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University of Surrey

Achieving high attainment for all Surrey's children

Research report: December 2021

WPO | WIDENING PARTICIPATION AND OUTREACH

UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

Foreword

Thank you for taking the time to read this Free School Meals Attainment Gap Insight report. The report was commissioned by the University of Surrey's Widening Participation & Outreach Team and completed by Alterline, an insight and intelligence agency specialising in higher education.

The University of Surrey is committed to social mobility and believes, to have a diverse and representative society, we must ensure all learners with the potential to succeed at University can do so, regardless of their background or personal experience.

The University of Surrey's Widening Participation and Outreach (WPO) Team work with under-represented learners and their supporters to encourage educational engagement, support the development of aspirations, expectations and attainment and empower individuals to not only access higher education but to succeed and flourish in their future ambitions and positively shape the society that we live in. We work closely with schools, colleges and community partners to provide a sustained programme of targeted, on- and off-campus, curriculum-enhancing activity for under-represented and disadvantaged learners.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the inequalities that exist within our society and within education. While some students have felt the benefits from working at home with their parents, others have fallen further behind. Those who are already disadvantaged have been disproportionally affected by Covid and the control measures put in place to protect us, and more people have been pushed into poverty. As a result, the already present education disadvantage gap will have widened.

To try and combat the impact of the pandemic and close the GCSE Attainment gap, the WPO Team have developed Surrey Stars in collaboration with headteachers in key target schools. Surrey Stars is a sustained programme of interactions targeted at disadvantaged learners which is underpinned by four key principles, and delivered alongside an embedded Aspirations Curriculum for all.

We commissioned this Free School Meals Attainment Gap Insight research to further understand the GSCE Attainment gap, inform the Surrey Stars programme and facilitate a partnership of leaders to work towards closing the gap.

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Introduction

In 2017, the Community Foundation for Surrey highlighted that, while Surrey is often known for its relative affluence, such impressions obscure the reality of extreme pockets of disadvantage that exist within its communities. While median weekly earnings in Surrey in 2019 were £44.70 higher than the national average, and rise to £224.50 higher than the national average in more affluent areas, such as Elmbridge, this is offset by increasing numbers facing financial disadvantage. Since the first lockdown in March 2020, the number of Universal Credit claimants in Surrey has doubled at a point in time where private rentals cost over £400 per month more than the national average. This has had a substantial impact on young people, with the number of households claiming Universal Credit with children increased by around 70% between February 2020 and April 2020, and continued to rise into 2021.

While financial disadvantage, in and of itself, does not preclude access to quality education, there is an increasing focus on the persistent gap in educational outcomes between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children. In order to address such inequalities, Surrey County Council (2018) identified the attainment of free school meal (FSM) eligible pupils as a priority for the area. In particular, it sought to:

- Increase the percentage of pupils achieving the expected standards at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4
- Reduce the percentage of pupils' persistent absence and exclusion from school
- Increase the proportion of learners making good progress in Writing and Maths between the ages of 7 and 11, and
- Increase the percentage of FSM learners who enter higher education (HE) by age 19, who are 22% less likely to enter HE by the age of 19 than their peers.

This report provides an overview of the free school meal attainment gap in Surrey from early years to Key Stage 4, explores the reasons why the gap is so pervasive in the local authority and offers current best practise for tackling the gap. It highlights:

- The underperformance of Surrey's FSM eligible pupils in comparison to the extremely high attainment of non-free school meal eligible pupils and to similar local authorities
- The persistence of the gap from early years into Key Stages 2 and 4
- The potential impact of COVID-19 on attainment and the need to closely monitor this in future years
- The need for further investigation of the FSM attainment gap in Surrey to explore intersectional disadvantage
- A limited understanding of the lived experience of disadvantaged families and the role this plays in educational outcomes
- The role of the wider culture in Surrey in alienating FSM eligible pupils and families from wider engagement in the education community
- The opportunity to develop a county-led approach to tackle persistent disadvantage that works for, and within, local communities.

Research Objectives

Specifically this project aimed to:

• Highlight the educational attainment gap between pupils who are and are not entitled to Free School Meals at primary and secondary level.
• Evidence the specific gap which the county of Surrey faces and compare to similar regions
• Understand why the gap exists and persists
• Review the existing evidence on what is effective in closing the attainment gap.

Methodology

The project began with two stakeholder engagement workshops, which took place in July 2021 and brought together school leaders and members of Surrey County Council to reflect on what is already known about the challenge Surrey faces in tackling the FSM attainment gap.

A review of the literature available on the subject was conducted. This report draws on over 20 peer reviewed journal articles and chapters published over the past five years on the topic of free school meals. Throughout the report there are references to a number of government data sets and publications, as well as literature produced by charitable bodies active in the widening participation sector in the UK.

In order to investigate the local picture in Surrey, Department for Education datasets on early years, Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 performance were interrogated. As no data has been produced for Early Years and Key Stage 2 in 2018-2019, this has been the focus of this report to allow for comparability across all three stages (with a sense check at Key Stage 4 from more recent data).

However, it should be noted that the situation may look quite different now, particularly given the high levels of disruption to education in the face of COVID-19.

Where comparisons have been made to similar local authorities, these have been selected using Surrey's statistical neighbours as determined by the Local authority interactive tool (LAIT), which uses a range of socio-economic and demographic factors to identify similar local authorities for benchmarking purposes.

Alongside this, eight one to one interviews took place with stakeholders between September and December 2021 to gain expertise from practitioners and local leaders. In total, five headteachers and 3 external stakeholders took part.

The national context

The national context

The free school meal attainment gap

The UK has successfully increased the numbers of young people participating in higher education (Danvers & Hinton-Smith, 2021). Larger proportions across all social classes have been attending UK universities for several years (Shavit et al., 2007) and the UK is often perceived as being at the forefront of widening participation in Higher Education (Burke, 2013). Nevertheless, social class has remained a persistent inequality (Lucas, 2001; MacInnes et al, 2015; Stopforth et al, 2021), with socio-economic achievement gaps emerging in the earliest years of children's lives, continuing into adolescence and impacting well into later life (Ilie et al, 2017).

Free school meal (FSM) eligibility has, and remains, the key measure of socio-economic disadvantage in the UK school system. The Department for Education allocates funding on the basis of this metric (i.e., the deprivation component of the pupil premium). Whilst FSM eligibility doesn't capture the broader multi-dimensionality of social advantage and disadvantage (Taylor, 2018), the measure was found to correlate highly with other measures of inequality, with a predictive power only marginally lower than many richer survey measures (Ilie et al, 2017). As such, FSM eligibility can be seen as a useful proxy indicator to use when designing initiatives to improve educational attainment and a more valid and reliable indicator than area-level measures such as POLAR (Boliver et al, 2021).

FSM eligibility was recently used by the Education Policy Institute (2020) to demonstrate that, prior to the pandemic, the country was facing significant inequality challenges. Their data shows the attainment gap between FSM eligible pupils and non-eligible pupils widened across early years, primary school and secondary school in 2019.

Other factors associated with attainment gaps

There are some equity issues that are important to highlight. The Office for National Statistics (2020:11), when describing that pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) made less progress between 11 and 16 years old than those not eligible for FSM, recognised that, 'gender plays an important role'. Among pupils eligible for free school meals, girls made more progress than boys, and this was the case within every ethnic group. In addition to gender, ethnicity has become a focus of discussion.

Recently, the underachievement of White British pupils has been increasingly highlighted in the literature, including a high profile government report (Strand, 2014a; 2014b; Keddie, 2015; Fisher, 2017; Education Committee, 2021). Strand (2014a) found that the gap in progress between 11–16 years was significantly larger for White British pupils than for other minority groups. Perera et al. (2016) suggested that belonging to certain minority ethnic groups (e.g., Chinese) is a protective factor associated with greater resilience against low achievement at all levels of deprivation, compared to White British pupils. The Office for National Statistics (2020) noted that White Irish and White British pupils had the largest gaps between average Progress 8 scores for FSM-eligible students and those not eligible, while Chinese, Black African, Bangladeshi and Pakistani students had the smallest gaps. Whilst further longitudinal research is needed, a number of studies suggested that average attainment and school progress are the same for pupils who differ only in

terms of their ethnicity (Gorard & Siddiqui, 2019).

Whilst gender and ethnicity were frequently discussed, the most often cited reason for persistent inequality was class. For example, Hadden et al (2020:518) reporting, 'it is clear that in England, SES [socio-economic status] is a significantly stronger predictor of academic success than is ethnicity'. Stophforth et al (2021:310) argue there is 'substantial evidence of persistent social class inequalities in school GCSE outcomes'. To evidence or define social class, researchers drew not only on FSM data, but also on household income, parental education and parental occupation data. The concerns included the suggestion that teacher assessment can unconsciously disadvantage students from certain groups, such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Montacute, 2020), with teachers less likely to judge low-income students as having above average ability in reading or in maths, even when their previous test scores indicate as such (Campbell, 2015). The strength of socio-economic status as a predictor of academic attainment continues post secondary school. By using FSM as a proxy indicator of class, a persistence of inequality can be seen at both 16-19 levels and in relation to progression to higher education.

Attainment gaps by stage of education

The educational attainment gap continues to grow between the ages of 16-19. Given that at age 15, just two percent of state education pupils who had received free school meals were placed within the top decile of attainment distribution nationally (Boliver et al, 2017) a further decline is exceptionally disappointing. Nationally, FSM eligible pupils fall further behind non-FSM eligible pupils with the same key stage 4 attainment and otherwise similar characteristics (Tuckett et al, 2021). Their economic disadvantage could be contributing the equivalent of half an A-level grade beyond the gap already present at the end of secondary school. This gap is consistent across all school and college types, with the variation between institutions predominantly explained by the prior attainment of pupils.

The attainment gaps that develop during early years, primary, secondary and 16-19 education present a major barrier to universities seeking to achieve the ambitious access targets set by the Office for Students (Boliver et al, 2021).

The percentage of state-funded and special school pupils who received free school meals at age 15 entering Higher Education by age 19 has remained at 26.3% for the latest two years of available data (2017-19). Data provided by the Department for Education in July 2020 on widening participation in higher education demonstrates the gap in progression rates by age 19 between FSM and non-FSM pupils has continued to grow, increasing to 18.8%. Male White British FSM pupils are the least likely of all the main ethnic groups to progress to higher education by age 19 at just 12.7%.

Long term impact of the attainment gap

Analysis of the labour market suggests ongoing challenges for those eligible for free school meals. Department for Education (2018) reported that 60% of individuals who were eligible for free school meals in year 11 were in sustained employment at age 27, compared to 77% of their peers who were not eligible for FSM. Therefore, FSM-eligible pupils were 23% less likely to be in sustained employment aged 27 when compared to their peers who were not eligible for FSM. The same

report claimed that 24% of individuals who were eligible for FSM in year 11 were on out-of-work benefits at age 27, compared to 8% of their peers who were not eligible for FSM. Therefore, pupils who were eligible for FSM in year 11 were three times more likely to be on out-of-work benefits

Impact of COVID-19

There is great concern that the impact of COVID-19 will be disproportionately felt by those on lower incomes (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; Montacute & Cullinane, 2021; Education Policy Institute, 2020). One of the most frequent reasons cited for this was a lack of access to technology and hence on-line learning. Whilst, technology poverty already existed prior to the pandemic, the move to remote learning during school closures accentuated a digital divide.

There was a consensus in the literature reviewed that future metrics will evidence a widening the attainment gap between FSM eligible and non-FSM eligible pupils due to the pandemic. Research from the Department of Education found that "All year groups have experienced a learning loss in reading. In primary schools these were typically between 1.7 and 2.0 months, and in year 8 and year 9, 1.6 and 2.0 months respectively" (Department for Education, 2021:8).

Recommendation	**Use FSM eligibility as a metric** Whilst not without fault, FSM eligibility is the most practical and robust metric to use as a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage. The objective of interventions should be to improve this metric.

The attainment gap in Surrey

Overview of the attainment gap in Surrey

In Surrey, the attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and those non-eligible widens as they progress from early years to secondary school. The gap appears to widen most significantly during primary school. An important caveat to the data provided in this section of the report is that it is limited to state-funded schools only.

Surrey attainment gap for FSM eligible pupils

Early Years	Primary	Secondary
3 months	11 months	19.2 months

Source: Education in England: Annual Report 2020, The Education Policy Institute (EPI)

Compared to national averages, the research by the Education Policy Institute (2020) cited above suggests that the Surrey local authority area is:

- Performing well at minimising the attainment gap for early years pupils (ranked 17th= out of 149 local authorities). The national average for the attainment gap for early years is 4.5 months. Whilst there is evidence that high quality early years provision results in improved attainment at school five years later (Higgins et al., 2013), it is not an inoculation and sustained support is needed at all stages.

- Within Surrey there is a significant increase in the attainment gap at primary school. The gap rises to 11 months (110th= out of 149 local authorities).

- The rapid increase in the performance gap slows during secondary school, but at 19.2 months, it remains above the national average of 18 months. This leaves Surrey ranked 66th= out of 149 local authorities reported on).

However, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) also notes that local demographics are "essential" to understand differences in attainment across the country. When adjusting for Surrey's relatively low proportion of disadvantage, it falls down the rankings by 30 places, suggesting much poorer performance than first appears.

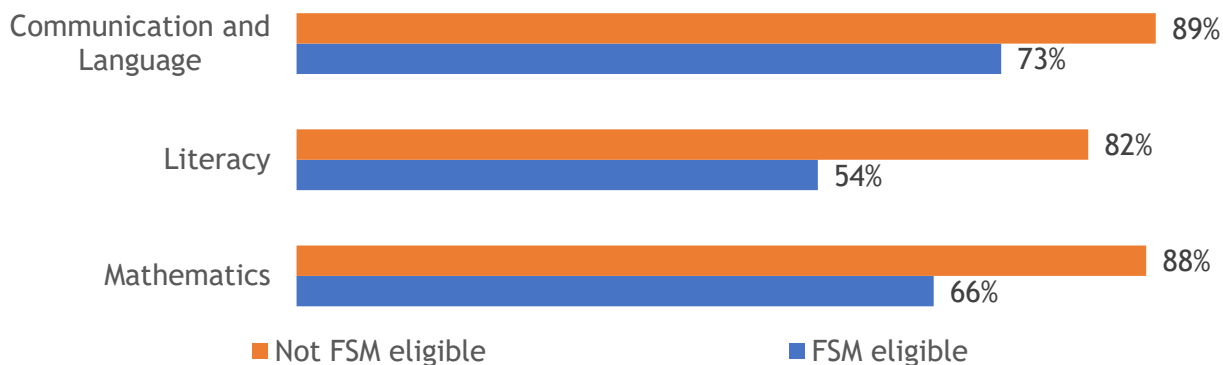| Recommendation	**Develop a body of county leaders committed to tackling inequality** The pervasive nature of the FSM attainment gap across all levels demonstrates the need for county-wide leadership to reduce inequality. A body of county leaders, drawing from the local authority, schools, universities, and community leaders, should be created with a focus on setting ambitious targets for reducing the attainment gap, driving change through the county and setting best practice standards.

The attainment gap in early years

Overall context in 2018-2019

Of the 89,742 early years pupils eligible for free school meals in 2019 in England, 71% reached at least expected standards in communication and language, 58% in literacy and 65% in mathematics. This is compared to 84%, 76% and 81% of those who do not qualify for free school meals respectively. This generates a national attainment gap of 13 percentage points for communication and language, 18 percentage points for literacy and 16 percentage points for mathematics.

Surrey had 1,092 (1%) of England's FSM eligible Early Years pupils in 2019. 73% reached at least expected standards in communication and language, 54% in literacy and 66% in mathematics. This is compared to 89%, 82% and 88% of those who do not qualify for FSM respectively. This generates an attainment gap of 16 percentage points for communication and language, 28 percentage points for literacy and 22 percentage points for mathematics in Surrey specifically.

While the attainment gap is larger than is seen nationally, it is worth noting that slightly higher proportions of pupils in Surrey who are eligible for free school meals reach at least expected standard in communication & languages and mathematics than the national average. The gap in these areas is driven particularly by the over-performance of those who are not eligible for free school meals.

Proportion of pupils reaching at least expected standard in communication & language, literacy and mathematics in Early Years in 2018-2019 in Surrey.

Communication and Language	Not FSM eligible: 89% / FSM eligible: 73%
Literacy	Not FSM eligible: 82% / FSM eligible: 54%
Mathematics	Not FSM eligible: 88% / FSM eligible: 66%

■ Not FSM eligible   ■ FSM eligible

Source: Early years foundation stage profile results: 2018 to 2019 (Department of Education, 2019)

Performance by district

There is a wide variation observed when breaking down the FSM gap by district. At its lowest, there is only a gap of 20% in Tandridge, but this widens to 45% in Mole Valley. There does not necessarily appear to be a clear cut link between the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM and

the gap in performance between pupils who are and are not eligible for FSM, however, it should be noted that, at a district level, there is not a large amount of variation of eligibility.

Proportion of pupils reaching at least expected standard in all learning goals in early years in 2018-2019 in Surrey.

Surrey District	Proportion of pupils eligible for FSM	Percentage of FSM Early Years pupils reaching at least expected standards in all early learning goals	Percentage of non-FSM Early Years pupils reaching at least expected standards in all early learning goals	Percentage point difference between performance at Early Years between FSM and non-FSM pupils
Elmbridge Borough	7%	50%	83%	33
Epsom and Ewell Borough	5%	46%	80%	34
Guildford Borough	9%	55%	80%	25
Mole Valley District	6%	36%	81%	45
Reigate and Banstead Borough	9%	57%	81%	24
Runnymede Borough	11%	47%	79%	32
Spelthorne Borough	13%	52%	77%	25
Surrey Heath Borough	6%	53%	83%	30
Tandridge District	8%	63%	83%	20
Waverley Borough	7%	44%	80%	36
Woking Borough	7%	53%	75%	22
Surrey total	**8%**	**52%**	**80%**	**28**

Source: Early years foundation stage profile results: 2018 to 2019 (Department of Education, 2019)

Comparison to similar local authorities

Surrey's gap in terms of those who achieve a good level of development at early years is one of the largest of its statistical neighbours, with a 29 percentage point difference between those who are and are not eligible for FSM. Only West Berkshire has a larger gap, at 36 percentage points.

The 52% of pupils who achieve a good level of development and are eligible for FSM is not, in comparison to this group, starkly low; in fact Surrey has fairly middling performance here. Yet, the 81% of pupils who are not eligible for free school meals outperforms the other statistical neighbours, which may explain the larger gap. Wokingham is the most similar areas to

Surrey in this sense, in that it has fairly average performance among FSM eligible pupils (51%), yet high performance among those who are not (79%). This also results in a similar gap of 28 percentage points.

Hampshire and Oxford are the least similar to Surrey at early years. In the case of Hampshire, both those who are eligible for FSM (58%) and those who are not (79%) perform well in terms of the comparator group. Early years pupils in Oxford, by way of contrast, perform poorly compared to the other statistical neighbours whether they are eligible for FSM (50%) or not (76%), despite this resulting in a similar gap to Surrey at 26 percentage points.

Gap in achieving a good level of development at Early Years by local authority.

Local authority	Percentage of FSM early years pupils achieving a good level of development	Percentage of non-FSM early years pupils achieving a good level of development	Percentage point difference between performance at early years between FSM and non-FSM pupils
Bracknell Forest	60%	77%	17
Hampshire	58%	79%	21
Windsor and Maidenhead	53%	76%	23
Buckinghamshire	53%	76%	23
Hertfordshire	51%	75%	24
Oxfordshire	50%	76%	26
Wokingham	51%	79%	28
Cambridgeshire	47%	75%	28
Surrey	52%	81%	29
West Berkshire	41%	77%	36

Source: Early years foundation stage profile results: 2018 to 2019 (Department of Education, 2019)
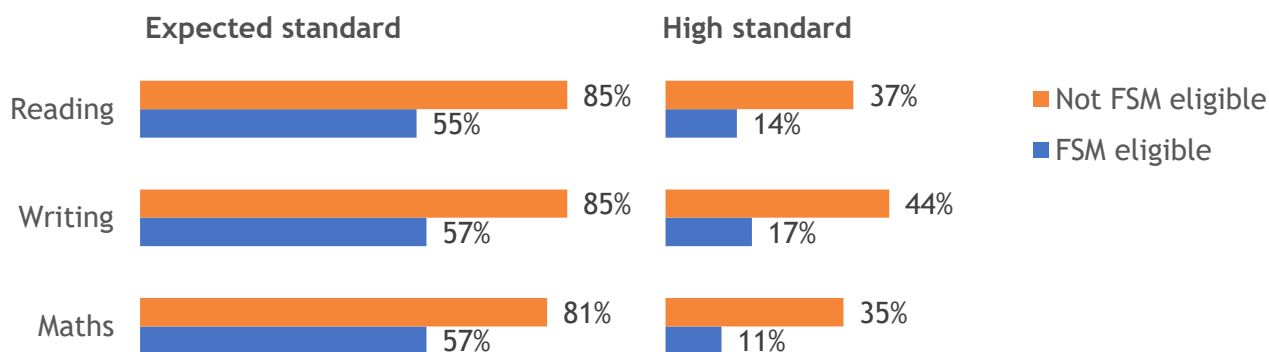
The attainment gap at Key Stage 2

Overall context in 2018-2019

Of the 108,378 Key Stage 2 (KS2) pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) in 2019 in England, 48% reached the expected standards in reading, writing and maths. 69% of those not eligible for FSM reached the expected standards, showing a national attainment gap at KS2 of 21 percentage points.

Surrey had 1,046 (1%) of England's FSM eligible KS2 pupils in 2019. Only 416 (40%) of them reached the expected standards in reading, writing and maths. Some 629 FSM eligible pupils did not meet the expected standards. 73% of those not eligible for FSM reached the expected standards, resulting in an attainment gap of 32 percentage points in the county. This supports the evidence that the gap widens at KS2 because the attainment of those who are FSM eligible starts to drop below national average at this stage, while the performance of those who are not eligible for FSM continue to out-perform their peers nationally.

Similar proportions of pupils eligible for FSM reach expected standards in writing (57%), maths (57%) and reading (55%), though the slight drop in those reaching expected reading standards should be noted. Those who are not eligible for FSM, however, perform consistently in reading (85%) and writing (85%), though fewer reach the expected standard in maths (81%). Similar trends between the two groups are observed among those reaching a higher standard: higher proportions reach a higher standard in writing, which drops slightly in those who reach the expected standard in reading, then again in maths.

Proportion of pupils reaching expected and high standards in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 in 2018-2019 in Surrey.

Source: National curriculum assessments at key stage 2 in England, 2019 (Department of Education, 2019)

Performance by district

The variation in the FSM attainment gap reduces slightly from early years to KS2 across districts, however there is still a 15 percentage point difference between the districts with the

lowest and highest gaps. Reigate and Banstead have the smallest gap at 24 percentage points, and Surrey Heath, Runnymede and Guildford Boroughs have the highest at 39 percentage points.

As with Early Years, there is no clear trend relating to the proportion of pupils who are eligible for FSM and the size of the gap in attainment. However, like Early Years, there remains little variation at a district level in terms of eligibility which may make it difficult to draw conclusions from this.

Key Stage 2 performance by Surrey district.

Surrey District	Proportion of pupils eligible for FSM	Percentage of FSM KS2 pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths	Percentage of non-FSM KS2 pupils reaching expected standard in reading, writing and maths	Percentage point difference between performance at KS2 between FSM and non-FSM pupils
Elmbridge Borough	6%	45%	77%	32
Epsom and Ewell Borough	7%	43%	76%	33
Guildford Borough	9%	32%	71%	39
Mole Valley District	8%	37%	72%	35
Reigate and Banstead Borough	9%	44%	68%	24
Runnymede Borough	13%	38%	77%	39
Spelthorne Borough	12%	41%	69%	28
Surrey Heath Borough	6%	32%	71%	39
Tandridge District	9%	38%	73%	35
Waverley Borough	7%	43%	75%	32
Woking Borough	9%	43%	73%	30
Surrey total	**8%**	**40%**	**73%**	**33**

Source: National curriculum assessments at key stage 2 in England, 2019 (Department of Education, 2019)

Comparison to similar local authorities

Surrey has a 33 percentage point gap between those who achieve expected standard in reading, writing and maths who are eligible for FSM and those who are not, which puts it on the lower end of performance of the comparator group alongside Wokingham and Buckinghamshire. Only Windsor and Maidenhead has a larger gap than Surrey at KS2 or 41 percentage points.

With the proportion of those who are eligible for FSM attaining expected standards varying from 29% to 43% across comparator group, the 40% of free school meal pupils who reach

expected standards in Surrey is relatively high compared to other local authorities. Similarly, those who are not eligible for free school meals who reach expected standards varies from 66% to 76% across the local authorities measured; the 73% who do so in Surrey suggests high performance again. Both Wokingham and Hampshire see similar trends in this group, with high performance across the board, while maintaining a particularly large gap, though Hampshire does have a smaller gap at 28 percentage points.

It is worth noting that, with the exception of Windsor and Maidenhead, the variation of the gap between this group is relatively low (28-33 percentage points) which may indicate a more similar experience among the statistical neighbours at KS2.

Gap in awarding the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 by local authority.

Local authority	Percentage of FSM KS2 pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths	Percentage of non-FSM KS2 pupils reaching expected standard in reading, writing and maths	Percentage point difference between performance at KS2 between FSM and non-FSM pupils
Hampshire	43%	71%	28
Hertfordshire	42%	70%	28
Oxfordshire	39%	68%	28
West Berkshire	37%	67%	30
Cambridgeshire	37%	66%	30
Bracknell Forest	36%	68%	31
Surrey	40%	73%	33
Wokingham	43%	76%	33
Buckinghamshire	36%	69%	33
Windsor and Maidenhead	29%	71%	41

Source: National curriculum assessments at key stage 2 in England, 2019 (Department of Education, 2019)

The attainment gap at Key Stage 4

Overall context in 2018-2019

In 2019, Key Stage 4 (KS4) pupils eligible for free school meals were 14% of the total number of pupils. The average attainment 8 score for these 75,871 pupils was 35 (Department for Education, 2020a). This compares to an average attainment 8 score of 49 for those not eligible for free school meals, showing a national attainment 8 gap at KS4 of 14.

Surrey had 752 (1%) of England's free school meal eligible KS4 pupils in 2019, making up 7% of the total number of pupils in the county. The average attainment 8 score for this selection of pupils was 33. In contrast, the average attainment 8 score for those not eligible for free school meals was 52. Surrey's attainment 8 gap, at 19, is higher that the national attainment 8 gap.

When focusing on Maths and English only, we can see a large disparity between performance based on free school meal eligibility. Only 39% of pupils eligible for free school meals reach Grade 4 or above in Maths and English, compared to 76% of their counterparts, resulting in a 37 percentage point gap. Similarly, only 20% of FSM eligible pupils reach Grade 5 or above in English and Maths. When compared to the 54% of those who are not eligible for free school meals that go on to achieve this, there is a similar gap of 34 percentage points at that level.

Proportion of pupils reaching grades 4 or 5 and over in Maths and English at KS4 in 2018-2019 in Surrey.

Legend: ■ Not FSM eligible   ■ FSM eligible

- Grade 4 or above in Maths and English: Not FSM eligible 76%, FSM eligible 39%
- Grade 5 or above in Maths and English: Not FSM eligible 54%, FSM eligible 20%
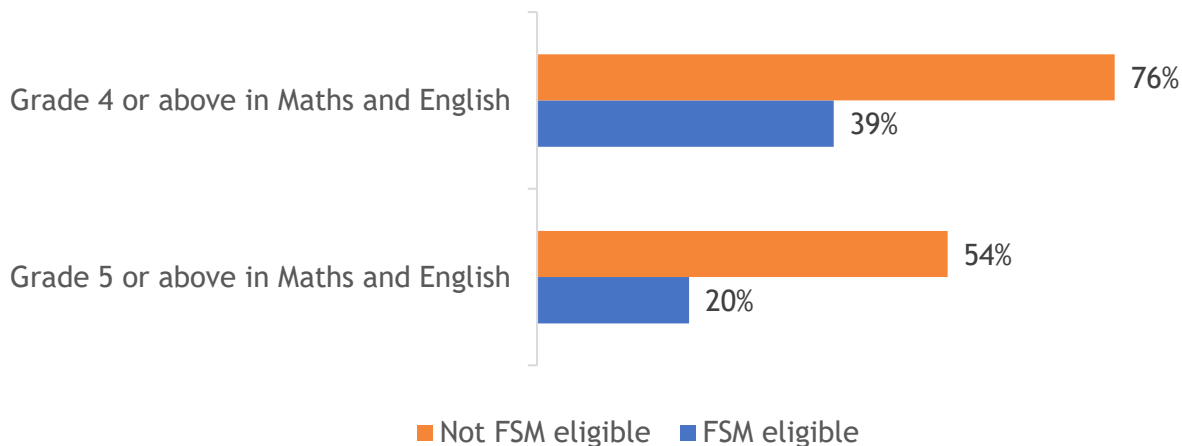
Performance by district

There is a variation between districts in the gap between attainment 8 scores of those who are and are not eligible for free school meals. The gap is smallest in Mole Valley (14) and largest in Epsom and Ewell (24).

As with Early Years and KS2, there is no clear trend relating to the proportion of pupils who are eligible for free school meals and the size of the gap in attainment, likely due to the relatively low variation of free school meal eligibility across districts.

Key Stage 4 performance by Surrey district in 2018-2019.

Surrey District	Proportion of pupils eligible for FSM	Average Attainment 8 score at of FSM pupils at KS4	Average Attainment 8 score at of non-FSM pupils at KS4	Gap
Elmbridge Borough	9%	37	54	17
Epsom and Ewell Borough	5%	36	60	24
Guildford Borough	7%	34	54	21
Mole Valley District	7%	37	51	14
Reigate and Banstead Borough	7%	28	48	20
Runnymede Borough	8%	37	52	16
Spelthorne Borough	9%	34	52	17
Surrey Heath Borough	8%	30	52	21
Tandridge District	11%	30	46	16
Waverley Borough	8%	30	54	24
Woking Borough	9%	32	52	21
Surrey total	**7%**	**33**	**52**	**19**

Source: National curriculum assessments at key stage 4 in England, 2019 (Department of Education, 2019)

Comparison to similar local authorities

Surrey has a gap of 19 in the average attainment 8 score between pupils who are and are not FSM eligible. As with previous stages, this is at the lower end of the comparator group, and is similar to the gap observed in Wokingham. In fact, Surrey and Wokingham have identical attainment 8 scores among those who are eligible for free school meals (33) and those who are not (52).

The observed gaps for eight of the ten statistical neighbours fall within an exceptionally small range (17-19). Further, the actual attainment 8 scores of those who are and are not eligible for free school meals also has a small range. Those are eligible for free school meals have average attainment 8 scores which range between 31 and 34; those who are not eligible for free school meals have average attainment 8 scores which range between 48 and 53. This suggests that the experience at Key Stage 4 across these local authorities is very similar.

Only Windsor and Maidenhead and Buckinghamshire fall outside of this range, with gaps of 14 and 23 respectively. Windsor and Maidenhead sees the best average attainment 8 score of the comparator group at 37. Given it had the largest gap at Key Stage 2, this would suggest this local authority is particularly successful in closing this gap at Key Stage 4.
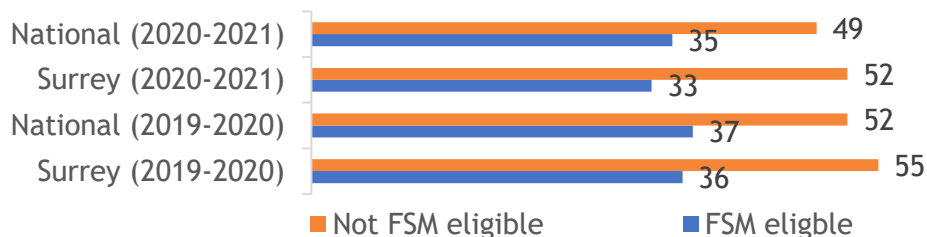
Average Attainment 8 score by region in 2018-2019.

Local authority	Average attainment 8 score for pupils eligible for FSM	Average attainment 8 score for pupils ineligible for FSM	Gap
Windsor and Maidenhead	37	51	14
Oxfordshire	32	49	17
Bracknell Forest	31	48	17
West Berkshire	32	49	17
Hampshire	31	49	18
Cambridgeshire	33	51	18
Hertfordshire	34	53	18
Surrey	33	52	19
Wokingham	33	52	19
Buckinghamshire	34	56	23

Source: National curriculum assessments at key stage 4 in England, 2019 (Department of Education, 2019)

Beyond 2018-2019

At the time of writing, the most up to date data for performance in Early Years and KS2 was the 2018-2019 year. However, KS4 data has been published for both the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 years in this time. It should be noted that any direct comparisons between these years and earlier years should be treated with caution, due to the move to teacher-assessed grades during COVID-19. However, they do suggest that both the gap at a national and Surrey level have remained consistent, at 14 and 19 points respectively. However, the true impact of COVID-19 on attainment is likely to only be known in the coming years.

Average attainment 8 score by year in Surrey and nationally.

	Not FSM eligible	FSM eligble
National (2020-2021)	49	35
Surrey (2020-2021)	52	33
National (2019-2020)	52	37
Surrey (2019-2020)	55	36

Source: National curriculum assessments at Key Stage 4 in England, 2020 (Department of Education, 2020); National curriculum assessments at Key Stage 4 in England, 2021 (Department of Education, 2021)

Recommendation

Proactive action on the long-term impact of COVID-19
While teacher-assessed grades do not suggest a widening of the FSM attainment gap, close attention should be paid in future years to the longer term impact of COVID-19 on outcomes and early action put into place to minimise this at a county level.

The attainment gap Post-16

Surrey's Attainment Gap – 16-19

A further Education Policy Institute (EPI) report suggests that Surrey's attainment gap does not improve for those continuing in education post GCSE. When looking at the equivalent number of A level grades that FSM pupils in Surrey are behind non-FSM pupils, the county ranks as 80th= out of 147 local authority areas (Tuckett et al, 2021). Surrey FSM eligible pupils are underperforming their peers by the equivalent of up to 3 A-level grades (Tuckett et al, 2021).

Surrey's Attainment Gap – Higher Education

Nationally, 26.3% of FSM eligible pupils progressed to higher education in 2018-2019, compared to 45.1% of their non-FSM eligible counterparts. According to the Office for National Statistics (2020), in the same year only 19.8% of FSM eligible pupils in Surrey progressed to higher education compared to a higher education progression rate for non-FSM pupils of 48.0%. The progression rate gap of 28.2% is one of the highest in England, 14th highest out of 151 local authorities. Progression of FSM pupils in Surrey to high tariff higher education provision (such as the University of Surrey) was only 3.3% compared to 15.3% for non-FSM eligible pupils. The progression rate gap of 12% was the 24th highest gap out of 151 local authorities, suggesting the attainment gap continues to persist beyond leaving school.

Recommendation	**Develop a Virtual School for Surrey's disadvantaged learners** A Virtual School for Surrey's disadvantaged learners should be created to monitor young people through primary school up to higher education to track performance and ensure students are targeted for educational intervention, including opportunities to access Information Advice & Guidance (IAG), careers guidance and opportunities to develop cultural capital to encourage and support social mobility.

Reflections on Surrey's attainment gap

At this point, it is worth noting that FSM eligibility is not a constant characteristic of an individual pupil. They may be eligible for free school meals for just one year during their education or many years. Surrey is in the lowest 25% of local authorities in England for persistently disadvantaged pupils (i.e., pupils on free school meals for more than 80% of their school life) at both primary and secondary school levels. Further detailed research at a local level, potentially drawing on local authority data sets would be useful to clarify information about persistently disadvantaged pupils. For example, there are groups that have been highlight as having wider attainment gaps. The gap is particularly large for Gypsy/Roma pupils, who are nearly three years behind by the end of secondary school, and Traveller of Irish Heritage pupils, who are two years behind (Education Policy Institute, 2020). Another area of focus could be in relation to looked-after children (i.e. children cared for by the local authority for a period of more than 24 hours) and children in need (i.e. those receiving support from a social worker). By the time they sit their GCSEs, looked after children in England are 29 months behind their peers. Meanwhile, children in need with a child protection plan are 26 months behind, and children in need without a child protection plan are 20 months behind (Education Policy Institute, 2020). Likewise, children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are predicted to have lower KS4 attainment (Gorard & Siddiqui, 2019) and need to be emphasised more in policy, practice and school "performance" measures' (Gorard, 2018).

Stakeholders interviewed were particularly conscious that solely viewing the gap from the perspective of those eligible for free school meals, against those who are not eligible for free school meals, has the potential to obscure other explanatory factors which make the gap so difficult to shift.

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Pupil premium versus whole cohort is quite a distorted picture.
External stakeholder

There were comments that the intersection between free school meal eligibility and SEN were particularly relevant for Surrey. One stakeholder noted that there was a possibility that Surrey had a higher SEN and free school meal population than the national average, which may, in part, explain why Surrey's gap, when looking only at free school meal eligibility only, is particularly wide.

There is as an opportunity to update work undertaken by the County Council (2018), and revisit progress against the recommendations of that report and whether there should be changes to the outcomes sought. It is worth highlighting that there is a level of agreement between this report and this previously undertaken work. In particular, the assertion that to increase education attainment within the local authority overall there should be a focus on the most vulnerable children and that the focus should be throughout the education system.

Recommendation	**Exploring intersections** There is a need to explore Surrey's situation in greater detail, particularly understanding the intersection of multiple challenges (e.g. SEN and FSM).

Explaining, and closing, the gap

Explaining the free school meal attainment gap in Surrey

There were numerous explanatory factors in the literature and from the stakeholder interviews as to why the free school meal attainment gap exists. Many of those which were reflected on by stakeholders were also borne out in the literature, however, it is worth noting that the role of affluence in Surrey was a particular area of distinction from the national picture. The main factors identified were:

- **Understanding disadvantage**: There was not necessarily a shared understanding among schools and local leaders of the true lived experience of disadvantaged pupils

- **Cultural norms and stigma**: The affluence in Surrey creates an environment whereby privilege is a norm and disadvantage is stigmatised

- **Social capital:** A lack of opportunities to broaden young people's horizons results in an inability to conceptualise certain phenomenon and to consider a range of future options

- **Parental role:** Parents in disadvantaged families had worse experiences of education and therefore do not necessarily provide the right set of expectations around learning

- **Transition:** Disadvantaged pupils become more dispersed between primary and secondary school, making the transition between the two more difficult

- **Careers advice:** Advice provided to free school meal eligible pupils may not explore the full range of options available to them, and limits their progression.

Understanding disadvantage

One of the repeated explanations for persistent inequality highlighted in the literature was a lack of a strong understanding of free school meal pupils. Ilie et al (2017) noted that, 'teachers, school leaders and policy-makers do not have good information on all of these aspects of pupils' background and instead they rely on proxy indicators of the socio-economic circumstances of pupils.' Headteachers who were interviewed noted that they has limited data about pupils' familial circumstances and educational experience to build a systematic understanding of their whole cohort. Many relied on prior experience of families built up by long-standing staff to get a better sense of individual pupils' circumstances. There were also a number of recommendations in the literature (e.g., Danvers & Hinton-Smith, 2021; Leaney & Mwale, 2021) for qualitative research with free school meal pupils to be undertaken in order to obtain in-depth, contextualised and nuanced understanding of the material, social and affective aspects of their lived experience.

A key factor touched on by stakeholders was, given the culture and affluence surrounding Surrey, some teachers had limited experience of mixing with others who experienced financial deprivation. This, in turn, led to a more limited understanding of a number of factors beyond the school gate (e.g. mental health and wellbeing, material poverty, skills development and employment opportunities) which may impact free school meal eligible pupils. Interestingly, a number of stakeholders interviewed said that online teaching during COVID-19 had deepened their understanding of the lived home experience of their disadvantaged pupils. This snapshot into their lives had enabled them to put in place effective support with the financial and practical challenges associated with learning in an online setting, in order to remove them as barriers to effective

education.

Concerns about a lack of appreciation and understanding of issues beyond the school gate have led to calls for more holistic approaches, focusing on communities as well as schooling (Sutton Trust, 2021). Parental engagement and support was often cited by stakeholders as an area they were consistently looking to make further strides in; however, implementation of wider engagement and education pieces could be patchy when budgets were tight and funding must be prioritised for the provision of high quality teaching.

Recommendations	**Avoid over-reliance on proxy indicators** Having endorsed the use of FSM as a metric, it is important not to over-rely on it when designing interventions. Teachers, school-leaders and policy-makers often do not have good information on all aspects of pupils' backgrounds (Ilie et al, 2017). It is recommended that qualitative research with FSM pupils is undertaken in order to obtain in-depth, contextualised and nuanced understanding of the material, social and affective aspects of their lived experience. **Hear and acknowledge FSM pupils and parents/carers concerns** The academic literature urged the avoidance of 'deficit discourses' and the development of more respectful and emotionally aware approaches to FSM pupils. **Build disadvantage into Initial Teacher Training** A stronger emphasis on building a nuanced understanding of disadvantage and the lived experience of FSM pupils should be built into Initial Teacher training courses, alongside the role in which teachers' own backgrounds play in the attainment of such pupils.

Cultural norms and stigma

The affluence of Surrey, and, by extension, the relatively few numbers of free school meal eligible pupils, was consistently highlighted by stakeholders as a key reason why the attainment gap persists at such high levels. Practically, this caused difficulties for schools to put effective measures in place when smaller numbers of free school eligible pupils results in lower amounts of pupil

> " It's really hard to be a child growing up knowing that you don't have, not just the same stuff, but opportunities as your peers.
> Headteacher

premium funding. There was also a knowledge gap in schools with small numbers of eligible pupils on the best ways to improve outcomes. On a community level, Surrey's affluence was perceived to create a culture where wealth and privilege is normalised and disadvantage is stigmatised. Anecdotally, the majority of stakeholders could point to instances where other teachers or parents had made sweeping generalisations about disadvantaged pupils, tone-deaf requests which benefitted their own child to the detriment of a disadvantaged child, or in smaller numbers of cases, jokes or insults targeted towards disadvantaged families.

This culture was perceived to negatively impact young people's attainment and aspirations. The literature also noted a lack of self confidence within free school meal eligible students as a reason for persistent inequality. With calls for more interventions to grow confidence (Sutton Trust, 2021) and self-integrity using self-affirmation (Hadden et al, 2020). Danvers & Hinton-Smith (2021) suggested there was some benefit in confidence growing activities, whilst rejecting the underlying assumption that educational disadvantage can be reduced to just individual confidence and 'thought out'. The issue of a lack of confidence was also raised in relation to parents and carers, with the recent Education Committee (2021:41) report suggesting that some parents 'lack the skills and confidence they need to support their children's education.'

Recommendation	**Driving culture change** Disadvantage must be put at the heart of future strategies to enhance educational attainment to provide county leadership on tackling differential outcomes. Any strategy must include wider cultural change initiatives, including campaigns to raise awareness of the lived experience of FSM eligible families in Surrey.

Social capital

A lack of social capital was another key reason cited by the Education Select Committee's (2021) report for persistent inequality, and was echoed by the stakeholders interviewed. This prevented young people from having a more well-rounded view of the world, which created both barriers in terms of teaching and aspiration development. On the teaching and learning side, there were concerns that some teachers make assumptions that young people have a frame of reference for terms they may have no experience of, which could be particularly prominent in schools where only a small numbers of individuals in a class were eligible for free school meals.

The lack of social capital also resulted in lower aspirations through lacking this knowledge to consider a broader range of options. Universities were perceived to be key in tackling this through trips to the university or residentials to provide that experience and open up higher education as an option. It was important, however, that such visits covered the whole experience of university, from academic, to accommodation to the social experience, in order to provide a holistic understanding of the university experience.

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Some teachers, who grew up in and work in more affluent areas, don't understand their disadvantaged pupils and in turn can't adapt. They might ask their children to imagine a castle or being at the seaside but they teacher shouldn't assume the children has the cultural capital to understand this
CEO Schools Alliance for Excellent (Surrey's Local Education Partnership)

Stakeholders also noted, given declining funding, rising costs and the need to justify the impact of any spending, that they had to make difficult decisions to reduce the opportunities for social or cultural trips to prioritise education endeavours. Funding streams to ensure that cultural trips were available to free school meals pupils were highly sought after.

In the national context, discussions of social capital have been related to place and the impact of the 'levelling up' narrative of the current government is discussed in the literature. One finding to highlight is that, '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' (Gorard & Siddiqui, 2019:12). This is important since it highlights that, in order to address persistent inequality, it is not simply a case of 'fixing schools', but that investment and infrastructure (e.g., local or regional government intervention) are needed alongside support for education. Or as Gorard & Siddiqui (2019:12) state, 'Education is not a cheap solution to economic disadvantage'. Place-based factors, including regional economics and under-investment need to be considered as part of the explanation for persistent disadvantage (Education Committee 2021:5).

Recommendation	**Enhancing social capital** The University has a clear role to play in ensuring that FSM eligible pupils have the opportunity to experience the higher education setting and firmly embed this as an option for this group. At a county level, there is a need for a joined up approach to ensure that schools have a network to draw from of organisations who are in a position to offer cultural opportunities for low or no cost.

Parental role

One of the most prominent factors stakeholders discussed was the role of parents in explaining the differential attainment between free school meal and non-free school meal eligible pupils. This multi-faceted issue raised a number of different challenges which schools were consistently attempting to navigate through informal and formal measures.

Expectation setting within free school meal eligible families was discussed as a primary reason why some pupils may not come to school in the right frame of mind to learn. As parents may not have had positive educational experiences, they do not necessarily put as high a value on areas such as ensuring their child attends school, ensuring they have the correct uniform or ensuring they have the correct equipment as is needed for young people to maximise the benefit from set teaching hours. Once at home, they may not set the same expectations around completing homework, by designating set times or providing adequate space in which to do so. These all contributed to mismatch in standards between home and school, which could be confusing for young people to navigate.

This engagement did not only relate to a readiness to learn, but also wider engagement in the school community. Stakeholders said that FSM eligible families were particularly difficult to engage in events, and it was a gruelling trial and error process to determine what events to run to encourage participation from these families. This was exacerbated by the relatively low numbers of FSM families in some schools as their voices could be drowned out by the larger, and more vocal, majority of advantaged families. Some stakeholders noted that some schools in particularly affluent areas were pricing free school meal eligible families out of such engagements by charging excessive fees for involvement.

Decision-making within FSM eligible families has been suggested as another reason for persistent inequality:

> **"**
> …there is a lot of evidence that working-class families have high aspirations. What they do not have is the information and the understanding as to how you might mobilise that aspiration effectively for outcomes for your children. Money makes a big difference here... but also understanding the rules of the game.
> Francis (2014:29)

Stakeholders confirmed this challenge, relaying that young people often had unrealistically high aspirations, such as becoming a footballer or a dancer, and they did not necessarily understand the route to doing so and the role that power and influence play in succeeding in such career paths. It was felt that aspirations could be too singularly honed in upon, and there was a need, in stakeholders' opinions, to broaden the horizons of free school meal eligible pupils to allow them explore a range of options which are available to them.

Recommendation	**Engagement of parents, carers and the community** There was not sufficient evidence of effective engagement with parents, carers and the community, despite local attachments and interpersonal relationships at home being identified as central to pupils' decisions about which university to attend (Hinton, 2011). Focused research within Surrey on engaging parents, careers and the local community would help inform future interventions.

Transition from primary to secondary education

Across all regions, there was some suggestion that inequalities were reinforced due to poor transitions between primary and secondary schools. The transition from primary to secondary, whilst often difficult for all children, was found to be even less positive for pupils with a low socio-economic status (Evangelou et al, 2008). Free school meal pupils were more likely to find that their primary peer groups were more dispersed when transitioning to secondary and that they were more likely to attend lower performing schools (Burgess et al, 2008; Stahl, 2015). There is some evidence that even relatively modest programmes to support transition can be effective for FSM children (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). Without a strong understanding of the 'emotional, practical and academic significance of transition' (Fisher, 2017:910) inequality for pupils in receipt of FSM is likely to persist.

Careers advice

Once within secondary education, the literature suggested that a partial cause of inequality was due to the advice given to free school meal eligible students on the qualifications they should study towards. A specific recommendation from the Education Committee (2021:7) was to improve careers guidance and specify targets in order to boost access to higher education. When analysing the disadvantage gap in 16-19 education Tuckett et al (2021) noted that the type and level of

qualification entered into by pupils explained one third of the gap. This finding was consistent with research by Maragkou (2019) suggesting that high achieving disadvantaged students are more likely to take qualifications associated with lower prior attainment. Information, advice and guidance targeted at free school meal students could change qualification choices. Stakeholders felt that universities had a key role to play in raising aspirations here to support the diversification of considered career choices. Suggestions such as organising talks from alumni who came from disadvantaged backgrounds which honestly portray their journey and organising student volunteering or work placements in schools were offered as ways in which universities could provide access to positive role models for young people.

"
In an ideal world, I'd love it if some students could come and do work experience for a week in the school and work alongside the students. If you had ten of those, wearing a University of Surrey hoodie, going around, helping out in classrooms, just generally being useful and engaging with the children. It's about that on-the-job visibility. Just send us ten students who are good communicators and don't mind getting stuck in – we'll deploy them around the school.
Headteacher

Closing the gap: what works?

There is a strong focus in the literature on the importance of identifying 'what works' due to extensive research demonstrating various ways of measuring attainment gaps. However, the evidence of what works was often lacking or relatively weak/equivocal (Demie & Lewis, 2015). It is worth, at this stage, recognising stakeholder's reflections that what works to solve this complex and evolving issue is not fixed, and what works one day with one set of pupils, may not work the next with another. As one stakeholder said, what works is:

> **"**
> Actually being resilient to keep trying every year, to know your cohort, to go 'we've tried that, it's not working with this cohort, we need to find something else'. It's that grind to push it all out.
> Headteacher

Many of the approaches taken recognised that each pupil is an individual, and what would ultimately be effective needed to be planned for that individual. As such, there was no fixed approach to reduce the attainment gap, and an immense amount of work is already being done by schools, the local authority and partner such as Schools Alliance for Excellence. There were, however, some common threads which aligned the steps stakeholders were taking:

- **Quality teaching first**: Ensuring that quality teaching is in place once young people are in the space to learn
- **Interventions:** Using the right, evidence-based interventions sparingly, with support from higher education
- **Pastoral support:** Building resilience and engaging with parents to ensure that young people come to school ready to learn
- **Ethos:** Fostering a culture where young people know they are cared for and know they can achieve
- **Financial support**: Removing barriers to accessing the materials needed to learn.

Quality teaching first

The role of teachers in decision-making and in delivery must be recognised; 'the quality of teaching makes the biggest difference to learning outcomes' (Sharples et al., 2010:2) and 'Without doubt, teaching is the most important factor in improving the outcomes of all pupils, and especially the poorest' (Sutton Trust, 2021:4). All stakeholders we interviewed were aligned with this thinking; they recognised that free school meal eligible pupils may not have the support at home with their learning, making their experience of education in the classroom all the more important.

> **"**
> It's about quality first teaching and making sure the classroom experience is fit for purpose. And ensuring that children are being tracked, and have that guidance and support in place.
> External stakeholder

A survey of teachers, run in England during the period 12 to 17 March 2021, by the National Foundation for Educational Research, suggested that teachers were aware of research evidence of which approaches and programmes to adopt in order to improve free school meal eligible pupil attainment. Sixty percent of the panel of 1,535 practising teachers from 1,349 schools in the publicly funded sector that completed the survey used such evidence to inform interventions. This evidence was augmented by their past experience of what works and it was this past experience that was the most relied upon to decide on interventions to support free school meal eligible pupils. There is concern, however, expressed in the literature, about ensuring opportunities for career development for teachers are built into attainment initiatives (Sutton Trust, 2021). There is a role for local authorities to 'encourage changes in pedagogy through extensive, school-based professional development' (Sharples et al, 2011).

There was a logical challenge as to how effective quality teaching could be. By focussing on ensuring teaching quality is excellent, all pupils will benefit, meaning the gap will never close. This in no way precluded the focus on teaching, which all recognised was the foundation of raising attainment, however it put greater emphasis on ensuring other measures were in place to ensure young people were in a space to learn. In particular, many stakeholders referenced removing barriers to getting students into the classroom and creating a love of learning.

Recommendation	**Co-construction of interventions with schools** It is important to recognise the central role of teachers and school leaders. It is strongly recommended that interventions are co-constructed with school staff. Teaching staff are likely to be key actors in sustaining and scaling any intervention.

Interventions

School-based Interventions were a more widely debated strategy and there was a reluctance to use these widely. This reluctance stemmed from the very nature of interventions, meaning that those who access them must limit their learning in another area, often with a limited evidence base to justify their use and a high financial burden. Where they were used, stakeholders stressed that they should be targeted, done in small groups, and for short time periods. A recent meta-analysis of the evaluations of the interventions available via the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) suggests that one-to-one and small group interventions were the most beneficial for FSM pupils in literacy, whereas whole class approaches were more beneficial for FSM pupils in mathematics. However, it also noted that, despite an increase in focus on interventions in mathematics in recent years, there is limited evidence that these make a difference in closing the gap in achievement between FSM and non FSM eligible pupils (Ashraf et al., 2021).

The higher education sector has also recognised a lack of evidence of successful interventions. This led to the Office for Students establishing the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO). TASO was set up in 2019 and is funded on an initial grant until 2023. It is an independent hub for higher education professionals to access research, toolkits and evaluation guidance to help improve equality. TASO notes that, in 2017-18, universities and colleges spent £248.2m on activities to support access to HE for disadvantaged and under-represented groups. Yet, despite this volume of activity, there is not a good understanding of which approaches are most effective because:

- There are gaps in the evidence base: for some student groups and activities there is simply not much existing research or evaluation.
- The existing evidence doesn't focus on the impact of activities: in some cases, we have evidence on the barriers certain groups face to entering HE, but we have less on the actual impact of activities designed to support these students.
- The existing evidence doesn't actually show that the activity has an impact: much existing research and evaluation looks at whether students who take part in some activity have better outcomes than other students who don't. But this approach doesn't actually tell us whether an activity is effective.

Despite the relative paucity of evidence on interventions to support the educational attainment of FSM eligible pupils, four types of interventions that appear to be gaining a strong evidence include: tutoring, metacognition and self-regulation, multi-intervention approaches, and interventions post-entry to higher education:

Tutoring for Primary and Secondary Pupils

Tutoring was recognised as an effective intervention, however, students from poorer backgrounds are often less able to access this type of support (Montacute, 2020). With a number of evaluations of one-to-one and small group tutoring interventions demonstrating positive results (The Brilliant Club, 2020), the establishment of the National Tutoring Programme by the government in 2020 was welcomed (Sutton Trust, 2021). The strong evidence base suggests that tutoring should be considered as part of any new widening participation programme. However, the Education Endowment Foundation notes that, while highly effective, one-to-one tuition is costly, which may be less appropriate in schools with low numbers of disadvantaged students.

Metacognition and self-regulation for Primary and Secondary Pupils

Metacognition and self-regulation approaches are strongly endorsed by the Education Endowment Foundation (2018) as having high impact for very low cost, based on extensive evidence, and a number of schools across the county have been using this. The Foundation describes metacognition and self-regulation approaches as aiming to help pupils think about their own learning more explicitly, often by teaching them specific strategies for planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning. Interventions are usually designed to give pupils a repertoire of strategies to choose from and the skills to select the most suitable strategy for a given learning task.

Multi-intervention approaches

A recent evaluation by the Office for Students (2021:1) on widening participation initiatives claimed, 'there is a high volume of strong evidence that multi-intervention approaches have a positive impact on short, medium and long-term outcomes for learners, particularly when they engage in seven to eight sessions for a minimum of three hours in total over the course of an academic year.' This approach is supported by previous research calling for an evidence-based basket of intervention (Ellis & Sosu, 2015). TASO advises that such approaches target multiple stages of education, and include a combination of the following: mentoring, counselling, coaching and role models; information, advice and guidance (IAG); summer schools, financial support, campus visits and subject tasters; and workshops.

Post entry in Higher Education

TASO has, to date, only identified two widening participation interventions that it judges to have both a positive impact on aspirations/attitudes *and* a positive impact on behaviour/outcomes. Both of these occur post entry into higher education. One is focused on mentoring, counselling, coaching and role-models, whilst the other refers to sustained programmes of engagement (for example, via course modules or events) designed to improve retention and success among students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

Pastoral support

Stakeholders advocated heavily for the role of pastoral support in supporting both children and families in getting young people into a mindset where they are ready to learn. Such support aimed to build young people's resilience to minimise disruption in the classroom or to provide parents with the support they needed to help their child engage more fully in school. Getting young people to enjoy school and love learning was also a key goal; if present, stakeholders said they could much more easily influence a child's attainment. Stakeholders referenced numerous initiatives, including: Home School Link workers, ecotherapy, Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs), inclusion units, safeguarding teams, Cadets, CPOMS, Thrive sessions, Be Me sessions, appointing parental champions and hosting parenting classes.

The challenge of expending such efforts on pastoral support is that this does not readily translate into what schools are measured upon, however, they are necessary to improve the areas in which they must demonstrate impact.

Ethos

Ethos was an important factor for building a community in schools where FSM eligible pupils could thrive. Headteachers we interviewed had differing approaches to their ethos, but the purpose was to ensure that each individual child knew that they belonged and what was expected from them. The setting of these expectations was thought to be key to minimising stigma and ensuring clarity of expectation when moving from the home to school environment.

"
[What works?] Kids knowing that they are cared for, they know that they belong, that we actually give a damn.
Headteacher

Financial support

Financial support was also offered to families to cover expenses, including uniform, revision guides, equipment, books, laptops and trips. There was a shared perception among stakeholders that, despite financial deprivation being the factor which unites free school meal eligible families, it alone does not lead to lower attainment. Instead, financial support was viewed as a way to remove barriers to learning, at which point other, more effective, measures to improve attainment could be put into place.

Recommendations

Recommendations

This report paints a stark picture of the differential outcomes of FSM eligible pupils and the challenges faced by schools and local leaders to continue to serve the needs of this under-represented group. That FSM eligible pupils in Surrey are more than a year and a half behind their peers at the point of leaving school at 16 is shocking, and serves as a reminder of the urgent action needed to support all young people to thrive. The scale of this meeting this challenge cannot be understated, however, and will only be achieved through the commitment of, and collaboration with, all local institutions who can impact educational outcomes.

We endorse the hard work already taking place and the commitment made by Surrey County Council in 2018 to improve outcomes for FSM eligible pupils, while adding the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1 – **Use FSM eligibility as a metric**

Whilst not without fault, FSM eligibility is the most practical and robust metric to use as a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage. The objective of interventions should be to improve this metric.

Recommendation 2 – **Develop a body of county leaders committed to tackling inequality**
The pervasive nature of the FSM attainment gap across all levels demonstrates the need for county-wide leadership to reduce inequality. A body of county leaders, drawing from the local authority, schools, universities, and community leaders, should be created with a focus on setting ambitious targets for reducing the attainment gap, driving change through the county and setting best practice standards.

Recommendation 3 – **Proactive action on the long-term impact of COVID-19**
While teacher-assessed grades do not suggest a widening of the FSM attainment gap, close attention should be paid in future years to the longer term impact of COVID-19 on outcomes and early action put into place to minimise this at a county level.

Recommendation 4 – **Exploring intersections**

There is a need to explore Surrey's situation in greater detail, particularly understanding the intersection of multiple challenges (e.g. SEN and FSM).

Recommendation 5 – Develop a Virtual School for Surrey's disadvantaged learners

A Virtual School for Surrey's disadvantaged learners should be created to monitor young people through primary school up to higher education to track performance and ensure students are targeted for educational intervention including opportunities to access IAG, careers guidance and opportunities to develop cultural capital to encourage and support social mobility.

Recommendation 6 – **Avoid over-reliance on proxy indicators**

Having endorsed the use of FSM as a metric, it is important not to over-rely on it when designing interventions. Teachers, school-leaders and policy-makers often do not have good information on all aspects of pupils' backgrounds (Ilie et al, 2017). It is recommended that qualitative research with FSM pupils is undertaken in order to obtain in-depth, contextualised and nuanced understanding of the material, social and affective aspects of their lived experience.

Recommendation 7 – **Hear and acknowledge FSM pupils and parents/carers concerns**

The academic literature urged the avoidance of 'deficit discourses' and the development of more respectful and emotionally aware approaches to FSM pupils.

Recommendation 8 – **Build disadvantage into Initial Teacher Training**
A stronger emphasis on building a nuanced understanding of disadvantage and the lived experience of FSM pupils should be built into Initial Teacher training courses, alongside the role in which teachers' own backgrounds play in the attainment of such pupils.

Recommendation 9 – **Driving culture change**
Disadvantage must be put at the heart of future strategies to enhance educational attainment to provide county leadership on tackling differential outcomes. Any strategy must include wider cultural change initiatives, including campaigns to raise awareness of the lived experience of FSM eligible families in Surrey.

Recommendation 10 – **Enhancing social capital**
The University has a clear role to play in ensuring that FSM eligible pupils have the opportunity to experience the higher education setting and firmly embed this as an option for this group. At a county level, there is a need for a joined up approach to ensure that schools have a network to draw from of organisations who are in a position to offer cultural opportunities for low or no cost.

Recommendation 11 – **Engagement of parents, carers and the community**

There was not sufficient evidence of effective engagement with parents, carers and the community, despite local attachments and interpersonal relationships at home being identified as central to pupils' decisions about which university to attend (Hinton, 2011). Focused research within Surrey on engaging parents, careers and the local community would help inform future interventions.

Recommendation 12 – **Co-construction of interventions with schools**

It is important to recognise the central role of teachers and school leaders. It is strongly recommended that interventions are co-constructed with school staff. Teaching staff are likely to be key actors in sustaining and scaling any intervention.

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