

Closing the Regional Attainment Gap

Introduction and background

The attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better-off classmates is substantial, across a range of different measures, and widens through the school years. At GCSE level, there is evidence that the attainment gap is narrowing, but very slowly.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility Inquiry into the Regional Attainment Gap ran from November 2017 until June 2018. It comprised 3 evidence sessions held in Parliament and a call for written submissions. This report summarises the evidence submitted to the inquiry and makes a series of policy recommendations to tackle the issues highlighted.

The report focusses on 3 key areas which emerged from the evidence presented, namely: the role of place and community; the importance of teaching along with ways to encourage good teachers into areas of deprivation; and the role of collaboration between schools.

Key points

The regional attainment gap

- The attainment gap varies across the country with different regions having vastly diverse patterns and one region being particularly distinctive from the others. London stands out as an area which has been extremely successful in narrowing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils. According to the most recent GCSE attainment data, disadvantaged pupils have a Progress 8 score of close to zero. This means that they have made the same progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 as the average student nationally. Disadvantaged pupils in the North East performed worst, with a score of -0.76, but this isn't a simple north/south divide, as the South East and South West (both -0.7) also performed poorly, despite their low levels of disadvantage.
- The regional attainment gap needs to be addressed if the country is to improve social mobility in England. London is pulling ahead of the rest of the country, while towns and cities in other parts of the country have widening gaps. Research by Oxera for the Sutton Trust has shown that this has economic repercussions. A modest increase in the UK's social mobility bringing it in line with average levels across Western Europe could be associated with an increase in annual GDP of approximately 2 per cent, the equivalent of £39bn to the UK economy as a whole.
- The concept of place involves planning which addresses the challenges and problems faced by a specific area. Justine Greening, the former Secretary of State, pointed out that a national strategy put together by national government needed to be nuanced to allow for variations between local areas. This sentiment was echoed by other speakers and there was a feeling that until policymakers meet this challenge, it will be difficult to close the regional gap.
- Up until the early 2000s, London had some of the poorest performing schools in the country. The London Challenge was set up in 2003 in response to this. This initiative brought together politicians, civil servants and practitioners with the aim of raising standards in the poorest schools and narrowing the attainment gap. Dame Sue John outlined key elements which had made the London Challenge successful. She spoke of community cohesion, strong local leaders, the role of the local economy and a diverse mix of families and young people. She also highlighted the range of opportunities available to pupils outside the school gates as well as a high level of buy-in from local education leaders. There was also a 'collective responsibility' for performance. Pupils in London had good opportunities for interactions with businesses, culture and the arts.
- A sense of place is emerging in the opportunity areas – this local buy-in is important and allows areas to interpret and shape national policy in a way that works for them. Local area plans are, for example, focusing on different issues.

A sense of place

- The idea of place and of local communities has gained political significance, as seen in the emergence of initiatives such as the Northern Powerhouse and Opportunity Areas.
- There is also now more recognition of the fact that it is not just towns and cities in the North which are being left behind. The Social Mobility Commission pointed out that there are pockets of deprivation across the whole country and that coastal and rural towns are also affected.

Collaboration

- One of the strongest messages to come out of the evidence submitted to the inquiry was that there is currently no mechanism by which best practice can be



shared; there is a lack of direction from government regarding scale up.

- The Sutton Trust's Mobility Map has shown that there are neighbouring areas across the country that have vastly different social mobility outcomes despite being extremely close to one another. For example, the constituency of Beverly and Holderness in Yorkshire has high social mobility, yet the neighbouring constituency of East Yorkshire has low levels of social mobility. This begs the question as to whether there are examples of best practice in Beverly and Holderness which could be applied to East Yorkshire.
- The APPG heard evidence about the importance of school level collaboration. This type of collaboration can take different forms. Research schools share evidence about good practice along with materials and training courses. The opportunities afforded by academy trusts were also highlighted; the inquiry heard about trusts which had taken on struggling schools and were working to improve them.
- Witnesses to the inquiry spoke of the need to go beyond school to school collaboration and to engage with local businesses. Many of the opportunity areas intend to work with local business to ensure that they have a strong post-16 plan in place. Dr Ogden of the Mulberry School Trust pointed out that community and family support services also had a role to play in helping schools to collaborate with the wider community.

Teacher recruitment and retention

- There is a body of evidence which suggests that the single most important classroom factor in helping a disadvantaged young person to raise their attainment is the quality of the teacher providing the instruction. However, students from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to have access to good quality teachers (especially if they attend an independent or grammar school) and it is disadvantaged young people who tend to miss out on good quality teaching. For example, the Sutton Trust's research has shown that schools with the highest percentages of pupils who are eligible for free school meals have lower proportions of specialised science teachers. This means that these pupils have less access to good quality subject-specific content knowledge.
- Research from the Education Policy Institute estimates that at Key Stage 4, only 37 per cent of maths teachers and 45 per cent of chemistry teachers in deprived schools outside of the capital have a relevant degree in the subject that they are teaching
- A further challenge is posed by the fact that less people are applying to become teachers; application rates for teacher training were down by 5 per cent in 2018, whereas pupil numbers continue to rise.
- Professor Rebecca Allen from the UCL Institute of Education told the inquiry that shortages of appropriately trained teachers are particularly acute in outer London, the South East and the East of England. For the East of England, she explained that this was because of a shortage of initial teacher training opportunities. Rural and coastal towns also face challenges, albeit different ones, when it comes to the mobility of teachers.
- A report from the Education Policy Institute suggested that teachers work on average 48.2 hours a week compared to 40.6 hours in other countries. It also points out that teachers in England have less access to Professional Development opportunities. This lack of Professional Development was a consistent theme. The inquiry heard how teachers in England spend an average of just 4 hours a week on these opportunities.
- Dame Sue John outlined the importance of the networks

and support for teachers which were a key ingredient of the success of the London Challenge.

- Professor Allen talked of the need for wider support for teachers in disadvantaged schools in order to avoid high staff turnover which leads to teacher shortages and the recruitment of more inexperienced staff.
- Financial incentives were not considered by witnesses to the inquiry to be the most important factor for teacher retention. Professor Allen pointed out that more experienced teachers tend to be less wage sensitive; she argued that financial incentives should really only be used for the local reallocation of teachers.

Other issues in the inquiry

- There was a sense from some organisations and individuals that in order to address the regional attainment gap, there was a need to tackle school funding at the root in order to ensure that schools had the necessary financial support to raise attainment. Luke Sibieta, Research Fellow at the Institute for Fiscal Studies did, however, point out that it was not necessarily the case that all schools lacked sufficient funding, and that in some cases it was more important to ensure that the resources that schools do have are being used properly and being directed at the right interventions.
- The issue of recent austerity policies was raised. Dr Lee Elliot Major told the inquiry that there was a wider question about whether inequality at a fundamental level needs to be addressed before social mobility can improve. Witnesses from the Equality Trust argued that some of the interventions put to the APPG are merely mitigating the impact of inequality on social mobility and therefore will not be as successful as dealing with the root cause.
- Unsurprisingly, the importance of early years was mentioned in every evidence session heard by the APPG. Attainment gaps emerge early, with Sutton Trust research documenting that on average, children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds start school around 11 months behind their more advantaged counterparts.
- It is important to recognise that while improving the amount of free childcare may help to encourage parents into work, this childcare may not help the child educationally. The Sutton Trust has therefore called on the government to ensure that early years education is of a good quality, with well-trained and well-qualified staff.
- Professor Kathy Sylva outlined that her research has shown how the quality of a child's preschool can have an impact on outcomes later in life. Crucially for her though, good quality early education means not only that children are able to hold onto those gains through their educational career, but they are also better learners.
- Professor Sylva's research has shown that children who went to a good quality pre-school made more progress between the ages of 7 and 11 and were better learners. She also pointed out that early years provision tends to be better in the maintained sector.
- The importance of children's centres to the early years debate was discussed; the number of centres has declined sharply. The charity People reported that they had seen a detrimental effect on children from the closure of children's centres in Oxfordshire. Furthermore, the absence of a national strategy for children's centres has led to a vacuum in their central purpose, and a decline in energy and coordination at a local level.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/appg-social-mobility-closing-the-regional-attainment-gap/>