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Investigating educational disadvantage and place-based approaches in the North East of England

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About the Education Policy Institute

The Education Policy Institute is an independent, impartial, and evidence-based research institute that promotes high quality education outcomes, regardless of social background. We achieve this through data-led analysis, innovative research and high-profile events.

About Durham University

Founded in 1832, Durham is England's third oldest university. It is an international institution comprising 27 departments across four faculties (Social Sciences, Science, Arts & Humanities and Business School), with over 4,300 staff and around 21,500 students. All students belong to one of 17 colleges, which provide a unique, supportive environment to inspire them to become the best they can be, in their studies and beyond. Durham is a member of the Russell Group of leading, research-intensive UK universities, with academics conducting innovative and impactful research that makes a difference globally and locally. 90% of the University's research is classed as world-leading or internationally excellent, according to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the assessment of UK research quality, which last reported in 2021.

Durham's School of Education, in particular, is known for its world leading research on tackling educational inequalities and promoting inclusive educational practices and successful outcomes. Research from the School of Education rated second best nationally in the Research Excellence Framework 2021, impacts regionally, nationally and internationally; from shaping education policy and practice, to developing educational research, to informing school improvements and contributing to the professional development of teachers and practitioners around the world.

About the North East combined Authority

The North East Combined Authority exists to serve the people of the region by delivering the Mayor's manifesto in line with the devolution deals agreed with government. Our purpose is to create a better North East on their behalf, ensuring people here have access to opportunity and that the economy thrives.

Kim McGuinness is the first North East mayor. She was elected on a manifesto dedicated to creating the infrastructure of opportunity, with a plan to end child poverty and create local, well-paid jobs across the region.

As Mayor, Kim has committed to creating a North East that goes beyond net zero with climate change policies that change lives, where there is a good home for everyone, whether you rent or own and a well-paid job enjoyed by a skilled workforce backed by strong trade unions.

Kim's economic plan for the North East will be based on three key strands;

- improving the foundational economy
- delivering on the green jobs revolution
- making regional pride a key economic driver with investment in arts and music, culture and sport.

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It should be noted that this report reflects a range of discussions and views, and not necessarily the views of the authors.

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Executive summary

This paper draws together reflections from a series of roundtables investigating educational disadvantage and the opportunities place-based solutions offer to tackle them in the North East of England. The series comprised of three roundtables: the first looked at understanding and acting on the drivers of regional educational inequalities in the North East; the second focused on the role of local partnerships in addressing these gaps and the third and final event considered what the findings of the first two discussions means for place-based policy, both at a local and national level.

The below outlines key points from the discussion alongside participant recommendations for future reform.

Educational inequalities in the North East of England

- There is significant disadvantage in the North East. Children growing up in the region have a lower life expectancy, are more likely to be born into disadvantaged contexts, are more likely to perform poorly in secondary education, are more likely to become NEET (not in education, employment, or training) and are more likely to experience child poverty.
- In education, EPI research shows that in 2023, by the end of Key Stage 4 the disadvantage gap in the North East was 21.6 months, above the national average of 19.2 months. This is despite the NE having a smaller gap at the end of primary school (of 9.5 months) than the national average (10.3 months).¹ The disadvantage gap is a measure of how far disadvantaged pupils, or those who are eligible for free school meals at any point over the preceding six years, are behind their peers in months of learning.
- However, once pupil intake characteristics and prior attainment are accounted for, schools in different economic regions do not have different outcomes for equivalent pupils.² Rather it was suggested that the North East's disparities are due to the number of disadvantaged pupils and a lack of both historic and current social mobility within the region.
- This is important as it demonstrates the size of this disadvantage gap is not a question of poor institutions. The North East does well compared to other regions with similar levels of

¹ Tuckett et al. "Annual Report 2024: Geographic Disadvantage Gaps." 2024. <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-geographic-disadvantage-gaps/>.

² Gorard and Siddiqui. "How Trajectories of Disadvantage Help Explain School Attainment." 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018825171>

disadvantage in terms of inspection outcomes and is particularly successful in attracting and developing high-performing school leaders in comparison to other regions.³⁴

- That said, there remains much work to be done to address the educational and wider inequalities in the region.

Factors outside of education

- Participants highlighted that challenges in the provision of wider services make closing the disadvantage gap harder, including the inconsistent observation of the 2-year development check; national and local funding cuts and limited and expensive transport, citing examples of young pupil choosing which further education college to go to depending on whether they could get there by bus.
- The North East also has the highest rate of public sector employment across the nine regions of England, making the area particularly vulnerable to the impact of national and local government cuts.⁵
- Overall, schools in the region are providing extensive non-educational support services to families living in poverty and there was significant concern that in a tighter fiscal climate, this crucial support might be further reduced, undermining educational efforts.
- As ever, it was agreed the education sector cannot close these gaps alone. The engagement from political representatives around the table was welcomed, alongside the recognition of the importance of high-quality housing and transport, wider services around children and families and increasing economic prosperity more generally across the region.

Challenges within schools

- There are also challenges within schools that affect the experiences and outcomes of children and young people, including a lack of resources; difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, particularly in disadvantaged schools; and struggles with literacy.
- Many participants felt that the accountability system is having detrimental impacts on the system, including a narrowed curriculum offer, deskilling of teachers and leaders and disincentives for inclusive practice. It was felt that in the current system, it takes significant

³ EPI analysis of Ofsted. “State-Funded Schools Inspections and Outcomes as at 31 December 2024.” GOV.UK. 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2024>.

⁴ Cardim Dias and Zuccollo. “Networks of Headteachers and Schools.” 2024. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/networks-of-headteachers-and-schools/>.

⁵ Office for National Statistics. “Public Sector Employment.” Office for National Statistics. 2025a. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/publicsectorpersonnel/datasets/publicsectoremploymentreferencetable>.

bravery to run a school in the best way for its staff and pupils, as opposed to meeting inspection standards.

- Participants recognised that Ofsted is currently reviewing its inspection measures and there may be change for the better in future. For this to be the case, it was felt that doing well on attainment and being inclusive cannot be at odds with each other.
- School absence was also identified as a critical issue, mirroring national trends. Participants expressed some frustration with messaging from national policy representatives to focus on those pupils who are less severely absent. It was felt that the crisis of children not attending 50% or more of school needs more attention as well, but that supporting these children to re-engage with school is a challenge to justify financially as there is not enough funding available to make material change.
- Finally, participants described a lack of shared definition regarding what inclusive practice looks like, making meeting children’s needs more difficult.

Supporting vulnerable pupils

- SEND provision was identified as the “biggest challenge of our time” with research shared showing increasing academic achievement gaps over time for most SEND categories in reading, writing and maths.⁶
- Participants called for greater collaboration between local multi-academy trusts and local authorities concerning vulnerable pupils, with trusts taking on more responsibility for inclusion and, when a pupil is excluded, remaining involved while a decision is made over where the child goes next, with the support of the LA.

Potential solutions

- Alongside outlining key issues facing the education sector in the North East, participants considered what can be done to improve outcomes at a local level, particularly in areas where the North East Combined Authority (NECA) may be able to intervene or offer support.
- NECA has allocated £5 million in funding for an Excellence in Education programme and this paper offers suggestions for potentially fruitful areas for investment.⁷

⁶ Daniel, Johnny. “The Academic Achievement Gap between Students with and without Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.” 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2024.2400771>.

⁷ North East Combined Authority. “Mayor to Back Schools with £5m Funding to Give Children the Best Start in Life.” 2025. <https://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/news/education-skills-and-inclusion/mayor-to-back-schools-with-5m-funding-to-give-children-the-best-start-in-life>.

- Reflecting many national issues, areas identified for greater support at the regional level included:
 - More training for teaching assistants (TAs), particularly given they are often working with more vulnerable pupils, either with SEND or who otherwise need one-to-one support.
 - More support for leaders in terms of training and CPD so they can feel confident to take calculated risks and make choices that are in the best interests of their pupils.
 - A more well-defined collective understanding of inclusion and trauma-informed approaches, so these concepts become embedded in school praxis.
 - A greater focus on attendance and how to ensure children can re-engage with school, particularly those with the highest rates of absence, not just those who may be easier to get back into school.

- Regarding disadvantage, it was strongly felt that measures aiming to end segregation by socioeconomic status should be introduced, spreading the disadvantaged pupil population more evenly across schools. This would then have a knock-on effect on teacher recruitment and retention. Participants also called for an expanded definition of disadvantage, beyond FSM eligibility, which captures children who are not currently eligible for statutory support, such as young carers. It was acknowledged that much of this would require changes to national policy, including primary and secondary legislation that determines funding formulae.

- It was felt NECA is in a unique position to look across the system and advocate for inclusive practices through their messaging, partnerships and potentially through limiting access to funded programmes unless an institution is meeting required standards.

- Participants also highlighted the value of partnerships with institutions outside of schools including local colleges, universities and third sector organisations. They called for the continuation and expansion of cross sector-partnerships and suggested this may be one example where other regions could learn from the North East's example.

Further research

- Participants called for further research to investigate and identify high-quality local practice and how this can be scaled up within the region and shared with other areas.

- The combined authority, with its links to LAs, trusts and schools, has a significant opportunity to develop, test and lead evidence generation that can inform school practice, local and national policy.

Introduction

The evidence body is increasingly clear that where a child grows up matters; educational and other outcomes differ by geography, particularly for the most disadvantaged pupils.

In the North East, children have a lower life expectancy, are more likely to be born into disadvantaged contexts, more likely to perform poorly in secondary education and more likely to become NEET (not in education, employment, or training).⁸ The North East has had the highest rate of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) of all regions since 2014. This currently stands at 16%.^{9,10}

Children in the North East are also more likely to experience child poverty. In the UK, 4.5 million children are growing up in relative poverty, or 9 in an average classroom of 30 children.¹¹ Between 2014-2021, the UK's child poverty rate increased by almost 20%, the largest increase in any of the 39 higher and upper-middle income countries reported on by UNICEF.¹² In the North East, 30% of children are living in relative poverty and in 89% of North East constituencies, 25% or more of children are living in poverty.¹³

Building on both a collective interest in tackling educational inequalities and timely opportunity to act on these issues given the movement towards further devolution expressed in the English Devolution White Paper, in Spring 2025, the Education Policy Institute partnered with Durham University and the North East Combined Authority (NECA) to hold a series of expert roundtables investigating potential drivers of geographic educational inequalities and their implications for place-based policy, using the North East Combined Authority area as a case study. This area includes the following local authorities: County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside and Sunderland.

The series included three roundtables: the first looked at understanding and acting on the drivers of regional inequalities in the North East; the second focused on the role of local partnerships in addressing these gaps and the third and final event considered what the findings of the first two discussions meant for place-based policy, both at a local and national level, building on EPI's

⁸ The Health Foundation. "Local Healthy Life Expectancy at Birth by Region and Sex." 2025. <https://www.health.org.uk/evidence-hub/health-inequalities/local-healthy-life-expectancy-at-birth-by-region-and-sex>.

⁹ Department for Education. "NEET Age 16 to 24: Calendar Year 2022." 2023. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/neet-statistics-annual-brief/2022>.

¹⁰ Learning and Work Institute. "Three in Five Young People Who Are Neither Learning nor Working Have Never Had a Paid Job, New Analysis Finds." 2025. <https://learningandwork.org.uk/news-and-policy/three-in-five-young-people-who-are-neither-learning-nor-working-have-never-had-a-paid-job-new-analysis-finds>

¹¹ Child Poverty Action Group. "Poverty: Facts and Figures | CPAG." 2024. <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/poverty-facts-and-figures>.

¹² UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight. "Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth: Innocenti Report Card 18." 2023. <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/3296/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-18-Child-Poverty-Amidst-Wealth-2023.pdf>.

¹³ Loughborough University. "Child Poverty across the UK." 2024. <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/End-Child-Poverty-Briefing.pdf>.

analysis of geographic disparities, Durham University's research base and NECA's intentions and policy resource to make meaningful change in the region.

This paper draws together reflections from the wide-ranging discussions, touching on issues felt across England; the extent to which they are felt more acutely in the North East and some which are specific to the region and offers participant recommendations for how to improve education for pupils and staff in the North East.

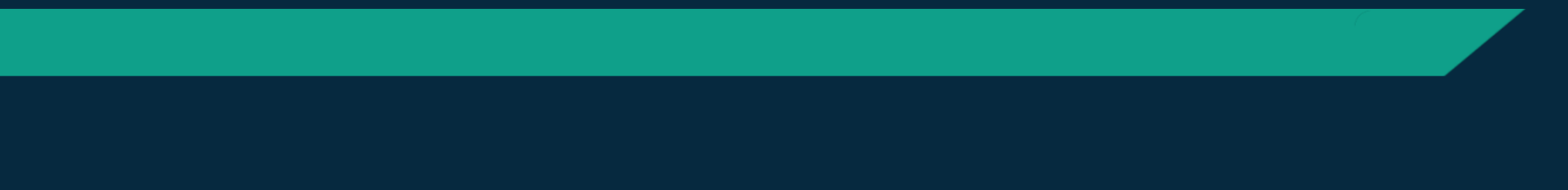
More widely, the paper also touches on the opportunities presented by the move towards further devolution and how place-based policy might offer solutions to the challenges identified. In the English Devolution White Paper, the Government sets forth a “generational project of determined devolution,” aiming to achieve universal coverage in England of Strategic Authorities and facilitate Mayors to prioritise funding according to the needs of their region through integrated settlements among others, in order to boost economic growth and unlock opportunity for all. As far as education is concerned, devolution efforts so far have focused on skills and the post-16 phase but this trajectory does offer opportunities for pre-16 education too through greater regional partnership working; strategic leadership and the sharing of best practice.

For example, NECA has allocated £5 million for a three-year Excellence in Education programme¹⁴ to drive up education standards, through interventions to improve attendance; support children’s reading, writing and maths outcomes; retain teachers and provide extra-curricular activities. This paper also aims to offer insights into how this funding may be used for the benefit of the region.

We are grateful to Durham University and the North East Combined Authority for supporting this work and to all participants for their contributions.

¹⁴ North East Combined Authority. “Mayor to Back Schools”.

Part 1:
Educational
inequalities in the
North East of
England



Educational inequalities in the North East of England

EPI's 2024 annual report breaks down geographic inequalities in educational outcomes by region, parliamentary constituency and local authority (LA). The analysis finds stark disadvantage gaps in some areas. The disadvantage gap is a measure of how far disadvantaged pupils, or those who are eligible for free school meals at any point over the preceding six years, are behind their peers in months of learning. Nationally, the disadvantage gap at the end of Key Stage 4 was 19.2 months in 2023, whereas in the North East the gap was 21.6 months. This is despite the North East having a smaller gap at the end of primary school (9.5 months) than the national average (10.3 months), potentially suggesting that something is going well in primary schools but the picture grows more challenging as pupils move through secondary education.¹⁵

Looking more closely, EPI's 'Local Disadvantage Gaps in England' report examines how gaps change as pupils move through educational phases by LA. This report highlights a similar trend, finding that Newcastle, North and South Tyneside all have below-average gaps at both age 5 and 11 for their 2023 cohort, however in Newcastle and Sunderland, despite having below-average gaps at age 11, by the time pupils leave secondary schools, these gaps have increased to larger than the national average.¹⁶

However, as Durham University research has noted, once pupil intake characteristics and prior attainment are accounted for, there is no evidence that schools in different economic regions have different outcomes for equivalent pupils.¹⁷ In other words, a disadvantaged child does not do worse in the North East than if they lived in any other region. The researchers at the round tables went on to suggest that the North East's disparities are due rather to the number of disadvantaged pupils and a lack of both historic and current social mobility within the region.

The Social Mobility Commission publishes information on social mobility by region across four different measures including prospects for young people; childhood conditions; labour market opportunities and innovation and growth.

For each of these measures, a local authority is classified in one of five groups from least to most favourable. Across these four measures, no local authority in the North East does better than the 'middle' group, meaning there are no LAs in the 'favourable' or 'most favourable' groups across any of these four indicators of social mobility.¹⁸

This is important because...

¹⁵ Tuckett et al. "Annual Report 2024".

¹⁶ Hunt and Joseph. "Funding Futures: Targeting Early Investment so All Children Can Reach Their Potential about the Education Policy Institute." 2024. <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/EPI-Local-Disadvantage-Gaps-in-England-FINAL-1.pdf>.

¹⁷ Gorard and Siddiqui. "How Trajectories of Disadvantage Help Explain School Attainment." 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018825171>

¹⁸ Social Mobility Commission. "Conditions of Childhood - Social Mobility Commission State of the Nation." 2024. https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/drivers_of_social_mobility/composite_indices/conditions_of_childhood/latest.

... it is not a question of institutions

These persistent disadvantages exist despite improvements in institutional performance metrics. Schools in the region are receiving increasingly positive Ofsted gradings; EPI analysis of Ofsted data finds an 18% change in the proportion of schools rated 'Good' in 2018 compared to the proportion of schools rated 'Good' in 2024; this is the largest increase across England's regions during this period.¹⁹

Moreover, EPI research on the movement of headteachers and future headteachers throughout their careers suggests that the North East does particularly well in attracting and developing the best performing secondary school headteachers, with a fifth of the secondary schools developing top headteachers and a quarter recruiting them to the region.²⁰

This evidence suggests that the challenges are not primarily about underperforming institutions but rather about deeper structural and societal issues. This distinction was emphasised as crucial for developing effective interventions.

Factors outside of education

Factors outside of education emerged as a prominent theme in the discussion with participants identifying challenges in the provision of wider services that make closing the attainment gap even more difficult. Please note that the below is not an exhaustive list but rather synthesises the key points made by participants.

Participants identified the early years as a crucial phase for intervention, but that statutory checks are not always observed. Participants shared anecdotal evidence of lack of support from health visitors, where 2-year development checks are carried out online and children are not seen consistently by the same Health Visitor. Research suggests that roughly 1 in 4 children may be missing this vital check, with children from deprived backgrounds or in local authority care less likely to have these checks recorded than other children.²¹ The early years are crucial in setting children up to achieve and experiences in the first five years of life have significant impacts on

¹⁹ EPI analysis of Ofsted. "State-Funded Schools Inspections and Outcomes as at 31 December 2024." GOV.UK. 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2024>. To note, some of this change may be due to the number of outstanding schools decreasing by 7% during the same time period.

²⁰ Cardim Dias and Zuccollo. "Networks of Headteachers and Schools." 2024. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/networks-of-headteachers-and-schools/>.

²¹ Fraser et al. "Variation in Health Visiting Contacts for Children in England: Cross-Sectional Analysis of the 2–2½ Year Review Using Administrative Data (Community Services Dataset, CSDS)." 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-053884>.

later outcomes; EPI research that finds that around 40% of the GCSE disadvantage gap is already present by the time a child is five years old.²²

Secondly, participants highlighted the impacts that local funding cuts have had on communities, including the closure of leisure centres, libraries and youth centres. In 2022, local authorities in the North East spent a combined £951,131,000 on neighbourhood services; this is around £19.5m lower than the amount spent in 2013.²³ Research from the Local Trust highlights the incidence of ‘doubly disadvantaged’ communities, where socioeconomic deprivation has combined with closures of social infrastructure, such as community spaces and youth clubs, to create a double penalty that makes closing the gap even harder. The research shows that people living in these neighbourhoods experience significantly lower attainment, worse health outcomes and fewer employment opportunities, even in comparison to areas with similar levels of deprivation but which are less isolated from access to local services and community spaces. Of the 206 wards identified in the research, 13.3 per cent are in the North East, the highest percentage of any region.²⁴

The North East also has the highest rate of public sector employment across the nine regions of England²⁵, which one participant mentioned made the area particularly vulnerable to the impacts of national and local government cuts. The latest employment data shows that the North East has the lowest rate of employment across England.²⁶

Finally, multiple participants raised concerns over the impact of limited or expensive transport within the region, citing examples of young pupil choosing which further education college to go to depending on whether they could get there by bus. Similarly, examples were given of young people choosing to go to a college that performed less well because they could get a free bus there, as opposed to having to pay to go to another, better option which was further away. Participants called for the two combined authorities in the North East to work together to support young people living on the border to ensure they can get back and forth between combined authority areas easily. Since June 2024, the Tees Valley Combined Authority have matched NECA’s offer for 21 and under travellers (£1 for a single ticket and £3 for a day ticket), so it is now possible

²² Hutchinson, Jo, and John Dunford. “Divergent Pathways: The Disadvantage Gap, Accountability and the Pupil Premium.” 2016. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/divergent-pathways-disadvantage-gap-accountability-pupil-premium/>.

²³ McLinden and Fyans. “Level Measures: A Modern Agenda for Public Service Integration.” 2023. <https://localis.org.uk/research/level-measures-modern-agenda-public-service-integration/>.

²⁴ Local Trust, and Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion. “Left Behind?”

²⁵ Office for National Statistics. “Public Sector Employment.” Office for National Statistics. 2025a. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/publicsectorpersonnel/datasets/publicsectoremploymentreferencetable>.

²⁶ Office for National Statistics. “Labour Market in the Regions of the UK.” 2025b. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/april2025>.

to use cross boundary services for the same fare across the whole region. This scheme is funded until December 2025 using Bus Service Improvement Plan funding.²⁷

Overall, several participants, particularly those working directly in schools, emphasised that while high-quality teaching is essential, children's basic needs must be addressed first for any educational interventions to succeed. Schools in the region are providing extensive non-educational support services to families living in poverty, including child and family workers and attendance support officers, and there was significant concern that in a tighter fiscal climate this crucial support might be reduced, undermining educational efforts. One participant noted that schools can have the same quality teaching and brilliant leadership regardless of disadvantage levels, but outcomes significantly depend on the level of wider disadvantage students experience.

Mayor Kim McGuinness has recognised that child poverty is a major challenge and has already taken steps to tackle its drivers since the creation of NECA in summer 2024, including the creation of the Child Poverty Reduction Unit; a £50 million package to help those who face health and disability barriers to find and stay in work and collaboration with LAs to auto-enrol pupils for free school meals.²⁸

Ultimately, education outcomes depend on many factors beyond schools, requiring coordination across phases between early years, schools, further and higher education and between local authorities, combined authorities, national government, and other partners such as the third sector and employers to tackle issues, support early intervention and build suitable education and skills pathways. One participant observed that a person's perception of public services is only as good as their worst interaction, emphasising the need for cohesive approaches across all services. The education sector cannot close these gaps alone and participants recognised the importance of high-quality housing and transport, wider services around children and families and increasing economic prosperity more generally across the region. The trajectory of further devolution offers potential opportunities to take a more place-based approach across many of these key issues.

²⁷ North East Combined Authority. "Get Round for £1." 2024. <https://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/getround>.

²⁸ North East Combined Authority. "Child Poverty Reduction Unit." 2025. <https://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/child-poverty-reduction-unit>.

Challenges within schools

Participants also discussed challenges within schools that impact the experiences and outcomes of children and young people. Once again, this list is not exhaustive but speaks to the priorities of the expert participants at the discussions.

Teacher recruitment and retention

The Education Endowment Foundation identifies great teaching as the most important lever schools have to improve pupil attainment.²⁹ Yet, teacher recruitment and retention emerged as a significant challenge. Participants noted difficulties in attracting and keeping talented teachers in disadvantaged schools, with the system seemingly geared to drive teachers toward schools that need them least. EPI research finds stark differences in how experienced teachers are represented in the most, and least deprived schools in England; those teaching in disadvantaged secondary schools having approximately 3 years less experience than those in affluent schools.³⁰

Disadvantaged communities outside of London are also far less likely to have a qualified teacher in maths and physics. In the worst-off schools outside of London, fewer than 1 in 5 of physics teachers have a relevant degree.³¹ While not broken down by region, this research speaks to the challenge of getting qualified teachers where they are needed most.

Research from Durham University shows that there is not a shortage of people wanting to teach in England, suggesting that the current shortage of staff is a result of more complex factors, requiring more nuanced policy solutions and a greater understanding of the drivers involved in individuals' decision-making on whether to enter the profession.³²

Educational resources

School leaders highlighted the challenge of supporting children to learn when the resources they have available at home are limited. One trust representative outlined how many of their Year 11 pupils did not have access to pens, paper and textbooks at home, making studying and learning outside of school a challenge. While the school aims to provide them with the necessary tools, the school leader also mentioned how technology can act as a leveller as all their pupils have mobile phones. While they acknowledged that the use of phones is not the same as reading a book, they

²⁹ Education Endowment Foundation. "High-Quality Teaching." 2023.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/support-for-schools/school-planning-support/1-high-quality-teaching>.

³⁰ Cardim Dias et al. "Closing the Workforce Quality Gap." 2025. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/closing-the-workforce-quality-gap/>.

³¹ Sibieta, Luke. 2018. "The Teacher Labour Market in England." Education Policy Institute. August 30, 2018.

<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-teacher-labour-market-in-england/>.

³² See et al. "Tackling Teacher Shortages: Doing the Right Thing at the Right Time and with the Right Evidence." 2023.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-818630-5.04084-7>.

felt it was “better than nothing” and highlighted the importance of marginal gains, recommending facilitating access to e-books and audio books through online county library services.

Literacy

Literacy, particularly vocabulary development, was identified as a critical area for intervention. One participant noted the strong correlation between vocabulary at ages 7 and 13 with later educational outcomes. Reading comprehension was described as necessary but not sufficient for success across the secondary curriculum, with the specialised vocabulary of different subjects becoming increasingly challenging as students progress through Key Stages 3 and 4. The transition from Year 6 to Year 7 was highlighted as particularly problematic, with many young people struggling with subject-specific vocabulary despite having adequate general reading comprehension. Durham research shows that teachers’ knowledge of reading instruction in England is high, particularly in phonics, but challenges arise in translating theory into practice, offering insights into where the policy answers to this challenge lie.³³

The accountability system

The impacts of the accountability system were extensively discussed. Some participants criticised how performance tables drive behaviour in secondary schools, leading to a restricted curriculum that may not meet all students’ needs. The impact of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), which encourages schools to focus on core subjects aimed at academic progress, and Progress 8 measures, which compare relative progress from Key stage 2 to GCSE, was questioned, with suggestions that well-intentioned accountability measures might be having unintended consequences, including a narrowed curriculum offer, deskilling of teachers and leaders and disincentives for inclusive practice. There were also concerns about the reduction in vocational offerings and post-16 options, limiting pathways for students who might not thrive in traditional academic routes.

Participants recognised the system is currently being reviewed but were concerned about the risk that under the new proposed framework, a school may either do well academically or be inclusive but not both.

High-quality leadership was described as critical for driving change within schools. However, it was felt that in the current system, it takes significant bravery to run a school in the best way for its staff and pupils, as opposed to meet inspection standards.

Participants also highlighted the differing leadership approaches across the region’s schools and the impact this has on pupils. It was felt that there is a lack of shared definition of what inclusive

³³ Johnny et al. “A Comparative Analysis of Preservice Teachers’ Knowledge of Reading Instruction and Their Confidence in Supporting Struggling Readers: A Study of India and England.” 2025. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15040442>.

practice looks like, particularly regarding behaviour approaches and thresholds for sanctions; some schools focus entirely on attainment, to the detriment of some pupils.

There were calls, echoing those across the sector and recognised by the Government and Ofsted through proposed reforms to the curriculum and accountability system, for a wider understanding of what success looks like, taking into account progress as well as destination.

At the same time, another participant highlighted that Ofsted should not be the lever to improve school standards. Rather their role should be to highlight schools' strengths and weaknesses and then other bodies should step in to support an institution to improve.

Supporting vulnerable pupils

Building on the above, inclusion was a major focus across the three roundtables. The next section outlines participant discussion of SEND, absence and home education within the North East context.

SEND

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision was identified as "the biggest challenge of our time." Durham University research shows that since 2014 when the Children and Families Act and the SEND Code of Practice (2015) were introduced, there has been a concerning trend of increasing academic achievement gaps over time for most SEND categories in reading, writing and maths, compared to peers without SEND.³⁴ The research highlights a lack of access to continuous professional development (CPD) for teaching assistants (TA) as a contributing factor; without CPD, it is a challenge to implement the most up-to-date evidence-based support for pupils.

The number of hours a child spends with a TA is determined by their education, health and care plan (EHCP) for those with the most complex needs. For pupils with lower-level SEND, the school themselves may provide some TA support. The research suggests that while lots of time is spent and there is well-meaning effort, the pedagogy underpinning these interactions is not always sound. Participants discussed the huge range of professional backgrounds TAs come from with some not having the necessary qualifications to support pupils, particularly given the low salary, meaning the role may not be particularly attractive to more highly-qualified candidates. These challenges are compounded by a lack of access to training and support. It was felt this situation may be particularly pronounced in special schools, though more research is needed to map out the landscape of TAs across the school system. Participants recommended better access to CPD

³⁴ Daniel, Johnny. "The Academic Achievement Gap between Students with and without Special Educational Needs and Disabilities." 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2024.2400771>.

for teaching assistants in order to improve outcomes and meet the TA deployment strategies recommended by the Education Endowment Foundation.³⁵

Participants also discussed how mainstream schools are struggling to support children with complex needs who previously would have attended special schools. In particular, participants considered the rise of ‘trauma-informed approaches’, which seek to understand children’s previous experiences of trauma to understand drivers of behaviour rather than simply addressing symptoms. It was felt that there was a significant lack of training on these approaches and what is available is often an e-learning module, after which schools say they take a trauma-informed approach but, according to participants, these approaches may not be fully embedded. This can then lead to pupils needs not being met or increased use of disciplinary measures including suspensions and exclusions.

The North East has both the highest rate of pupil suspensions and of permanent exclusions of any region in England.³⁶ It is likely therefore that a greater proportion of pupils with SEND are interacting with the disciplinary system and being taken out of school. Nationally, the rate of suspensions for pupils with SEN support is four times higher than for pupils with no identified SEND.³⁷

Absence

Absence is a critical challenge for the sector. Nationally, while absence rates have been decreasing, they still remain worryingly high post-pandemic. The latest DfE data release shows that more than 170,000 children in England missed at least half their school lessons in the 2023/24 academic year.³⁸ Regionally, analysis of Department for Education absence data by the Northern Powerhouse Partnership finds that nine out of the ten areas worst affected by unauthorised absence are in the north of England. Newcastle is third in the country with a rate of 5.3% in secondary schools, while Sunderland has a rate of 4.8%, both far higher than the national average of 2.9%.³⁹

Participants raised some frustration with messaging from national policy representatives to focus on those pupils who are less severely absent, citing children who have an attendance rate of 87%

³⁵ Education Endowment Foundation. “Deployment of Teaching Assistants.” 2025.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/teaching-assistants>.

³⁶ Department for Education. “Suspensions and Permanent Exclusions in England, Autumn Term 2023/24.” 2024b.

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24-autumn-term>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Badshah, Nadeem. “Record 170,000 Children in England Missed at Least Half of Classes in 2024.” 2025.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/mar/20/record-170000-children-in-england-missed-at-least-half-of-classes-in-2024>

³⁹ Turner, Cerys. “9 out of 10 Areas with Highest Absence Are in the North.” 2025.

<https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/9-out-10-areas-highest-absence-are-north-of-england-school-attendance>.

or above. It was felt that, while supporting these children to attend was very important, it was “low-hanging fruit.” The crisis of children not attending 50% or more of school needs more attention. It was suggested that currently, supporting these children to re-engage with school is a challenge to justify financially as there is not enough funding available to make material change.

EPI research finds that pupil absence is a key, and growing, driver of the disadvantage gap. If disadvantaged pupils had the same level of absence as their peers in 2023, the attainment gap at age 11 (of 10.1 months) would have been almost one month smaller and the gap at age 16 (of 18.6 months) would have been over four months smaller.⁴⁰

Elective Home Education

The discussion briefly touched on the number of children who are now being home educated. While some families have always felt home education is the best option for their child, participants were concerned that increasingly, this is due to children’s needs not being met in school. They also felt that the punitive levers in the system may be contributing to the move to home education, with parents afraid of getting a criminal record for multiple absences. In the current system, an LA can give parents a fine of £80, rising to £160 if it is not paid within 21 days. From the 2024 to 2025 school year, each parent will only get up to two fines for the same child in a 3-year period. If there is a second fine in three years it will be £160 and if this is not paid, they may be taken to court. There is no statutory duty for LAs to monitor home education and participants were concerned about the potential for significant safeguarding issues.

The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools bill currently making its way through parliament will make it a legal requirement for parents and guardians of special school children to seek LA approval for home education.

Collaboration across the school system

Finally, the relationship between multi-academy trusts (MATs) and local authorities (LAs) generated significant discussion, particularly in relation to supporting inclusive practices. Central LA representatives felt that there needs to be more collaboration with local MATs. Participants called for trusts operating in the region to take on more responsibility for inclusion, ensuring their pupils come to school and, when a pupil is excluded, remaining involved while a decision is made over where the child goes next, with the support of the LA.

Participants were hopeful about the DfE’s RISE (Regional Improvements in Standards and Excellence) teams, feeling that this could instigate a new relationship between central LA teams

⁴⁰ Jiménez et al. “Breaking down the Gap.” 2025. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/breaking-down-the-gap/>.

and MATs given that under the new system, LAs are involved in identifying struggling schools and facilitating the programme of support.

EPI research finds that across all measures, there is considerably more variation within school group types compared to between school group types. Larger MATs (with 10 or more schools in a phase) have, on average, higher rates of persistent absence, suspension, and unexplained exits than smaller MATs and local authorities. However, these larger MATs also admit greater rates of disadvantaged pupils and have higher attainment outcomes for low prior attaining and disadvantaged pupils. The highest performing groups on overall attainment receive a lower proportion of applications from disadvantaged pupils and have lower rates of absence and suspension.

That said, there are some differences between the school group types. The median local authority has a lower rate of suspensions than the median MAT, whilst the median MAT has higher progress scores for both disadvantaged and low prior attaining pupils than the median local authority.⁴¹

Participants acknowledged that for most headteachers, inclusion is a priority but at the same time, the accountability system adds significant pressure, incentivising non-inclusive practices. Moreover, it was mentioned that leaders tend to be moved up within a trust so they learn and retain patterns of leadership. Participants felt many secondary schools no longer use open adverts, preventing the circulation of teachers and leaders outside their trusts and limiting sharing of best practice.

EPI research finds that school leaders and future leaders tend to operate in tightly connected ‘communities’. These are groups of schools, often within the same region, where headteachers and future headteachers are more likely to switch jobs, over a ten-year period. A headteacher, or future headteacher, in a secondary school is 20 times more likely to move to a school within the same community than to a school in another community. However, more research is needed on how knowledge and information flows between schools within each community. Additionally, it would be helpful in future research to investigate whether identified communities align with the structure of MATs. This would help clarify whether knowledge gaps caused by low headteacher mobility can be mitigated by MAT networks.⁴²

⁴¹ Hodge and Cruikshanks. “The Features of Effective School Groups: Measuring Pupil Inclusion and Attainment at School-Group Level.” 2024. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/effective-school-groups-pupil-attainment-and-inclusion/>.

⁴² Cardim Dias and Zuccollo. “Networks”.

Part 2: Potential Solutions



Potential solutions

Alongside outlining key issues facing the education sector in the North East, participants considered what can be done to improve outcomes at a local level, particularly in areas where NECA may be able to intervene or offer support. The combined authority has invested over £5 million in educational improvement and child poverty reduction for the 24/25 academic year alone and projects thus far include, among others, Voice North East, a whole school approach to oracy programme, Launchpad for Literacy, which supports early literacy skills across the region and inclusive leadership courses, which aim to reduce unnecessary exclusions.

The following section outlines recommendations for further interventions set forth during the roundtables. Again, the list is non-exhaustive and the discussion prioritised areas where local approaches might offer solutions but also touches on potential opportunities for improvement in national policy.

Expand definitions of disadvantage

As the first section shows, much of the discussion focused on the role of disadvantage. As part of this discussion, participants recognised that disadvantage currently has a very specific measure – free school meals (FSM) eligibility – and considered to what extent this measure captures the full picture within the region. One participant outlined their work with families whose income falls just above the threshold where many of them have multiple jobs leaving little time to spend with their children. Recent EPI research finds that there are fewer children registered for FSM than are estimated to be in poverty due to a number of factors including the low income threshold (£7,400 per year), under-registration and eligibility rules that do not take into account housing costs and family size. Under-registration for FSM also seems to be higher in more deprived local authorities, particularly pertinent for the North East due to widespread disadvantage.⁴³

Ofsted have commissioned the National Children’s Bureau to carry out research to support their new inspection criterion on inclusion. The research will look at how vulnerability is currently understood within the education and social care settings; the strengths and limitations of different understanding and how Ofsted can better understand vulnerability and its complexity to assess inclusive practice.⁴⁴ The research is due to be published later in 2025 and may offer a more holistic understanding of the challenges children and young people face.

⁴³ Campbell et al. “Who Has Been Registered for Free School Meals and Pupil Premium in the National Pupil Database?” 2025. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/who-has-been-registered-for-free-school-meals-and-pupil-premium-in-the-national-pupil-database/>.

⁴⁴ Ofsted. “Terms of Reference: Commissioned Research on Vulnerability and Inclusion.” 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/commissioned-research-on-vulnerability-and-inclusion-terms-of-reference/terms-of-reference-commissioned-research-on-vulnerability-and-inclusion>.

If this concept was utilised beyond inspection, it may offer useful information for both in-school practice and research and for policy, for example through extending funding eligibility criteria to include vulnerable children who do not currently qualify for statutory support, such as young carers or those living in temporary housing.

End segregation by socio-economic status

To improve outcomes for all children, it was suggested that it is critical to spread the disadvantaged pupil population more evenly across schools and end segregation by socioeconomic background. Durham University research shows that socio-economic status (SES) segregation between schools creates a system split between heavily disadvantaged and much less disadvantaged schools. Because of the well-established link between disadvantage and lower average attainment, this means that the school system has schools with very different attainment outcomes.⁴⁵ The more segregation by poverty is eradicated, the greater the reduction in the attainment gap and the easier it is to retain teachers.

EPI has developed a data tool that seeks to offer a more holistic picture of school performance, using a range of measures including attainment, finances, workforce and inclusion.⁴⁶ The tool includes a SEN and disadvantage admissions score which describe whether a pupil with those characteristics is more or less likely to be admitted to a certain trust or schools in a local authority. While EPI has published the data at school group level to ensure no individual is identifiable, this method could offer a useful tool for Ofsted to hold individual schools to account over their inclusion practices and ensure that disadvantaged pupils are fairly admitted to all schools in the local area.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill may also offer policy solutions to tackle segregation. There will be a legal duty for LAs and trusts to cooperate on admissions and place planning and councils will also get the power to direct academies to admit a child who has been refused admission or been permanently excluded from every suitable nearby school.

Target interventions

Participants suggested that any intervention should be targeted towards disadvantaged children and families who need it most, as opposed to a universal approach which may shift the gap rather than close it. The pupil premium policy was cited as an example of this working in practice.⁴⁷ One participant mentioned the example of the DfE's RISE teams that demonstrate that it does not have

⁴⁵ Gorard, Stephen. "The Pattern of Socio-Economic Segregation between Schools in England 1989 to 2021: The Pupil Premium, Universal Credit, and Covid-19 Eras." 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00345237231179854>.

⁴⁶ Education Policy Institute. "Effective School Groups Data Tool." 2024. <https://edu-policy-inst.shinyapps.io/effective-school-group-app/>.

⁴⁷ Gorard, Stephen. "Segregation and the Attainment Gap for Permanently Disadvantaged Pupils in England." 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.2007055>.

to be one approach or the other; the RISE teams offer universal support in the form of signposting resources to leaders alongside commissioning targeted support for schools that need more significant interventions.

It was also suggested that areas with higher numbers of pupil premium pupils should receive more funding to account for the greater proportion of disadvantaged children, though this would require changes to the National Funding Formula (NFF). EPI research using our NFF model finds that persistently disadvantaged pupils require additional resources that go beyond the current broad definitions of disadvantage used in the NFF and Pupil Premium. It recommends that the DfE should allocate £640 million from the savings made by falling pupil numbers to reverse real terms cuts in the Pupil Premium and also target additional funding specifically for persistently disadvantaged pupils through an enhanced Pupil Premium.⁴⁸ While not an area-based approach as suggested above, this recommendation would be a no additional cost of targeting support to those who need it most.

Place-based interventions to support SEND pupils

The discussion touched on to what extent the challenges within the SEND system could be tackled by taking a regional approach given that so many of the drivers stem from national policy, which also has the means to solve them. For example, Durham University research reveals significant variability in the methods used for identifying dyslexia and calls for more standardised national practice and calls for more standardised practice to enhance consistency and accuracy in identification.⁴⁹ It was acknowledged that within the parameters of available funding from NECA's Excellence in Education programme, it will be very difficult to materially improve the SEND system. That said, one participant highlighted that access to support does vary across the country and is linked to deprivation. There is unmet need for support and provision among children living in more deprived areas: children who are eligible for FSM are less likely to be in receipt of an EHCP in more deprived areas and children living in more deprived areas are more likely to be recorded in the National Pupil Database (NPD) with less well-defined, more commonly documented SEND conditions, while children in more affluent areas have higher chances than those in poorer areas of being diagnosed with less prevalent, more precisely defined conditions.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Andrews, Jon, and Robbie Cruikshanks. "Tackling the Persistent Disadvantage Gap-A New Approach to Deprivation Funding." 2024. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/tackling-the-persistent-disadvantage-gap-a-new-approach-to-deprivation-funding/>.

⁴⁹ Johny et al. "Identifying Students with Dyslexia: Exploration of Current Assessment Methods." 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11881-024-00313-y>.

⁵⁰ Campbell, Tammy. "Inequalities in Provision for Primary Children with Special Educational Needs and / or Disabilities (SEND) by Local Area Deprivation." 2023. https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/CASE/_NEW/PUBLICATIONS/abstract/?index=10538.

Participants suggested NECA could help in this area through investigating what local high-quality SEND provision looks like, particularly in secondary settings where teachers may lack specialised knowledge; advocating for multi-agency collaboration and signposting families to support.

Recruitment and retention incentives

To support local teacher recruitment and retention, various incentives were suggested, including secondments between schools to allow teachers to gain experience in challenging contexts without permanent commitments, particularly across trusts and maintained schools. Moreover, teacher education curricula could be adapted to include more regional content, potentially improving retention by helping teachers connect with local contexts. Finally, the value of continued professional development (CPD) was emphasised as vital for retention, with many teachers benefiting from National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) before funding reductions.

Durham University research into teacher shortages and approaches that show promise in getting more people to teach in challenging areas and schools recommends more thought be given to making teaching an attractive profession to children and young people as by the time they reach university, their decision is largely mapped out already. It also calls for more consideration of the impact of government policies which can affect teacher demand and supply, for example through changing mandatory class sizes; pupil:teacher ratios and entry requirements for teacher training.⁵¹

Improve access to CPD for school leaders and teaching assistants

Building on the above, participants called for greater support and training for school leaders. Since Autumn 2024, National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) – accredited qualifications for teachers and school leaders - are no longer fully funded by the DfE. Rather, funding is targeted towards settings with higher levels of disadvantage and take-up is capped at 10,000 places. Participants felt that given it is mandatory for all school Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) to have an NPQ⁵², there is a risk of limited funding for leadership training with the current pot. There was significant participant interest in the potential for NECA to support and offer leadership training.

In a similar vein, participants also called for better access to CPD for TAs to improve pedagogical practice in their interactions with pupils with SEND. It was acknowledged that there is significant TA turnover so investing in training also poses a risk. That said, greater access to CPD supports

⁵¹ See et al. “Tackling Teacher Shortages: Doing the Right Thing at the Right Time and with the Right Evidence.” 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-818630-5.04084-7>.

⁵² Department for Education. “Transition to National Professional Qualification for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators.” 2024a. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mandatory-qualification-for-sencos/transition-to-national-professional-qualification-for-special-educational-needs-co-ordinators>.

teacher retention⁵³ and, although research has not been carried out in this area yet, it would be reasonable to assume this may also apply to TAs. Weighing the risks and potential benefits, participants agreed that more CPD for TAs would be a useful investment of resource.

To do so, participants mentioned there was a need for more specific TA CPD resources as there is currently a gap in availability; even schools that do have the funding and capacity to support their TAs to undertake CPD can struggle to find useful resources. Participants called for more specific resource development from CPD providers.

Overall, areas identified for greater support included:

- More support for leaders, both in terms of training and CPD and in internal assurance so they can feel confident to take calculated risks and make choices that are in the best interests of their pupils.
- More training for teaching assistants (TAs), particularly given they are often working with more vulnerable pupils, either with SEND or who otherwise need one-to-one support.
- A better understanding of inclusion and trauma-informed approaches, so these concepts become embedded in school praxis.
- A greater focus on attendance and interventions to support children to re-engage with school, particularly those with the highest rates of absence, not just those who may be easier to get back into school.

Encourage cross-system working

Participants felt NECA could play a key role in encouraging cross-system collaboration between LAs and MATs by championing inclusive practice, potentially through greater engagement with regionally influential Trust CEOs to encourage networks across school group types and share best practice. It was felt NECA is in a unique position to look across the system and take a stance against non-inclusive practices through their messaging, partnerships and potentially through limiting access to funded programmes unless an institution is meeting required standards.

Again, the measures on place planning and admissions included in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill may also help to tackle some of the tensions identified in this area.

⁵³ Zuccollo and Fletcher-Wood. "The Effects of High-Quality Professional Development on Teachers and Students." 2020. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/effects-high-quality-professional-development/>.

Build wider partnerships

Local partnerships were cited as a key opportunity to support schools and share best practice. These partnerships are already an important feature of the educational landscape in the North East; as one participant put it: “the North East trope of sticking together is alive and well.”

Representatives from Durham University round the table highlighted the value they place on partnerships and a renewed commitment to positively impacting on the local area and wider North East region. Durham University’s most recent Access and Participation Plan will increase access to the university to local low income families, increase enrolment from underrepresented groups, including for care experienced young people, and close attainment gaps for mature and lifelong learners.⁵⁴ The University has developed partnerships with Durham County Council, Durham Constabulary, County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust, the Foundation of Light (Sunderland AFC’s official charity) and set up the Durham Learning Alliance with four local colleges across the region to expand education opportunities, support access to higher education and improve economic growth in the region.⁵⁵ This partnership model with local colleges has since been emulated by other universities across the country to improve local partnership working.

Participants also cited Schools North East as another important example of partnership working – the first and only school-led regional network in the UK, representing all 1,150 schools in the region – which campaigns to improve conditions for North East schools and every child in them.⁵⁶

Participants called for the continuation and expansion of cross sector-partnerships and suggested again that NECA has a key convening role to play here in developing these partnerships and that this may be one example where other regions could learn from the North East’s example.

Further research

Finally, throughout the discussions, participants emphasised the importance of evidence-based approaches. Several speakers highlighted the value of micro randomised controlled trials (RCTs) to test interventions quickly and build a regional evidence base, with work underway already in this area.⁵⁷ The partnership between Durham University and local schools was cited as a positive example of combining education practice with research. That said, there was discussion about not only implementing new interventions but also “de-implementing” ineffective practices to create space for innovation, recognising that schools are often overloaded with initiatives.

⁵⁴ Durham University. “Access and Participation - Durham University.” 2025. <https://www.durham.ac.uk/study/access-and-participation/>.

⁵⁵ Durham University. “Durham Learning Alliance MoU.” 2024. <https://www.durham.ac.uk/news-events/latest-news/2024/09/durham-learning-alliance-mou>.

⁵⁶ Schools North East. “Who We Are.” 2025. <https://schoolsnotheast.org/who-we-are/>.

⁵⁷ WhatWorked Education. “School Improvement 2024.” 2024. <https://interventions.whatworked.education/school-improvement-2024>.

Participants called for further research to investigate and identify high-quality local practice and how this can be scaled up within the region and shared with other areas. In particular, one participant mentioned the goal of creating a North East education research institute focused on the challenges in the region and working specifically with local schools. Alongside this, participants also called for rural, coastal and disadvantaged schools to participate in research if they have the capacity, to ensure that all staff and pupils experiences are represented in research.

More widely, an upcoming project from the Children’s Commissioner’s Office was mentioned which will collate data from the last four years to map out what a childhood looks like in a local area with the aim of driving targeted intervention where it is needed most.⁵⁸ Once published, this may offer useful insights for NECA and other bodies in the North East on where best to target interventions.

Overall, the combined authority, with its links to LAs, trusts and schools, has a significant opportunity to develop, test and lead evidence generation that can inform school practice, local and national policy.

⁵⁸ Children's Commissioner for England. “Business Plan, 2025-26.” 2025.
<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/corporate-governance/business-plan-2025-26/>.

Conclusion

Through this project, Durham University, NECA and EPI collated expert views from the region with key relevant research to offer suggestions both on how NECA's funding allocation might be most beneficially used and on the way forward more widely for the North East.

The paper outlines systemic problems that will take long-term national policy solutions to solve. At the same time, there are actions to be taken now that will help to improve the lives of children and young people across the North East. Participants committed to developing practical, evidence-informed solutions that could make a difference now and in the future, noting upcoming opportunities for change including the June spending review and the expected publication of the Government's child poverty strategy.

As ever, the education sector cannot close these gaps alone. The engagement from political representatives round the table was welcomed alongside the recognition of the importance of high-quality housing and transport, wider services around children and families and increasing economic prosperity more generally across the region.

There was a strong desire to use devolution as an opportunity to innovate in addressing persistent regional disadvantage, with recognition that the North East is one of the few combined authorities focusing specifically on education and tackling child poverty—an approach that participants felt should be celebrated and potentially replicated elsewhere. The Government's intention to move towards integrated funding settlements in future, removing ring-fencing and allowing combined authorities control over their funding decisions, may offer significant opportunities in future to further NECA's mission, improve the lives of local children and young people and ultimately drive regional growth.

While there is significant entrenched disadvantage within the region, there is also a deep commitment from schools, third sector organisations, further and higher education and local policy makers to work in partnership to improve the lives of children in their care and bring about meaningful change. This brings hope in the face of significant challenges.

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