figure 4.3: FSM eligibility among each 'lower attainer' category, 2015 cohort (%)
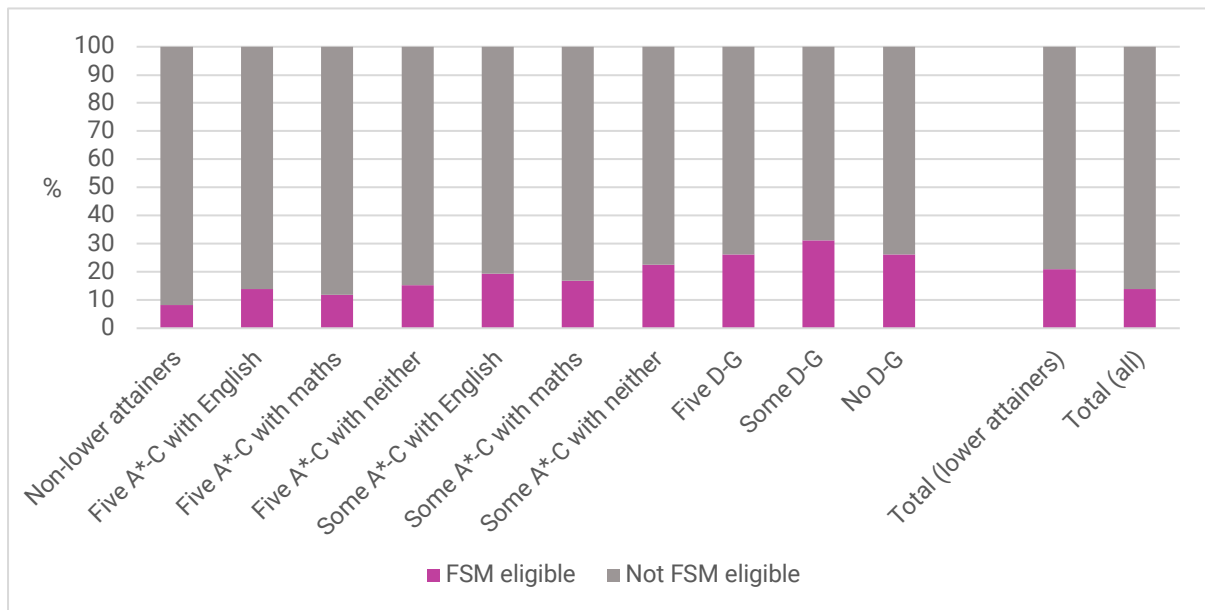
Source (for Figure 4.3 to Figure 4.5): National Pupil Database, KS4 and Spring Census data for 2015. Excludes young people in (non-special) independent schools.

Figure 4.4: SEN composition of each 'lower attainer' category, 2015 cohort (%)
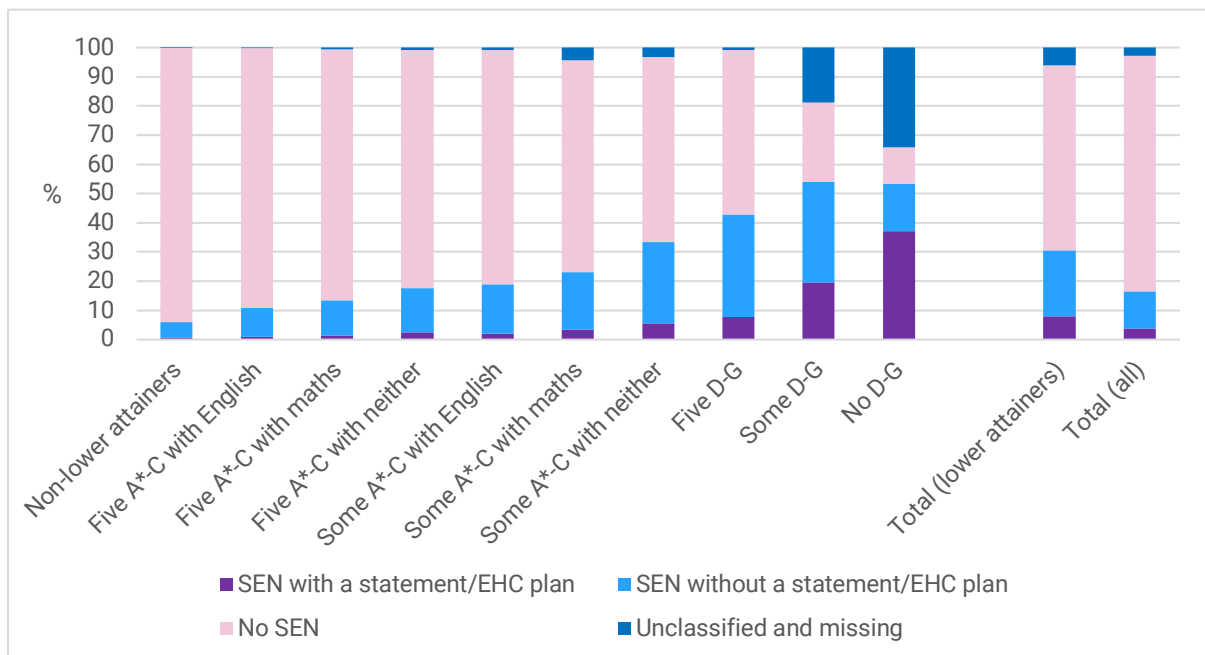
Figure 4.5: Combined SEN and FSM status of each 'lower attainer' category, 2015 cohort (%)
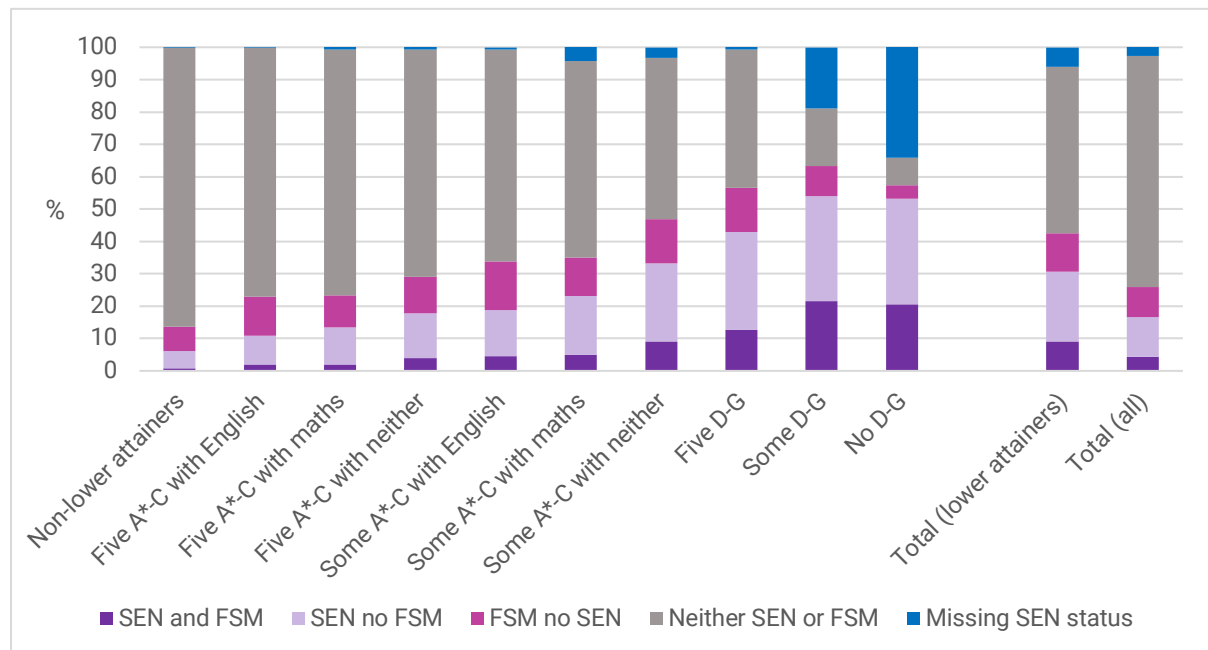
Figure 4.6 and Figure 4.7 demonstrate that the gender and ethnic mix of the 'lower attainer' group as a whole is not markedly different from that of all learners. However, there are striking gender differences between the categories. Boys were overrepresented in the three lowest attaining groups, and also in groups achieving GCSE grade C or above in maths but not in English. In contrast, girls were overrepresented in groups achieving a higher grade in GCSE English, but not in maths.

Figure 4.6: Gender composition of each 'lower attainer' category, 2015 cohort (%)
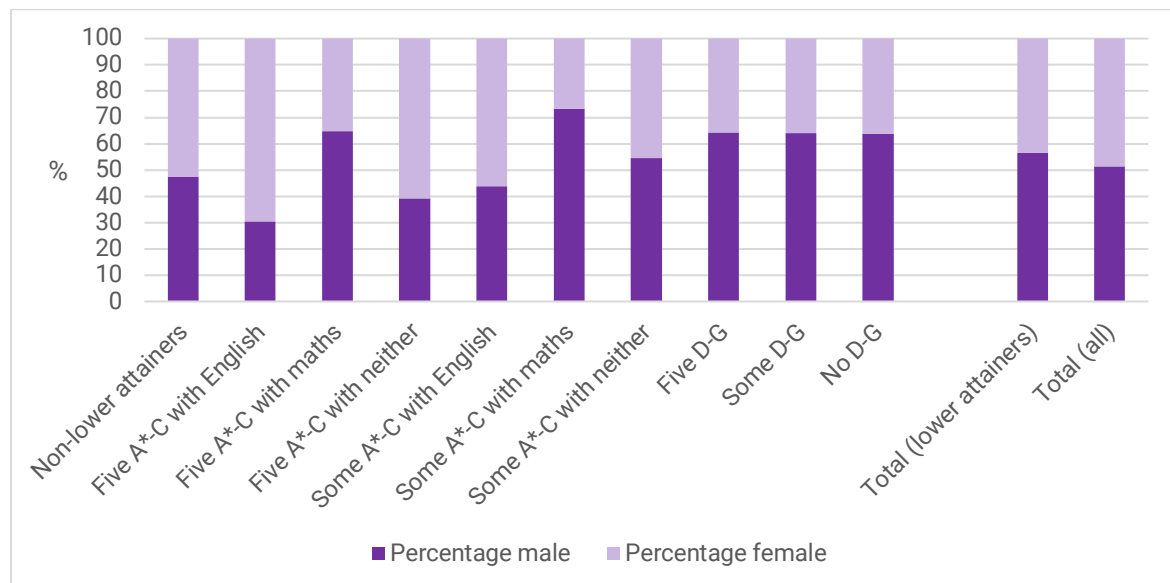
Source: National Pupil Database, Key Stage 4 and Spring Census data for 2015. Data excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

Figure 4.7: Ethnic composition of each 'lower attainer' category, 2015 cohort (%)
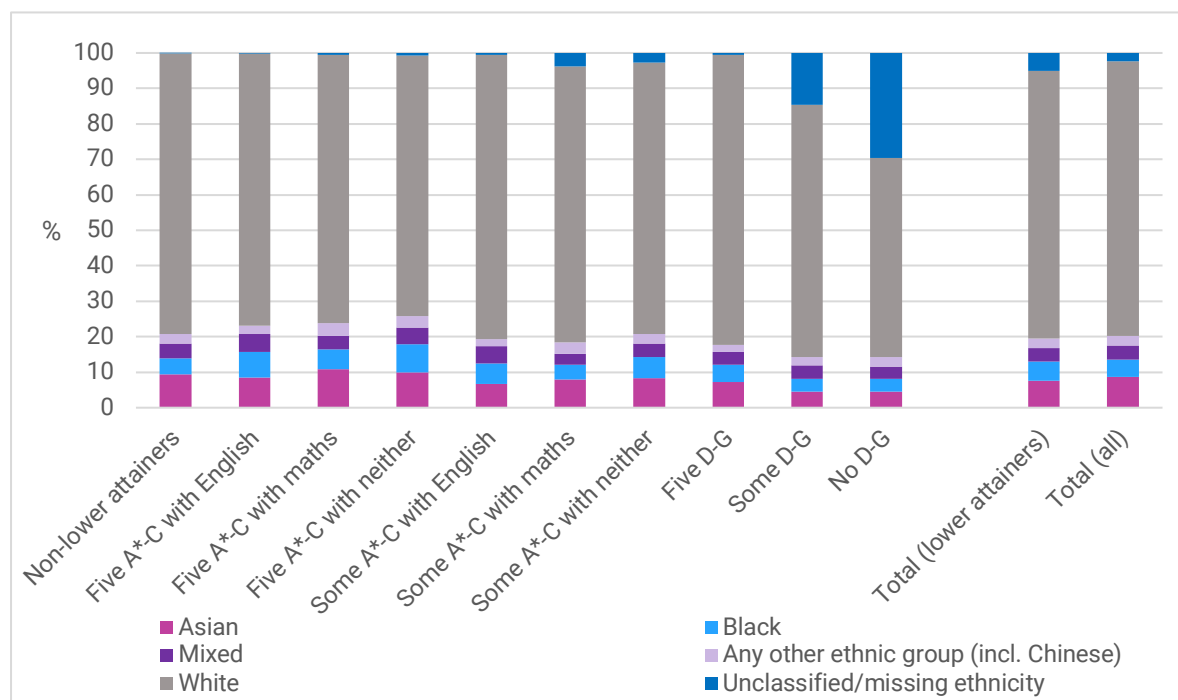
Source: National Pupil Database, Key Stage 4 and Spring Census data for 2015. Data excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

Non-white pupils, especially those of Black and Mixed ethnicity, were somewhat more likely to be found in one of three higher attaining groups than the others. Pupils of Asian ethnicity were slightly overrepresented in the two categories characterised by achievement of grade C or above in maths, but not English (and this was also true for EAL learners – not shown) whereas pupils of Black and Mixed ethnicity were slightly overrepresented in the two categories characterised by achievement of grade C or above in English (in which EAL learners were, perhaps not surprisingly, underrepresented).

4.4.   Spatial distribution and variations

'Lower attainers' are not concentrated in any one region of the country. As Table 4.2 shows, their distribution in 2015 roughly mirrored the distribution of the total cohort.

However, London and the South East had slightly fewer 'lower attainers' than would be expected given the distribution of the cohort overall.

Table 4.2: Spatial distribution of 'lower attainers', by region, 2015 cohort

	Percentage of all 'lower attainers'	Percentage of total cohort	Difference
East Midlands	8.8	8.6	0.2
East of England	10.4	11.0	-0.6
London	12.4	13.7	-1.3
North East	4.7	4.7	0.0
North West	13.5	13.4	0.1
South East	13.9	15.4	-1.5
South West	7.9	8.3	-0.5
West Midlands	11.9	11.9	0.0
Yorkshire and The Humber	10.0	9.9	0.1

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System. Excludes learners in independent schools.

Table 4.3 analyses regional differences, showing what percentage of the total 2015 cohort in each region were 'lower attainers' and how these learners were distributed among the nine attainment categories. In line with Table 4.2 (and of course with more familiar data showing regional gaps in proportions achieving GCSE thresholds), the South East and London had lower percentages of 'lower attainers' than other regions. The North West, Yorkshire and Humber and the West Midlands had the highest proportions.

Although there are some broad commonalities between regions (for instance, that in every area, the category 'Some A*-C with neither' was the largest sub-group of 'lower attainers' and 'Five A*-C with neither' was the smallest), there are also some interesting differences.

London had the highest percentage of 'lower attainers' in the Five A*-C categories with around a quarter of the 'lower attainers' in 2015 falling into this group. It also had a comparatively low percentage of 'lower attainers' in the No A*-C categories (although within that, the highest proportion with no GCSEs at D-G or equivalent). The North West shows the same pattern, though not as strongly, with 23 per cent of 'lower attainers' belonging to the Five A*-C categories and around 24 per cent having no D-G grades.

On the other hand, the South East and East (although having low proportions of 'lower attainers' overall) had relatively low proportions with five A*-C grades and higher proportions with no D-G passes. These differences highlight the importance of understanding the heterogeneity within the 'lower attaining' group.

Table 4.3: Percentage of the cohort that are 'lower attainers' and percentage of 'lower attainers' by category, by region, 2015 cohort

	East Mids	East	London	North East	North West	South East	South West	West Mids	Yorks and Humber
% 'lower attainers'	44.1	40.6	39.1	42.6	43.3	38.8	40.7	43.1	43.3
% 'lower attainers' with:									
Five A*-C with English	8.2	10.1	12.5	10.3	11.5	10.5	10.2	10.8	9.7
Five A*-C with maths	10.4	9.5	11.4	10.4	9.9	8.9	10.3	9.6	9.1
Five A*-C with neither	1.1	1.1	1.8	1.3	1.6	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.0
Total with Five A-C*	*19.7*	*20.7*	*25.7*	*22.0*	*23.0*	*20.6*	*21.6*	*21.5*	*19.8*
Some A*-C with English	11.3	13.1	12.7	12.6	12.6	14.4	13.6	13.4	12.5
Some A*-C with maths	14.3	12.7	10.5	12.6	10.4	11.5	13.5	11.3	12.1
Some A*-C with neither	28.0	26.3	29.2	31.4	29.6	26.9	26.1	30.1	29.7
Total with Some A-C*	*53.6*	*52.1*	*52.4*	*56.6*	*52.6*	*52.7*	*53.2*	*54.9*	*54.3*
Five D-G	13.6	13.6	8.4	8.3	10.3	12.7	12.7	11.4	11.8
Some D-G	7.7	8.0	6.9	7.1	8.4	8.5	7.7	6.9	8.5
No passes	5.4	5.6	6.5	5.9	5.7	5.5	4.9	5.3	5.7
Total with No A-C*	*26.8*	*27.2*	*21.9*	*21.4*	*24.4*	*26.7*	*25.3*	*23.6*	*26.0*

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

Table 4.4 shows the percentages of 'lower attainers' and their distribution amongst the 'lower attaining' categories for city regions (again for the 2015 cohort). As with regions, there are broad commonalities between city regions and some interesting differences. For example, 'Some A*-C with neither' was again the biggest subgroup of 'lower attainers' everywhere and the proportion in this category was very similar everywhere.

Greater Manchester had the highest percentage of 'lower attainers' in the Five A*-C category with 24 per cent in this category but the lowest percentage in the Some A*-C category with around 52 per cent. In general, most city regions had higher percentages of 'lower attainers' than their wider region.

Table 4.4: Percentage of cohort that are 'lower attainers' and percentage of 'lower attainers' by category, by city region, 2015 cohort

	London	Birmingham	Liverpool	West Yorks	Newcastle	Greater Mcr	Bristol	Sheffield	Nottingham
% 'lower attainers'	37.6	45.7	45.5	43.6	42.0	44.9	42.2	45.5	43.8
% of 'lower attainers' with:									
Five A*-C with English	12.5	11.1	13.6	9.5	10.2	10.8	10.4	10.0	7.6
Five A*-C with maths	11.4	8.9	8.2	8.5	10.0	11.3	10.1	9.0	9.8
Five A*-C with neither	1.8	1.3	1.6	1.0	1.1	2.0	1.0	1.1	0.8
Total with Five A-C*	*25.7*	*21.3*	*23.4*	*19.0*	*21.3*	*24.1*	*21.5*	*20.0*	*18.2*
Some A*-C with English	12.7	14.4	14.1	12.3	12.4	11.9	12.3	13.8	12.0
Some A*-C with maths	10.5	10.5	8.8	11.2	13.6	9.5	12.9	11.1	13.9
Some A*-C with neither	29.2	30.6	30.6	29.6	30.8	30.2	27.8	30.2	30.9
Total with Some A-C*	*52.4*	*55.5*	*53.5*	*53.1*	*56.8*	*51.6*	*53.0*	*55.1*	*56.9*
Five D-G	8.4	11.0	7.9	12.6	8.7	10.1	11.2	10.8	12.3
Some D-G	6.9	6.9	9.0	9.2	7.2	8.7	8.9	8.1	7.6
No passes	6.5	5.3	6.2	6.1	5.9	5.4	5.4	6.0	5.0
Total with No A-C*	*21.9*	*23.2*	*23.2*	*27.9*	*21.8*	*24.3*	*25.6*	*24.9*	*24.9*

Source: National Pupil Database. Excludes learners in independent schools. See Appendix A for city region definitions.

4.5. Change over time

4.5.1. Change 2013 to 2015: the effects of the 'Wolf reforms'

Conducting the same analyses for the 2013 and 2014 KS4 cohorts enables us to assess the implications of the so-called 'Wolf Reforms' (Box 3).

Consistent with previously published research (Burgess & Thomson, 2019), our analysis shows that overall attainment at KS4 fell after many VQs were removed from the performance tables. This has implications for the composition of our 'lower attaining' categories over time. We found, for example (Figure 4.8 and Figure 4.9) that:

- the proportion of 'lower attainers' overall was higher in 2015 than in 2013 (43 per cent compared with 41 per cent);
- there was a significant fall in the proportion of learners in our 'Five A*-C' categories (i.e. those who had achieved full Level 2), and a similar fall in the proportion of learners achieving full Level 1. This drop primarily took place between 2013 and 2014.

Figure 4.8: 'Lower attainer' categories as percentage of entire cohort, 2013 to 2015
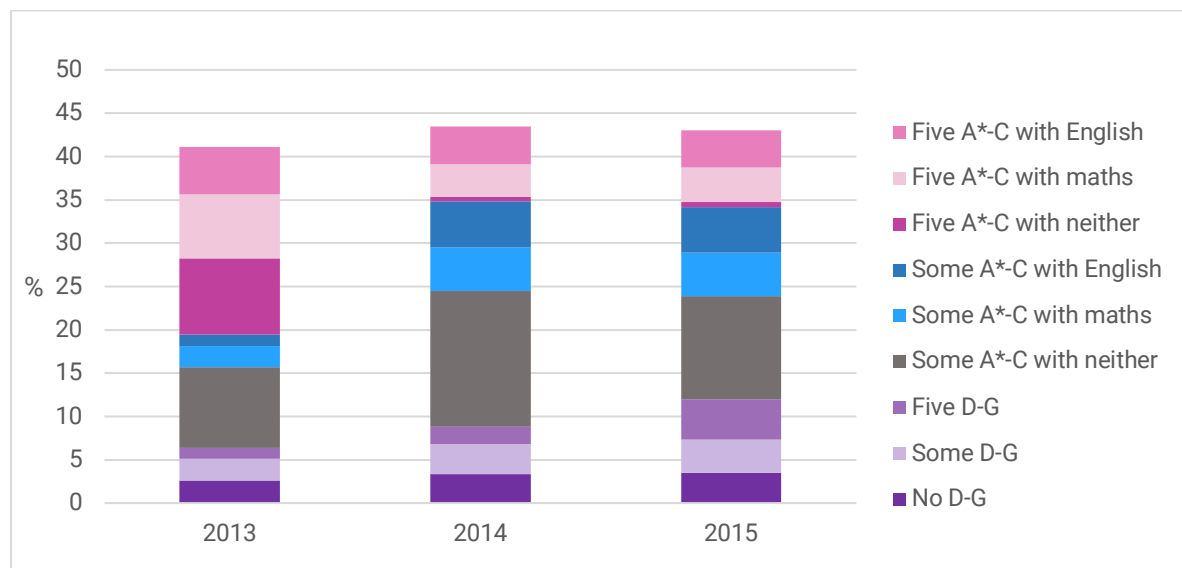
Source: National Pupil Database. Data excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

Our analysis additionally shows that these decreases in overall attainment were more pronounced for learners with SEN (Figure 4.9). This may be partly because learners with SEN were more likely to have attainment just above, or at, the 'full Level 2' or 'full Level 1' benchmark prior to the reforms and tended to enter, on average, a slightly higher number of vocational and other non-GCSE qualifications than other learners. This meant they were more susceptible to the effects of the Wolf reforms.

Figure 4.9: Decrease (in percentage-points) in learners achieving 'full Level 2' and 'full Level 1', between 2013 and 2014
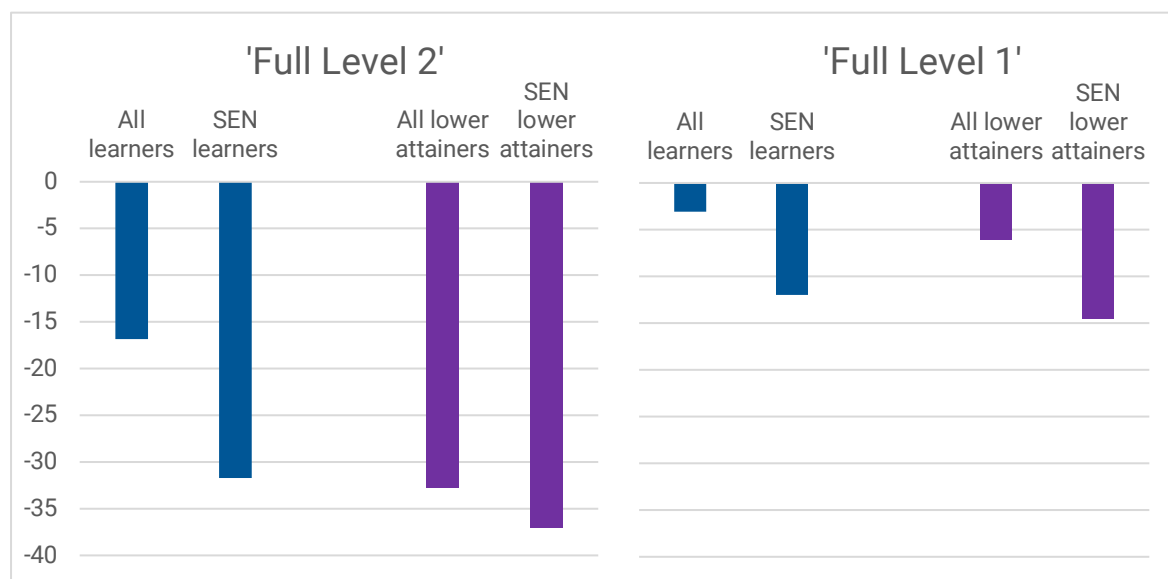
Source: National Pupil Database. Data excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

Burgess and Thomson (2019) focused on a relatively small subset of pupils likely to be most affected by the Wolf reforms in their analysis, that is those who entered fewer than eight 'academic' qualifications and still took a sizeable amount of 'ineligible' VQs.

We find similar results for our larger group of 'lower attainers'. Between 2013 and 2014 they:

- entered slightly fewer qualifications overall (a fall from an average of 9.1 qualifications in 2013 to 8.9 qualifications in 2014, compared with a fall from 11.2 to 10.6 in Burgess and Thomson's analysis);
- entered, on average, a higher number of academic qualifications[14] (increasing from an average of 5.5 in 2013 to 6.0 in 2014, compared with an increase from 5.2 to 6.2 in Burgess and Thomson's work);
- entered, on average, fewer VQs (decreasing from an average of 2.9 qualifications in 2013 to 2.3 in 2014).

However, the Wolf reforms have had a more prolonged effect on entries into academic versus vocational qualifications that is not reflected in the Burgess and Thomson analysis (which only considers cohorts up to 2014). Rather than the reforms leading to a one-off shift between 2013 and 2014, our analysis of subsequent years shows a continued gradual increase in the numbers of academic qualifications entered and a continued decrease in the numbers of VQs entered, such that, in the 2017 cohort, 'lower attainers' entered on average 7.0 academic qualifications and only 1.4 VQs. Table 4.5 shows that in all regions the percentage of 'lower attainers' went up between 2013 and 2015. However, these increases varied by region. London saw the largest increase, the South West and East of England the smallest.

Table 4.5: 'Lower attainers' as a proportion of the total cohort, by region, 2013 to 2015

Year	East Mids	East	London	North East	North West	South East	South West	West Mids	Yorks and Humber
2013	40.3	39.6	34.5	40.3	39.6	37.0	40.0	39.7	40.1
2014	44.4	41.4	37.9	43.3	43.2	39.7	42.1	43.2	44.5
2015	44.1	40.6	39.1	42.6	43.3	38.8	40.7	43.1	43.3
2013-15	3.9	1.0	4.6	2.4	3.7	1.8	0.7	3.4	3.2

Source: National Pupil Database. Excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

However, as Table 4.6 shows, changes in the composition of the 'lower attainer' group as a result of the Wolf reforms showed a different pattern. The largest falls in the proportion achieving full Level 2 were in the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and the West Midlands, suggesting that a higher proportion of young people in these regions were achieving full Level 2 through VQs. For example, in the North East, the percentage of the

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[14] Academic qualifications are defined as GCSEs and international GCSEs.

'lower attaining' cohort with five A*-C dropped from around 70 per cent to around 20 per cent between 2013 and 2014.

Table 4.6: Percentage of 'lower attainers' that obtained at least 5 A*-C (full Level 2), 2013 to 2015

Year	East Mids	East	London	North East	North West	South East	South West	West Mids	Yorks and Humber
2013	58.3	50.2	56.0	70.9	59.5	53.9	50.4	63.8	62.6
2014	20.3	20.0	23.2	19.6	21.8	20.8	22.3	21.1	19.7
2015	19.7	20.7	25.7	22.0	23.0	20.6	21.6	21.5	19.8
2013-15	-38.6	-29.5	-30.3	-48.9	-36.5	-33.3	-28.9	-42.3	-42.8

Source: National Pupil Database. Excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

4.5.2. Change 2015 to 2017

Figure 4.10 shows that, since 2015, the composition of the 'lower attaining' group has remained relatively stable, with no large shifts in terms of the proportion of 'lower attainers' in the various attainment categories.

Figure 4.10: 'Lower attainer' categories as percentage of entire cohort, 2015 to 2017
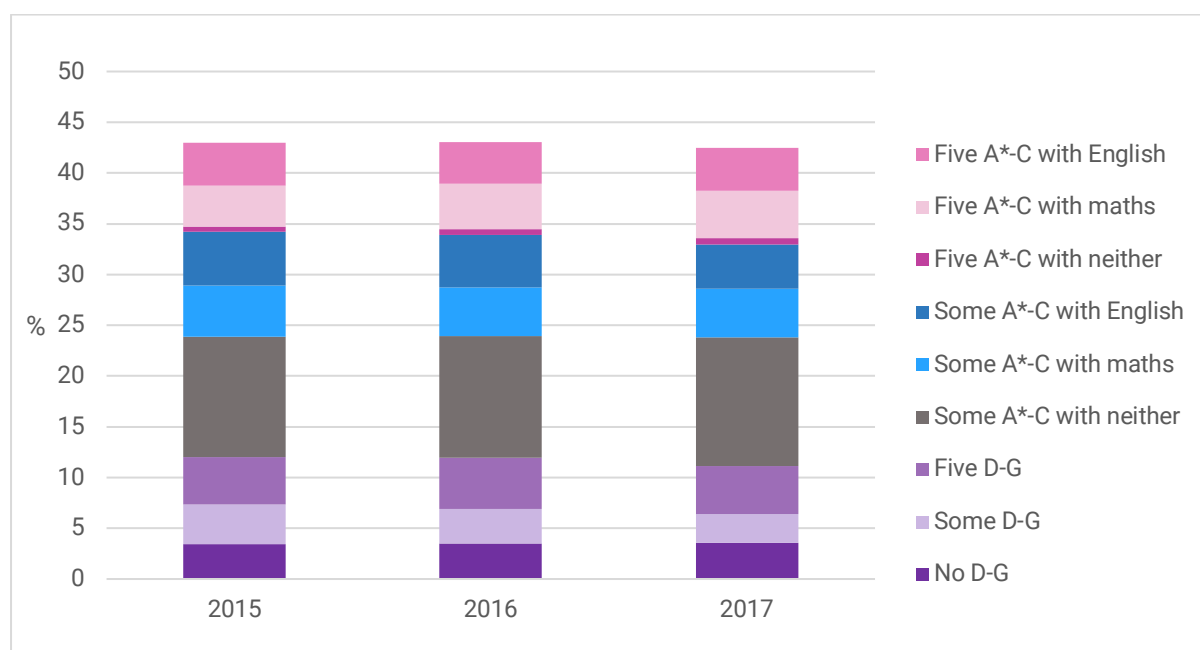
Source: National Pupil Database. Data excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

Similarly, compared to the period 2013 to 2015, the period 2015 to 2017 saw relatively little change in the percentage of learners achieving full Level 2 and full Level 1, with only a slight drop on both of these measures of around 1.5-2 percentage points when considering all learners (Figure 4.11).

When considering 'lower attainers' only, these decreases were somewhat larger, especially when it came to achievement of full Level 1 (which fell by 3.1 percentage points). This may have been due to a continued move away from vocational and other non-GCSE qualifications over this period as the Wolf reforms continued to bed in. On the other hand, it doesn't appear that SEN learners were disproportionally affected by this continued fall in the proportion of learners achieving full Level 1 or full Level 2.

Figure 4.11: Decrease (in percentage-points) in learners achieving 'full Level 2' and 'full Level 1', 2015 to 2017
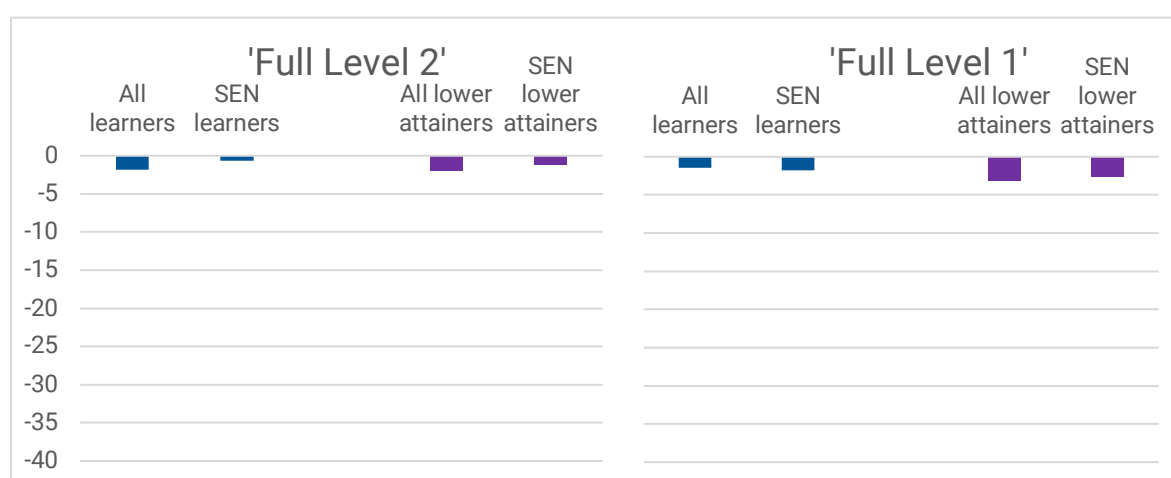
Source: National Pupil Database. Data excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

Our analysis additionally shows that EBacc subjects were among those academic subjects to see some of the highest increases in entries for 'lower attainers', where entries had been increasing anyway since 2013. Figure 4.12 shows that English Literature and Science were those with the biggest increases but MFL hardly increased at all. As a result of the increased entries into subjects like science, History and Geography, the proportion of 'lower attainers' who follow an EBacc curriculum has increased over time. This is in contrast to the trend among non-lower attainers, where the percentage doing the EBacc has actually fallen slightly since 2014.

Figure 4.12: Proportion of 'lower attainers' entering various EBacc subjects, 2013 to 2017
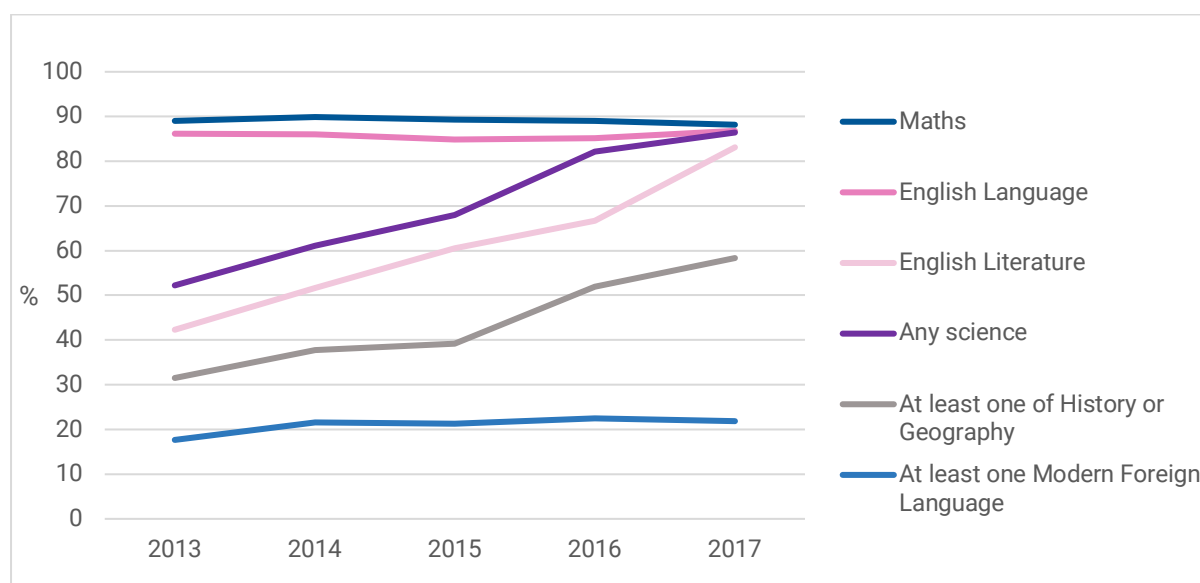
Source: National Pupil Database. Data excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

Between 2015 and 2017, some regions saw a decline in the percentage of 'lower attainers' – the East Midlands and London particularly – whilst there was relatively little change in many other areas (Table 4.7). The North East stands out as the region where the percentage of 'lower attainers' increased the most over this period. Differences between regions therefore decreased slightly between 2013 and 2015 but increased between 2015 and 2017.

Table 4.7 shows that every region (bar London) saw a modest increase in its percentages of 'lower attainers' with 5 A*-C (full Level 2) since 2015. The regional differences in 2017 were therefore very similar to those in 2015. We see even less change over time and overall regional differences for the other subgroups of 'lower attainers'.

Table 4.7: 'Lower attainers' as a proportion of the total cohort, by region, 2015 to 2017

	East Mids	East	London	North East	North West	South East	South West	West Mids	Yorks and Humber
2015	44.1	40.6	39.1	42.6	43.3	38.8	40.7	43.1	43.3
2016	43.4	41.1	39.0	42.2	43.0	38.5	40.6	43.8	43.2
2017	42.2	39.9	37.6	45.0	42.7	38.3	41.3	43.8	43.2
2013-15	3.9	1.0	4.6	2.4	3.7	1.8	0.7	3.4	3.2
2015-17	-1.9	-0.7	-1.6	2.4	-0.6	-0.5	0.6	0.7	-0.1
2013-17	1.9	0.3	3.0	4.7	3.1	1.3	1.3	4.1	3.1

Source: National Pupil Database. Excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

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Table 4.8: Percentage of 'lower attainers' that obtained at least 5 A*-C (full Level 2), 2015 to 2017

	East Mids	East	London	North East	North West	South East	South West	West Mids	Yorks and Humber
2015	19.7	20.7	25.7	22.0	23.0	20.6	21.6	21.5	19.8
2016	21.0	22.3	25.9	20.2	22.6	21.9	21.9	23.4	21.4
2017	22.0	22.6	25.7	23.9	24.1	22.7	23.7	23.9	23.4
2013-15	-38.6	-29.5	-30.3	-48.9	-36.5	-33.3	-28.9	-42.3	-42.8
2015-17	2.3	1.8	0.0	1.9	1.1	2.1	2.1	2.3	3.6
2013-17	-36.3	-27.7	-30.3	-47.0	-35.4	-31.2	-26.8	-40.0	-39.2

Source: National Pupil Database. Excludes young people completing Key Stage 4 in (non-special) independent schools.

5. Moving on from Key Stage 4

5.1.   Overview

This section examines the post-GCSE transitions of 'lower attainers', categorised according to the classification described in section 4. We draw on quantitative analysis of the administrative data to identify transitions to different types of post-16 provision, different levels of learning, and different qualification types. We also draw on our qualitative research with young people to help explain how their post-16 trajectories are shaped and different pathways they follow.

As previously, most of the analysis focuses on the **2015 cohort**. Sub-section 5.4 explores changes over time.

Our analysis is based on what young people were doing on **November 1st of Year 12**, taking account of the fact that some young people do not start their courses, apprenticeships or traineeships straight away in September. Some also change courses or providers in the first few weeks of the academic year. This snapshot is, therefore, the earliest point in Year 12 that we could reasonably expect to observe a learner's settled destination.

In the 2015 cohort as whole, just under two-in-five young people (38 per cent) continued their post-GCSE learning in school sixth forms. A similar proportion (37 per cent) went to general FE colleges[15], 13 per cent transitioned to sixth form colleges, and a very small proportion (4 per cent) started apprenticeships or traineeships.[16]

For 'lower attainers', transitions to school sixth forms and sixth form colleges were much less likely than for non-lower attainers (Figure 5.1). Only 18 per cent went to school sixth forms and 7 per cent to sixth form colleges. The majority of 'lower attaining' learners made a transition to an FE college (55 per cent). 'Lower attainers' were slightly more likely than non-lower attainers to enter apprenticeships (5.8 per cent), although apprenticeship remained very much a minority destination. 'Lower attainers' were also more likely to be NEET or have an unknown destination (7.1 per cent versus 0.8 per cent of non-lower attainers).

One implication of this is that 'lower attainers' are much more likely to move institution after Key Stage 4 (KS4) than peers who do achieve A*-C/9-4 in English and maths. We estimate that well over 80 per cent did so in 2015, compared with a little over half of non-lower attainers. Moving institution is not necessarily problematic, but movers are more likely to have had to make more complex decisions about providers and options than those who have progressed in a straightforward way into their current school sixth forms. We examine these decision-making processes later in the section.

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[15] The category 'general FE colleges' includes tertiary colleges, which offer vocational courses as well as A Levels and other academic options, and which cater for learners across the attainment spectrum.
[16] Apprenticeship figures are lower than in DfE official figures (which show 6 per cent of learners in this route) since the latter count participation in an apprenticeship at any point between October and March. For more on transitions to apprenticeships, see Appendix D.

Figure 5.1: Post-16 destinations for 'lower attainers' and non-lower attainers, as percentages, 2015 cohort
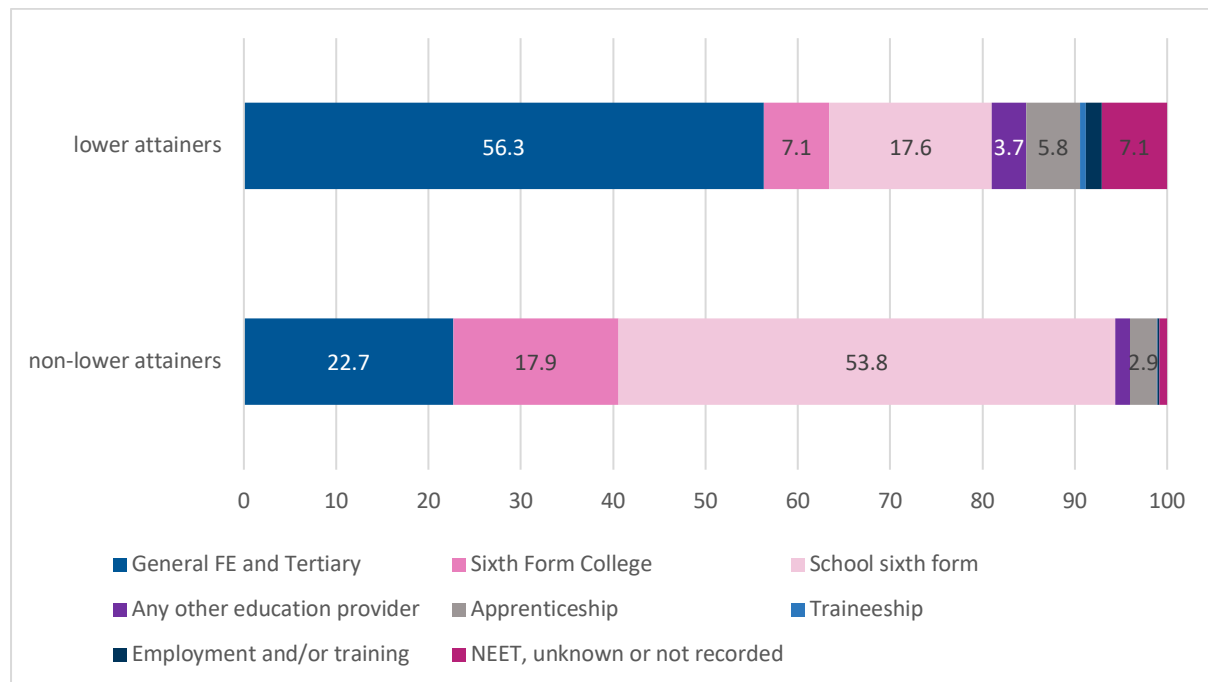
Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System.

It is notable, however, that within this broad picture, destinations vary substantially according to KS4 attainment.

We look first at the seven categories of 'lower attainers' who had a minimum of five GCSE or equivalent passes (i.e. at least full Level 1), compared with those who were non-lower attainers. As Figure 5.2 shows, FE college was the most common destination for all these categories, increasingly so for the 'lower attaining' categories, underscoring the vital importance of the work of FE colleges in ensuring successful transitions for these young people. Nearly half of young people who had five A*C or equivalent passes but neither English nor maths GCSE at these grades were in destinations other than FE colleges, but this dropped off substantially for those with fewer than five A*-C.

Apprenticeship became more common with declining GCSE attainment up to a point. Young people with fewer than five A*-C grades, but including maths GCSE at A*-C, were the group most likely to be in apprenticeship (7 per cent), but this was a slightly less common route for those with similar attainment though not a higher grade in maths.

The likelihood of being NEET or having an unknown destination and the likelihood of being in another kind of educational provider (such as an independent provider or charity, University Technical College, alternative provision or special needs provision), also increased with declining attainment.

Figure 5.2: Post GCSE destinations for 'lower attainers' with five or more GCSE or equivalent passes, by category, 2015 cohort (%)

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System. Note: Traineeships and employment are rare for all these groups, under 1% each.

In Figure 5.3**,** we show destinations for the remaining two categories in our classification of 'lower attainers': those with fewer than five GCSE passes at any grade (below full Level 1). For both these groups, rates of 'NEET, unknown or not recorded' were very high (almost one-third of learners in the No D-G group, of which 11 per cent were NEET, the rest unknown or not recorded). Apprenticeship and traineeship rates were low for these groups. The lowest attainment group also had a high rate of school sixth form destinations (24 per cent), which is likely to refer to sixth form provision for learners with special educational needs (SEN). We estimate that almost all young people (more than 90 per cent) in these two categories moved institution between Year 11 and Year 12.

Interviews with professionals in our case study localities provided more insights into the vulnerability of some young people as they make the transition from GCSEs. Some local authorities were playing key roles in working with schools to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET, and to develop and coordinate transition programmes for those most at risk. Some had post-16 coordinators, or similar roles, however there was no consistent approach and there will be different levels of coordinating capacity across LAs.

Figure 5.3: Post GCSE destinations for learners in lowest two attainment categories, 2015 cohort (%)
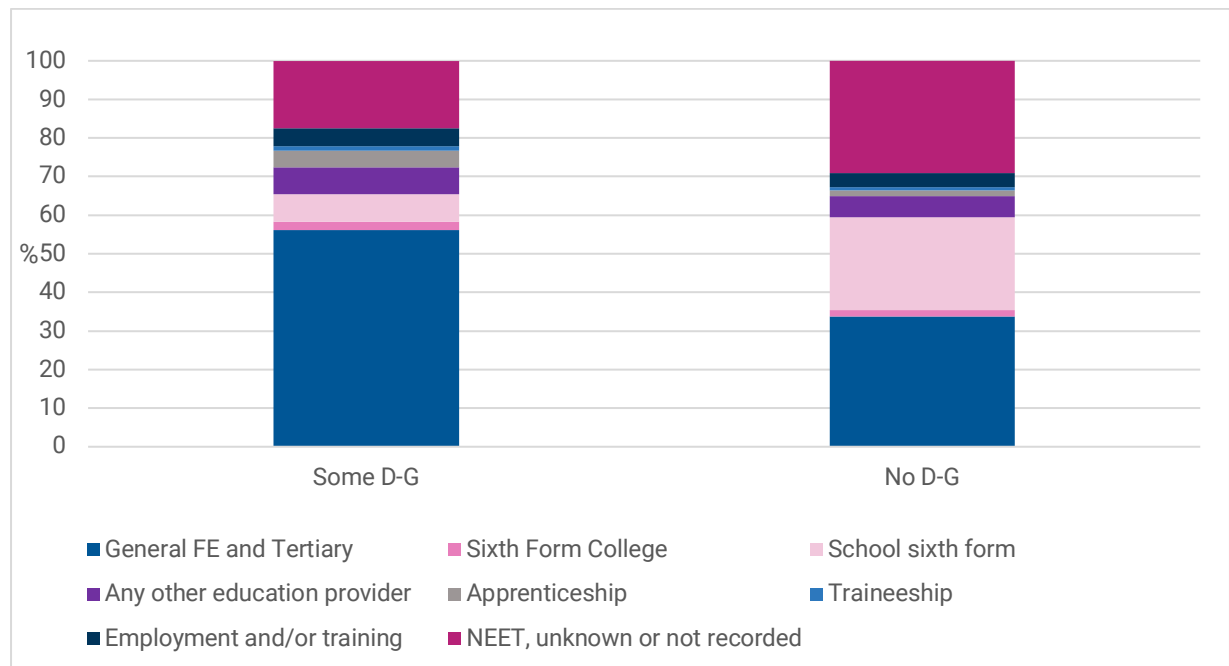
Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System. Note: Traineeships and employment are rare for all these groups, under 1% each.

Given concerns about disadvantage gaps, a key question is whether young people eligible for FSM in KS4 make different transitions from those with similar attainment, but from more economically advantaged families. When it comes to transitions to school sixth forms or sixth form colleges, we find this not to be the case. However, even within the same attainment category, FSM-eligible young people were markedly less likely to have moved into an apprenticeship in Year 12 (Table 5.1). They were also more likely to be in the NEET, unknown and unrecorded categories. This may be because *within* each category, FSM-eligible young people have lower attainment; or it may be that family socio-economic disadvantage is creating barriers to post-16 achievement in ways that are not being adequately compensated for in current policy. For instance, the impact on household benefit income may deter some young people from taking up apprenticeships (Buzzeo et al., 2016; House of Commons Education Committee, 2018; Murphy, 2020).

Table 5.1: Percentage of young people in sixth forms, apprenticeships and NEET or with unknown activity, by category and FSM eligibility at the end of Key Stage 4, 2015 cohort

	% in sixth forms		% in apprenticeships		% NEET	
	Non-FSM	FSM	Non-FSM	FSM	Non-FSM	FSM
Five A*-C with English	50.3	49.4	4.7	3.1	1.2	1.7
Five A*-C with maths	49.5	48.6	5.5	3.0	1.2	1.6
Five A*-C with neither	40.3	40.8	6.1	SUPP	1.6	3.2
Some A*-C with English	24.8	25.2	7.9	4.3	3.2	4.5
Some A*-C with maths	22.4	22.5	8.5	4.5	3.7	4.4
Some A*-C with neither	17.5	18.1	7.3	3.5	5.2	5.7
Five D-G	10.3	11.8	8.2	3.6	5.2	6.6
Some D-G	9.4	9.3	5.0	2.9	17.5	17.1
No D-G	24.8	28.6	1.6	1.3	30.7	24.5
Total 'lower attainers'	25.4	22.2	6.5	3.4	6.7	8.5

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System. Note: '% sixth forms' includes school sixth forms and sixth form colleges. '% NEET' includes recorded NEET, unknown activity, and not recorded in data. SUPP = suppressed due to low numbers in this category.

5.2.   Transitions to different levels of learning

We now look at the level of post-16 learning that young people are undertaking. We describe our approach to defining levels of learning in Box 16. Our analysis shows that the vast majority (92 per cent in 2015) of young people who achieve a C or above in both English and maths (non-lower attainers) progress to Level 3 learning (see Box 2) in Year 12. Much less is known about what happens to those who don't reach Level 2 during KS4. Do they progress to Level 3 nonetheless, or continue at Level 2, or even at Level 1?

This is a difficult question to answer and, for this reason, relatively little is known about these pathways. Previous research has focused on the achievement of qualifications at different levels and the trajectories of learners during Key Stage 5 (KS5), rather than the transition from Year 11 to Year 12 (see de Coulon et al., 2017; Hupkau et al., 2017).

Our analysis (Table 5.2) shows that Level 3 learning does take place for many of the higher attainers in the 'lower attainer' group. In the 2015 cohort, among those with full Level 2 (five A*-C or equivalent), but without English or maths at grade C, more than three-quarters progressed to Level 3 learning in Year 12. About two-fifths studied at least one A or AS Level. More than half of learners with full Level 2 but neither maths nor English were also learning at Level 3, although for these the proportion taking an A or AS Level was much lower (around one-fifth).

For those below the full Level 2 threshold, the picture was mixed. Among learners with 'Some A*-C with English' or 'Some A*-C with maths', just under a third progressed to learning at Level 3. However, for between 12 and 15 per cent of these learners, the primary level of learning was Level 1 (despite the fact that they had all achieved full Level 1 already and even had a number of Level 2 qualifications). Among those in the 'Some A*-C with neither'

category, the proportion learning at Level 1 was higher still at 27 per cent. Among learners with five D-G grades, 43 per cent were learning at Level 1 despite this group also having achieved full Level 1 already.

Box 16: Defining levels of learning

A young person's level of learning is defined as the level associated with the largest proportion of their learning in Year 12. The size of a qualification or 'learning aim' is expressed by its number of 'guided learning hours' (GLH).

We added up the total size of a young person's learning at Level 1, at Level 2, and at Level 3. The level with the largest number of GLH is set as their overall level of learning. As such this can be thought of as their main level of learning. For instance, if a young person is enrolled in a Level 2 BTEC in Sports of 360 GLH, a Level 2 Functional Skills Award in maths of 45 GLH, and a Level 1 certificate in employability of 90 GLH, their total GLH at Level 2 are 405, with 90 GLH at Level 1. This person would be categorised as learning at Level 2.

Apprentices are an exception to this approach. They are assigned the level associated with the main learning aim in their apprenticeship programme.

For some learners, a level of learning cannot be determined. Mostly this affects learners who are not recorded in the ILR or NPD, only in the NCCIS, and learners who are exclusively following learning aims which have no level attached (usually unregulated learning aims, or activities like work experience placements or bespoke learning activities to improve study skills or employability or provide enrichment).

Progressing to Level 3 (or continuing at Level 2) will not necessarily be the best option for all these learners. 'Levels' tend to signify different things (in terms of difficulty and progression routes) in different subjects and occupational areas. However, these findings raise the important question of how many young people may not be going on to the level of learning of which they are capable. One factor determining whether people end up at the 'right' level for them will be the entry requirements set by post-16 providers, a topic we explore further in section 6. Other factors include the decisions made by providers and young people themselves about what they are capable of and interested in, and what is possible alongside GCSE resits. Our qualitative evidence, presented later in this section, sheds further light on this issue.

For many of the learners in the bottom two categories (Some D-G and No D-G; i.e. below full Level 1), not enough information was provided in the administrative data to be able to determine a level of learning. Many were engaged in the types of learning aims that do not have a recorded level (see Box 16) or were absent from the ILR and NPD. Among the learners for whom we do record a level, the majority were engaged in learning at Entry Level and Level 1.

Table 5.2: Level of learning in Year 12, by category, 2015 cohort (%)

Category	Entry Level	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	of which at least one A/AS Level*	Unable to determine	Total
Five A*-C with English	0.1	2.7	16.3	78.8	43.6	2.2	100
Five A*-C with maths	0.1	4.1	17.0	77.0	39.2	1.8	100
Five A*-C with neither	<0.5	5.5	38.2	53.7	20.9	<3.0	100
Some A*-C with English	0.7	11.7	49.9	32.1	8.8	5.7	100
Some A*-C with maths	0.9	15.3	49.3	29.3	6.6	5.2	100
Some A*-C with neither	4.6	27.2	50.3	11.6	2.5	6.5	100
Five D-G	7.7	42.7	37.5	3.5	0.5	8.6	100
Some D-G	18.2	37.3	20.6	2.5	0.2	21.4	100
No D-G	21.9	20.2	11.2	2.9	0.4	43.7	100
Total 'lower attainers'	4.9	20.5	37.1	29.0	11.8	8.5	100
Non-lower attainers	0.0	1.2	5.0	92.4	74.7	1.5	100
Total (all learners)	2.0	9.0	18.0	66.7	49.2	4.3	100

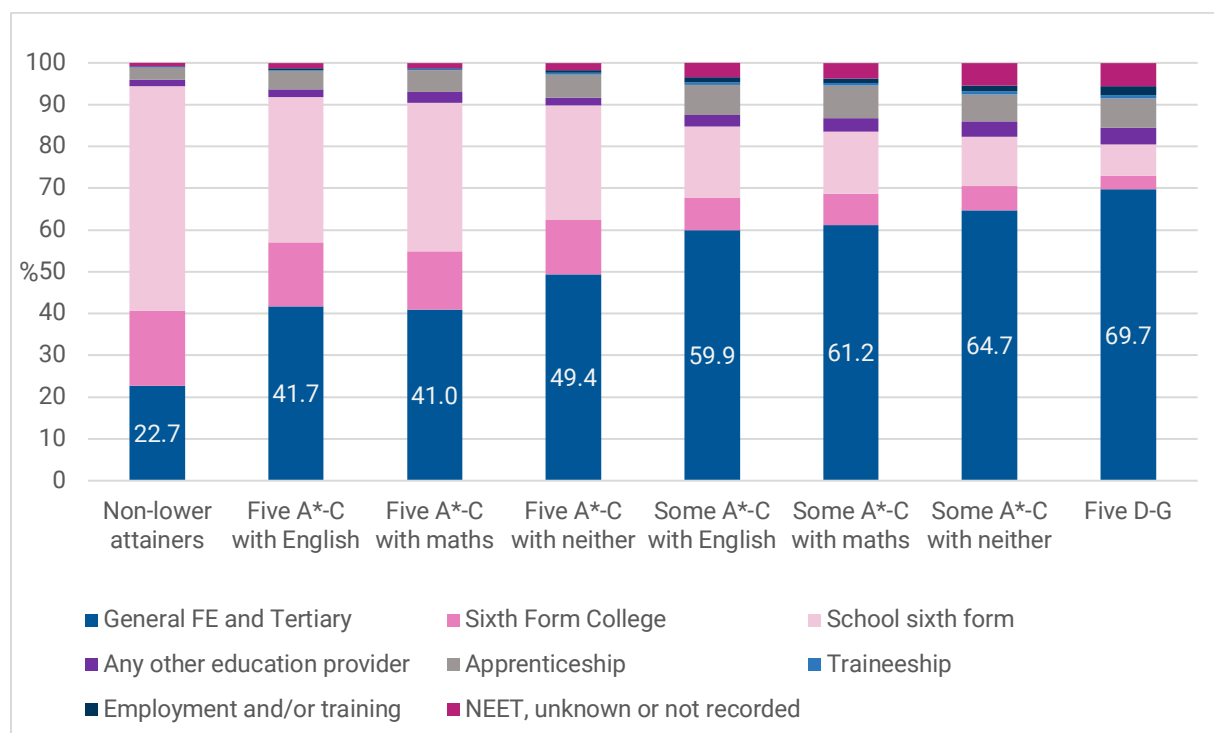Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System. Population is limited to learners in education, apprenticeships or traineeships. Expressed as a percentage of all learners.

Table 5.3: Level of learning for learners in apprenticeships in Year 12, by category, 2015 cohort (%)

| Category	Level 2	Level 3	Unable to determine	Total
Five A*-C with English	77.1	17.8	5.2	100
Five A*-C with maths	68.9	26.9	4.2	100
Five A*-C with neither	80.7	SUPP	SUPP	100
Some A*-C with English	79.9	10.9	9.2	100
Some A*-C with maths	76.1	15.6	8.3	100
Some A*-C with neither	82.3	8.2	9.5	100
Five D-G	82.3	4.8	12.9	100
Some D-G	72.7	4.3	23.0	100
No D-G	66.5	6.2	27.3	100
Total 'lower attainers'	78.5	11.5	10.0	100
Non-lower attainers	60.4	35.2	4.4	100
Total (all learners)	71.1	21.1	7.8	100

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System. SUPP = suppressed due to low numbers in this category.

Table 5.3 looks specifically at apprenticeships. The key finding here is that, compared with those who achieved A*-C grades in English and maths, 'lower attainers' are more likely to transition to Level 2 apprenticeships rather than Level 3. Those who have **neither** English nor maths at A*-C are particularly unlikely to transition to a Level 3 apprenticeship. In other words, their academic achievements in English and maths appear to block their apprenticeship routes. Consistent with the findings reported above, young people who achieved grade C or above in maths, but not English, appear to be more likely to enter apprenticeships at Level 3 compared to those who achieved a grade C in English, but not maths.

An important question is whether learners tend to enter different levels of learning depending on the type of provider they are in after Year 11. To get a sense of this, Figure 5.4 shows, for each of the three 'lower attainer' categories characterised by having 1-4 GCSEs at A*-C[17], the main level of learning in Year 12 depending on the type of provision they were enrolled in (focusing only on learners on education pathways). It shows clearly that young people in these three categories tend to be on higher levels of learning in sixth form colleges and especially school sixth forms, than in FE colleges and 'other' education providers (independent and charitable providers, special provision, etc.), even when we consider young people within the same attainment category.

Of course, this may in part be due to differences in KS4 attainment within these attainment categories. It might also point to the possibility that those who attend FE colleges and other providers are more likely to be on a lower-level course than they might have been on if they had made a transition to a school sixth form or sixth form college. If this is the case, then that suggests the type of provision accessed by (and accessible to) 'lower attaining' young people shapes the extent to which higher levels of learning are open to them.

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[17] We focus on learners in these three attainment categories as they make up the largest share of 'lower attainers', and because they enter a wide range of levels as well as provider types. Qualitatively similar results were found for the three 'Five A*-C' categories (i.e. a higher proportion entering Level 3 courses in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges).

Figure 5.4: Level of learning in Year 12 for each of the 'Some A*-C' categories, by provision type (%), 2015 cohort
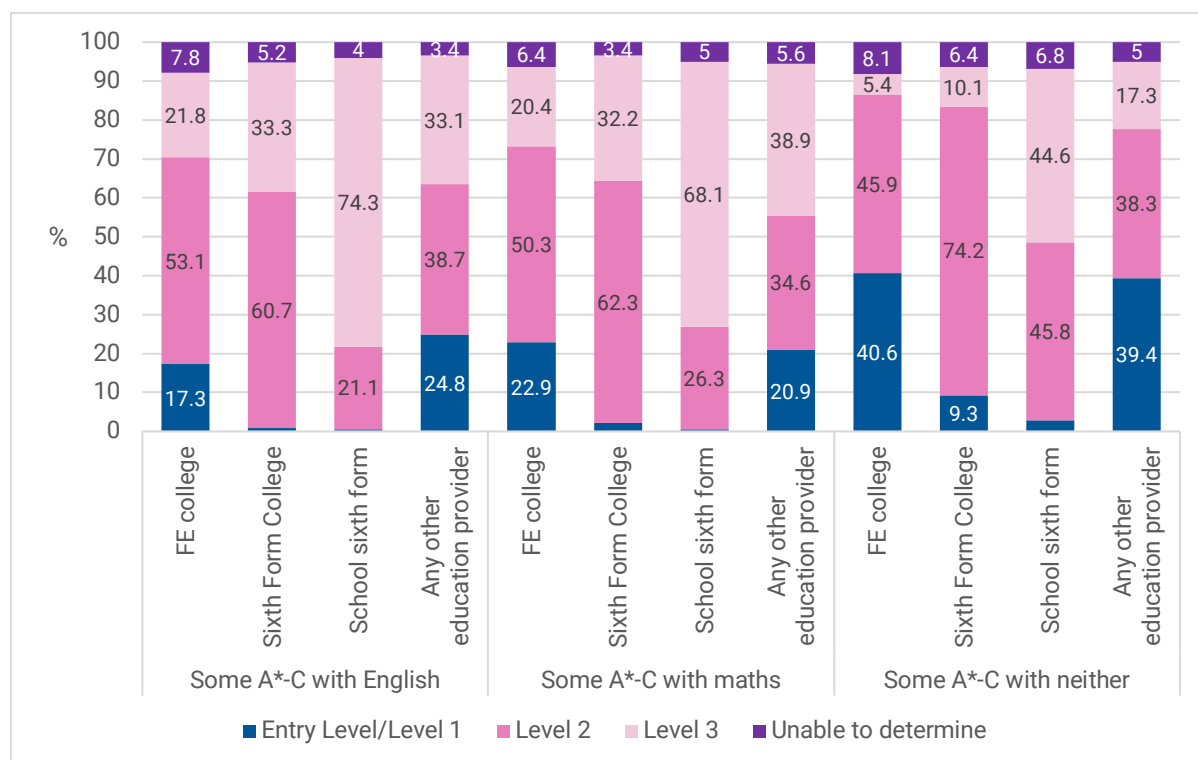
Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System.

5.3. Subjects and occupational areas studied

The majority (more than two-thirds) of non-lower attainers follow programmes of study in Year 12 which incorporate a number of equal-sized qualifications, typically A or AS Levels. As such it is hard to identify a main subject for these learners and, therefore, we describe them as studying 'multiple subject areas'.[18] 'Lower attainers', however, are much more likely to study for one qualification which is larger than their other qualifications – which we call a 'main subject'.[19]

In the 2015 cohort, the most commonly studied main subject was a qualification in the area of Health, Public Services and Care, followed by Arts, Media and Publishing (Table 5.4). Surprisingly, Table 5.4 also shows that some learners were studying English and maths only with no other qualification of a significant size registered against them. This may be a timing issue caused by looking at subjects studied in November; however, it is an important finding and one that warrants more investigation. Post-16 study programmes are meant to include other qualifications alongside English and maths, but it seems that, for some learners, this is not happening.

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[18] For about 15 per cent of all learners registered on multiple qualifications of equal size, these qualifications did not include A/AS Levels.

[19] When determining someone's main subject, we exclude English and maths qualifications. English and maths tend not to be the largest qualifications taken by learners anyway, at least for most learners. The exceptions are learners who are *only* taking English and maths, who are categorised separately.

Box 17: Sector subject areas

All courses and apprenticeships are categorised into 15 'Sector Subject Areas' identified by Ofqual. These are:

- Health, public services and care
- Science and Mathematics
- Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care
- Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies
- Construction, Planning and the Built Environment
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT)
- Retail and Commercial Enterprise
- Leisure, Travel and Tourism
- Arts, Media and Publishing
- History, Philosophy and Theology (which we abbreviate to 'Humanities')
- Social Sciences
- Languages, Literature and Culture
- Education and Training
- Preparation for Life and Work
- Business, Administration, Finance and Law

These areas encompass a broad range of sub-areas and courses some of which may not appear to correspond to the main 'area' name, making it hard to link 'subject areas' to occupations/job roles. For example, 'Retail and Commercial Enterprise' includes hairdressing, warehousing and hospitality.

Table 5.4: Main subject area studied by 'lower attainers' and non-lower attainers in Year 12, 2015 cohort (%)

Subject area	'Lower attainers'	Non-lower attainers	All learners
Multiple subject areas (often A or AS Levels)	17.4	68.0	47.5
Health, Public Services and Care	13.0	4.4	7.9
Arts, Media and Publishing	9.0	5.2	6.7
Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	7.6	1.2	3.8
Leisure, Travel and Tourism	7.3	3.8	5.2
Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	7.3	2.4	4.4
Retail and Commercial Enterprise	6.4	1.2	3.3
Business, Administration and Law	4.9	3.4	4.0
Preparation for Life and Work	6.2	0.7	2.9
Any other subjects	10.1	8.3	9.0
Learner doing E&M only	2.2	0.0	0.9
Subject area not provided	8.5	1.5	4.3

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System. Note: Population is limited to learners observed in education, apprenticeships or traineeships.

Figures 5.5 to 5.7 show how the subjects and occupational areas studied varied according to learners' previous attainment profiles. For clarity of presentation, only more commonly studied subjects are included.

Figure 5.5 shows that 'multiple subject areas' was the most common route for those young people with full Level 2 attainment. Around two fifths of those with a higher grade in English or maths followed this route, but it was much less common among learners with a higher-grade pass in neither subject (only followed by around a quarter), who were substantially more likely to take all kinds of vocational subjects except Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies, which appeared to be open to learners with higher grade passes in maths, but not English.

Figure 5.5: Subjects and occupational areas studied, for the 'Five A*-C' category (%), 2015 cohort
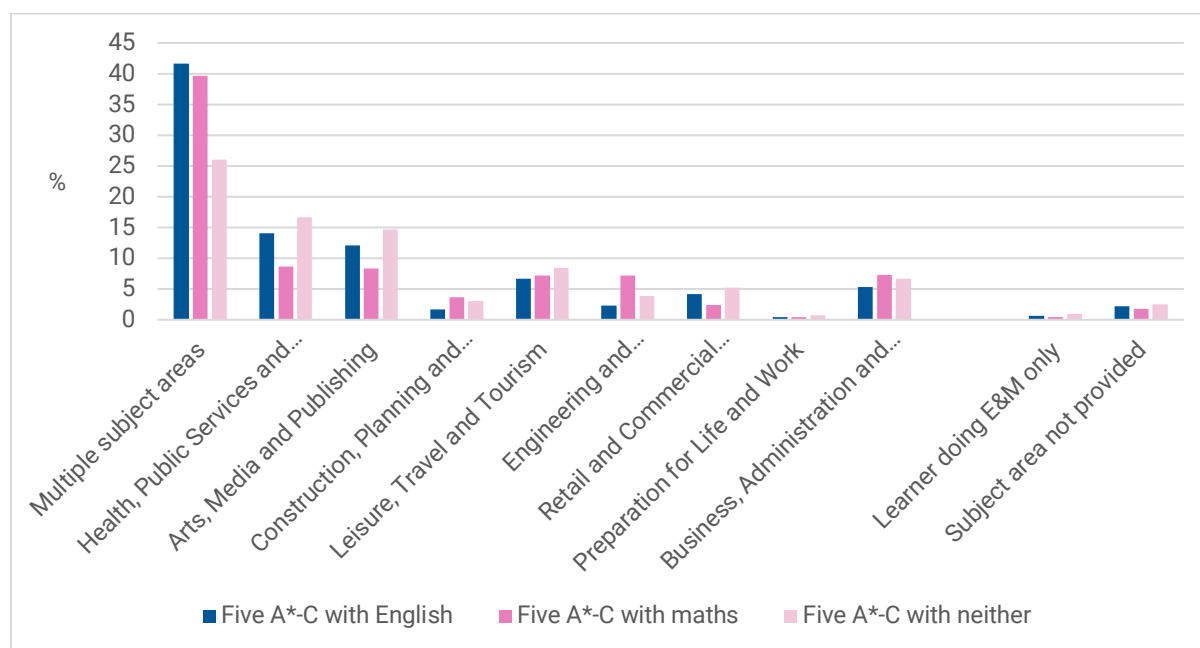
Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System. Note: Population is limited to learners observed in education, apprenticeships or traineeships.

Figure 5.6 shows that the 'multiple subjects' route was only taken by around 15 per cent or fewer learners who had not attained five A*-C or equivalent passes. Main subjects in the areas of Health, Public Services and Care, and Arts, Media and Publishing were more commonly taken by learners with a higher grade in English, but not maths. The reverse was true for Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies. Health, Public Services and Care qualifications were also commonly taken by the 'lower attainers' without 5 A*-C with neither English or maths at a higher grade, as were qualifications in Construction and related areas and Retail and Commercial areas. For one in ten learners with five D-G or equivalent passes, Preparation for Life and Work was the main subject area.

Figure 5.6: Subjects and occupational areas studied, for the 'A*-C' and 'Five D-G' categories (%), 2015 cohort
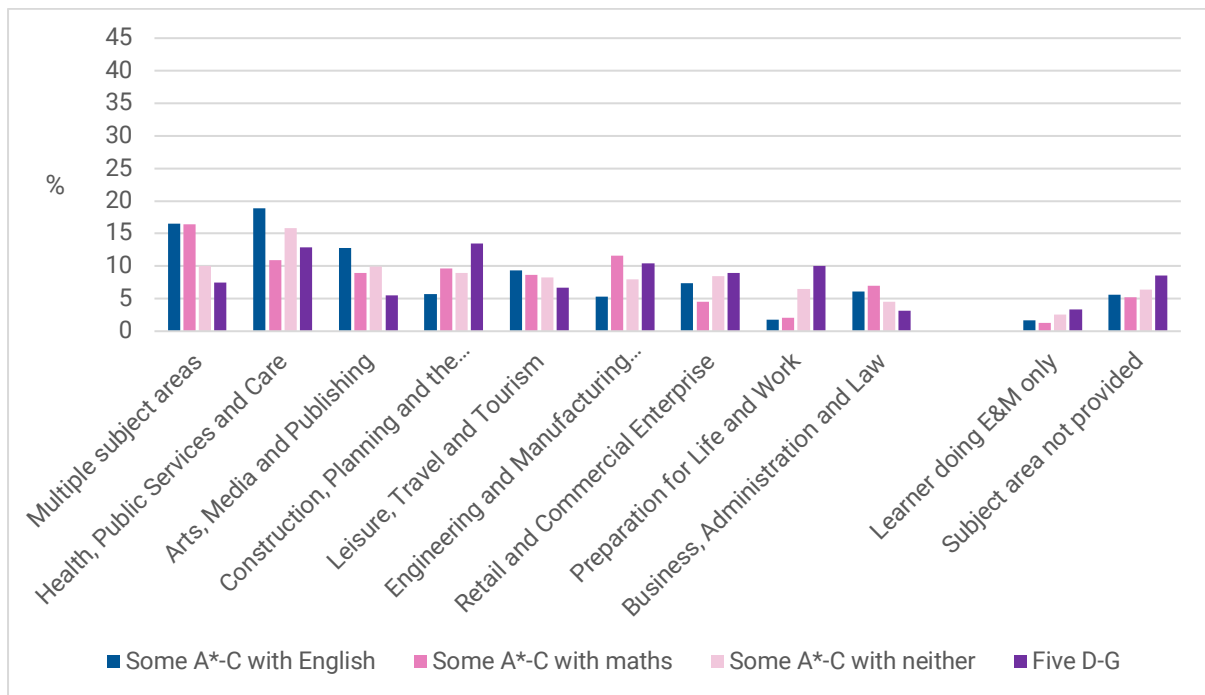
Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System. Note: Population is limited to learners observed in education, apprenticeships or traineeships.

Figure 5.7: Subjects and occupational areas studied, for the 'Fewer than five D-G' category (%), 2015 cohort
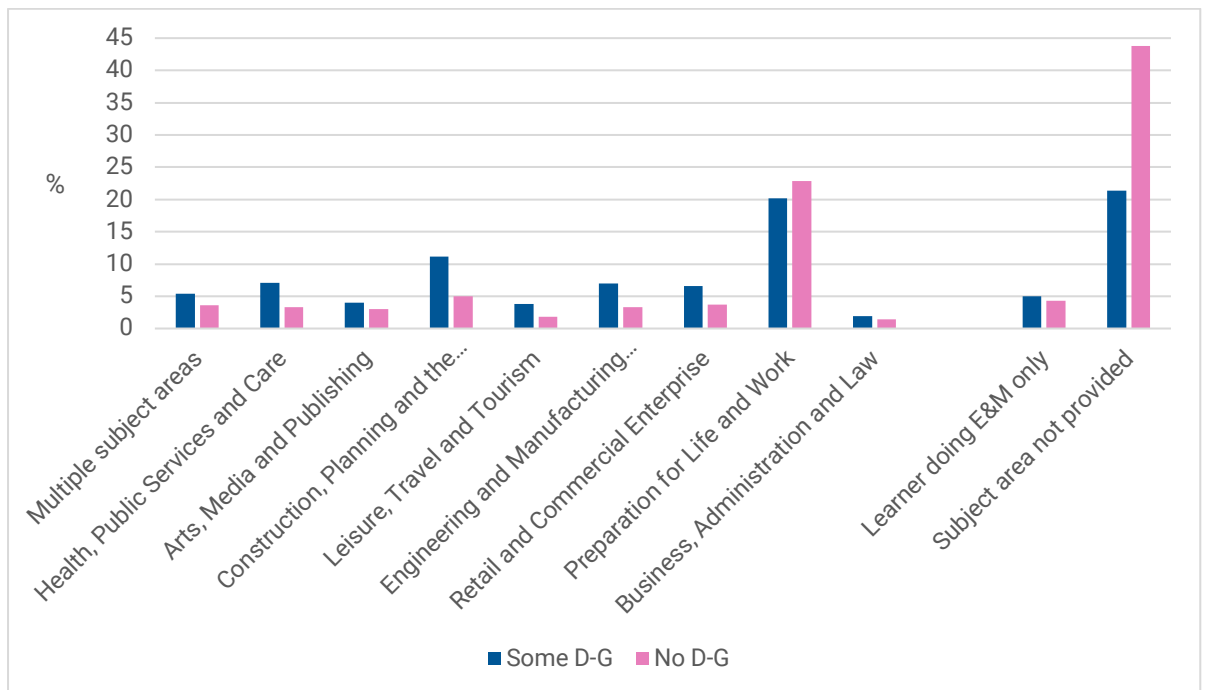
Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System. Note: Population is limited to learners observed in education, apprenticeships or traineeships.

Figure 5.7 (again on the same scale) shows that in the lowest attaining group, more than two thirds either had no main subject area recorded (see Box 16), or their main area was 'Preparation for Life and Work', or they were studying English and maths only (fewer than 5 per cent). This was also the case for around two fifths of the group with some (but fewer than five) GCSE or equivalent passes. Construction and related areas were the only areas followed by one in ten of this group or more.

These charts illustrate the importance of appreciating the heterogeneity in the 'lower attainer' group, since very different options and pathways are available (see section 6) and followed depending on prior attainment.

Further analysis shows that the subjects taken considerably affect the propensity for learners who already have some Level 2 qualifications (A*-C or equivalent) to be learning at Level 1. For example, 71 per cent of learners with some A*-C passes but not maths who were studying Construction and related areas were doing so at Level 1. Most would be entering post-16 learning without pre-existing skills in these areas, which is often cited as the rationale for starting them at Level 1, including by some of the further education professionals we spoke to during our fieldwork. The analysis of administrative data does not, however, help us to know whether young people end up on Level 1 because of their interest in these subject areas or whether the subject areas open to them are narrower because they are designated as Level 1 learners.

Our qualitative research with young people and interviews with professionals provided some additional insights. The FE colleges we visited explained that Level 1 provided a 'breathing space' or 'preparatory opportunity' to support young people who: a) display behavioural problems; b) struggle to settle into the demands of full-time learning because they have not been attending school on a regular basis (in some cases for long periods of time prior to Year 11); c) are very unsure about the type of course and/or occupational pathway they want to pursue and so might benefit from a more general curriculum; and d) need substantial levels of tutoring to help them improve their English and maths grades. We encountered young people on Level 1 courses with very mixed GCSE attainment profiles, levels of maturity, and school and life experiences. Some clearly understood how Level 1 could function as a taster or a first stage of learning in a new area. For instance, Saskia explained that she knew about a college course:

> "…where like, you can go and they'll show you the different sort of kids you can work with. And then, in Level 1 you learn about every basic, like, you learn about the infants and nursery and primary and secondary and quite far up. And then in Level 2 you can choose out of them, say, three, and then you carry on learning about that specific thing you pick. So they give you a bit of knowledge about every single one, and when you come to doing your Level 2, you pick what one you want to do and then they'll put you in classes with other people who want to do that. So then you're just concentrating on that one. So you've got time to learn about the others, but then you've got to decide what one you want to go to, to proceed."

Other students we spoke to, however, were not aware of the content of courses at different levels and how different study programmes could enable them to progress. A group of young men we interviewed on Level 1 construction and vehicle maintenance courses complained that the vocational aspects were very thin and that as a result they had essentially been set back a year. One said that, rather than the course in construction he had

imagined:

> "I think it's more maths and English. Yeah, like, cos that, when I come into college I feel like I'm doing more maths and English than I actually am doing, like, laying bricks and plastering and stuff like that."

It is clear that for some 'lower attainers', Year 12 is a 'year in flux', rather than the first year of a two-year programme in which progress is linear. We did not have the time or resources to examine in more detail the reasons for, or effectiveness of, placing young people on Level 1 courses. These kinds of transitions need to be much better understood in order that they can be optimised for young people. This can only be achieved through qualitative research as the quantitative analysis of success at Level 1, 2 and 3 – which is the typical approach to understanding progression – cannot shed light on what actually happens in practice.

5.4.   Change over time

Conducting the same analyses for the 2013 and 2014 KS4 cohorts enabled us to assess the implications of the Wolf reforms (Box 3) on post-16 trajectories of 'lower attainers', while analysis of the 2016 cohort (the latest available at the time of writing) gave some indication of whether the patterns reported here are likely to have changed.

In relation to the Wolf reforms, our findings corroborate those of Burgess and Thomson (2019) and for this reason we cover them only briefly here. We do observe a shift in the post-16 destinations of 'lower attainers' in the three highest attainment categories, defined by achievement of full Level 2 (five GCSEs at A*-C or equivalent). Young people in this attainment group were *more* likely to transition to a sixth form institution in 2014 and 2015 than in 2013, and also *more* likely to enter Level 3 qualifications including A Levels and AS Levels. However, this is accounted for by the fact that, following the Wolf reforms, it became harder to achieve full Level 2 since many VQs no longer counted, and those that do still count have a lower rate of equivalence to GCSEs. With fewer 'lower attainers' achieving full Level 2 since 2014, those that do still achieve this benchmark are more likely to enter sixth forms and study at higher levels in post-16 learning. However, consistent with those of Burgess and Thomson (2019), our findings provide no evidence of a substantial change in overall patterns of transition for 'lower attainers' as a group. Young people's attainments may have counted for less after 2013, but they had similar destinations as their peers in previous years. In fact, we find a slight increase in the proportion of 'lower attainers' starting post-16 learning at Level 2 and Level 3, rather than at Entry Level and Level 1.

For the 2016 cohort, transition rates to different types of post-16 provision remain very similar to those of the 2015 cohort considered overall and when examining different categories of 'lower attainer'. Whilst analysis of further cohorts would certainly be valuable, this, and the similarity of 2014 and 2015 patterns, suggests that the experiences of the 2015 cohort are a good indication of what is likely to have happened to young people in subsequent years, at least up until 2019 (the full effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the 2020 cohort are not yet known).

One exception may be transitions to apprenticeship. In the period 2013 to 2015, we observed an increase (4.5 to 5.3 per cent) in the proportion of 'lower attainers' entering into an apprenticeship after Year 11, reflecting but exceeding an increase in the proportion of learners overall following this route (from 3.4 per cent to 3.8 per cent). For both 'lower attainers' and learners overall, this increase stalled in 2016. The effect of the Apprenticeship Levy (introduced in 2017) and of the COVID-19 lockdown on these trends will need to be explored further.

5.5.   Spatial differences

In an earlier working paper (see Velthuis et al., 2018), we established that substantial differences exist between different areas of England in terms of the post-16 transitions that young people make. To explore this further, including analysis by category of 'lower attainer', we combine data from the 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 cohorts to increase the number of observed learners and enable more fine-grained analysis at the sub-national level.

Table 5.5 shows what percentage of 'lower attainers' of each category makes a transition to an FE college, the most common post-16 destination nationally, by region. We can immediately see that, even within the same 'lower attaining' category, there are large differences in the percentages of learners attending an FE college. The North East consistently has the highest percentages of each 'lower attaining' category in FE whereas London has among the lowest for each category.

Table 5.5: Percentage of 'lower attainers' in general FE colleges in Year 12, by region and category, 2013-16 cohorts

	East Mids	East	London	North East	North West	South East	South West	West Mids	Yorks and Humber
Five A*-C with English	47.5	43.9	31.0	56.3	47.5	40.2	51.3	48.9	42.6
Five A*-C with maths	47.1	46.1	29.6	55.1	48.7	41.5	50.5	47.4	43.3
Five A*-C with neither	64.2	64.6	49.8	67.3	64.0	56.4	63.4	61.1	60.7
Some A*-C with English	63.9	61.8	48.0	67.3	60.6	53.8	64.7	61.7	56.9
Some A*-C with maths	65.5	64.9	48.8	66.2	62.2	57.6	63.7	63.0	58.6
Some A*-C with neither	67.8	68.9	54.6	69.7	67.0	61.1	67.7	66.0	63.9
Five D-G	69.4	71.4	60.8	72.2	69.9	65.9	71.2	68.2	68.1
Some D-G	52.8	56.5	52.2	50.0	52.4	50.8	60.1	50.3	55.6
No passes	29.3	35.0	28.0	24.6	28.6	27.1	38.3	25.9	31.9
Total	*59.5*	*59.7*	*45.4*	*62.0*	*58.3*	*52.8*	*61.1*	*57.9*	*55.9*

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

The differences are not only in relation to FE, as Table 5.6 shows. For illustration, this table gives a more detailed breakdown by region of destinations for one category – those with

'Five A*-C with English'. It shows that anywhere between 5 and 19.5 per cent of this group were typically in sixth form colleges and between 22 and 45 per cent were in school sixth forms, depending on the region.

The percentages in apprenticeships were reasonably similar everywhere except London, and there were also small differences in the percentage ending up NEET or 'unknown'. Table 5.7 shows differences between city regions in the typical destinations of 'lower attainers'.

Table 5.6: Destinations in Year 12 for 'lower attaining' learners in the 'Five A*-C with English' category, by region (%), 2013-16 cohorts

	East Mids	East	London	North East	North West	South East	South West	West Mids	Yorks and Humber	All
FE college	47.5	43.9	31.0	56.4	47.5	40.2	51.3	48.9	42.7	44.2
Sixth form college	6.9	12.7	15.3	6.3	19.5	16.2	5.0	10.5	16.0	13.2
School sixth form	36.1	34.6	44.9	26.5	22.2	34.4	34.4	28.2	31.7	32.8
Any other education provider	2.3	2.3	2.8	2.1	2.0	1.6	1.8	2.8	1.5	2.1
Apprenticeship	5.0	3.9	1.9	5.0	5.3	3.4	4.9	4.6	4.9	4.2
Traineeship	SUPP	0.1	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.1	SUPP	0.2	0.2	0.2
Employment and/or training	SUPP	0.3	0.1	0.5	0.2	0.1	SUPP	0.3	0.3	0.2
NEET, unknown or not recorded	1.9	2.2	3.9	3.0	3.1	4.0	2.4	4.5	2.7	3.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: National Pupil Database. Excludes learners in independent schools.
Note. SUPP = suppressed due to low numbers in this category.

Differences are also found at the city region level. Whilst around 41 per cent of those in the Five A*-C 'lower attaining' category were in school sixth forms in the Liverpool and West Yorkshire City Regions, only around 10 per cent are in Greater Manchester, although 29 per cent are in Sixth Form Colleges.

This means that, whilst learners in both these types of institution can typically access Level 3 provision, those in Greater Manchester who attend Sixth Form Colleges will have had to change provider. In fact, even if we assume that all those in school sixth forms and other education providers are in the school in which they did KS4 (although this is likely to be an overestimate), around 88 per cent of learners of 'lower attainers' with Five A*-C have to move

to a different provider for their post-16 phase in Greater Manchester – the highest of all the city regions we looked at.

Table 5.7: Destinations in Year 12 for 'lower attaining' learners in the 'Five A*-C with English' category, by city region (%), 2013-16 cohorts

	London	Birmingham	Liverpool	West Yorks	Newcastle	Greater Mcr	Bristol	Sheffield	Nottingham	All
FE college	31.0	43.0	53.0	49.2	55.0	50.6	36.5	36.9	55.6	42.0
Sixth form college	15.3	9.8	3.7	5.9	11.2	28.5	11.1	14.3	1.7	13.2
School sixth form	44.9	35.7	32.9	31.7	21.6	10.2	41.3	40.6	31.8	34.5
Any other education provider	2.8	SUPP	2.5	2.8	2.0	2.2	2.6	1.3	1.9	2.4
Apprenticeship	1.9	5.1	4.8	3.9	6.3	5.0	4.7	4.3	5.2	3.8
Employment and/or training, including traineeship	0.1	SUPP	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.4	0.7	0.4	0.8	0.4
NEET, unknown or not recorded	3.9	3.1	2.5	6.0	3.2	3.2	3.3	2.2	3.1	3.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: National Pupil Database. Excludes learners in independent schools.
Notes: SUPP = suppressed due to low numbers in this category. Traineeships included with employment and training due to low numbers of observations at city region level.

These spatial differences in destinations will partially reflect the structures of provision locally and also young people's decisions about their post-16 phase. As a conclusion to this section, we now turn to our qualitative data to shed light on the way young people approach the decisions they need to make during Year 11 about their post-16 futures. In section 6 of this report, we draw on the same data to explore decision-making from the perspective of place.

5.6. Decision-making in the Year 11 pressure cooker

All young people, regardless of which attainment category they subsequently occupy, face the challenge of making decisions about their post-16 options whilst also dealing with the increasing intensity of preparing for their GCSE examinations. The pressure cooker atmosphere of Year 11 squeezes out time to absorb and reflect on the information and advice about the different career pathways they could follow and the opportunities that might be available to pursue those pathways.

Some of the 'lower attainers' we spoke to were hoping to pursue occupational pathways they had been considering for some time, as these comments from Jake and then Jess illustrate:

Jake: I was considering doing electrical, is it, electrical engineering, is that what it's called? But deep down I knew I wanted to be a mechanic, because, as I said, the passion for cars and things like that.

Interviewer: Alright. So making that choice wasn't too...

Jake: It wasn't difficult. No, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I can imagine, like, it's not as easy for certain people. [...] About halfway through Year 11 I knew what I wanted to do, and then I applied just before GCSEs.

Jess: Since I was a little kid, I always... I remember. I loved my primary school. But in primary, we had a 'what you want to be' when you get older, and I always wanted to work with children, and help people. So, either children...or animals cos I had pets at home. Or, like, health and social care cos my mum was a nurse... I've seen her help loads of people. So I wanted to be like her. But I think that children is better for me.

In contrast, many young people were still unsure about their post-16 futures and some felt they were being pressurised into making decisions without sufficient information or guidance, as this focus group discussion illustrates:

Hazel: 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.

Facilitator: When does that start?

Mary-Jane: Year 11.

Hazel: Any time from Year 10 to Year 11, really. And then...

Facilitator: And then when you were in Year 11, were you given enough time to think about it?

Hazel: No, you just have to rush and pick something.

Facilitator: So if you could give some advice to the government, or the local council about how things could be improved, what would you say?

Hazel: Give us more time. And more opportunities to actually decide.

A college tutor we spoke to commented on the fact that many young people with moderate to low attainment have had their aspirations "trained out of them" in school, especially if they've attended a school more focused on supporting higher attaining learners. In a focus group discussion with CIAG professionals, they spoke about how the practice of giving young people predicted GCSE grades in Year 10 'normalises low attainment' because if children hear all the time they are going to 'fail', then they internalize this and can erect 'glass ceilings'. In this interview extract, Saskia talks about the effect this had on her:

Saskia:	So basically the people in the lower sets, they just thought, right, they won't get what they need, don't give them any sort of help. And I got, I think, one 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, and it puts you right down. And then you just give up, and then the teachers complain that you gave up.
Facilitator 2:	But nobody's given you any information to say, well, you could get there if you did this and this and this. Is that right?
Saskia:	Yeah. 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.

In another example, Bob, a young man who was aiming for a career in the fire service – a choice inspired by spending several years in the fire cadets – told us how his head was "all over the place" thinking about the GCSE exams. This was compounded when the exams did not go as well as he'd hoped, and he ended up leaving school without a plan for what to do next:

Bob:	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.
Interviewer:	So you didn't have a clear plan yet, when you left?
Bob:	No.

His disappointment about his GCSE grades and concern about how they would affect his future came through clearly in this extract from his interview where he talks about the reasons why the support from his family was important to him:

Bob:	Because, obviously, at the time, your family knows what you're going through, and they want to be there, to help you through it all. And not to see you upset and depressed, and, like, when they find out what grades you got they, like, they understand that you have put the effort in but then, it's going to affect your life really bad. That time, when I found out about my grades, yeah I was upset that I didn't get the ones I wanted.

The CIAG professionals we talked to stressed that it is difficult for parents to support their children if they don't fully understand how to interpret GCSE grades. They emphasised the importance of giving young people the opportunity to hear from people who have been successful in their careers despite not achieving 'good' GCSE grades. Saskia, the young woman we met earlier in this section, triggered a discussion in one of the focus groups

about the impact of the grading changes that made grade 4 a 'standard pass' and grade 5 a 'strong pass':

Saskia: I wanted to get out (of school), really. I didn't have anything planned for when I left school, at all. Because I knew I was going to fail my GCSEs and everything, so I just didn't have anything planned. At all. […] Some places still say you need a 4 or a 5, when in a couple of years they might want a 6 or a 7. And then we'll be like stuck behind… when we left (school), the highest you had to get was a 4, wasn't it? And it seems like you two [referring to two other participants in the focus group] had to get a 5 to get anywhere… So it's just going up and up.

A college tutor we spoke to said she and her colleagues referred to many of their 16-year-old students with lower attainment as 'accidental adults' because they lacked the maturity required to make the difficult post-16 decisions they faced. These young people often rely heavily on other people to help them navigate and evaluate the options available to them, and, in some, cases to motivate themselves to make a decision after receiving their GCSE results. Callum, one of the young men we interviewed, traced for us how he struggled with the build-up of pressure and the importance of interventions from both his family and one of his teachers who were actively involved in helping him find a course after he faced two setbacks: a) the withdrawal of a BTEC in Sport by his school sixth form due to low numbers (something he was warned might happen); and b) his GCSE results. His experiences show how, in a short space of time, decisions about careers and post-16 opportunities can change significantly.

Box 18: Callum's story

From the end of Year 10 and into Year 11, Callum's school increased its focus on CIAG. He said, the teachers "wouldn't stop going on about it" and he would have preferred to be left alone to consider his options in his own time. In the second half of Year 11 and after the BTEC in sport was withdrawn, he applied for two apprenticeship places, but was unsuccessful. He achieved grade 3 in most of his GCSE subjects, including English and maths. At this point, the head of Year 11 at his school began phoning Callum at home on a regular basis to discuss his options. His parents and sister also asked him about his plans. His older brother, who was at university, helped him to search for courses on the internet and they found a vehicle maintenance course at the local FE college. Callum applied and was accepted at Level 1. Although he doesn't have strong interest in cars, being able to figure out how things work and how to fix problems appeals to him, and he seems to be doing well in his assessments. He hopes to progress to Level 2 next year. On the suggestion of his tutor, he is also considering completing a Duke of Edinburgh bronze award.

Three other examples also provide evidence of the role that key actors play in encouraging and cajoling young people in the frantic push to find a post-16 place after the GCSE results are announced:

Boss Man: I wasn't even gonna go to college. I was gonna chill out at home… I got forced into it… So my high school teacher she came to my house and

said, 'come on, you're going to college... Yeah, she said, come we're going to college... and she applied for me.

Rolfey: She [her mother] basically made me come here. Because I kept messing about, so she said, 'come to this one'.

Lofty: (I go home from school) thinking that I'm not going to go to college or do anything for a short while. But, my uncle, was looking up different places. He looked up this place...originally they said, just come in, and we can talk about what you could do, like, not to do here, but just, in general what you could do with what you've got. So I came here one day and then they just started, they said, do you want to apply for here, sort of thing. And she was just going on about cabin crew. And I was like, okay, that's fine.

Our qualitative data supports the findings of many studies conducted on the variable effectiveness of careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) in recent years. This variability continues despite the introduction in 2018 of the 'Baker Clause' and the Gatsby Benchmarks for Good Career Guidance in 2017 (for studies of their impact, see AOC, 2018; Hochlaf & Dromey, 2019). A key issue was raised in one of the focus groups by two college students, Daisy and Minnie, who had only discovered they could change their courses once they were at college.

Daisy: We've found out by doing things ourselves and, so like, me and Minnie wanted to change at one point, we wanted to go to a different college, so we went and we like, asked, the student services and things like that. And then they gave us more options, but you don't know until you ask... But like you'd want to know before you come here.

Facilitator 2:   So how did it work when you were in high school then? What sort of people do you get advice from?

Minnie: Only the people who came in from the colleges basically.

Daisy: Yeah and the teachers and things... we didn't have students in (from the colleges). It would've been better if you'd had a student come in because then they could tell you their experience, and not the teachers and like, the heads and stuff. Like, their advice was good... but it'd be better coming from a student who's like sat and done the courses and things like that.

Some colleges invest considerable time and effort in school engagement during Year 11 to identify young people who are likely to require this additional support or who are generally at risk. This continues during the summer holidays and is particularly hectic once the GCSE results are announced. One college we visited arranges summer classes and 'taster days' so young people can experience 'college life' and also sets up individual meetings with prospective students and their parents/guardians to discuss what support the college will provide and what it expects in return in terms of attendance and behaviour.

When they talked about the merits of the different post-16 pathways, young people often drew on a mix of anecdotal information and the experience of family and friends. This included, for example, opinions about the quality of local providers. The following extracts from a focus group and a personal interview in which young people discussed how to access apprenticeships in their local areas reflect the anecdotal character of their understanding, but also a more solid awareness of the low number of vacancies for 16-18 year olds and that access can rely on knowing someone already employed by an apprenticeship employer.

Facilitator:	Did anybody think about doing an apprenticeship?
Participant:	I did, but it's so hard to get them, like.
Participant:	Yeah, it's so hard to get one without going to college.
Facilitator:	So do you think you have to maybe go to college first to get an apprenticeship?
Participant:	Yeah.
Participant:	See actually my cousin didn't. His dad knew the person and they got him an apprenticeship.
Sinead:	My mum's friend owns a nursery, and she had been told about it (apprenticeship), so she told my mum, like, for me to apply.
Facilitator:	Do you think you would have found an apprenticeship to do, if it hadn't been for your mum knowing this person in the nursery?
Sinead:	No, like, no one really advertises things very well.

Attitudes to apprenticeship can also be based on how far young people themselves and their family members put faith in courses leading to qualifications. This may have been partly triggered by the knowledge that some apprenticeships at Level 2 do not include stand-alone qualifications.

Lofty:	So, originally, I was going to do an apprenticeship. You know, in a travel agent… in the airport, something like that. But other people were just talking about how they were going to college. And, you know, they might say how you'd end up with more money or stuff like that, at the end of it. So in the long run, you'd be better off going to college and getting more, you know, more...
Interviewer:	Qualifications?
Lofty:	Yeah, qualifications.
Interviewer:	So people thought that would be better than the apprenticeship? For long-term prospects?
Lofty:	Yeah. Not just for me, but for everyone.

Daisy: Yeah that's what people mainly do. Come to college, get, like, the stuff, and then get an apprenticeship. But they also come to college to see if they can get like, higher grades. Say if me and you was like doing our health and social and we passed our maths and English and then got an apprenticeship, we could still come back to college to do our Level 3 and Level 4 and then be like better. Whereas, Bob he could be doing Sport and he could pass his maths and English and then he could come back and do, like, teaching in Sport or a personal trainer type thing.

In this section, we have shown that 'lower attainers' are moving into different kinds of destinations than those who do get a grade C in English and maths. They are more likely to be on lower-level courses, lower-level apprenticeships, doing different subjects and in different types of provider. There is evidence that some further differences may exist in different areas of England and this is something that we explore more in the next section.

Speaking to young people, we see that the decision-making period in Year 11 is very challenging for young people with lower attainment often because they lack information and guidance about suitable options or are not sure which routes would be better for them. Many spoke about how the interventions of key people helped them to make a decision about which option to pursue, but these interventions were often at a sub-optimal point in the decision-making process. These findings disrupt the notion that, armed with sufficient information, young people can make a straightforward transition from Year 11 into post-16 pathways that place them on the next rung of an academic or vocational ladder.

In the next section, we explore the role of the provision structures in shaping access to opportunities and examine the interplay between providers, courses, levels and entry requirements in an attempt to understand whether some young people in some places have access to different opportunities than others

6. Local differences in provision and destinations

6.1. Overview

In this section, we examine the differences in the range and types of post-16 provision on offer to GCSE 'lower attainers' living in different places, through a close analysis of the seven localities that we studied in-depth in Greater Manchester (GM) and the North of Tyne (NoT). Earlier, in sections 2.3 and 2.5, we explained that though the English post-16 system is centrally funded and regulated, it comprises many locally variable markets with most decision-making taking place at the provider level. This variety and lack of local coordination will undoubtedly lead to differences in opportunities for young people with similar qualifications in different areas. In this section, we aim to understand the extent to which these local markets can vary and what kinds of variation are present. We explore the range of provision on offer and the associated entry requirements in our seven localities to try and get a detailed view of the realities of post-16 choice for 'lower attainers' in these places and the differences between them.

We analyse different aspects of the provision – namely the levels and subjects on offer and whether courses or apprenticeships are available. This analysis takes place in several stages since the opportunities available to 'lower attainers' depend on multiple factors. First, we examine the provision that is on offer for **all** those entering their post-16 phase since, for example, different areas may be better or worse served for apprenticeships. Next, we examine which parts of the local provision are inaccessible to **any 'lower attainer'** since this starts to show us if, for example, whole subject areas become inaccessible in some places. Lastly, we examine the opportunities available for the largest subgroup of 'lower attainers' – those with between one and four GCSEs (or equivalent) at A*-C but neither English nor maths at this level. This allows us to see what the options are in different areas for a 'typical lower attainer' who may have some strong grades but would be required to keep studying towards both English and maths in their post-16 phase.

This staged analysis allows us to distinguish between areas where options are generally limited or skewed towards particular routes and those where 'lower attainers' have particularly narrow routes open to them. By looking at the provision structures in detail, we can go beyond a superficial view that is based solely on structures of provision and begin to understand how the different local markets produce different options for young people with similar attainment. By examining both levels of study, courses, apprenticeships and subjects on offer, we can start to build up a picture of how well (or not) these educational markets provide routes into further education or employment.

6.2. The localities

All of the localities we examined have sizeable numbers of 'lower attainers' but they differ geographically, socially and economically. Figure 6.1 shows their locations.

Within GM, **Oldham** is a large industrial town in the north-east of the conurbation about nine miles from Manchester city centre. **Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall** are adjacent inner-city neighbourhoods in north Manchester. **Eccles** is a town within the Salford local authority and

lies about five miles to the West of central Manchester, connected by bus, tram and rail, while **Wythenshawe** is a large suburban housing estate on the outskirts of Manchester, about seven miles from the city centre and close to Manchester airport. Bus and tram lines connect Wythenshawe to central Manchester. All these localities have high levels of deprivation in parts, although Eccles is more mixed, as are outer areas of Oldham. Wythenshawe and Eccles have majority White British populations; Oldham White British and Asian British; and Cheetham Hill/Crumpsall also large White and Asian British populations as well as a range of smaller ethnic groups.

Figure 6.1: The local case study areas in Greater Manchester and the North of Tyne
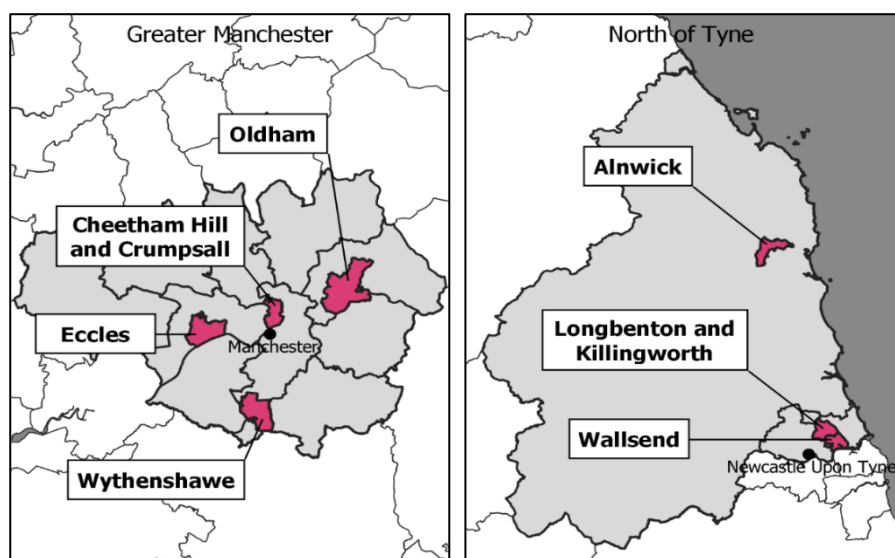
Within NoT, **Alnwick** is a small market town in rural Northumberland, about five miles from the North Sea coast, and over thirty miles from the centre of Newcastle. It is for the most part fairly affluent, although with higher deprivation in the north-western part of the town. The other two localities are both within North Tyneside local authority area, although well connected to Newcastle city centre by bus and metro at a distance of around four miles. **Wallsend** is a former shipbuilding area and many parts of the town now have high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, while **Longbenton & Killingworth** are adjacent suburban areas with a mix of income levels. All of the NoT localities have majority White British populations.

Looking simply at the structure of post-16 provision available within 30 to 60 minutes of these localities (90 minutes for Alnwick) (Table 6.1 and Table 6.2), it is immediately clear that young people's opportunities are structured very differently depending on where they live.[20] For example, in some areas such as Eccles, there is a dominant FE provider which operates a range of provision including general FE and a sixth form college. In most other localities, sixth form colleges are distinct providers. In Alnwick, there is some provision run by the Local Authority delivered across a range of sites. We haven't included independent training providers in the tables because it is difficult to obtain accurate data on their location

and coverage, and some of them work in partnership with other providers. The continued lack of research on their role in the post-16 system needs to be addressed.

Table 6.1: Available post-16 provision up to and within 60 minutes travel time of someone living in each of the Greater Manchester localities

	30 minutes	45 minutes	60 minutes
Oldham	1 FE college 1 sixth form college 1 school sixth form 1 UTC	1 FE college 2 sixth form colleges 3 school sixth forms 1 UTC	4 FE colleges over 5 sites 4 sixth form colleges 9 school sixth forms 1 UTC
Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall	1 FE site offering limited provision 3 school sixth forms	4 FE colleges over 8 sites 4 sixth form colleges 5 school sixth forms 1 state grammar school 1 UTC	4 FE colleges over 8 sites 4 sixth form colleges 5 school sixth forms 1 state grammar school 1 UTC
Eccles	1 FE college site 1 sixth form college (part of same provider as above) 1 UTC	1 FE college over 3 sites 2 sixth form colleges (part of same provider as above) 1 UTC	5 FE colleges over 7 sites 2 sixth form colleges 7 school sixth forms 2 state grammar schools 1 studio school 1 UTC
Wythenshawe	2 FE college sites 3 school sixth forms	2 FE college sites 8 school sixth forms 4 grammar schools	3 FE colleges over 7 sites 4 sixth form colleges 15 school sixth forms 5 state grammar schools 1 studio school

Table 6.2: Available post-16 provision up to and within 60/90 minutes travel time of someone living in each of the North of Tyne Localities

	30 minutes	60 minutes	90 minutes
Alnwick	• 1 school sixth form • Local authority provision	• 3 school sixth forms • Local authority provision	• 3 school sixth forms • Local authority provision • 1 FE college across 2 sites
Wallsend	• 1 FE college and 1 FE college site offering limited provision • 1 sixth form college • 8 school sixth forms	• 2 FE colleges over 4 sites • 2 sixth form colleges • 14 school sixth forms	• 3 FE colleges over 10 sites • 2 sixth form colleges • 27 school sixth forms • 1 CTC • 1 studio school
Longbenton & Killingworth	• 3 school sixth forms	• 2 FE colleges over 3 sites • 1 sixth form college • 14 school sixth forms	• 3 FE colleges over 9 sites • 2 sixth form colleges • 23 school sixth forms • 1 CTC

In this section, through our analysis of actual course and apprenticeship/traineeship opportunities and entry requirements within these 'travel to learn' areas, we examine how these different geographies and structures translate into different 'opportunity sets' for young people, partly depending on their level of GCSE attainment.

We define an opportunity as any course, apprenticeship or traineeship advertised within a 60 minute travelling time (by public transport) of our urban localities and 90 minute travelling time (by public transport) for Alnwick. To be included, it must typically be available to young people at the end of KS4 and must be advertised online to be included (see section 3 and Appendix C for more detail). Note that we show the range of opportunities, but not necessarily the number of places, as courses will have multiple places but apprenticeships often only one.

6.3.   Spatial differences in opportunities for all young people

Figure 6.2 shows the numbers of distinct opportunities in each locality, by the type of provision and gives a sense of the overall variety of provision in each area.

The striking differences in this graph reflect the situations described above. For instance, in Wallsend and in Longbenton & Killingworth, the majority of opportunities are available in school sixth forms. In contrast, the four areas of Greater Manchester show how much variation there can be between areas within the same city region. Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall's good transport connections to central Manchester mean that the number of

opportunities within a reasonable travelling time is much higher there than in Oldham, where the numbers of young people are higher. It is important to note again here, however, that these are not numbers of places available and so those areas where there are large numbers of courses will have the capacity to accommodate more young people and there will be differences in average class sizes by area. Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall and Wythenshawe have substantial provision in school sixth forms; less so in Oldham and Eccles. UTC provision is available within 60 minutes to learners in Oldham and Eccles.

Figure 6.2: Number of opportunities and young people, by locality and type of provision (for all young people)
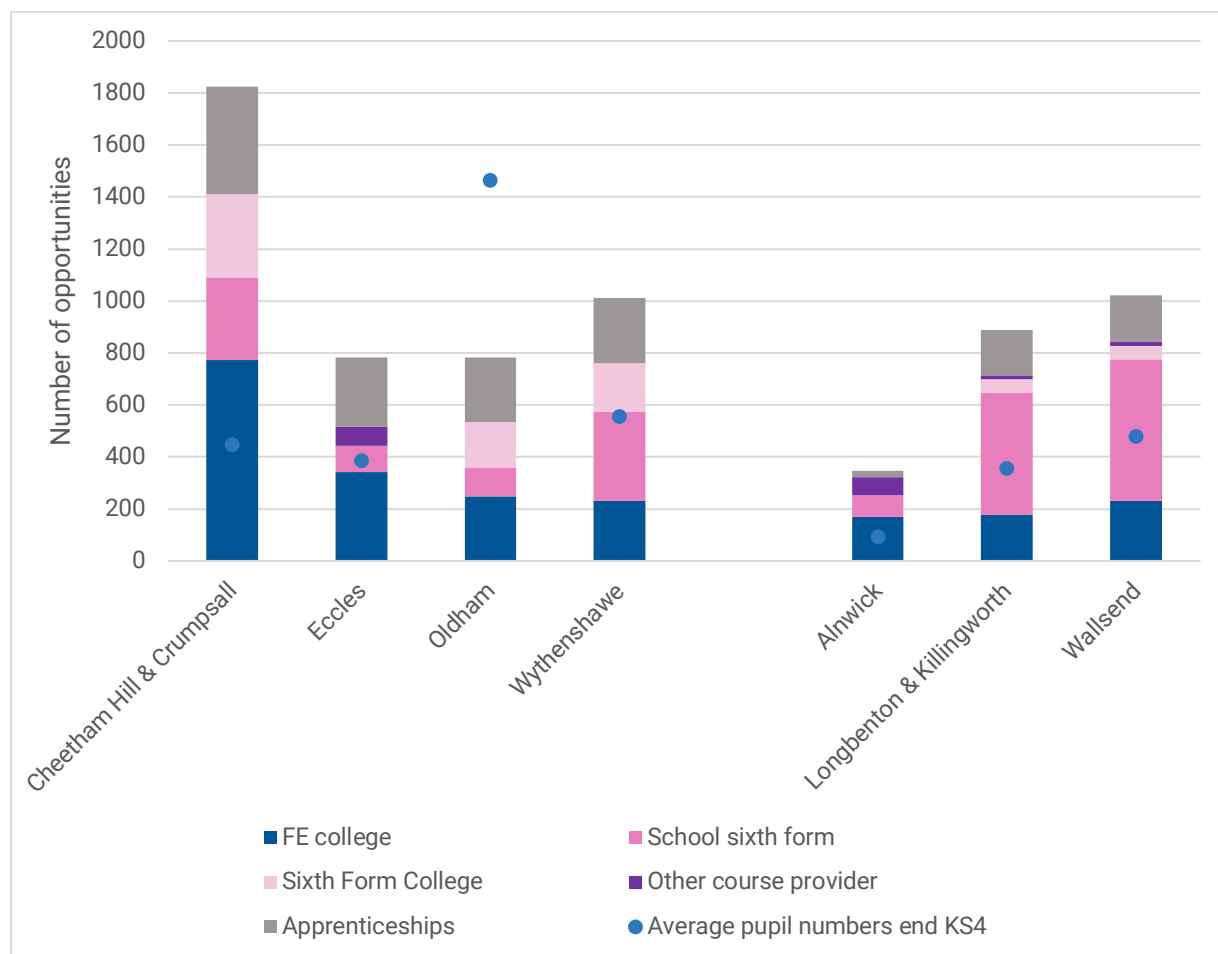
Source: Dataset on opportunity sets constructed by the researchers, average pupil numbers from the National Pupil Database.

As mentioned earlier, however, there is a need to look beyond simply which types of providers are operating in areas because there is also variation in what kinds of opportunities are offered within institutions. The case study localities showed substantial differences in the extent to which academic provision (e.g. A/AS Levels) was offered in general FE colleges and vocational provision was offered in schools. For example, in Alnwick, our most rural locality, academic provision was only available in school sixth forms though some of these did also offer vocational provision. By contrast, in Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall, 15 per cent of college provision was academic though not every college serving

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this area offered academic options. Similarly, between 20 and 33 per cent of school sixth form and sixth form college provision was vocational in the localities we studied but, again, some providers had an exclusively academic offer.

Nonetheless, Figure 6.3 shows that opportunities at Level 3 still dominate what is available in most places and these tend to be predominantly courses. By contrast, apprenticeships are a large part of the variety of Level 2 provision everywhere except rural Alnwick where they account for only a very small share of the range of opportunities.

Figure 6.3: Opportunities by type, level and area (for all young people; %)
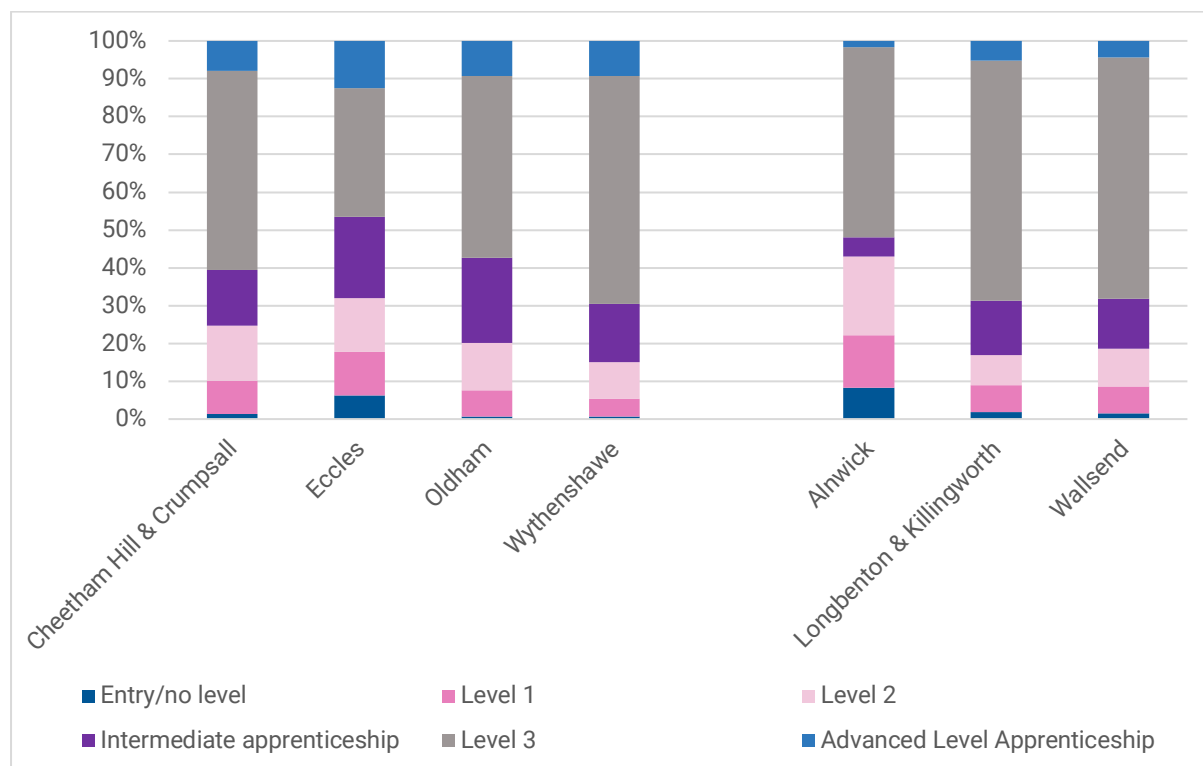
Source: Dataset on opportunity sets constructed by the researchers.

6.4.   Spatial differences in opportunities for 'lower attainers'

Thus far we have described all opportunities available in a locality. By analysing entry requirements, we can say whether those in each of our 'lower attaining' categories: are eligible, might be eligible or are not eligible for these opportunities. In doing so, we have erred on the side of optimism. Unless otherwise stated, we have assumed that GCSE 'equivalents' would be acceptable. In addition, where courses/apprenticeships do not provide precise information, we have assumed that a young person *might* be eligible. In reality, there is likely to be some flexibility around entry requirements, when personal circumstances and levels of demand are taken into account. Given the complexity of the analysis – with seven localities, nine lower-attainer categories and multiple six course/apprenticeship levels – we proceed illustratively, using selected localities to show how the range of opportunities diminishes once entry criteria are considered.

Figure 6.4 and Figure 6.5 show that, in some localities, like Oldham for example, once entry requirements are taken into account, the majority of opportunities at Level 3 (around 60 per cent) become inaccessible to **any** 'lower attainer' – even those who might have five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C. In other areas, such as Wallsend and Longbenton & Killingworth, the proportion of inaccessible courses at this level is much lower (around 34 per cent and 30 per cent respectively). In general, the areas we looked at in NoT had lower percentages of inaccessible courses at Level 3 than those in GM. Eccles was an exception. As Figure 6.4 shows, it had the lowest number of opportunities at Level 3 of any of the urban localities we examined. Looking more closely at the provision in Eccles shows that it is the only urban locality where vocational opportunities at Level 3 outnumber academic ones which partially explains why the Level 3 options there are more accessible than in other parts of GM. It is also an area where the academic opportunities that do exist are particularly accessible with 73 per cent of these potentially accessible to 'lower attainers'. By contrast, in Wallsend and Longbenton & Killingworth academic provision at Level 3 outnumbers vocational by around 2:1 and it is the accessibility of this academic provision that is driving the overall accessibility at Level 3. In both these places, around 74-75 per cent of academic provision is potentially accessible to 'lower attainers'. This suggests that 'lower attaining' learners in these localities might have a better chance of starting on a Level 3 course in their post-16 phase because there are a large number of courses for which they could be eligible.

Figure 6.4: Course opportunities at Level 3, by area and accessibility
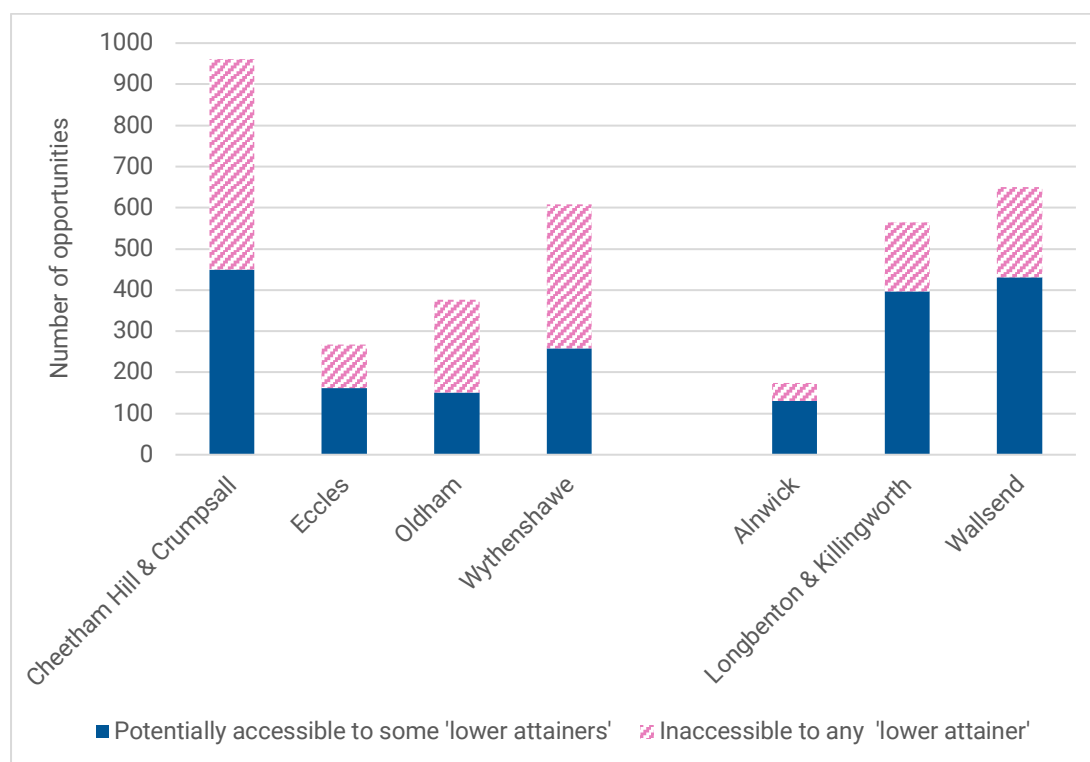
Source: Dataset on opportunity sets constructed by the researchers.

The amount of variety by area for courses at Level 2 and below was much lower, with most localities having very little provision at these levels that 'lower attainers' could not potentially access. This is because the vast majority of post-16 provision at Level 2 and below is

vocational and entry requirements tend not to expect learners to already have English and maths at a Level 2 standard before starting courses. There are exceptions, however, and we found that Level 2 courses in Engineering and Construction were those that imposed this restriction most often in the areas we examined.

By contrast, in the localities we examined, between 25 and 33 per cent of intermediate apprenticeships (equivalent to Level 2) were inaccessible to anyone in the 'lower attaining' group, as were between 33 and 66 per cent of Advanced Apprenticeships (equivalent to Level 3) due to the fact that their existing Level 2 qualifications did not include GCSE English and/or maths. This means that apprenticeships at Level 2 are generally far less accessible than courses at this same level. At Level 3, the differences in accessibility between courses and apprenticeships are generally less stark – particularly in GM where courses at Level 3 tend to be less accessible.

Taken together, these findings show, first, that different entry standards can lead to differential access to options in different places, particularly those at Level 3. This raises the possibility that those in different areas with similar attainment may follow different post-16 routes largely because of standard practices in their area. Thus, any evaluation of post-16 provision in an area must take account of entry requirements, otherwise a false impression will be given about accessibility. Second, the fact that even some provision at Level 2 – particularly apprenticeships – is inaccessible to all 'lower attainers' in an area exposes the lack of rungs in the progression ladder. Instead of continuing their learning at Level 2 (the level at which they were studying in Year 11), this means some 'low attainers' are required to drop down to Level 1 when they enter the post-16 phase. As we saw in section 5, this is not always necessarily a negative outcome for a young person, but it may be.

In all the localities we looked at, Level 3 opportunities were those most usually blocked off to the 'lower attaining' group as a whole because of the requirement to have English and maths at grade C/4 or above to access these opportunities. This can also impact on the range of subject areas on offer to 'lower attainers' as some subjects are only typically offered at higher levels. As before, however, this varies a great deal by locality and will also depend on the subject distribution across the local offer as a whole. Using Oldham as an example (see Figure 6.5) we can see that around half the opportunities in some subject categories are inaccessible to any 'lower attainer' whereas in some other categories, most opportunities are accessible. Retail and commercial enterprise and Health, public services and care are among the most accessible subject areas, whilst Science and maths and Business, administration and law are among the least accessible (if we consider the proportion of opportunities overall that are available to 'lower attainers'). Other subject areas with low accessibility are those where the qualifications on offer are typically A levels, for instance Social sciences and Humanities.

As Figure 6.5 shows, it is not simply the case that subject areas which are well-represented in an area's provision in general are the most accessible to 'lower attainers'. In Oldham, the number of opportunities for 'lower attainers' in Business, administration and law is roughly the same as in Health, public services and care, despite there being many more opportunities in general in the former.

Figure 6.5: Opportunities in Oldham, by subject, category and accessibility
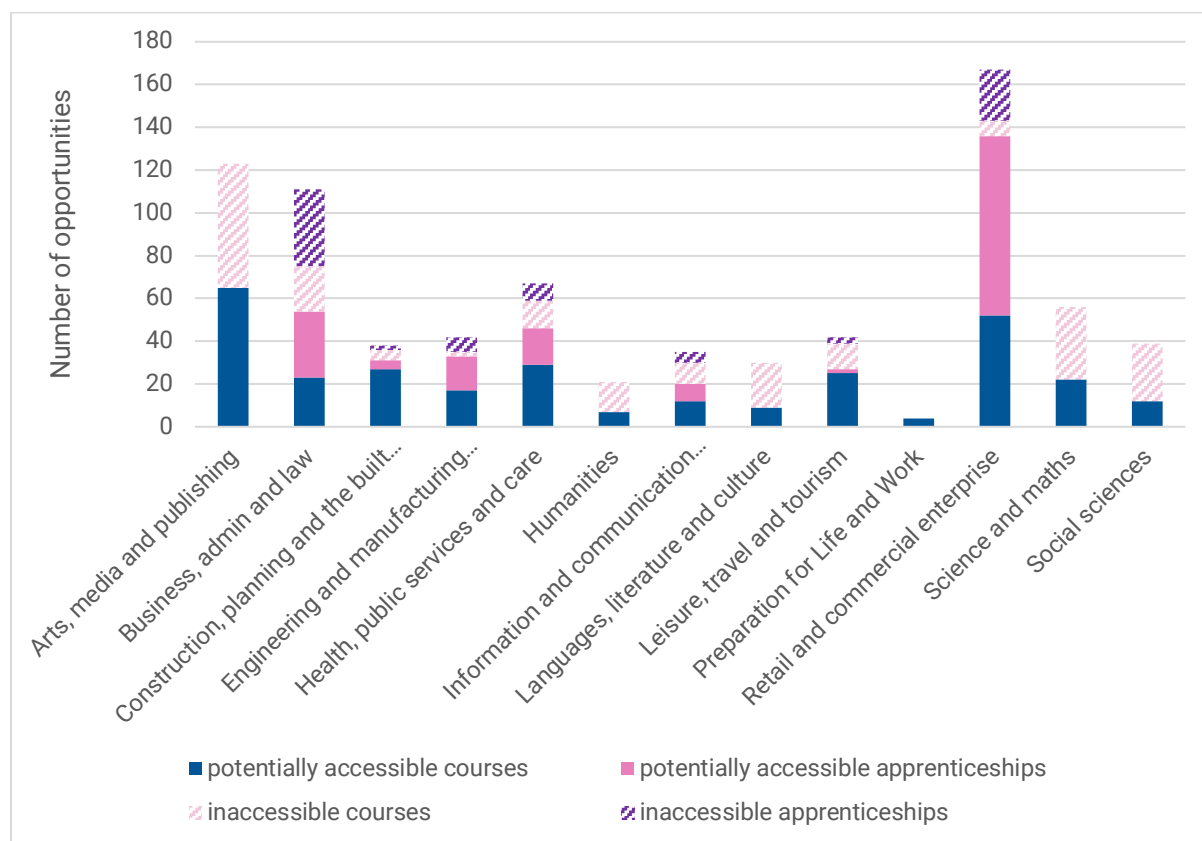
Source: Dataset on opportunity sets constructed by the researchers.

Oldham was the locality where the subject offer for 'lower attainers' was the most different from that on offer to all young people. In the other localities, the share of the offer by subject was roughly similar for 'lower attainers' and the whole cohort, suggesting that by and large, 'lower attainers' in these localities have access to roughly the same range of subject opportunities as their higher-attaining peers. In Oldham, because the overall offer is more heavily skewed towards subjects which have large numbers of inaccessible opportunities such as Arts, media and publishing and Business, administration and law, 'lower attainers' there have access to a more constrained choice of subjects compared to young people who achieved a grade C/4 in English and maths.

Considering the effect of entry requirements and overall offer shows us that both are important for understanding opportunities for 'lower attainers'. Though opportunities at Level 3 are, unsurprisingly, the least accessible to 'lower attainers', we have seen above that there is some real variety in accessibility to these by locality and variety in accessibility of different subject areas. At Level 2 and below, courses are generally accessible everywhere but apprenticeships at this level are not so accessible and this too varies by locality.

6.5. The largest subgroup of 'lower attainers': 'Some A*-C with neither English nor maths at A*-C'

So far, these results highlight the different nature of the offer available to the whole group of 'lower attainers', some of whom will have very similar overall attainment to their peers who did obtain grade 4/C in English and maths. However, opportunities also differ within the 'lower attainer' group. Here we focus on the largest subgroup of 'lower attainers': those with between 1 and 4 GCSEs at grade 4/C (or equivalent) but neither English nor maths at grade 4/C (i.e. the 'Some A*-C with neither' category).

In all localities, these learners (unsurprisingly) had access to less of the overall offer than those in the 'lower attaining' group with higher grades. Figure 6.6 focuses on Level 3 courses where the differences between areas were the most stark. In the GM localities, between 88 and 92 per cent of course opportunities at Level 3 were inaccessible to 'lower attainers' in the 'Some A*-C with neither' category. In most cases, this is because entry to Level 3 (whether academic or vocational) requires 5 GCSEs (or equivalent) at A*-C and/or either English or maths at C or above. However, Figure 6.6. does show an interesting difference between the urban localities in NoT and GM with around 40 per cent of Level 3 provision in Longbenton & Killingworth and Wallsend accessible to the 'Some A*-C with neither' group. In fact, in both these areas, most of the accessible opportunities for this group were at Level 3. As in the previous section, we see much less difference by locality at Level 2 where the majority of courses (between 80 and 100 per cent) were accessible to this group.

Figure 6.6: Course opportunities at Level 3, by area and accessibility (Some A*-C with neither only)
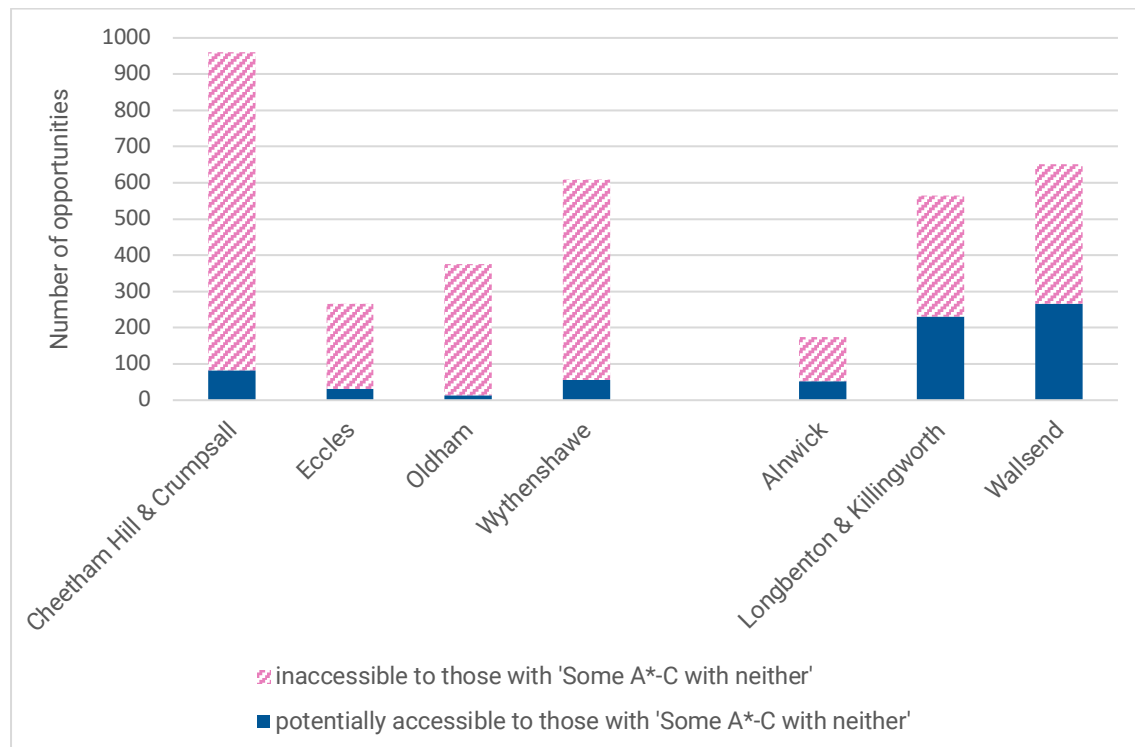
Source: Dataset on opportunity sets constructed by the researchers.

For apprenticeships at both levels, we see very little difference between what is accessible for 'any lower attainer' and this group with 'Some A*-C and neither English nor Maths'. This is because of structural differences in entry requirements for apprenticeships compared with courses. Around 45 per cent of apprenticeships, but only 4 per cent of courses, have entry requirements only based on grades in English and maths and, where apprenticeships do have a general entry requirement, it is almost always coupled with requirements for particular English and maths grades. The result is that a large number of apprenticeship vacancies are inaccessible to *any* lower attainer, but many of those that are accessible to 'lower attainers' are accessible to most of them. With courses, we see that general attainment is more often a component of entry requirements and that, as a result, many more of the opportunities available to those with five A*-C are not available to those with lower attainment like the 'Some A*-C with neither' group.

When we look at accessibility by subject area, we see again (just as in Figure 6.5) that some subject areas are more accessible than others for this group. We can also see there are important differences between localities. Looking at Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall and Wallsend as examples, Figure 6.7 and 6.8 show how 'lower attainers' in the 'Some A*-C with neither' category have almost no access to whole subject areas such as Languages, literature and culture in one area (Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall) but have access to many more opportunities in this subject area in another (Wallsend). In general, the greater accessibility at Level 3 in Wallsend for those with 'Some A*-C with neither' has translated into a wider range of subjects being available there for this group.

Figure 6.7: Opportunities in Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall, by subject, category and accessibility (Some A*-C with neither only)
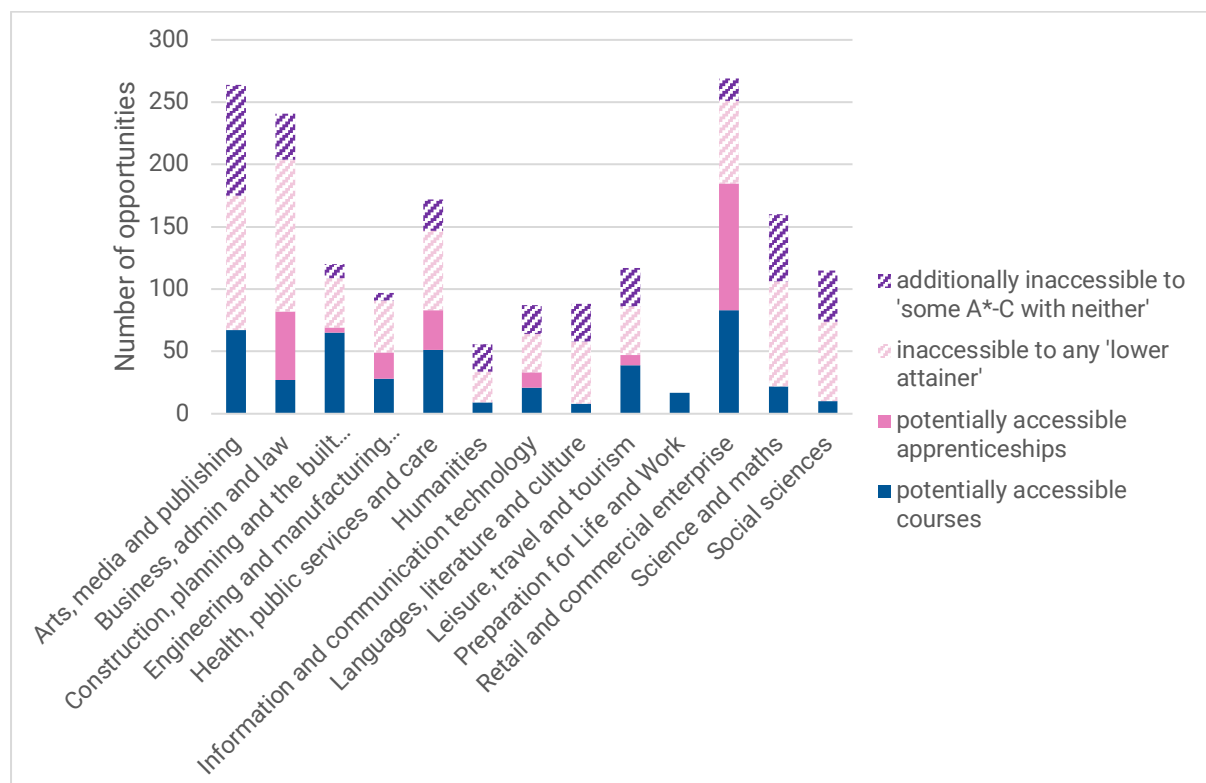
Source: Dataset on opportunity sets constructed by the researchers.

Figure 6.8: Opportunities in Wallsend, by subject, category and accessibility (Some A*-C with neither only)
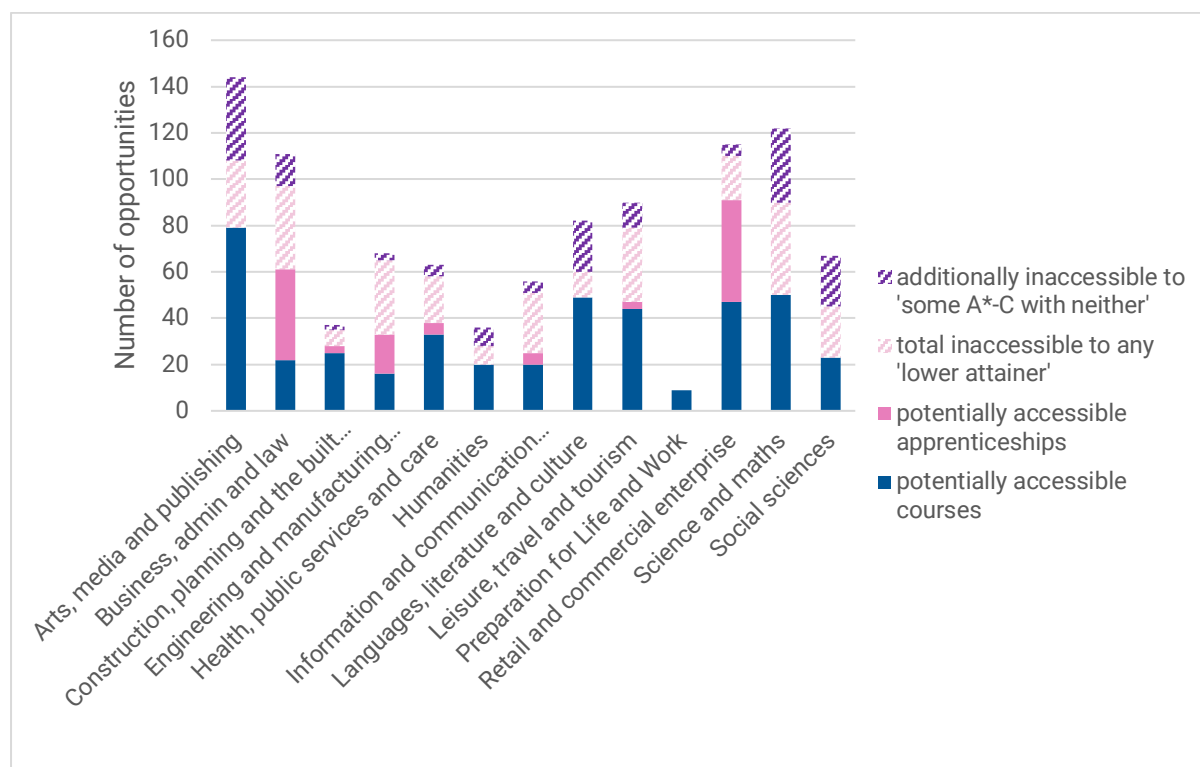
Source: Dataset on opportunity sets constructed by the researchers.

In general, our analysis shows that local offers differ in terms of what is available to everyone and that entry requirements shape what is accessible to those in the 'lower attaining' group. Additionally, there were differences across the localities we studied in terms of the subjects and levels that were accessible to young people with the same general attainment. It is worth remembering here that we have interpreted the entry requirements for opportunities 'as published' and there is evidence that the behaviour of some centres is different, in reality, to their published entry requirements. For example, we found a number of schools that either had blanket policies about admission to their sixth forms that required grade 4/C in English and maths or had no accessible options listed for those without these grades. However, when we examined the Key Stage 5 (KS5) results in the performance tables for these schools, we could see that there were some young people re-sitting GCSE English and maths during KS5. More work should be done to investigate the factors influencing whether young people are allowed to stay on to KS5 in these centres if they don't meet the stated entry requirements.

6.6. Actual destinations in case study localities

The opportunity sets have shown the differences in provision structures in each of our localities and now we explore the extent to which this affects actual destinations, using the ILR, NPD and NCCIS data. As these case-study localities contain relatively small numbers of

young people, we have again combined the cohorts from 2013-2016 together as in the previous spatial analysis.

Firstly, it is important to note that, whilst there some differences in the distribution of 'lower attainers' into categories by area, they are largely similar. For example, in every area, the 'Some A*-C with neither' group is the largest sub-group of 'lower attainers' and the proportion of 'lower attainers' with 5 A*-C grades at GCSE (or equivalent) is fairly similar at between 13 and 17 per cent. As these are small areas with relatively small numbers of learners, the differences in percentages should be interpreted with some caution. This is important to bear in mind as we start to look at destinations, levels and subjects studied because one explanation for any differences observed there may be the young people in these different areas have very different patterns of attainment.

To examine transitions to destinations, we grouped together learners into three larger categories (Five A*-C, Some A*-C, and No A*-C) to slightly increase the number of observed learners and allow us to report the most common destinations (Table 6.3 to Table 6.5). This analysis shows that Alnwick had by far the largest rate of transition to school sixth form, but it also had a relatively large number of young people going into apprenticeships, particularly among those in the 'Some A*-C' category. In Wallsend, a greater proportion of 'lower attainers' moved into FE college than in nearby Longbenton & Killingworth (where slightly more learners went to school sixth forms) despite both these areas having very similar opportunity sets for 'lower attainers'. One explanation for this could be the relative position of different providers within opportunity sets. If we examine the travel time to different types of provider (Table 6.2) we can see that those in Wallsend have an FE college within around 15 minutes travel time whereas those in Longbenton & Killingworth would be travelling around 40 minutes to reach the same provider. Schools with sixth forms are the predominant local option in Longbenton & Killingworth, with three of these within a 30 minute travel time.

Of the case study areas in Greater Manchester, Eccles had the largest percentage of young people entering apprenticeships, although Wythenshawe was a close second. This is despite the fact that, according to the opportunity sets analysis, apprenticeships tended to be less accessible to 'lower attainers' in Eccles. Further analysis reveals, however, that out of all 'lower attainers' who entered an apprenticeship in Eccles, more than two-fifths had at least five GCSEs at A*-C or equivalent (not shown). This is a much higher percentage than in the other case study localities, where 'lower attainers' entering apprenticeships typically have fewer GCSEs at grade C or above.

Table 6.3: Transitions to post-16 destinations for young people belonging to the 'Five A*-C' categories, by case study area (%), 2013-16 cohorts

	FE College	Sixth Form College	School sixth form	Any other education provider	Apprentice ship	NEET, unknown or not recorded
Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	52.5	28.7	11.6	<2.0	<2.0	4.6
Eccles	70.3	<1.0	14.1	5.4	5.8	<5.0
Oldham	46.1	42.0	4.3	2.0	1.7	3.1
Wythenshawe	44.7	24.1	18.4	3.1	4.4	4.7
Alnwick	25.5	0.0	58.2	<2.0	<10.0	<10.0
Longbenton & Killingworth	50.3	0.0	37.8	<5.0	6.5	<5.0
Wallsend	61.4	0.0	26.9	4.0	4.4	<2.0
Total	47.9	11.0	29.2	2.6	4.8	4.0

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System (combined data for 2013 to 2016 cohorts). N = 2,191. Note: Rows do not sum to 100 per cent as not all destinations have been reported.

Table 6.4: Transitions to post-16 destinations for young people belonging to the 'Some A*-C' categories, by case study area (%), 2013-16 cohorts

	FE College	Sixth Form College	School sixth form	Any other education provider	Apprentice ship	NEET, unknown or not recorded
Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	77.1	6.4	3.3	3.1	<2.0	6.9
Eccles	68.1	<1.0	9.7	7.7	4.7	6.5
Oldham	68.3	19.6	0.8	2.2	1.6	6.1
Wythenshawe	48.5	11.2	18.1	3.8	4.8	12.5
Alnwick	43.2	0.0	32.4	<5.0	14.9	<10.0
Longbenton & Killingworth	56.5	0.0	18.5	7.1	7.5	7.5
Wallsend	70.4	0.0	7.6	4.3	7.3	5.1
Total	64.9	11.4	7.3	3.6	3.7	7.3

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System (combined data for 2013 to 2016 cohorts). N = 3,909. Note: Rows do not sum to 100 per cent as not all destinations have been reported.

Table 6.5: Transitions to post-16 destinations for young people belonging to the 'No A*-C' categories, by case study area (%), 2013-16 cohorts

	FE College	Sixth Form College	School sixth form	Any other education provider	Apprentice ship	NEET, unknown or not recorded
Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	64.3	<1.0	10.1	<5.0	<2.0	18.5
Eccles	42.2	<2.0	21.6	<10.0	<5.0	24.1
Oldham	52.1	<2.0	12.6	3.7	3.0	22.6
Wythenshawe	44.8	4.2	14.1	4.2	<5.0	27.4
Alnwick	31.0	0.0	31.0	<15.0	<10.0	<10.0
Longbenton & Killingworth	40.0	0.0	30.6	11.8	0.0	<15.0
Wallsend	53.2	0.0	15.3	9.0	<5.0	14.4
Total	50.3	1.5	15.1	5.1	2.8	21.3

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System (combined data for 2013 to 2016 cohorts). N = 1,421. Note: Rows do not sum to 100 per cent as not all destinations have been reported.

Tables 6.6 to 6.8 look at whether these provider differences make a difference to the levels of learning of 'lower attainers'. Again, we group together learners into three larger categories (Five A*-C, Some A*-C, and No A*-C) and focus on those in education only.

For those in the Five A*-C categories, transitions to Level 3 were highest in Alnwick and Longbenton & Killingworth with around 77 per cent of learners enrolling on Level 3 courses and 44 per cent entering AS/A levels. By contrast, only around 54-55 per cent of learners in Wallsend, Eccles, Oldham and Wythenshawe with Five A*-C were enrolled on Level 3 courses with only 8 per cent in Eccles enrolled on AS/A levels. We saw earlier how areas like Longbenton & Killingworth had more accessible Level 3 options and this seemed to be affecting the likelihood of studying at Level 3 there. Interestingly, the provision structure in Wallsend looks almost identical to that in Longbenton & Killingworth because of their proximity to one another. But we can see that learners in Wallsend with 5 A*-C were much less likely to be studying at Level 3 than learners in Longbenton & Killingworth with the same kind of attainment, which may be accounted for by the differences in the local provider types discussed above.

Table 6.7 shows that, just as for the 'Five A*-C' categories, there is a strong degree of between-area variation in levels of learning for learners in the 'Some A*-C' categories. In Alnwick, for example, again we see a much larger proportion of learners moving into Level 3 courses. Learners there seem much less likely to enter Entry Level or Level 1. By contrast, in Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall, Wallsend, and Oldham, learners in these three categories seem to transition to Entry Level or Level 1 much more frequently. Of course, Table 6.1 shows that the balance between the individual 'lower attainer' categories is subtly different across the various case study localities. However, the differences in provision structures shown by the opportunity sets can also help explain some of these stark differences in the levels of learning entered.

Table 6.6: Levels of learning in Year 12 for young people in the 'Five A*-C categories, by case study area (learners in education only; %), 2013-16 cohorts

	Entry Level/ Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	of which, at least one A/AS Level*	Total
Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	6.1	26.9	67.0	29.7	100
Eccles	12.9	33.0	54.1	7.8	100
Oldham	15.3	30.6	54.0	23.2	100
Wythenshawe	17.2	28.2	54.6	16.4	100
Alnwick	<5.0	<25.0	77.3	43.8	100
Longbenton & Killingworth	7.8	19.0	73.2	35.4	100
Wallsend	17.6	27.0	55.5	24.3	100
Total	13.4	28.4	58.2	23.1	100

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System (combined data for 2013 to 2016 cohorts). N = 1,995.

Table 6.7: Levels of learning in Year 12 for young people in the 'Some A*-C categories, by case study area (learners in education only; %), 2013-16 cohorts

	Entry Level/ Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	of which, at least one A/AS Level*	Total
Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	35.3	52.8	11.9	<2.0	100
Eccles	26.4	53.5	20.1	<2.0	100
Oldham	36.8	51.2	12.0	2.4	100
Wythenshawe	28.5	53.2	18.3	<2.0	100
Alnwick	17.2	46.6	36.2	<15.0	100
Longbenton & Killingworth	28.5	47.7	23.8	7.7	100
Wallsend	39.6	42.6	17.7	<2.0	100
Total	33.8	50.8	15.4	2.6	100

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System (combined data for 2013 to 2016 cohorts). N = 3,149.

Table 6.8 shows the levels studied by young people in the bottom three categories (the 'No A*-C' group). These figures have to be interpreted with some caution because for a lot of learners in these three categories a level of learning was not recorded in the data and so we only include those learners here for whom a level could be determined. Again, we see differences in the levels entered with learners in Alnwick, Longbenton & Killingworth, and Wythenshawe entering Year 12 at higher levels of learning than in other areas. Of particular note here are the differences in access to Level 2 courses with around 37 per cent of learners in this category accessing these in Wythenshawe but only around 12 per cent in Eccles. Again, the differences between Wallsend and Longbenton & Killingworth are particularly striking – given the apparently similar provision structures in both these places.

Table 6.8: Levels of learning in Year 12 for young people in the 'No A*-C categories, by case study area (learners in education only; %), 2013-16 cohorts

	Entry Level	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	34.4	52.1	13.5	0.0	100
Eccles	43.1	41.2	11.8	<5.0	100
Oldham	23.2	49.5	26.6	<1.0	100
Wythenshawe	21.4	41.1	36.6	<1.0	100
Alnwick	<20.0	<45.0	<45.0	0.0	100
Longbenton & Killingworth	<20.0	42.9	33.3	<10.0	100
Wallsend	37.7	45.9	14.8	<2.0	100
Total	26.6	47.0	25.1	<2.0	100

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System (combined data for 2013 to 2016 cohorts). N = 704.

To examine subject areas, we consider the whole group of 'lower attainers' together and again combine four cohorts (2013-2016) to make the sample sizes viable to report. Again, we look at those in educational routes only. Table 6.9 shows the main subject areas in which learners were enrolled in Year 12. As explained in Box 16, we have calculated the main subject area by considering the learner's largest qualification. Some learners, particularly those attempting A levels, will be taking several qualifications of the same size and so, as before, these are listed as studying 'Multiple subject areas'.

'Multiple subject areas' was the most common subject category for 'lower attaining' learners in Alnwick and Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall, suggesting that substantial proportions of learners in these areas were doing more than one AS/A level (implied in Table 6.6 and Table 6.7). This is quite surprising, in the case of Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall, since the opportunity sets analysis indicated that academic Level 3 options were not particularly accessible there. In every other area, the most common subject category was Health, public services and care. This aligns with what we saw in the opportunity sets where a large number of options in this subject category were accessible to 'lower attainers'. Another important finding is that sometimes as many as 11 per cent of learners were doing 'Preparation for Life and Work' courses in the localities we examine despite these not featuring prominently in our analysis of opportunity sets. This may be because such courses are not advertised in the same way as other vocational options and will run alongside other 'access to college' programmes.

Some of the differences between localities are particularly interesting. For example, higher percentages of learners in Longbenton & Killingworth and Wallsend were doing courses in 'Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies' than in any of the areas in GM. This may be explained by a large FE provider in Newcastle having a specialist technology campus close to both these areas.

For some areas, we can see a link between the local employment opportunities, courses offered and the subjects 'lower attaining' young people are enrolled on. For example, in Wythenshawe, around 12 per cent of 'lower attaining' learners were pursuing courses in 'Leisure, travel and tourism', which are no doubt offered as a route into employment in

nearby Manchester Airport. Similarly, in Eccles, which is near to MediaCityUK, around 14 per cent of 'lower attaining' learners were enrolled on courses in 'Arts, media and publishing'.

Table 6.9: Subject area of main qualification on November 1st of Year 12, for 'lower attainers' by case study area (%), 2013-16 cohorts

	Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	Eccles	Oldham	Wythenshawe	Alnwick	Long benton & Killingworth	Wallsend
Multiple subject areas	21.1	7.0	11.5	9.2	22.3	16.7	11.8
Health, Public Services and Care	16.6	17.8	20.6	17.2	20.7	21.6	22.0
Leisure, Travel and Tourism	6.8	11.5	8.0	12.2	<5.0	8.4	8.2
Engineering and Manufacturing	6.2	3.6	7.6	8.3	<10.0	15.1	15.4
Arts, Media and Publishing	7.4	13.6	7.4	10.2	<10.0	7.9	6.3
Preparation for Life and Work	10.9	9.6	7.8	8.9	<5.0	4.2	8.2
Construction, Planning & Built Environment	3.1	10.6	6.3	9.3	8.3	11.4	8.2
Retail and Commercial Enterprise	4.5	7.9	5.0	10.7	<10.0	5.3	6.0
Business, Administration and Law	9.8	3.4	8.7	3.6	0.0	<2.0	2.1
Information & Communication Technologies	5.7	6.1	3.5	3.6	<5.0	2.8	5.6
Learner doing E&M only	<2.0	<1.0	7.9	1.5	<10.0	3.0	2.4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System (combined data for 2013 to 2016 cohorts). N = 5,797. Note: Population restricted to learners in education only. Columns do not sum to 100 per cent as some smaller subject categories are omitted from the table.

These results show us that, in all areas, substantial proportions of the 'lower attaining' cohort go on to study at Level 3 with many 'lower attaining' young people entering A/AS level routes. The extent to which this happens in each area seems to be partially influenced by how accessible Level 3 provision is in each area. However, making it possible for 'lower attaining' young people to enter higher level courses does not guarantee they will finish these courses and attain qualifications at this level. In section 7, we consider the attainment differences between areas to see if having more accessible options leads to better outcomes.

As our opportunity sets analysis shows, young people face a bewildering landscape of opportunities when starting to explore their post-16 options. Although we included all options within a realistic travelling time of up to 60 or 90 minutes, it was clear from the

focus groups and individual interviews that many young people's 'horizon for action' was limited to those providers within easy reach of home. Most of the learners we spoke to were travelling between 10 and 30 minutes to attend their provision and spoke of distance and travelling time as a factor, even in situations where they themselves had considered or attended providers further away or felt that such providers would be accessible for people living in their area. They felt that given the choice of two options, it was much easier to choose the closest one.

However, young peoples' *perceptions* of 'nearness' mattered too. For instance, in Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall, young people had mainly considered the nearest FE provider and another FE provider closer to the centre of Manchester. There was another nearby provider of FE that they tended not to consider even though the opportunity sets analysis tells us that it did have some accessible options. One possible reason for this is that this provider was in another local authority and further towards the edge of Greater Manchester rather than being located towards the centre. Similarly, in Wallsend and Longbenton & Killingworth, young people considered a large FE provider in the centre of Newcastle as a viable option despite this being one with a long travelling time, relative to other options. This is evidence of the 'centrifugal quality' that Watson and Church (2009) found in their study of post-16 travel to learn patterns in London.

There was also evidence from Alnwick, the most rural focus group, that young people were typically not basing decisions about provision solely on travelling times by public transport and fully expected to have to get a lift to provision outside the immediate Alnwick area such as options in Ashington or Berwick. For those who did have to rely on public transport, this caused issues with accessing apprenticeships particularly since the start time of apprenticeships more closely mirrored jobs and there were no feasible public transport options to enable young people to get there sufficiently early in the morning. Our opportunity sets placed provision in Ashington as equally 'far' as that in Newcastle because the travelling times were similar on public transport. The reality, however, was that learners considered Ashington or Berwick as more feasible to get to and Newcastle less feasible, since Ashington/Berwick could be reached more easily by car and are the closest nearby towns. They also had inbuilt expectations that considerable travel to their provider might be necessary – perhaps since travelling to access services is a more normal feature of rural life. As a result, some learners in Alnwick considered or had attended provision as far away as Newcastle meaning they had potentially quite extensive 'spatial horizons' (White and Green, 2015). This level of travelling proved unsustainable for one learner only when there were other problems with her course, and it was then that she changed provider to something more local.

Our focus in the previous section has been on individual courses and apprenticeships, but we found evidence in our qualitative work that young people often consider the type of provider they might attend first, rather than type of course, when thinking about what they want to do next. One young person in Wythenshawe explained how sixth form was "the first thing that came into [his] head" since he was attending a school with a sixth form at the time. Crucially, this sixth form had a mix of academic and vocational options and going there would not have meant changing provider. Other young people mentioned how they discounted school sixth form as they didn't think they would be able to get in. The opportunity set analysis did allow us to see that some school sixth forms operate with set of

entry requirements for the whole sixth form and then have additional requirements for specific courses, whereas others simply list the requirements separately for each course. This may make a difference to how accessible they are perceived to be by young people.

Young people in the interviews and focus groups displayed a range of awareness of options with most being able to name key providers in their area. However, they sometimes showed less knowledge about the courses on offer or the entry requirements. This may have been a feature of how they had explored post-16 options locally – whether they had a subject area in mind already (and so had looked across institutions for a suitable opportunity) or whether they needed assistance in selecting an area of study as well. We saw evidence of both kinds of approaches from young people.

Several participants commented on the practicalities, and cost, of transport as being an important consideration in their choice of provider, as these extracts show:

> Facilitator: So is that the sort of thing that might put you off? If it's too far to go to.
>
> Participant: Uh-huh, aye. Cos when I came here, Sharon said you can do building in Ashington or you can do it here. But I was like, I'm not going all the way to Ashington to do something I can do closer.
>
> Facilitator :   Okay. But were there other things that were also important [in your decision]?
>
> Zain: It's closer.
>
> Facilitator: It's closer, yeah. So the distance...
>
> Zain: And that's about it, to be honest.

In some cases, they suggested that transport issues could be a barrier to accessing education training or employment further afield:

> Participant: Cos I'm sure there'll be plenty [of apprenticeships] in Newcastle, but I can't get up to Newcastle every day. Especially if, cos, normally in construction if you're working on a site you'll start early in the morning. I don't know if the bus would even get there that early in the morning.
>
> Facilitator: So that's, really, you'd have to know you could get there. You'd have to know somebody who'd be able to take you.
>
> Participant: Yeah, yeah.
>
> Facilitator: And that's a bit of a barrier?
>
> Participant: Aye.
>
> Sinead: Like, travelling as well. Like if I was to go to like Ashington I'd have to get up at half six every morning, to get a bus.
>
> Facilitator: Right.
>
> Sinead: So it's just, like, a bit too far.

Participants at some providers received a bursary intended to help them with transport costs. Sometimes additional bursary money was added to cover the costs of lunches. Most of the young people in receipt of such bursaries were very positive about them:

Facilitator 2:	Just another thing I was interested in was the transport. For one or two of the people you said they can get a tram. Is that affordable?
Daisy:	Yeah, college gives you a bursary every week. So, like, us we all get a £10 bursary every week.
Minnie:	If you're in all your lessons. […]
Bob:	You get an increase in your bursary as well. Depending on how far out you live from…
Minnie:	Yeah, so if you live, like, really far away you might get like, £20.
Sandra:	You get a bursary fund here. So if you do over 16 hours you get £20.
Facilitator:	Okay, right, a bursary. Who provides that?
Sinead:	The council. Northumberland Council.
Facilitator:	Okay. Do you get that?
Sandra:	So it like helps you with the travel and… food and stuff.

However, sometimes young people received less flexible support with travel leading to longer travel times. Some participants mentioned free college buses but noted that these took a set route which meant their journey time was longer than on a public bus. One student, Alice, mentioned that at the college she'd attended previously she received a free travel pass, but this was only valid on a particular bus franchise and the operator that ran the bus route closest to her house wasn't covered.

Alice:	We just got a free travel pass. And then free meals.
Facilitator:	A free travel pass. Is that for the buses?
Alice:	Just for Stagecoach. So I had to walk 20 minutes to get my bus in the morning. And obviously walk 20 minutes back home, once I got off my bus. And there's like a Go North East [bus operator] right outside my house, but they'd just given us a Stagecoach one instead.
Facilitator 1:	Right, so you couldn't use it on the bus that you would have preferred?
Alice:	Uh-huh.

Some participants explained that their bursary payments were not always regular or did not cover the amount needed for travel and that free bus options were not suitable for where they lived. What kind of support young people received and how it was administered partly depended on which type of provision they were in and also partly on which local authority they lived in and the subsequent local policy on post-16 travel.

These insights from our qualitative data can be combined with the opportunity sets analysis to give some insight into the ways in which the structures of the local education markets, young peoples' perceptions of nearness and support for travelling can all combine to make post-16 choice different in different areas. In the next section, we explore the post-16 attainment of 'lower attaining' young people nationally before exploring the influence of some of these local factors on their progress and achievement in the post-16 phase.

7. Progression and attainment in the post-16 phase

7.1.   Overview

We have seen so far that 'lower attainers' are a diverse group of young people with diverse prior attainment (section 4) who access different types of opportunities in their post-16 phase (section 5) often depending on where they live (section 6). Such different trajectories are perhaps inevitable in England where the post-16 pathways are less rigidly stratified than in some other countries and where the structures of local provision have evolved differently over time from different starting points. In this section, we consider the extent to which this matters for young people's outcomes by tracking the achievement of 'lower attainers' in the post-16 phase. We focus on the achievement of qualifications at different levels between age 16 and age 18/19, recognising that for some young people, and 'lower attainers' in particular, the post-16 phase can take three years.

To assess attainment between these ages, we calculated the percentage of learners who, during the 16-18 phase, achieved at least one qualification at Level 1 or above, at least one qualification at Level 2 and above, and at least one qualification at Level 3 or above.[21] For attainment at 19, we measured what percentage of learners achieved these qualifications over three years of post-16 study. We explored whether the highest level achieved by different types of 'lower attainer' varied by the level they started on after Key Stage 4 (KS4), the type of provision they entered or their attainment profile. We then explored the extent to which these differences vary across different regions and for the case-study localities. As with previous sections, we concentrated on the 2015 cohort as they can be followed throughout the post-16 phase, unless otherwise stated.

Our analysis mainly focuses on learners who engaged in some kind of post-16 education or training. This means that those young people who left education or training after KS4 and for this reason do not have any recorded post-16 attainment, are not included, but we show at key points how the picture changes if these young people are included in the figures. We drew information on learners and their qualifications from the National Pupil Database (NPD) and/or the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) depending on what types of qualifications were being attempted. Where learners appeared in both the NPD and the ILR, we used the ILR as the primary source of information about post-16 achievements. Results using the NPD on its own can be found in Appendix E.

7.2.   Tracking attainment in the post-16 phase

Figure 7.1 shows that the vast majority of both 'lower attainers' and non-lower attainers in England achieved at least one Level 1 qualification (or higher) during the first two years of the post-16 phase, although the percentage of 'lower attainers' achieving this was somewhat

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[21] We acknowledge here that the level of qualification obtained is only one measure of success and that many other outcomes could be considered a sign of achievement in the post-16 context. For example, for those learners who are primarily engaged in a work experience/work placement element, success could reasonably be measured by their performance in that context rather than a level of learning. However, since the vast majority of learners will be participating in a level-based activity for a significant portion (if not all) of their study programme, looking at achievement by level gives a good sense of how well the system is serving the whole cohort.

lower than of those who achieved grade C in English and maths in school (86 per cent versus 96 per cent).

The difference between 'lower attainers' and non-lower attainers is more marked with respect to achievement of Level 2 qualifications. More than 94 per cent of those who achieved grade A*-C in English and maths at KS4 achieved a Level 2 qualification between age 16 and 18, but for 'lower attainers' the percentage was only 71 per cent. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when it comes to achievement of Level 3 qualifications, the contrast between 'lower attainers' and non-lower attainers is even more evident. Whereas 89 per cent of young people who met the English and maths benchmark at KS4 achieved a Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18, for 'lower attaining' learners this figure was only 34 per cent. We saw in section 5 how relatively few 'lower attainers' start the post-16 phase on Level 3 courses and it is clear that this affects their level of attainment by age 18.

When we consider attainment after an additional year, by age 19 (the dotted lines in Figure 7.1) we see a notable increase in the proportion of 'lower attainers' who obtained a Level 3 qualification, from 34 per cent to 41 per cent, reflecting the fact that it takes some of them longer to achieve a qualification at Level 3; particularly if they start the post-16 phase on a lower initial level of learning. However, 'lower attainers' are still a long way behind higher GCSE attainers by age 19. In this cohort around 15 per cent had not achieved an entry level qualification; around 25 per cent had not achieved a Level 2 qualification; and around two thirds had not achieved a Level 3 qualification. These findings point to the need for continuing investment in learning in the post-19 (adult) phase.

Despite GCSE 'lower attainers' generally having lower formal achievements than their peers, it is important to note that many of them do achieve meaningful qualifications in the post-16 phase, with 86 per cent achieving a qualification at Level 1 or higher, 75 per cent achieving a Level 2 qualification or higher, and 41 per cent achieving a Level 3 qualification by age 19.

Figure 7.1: Percentage of 'lower attainers' and non-lower attainers who achieved at least one Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18/19, 2015 cohort
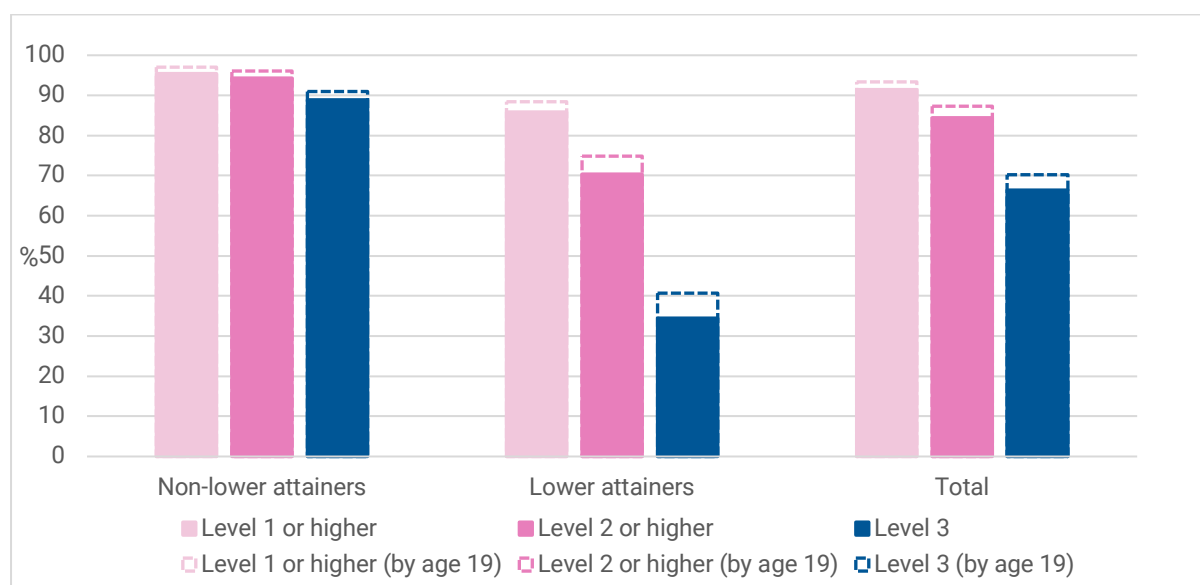
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 552,575.

Mirroring findings in previous sections, there is a substantial amount of heterogeneity across 'lower attainers' with different KS4 attainment profiles when it comes to post-16 attainment, as shown in Figure 7.2. Focusing initially on the first seven attainment categories, we can see that more than three-quarters of learners in the first two categories achieved a Level 3 qualification during the 16-18 phase, but for learners in the remaining categories this percentage steadily falls. Among young people in the 'Some A*-C with neither' category (the largest attainment category among 'lower attainers'), only 22 per cent achieved a Level 3 qualification during two years of post-16 education or training. Differences in the percentages achieving Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications are less stark. Again, we see that many learners, especially among the 'lower attaining' groups, make up ground between 18 and 19.

Figure 7.2: Percentage of 'lower attainers' in different attainment categories who achieved at least one Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18/19, 2015 cohort
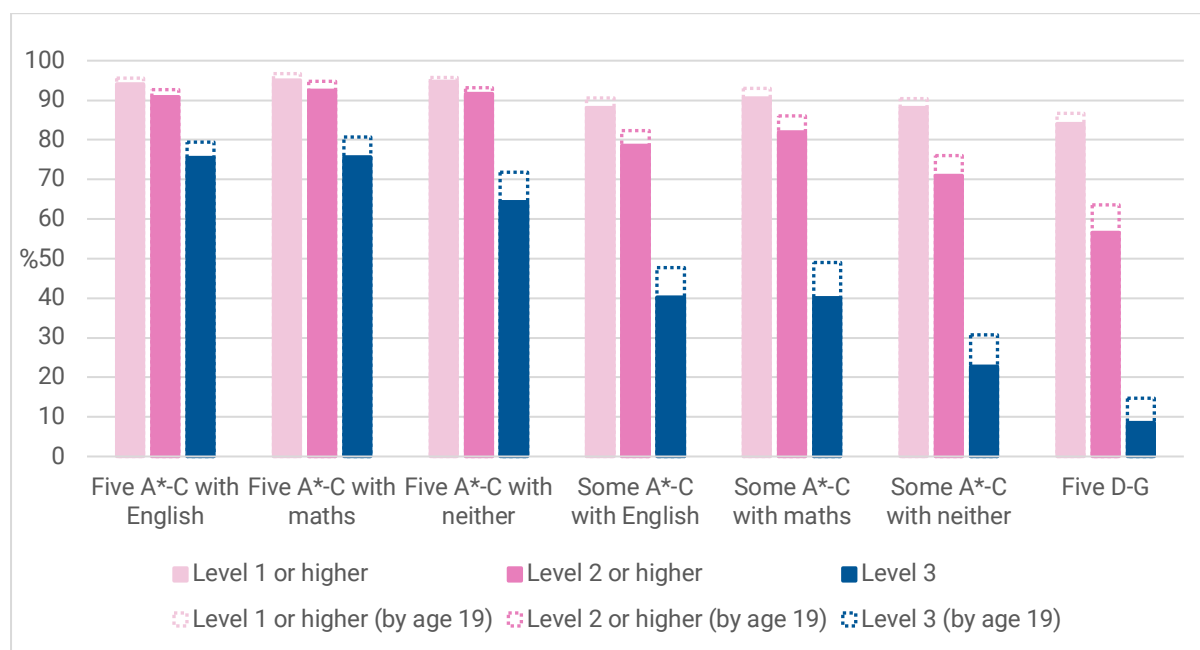
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 197,149.

For learners in the last two attainment categories, the percentage attaining Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications is substantially lower. Figure 7.3 indicates that just under 70 per cent of young people in the 'Some D-G' category achieved a Level 1 qualification by age 18, meaning that more than 30 per cent did not. By age 19, this had increased to 74 per cent, still leaving more than a quarter of young people without a Level 1 qualification. Among young people who obtained no GCSE or equivalent passes in school, just over attained a Level 1 qualification during the first two years of the post-16 phase. By age 19, this proportion had increased to just under three-in-five.

Importantly, more than a quarter of learners in the last two attainment categories appeared to have spent only one year in education and/or training before disappearing from the data.

A smaller percentage (around 5 per cent of the 'Some D-G' group and 12 per cent of the 'No D-G' group) were missing from the data for 16/17 year-olds but re-entered the following year.

As noted at the start of this section, some young people did not engage in any officially recognised post-16 learning. These were disproportionately represented in the bottom two attainment categories (17 per cent for those in the 'Some D-G' category and 36 per cent for those in the 'No D-G' category). When we take these young people into account, the percentages attaining qualifications at different levels was even lower: for example, only 58 per cent of those in the 'Some D-G' category, and 34 per cent of those in the 'No D-G' category, achieved a Level 1 qualification by age 18 when we consider all learners who completed KS4. Figure 7.3 however shows that, even among those who engage in post-16 education or training, those in the bottom two attainment categories often did not manage to achieve a Level 1 qualification. Of those in the two attainment categories combined, just under a third did not achieve a Level 1 qualification by 19.

Figure 7.3: Percentage of 'lower attainers' in two last attainment categories who achieved at least one Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18/19, 2015 cohort
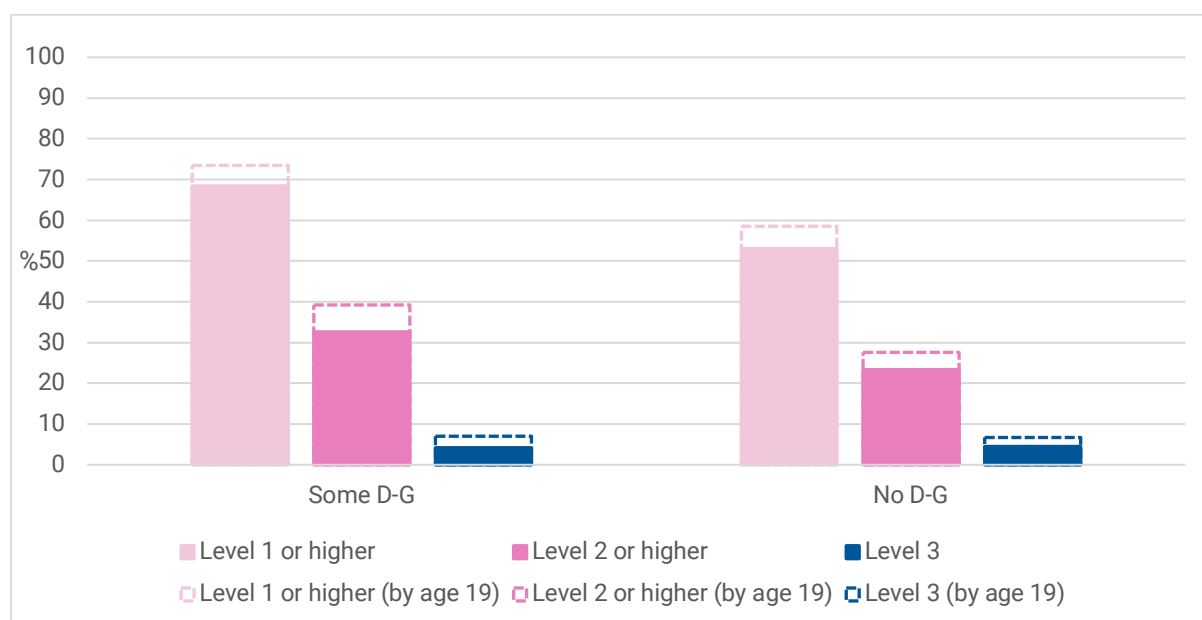
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 31,387.

7.3.   Differences in post-16 attainment by level of learning entered in Year 12

We have seen in section 5 that 'lower attainers' start at a range of levels of learning after GCSEs. Figure 7.4 shows that these starting levels strongly influence attainment in the post-16 phase. Just under half of the young people who start at Level 1 achieve a Level 2 qualification by age 18, compared with around four fifths of those who started at Level 2. For Level 3 qualifications (which typically take two years to complete), these differences are even more pronounced.

A very similar picture emerges even when we look only at young people with very similar KS4 attainment. Figure 7.5 shows the same analysis for the 'Some A*-C with neither' category, who have similar attainment going into the post-16 phase and might be expected to make a similar amount of progress.

Figure 7.4: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by main level of learning entered in Year 12, for 'lower attainers' in the 2015 cohort (%)
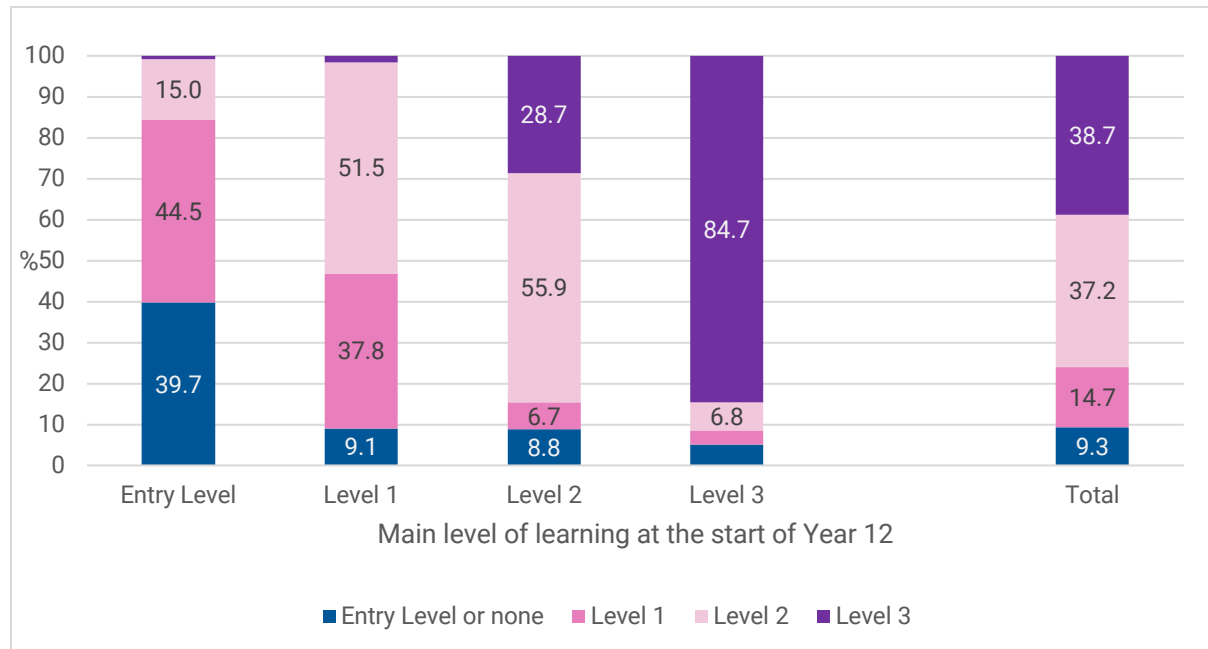
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 199,835.

Figure 7.5: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by main level of learning entered in Year 12, for young people from the 2015 cohort in the 'Some A*-C with neither' category (%)
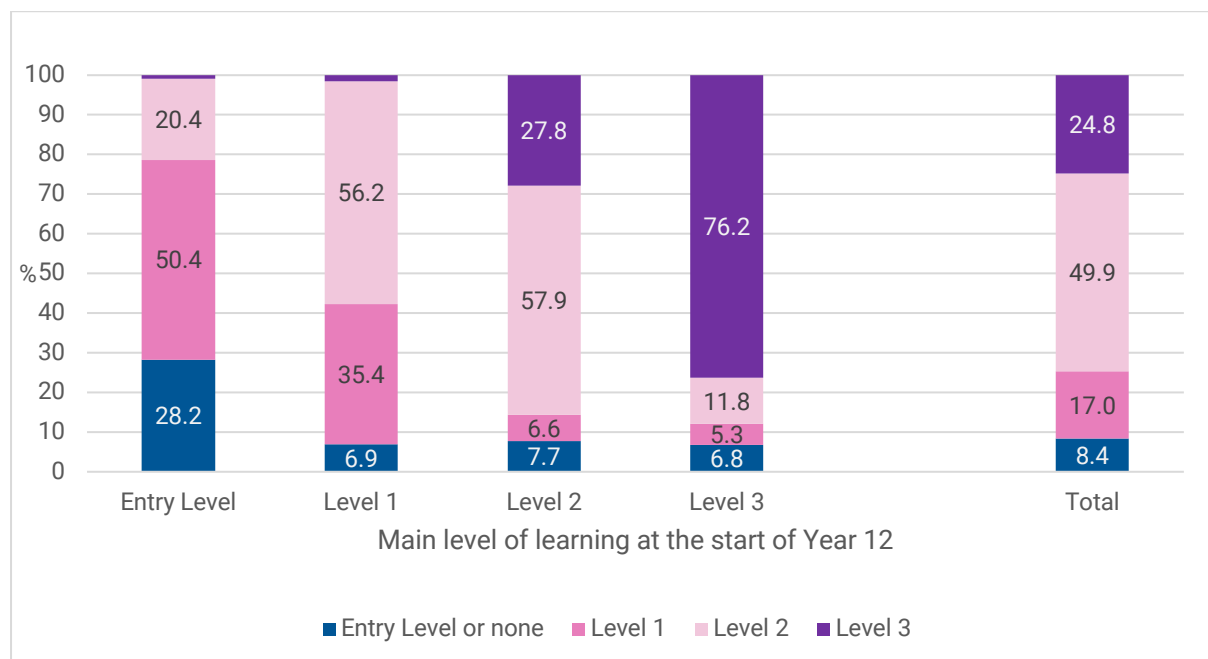
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 58,147.

Table 7.1 takes this further, showing the results of a regression analysis of achievement of Level 2 and 3 qualifications between age 16 and 18 in which we added stronger controls for GCSE attainment. Instead of comparing young people in the same broad attainment category, this analysis controlled for young people's overall GCSE attainment via a GCSE point score, in addition to whether or not they had achieved full Level 2 and whether they had achieved a grade C or above in English or maths. For the achievement of Level 2 qualifications, all 'lower attainers' who had achieved full Level 1 at KS4 are included in the analysis, and for the achievement of Level 3 qualifications we include everyone who had achieved full Level 2 at KS4. Even here, when we are comparing young people with very similar GCSE attainment, we can see that learners who start their post-16 phase at Level 2 are much less likely to achieve a Level 3 qualification by 18 than young people who start on Level 3 qualifications.

Table 7.1: Estimated probability of achieving a Level 2 or 3 qualification between age 16 and 18, by main level of learning on entry to post-16, controlling for overall KS4 point score, achievement of full Level 2 during KS4, and achievement of English or maths during KS4 (versus neither), 2015 cohort

Main level of learning on entry	Obtaining a Level 2 qualification		Obtaining Level 3 qualification	
	Estimated probability	Standard Error	Estimated likelihood	Standard Error
Entry Level	0.39	0.008		
Level 1	0.67	0.003	0.06	0.006
Level 2	0.87	0.001	0.41	0.005
Level 3	0.88	0.002	0.89	0.002

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 174,420. Reported probabilities are the average estimated probabilities over the entire population included in the model, with 0.39 being the average predicted probability of achieving a Level 2 qualification if everyone in the data were treated as if they started on Entry Level in Year 12, 0.67 being the average predicted probability if everyone were treated as if they started on Level 1 on entry, and so on.

Figure 7.6 and Table 7.2 continue the story through to age 19. They show that for all 'lower attainers' an additional ten per cent or so of those who started on Level 2 courses had achieved a Level 3 qualification by 19 (compared with by 18), and even a small proportion of learners who started on Level 1 courses had achieved a qualification at Level 3. This clearly shows that more study time *can* enable progression for *some* learners. However, although more learners managed to achieve a Level 3 qualification when given three years, the majority of young people starting at Level 2 at 16 did not do so. Again, regression analysis shows that the probability of achieving a Level 3 qualification is much lower if starting at Level 2 than Level 3 even when we consider learners starting off with very similar attainment. This suggests that there might be difficulties in progression from Level 2 courses to Level 3 even within a three-year post-16 timespan, and that decisions about starting levels make a big difference.

Figure 7.6: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 19, by main level of learning entered in Year 12, for 'lower attainers' in 2015 cohort (%)
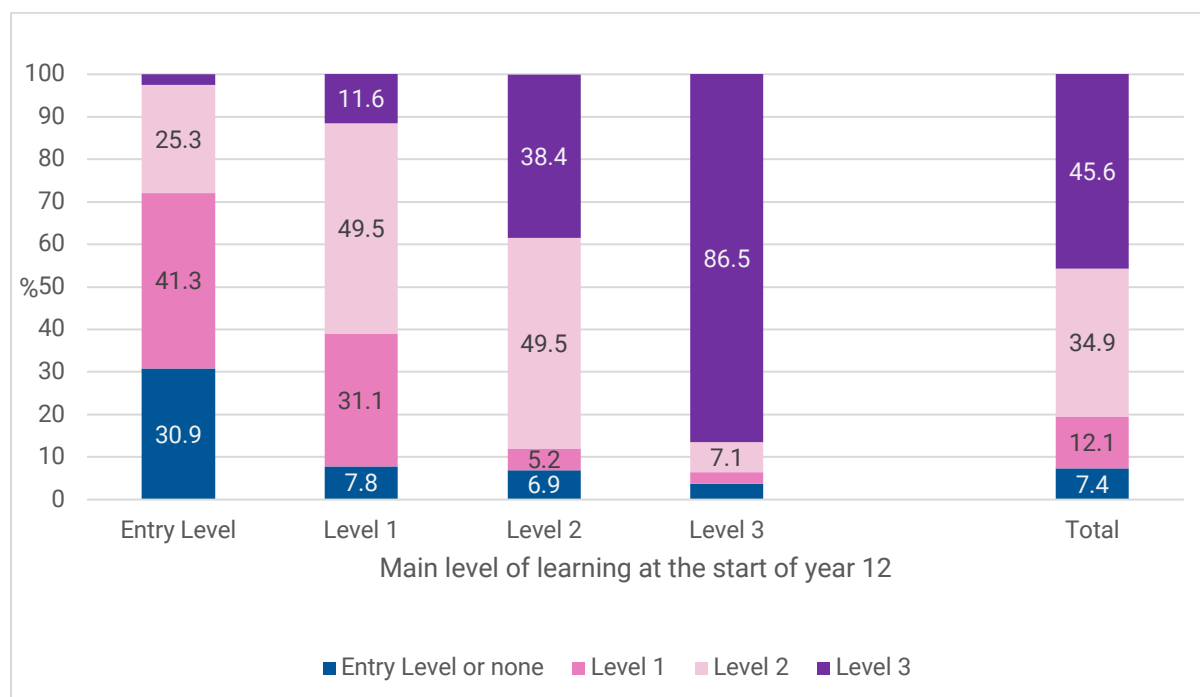
Table 7.2: Estimated probability of achieving a Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 19, by main level of learning on entry to post-16 phase, controlling for overall GCSE point score and achievement of English or maths (versus neither), 2015 cohort

Main level of learning on entry	Estimated likelihood	Standard Error
Level 1	0.32	0.011
Level 2	0.54	0.005
Level 3	0.91	0.002

Further analysis is necessary to explore the issues about progression that are raised here. Clearly some learners *are* able to progress from a Level 2 start to achieve a Level 3 qualification by 19, but many more do not, which could point to barriers to progression. In addition, while most learners who start at Level 1 do not achieve a Level 3 qualification by 19, some of these learners *are* able to achieve Level 3 qualifications over a three-year post-16 phase which suggests better than average progression. Subject choices and, to some degree the characteristics of learners, are likely to be part of the reason why young people are often not 'catching up' by 19 with their peers who start on higher levels of learning. In certain vocational areas, a Level 3 qualification might not be seen as a necessary next step if a Level 2 qualification is generally held to provide sufficient knowledge and skill to gain entry

to the labour market. We found evidence of this in the qualitative fieldwork where some learners said they felt their study programmes were delaying them from getting jobs. If young people are able to find work in their area of interest with a Level 2 (or even a Level 1) qualification, the fact that they do not have a Level 3 qualification is of course not necessarily a problem, particularly if they are given the opportunity to progress to a higher level (and hence gain access to better pay and promotion prospects) during the early years of their working lives.

Although not achieving a Level 3 qualification is not a sign of 'failure', the findings presented here clearly demonstrate that the level of learning entered at the start of the post-16 phase has a big impact on educational outcomes. One implication of this is that the degree of local access to provision at particular levels is likely to be important in shaping post-16 outcomes at the local level.

7.4.   Changes in attainment over time

Analysis of change over time shows a slight decrease in higher-level attainment in the post-16 phase since 2013, although a slight increase in lower-level attainment.

Figure 7.7 shows that, of the cohort of learners completing compulsory schooling in 2013, 67.4 per cent achieved a Level 3 qualification, whereas of the cohort completing KS4 in 2016, the figure dropped to 64.8 per cent. There was, however, an increase in the percentage of learners achieving Entry Level or Level 1 qualifications only within the first year of the post-16 phase.

These findings are largely mirrored for 'lower attainers' (Figure 7.8), although the fall in achievement of Level 3 qualifications is a little less pronounced. Additionally, the drop in post-16 attainment among 'lower attainers' appears to have emerged in the 2015 cohort onwards, with the pattern up to the 2015 cohort being on the whole fairly stable. These findings provide evidence to question how far the policy reforms introduced since 2014, including the requirement to retake English and maths during the 16-18 phase, have led to improvements in overall post-16 attainment for young people.

Figure 7.7: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by cohort, includes all learners (%)
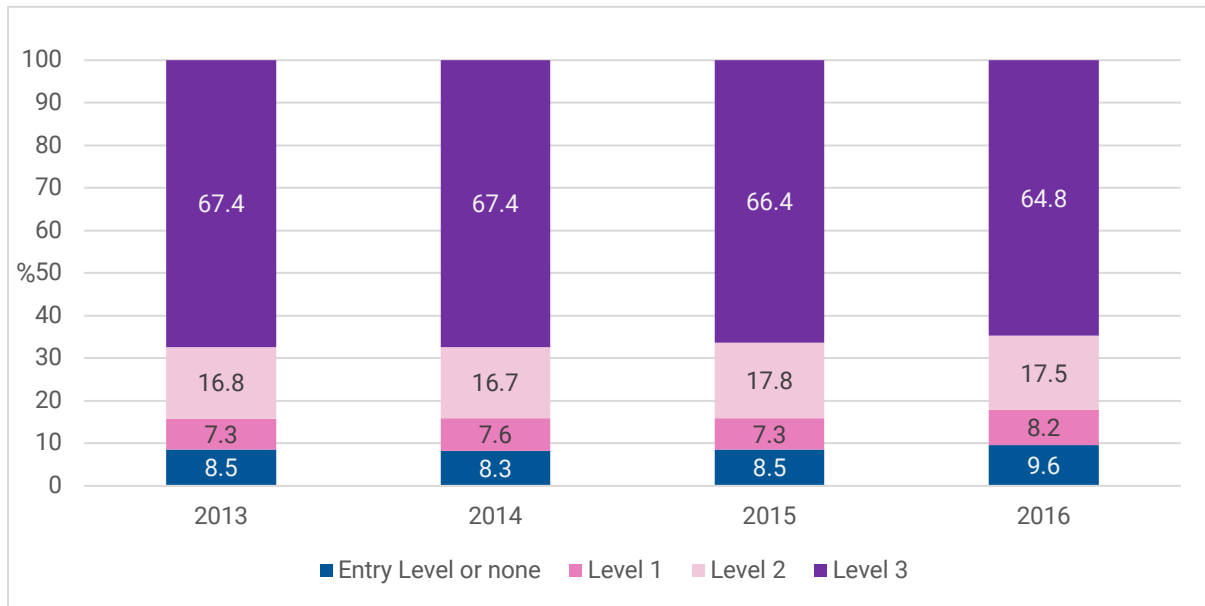
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 2,207,629.

Figure 7.8: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by cohort, includes all 'lower attainers' (%)
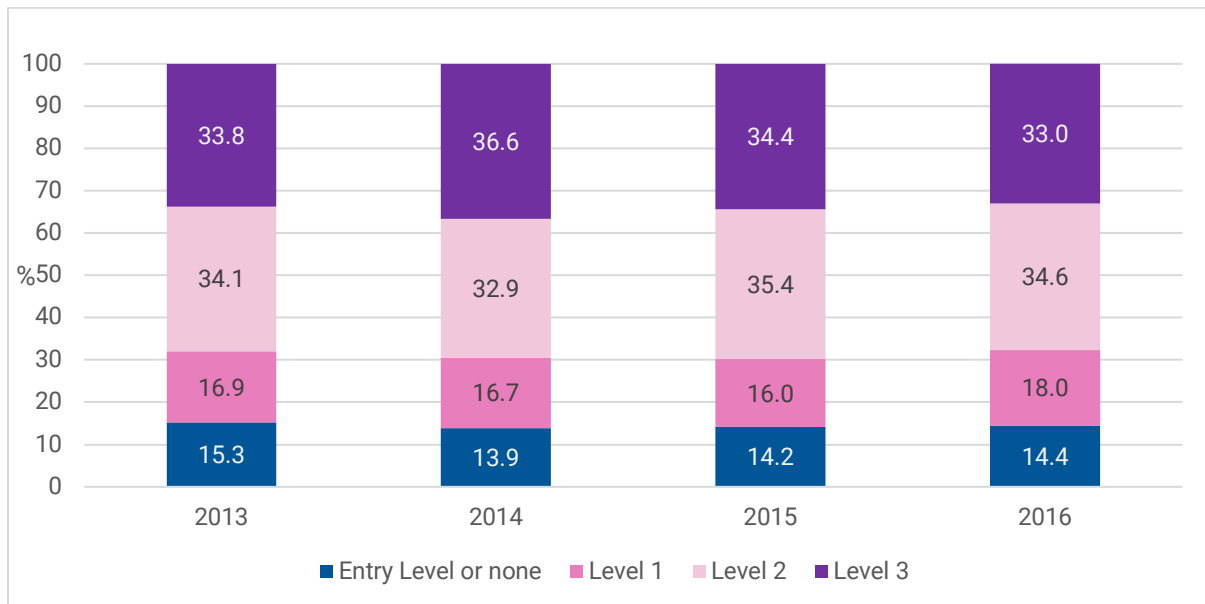
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 897,808.

7.5. Differences by provider type

We have already seen that young people participate in different types of provision during the post-16 phase, which raises questions about what impact this might have on their attainment. In order to explore this issue, we took each of the main types of educational provider and looked at what proportion of learners enrolled at these providers achieved a Level 3 qualification by 18. To allocate a learner to a provider type, we identified which provider they were enrolled at in November of their first year in the post-16 phase, and only included learners who remained within the same provider type over the course of the next two years.[22] To ensure we were considering learners with similar KS4 attainment, we examined learners belonging to the same attainment category, focusing on the first three categories since these are the most likely to attain a Level 3 qualification during the post-16 phase.[23]

Figure 7.9 shows that the proportion of learners within each attainment category who obtained a Level 3 qualification was substantially higher in sixth form colleges and school sixth forms than in general FE colleges and other education providers. For attainment at 19 (dotted lines), the gap between provider types narrowed somewhat, but remained fairly substantial. For instance, among learners in the 'Five A*-C with English' category, the percentages achieving Level 3 qualifications by 19 were 82 per cent in FE colleges, 79 per cent in 'other' education providers, 94 per cent in sixth form colleges and 96 per cent in school sixth forms. A very similar pattern can be found with achievement of Level 2 qualifications.

Figure 7.9: Percentage of 'lower attainers' who achieved a Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18/19, by attainment category and provider type attended, 2015 cohort
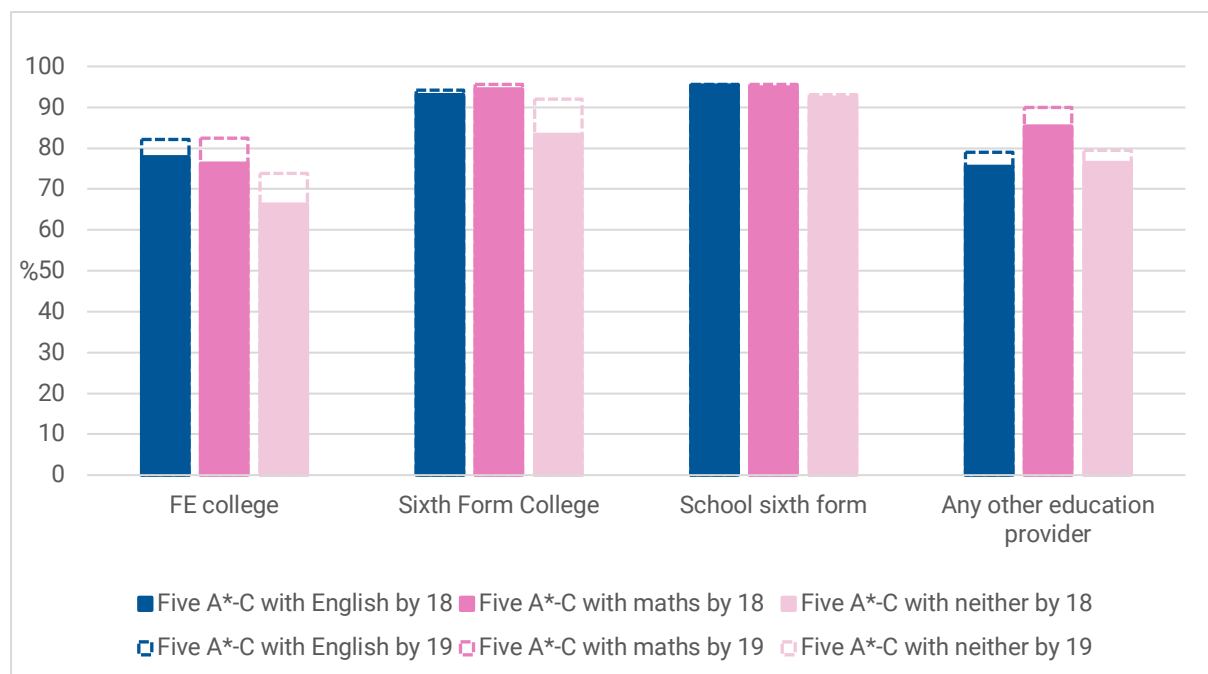
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 37,161.

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[22] The majority (75.1 per cent) of 'lower attainers' remain in one provider type during the duration of their 16-18 phase.
[23] Though when we look at learners in other attainment categories the findings are very similar.

However, these disparities appear to be less a reflection of differences in the quality of provision than differences in the level of learning that people start on at the beginning of the post-16 phase. As we saw in section 5, in FE colleges young people are less likely to start on higher-level courses compared to young people with similar attainment attending sixth form colleges or school sixth forms. This is because it is often necessary to begin a vocational programme or an apprenticeship at Level 2 rather than Level 3. And, as we have seen earlier in this section, the level of learning at which young people start has a big impact on the qualification level they are able to achieve by the end of the post-16 phase. When we consider only those learners on Level 3 as their main level of learning on entry, the percentages of young people achieving a Level 3 qualification are much more similar across provision types (Figure 7.10). Similarly, when we look at young people in the 'Some A*-C' categories who started at Level 2 (not shown), almost all of them achieved a Level 2 qualification or higher, regardless of the type of provision they attended. This suggests that the type of post-16 provision attended does have an important impact on achievements at 18 and 19, but that this mainly stems from the fact that learners in different providers tend to start at different levels of learning.

Figure 7.10: Percentage of 'lower attainers' on Level 3 on entry who achieved a Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18, by attainment category and provider type attended, 2015 cohort
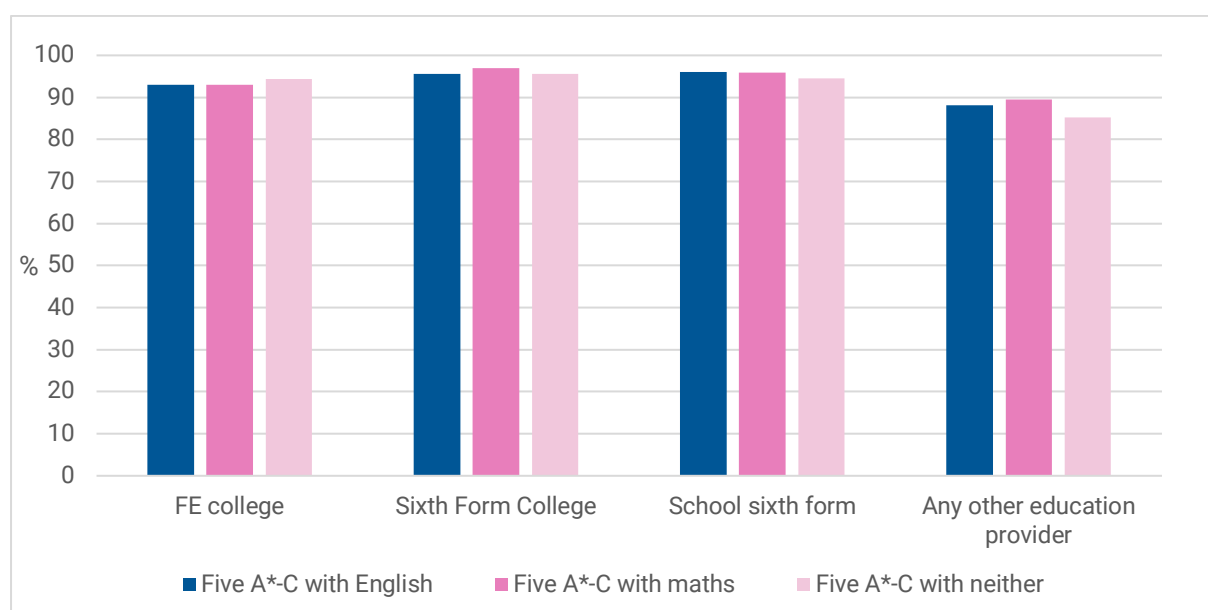
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 47,771 (Level 2) and 30,208 (Level 3).

7.6.   Spatial differences at the region and city region level

Table 7.3 and Table 7.4 explore the extent of spatial variation in post-16 attainment. London is the region with the highest percentages of 'lower attaining' learners achieving a Level 3 qualification by 18 (44 per cent), with most other regions having much lower percentages (around 30-35 per cent). This largely mirrors spatial differences in attainment in the wider cohort (not shown). These differences do not disappear when we consider attainment by 19. If anything, the contrast between London and other regions widens slightly (results included in Appendix F).

Table 7.3: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by region, 'lower attainers' in the 2015 cohort (%)

	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
London	13.0	13.2	30.2	43.6	100
West Midlands	13.2	16.6	35.1	35.1	100
South East	13.7	14.3	37.1	34.9	100
East of England	13.9	14.9	36.4	34.8	100
North East	12.2	17.7	35.7	34.4	100
North West	14.4	15.9	36.0	33.7	100
Yorkshire and The Humber	13.9	18.1	35.0	33.1	100
South West	13.3	15.4	38.6	32.7	100
East Midlands	14.6	17.2	37.7	30.6	100
Total	13.7	15.7	35.6	35.1	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 217,851. Number of learners does not add up to that of England as a whole as for some young people a region could not be determined.

Our city region analysis shows variation at this spatial scale (Table 7.4). For example, Greater Manchester has a higher percentage of 'lower attainers' who are at Entry level or below or Level 1 by 18 and a lower percentage of 'lower attainers' reaching Level 2 compared to Liverpool City Region, even though both areas have similar percentages of 'lower attainers' reaching Level 3 by this stage. This reminds us that a focus on Level 3 outcomes alone can obscure important differences.

Table 7.4: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by 'lower attainers' in the 2015 cohort for selected cities and city regions (%)

	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
London	13.0	13.2	30.2	43.6	100
Birmingham City Region	12.9	16.7	33.5	36.9	100
Liverpool City Region	12.7	15.0	37.6	34.7	100
Greater Manchester	15.6	16.5	33.6	34.3	100
Newcastle City Region	12.0	17.6	36.3	34.1	100
West Yorkshire	13.6	18.8	34.7	32.9	100
Bristol City Region	15.8	17.9	36.7	29.6	100
Sheffield City Region	16.1	21.4	34.2	28.4	100
Nottingham City Region	17.1	20.0	36.5	26.5	100
Total	13.8	16.3	33.5	36.4	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 94,784. City region could not be determined for a small number of young people.

To reduce differences driven by variations in attainment within the 'lower attaining' group, Table 7.5 shows only young people within the largest category of 'lower attainers' – the 'Some A*-C with neither' category. This shows that even when considering young people

who started the post-16 phase with similar attainment, there are large differences between city regions in terms of the proportion of learners achieving a Level 3 qualification by 18. The proportion of learners reaching the end of their first year in the post-16 phase without having achieved a Level 1 qualification also shows substantial spatial variation.

Table 7.5: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by city region, young people in the 2015 cohort belonging to the 'Some A*-C with neither' category (%)

	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
London	11.0	15.8	43.6	29.6	100
Birmingham City Region	11.3	19.5	45.7	23.6	100
Liverpool City Region	12.1	17.9	47.7	22.3	100
West Yorkshire City Region	11.5	19.2	47.8	21.5	100
Newcastle City Region	9.6	21.0	48.4	21.1	100
Greater Manchester	14.5	19.0	45.6	20.9	100
Bristol City Region	13.9	22.3	46.1	17.7	100
Sheffield City Region	15.6	24.9	44.1	15.5	100
Nottingham City Region	16.1	25.3	46.3	12.3	100
Total	12.2	19.0	45.6	23.2	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 28,805. City region could not be determined for a small number of young people.

The fact that large differences in attainment remain even when considering young people with similar GCSE attainment suggests that the structure of provision may play a role in influencing post-16 attainment. To examine this in more detail, we introduced more stringent controls for GCSE attainment and conducted regression analysis of the probability of achieving a Level 3 qualification by age 18 across our selected areas. At the same time, we controlled for learners' GCSE point score, whether they achieved 'full Level 2' and whether they achieved a grade C or above in English, maths or neither.[24] We included all learners in this analysis to maximize the number of observations we could draw on, given we were looking at a selected number of areas.

Figure 7.11 shows that the probability of achieving a Level 3 qualification by age 18 without controlling for GCSE attainment (purple line) shows substantial city region variation with London having a much higher proportion of learners achieving Level 3 qualifications. Controlling for GCSE attainment, however, differences were much less pronounced (pink line). Disparities between areas did remain, however, suggesting that spatial variations in post-16 attainment are not all driven by differences in GCSE attainment and that the local structure of provision also plays a role. Indeed, we found evidence for this when we controlled for the type of provision attended as the city region disparities in achievement of Level 3 qualifications reduced further (blue line). Without accounting for differences in the type of provision attended, but controlling for GCSE attainment, the estimated probability of

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[24] Further analysis could usefully extend this by adding additional controls for learner characteristics such as gender, disadvantage, SEN, and so on, since these are likely to also play a role in determining post-16 progress. Here, however, the focus is on the extent to which geographic differences in post-16 attainment can be explained by KS4 attainment versus differences in the type of provider attended.

achieving a Level 3 qualification in London is 75 per cent, and for Sheffield City Region, 67 per cent. When we take into account differences in the type of post-16 provision, however, the gap reduces to just 4 percentage points (73 per cent versus 69 per cent).

This suggests that spatial differences in post-16 attainment are, to an important degree, explained by differences in the structure of provision. Introducing further controls for the level of learning at entry leads to a further reduction in spatial differences (grey line). Importantly, however, the magnitude of this reduction is relatively small suggesting that much of the contrast in attainment that is explained by differences in levels of learning have already been accounted for by adding controls for provision type. This makes sense since, as we have seen, the type of provider attended correlates quite strongly with the level of learning entered at the start of the post-16 phase.

Overall, the results from this analysis suggest that spatial differences between the types of post-16 providers in the local market, through their influence on the level of learning that young people tend to start on, have an important impact on post-16 attainment.

Figure 7.11: Estimated probability of achieving a Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18, for learners in different city regions, controlling for attainment and provision type, 2015 cohort
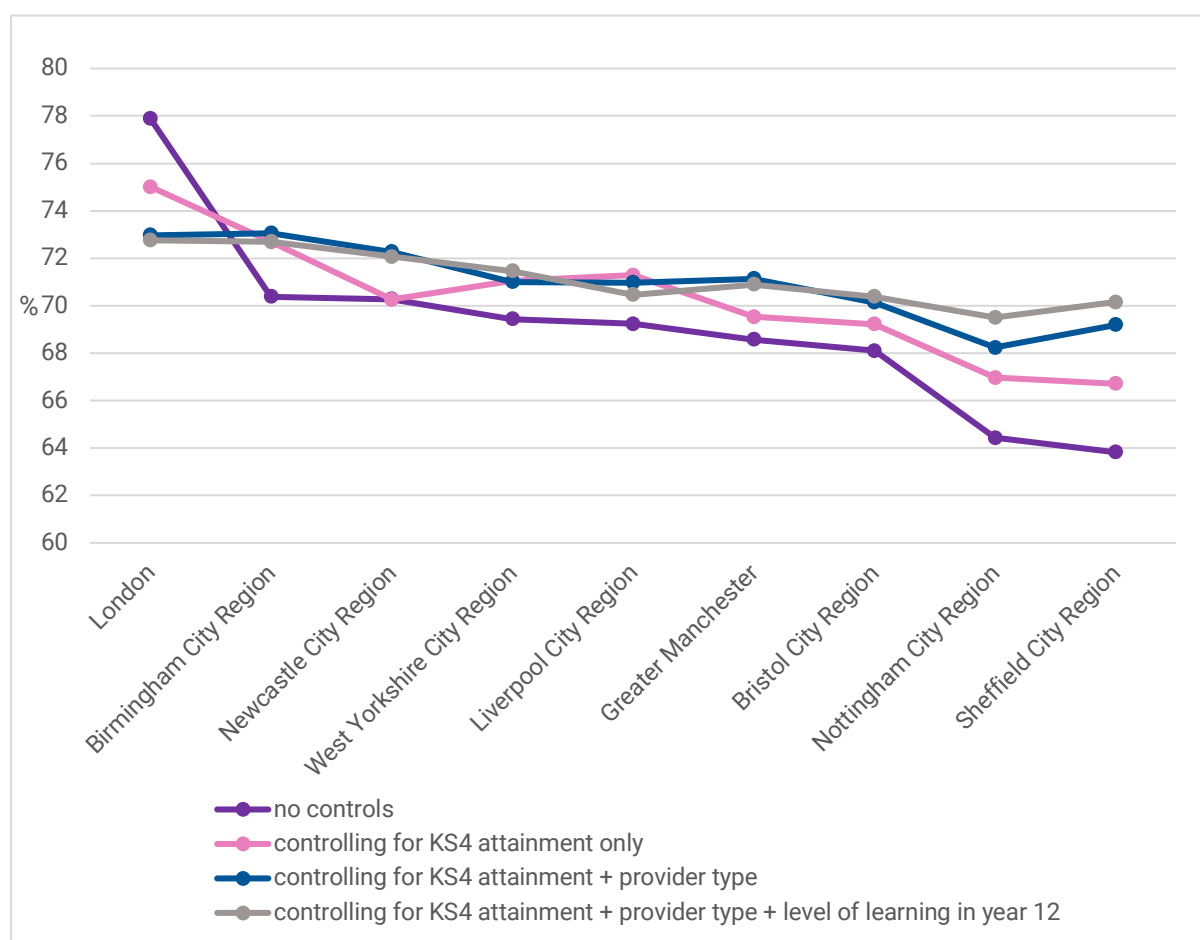
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. Measure used is the NPD-precedence measure. N = 213,326. R² for 'no control' model is 0.0093, R² for 'KS4 attainment controls only' model is 0.4137, R² for 'KS4 attainment + provider type controls' model is 0.4678, R² for 'KS4 attainment, provider type and level of learning controls' model is 0.5615. Note that y-axis does not start at zero, making differences between city regions appear larger.

7.7.   Attainment in the case study localities

Finally, we consider attainment across our seven localities. As in previous sections of the report, we pooled data for four cohorts (2013 to 2016) to increase the number of learners we are able to observe. For this reason, this analysis focuses on attainment between age 16 and 18 as data for between age 16 and 19 was not available for the 2016 cohort.

Figure 7.12 shows differences in levels of attainment by level for all learners. In all the localities, the majority of learners had qualifications at Level 3 by 18, but the percentages of learners with Level 3 in each area did vary. In Wythenshawe, for example, around 51 per cent of learners reached this level, whereas in Alnwick, around 72 per cent did. The percentages of learners reaching other levels also varied.

Figure 7.13 shows attainment for 'lower attainers' specifically. Similar differences between localities are evident. However, when we compare each area's percentages against the national averages in Figure 7.12, we see that the attainment of the 'lower attaining' group is different to what we might expect. For example, in Longbenton & Killingworth, the percentage of all learners reaching Level 3 by 18 is in line with the national average, but the percentage of 'lower attainers' reaching Level 3 is around 5 percentage points higher. Earlier, in section 6, we saw that Longbenton & Killingworth had a large number of Level 3 opportunities accessible to 'lower attainers' which may enable more learners in the 'lower attaining' group to complete a Level 3 qualification by 18.

Figure 7.12: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by case study locality, by all learners in 2013 to 2016 cohorts (%)
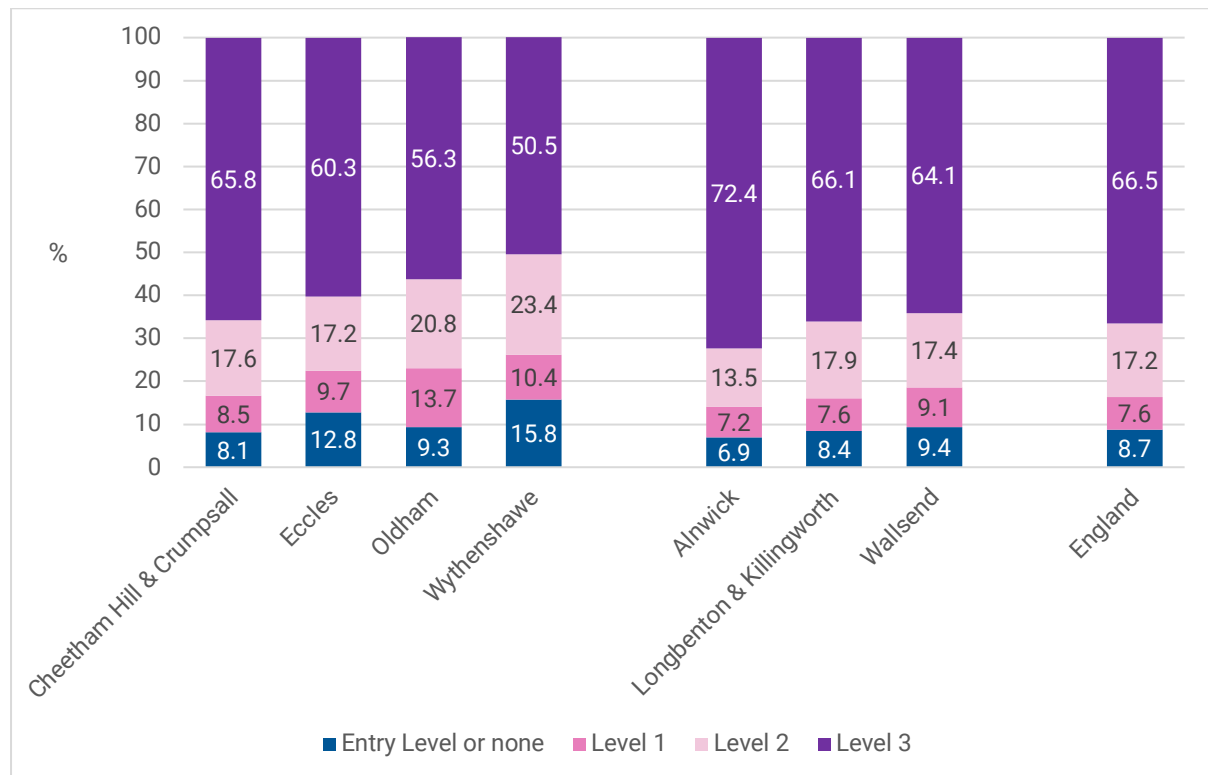
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record.

Figure 7.13: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by case study locality, by 'lower attainers' in 2013 to 2016 cohorts (%)

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record.

To examine this further, we considered post-16 attainment depending on the main level of learning at the start of Year 12. We started with learners on Level 3 programmes on entry because, as we showed in section 6, there are notable differences in the accessibility of this level of provision by area.

As shown in Figure 7.14, 'lower attainers' starting their post-16 phase at Level 3 are generally very likely to be successful in obtaining a Level 3 qualification by 18. However, we can see there are differences across localities. Wythenshawe stands out as having a relatively low percentage of learners achieving a Level 3 qualification by 18, even for those who started at Level 3. When considering 'lower attainers' who started at Level 3 only, Longbenton & Killingworth is roughly in line with the England average, suggesting that the earlier differences in attainment are probably explained to a large extent by more young people in this locality entering Level 3 compared to other localities.

Figure 7.14: Percentage of 'lower attaining' learners who started on Level 3 programmes in Year 12 that achieve Level 3 between age 16 and 18, by case study locality, 2013 to 2016 cohorts
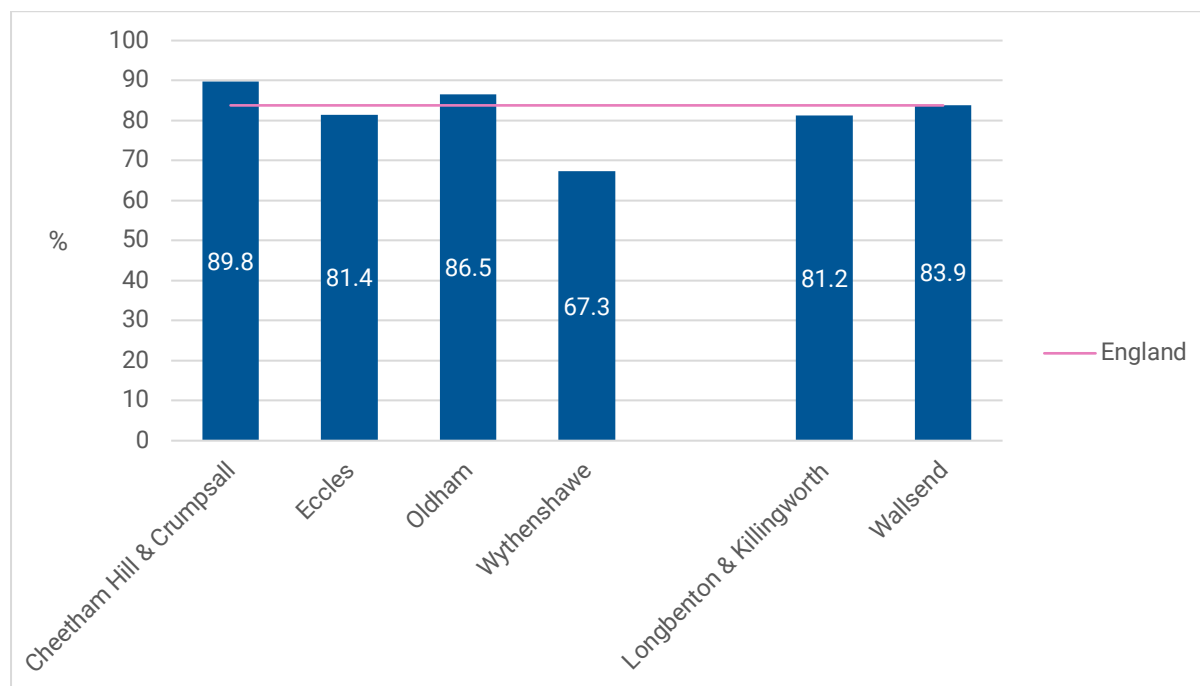
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N (local case study areas) = 2,436. N (England) = 312,850. Alnwick not included due to too few observations to allow meaningful and non-disclosive analysis.

Figure 7.15 shows the percentage of learners with 'Five A*-C' on entry who achieved a Level 3 qualification by 18 after starting on a Level 3 pathway. These learners are the most well-equipped to tackle Level 3 learning having already reached 'full Level 2' before they start. Figure 7.15 shows that even when considering learners within the same broad GCSE attainment category who start Level 3 pathways on entry, the percentages achieving a Level 3 qualification by age 18 varies between areas.

Similarly, there are differences by locality when we examine those 'lower attaining' learners who start at Level 2. For example, Figure 7.16 shows that, whilst around 40 per cent of 'lower attaining' learners who start on Level 2 obtain a Level 3 qualification by 18 in Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall, only around 25 per cent do in Wythenshawe. This may be down to a combination of factors including differences in specific GCSE attainment, characteristics of learners, or due to the nature of the learning pathways and subject areas pursued. More research should be done to explore why progression to a successful Level 3 outcome is more likely in some areas than others to determine whether there are structural issues that are impeding progression to Level 3.

Figure 7.15: Percentage of 'lower attainers' in the 'Five A*-C' categories who started on a Level 3 programme in Year 12 who achieved a Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18, by case study locality, 2013 to 2016 cohorts

Source: National Pupil Database & Individualised Learner Record. N (local case study areas) = 1,084. N (England) = 161,465. Alnwick not included due to too few observations to allow meaningful and non-disclosive analysis.

Figure 7.16 Highest level of qualification achieved between 16 and 18 for 'lower attainers' on Level 2 programmes in Year 12, by case study locality, 2013 to 2016 cohorts (%)
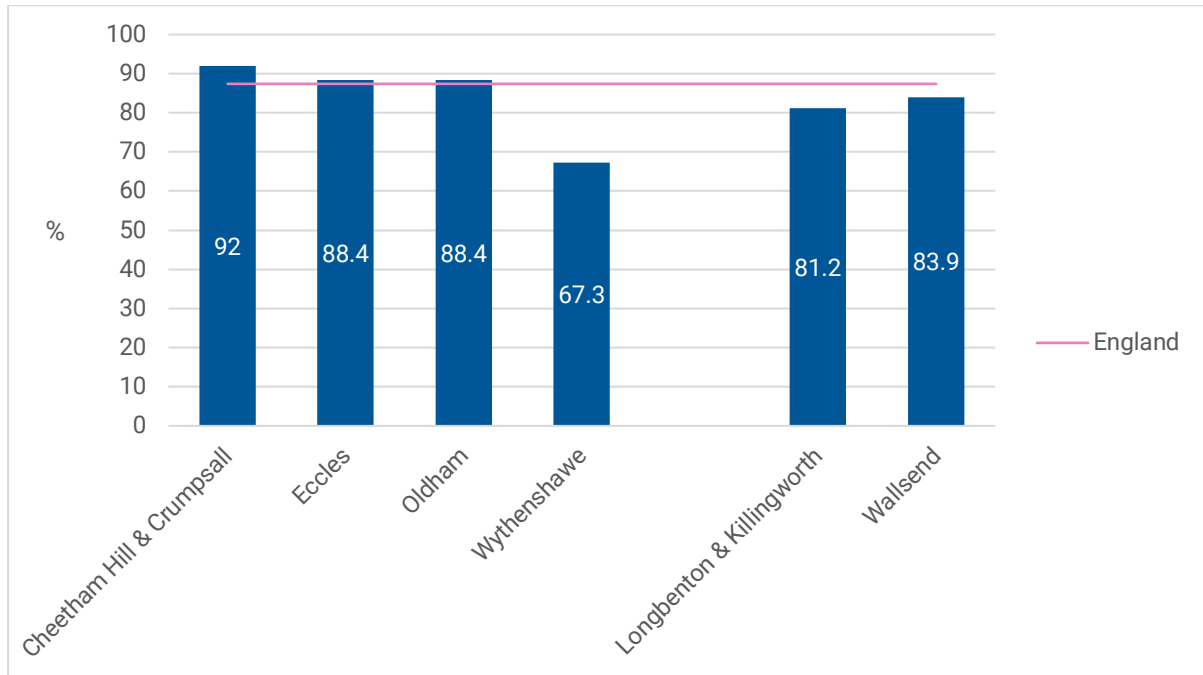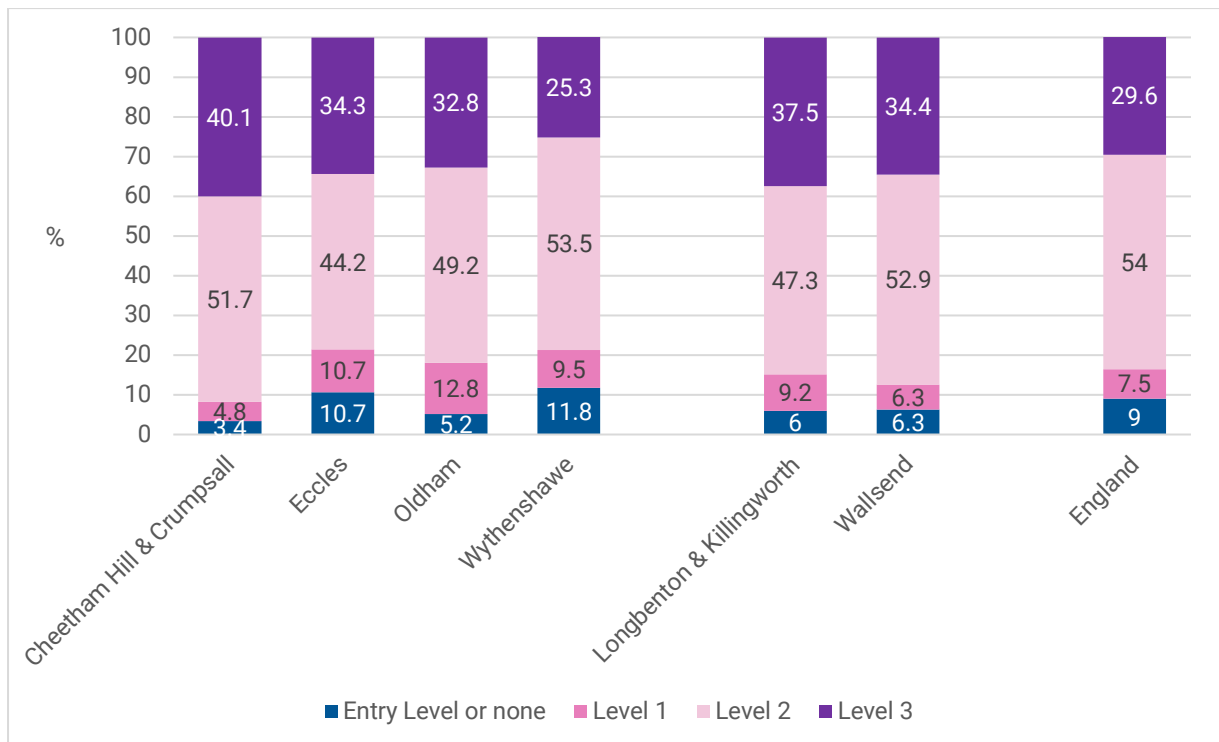

Source: National Pupil Database & Individualised Learner Record. N (local case study areas) = 1,563. N (England) = 247,714. Alnwick not included due to too few observations to allow meaningful and non-disclosive analysis.

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In summary, our analysis shows that many 'lower attainers' do continue to achieve in their post-16 phase and many of them are able to obtain qualifications at Level 3 by either 18 or 19. The period between 18 and 19 seems to allow some 'lower attaining' learners to 'catch up' and achieve qualifications that they would not have completed by 18. However, the achievements of the 'lower attaining' group overall still lag behind those who achieved grade C in English and maths by 16. We have seen that the propensity for 'lower attainers' to be enrolled on lower level courses in their post-16 phase is an important factor in explaining their attainment by 18 and 19. A particular group for concern is the large proportion of those in the two lowest attainment categories who do not achieve any qualifications at Level 1 or higher between age 16 and 18/19. Many of this group do not make a successful transition to post-16 learning and end up NEET. But even among those who are engaging with education and training for at least some of their post-16 phase, there seems to be little progress made towards higher-level qualifications, with almost a third not having achieved a Level 1 qualification three years after starting post-16 learning and only a minority achieving Level 2 qualifications or higher.

We also found that there are spatial differences in post-16 attainment, even when we consider learners who enter the post-16 phase with similar KS4 attainment. The analysis suggests that the local structure of post-16 provision plays a role in explaining these differences. The mix between different types of post-16 providers within a region or city region has implications for the levels of learning that young people tend to start on when they enter the post-16 phase, which in turn has implications for the qualification levels that they are likely to achieve by 18 or 19.

In addition, when comparing smaller localities within the same city region, there appear to be differences in attainment even for young people starting on the same level of learning. This could point to differences in the achievement rates of qualifications between providers. However, although research suggests that there are provider-level differences in 'value added' in terms of educational achievements (Aucejo, Hupkau & Ruiz-Valenzuela, 2020), these differences appear to be fairly small. This suggests that other factors such as the characteristics and circumstances of learners, their chosen subject area, whether or not they work in part-time jobs alongside their study or training, or their progress in English and maths, are likely to be important in driving these differences. Further investigation of post-16 progression and achievement at the local level could help to identify what the most important factors are in helping young people to make progress during the post-16 phase.

8. Summary of key findings and implications for policy

8.1.　Key findings

8.1.1. 'Lower attainers' are not failures

It is a mistake to think of young people who do not achieve grade 4 or above (formerly A*-C) in English and maths by the end of Key Stage 4 (KS4) as failures – learners who have not achieved 'the basics' or who are leaving school with nothing. As our analysis of the 2015 cohort shows, over two-fifths (43 per cent) of the 'lower attaining' group achieved a C or above in <u>either</u> English or maths, and 21 per cent had five A*-C grades or equivalents. These young people typically had an average of eight GCSE passes, only one fewer than the average for non-lower attainers. Even those who gained neither English or maths at A*-C *and* had fewer than five higher grade passes tended to have at least five GCSE passes (at any grade). On average 'lower attainers' were also entered for two vocational qualifications.

However, 'lower attainers' often feel like failures, partly because the strong emphasis on English and maths throughout their school careers has positioned them as such. They tend to under-recognise their other achievements and feel less confident about their futures. They often complain that they have been overlooked or underserved in getting access to career advice, guidance and support.

8.1.2. Post-16 decisions for 'lower attainers' are complex and made in a pressurised environment

'Lower attainers' experience more complex and difficult post-16 transitions than their higher achieving peers who move relatively smoothly to A Levels, Level 3 vocational courses and some apprenticeships. For 'lower attainers', there are additional barriers and blockages in place both before and after they sit their GCSE examinations.

a.　The school curriculum in Years 10 and 11 offers minimal opportunity to study vocational subjects which could provide a platform to progress to Level 2 courses or an Intermediate Apprenticeship after GCSEs.

b.　Critical decisions about careers and vocational courses have to be made at age 15/16 in the context of a 'pressure cooker' year when schools' main focus is on GCSE examinations and achievement in English and maths. In contrast, young people who progress from GCSEs straight to A Levels can delay these critical decisions until the age of 18 and often take a 'gap year' before entering higher education.

c.　Whereas more than half of non-lower attainers go to school sixth forms, fewer than a fifth of 'lower attainers' do so. This means that they are much more likely to move institution. Finding a new post-16 provider is not as straightforward as progressing to a school's sixth form. 'Lower attainers' face an array of post-16 options, from different providers and in different subjects and occupational areas, and with different entry requirements. Finding a suitable post-16 pathway often takes time and considerable effort involving teachers, family members, and provider and local authority personnel.

d. Many post-16 options are unavailable due to GCSE maths and English entry requirements, even when these may not correspond with course requirements or, in the case of apprenticeships, with employer requirements.

Some young people change courses (and/or institutions) during the autumn term after the GCSE results are announced, and 'lower attainers' are much more at risk of not being in employment, education or training (NEET) after GCSEs – 7.1 per cent versus 0.8 per cent of non-lower attainers – or have an 'unknown' destination.

8.1.3. Apprenticeship options remain very limited

Apprenticeship is not the accessible pathway for 'lower attainers' that many would assume it to be as vacancies for 16-18 year-olds as a whole remain scarce. Although apprenticeship is a more common destination for 'lower attainers' (5 per cent) than non-'lower attainers' (3 per cent), vacancies are often poorly advertised and hard to find. This means apprenticeship may not form part of young people's aspirations and planning for their post-16 options. Young people are very aware of the difficulties in accessing apprenticeships without personal contacts with employers through family or friends. Around 30 per cent of Level 2 and 54 per cent of Level 3 apprenticeship vacancies we reviewed specified a minimum of grade C/4 English <u>and</u> maths as the main entry requirement, making them inaccessible to any lower attainer. For this reason, some 'lower attainers' start on Level 1 courses before starting an apprenticeship, although achievement of the course aims may not be required for entry to an apprenticeship.

8.1.4. 'Lower attainers' can make a lot of progress post-16 but significant proportions do not

Many 'lower attainers' continue to achieve in their post-16 phase. Overall, 71 per cent achieve a Level 2 qualification (or higher) between age 16 and 18, and 34 per cent achieve a Level 3 qualification (or higher). By 19, these figures rise further to 75 per cent and 41 per cent. An important point, not widely understood or acknowledged, is that some 'lower attainers' are taking three years or more in the post-16 phase.

However, even by age 19, 'lower attainers' are still a long way behind higher GCSE attainers. By this age, around 12 per cent had not achieved a Level 1 qualification. Around 25 per cent had not achieved a Level 2 qualification and around two fifths had not achieved a Level 3 qualification.

These findings point to the need for continued investment in learning in the post-19 (adult) phase. But they also point to the need to improve progression for some 'lower attainers' between 16 and 19.

8.1.5. Starting at the right point is a key issue influencing progression

Overall a quarter of 'lower attainers' start their post-16 phase at Level 1 or below, considerably more than would be expected given levels of achievement at the end of KS4. Dropping back a 'Level' may be appropriate when starting a completely new area of study such as a vocational course, or to give breathing space or allow concentration on GCSE resits. But it will not be the best option for all young people and does constrain the progress that can be made by 19. Learners who start their post-16 phase at Level 2 are much less

likely to achieve a Level 3 qualification by 18, and even by age 19, than young people who start on Level 3 qualifications.

Provider type is a factor influencing the levels at which people start. Even within same categories of attainment, 'lower attainers' who transition to FE colleges are more likely to start courses at Entry Level, Level 1 and 2 in contrast to their peers who enrol in school sixth forms or sixth form colleges and are more likely to start at Level 3. This probably has to do at least in part with the fact that learners in FE colleges more often do vocational courses. These differences in starting points largely explain differences between provider types in the achievement of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications.

8.1.6. Place matters: local variations affect what young people can achieve

Post-16 structures and practices vary substantially across the country, such that opportunities differ even between localities within the same local authority areas. There are differences in structures of provision and in what is offered. For example, in some areas school sixth forms and sixth form colleges have an exclusively academic offer. In others they offer substantial vocational options.

Differences in entry requirements can also lead to differential access to options in different places, particularly with regard to Level 3, and therefore to the possibility that those in different areas with similar attainment may follow different post-16 routes largely because of entry requirement practices in their area.

Some variation is to be expected, as systems balance the needs of individual learners (including for portable qualifications to give access to wider opportunities) with current and future local labour market demands. However, our findings clearly show that these differences are affecting what people with similar attainment are able to achieve in different areas of the country. This suggests that the market for post-16 learning is working better in some places than others.

Other local factors are important in influencing destinations and progression. These include actual travel times by public transport (such that well linked city centre provision was often perceived as more accessible than nearer opportunities), bus fares, discounts and other financial support with travel. There is a particular need to better understand patterns in rural areas and their distinct needs.

8.1.7. Disadvantaged young people are over-represented and some young people with multiple needs are doing very badly in the education system

GCSE lower attainment is not exclusively associated with disadvantage. There are 'lower attainers' across the socio-economic spectrum and in all parts of the country. However young people from poorer backgrounds as well as those with special educational needs are overrepresented among 'lower attainers'. Twenty-one per cent of 'lower attainers' are Eligible for free school meals (FSM) compared with 8 per cent of non-lower attainers, and 31 per cent of 'lower attainers' have special educational needs (SEN) compared with 6 per cent of non-lower attainers. Disadvantaged young people also have less advantageous post-16 transitions, even when comparing people with similar KS4 attainment. For example, young people eligible for FSM are less likely to be in apprenticeships and more likely to be NEET/unknown.

Whilst we have shown that most 'lower attainers' have considerable achievements by the end of KS4, there is a group of young people (around 20,000 or 1 in 29 of the whole cohort in 2015) who complete their secondary schooling without having achieved any passes at GCSE or equivalent, as well as a similar sized group who have some GCSEs at lower grades, but without achieving at least five passes (i.e. 'full Level 1') – traditionally, a marker of a broad general education. Young people with FSM or SEN are in the majority in these groups, and there are substantial minorities whose SEN status is not recorded, suggesting perhaps that they are recent arrivals or have had disrupted schooling careers. While we cannot establish the detail from the data available in the NPD/ILR, it is likely that many of these young people have faced/are facing immense challenges outside school.

Post-16 outcomes are particularly poor for these lowest attaining groups. Many are NEET for periods of their post-16 phase but, even among those who are engaging with education and training, there seems to be little progress made towards higher-level qualifications in their post-16 phase. A third do not achieve a Level 1 qualification by 19.

Without characterising all 'lower attainers' as having very low attainment and complex needs, it is essential that the system can identify and effectively support young people who do not fit its standard categories and pathways and need a great deal more time and support in moving from school to further learning and work.

8.1.8. Policy-making lacks a robust evidence base

This study is the first to focus in detail on young people who do not reach GCSE benchmarks. In doing so, it has revealed large differences in attainment profiles (rather than defining 'lower attainers' by what they have not achieved) and illuminated differences in post-16 pathways and outcomes and how and why these vary locally. The findings show the importance of going beyond particular 'at risk' sub-groups (particularly NEET young people) who can be readily identified in the data, and of examining pathways and progression rather than just the levels of attainment achieved at particular stages.

Yet none of these important issues are routinely analysed by the DfE or in local areas. The datasets themselves are complex and do not easily enable tracking across school and post-16 phases. Although there have been improvements in this in recent years, because not all young people are captured in the NPD during the post-16 phase, the NPD and ILR have to be combined in order to produce a full picture. NPD and ILR data (in combination) are not routinely supplied to local or combined authorities. Data are not routinely aggregated to combined authority level. These analytical problems are a real barrier to policy development at both local and national levels. They exacerbate the disconnect between local reality and national conceptions about how the 'system' does and should work, leaving policy-makers without the 'joined-up' evidence base they need to improve progression for 'lower attaining' young people. Inadequate information about two-fifths of every cohort is itself a system failure that is damaging to individuals, the economy and society more generally.

8.2. Implications for policy

Our findings challenge the assumption that it is purely lack of attainment in English and maths that is holding back 'lower attainers', rather than a lack of co-ordinated and accessible

opportunities to develop and progress. A number of implications for policy and practice at both national and local levels arise.

8.2.1. Focus on post-16 progression for all learners

Provided the GCSE continues to exist as the key external national examination at the end of compulsory schooling, the key issue is to ensure that there is an emphasis on progression for all learners. If the government is serious about reducing inequalities, increasing social mobility, and utilising all available skills and talents, the focus at age 16 must not be on using GCSE grades in English and maths to block progression. Instead, the focus should be on supporting young people to progress into pathways that will build on their actual achievements to enable them to pursue their education, training and employment goals.

This is even more pressing in the current context, as these young people are likely to be most vulnerable to both the educational and economic effects of the COVID pandemic. Their experiences should be seen as a litmus test for how well the English system prepares young people to transition and progress from compulsory schooling.

We argue, therefore, that a major policy shift is required to create a meaningful Upper Secondary Education and Training Phase funded for three years from 16-19. This would overcome the inadequacy of the Raising of the Participation Age legislation and allow adequate time for young people to prepare properly for the education and labour market trajectories they decide to pursue. It would also reduce the current compression of decision-making about post-GCSE pathways within the 'pressure cooker' of Year 11. Above all, it would bring together the two unbalanced and incoherent post-16 academic and vocational sub-systems.

The nature of young people's participation across the three-year period would vary with some individuals needing the whole period and some less. It would offer individuals the chance to study for GCSEs in subjects they were interested in, for vocational 'taster' sessions, and time for work experience and volunteering. The T Level Transition Programme could be adapted and broadened to enable more young people to experience and prepare for technical education and training pathways including apprenticeships. Our research has shown that many 'lower attainers' find themselves in a quasi-transition year after GCSEs, but because it is not formally recognised as such, providers are constrained by course-related regulations and funding rules and young people can feel they have gone backwards.

Incorporating apprenticeship within a three-year Upper Secondary Education and Training Phase would also provide young apprentices with a much stronger platform for progression, as is the case in countries with stronger apprenticeship systems. Categorising 16-19 apprenticeships within the social security system in the same way as other educational courses would help to remove barriers to participation from young people from low-income families in receipt of benefits or tax credits.

Young people with the lowest attainment, who often have additional needs, would enter post-16 with a funded support plan.

8.2.2. Adjustments to the pre-16 phase

Facilitating progression for all learners will require adjustments to be made to pre-16 accountability measures. These should focus less heavily on English and maths GCSE in order to recognise a wider range of achievements.

English and maths should continue to be key elements in a broad and balanced curriculum which emphasises increasing competence and confidence through integrated cross-curricular teaching rather than focussing narrowly on these subjects to the exclusion of others.

Young people who are not predicted to reach a C/4 grade in English and maths should not have their opportunities excessively narrowed by their prospects in these subjects. Consideration should be given to extending vocational provision in KS4 where this builds clear pathways to Level 2 courses post-16.

All attainment should be recognised by making it clear to pupils, parents, employers and the general public that a pass grade in GCSE is a G/1, not a C/4 or C/B 5.

8.2.3. Improvements to the collecting and reporting of data

The DfE should publish more detailed and more accessible statistics on 'sub-benchmark' GCSEs and equivalent attainment. It should, for example, not restrict its reporting in the main statistical reports to particular benchmark grades in English and maths, but instead offer more detailed reports on learners who achieve different grades in English and maths and on attainment in combinations of subjects. It should distinguish between those categories of young people with specific educational needs and those without who have general low attainment.

The DfE should also routinely produce data on the achievement of a range of standard outcomes in the post-16 phase, including more detail on attainment at Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2, drawing these from the various post-16 datasets.

For both KS4 and post-16 data, the DfE should routinely report on these statistics disaggregated at relevant spatial levels, to enable national and local decision-makers as well as the professionals responsible for organising and running the system to understand the achievements, needs and trajectories of the diverse and substantial group of 'lower attainers'.

8.2.4. Strengthen local coordination

The problems we have described in this report cannot entirely be solved by qualifications and curriculum reform or changes to funding rules at the national level. They also demand the capacity to monitor, shape and support transitions from school to further learning and work at the local level, enabling progression, meeting labour market needs, and avoiding people falling through the cracks opened up by provider decisions in competitive markets.

A key challenge will be striking the optimum balance between, on the one hand, ensuring that 'lower attainers' have access to pathways and qualifications that adhere to national standards whilst, on the other hand, enabling the degree of flexibility required to create sustainable provision at local level. Hence, in order to build and implement this new Upper Secondary Education and Training Phase, the relationship between national and local

stakeholders needs to be strengthened with the role of the latter being enhanced. This does not mean devolving all powers and funding. In the case of apprenticeships, for example, employers and their associated training providers operate at both local and national levels and cross local boundaries. The funding of school sixth forms would also need to be considered given it currently sits within a centralised school funding system.

As steps towards building a more cohesive, consistent and efficient post-16 phase, we propose that local areas need the coordinating powers, capacity and devolved funding to do five things:

- Routinely analyse administrative data in robust and comprehensive ways. This would be a major step forward in reconfiguring the way the role of local stakeholders vis-à-vis national government and its agencies is currently conceived in the English system.
- Construct post-16 provision in the form of local progression routes which connect with and have some influence on pre-16 provision. This would include aligning provision with local transport arrangements to ensure young people have access to a reasonable range of options within a realistic travelling time.
- Identify and create some progression routes that can be closely aligned with local labour market needs, but which also conform to national standards. This would require the allocation of financial incentives and accountability measures to kick start and sustain a more proactive set of partnership arrangements between post-16 providers, sector bodies and employers.
- Create a standard set of entry requirements for all courses in the post-16 phase and more robust careers information, advice and guidance services with responsibility for ensuring all providers and individuals have access to clear and concise information. This would include working with employers to bring their requirements for recruiting apprentices and trainees in line with the standardised model for course entry. The achievement of grade 4 or above in GCSE English and maths would only be used as a threshold for entry to the post-16 courses and apprenticeships that demonstrated there was a robust case.
- Make contingency and stimulus funding available at local level for the development of new forms of provision and to underwrite provision that has labour market value, but where demand fluctuates from year to year.

The powers needed to enable this should take account of: a) the need for appropriate geographies of coordination which may vary in different parts of the country; and b) the incentives and/or regulations needed to mandate collaboration by schools, colleges and independent training providers in planning local provision for the benefit of all.

9. References

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Appendix A: Core city regions

The term 'city region' in this report describes the major conurbations of England – in other words Greater London and the extended urban areas English Core Cities – Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield (Table A1).

Table A1: Definition of city regions

City region	Constituent local authorities
Bristol City Region	Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, South Gloucestershire
Birmingham City Region	Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall
Greater Manchester	Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wigan
Liverpool City Region	Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St. Helens, Wirral
London	All 33 London Boroughs
Newcastle City Region	Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Gateshead, South Tyneside, Sunderland, County Durham
Nottingham City Region	Nottingham, Nottinghamshire
Sheffield City Region	Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley, Doncaster
West Yorkshire	Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds, Wakefield

Given the bespoke nature of recent devolution deals, these areas do not in all cases correspond to combined authority areas. Newcastle City Region is defined according to the boundaries of the old North East Combined Authority, rather than the more recently established North of Tyne Combined Authority and the current form of the North East Combined Authority, which now only covers the local authorities south of the River Tyne. The city region surrounding Leeds is referred to as 'West Yorkshire' in this report. This is to avoid confusion with the Leeds City Region Partnership which encompasses a wider area than that included in the West Yorkshire Combined Authority. As Nottingham is a Core City, but is not part of a combined authority, the boundaries of Nottingham City Region are those of Nottinghamshire County Council and Nottingham City Council.

Appendix B: Locality profiles

Locality definitions

The localities were defined on the basis of ward boundaries as a starting point, with a few minor deviations reflecting natural boundaries or local knowledge. For instance, the Wythenshawe locality excludes the area around Manchester airport and the Alnwick locality includes only the built-up area of Alnwick not surrounding villages included in the ward boundary.

Table B1: Locality definitions

Locality	Definition
Oldham	Includes the wards of St James', Waterhead, St Mary's, Alexandra, Coldhurst, Werneth, Hollinwood, and Medlock Vale. Bordered by the M60 to the south, and the river Medlock to the east (although it also includes the Holts estate just east of the river). It also includes Moorside and Sholver to the north.
Eccles	Includes the Eccles, Barton and Winton wards. Bounded by Worsley golf course and Swinton park golf course to the north, the Gilda Brook roundabout to the east, and the Manchester ship canal to the south. Includes Peel Green just to the west of the M60. Also includes the Westwood Park/Alder Forest area of Eccles up to the boundary of Worsley.
Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall	Includes the Cheetham and Crumpsall wards. Bounded by the river Irk to the north and east, the Manchester Inner Ring Road to the south, and the boundaries of Salford local authorities to the west.
Wythenshawe	Includes the northern part of the Woodhouse Park ward (the built-up area north of the airport/the A555), Baguley ward, Sharston ward and the part of the Northenden ward south of the M56 (basically Benchill).
Alnwick	The built-up part of the Alnwick ward. Bounded by the A1 to the east, the River Aln to the north, and Alnwick Moor on the west.
Longbenton and Killngworth	Encompasses the wards of Longbenton, Benton, Killingworth, and the southern tip of the Camperdown ward (the area south of the Killingworth Way).
Wallsend	Encompasses the wards of Wallsend, Northumberland, Battle Hill, and Howdon, as well as the western part of the Riverside ward (the bit west of the A19).

Oldham

Oldham is a large town in the north-east of the Greater Manchester conurbation. Large parts of the town, especially the central area, is in the top two deciles of the IMD, although areas further from the city centre are less disadvantaged. Central Oldham has a majority British Asian population, mostly comprised of people from Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnicity. The outer areas of the town are mostly White British. There is a similar divide between the more central areas of Oldham and the surrounding suburbs in terms of ONS area classifications, with the central areas classified mostly as 'Ethnicity Central' and 'Multicultural Metropolitans', while the outer areas classified as 'Hard-Pressed Living' and 'Constrained City Dwellers'.

Population
108,000

16 year old population
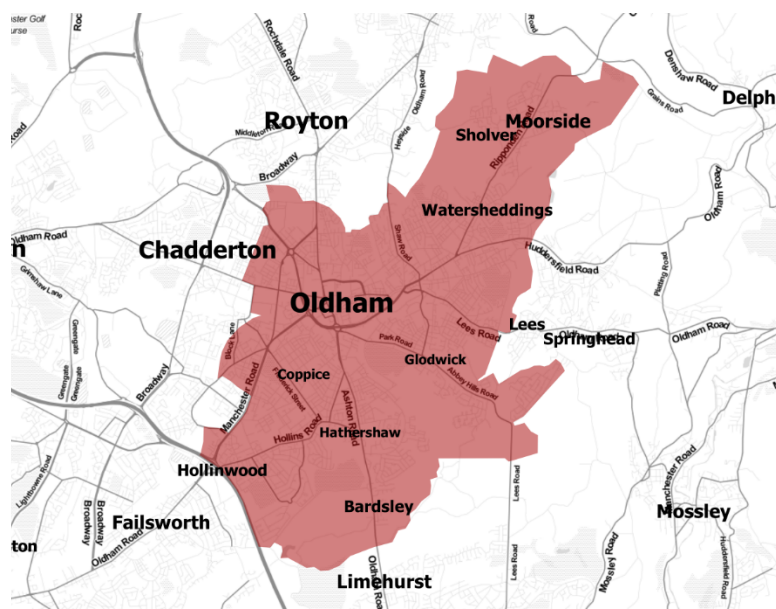1,660

Percentage of young people who are 'lower attainers'
53

Pre-16 provision
- 4 mainstream secondary schools, 1 with a sixth form
- 2 special schools
- 4 independent schools, 2 of which are single-sex schools with religious ethos

Post-16 providers within…

30 minutes	45 minutes	60 minutes
- 1 FE college - 1 sixth form college - 1 school sixth form - 1 UTC	- 1 FE college - 2 sixth form colleges - 3 school sixth forms - 1 UTC	- 4 FE colleges over 5 sites - 4 sixth form colleges - 9 school sixth forms (of which two are single-sex schools with a religious ethos) - 1 UTC

Post-16 landscape type

Abundant provision, mix of FE college and sixth form college

Eccles

Eccles is a town in Greater Manchester, in the Salford local authority. The town contains several areas of economic disadvantage, but also several middle-income areas and some higher-income areas, especially around Ellesmere Park. All areas of the town are majority White British in terms of ethnic make-up, but a sizable minority of the population is of 'White Other' ethnic background, and there are small minorities of Pakistani and Bangladeshi residents. The dominant ONS classifications in Eccles are 'Constrained City Dwellers' and 'Hard-Pressed Living', although much of Particroft is classified as 'Multicultural Metropolitans'. The Ellesmere Park neighbourhood is classified as a mix of 'Urbanites' and 'Suburbanites'.
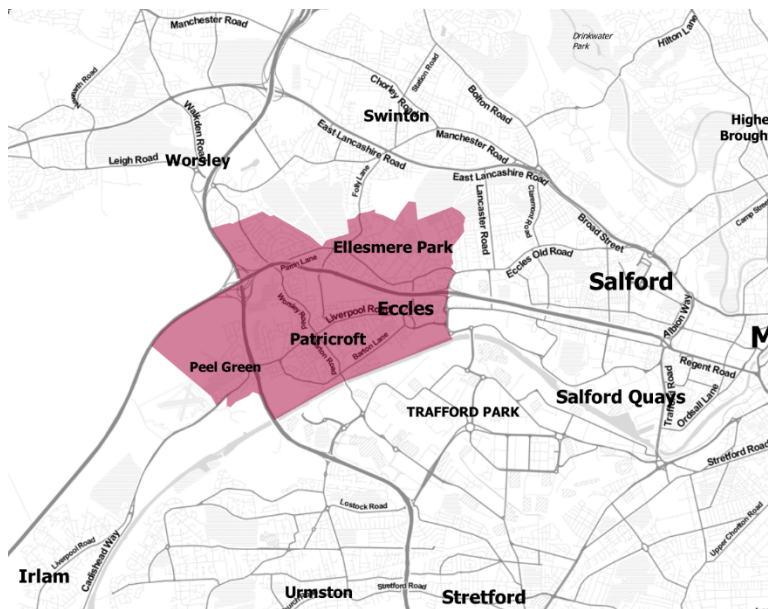
Population
38,000

16 year old population
346

Percentage of young people who are 'lower attainers'
55

Pre-16 provision
- 3 mainstream secondary schools, of which one with religious ethos (none with sixth forms)
- 3 special schools (1 with sixth form)

Post-16 providers within…

30 minutes	45 minutes	60 minutes
• 1 FE college site offering limited provision • 1 sixth form college (part of same provider as above) • 1 UTC	• 1 FE college over 3 sites • 2 sixth form colleges (part of same provider as above) • 1 UTC	• 5 FE colleges over 7 sites • 2 sixth form colleges • 7 school sixth forms • 2 grammar school • 1 studio school • 1UTC

Post-16 landscape type

Moderate provision, dominated by large FE provider

123

Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall

Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall are inner-city neighbourhoods in north Manchester. Levels of economic disadvantage are high across many parts of the two neighbourhoods. In terms of ethnicity the two neighbourhoods are roughly evenly split between White British and (British) Asian residents (mostly Pakistani and Indian). There are also small minorities of White Other, Black and Black British residents, as well as a small proportion of residents of Arab ethnicity. Most of Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall is defined by the ONS as 'Multicultural Metropolitans', with smaller areas classified as 'Ethnicity Central' and, in the very south of Cheetham Hill, some areas classified as 'Constrained City Dwellers' and 'Cosmopolitans'.

Population
38,000

16 year old population
474

Percentage of young people who are 'lower attainers'
36[25]

Pre-16 provision
- 5 mainstream secondary school, of which 4 with a religious ethos (3 of which have a sixth form)
- 1 special school with religious ethos

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

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[25] GCSE attainment varies substantially between schools, ranging from just below the England average at Abraham Moss Community High School and extremely high at the King David High School.

Wythenshawe

Wythenshawe is a large suburban housing estate located to the south of Manchester, largely built in the post-war period. Much of the area is ranked in the top decile of the IMD, although there are parts that are closer to the middle-income range. In terms of ethnicity, the area is mostly White British (70-90 per cent), but especially in central areas of the district, there are small shares of residents from Indian, Black African, and White Other backgrounds. Most areas of Wythenshawe are classified by the ONS as 'Hard-Pressed Living', 'Multicultural Metropolitans', and 'Constrained City Dwellers', with small pockets of 'Urbanites' and 'Suburbanites' particularly in Baguley and Woodhouse Park.
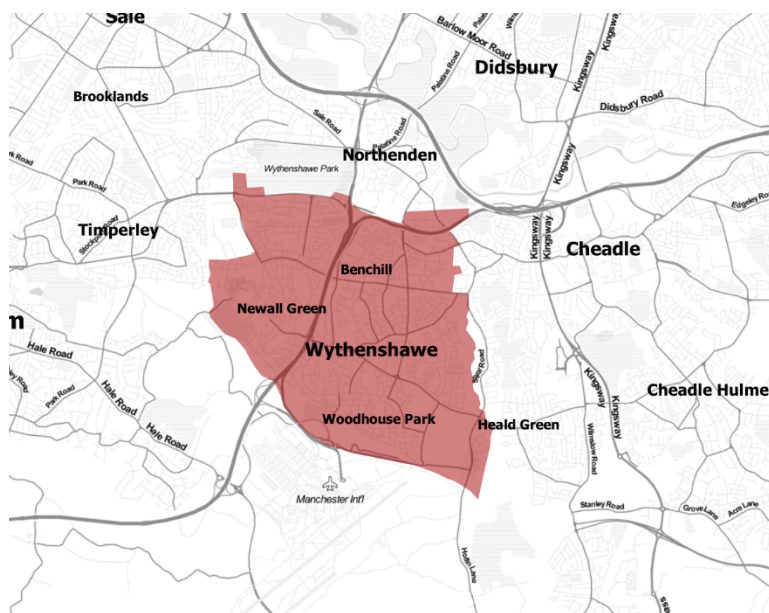
Population
46,000

16 year old population
534

Percentage of young people who are 'lower attainers'
61

Pre-16 provision
- 4 mainstream secondary schools, 1 of which has a religious ethos (3 with sixth forms)
- 1 special school

Post-16 providers within…

30 minutes	45 minutes	60 minutes
• 2 FE college sites with a somewhat limited course offer • 3 school sixth forms	• 2 FE college sites with a somewhat limited course offer • 8 school sixth form • 4 grammar schools	• 3 FE colleges over 7 sites • 4 sixth form colleges • 15 school sixth forms • 5 grammar schools • 1 studio school

Post-16 landscape type

Moderate provision, mix of school sixth form and FE college

Alnwick

Alnwick is a small market town in rural Northumberland, about five miles from the North Sea coast. It is, for the most part, fairly affluent, although the north-western part of the town is somewhat less economically advantaged. The vast majority of residents are White British (around 95 per cent), with very small percentages of British Asian and White Other residents. A relatively large proportion of residents are aged 65 and over. In terms of ONS area classifications[26], Alnwick is a mix of areas categorised as Urbanites, Suburbanites, Constrained City Dwellers, and Hard-Pressed Living, with some Rural Residents on the fringes of the town.
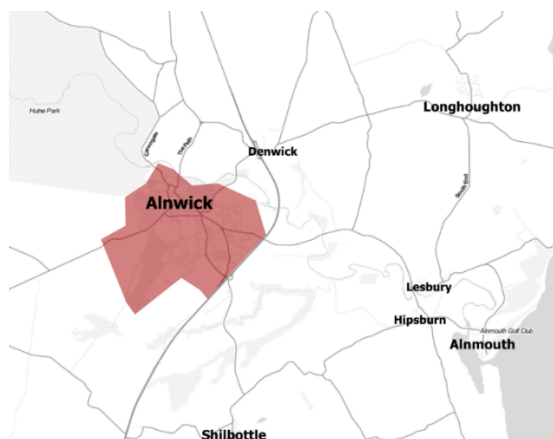
Population[27]
8,000

16 year old population[28]
75

Percentage of young people who are 'lower attainers'[29]
34

Pre-16 provision[30]
- 1 mainstream secondary school with sixth form

Post-16 providers within…

30 minutes	45 minutes	60 minutes
• 1 school sixth form • Local authority provision	• 2 school sixth forms	• 3 school sixth forms

Post-16 landscape type

Very limited provision

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[26]See https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/areaclassifications/2011areaclassifications

[27] Based on ONS Table SAPE20DT1: Mid-2017 Population Estimates for Lower Layer Super Output Areas in England and Wales by Single Year of Age and Sex.

[28] As above.

[29] Proportion of all young people who completed KS4 in schools in the case study area who did not achieve A*-C/9-4 in English and maths, average for 2016, 2017 and 2018.

[30] Based on the Get Information About Schools (GIAS) database for academic year 2017/18.

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Longbenton & Killingworth

Longbenton & Killingworth are suburban areas situated in the far north-west corner of North Tyneside. Both areas constitute a mix of several lower-income areas, some middle-income areas, and some relatively affluent areas. Residents of Longbenton & Killingworth are mostly of White British ethnicity (90-95 per cent), although there are small minorities of residents from White Other and Asian backgrounds, mostly Indian and Chinese. Large areas of Longbenton & Killingworth are classified by the ONS as 'Hard-Pressed Living', but there are some areas classified as 'Urbanites', 'Suburbanites', and 'Constrained City Dwellers'.

Population
35,000

16 year old population
311

Percentage of young people who are 'lower attainers'
40

Pre-16 provision
- 3 mainstream secondary schools, 1 of which has a religious ethos (all with sixth forms)
- 1 special school

Post-16 providers within…

30 minutes	45 minutes	60 minutes
• 3 school sixth forms • 1 independent school	• 2 FE colleges over 3 sites • 1 sixth form college • 14 school sixth forms (2 of which with a religious ethos)	• 3 FE colleges over 9 sites • 2 sixth form colleges • 23 school sixth forms (4 of which with a religious ethos) • 1 CTC

Post-16 landscape type

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

Wallsend

Wallsend is a town in the conurbation of North Tyneside, just north of the River Tyne and bordering Newcastle to the west. The central parts of Wallsend, as well as the Howdon area to the east, are described as areas of relative economic disadvantage, but Battle Hill, just north of central Wallsend, is somewhat less disadvantaged. In terms of ethnicity, all areas of Wallsend are majority White British, although the area just to the east of the town centre is somewhat more ethnically mixed with a small minority of Indian households, and, in particular, a minority of 'White Other' households. The ONS classifies most areas of Wallsend as 'Constrained City Dwellers', 'Urbanites' and 'Hard-Pressed Living'.

Population
43,000

16 year old population
475

Percentage of young people who are 'lower attainers'
48

Pre-16 provision
- 2 mainstream secondary schools, both with sixth forms
- 2 special schools

Post-16 providers within…

30 minutes	45 minutes	60 minutes
• 1 FE college and 1 FE college site offering limited provision • 1 sixth form college • 8 school sixth forms	• 2 FE colleges over 4 sites • 2 sixth form colleges • 14 school sixth forms	• 3 FE colleges over 10 sites • 2 sixth form colleges • 27 school sixth forms • 1 CTC • 1 studio school

Post-16 landscape type

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

Appendix C: Opportunity set methodology: Interpreting entry requirements

The opportunity sets were created by identifying the provision within a 60-minute travelling time on public transport (or 90 minutes for Alnwick). We then looked at advertised courses/apprenticeships and their associated entry requirements. Course entry requirements were obtained from provider websites and apprenticeship vacancies scraped from the government's 'Find An Apprenticeship' website.

We found that entry requirements tended to comprise of one or more of the following:

- Requirements around English and/or maths
- Requirements around general attainment (e.g. 5 GCSEs)
- Requirements around specific subjects other than English and maths (e.g. grade 6 in Physics)
- Non-academic requirements

Where subjects or general attainment was mentioned, there was often but not always an accompanying grade requirement. However, sometimes requirements had a vaguer description such as 'good grades in…' or 'decent standard of…' which made the particular requirement less clear.

Non-academic requirements encompassed a wide range of things including auditions, portfolios, interviews, work experience and sometimes (particularly for apprenticeship vacancies) personal qualities such as 'reliability' or being 'hard-working'.

In addition, sometimes the phrasing of entry requirements was vague and specified that particular grades, for example, 'would be ideal' rather than saying they were necessary. In these cases, we were unable to determine whether there was an unstated necessary requirement. For example, if entry requirements state that a young person should 'ideally' have a grade C in maths then perhaps a D would be acceptable, whereas having no pass at all would not.

For these reasons, we classified each opportunity as 'definitely accessible', 'possibly accessible' and 'definitely not accessible' for each of our 'lower attaining' categories. In doing this, we took an optimistic view and coded anything as potentially accessible to relevant 'lower attaining' categories when there was doubt about the stringency of the requirements themselves or when any element of the requirement was unclear. As a result of this approach, our findings may be an overestimate of what is *actually* accessible.

However, in addition, there is evidence that the behaviour of some centres is different *in reality* to their published entry requirements. We found a number of schools that either had blanket policies about admission to their sixth forms that required grade 4/C in English and maths or had no accessible options listed for those without these grades. However, when we examined the Key Stage 5 (KS5) results in the performance tables for these schools, we could see that there were some young people re-sitting GCSE English and maths during KS5. This may suggest that, in some cases, the opportunity sets provide an underestimate of what is accessible.

Appendix D: Analysing transitions to different types of post-16 provision – apprenticeships

Because some young people don't start their courses, apprenticeships or traineeships straight away in September, and some learners change courses or providers in the first few weeks of the academic year, we looked at what young people were doing on **November 1st of Year 12**. By this point in the year we expect most learners to have settled into a destination in which they will stay for the rest of the academic year, although of course some young people may still change courses or providers after this date.

It is notable that, using this way of calculating destinations, there are relatively few young people in apprenticeships compared to the statistics produced by the DfE on destinations after Key Stage 4 (KS4). We found only 3.8 per cent of learners were in an apprenticeship on November 1st, whereas in the DfE figures around 6 per cent of leaners are recorded as being in an apprenticeship. This difference can be explained by the methodology used by the DfE when calculating the number of young people in apprenticeships. They count a young person as being in an apprenticeship if they were in sustained education during the period from October to March following the end of KS4, and they participated in an apprenticeship-related learning aim *at any point* during this period. This does not necessarily mean they were in an apprenticeship during this entire period; for instance, they may have started it later into the academic year, or they may have started an apprenticeship in September or October but left it after a few weeks. Our approach doesn't pick up on those learners who left an apprenticeship at any point before the 1st of November, or started their apprenticeship on or after this date. Table D1 shows that the vast majority of learners start their apprenticeships before November but around 17 per cent do so after November. In our approach, this small number of learners will be categorised by whatever learning aims they were undertaking prior to their apprenticeship starting.

Table D1: Starting months for apprenticeship aims during 2015/16 academic year, 2015 cohort

	n	%
Jul	2,046	8.4
Aug	3,862	15.9
Sept	11,029	45.3
Oct	3,145	12.9
Nov	2,748	11.3
Dec	1,492	6.1
Jan or later	31	0.1
Total	24,343	100

Source: National Pupil Database, Individualised Learner Record, and National Client Caseload Information System.

Appendix E: Section 7 results using the NPD measure

In section 7, we reported results from our outcome measure that prioritised the ILR as a source of information when learners appeared in both it and the NPD. The equivalent results for the measure where the NPD takes precedence are reported here. We reproduce the numbers of the Figures in section 7 so that NPD and ILR precedence measures can be easily compared.

Figure 7.1a: Percentage of 'lower attainers' and non-lower attainers who achieved at least one Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18/19, 2015 cohort, NPD-precedence measure
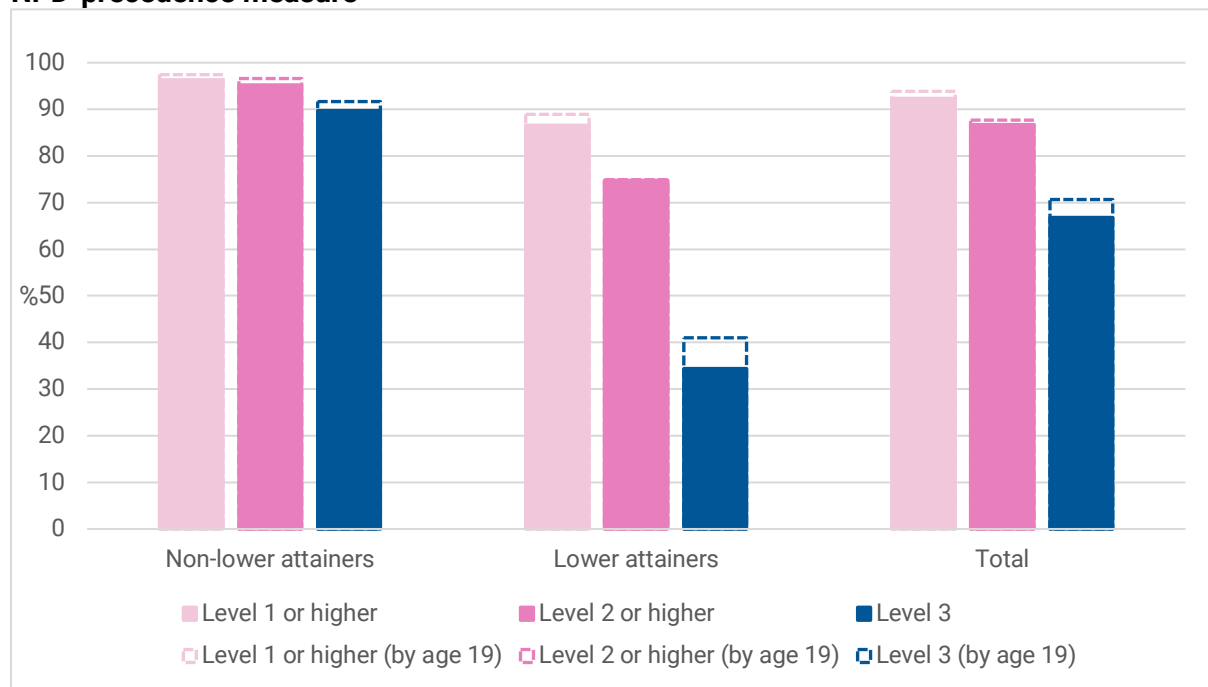
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 552,575.

Figure 7.2a: Percentage of 'lower attainers' in different attainment categories who achieved at least one Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18/19, 2015 cohort, NPD-precedence measure
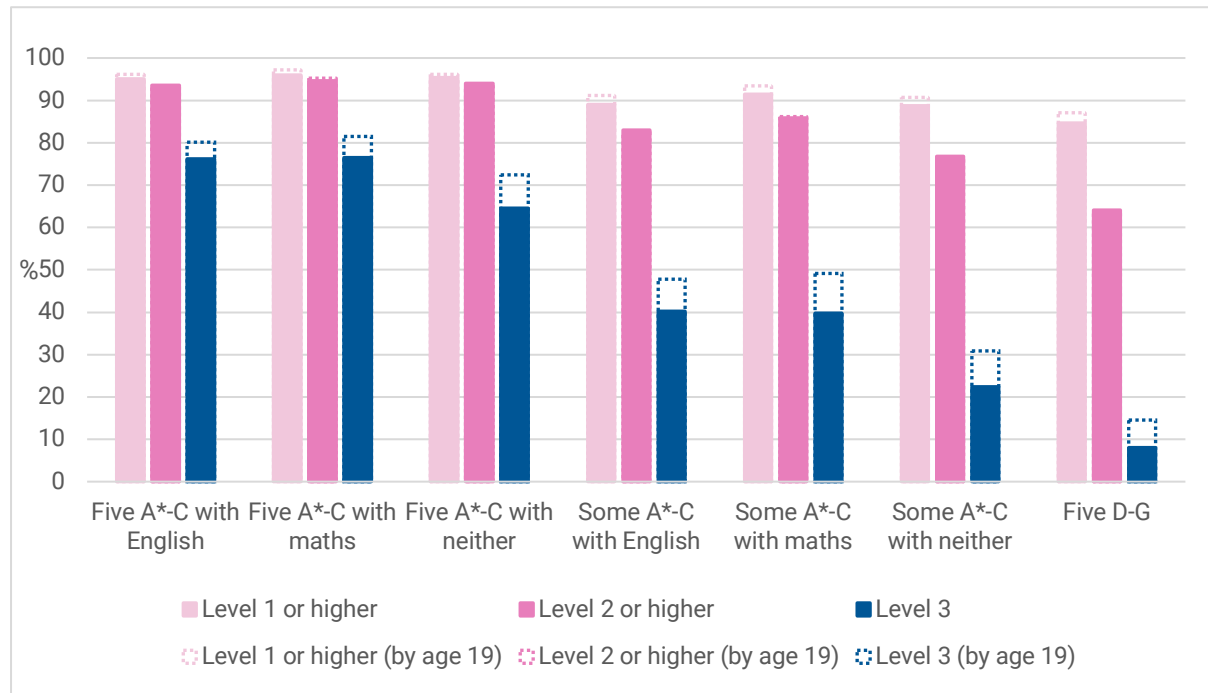
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 197,149.

Figure 7.3a: Percentage of 'lower attainers' in the two last attainment categories who achieved at least one Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18/19, 2015 cohort, NPD-precedence measure
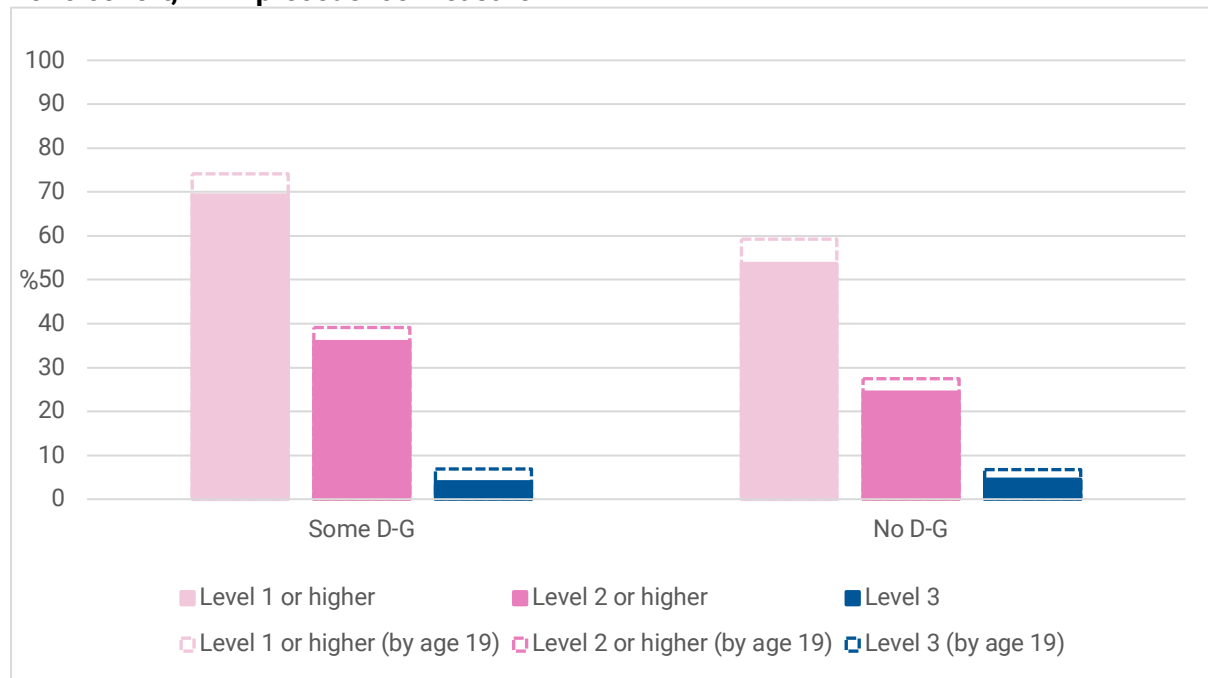
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 31,387.

Figure 7.4a: Highest level of qualification achieved by between age 16 and 18, by main level of learning entered in Year 12, for 'lower attainers' in 2015 cohort (NPD-precedence measure; %)
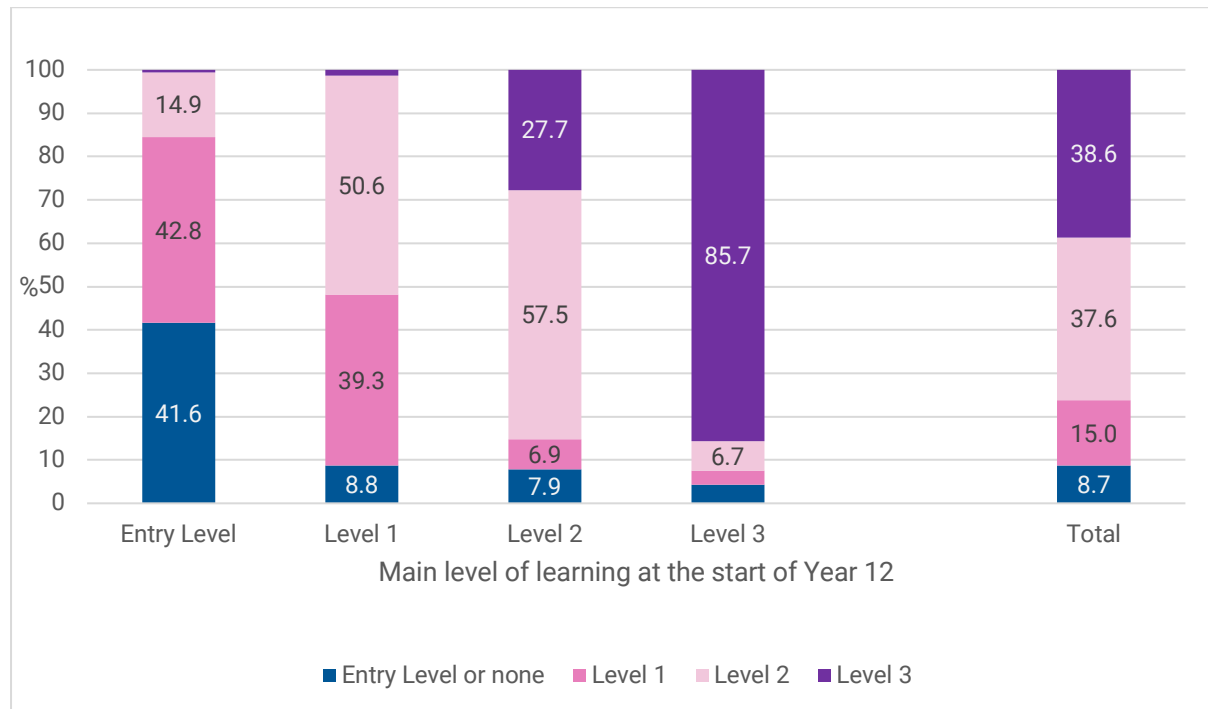
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 199,835.

Figure 7.5a: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by main level of learning entered in Year 12, for young people from the 2015 cohort in the 'Some A*-C with neither' category (NPD-precedence measure; %)
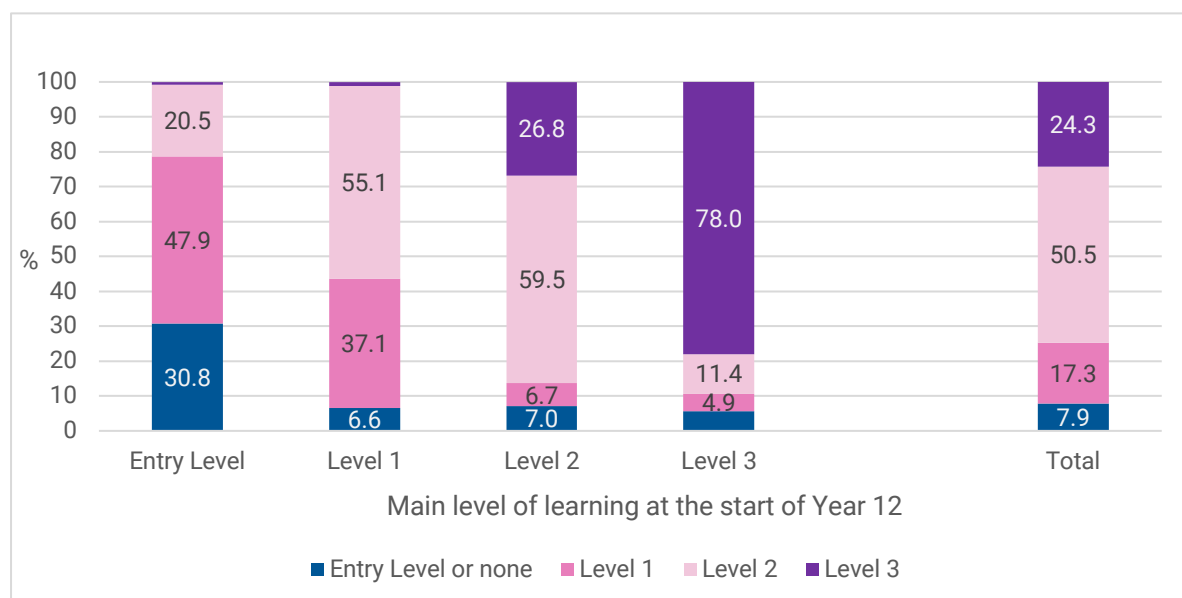
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 58,147.

Figure 7.6a: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 19, by main level of learning entered in Year 12, for 'lower attainers' in 2015 cohort (NPD-precedence measure; %)

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 199,835.

Table 7.1a: Estimated probability of achieving a Level 2 qualification between age 16 and 18, by main level of learning in Year 12, controlling for overall KS4 point score, achievement of full Level 2 during KS4, and achievement of English or maths during KS4 (versus neither), NPD-precedence measure, 2015 cohort

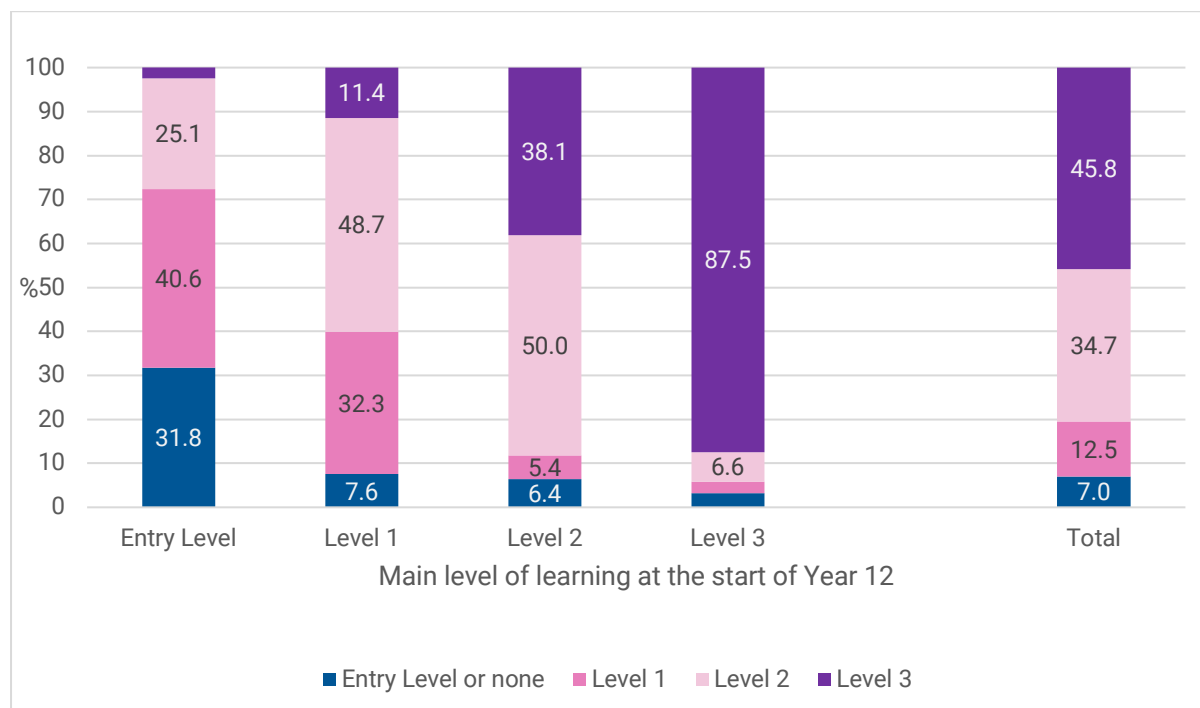|	Obtaining a Level 2 qualification		Obtaining Level 3 qualification	
Main level of learning in Year 12	Estimated probability	Standard Error	Estimated probability	Standard Error
Entry Level	0.39	0.008		
Level 1	0.66	0.003	0.06	0.006
Level 2	0.87	0.001	0.41	0.005
Level 3	0.89	0.002	0.90	0.002

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 174,420. Reported probabilities are the average estimated probabilities over the entire population included in the model, with 0.39 being the average predicted probability of achieving a Level 2 qualification if everyone in the data were treated as if they started on Entry Level in Year 12, 0.66 being the average predicted probability if everyone were treated as if they started on Level 1 on entry, and so on. Population for 'Obtaining a Level 2 qualification' is all 'lower attainers who had achieved full Level 1 at KS4. Population for 'Obtaining a Level 3 qualification' is all 'lower attainers' who had achieved full Level 2 at Key Stage 4 and were learning at Level 1 or higher in Year 12 (those on Entry Level excluded as there are too few observations to produce reliable estimates).

Table 7.2a: Estimated probability of achieving a Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 19, by main level of learning in Year 12, controlling for overall KS4 point score and achievement of English or maths during KS4 (versus neither), NPD-precedence measure, 2015 cohort

Main level of learning in Year 12	Estimated probability	Standard Error
Level 1	0.31	0.011
Level 2	0.54	0.005
Level 3	0.92	0.001

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 48,186. Population is all lower attainers who had achieved full Level 2 at Key Stage 4 and were learning at Level 1 or higher in year 12 (those on Entry Level excluded as there are too few observations to produce reliable estimates). Reported probabilities are, as above, the average estimated probabilities over the entire population included in the model.

Figure 7.9a: Percentage of 'lower attainers' who achieved a Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 19, by attainment category and provider type, NPD-precedence measure, 2015 cohort
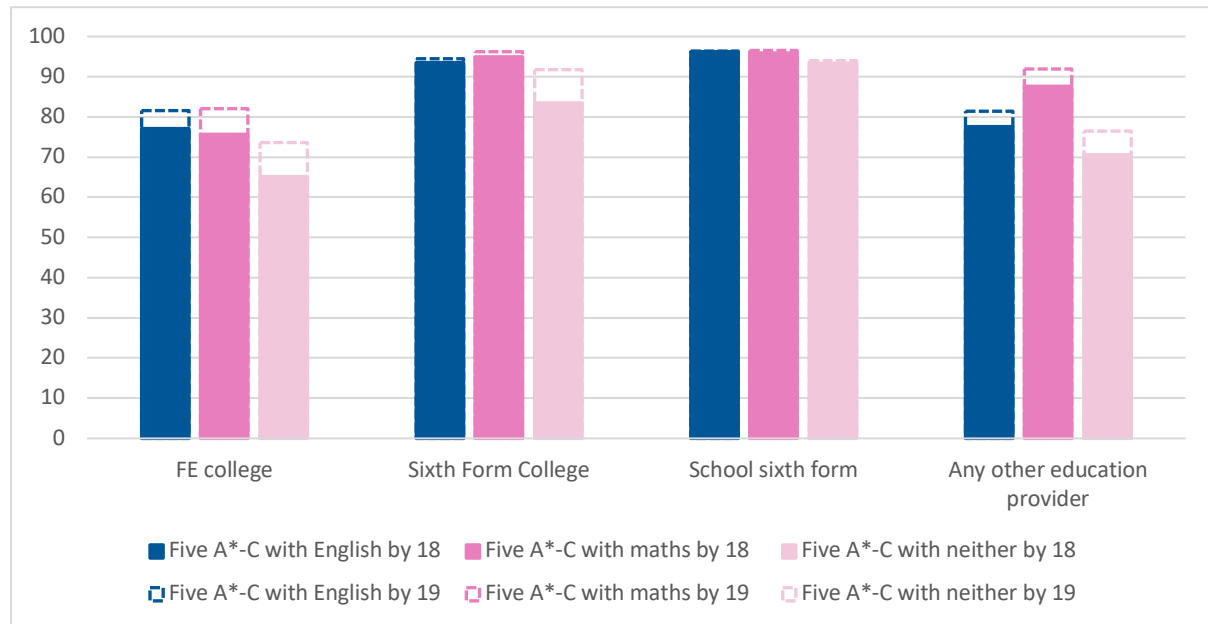
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 37,161.

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Table 7.3a: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by region, 'lower attainers' in the 2015 cohort (NPD-precedence measure; %)

	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
London	11.9	13.5	30.9	43.8	100
West Midlands	12.4	17.0	35.4	35.3	100
South East	13.1	14.3	37.7	34.9	100
North East	11.6	18.1	35.9	34.4	100
East of England	13.1	15.4	37.3	34.3	100
North West	13.6	16.4	36.4	33.6	100
South West	12.3	15.6	39.2	32.9	100
Yorkshire and The Humber	13.6	18.4	35.2	32.8	100
East Midlands	13.6	17.8	38.1	30.5	100
Total	12.9	16.0	36.1	35.0	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 217,851. Number of learners does not add up to that of England as a whole as for some young people a region could not be determined.

Table 7.4a: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by city region, 'lower attainers' in the 2015 cohort (NPD-precedence measure; %)

	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
London	11.9	13.5	30.9	43.8	100
Birmingham City Region	12.2	17.2	33.3	37.3	100
Liverpool City Region	11.6	16.8	36.1	35.4	100
Newcastle City Region	11.3	18.1	36.6	34.1	100
Greater Manchester	15.0	16.3	35.2	33.4	100
West Yorkshire City Region	13.4	18.8	34.7	33.0	100
Bristol City Region	14.1	18.1	37.7	30.1	100
Sheffield City Region	15.8	20.6	34.7	29.0	100
Nottingham City Region	16.3	19.9	37.1	26.8	100
Total	13.0	16.5	33.9	36.6	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 94,784. City region could not be determined for a small number of young people.

Table 7.5a: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by city region, young people in the 2015 cohort belonging to the 'Some A*-C with neither' category (NPD-precedence measure; %)

|	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
London	10.1	16.0	44.4	29.6	100
Birmingham City Region	10.7	20.1	44.8	24.4	100
Liverpool City Region	11.2	19.9	46.3	22.6	100
West Yorkshire City Region	11.4	19.6	47.5	21.4	100
Newcastle City Region	9.1	21.9	48.0	21.0	100
Greater Manchester	13.7	18.9	48.3	19.1	100
Bristol City Region	12.5	22.3	47.3	17.9	100
Sheffield City Region	15.1	24.8	44.3	15.8	100
Nottingham City Region	15.7	24.8	47.3	12.2	100
Total	11.5	19.4	46.0	23.1	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 28,805. City region could not be determined for a small number of young people.

Figure 7.11a: Estimated probability of achieving a Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18, for learners in different city regions, controlling for attainment and provision type, NPD-precedence measure, 2015 cohort
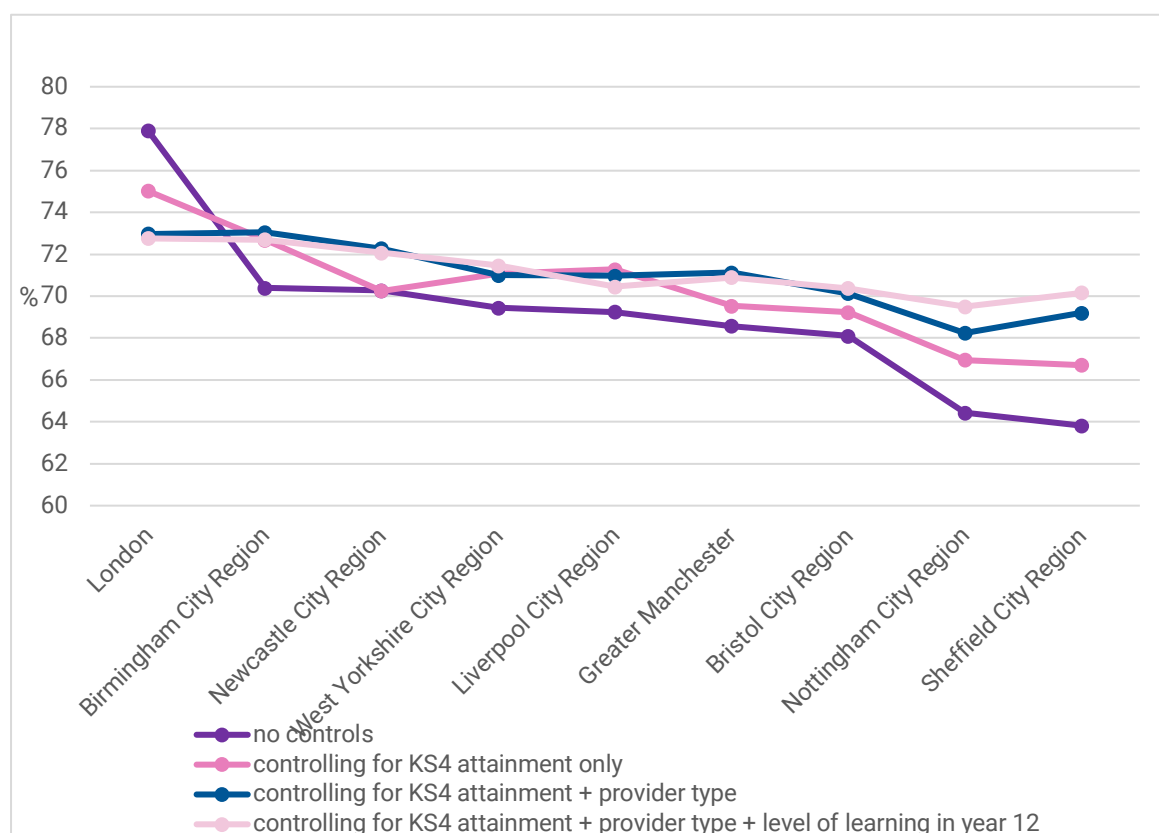
Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. Measure used is the NPD-precedence measure. N = 213,326. R² for 'no control' model is 0.0093, R² for 'KS4 attainment controls only' model is 0.4137, R² for 'KS4 attainment + provider type controls' model is 0.4678, R² for 'KS4 attainment, provider type and level of learning controls' model is 0.5615. Note that y-axis does not start at zero, making differences between city regions appear larger.

Figure 7.12a (shown as table): Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by case study locality, all learners in the 2013 to 2016 cohorts (NPD-precedence measure; %)

	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	7.9	10.3	15.9	65.9	100
Eccles	11.4	10.2	17.2	61.3	100
Oldham	9.2	14.7	19.3	56.7	100
Wythenshawe	15.4	11.9	22.6	50.1	100
Alnwick	6.0	7.8	12.1	74.1	100
Longbenton & Killingworth	7.7	7.8	16.6	67.9	100
Wallsend	8.7	9.5	17.3	64.6	100
England	8.1	8.6	16.2	67.2	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. Note. N (local case study areas) = 14,451. N (England) = 2,207,629.

Figure 7.13a (shown as table): Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, by case study locality, 'lower attainers' in 2013 to 2016 cohorts (NPD-precedence measure; %)

	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	10.6	19.9	29.6	39.9	100
Eccles	15.4	20.3	28.8	35.4	100
Oldham	13.4	25.7	31.3	29.6	100
Wythenshawe	20.6	20.9	35.1	23.4	100
Alnwick	9.9	17.1	25.0	48.0	100
Longbenton & Killingworth	12.2	16.8	29.9	41.1	100
Wallsend	14.4	19.8	31.9	33.8	100
England]	14.0	19.3	32.0	34.7	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record Note. N (local case study areas) = 6,973. N (England) = 897,808.

Figure 7.15a (shown as table): Percentage of 'lower attainers' in the 'Five A*-C' categories who started on a Level 3 programme in Year 12 who achieved a Level 3 qualification between age 16 and 18, by case study area, NPD-precedence measure, 2013 to 2016 cohorts

	NPD-precedence measure
Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	93.1
Eccles	89.3
Oldham	89.0
Wythenshawe	76.4
Longbenton & Killingworth	86.4
Wallsend	85.8
England	88.7

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N (local case study areas) = 1,084. N (England) = 161,465. Alnwick not included due to too few observations to allow meaningful and non-disclosive analysis.

Figure 7.16a (shown as table): Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 18, for 'lower attainers' on Level 2 programmes in Year 12, by case study locality, 2013 to 2016 cohorts (NPD-precedence measure; %)

	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
Cheetham Hill & Crumpsall	3.8	11.3	44.5	40.4	100
Eccles	10.7	9.9	45.1	34.3	100
Oldham	5.7	17.3	44.0	33.0	100
Wythenshawe	11.8	15.3	50.3	22.8	100
Longbenton & Killingworth	<5.0	<15.0	45.1	38.6	100
Wallsend	6.3	8.6	52.9	32.1	100
England	8.54	11.51	50.75	29.2	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record Note. N (local case study areas) = 2,436. N (England) = 312,850. Alnwick not included due to too few observations to allow meaningful and non-disclosive analysis.

Appendix F: Attainment between age 16 and 19 for regions and city regions

Table F1: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 19, by region, 'lower attainers' in the 2015 cohort (ILR-precedence measure; %)

	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
London	10.5	11.2	27.3	51.0	100
West Midlands	10.7	13.8	34.0	41.6	100
North East	9.3	14.3	35.2	41.2	100
North West	11.6	13.6	33.8	41.0	100
South East	11.5	12.2	35.4	40.9	100
East of England	11.5	12.9	35.3	40.4	100
Yorkshire and The Humber	11.5	15.0	34.5	39.1	100
South West	10.9	13.2	37.3	38.8	100
East Midlands	11.8	14.5	37.7	36.0	100
Total	11.1	13.2	34.2	41.4	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 217,974. Number of learners does not add up to that of England as a whole as for some young people a region could not be determined.

Table F2: Highest level of qualification achieved between age 16 and 19, by city region, 'lower attainers' in the 2015 cohort (ILR-precedence measure; %)

	Entry Level or none	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
Birmingham City Reg..	10.3	13.8	31.9	44.1	100
Bristol City Region	12.9	15.8	36.4	34.9	100
Greater Manchester	12.9	14.5	31.5	41.1	100
Liverpool City Region	10.2	12.4	35.5	41.9	100
London	10.5	11.2	27.3	51.0	100
Newcastle City Region	8.9	14.4	36.0	40.7	100
Nottingham City Reg..	13.8	17.4	37.2	31.6	100
Sheffield City Region	13.4	17.8	35.3	33.5	100
West Yorkshire City..	11.3	15.9	33.3	39.5	100
Total	11.2	13.8	31.8	43.3	100

Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. N = 94,859. City region could not be determined for a small number of young people.