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Funding futures: Targeting early investment so all children can reach their potential

Report 1: Local Disadvantage Gaps in England

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Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

It is well known that there are entrenched educational inequalities in England, with a sizeable disadvantage attainment gap at the point children start school, which then widens as children progress in their education. There is also a huge amount of variability in the gap depending on where children live. This report takes a comprehensive look at disadvantage gaps at a local level to better understand educational inequalities in England.

Specifically, we consider the parts of the country with the smallest and largest attainment gaps for disadvantaged learners at ages 5, 11, 16, and in the critical 16-19 phase of education.[1] We use 2023 data as the most recent snapshot of local performance but also consider recent trends over the three-year period, 2019, 2022 and 2023, to look through year-on-year volatility.[2]

As well as looking at local disadvantage gaps for different cohorts of children, we also consider gap-trajectories within the same cohort of children as they progress through primary and secondary school. This allows us to identify local authorities where gaps are consistently small or large across phases, or disadvantaged children appear to catch-up or fall behind, relative to the progress made by their peers living elsewhere. It does not appear that pupils moving between areas is a major factor in influencing local disadvantage gaps (at least based on the top and bottom ends of GCSE gap rankings).

Our aim through this project is to shine a light on local areas that face some of the biggest challenges in supporting their disadvantaged learners, and those that stand out as potential areas of best practice, to support more local areas to break the link between a child's background and their future life chances.

Which local authorities have the smallest and largest disadvantage gaps in recent years?

- By age five, disadvantaged children in London are outperforming disadvantaged children in the rest of England, and that trend continues as children get older. Five London boroughs emerge as consistently having the smallest disadvantage gaps at age 5 in recent years (Figure 1). By 16-19 education, this list has doubled to ten (mostly different London boroughs), plus Wokingham as the one local authority outside London that has a consistently small 16-19 gap.[3]

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[1] Throughout our analysis we compare the attainment of disadvantaged learners locally to the attainment of non-disadvantaged learners nationally, and define disadvantage based on free school meal eligibility. We do this to allow for a consistent benchmark across areas and avoid reporting narrow disadvantage gaps in areas where all local children – including non-disadvantaged children – have low attainment.

[2] 2019 is the most recent pre-pandemic year and provides a baseline for our analysis; we do not use years 2020 and 2021 as these were highly disrupted by the pandemic, with assessments at ages 5 and 11 cancelled altogether and alternative grading arrangements in place for GCSEs and in 16-19 education.

[3] This is based on being in the top 15 of local authorities nationally in each of the years 2019, 2022 and 2023 for those local authorities in England which exist in all three years.

- Newham stands out as the only local authority nationally with consistently small gaps in recent years across school phases (at ages 5, 11 and 16), indicating its disadvantaged pupils are attaining well across age groups. This is also the case for older disadvantaged learners in Ealing and Redbridge, who have consistently small gaps at ages 11, 16, and in 16-19 education.

Figure 1: Local authorities that consistently have the smallest disadvantage gaps across education phases (based on being in the top 15 of local authorities in each of the years 2019, 2022 and 2023)
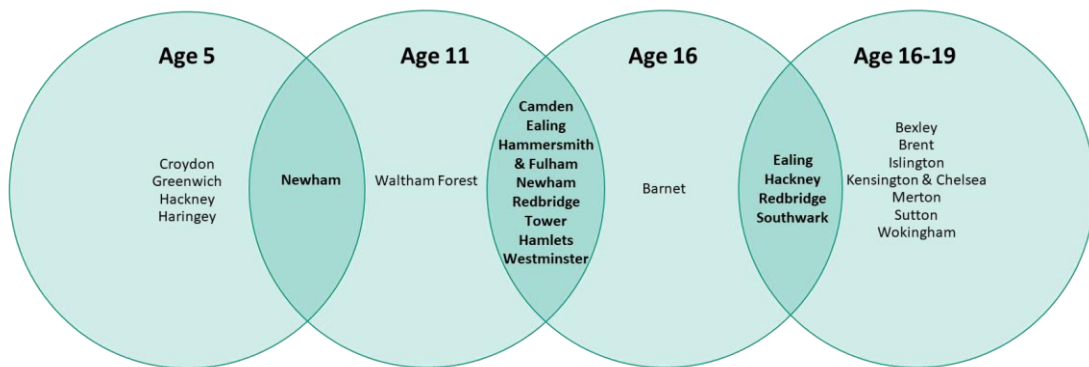
- While several areas that are doing well for their disadvantaged learners at one stage are the same ones doing well at the next stage (Figure 1, particularly from the end of primary school), this is less evident when looking at areas which consistently have the largest disadvantage gaps (Figure 2).
- Central Bedfordshire and West Berkshire have consistently large gaps in recent years at both ages 5 and 11 but, by age 16, the areas with the largest gaps have shifted. Parts of the North West (Blackpool and Knowsley) emerge as having some of the widest GCSE gaps, alongside Derby and Portsmouth. That the areas with the widest 16-19 gaps in recent years are (mostly) different again underlines that areas with the largest gaps tend to change as learners move through the system, while the areas with the smallest gaps tend to be London-dominated.

Figure 2: Local authorities that consistently have the largest disadvantage gaps across education phases (based on being in the bottom 15 of local authorities in each of the years 2019, 2022 and 2023)
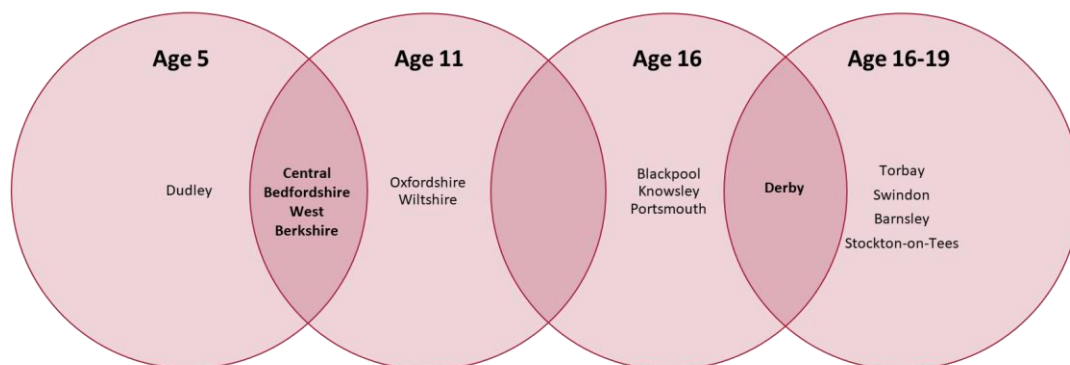
How did disadvantage gaps change for the cohort who completed primary school in 2023?

- As well as looking at disadvantage gaps for different cohorts of children, we also consider trajectories of disadvantage gaps within the same cohort of children as they progress through schooling up to age 16. As we do not have enough data to follow the same cohort of children from reception to year 11, we do this in two stages. We track the cohort who started primary school in reception year in 2017 and completed year 6 in 2023, and the older cohort who started secondary school in year 7 in 2018 and completed year 11 in 2023. We do not track gaps beyond age 16 for this part of our analysis because our gap measure is constructed on a different basis for 16-19 education, using grades rather than months of learning.

- Nationally, the disadvantage gap widens as children progress in their education, from 4.1 months among pupils who were aged 5 in 2017 to 10.3 months by the time these pupils completed primary school aged 11, in 2023.

- There are just four local authorities that bucked this national trend in 2023 – Newham had virtually the same gap at age 5 as it did at age 11, whereas in Camden, Kensington and Chelsea, and Tower Hamlets, the gap actually reduced over the course of primary school.

- There are local authorities that have below-average gaps at both age 5 and 11 for their 2023 cohort. These tend to be London boroughs but also include Birmingham, Hartlepool, Slough, and South Tyneside (all of which had a gap that grew by less than 5 months over the primary phase, compared with a growth of 6.2 months nationally).

- The local authorities with above-average gaps at both age 5 and 11 include Bath and North East Somerset, Central Bedfordshire, and West Berkshire (all of which had a gap that grew by at least 9 months between the ages of 5 and 11).

- Some areas have below-average gaps at age 5 but nevertheless ended up with above-average gaps at age 11. Two areas with notable 'fade-out' over the primary phase are Portsmouth and South Gloucestershire.

- There are also areas – such as Bolton, Trafford, Wigan, and Wolverhampton – where disadvantaged pupils started school behind other disadvantaged pupils living elsewhere but then subsequently caught up over primary school, relative to the progress made by

other disadvantaged pupils. For example, Wolverhampton had the same age 5 gap as Central Bedfordshire (4.9 months), and a slightly larger gap than West Berkshire (4.7 months), yet by age 11, Wolverhampton's gap was roughly half as large (7.2 months) for the 2023 cohort.

How did disadvantage gaps change for the cohort who completed secondary school in 2023?

- Nationally, the disadvantage gap continues to widen over the course of secondary school. For the 2023 cohort, it widened by a full 10 months, from 9.2 months among pupils who were aged 11 in 2018 to 19.2 months by the time these pupils completed secondary school.
- Redbridge is unique in being the only local authority which achieved a smaller gap at the end of secondary school (at 4.5 months) than at the start (5.5 months) for the 2023 cohort.
- Several of the local authorities with below-average gaps at both ages 11 and 16 are the same ones as for the primary phase, including Kensington and Chelsea, Newham, Redbridge, and Tower Hamlets, as well as Birmingham, Luton and Slough.[4] These areas' disadvantaged cohorts attained consistently well across the primary and secondary phases.
- The local authorities with above-average gaps at both ages 11 and 16 include Blackpool, Knowsley, Portsmouth, West Berkshire, and Bedford, though the challenges in these areas look different for the 2023 cohort. While in West Berkshire, and particularly Bedford, big gaps have already emerged by age 11, in Blackpool and Knowsley the key challenge is the markedly slower progress made by their disadvantaged pupils (who fell behind by a further 18 months over the secondary school phase compared to nationally). These areas also markedly differ in terms of their levels of deprivation, with West Berkshire ranking the eighth least deprived local authority in England and Blackpool the eighth most deprived.[5]
- Nearly all areas with below-average gaps at age 16 started with small gaps at age 11. There are far fewer areas that managed to support their disadvantaged pupils to 'catch-up' in the secondary phase compared to the primary phase, though Kirklees, Windsor and Maidenhead, and Wokingham are notable exceptions.
- The reverse is true in the 'fade-out' areas of Kingston upon Hull, Newcastle upon Tyne, Sefton, Sunderland, and Wigan, which had below-average gaps at age 11 but above-average gaps by age 16 for the 2023 cohort. For example, Sefton and Bolton had the same age 11 gap (8.6 months) but by age 16, Sefton's disadvantaged pupils had fallen almost 7 months behind Bolton's (with a gap of 25.9 months).

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[4] Like London, Birmingham, Luton and Slough have more diverse pupil populations than England as a whole, including higher proportions of Pakistani pupils who tend to have smaller disadvantage gaps than most other ethnic groups. Education Policy Institute, 'EPI Annual Report 2024' (16 July 2024), https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-ethnicity-2/
[5] This is based on the proportion of disadvantaged pupils aged 11 in 2023 in our local authority dataset.

Conclusions

- Local areas that are doing well for their disadvantaged learners at one phase of education are in several cases doing well for their disadvantaged learners at the next, which suggests it may be possible to identify areas of potential best practice for disadvantaged learners across multiple age groups. However, many factors – including those which are not under the control of education providers, such as pupil demographics and local poverty rates – will affect educational outcomes and may mask that some areas are doing well for their disadvantaged learners 'against the odds'.

- It is well known that London's disadvantaged learners outperform those elsewhere but by assessing gap-trajectories as children progress through education, we have shone a new light on areas of strong performance. Local authorities like Birmingham, Luton and Slough are attaining well across their disadvantaged cohorts in 2023, as well as South Tyneside and Hartlepool (during the primary phase), and Trafford (during the secondary phase).

- It appears to become increasingly difficult when areas are already behind for their disadvantaged pupils to subsequently catch-up, reflected in there being far fewer 'catch-up' areas during the secondary phase than at the primary phase. This points to the importance of early intervention to support better educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils before they fall behind their peers.

- Yet we still see some areas where the gap in the early years and primary phases is relatively narrow but is then wider amongst older pupils. This highlights that early intervention is not enough and has to be accompanied by continued intervention to prevent further widening of inequalities.

Recommendations

- The government should prioritise early intervention to prevent large gaps from emerging during the early years and primary education.
- The government must combine it with continued interventions throughout secondary school and beyond to prevent further widening of the disadvantage gap.
- Further research is needed to understand the specific drivers of disadvantage gaps at different points in the education lifecycle and why some areas manage to catch-up, to help support more local areas to break the link between a child's background and their future success.

1. Introduction

Each year, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) publishes our estimate of the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers – a leading indicator of social mobility. Consistent with many other studies, this clearly shows that there are entrenched educational inequalities in England, with a sizeable disadvantage gap that exists at the point children start school and then widens as children progress in their education, see Figure 3.

Figure 3: The disadvantage gap across school phases in 2023
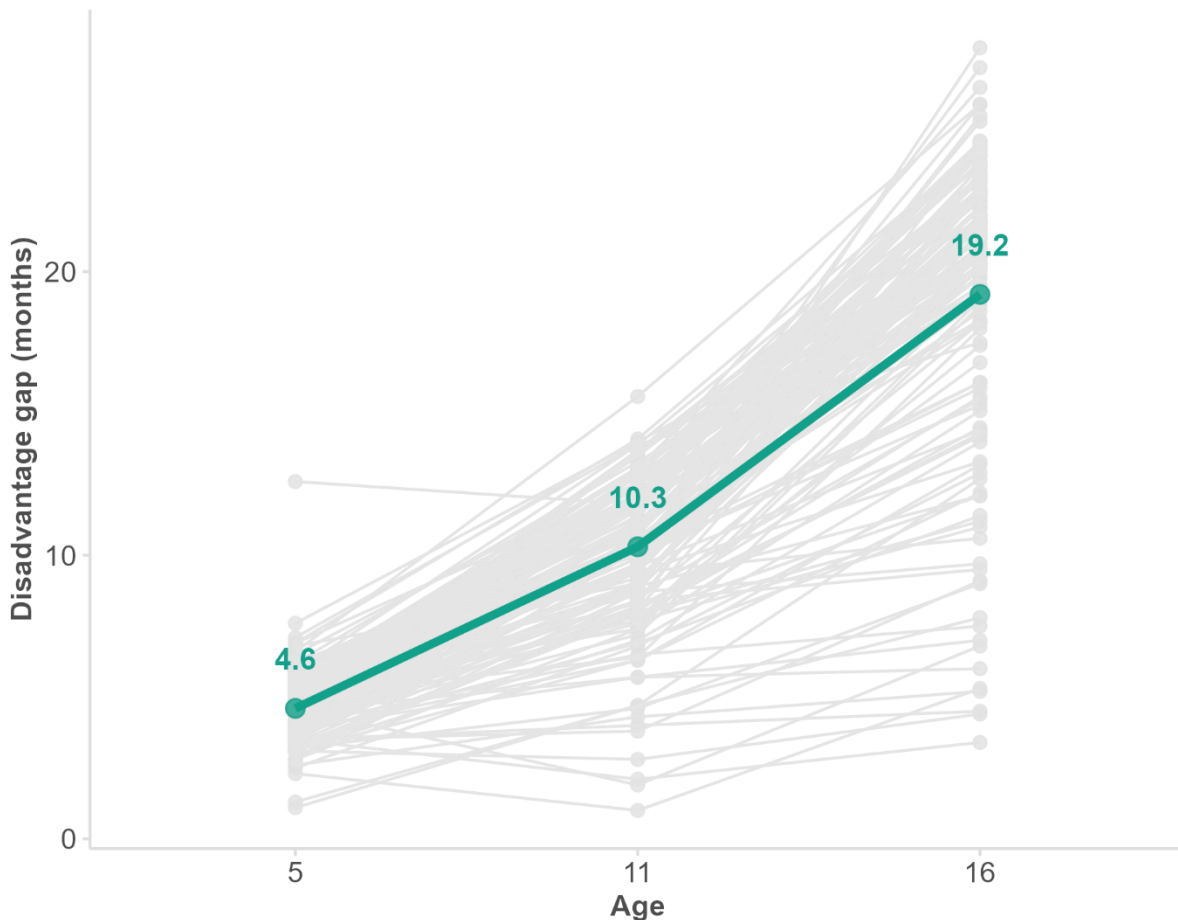
Notes: Green line represents national averages for England; grey lines represent individual local authorities

Yet, as the grey lines in Figure 3 show, there is a huge amount of variability in the gap depending on where children live. Disadvantaged children in London generally outperform those anywhere else and this gap between London and the rest of the country widens across phases. It is also the case that at a local level, gaps which can appear relatively narrow at age 5 can widen by later ages and in a small number of areas, the reverse is also true.

Outcomes vary in ways that indicate the presence of other influential forces at play. As Figure 4 suggests, local outcomes cannot be entirely explained by the proportion of disadvantaged children in an area: disadvantage gaps vary among areas with similar levels of disadvantage; some areas with high concentrations of children eligible for free school meals achieve relatively small

gaps; and the strength of the relationship seemingly varies by school phase. Taken together, this suggests that factors beyond the concentration of disadvantage itself—such as local policies, support, and leadership— may play an important role in shaping educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in their local area.

Figure 4: The relationship between concentration of disadvantage and disadvantage gaps in 2023

Note: Each dot represents a local authority
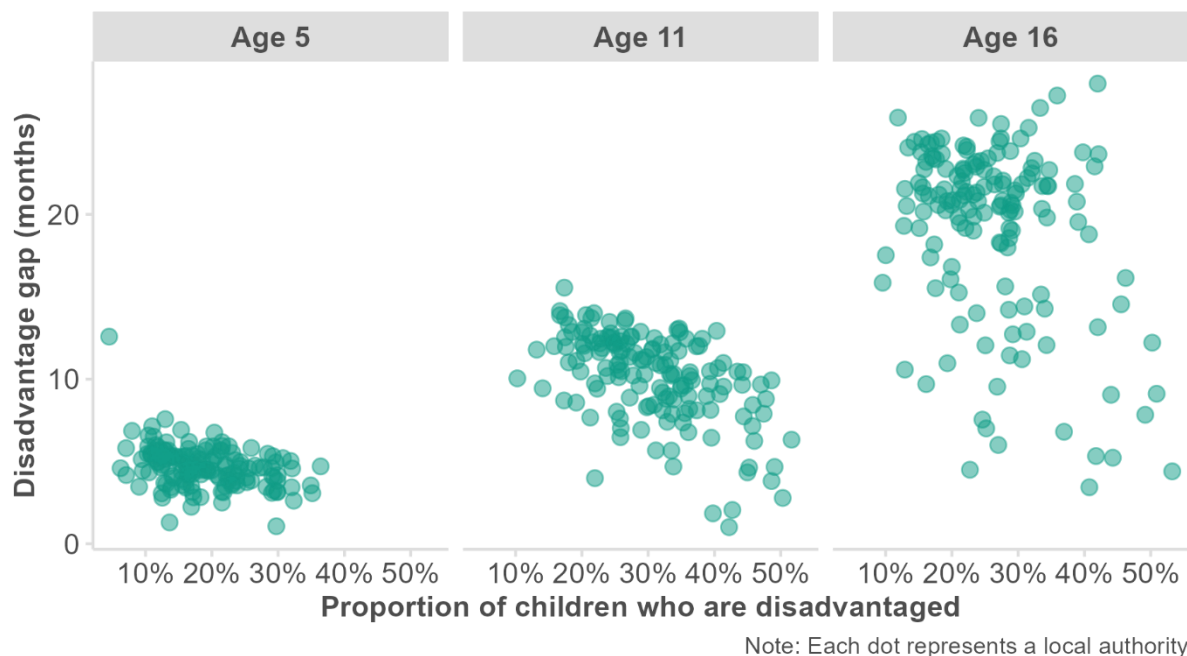
This report is the first in a project being conducted jointly by EPI, Isos Partnership and Mime Consulting, which aims to understand how different local factors influence attainment gaps across education phases, and to create new tools to support decisions about where and how to invest to have greatest impact. This publication, led by EPI, is the first of a series of publicly available outputs in our mixed-methods study. Together these ultimately will inform our understanding of the nature, and underlying drivers, of geographic inequalities, with the aim of narrowing gaps for some of the most disadvantaged children.

Through this report, we take a comprehensive look at disadvantage gaps at a local level to understand the parts of the country with the largest and smallest attainment gaps for their disadvantaged learners across education phases – specifically at ages 5, 11, 16 and in the critical 16-19 phase of education, the final stage of compulsory education. We focus on 2023 data as the most recent snapshot of local-level inequalities but also consider performance over the three-year period 2019, 2022 and 2023 to look through year-on-year volatility.

We consider the trajectory of disadvantage gaps across primary and secondary school phases (for the cohorts completing key stage 2 and key stage 4 in 2023) to identify areas where gaps are consistently small, large, start small and widen across phases, or vice versa, as children progress through their education. Through this within-cohort analysis, we aim to shine a new light on geographic inequalities and our understanding of the areas that face some of the biggest challenges in supporting their disadvantaged learners and those that stand-out as potential areas of best practice.

2. Methodology

Data sources and analysis plan

We use the National Pupil Database to study disadvantage gaps, focusing on pupils residing in England and attending a state-funded school. Our analysis excludes pupils whose sole (or main) registration is in alternative provision, pupil referral units, or hospital schools, as well as those attending independent schools.

For our analyses that are broken down by school phase, we focus on data from 2019, 2022, and 2023, as these represent the most recent years when assessments and exams were unaffected by the pandemic.

For our within-cohort analyses, we focus on the cohort who started primary school in reception year in 2017 and completed year 6 in 2023; and the older cohort who started secondary school in year 7 in 2018 and completed year 11 in 2023.

Our analysis builds on EPI's existing gap methodology for our annual reports which is based on pupils who are resident in an area at a given point in time. This approach means that our cohort analyses use snapshots of an LA's gap at two specific points in time (reflecting gaps at the start and end of the phase) rather than tracking individual pupils over time. We consider how compositional changes in the local population (i.e. families moving into and out of areas) could affect our results in the Annex, by exploring how differing levels of pupil mobility between year 6 and year 11 could affect LA rankings of GCSE disadvantage gaps.

Defining disadvantage

We define disadvantage based on eligibility for free school meals (FSM). Specifically:

- In reception, this is based on pupils eligible for FSM in the current academic year;
- In the primary and secondary school phases, it is based on pupils who are eligible for FSM at any point in the previous six years;
- In the 16–19 phase, where FSM data tends to be less reliable, disadvantage is based on whether a student was eligible for FSM at any point during the previous six years, as recorded at the end of secondary school.

Defining attainment

Early years foundation stage

To measure attainment at age 5, we use the statutory teacher-led assessments for the early years foundation stage (EYFS) profile that take place towards the end of reception year. Specifically, we use a pupil's total point score across twelve (out of seventeen) early learning goals which correspond to the Department for Education's 'good level of development' measure.[6] For each

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[6] These goals relate to five areas of learning: communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; physical development; literacy; and mathematics.

goal, children are assessed as either meeting the expected level of development at the end of reception year (score = 2) or not yet reaching this level (score = 1).[7] The total points score aggregates scores across these goals, giving a maximum possible score of 24 for pupils meeting the expected level in each goal.

Primary school

At the end of primary school, pupil attainment is measured by statutory key stage 2 assessments. We base our attainment measure on pupils' average scaled score in reading and maths. Scaled scores for these domains are derived from national test results and can take values between 80 and 120. We include teacher-assessed attainment scores for pupils who do not reach the lowest measurable test score, with scores ranging from 59 to 79, to ensure their inclusion in the point distribution.

Secondary school

To assess attainment at the end of secondary school, we measure pupils' average GCSE grade across English and maths. Pupils who fail or do not enter a relevant English or maths qualification by the end of Key Stage 4 receive a score of zero for that component.

16-19 phase

At the end of 16-19 study, we measure attainment as a total point score over students' best three qualifications, based on qualification size rather than number. We map all Level 1-3 qualifications onto the same scale, expressing the total point score in equivalent A-level grades.[8]

Calculating local disadvantage gaps

Local disadvantage gaps are calculated and expressed differently for pre-16 and post-16 phases:

- **Pre-16**: Disadvantage gaps are calculated by ranking all pupils by attainment and determining the mean rank for disadvantaged pupils in each local area. This is then compared to the national average rank of *non-disadvantaged* pupils. The rank difference is converted into 'months of learning' using a phase-specific scalar.[9] For the pre-16 phases, we base our analysis on pupils' area of residence rather than their school location.
- **Post-16**: The disadvantage gap is calculated by subtracting the mean total point score of disadvantaged students (based on their best three qualifications) in each local area from that of non-disadvantaged students nationally. This is then expressed in A-level grade

[7] Although the EYFS was reformed in 2021, we have adjusted our time series to allow us to compare 2023 and 2022 attainment data to earlier years.

[8] Tuckett, Bunting, Robinson, 'Measuring the Disadvantage Gap in 16-19 Education', Education Policy Institute, 2021, https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/disadvantage-gap-16-19-education/.

[9] Education Policy Institute, 'EPI Annual Report 2019 Technical Appendix' (Education Policy Institute, 30 July 2019), https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/EPI-Annual-Report-2019-Technical-Appendix.pdf; Education Policy Institute, 'Annual Report 2024', Methodology: Attainment methodology and changes since 2019, 16 July 2024, https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-methodology-2/.

equivalents. For this phase, we calculate disadvantage gaps based on school location rather than area of residence.

3. Which local authorities have the smallest and largest disadvantage gaps in recent years?

Early years foundation stage

Even at the point children start school, the gaps in the attainment of disadvantaged pupils across different local authorities in England are substantial. As context, nationally disadvantaged pupils at age 5 were 4.6 months behind their peers in 2023, an increase of 0.4 months since 2019.

Figure 5 displays the rankings of local authorities based on the size of their disadvantage gaps in recent years. This provides a snapshot of the areas of the country with the smallest and largest gaps 2019 and 2023, as well the biggest changes in rankings over this period. In 2023, the smallest gaps at age 5 were in the London boroughs of Hackney (with a gap of 1.1 months in 2023), Waltham Forest (1.3 months gap) and Newham (2.3 months). Of the ten local areas with the smallest disadvantage gaps, all were London boroughs except Thurrock and Slough. The local authorities with the largest gaps in 2023 were Rutland (with a gap of 12.6 months), followed by Bath and North East Somerset (7.6 months) and Windsor and Maidenhead (7.1 months).[10] None of the ten areas with the biggest gaps at age 5 were in the North except St Helen's.

We can also identify local authorities with more erratic patterns in their rankings in Figure 5 – specifically, those whose *ranking* improves or declines the most over the 2019-2023 period. For example, in 2019 Trafford was ranked at 40 based on its age 5 disadvantage gap but by 2023, its ranking had declined to 121. Meanwhile, Halton improved its ranking from 143 to 48 over this period.

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[10] Rutland's small number of disadvantaged pupils at age 5 means its disadvantage gap is subject to more volatility.

Figure 5: Local authority ranks for the disadvantage gap at age 5 in 2019, 2022 and 2023
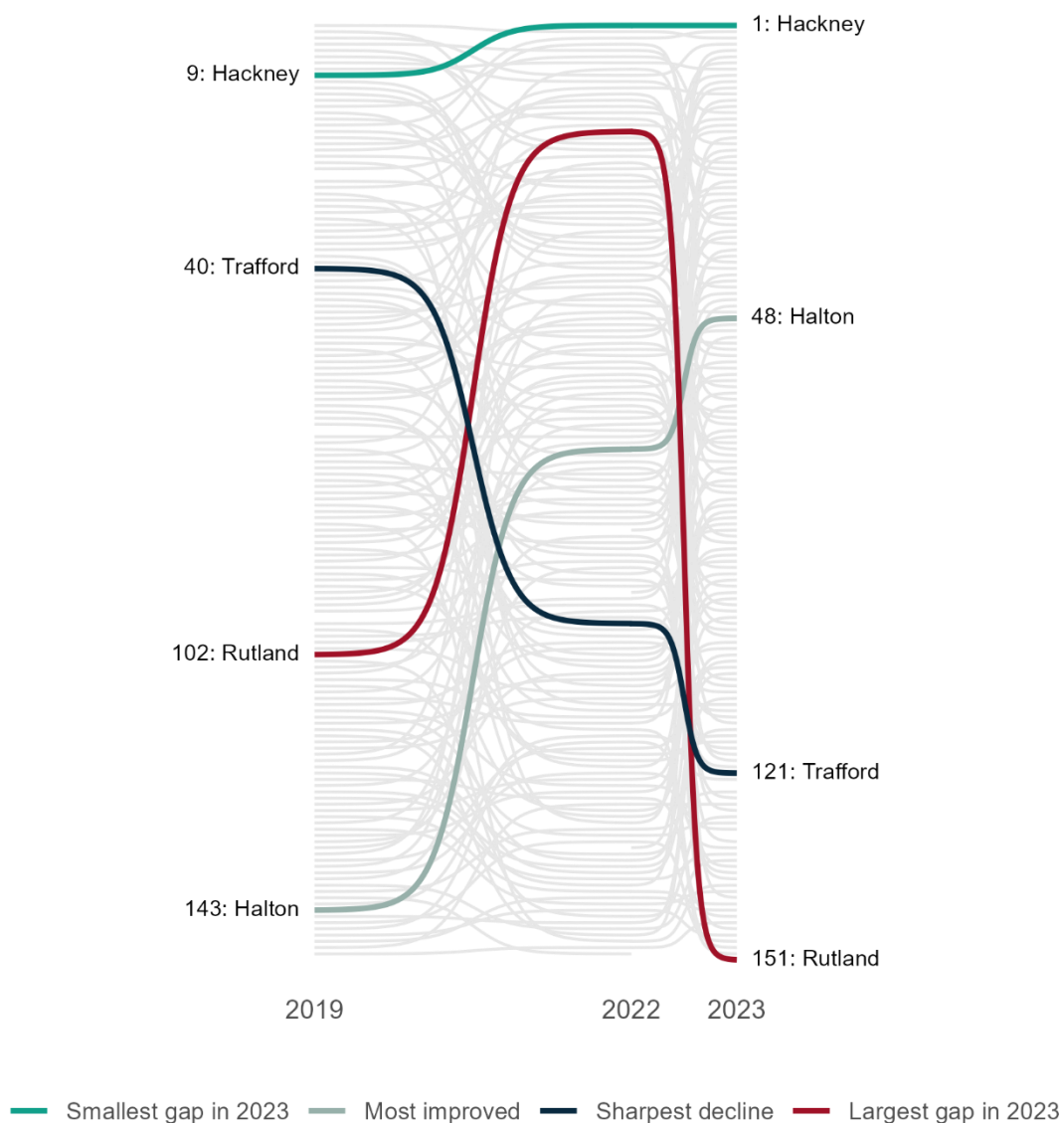
Looking across the period, we can consider which local authorities have consistently small or large disadvantage gaps in recent years which may provide a more reliable indicator of local inequalities than using a single year. If we consider areas that are in the top 15 local authorities in each of the years 2019, 2022 and 2023 (to approximate the top 10 per cent of local authorities), five local authorities emerge as consistently having the smallest gaps at age 5: Croydon, Greenwich, Hackney, Haringey and Newham. [11] This finding indicates that, consistent with previous studies,

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[11] For this part of our analysis, we restrict to those local authorities which exist in each of the three years 2019, 2022 and 2023.

disadvantaged children in London are starting primary school ahead of disadvantaged children living elsewhere.[12]

Turning to the bottom 15 local authorities in each year, there are three local authorities where disadvantaged children are consistently starting primary school behind disadvantaged children elsewhere in England: Central Bedfordshire, Dudley and West Berkshire.[13]

Primary school

Nationally the disadvantage gap at the end of primary school was 10.3 months in 2023, a whole month increase since 2019.

Of the 15 local authorities with the smallest disadvantage gaps in 2023, Redcar and Cleveland was the only area that was not in London. Newham had the smallest gap, at just one month, followed by Hammersmith and Fulham (1.9 months), Kensington and Chelsea (2.1 months) and Tower Hamlets (2.8 months). To put this in context, these areas had smaller gaps for their age 11 pupils than their age 5 pupils in 2023.

The only London borough with a gap (10.5 months) above the national average (10.3 months) in 2023 was Bromley. As in early years, Bath and North East Somerset had one of the three largest gaps at the end of primary school, at 14.0 months. West Berkshire and Central Bedfordshire were the only local authorities where the gap was larger, at 15.6 months and 14.1 months respectively. And consistent with the age 5 gap, of the ten local authorities with the largest gaps at age 11 in 2023, only one (North Yorkshire) was in the North.

Looking at the local authorities whose rankings changed the most over 2019-2023, we find that Dudley improved its relative position the most (from rank 146 in 2019 to 84 in 2023) whilst Shropshire declined the most (from rank 74 to 131).

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[12] Even if we expand our cut-off to 30 local authorities to capture the top quintile in each year, nearly all are London boroughs.

[13] Using the bottom quintile as our cut-off expands the list (by a further nine local authorities) but none of these are in London, again highlighting how well London performs for its disadvantaged pupils aged 5.

Figure 6: Local authority ranks for the disadvantage gap at age 11 in 2019, 2022 and 2023
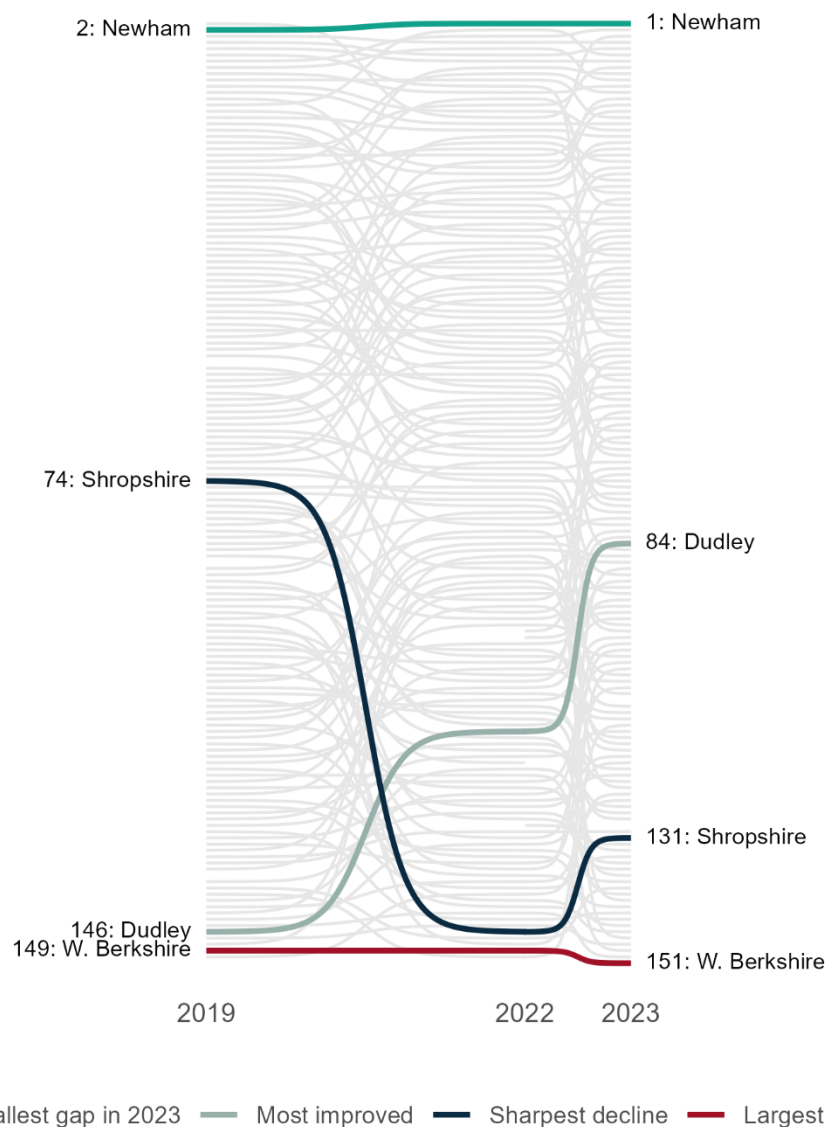
Looking across the period 2019-2023, the local authorities with consistently small disadvantage gaps at age 11 are: Camden, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Newham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest and Westminster. Newham also features on our list for having a consistently small gap at age 5. Turning to the local authorities which consistently struggle for their disadvantaged 11 year olds, these comprise: Central Bedfordshire, Oxfordshire, West Berkshire and Wiltshire – with Central Bedfordshire and West Berkshire also struggling at age 5.[14]

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[14] As before, this is based on being in the top or bottom 15 local authorities in each of the years 2019, 2022 and 2023 (to approximate the top or bottom 10 per cent of local authorities nationally each year) among the subset of local authorities in England that exist in each of these years.

Secondary school

Nationally the disadvantage gap at the end of secondary school was 19.2 months in 2023, an increase of over a month since 2019.

Again, the smallest gaps in 2023 were in London and all London boroughs had a gap below the national average. Kensington and Chelsea had the smallest gap (3.4 months) followed by Tower Hamlets (4.4 months) and Redbridge (4.5 months). All 25 local authorities with the smallest GCSE disadvantage gaps in 2023 were London boroughs – with Slough and Birmingham making it into the top 30.

In contrast to earlier phases, by age 16, the North West region features among areas where disadvantaged pupils are furthest behind their peers in 2023. Specifically, four of the six local authorities with the largest gaps in 2023 were in the North West: Blackpool (27.9 months), Knowsley (27.2 months), Sefton (25.9 months) and St. Helens (25.5 months). The other two were Portsmouth (26.5 months) and West Berkshire (25.9 months) completing this list.[15]

Looking at the local authorities whose gap rankings at age 16 changed the most over 2019-2023, Peterborough improved its relative position the most (from a rank of 143 in 2019 to 68 in 2023) whilst Medway declined the most (from rank 53 to 132).

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[15] These areas have markedly different levels of deprivation: whilst West Berkshire has one of the lowest proportions of disadvantaged pupils at age 16 (12 per cent), the opposite is true for Blackpool (42 per cent), Knowsley (36 per cent) and Portsmouth (33 per cent) which are among the fifth most deprived local authorities in England.

Figure 7: Local authority ranks for the disadvantage gap at age 16 in 2019, 2022 and 2023
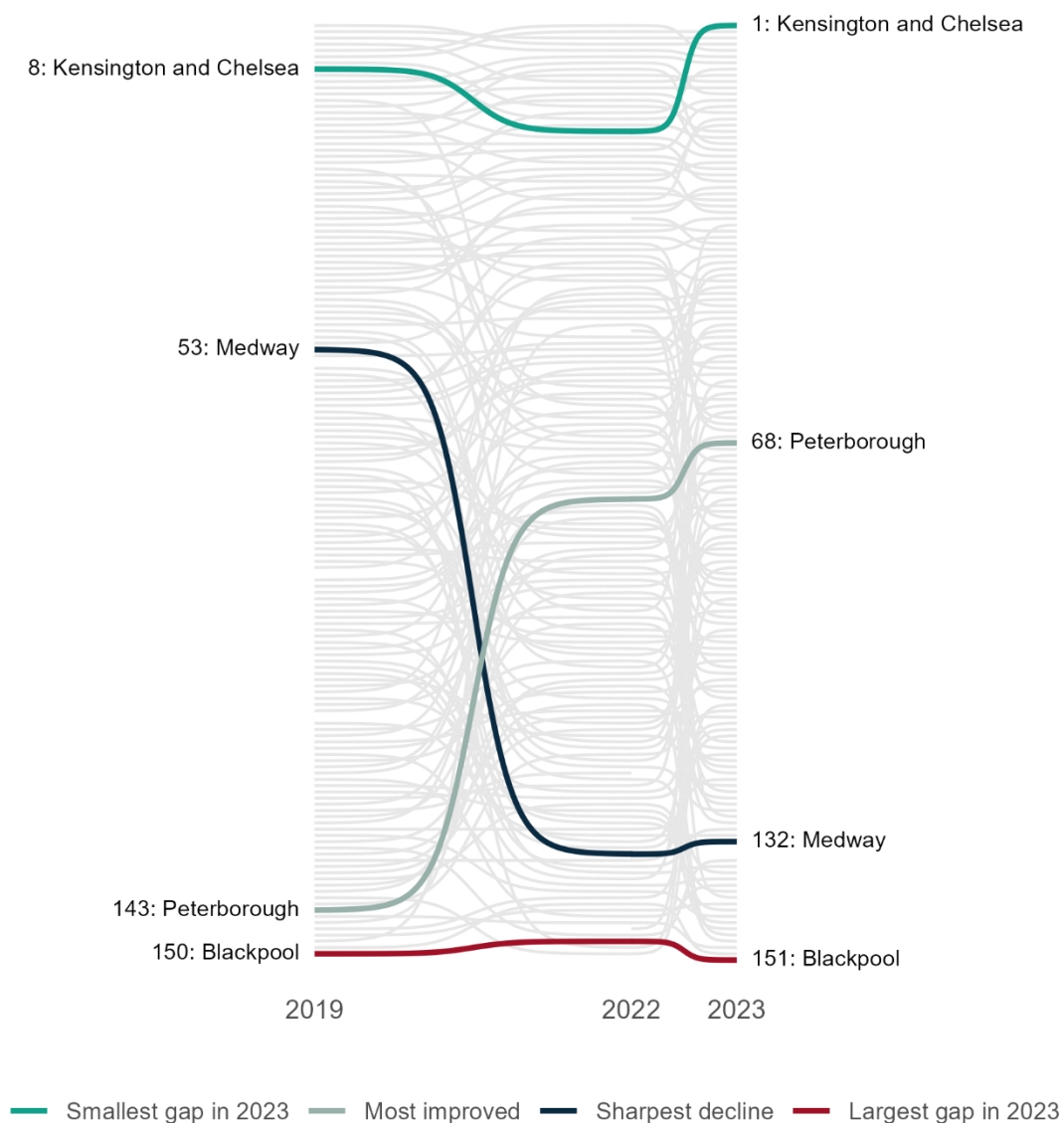
Looking across the period 2019-2023, there are ten local authorities with consistently small disadvantage gaps at age 16: Barnet, Camden, Ealing, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Newham, Redbridge, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, and Westminster. Seven of these are the same ones we identified as attaining well for their disadvantaged pupils at age 11 (with Barnet, Southwark and Hackney the exceptions, though Hackney features on our age 5 list). Meanwhile the local authorities which consistently struggle for their disadvantaged 16 year olds over 2019-2023 are Blackpool, Derby, Knowsley and Portsmouth.

16-19 education

Nationally the disadvantage gap at the end of 16-19 education in 2023 was 3.2 grades—the only phase whose gap remains unchanged since 2019.

As for earlier phases, London boroughs tended to have amongst the smallest 16-19 disadvantage gaps in the country. In 2023, many local authorities, such as Thurrock and Southwark (-1.8 grades),

Sutton (-1.6 grades), Ealing (-1.2 grades) and Islington (-1.1 grades), had negative gaps meaning that their disadvantage students had higher attainment than the average non-disadvantaged student nationally. There is a less clear pattern regarding the widest 16-19 disadvantage gaps. In 2023, the five local authorities with the widest gaps were Hartlepool (5.5 grades), Torbay (5.4 grades), Portsmouth (5.3 grades), Derby (5.2 grades) and Bedford (5.2 grades).

Looking at the local authorities whose 16-19 gap rankings changed the most over 2019-2023, Thurrock – which had the smallest gap nationally in 2023 – displays a striking improvement, having ranked 114 in 2019. Meanwhile, Windsor and Maidenhead declined the most (from rank 47 to 132). These changes are larger than the variability for earlier phases which may reflect that 16-19 education is also susceptible to changes in qualification choice and participation decisions among young people.

Figure 8: Local authority ranks for the disadvantage gap in 16-19 education in 2019, 2022 and 2023
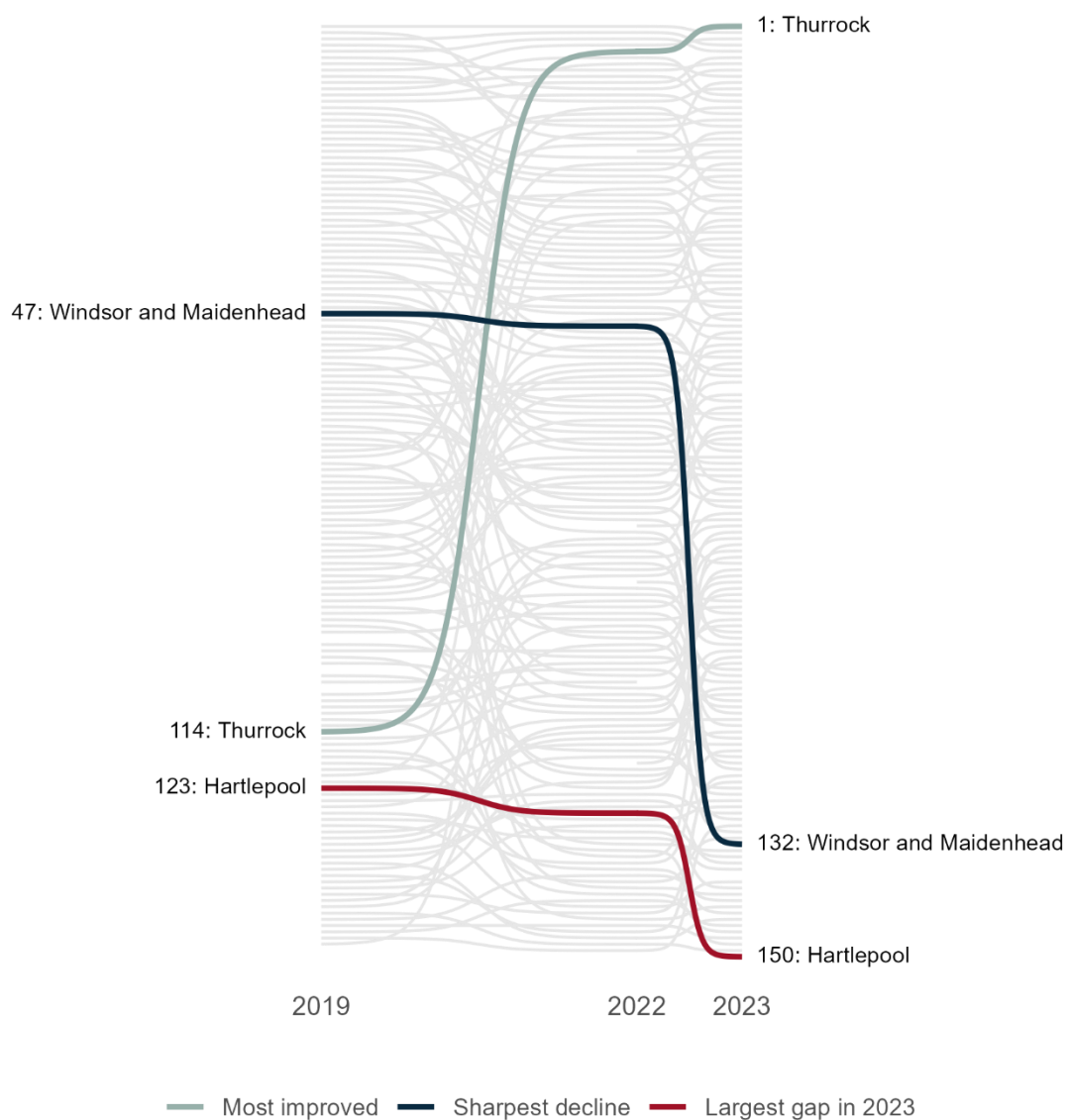
Looking across the period 2019-2023, there are 11 local authorities with consistently small disadvantage gaps in 16-19 education: Bexley, Brent, Ealing, Hackney, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Merton, Redbridge, Southwark, Sutton and Wokingham. Four of these also attain well for disadvantaged pupils during at least one previous key stage (Ealing, Hackney, Redbridge and Southwark). Meanwhile the local authorities with consistently large 16-19 gaps over 2019-2023 are Barnsley, Derby, Stockton-on-Tees, Swindon and Torbay. None of these except Derby appear in our earlier lists indicating that areas with the largest gaps tend to change as pupils move through the system, whilst the areas with the smallest gaps continue to be London-dominated.

4. How do disadvantage gaps change within cohorts for those completing primary and secondary school in 2023?

Our analysis so far has considered the size of local disadvantage gaps for individual phases of education in 2023. By construction, these snapshots capture different cohorts of children. In this section we consider trajectories of disadvantage gaps within the same cohort of children, as they progress through schooling up to age 16.[16] As we do not have enough data to follow the same cohort of children from reception year to year 11, we do this in two stages. We track the cohort who started primary school in reception year in 2017 and completed year 6 in 2023; and the older cohort who started secondary school in year 7 in 2018 and completed year 11 in 2023. For this within-cohort analysis, we are only able to include the subset of 144 local authorities that have the same geographic boundaries over this period.

Primary school phase

Nationally the disadvantage gap widens as children progress in their education, from 4.1 months among pupils who were aged 5 in 2017 to 10.3 months by the time these pupils completed primary school aged 11 in 2023 — an increase of 6.2 months. Previous EPI research, as well as many other studies, have considered the complex factors that explain why disadvantaged children fall further behind their peers as they get older.[17]

In Figure 9, we chart local authorities according to the size of their disadvantage gaps at age 5 in 2017 and age 11 in 2023. The bottom-left quadrant comprises those local authorities with small gaps at both the start and end of primary school compared to the national average. These areas have a small gap at the point their disadvantaged children start school which they are then able to maintain to age 11, such as Hammersmith and Fulham, Newham, Redbridge and Tower Hamlets. In the case of Newham, it is remarkable that for the 2023 cohort, the gap is virtually unchanged between the ages of 5 and 11 whilst in Tower Hamlets – along with Camden and Kensington and Chelsea – the gap actually reduces. In other words, these four London boroughs are unique in bucking the national trend of gap—widening over the primary phase for the 2023 cohort.[18] London dominates the areas with below-average gaps at the start and end of the primary phase in Figure 9, though within this we do find around one-third are outside of the capital, including Birmingham,

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[16] It is not straightforward for us to create gap trajectories beyond age 16 because our gap measure is constructed on a different basis for key stage 5, using grades rather than months of learning.

[17] Whitney Crenna-Jennings, 'Key Drivers of the Disadvantage Gap Literature Review. Education in England Annual Report 2018' (Education Policy Institute, July 2018), https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/EPI-Annual-Report-2018-Lit-review.pdf.

[18] Whilst it is generally true that some local authorities manage to close the gap between the ages of 5 and 11, there is noise in terms of the specific areas this applies to in any given cohort. For the 2019 cohort, there are 18 local authorities where the gap closes, whilst in the 2022 cohort, there is only one.

Hartlepool, Slough and South Tyneside (each with a gap that grows by under 5 months over the primary phase, compared with an increase of 6.2 months nationally).[19]

Figure 9: Local authorities' disadvantage gaps at age 5 and age 11, for the cohort completing primary school in 2023
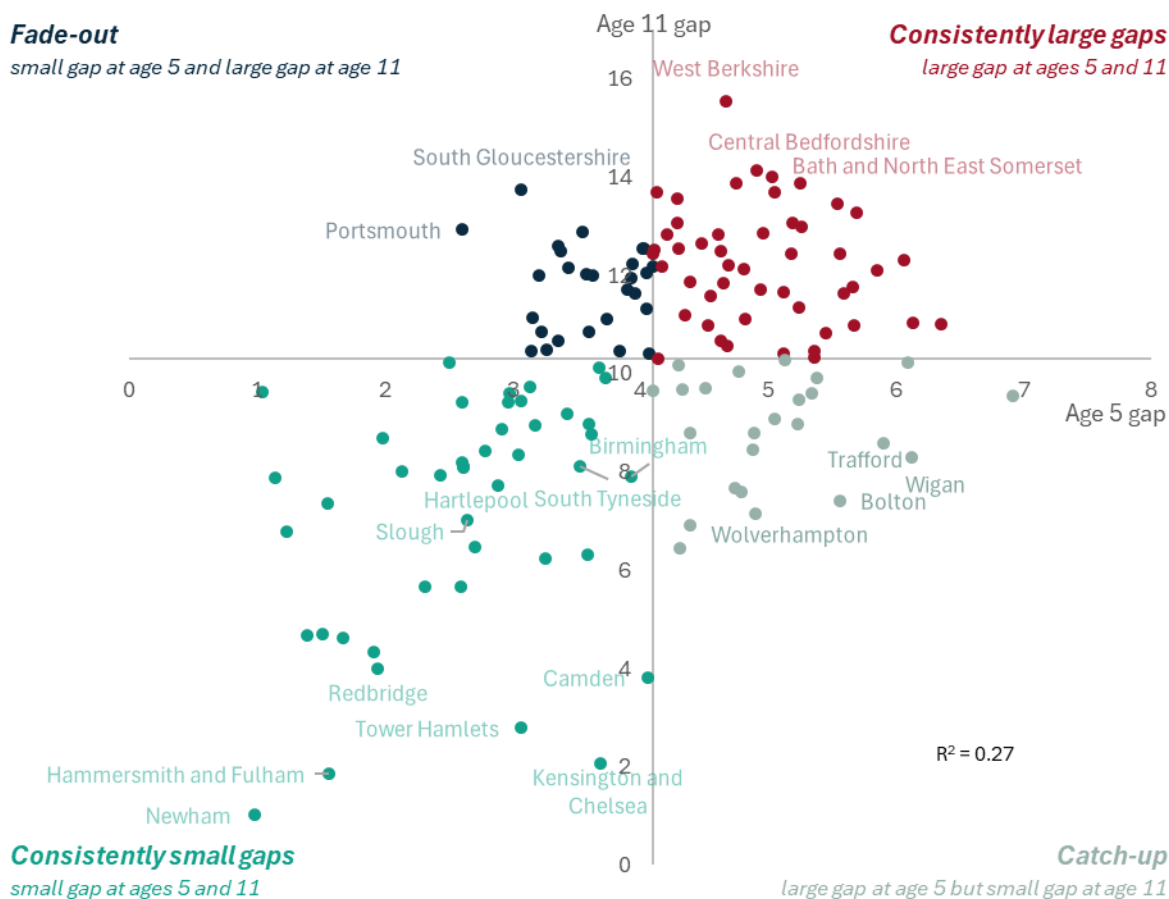
This contrasts with areas in the top-left quadrant which, despite having below-average gaps at age 5, end up with above-average gaps at age 11. Two areas with notable 'fade-out' over the primary phase for the 2023 cohort are South Gloucestershire and Portsmouth.[20] South Gloucestershire has an age 5 gap of 3.1 months, the same as Herefordshire. But by age 11, South Gloucestershire's gap has widened to 13.8 months, compared to 9.7 months in Herefordshire. Similarly, Portsmouth has an age 5 gap of just 2.6 months – the same as Slough and Luton – but by age 11, it has widened to 12.9 months, compared to 7.0 months in Slough and 8.1 months in Luton.

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[19] The full list outside London with below-average gaps at the start and end of the primary phase for the 2023 cohort is: Birmingham, Bury, Darlington, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Herefordshire, Luton, Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne, North East Lincolnshire, North Tyneside, Slough, South Tyneside, Thurrock and Torbay.

[20] Of the local authorities included in our analysis, Portsmouth experiences the biggest decline in its ranking based on the size of its disadvantage gaps at ages 5 versus 11. Its relatively small age 5 gap means Portsmouth starts with rank 20 but its subsequent fade-out means by age 11, it ranks just 131.

The top-right quadrant comprises those local authorities with large gaps at ages 5 and 11 compared to the national average. Those in the outer-edges of this quadrant include Bath and North East Somerset, Central Bedfordshire and West Berkshire, all of which have a gap that grow by at least 9 months over the primary phase.

This contrasts with local authorities in the bottom-right quadrant — including Bolton, Trafford, Wigan and Wolverhampton — whose disadvantaged pupils all start school well behind other disadvantaged pupils nationally but then subsequently 'catch-up', relative to the progress made by other disadvantaged pupils. [21] For example, Wolverhampton has the same age 5 gap as Central Bedfordshire (4.9 months), and a similar gap to West Berkshire (4.7 months), but by the time pupils reach age 11, the gap in Central Bedfordshire and West Berkshire is roughly twice as high (14.1 months and 15.6 months, respectively) as in Wolverhampton (7.2 months).

Secondary school phase

Nationally, the disadvantage gap continues to widen over the course of secondary school phase. For the 2023 cohort, the national gap widened by a full 10 months, from 9.2 months among pupils who were aged 11 in 2018 to 19.2 months by the time these pupils completed secondary school aged 16. Figure 10 shows how local authorities compare in terms of their disadvantage gaps at age 11 and 16.

Several of the local authorities with the smallest gaps at ages 11 and 16 — that are in the most bottom-left hand corner of the chart — are the same ones as for the primary phase. Areas like Kensington and Chelsea, Newham, Redbridge and Tower Hamlets are therefore attaining consistently well for their disadvantaged pupils across the primary and secondary phases. Redbridge is unique in being the only local authority which achieved a smaller gap at the end of secondary school (at 4.5 months) than at the start (5.5 months) for the 2023 cohort.

As for the primary phase, London dominates the areas in Figure 10 with below-average gaps at the start and end of the secondary phase for the 2023 cohort, though once again, Birmingham, Luton and Slough feature on this list, as well as Trafford (each with a gap that grows by under 9 months over the secondary phase, compared with a 10 month increase nationally).[22] Exploring how ethnicity intersects with disadvantage gaps has been considered extensively in the context of London's success[23] and is beyond the scope of this report, though it is notable that Birmingham, Luton and Slough are much more diverse than England as a whole with particularly high

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[21] Of all the local authorities included in our analysis, Bolton experiences the biggest improvement in its ranking based on the size of its disadvantage gaps at ages 5 versus 11. It is ranked at just 132 at age 5 but its disadvantaged pupils make such rapid progress during primary school that Bolton climbs to rank 22 by age 11.

[22] Of the local authorities with below-average gaps at the secondary phase, around one-quarter are outside London: Birmingham, Bolton, Leicester, Luton, Manchester, Redcar and Cleveland, Slough, Stockton-on-Tees, Thurrock, Trafford, Warrington and Wolverhampton. Five of these local authorities also have small gaps at the primary phase (i.e. ages 5 and 11) for the 2023 cohort: Birmingham, Slough, Luton, Manchester and Thurrock.

[23] For example, see Simon Burgess, 'Understanding the success of London's schools', The Centre for Market and Public Organisation Working Paper No.14/133 (October 204), https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cmpo/migrated/documents/wp333.pdf

proportions of Pakistani pupils, as well as Indian pupils in Slough, Bangladeshi pupils in Luton, and Black African pupils in Birmingham.[24]

Figure 10: Local authorities' disadvantage gaps at age 11 and age 16, for the cohort completing secondary school in 2023

Nearly all of the areas with small gaps at age 16 started with small gaps at age 11. In other words, it appears to be hard when areas are already behind for their disadvantaged pupils at age 11 to subsequently catch-up. Kirklees, Windsor and Maidenhead, and Wokingham are the three notable exceptions which do display rapid 'catch-up' for their disadvantaged pupils during secondary school such that despite starting behind at age 11, their gaps are below average by age 16.

The reverse is true in areas like Kingston upon Hull, Newcastle upon Tyne, Sefton, Sunderland and Wigan.[25] Despite having below-average gaps at age 11, this head start 'fades-out' by age 16 resulting in above-average gaps by the end of secondary school. For example, Sefton and Bolton have the same age 11 gap (8.6 months) but by age 16, Sefton's disadvantaged pupils have fallen

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[24] Department for Education, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics Academic year 2023/24' (6 June 2024), https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-thier-characteristics.

[25] Of the local authorities included in our analysis, Sefton experiences the biggest decline in its ranking between the ages of 11 and 16. Sefton's below-average disadvantage gap at age 11 means it starts with rank 56 but due to its subsequent fade-out, it ranks just 141 by age 16.

almost 7 months behind Bolton's (with a gap of 25.9 months, compared to just 19.0 months in Bolton).

The gap-increase in Sefton during the secondary school phase is second only to Blackpool and Knowsley which stand out as having large gaps at both 11 and 16 years, along with Bedford, Portsmouth and West Berkshire. But the underlying challenges are different.

In Bedford and West Berkshire, big gaps have already emerged by age 11 (of 14.5 months and 16.7 months, respectively). In the case of Bedford, it actually does well at mitigating against the 'expected' national gap increase that is seen over the secondary phase. But in Blackpool and Knowsley, disadvantaged pupils start behind the national average (with gaps of 9.7 months and 9.4 months, compared to 9.2 months nationally) but of key concern is the markedly slower progress made by these pupils during the secondary phase such that they have fallen a further 18 months behind disadvantaged pupils nationally by age 16.[26]

In conclusion, looking across the two phases, there is a closer association between the size of the gap at the start of the phase and how the gap subsequently evolves over the phase, during secondary school than at primary school. This is reflected in the tighter bunching of local authorities in the bottom-left and top-right quadrants in the secondary phase (Figure 10) than the more random scattering of local authorities in the primary phase (Figure 9).

It appears to become increasingly hard to catch-up once areas fall behind for their disadvantaged pupils, with many fewer 'catch-up' areas at the secondary phase compared to the primary phase. It underscores the importance of early intervention in supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils before these children fall behind their peers and large gaps emerge. Yet the emergence of distinct 'fade-out' areas that struggle for their disadvantaged pupils at older age groups – having attained well for younger age groups – highlights that early intervention is not enough. It has to be accompanied by later intervention to prevent further widening of inequalities during secondary school and beyond.

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[26] It is also notable that these areas differ markedly in terms of their levels of pupil deprivation – for example, West Berkshire is the eighth least deprived local authority in England and Blackpool the eighth most deprived (based on their respective proportions of disadvantaged pupils at age 11 in 2023).

Annex

Annex A: How do changes to the pupil population impact local attainment gaps?

We conducted sensitivity analysis to assess whether changes in the makeup of the local pupil population could influence the local authority (LA) rankings. The cohort analyses use snapshots of an LA's gap at two specific points in time rather than tracking individual pupils over time, which means that changes in the makeup of the local population (e.g. families moving into an area *because* of its schools) could influence results. In this Annex, we focus on pupils finishing secondary school in 2023. We use the annual Spring census returns to identify the local authorities where pupils live each of the six years between year 6 and year 11. We then restrict the cohort to pupils who live in the same LA between year 11 and year 6 (100 per cent of the time) and compare the results to those based on pupils who live in the LA where they sit their GCSEs for at least five years, four years, three years, two years, and one year.

To put this in context, most pupils (90.4 per cent) remain in the same LA between year 6 and year 11 (see Fig A1). Once we remove local authorities where boundaries have changed, the average proportion of time spent in the same LA ranges from 98.6 per cent to 93.0 per cent across areas (see Fig A2). This narrow range suggests that mobility is relatively low overall, though there is some variation. Some areas, such as Wirral, City of Bristol, and Sheffield show (relatively) higher stability, with most pupils staying in the same LA almost entirely. In contrast, areas such as Havering, Barking and Dagenham, and Bexley had higher levels of mobility, albeit marginally.

Fig A1: Proportion of cohort who finished secondary school in 2023 living in the same local authority
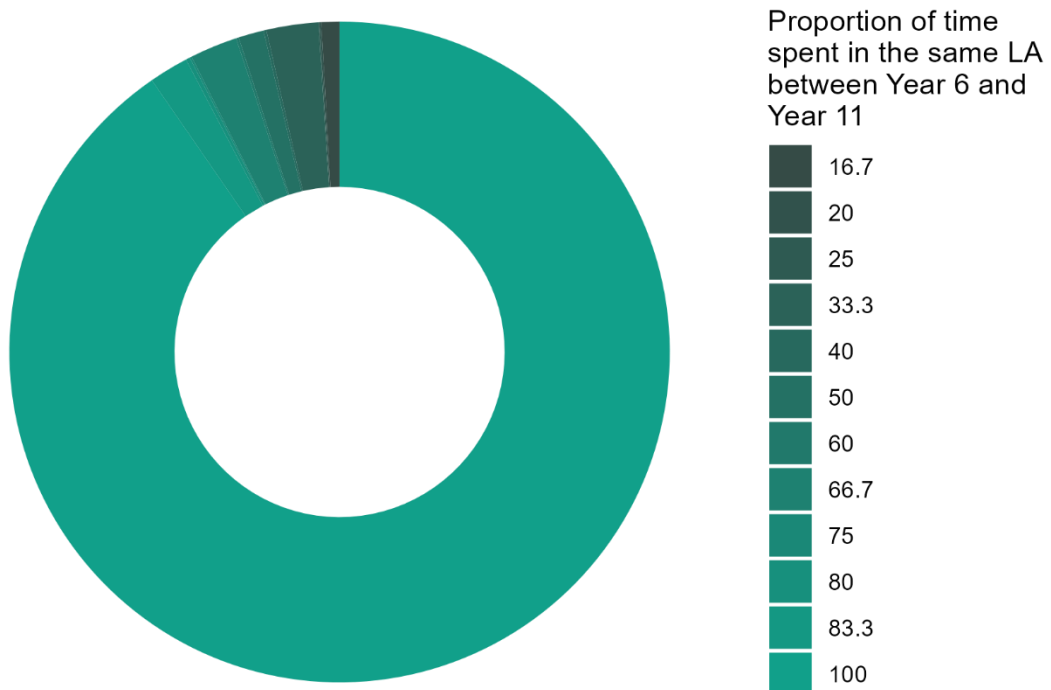

Proportion of time spent in the same LA between Year 6 and Year 11

- 16.7
- 20
- 25
- 33.3
- 40
- 50
- 60
- 66.7
- 75
- 80
- 83.3
- 100

Fig A2: Average levels of mobility in a local authority

Average levels of mobility in an LA — forest plot showing average levels of mobility with confidence intervals by Local Authority.

Local Authorities (top to bottom): Stoke-on-Trent, Oldham, Hertfordshire, Middlesbrough, Calderdale, Kent, North Tyneside, Hampshire, Tower Hamlets, Stockport, Gateshead, Nottingham, Reading, Southwark, Manchester, Stockton-on-Tees, Portsmouth, Cornwall, Plymouth, East Sussex, Cambridgeshire, Devon, Derby, Milton Keynes, County Durham, North Lincolnshire, Rochdale, Lincolnshire, Hackney, Trafford, Rotherham, Newcastle upon Tyne, Bedford, Surrey, Nottinghamshire, Barnsley

Note: Error bars refer to 95% Confidence Intervals

Figures A3 and A4 show rankings vary based on pupil mobility levels, starting with those who consistently lived in the same LA from year 6 to year 11, down to those who lived in the LA for only their final year (Year 11). Filtering the results to this group—which, importantly, is the largest group—shows overlap with the national rankings.[27] For example, Kensington and Chelsea, Redbridge, and Tower Hamlets consistently appear as the LAs with the smallest gaps and Blackpool, Knowsley and Portsmouth appear as the LAs with the largest gaps, reinforcing the idea that mobility generally has limited effect on rankings in most cases, at least at the top and bottom ends of disadvantage gap performance.

However, as we filter our cohort to more mobile pupils (e.g. moving down to cohorts who have only lived in the LA for one year), the rankings begin to shift. This could reflect greater uncertainty due to smaller sample sizes as the mobility threshold widens. Alternatively, it could also point to the differing characteristics of mobile pupils, which may influence outcomes in complex ways. For instance, some mobile pupils may come from highly engaged families who relocate for specific schooling opportunities, whilst others may move as a result of challenges such as housing instability. These competing effects of mobility on outcomes, as well as the reasons underpinning them, require further investigation to fully understand their impact on rankings.

Fig A3: Local authorities with smallest GCSE gaps in 2023 and how it varies by levels of pupil mobility

LAs with the smallest gaps in 2023	Ranking if…					
	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 6 years	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 5 years	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 4 years	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 3 years	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 2 years	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 1 year
Kensington and Chelsea	Redbridge	Westminster	Southend-on-Sea	Kensington and Chelsea	Hounslow	Hackney
Tower Hamlets	Kensington and Chelsea	Kingston upon Thames	Islington	Kingston upon Thames	Havering	Newham
Redbridge	Tower Hamlets	Newham	Ealing	Barking and Dagenham	Tower Hamlets	Hillingdon
Westminster	Westminster	Tower Hamlets	Luton	Merton	Coventry	Redbridge
Newham	Newham	Southend-on-Sea	Brent	Islington	Luton	Wolverhampton
Ealing	Ealing	Ealing	Lewisham	Redbridge	Central Bedfordshire	Greenwich
Hammersmith and Fulham	Barnet	Havering	Barnet	Newham	Merton	Barking and Dagenham
Merton	Hammersmith and Fulham	Peterborough	Redbridge	Luton	Harrow	Havering
Barnet	Merton	Barking and Dagenham	Westminster	Hounslow	Kirklees	Bexley
Hackney	Hackney	Merton	Harrow	Lewisham	Newham	Enfield

[27] These results only include the subset of local authorities that have the same geographic boundaries over this period.

Fig A4: Local authorities with the largest GCSE gaps in 2023 and how it varies by levels of pupil mobility

LAs with the largest gaps in 2023	Ranking if…					
	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 6 years	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 5 years	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 4 years	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 3 years	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 2 years	Filtered to cohort living in LA for at least 1 year
Blackpool	Blackpool	Newcastle upon Tyne	Middlesbrough	Coventry	Stoke-on-Trent	Leicester
Knowsley	Knowsley	Sefton	South Gloucestershire	Walsall	Sunderland	Knowsley
Portsmouth	Portsmouth	Isle of Wight	Cheshire East	Plymouth	West Berkshire	Portsmouth
West Berkshire	St. Helens	Oldham	North Yorkshire	Derby	Telford and Wrekin	Salford
Sefton	Central Bedfordshire	Brighton and Hove	Plymouth	Blackpool	Nottingham	Leeds
St. Helens	Sefton	Halton	Cheshire West and Chester	Blackburn with Darwen	Nottinghamshire	Barnsley
Stoke-on-Trent	Telford and Wrekin	East Riding of Yorkshire	Derby	Rochdale	Lancashire	Kirklees
Telford and Wrekin	Stoke-on-Trent	Sunderland	Nottinghamshire	Leicester	Blackpool	Lewisham
Somerset	Oxfordshire	Cheshire East	Stockton-on-Tees	Liverpool	Camden	Gateshead
Derby	West Berkshire	Leeds	Stoke-on-Trent	Sunderland	Cambridgeshire	Cheshire West and Chester