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# SHINE<sup>★</sup>

## **Investigating the barriers and the protective factors influencing GCSE achievement in secondary education**

**Dr Sarah Martin-Denham**  
**10th November 2024**



**University of  
Sunderland**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was commissioned to Dr Sarah Martin-Denham, Associate Professor of Care and Education at the University of Sunderland, by the SHINE Trust. SHINE was set up as an education charity by a group of committed philanthropists from the business and finance sectors.

Since 1999, they have invested £29 million in more than 300 education projects that have helped 1.3 million children from 20,000 schools. More than a million disadvantaged children have benefited from access to SHINE-funded programmes online. A charitable donation of £11m will support educational change for children in Sunderland from Autumn 2024 for ten years.

The City of Sunderland is located within the county of Tyne and Wear in Northeast England. The city has 18 mainstream secondary schools and 82 primary schools, serving a population of approximately 50,000 children. The Office of National Statistics (2024) report that in Sunderland, 19.2% of the population was income deprived in 2019.

The commissioned research has four elements:

1. Analysis of school census data between 2018/19 and 2022/23 using descriptive statistics and multi-level modelling.
2. Thematic analysis of contributions from 84 participants (37 interviews), focus groups and a film project, 'pullupachair'. The participants included 28 headteachers and senior leaders, 24 children (aged 11-16), 10 young people (aged 16-21), eight teachers, eight participants from the third sector/ statutory services and 6 parents.
3. A co-created film with young people 'pullupachair Post 16'
4. Mapping key relationships and networks that support GCSE achievement in Sunderland



### THIS PUBLICATION SHARES THE FINDINGS OF ELEMENT 2, WITH THE FOLLOWING AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

**Aim 1.** Investigate the factors influencing GCSE achievement in secondary education in Sunderland

**Aim 2.** Conduct an in-depth consultation exercise to collate and interpret the experiences, perspectives and expertise of children and young people, headteachers, senior leaders, teachers, parents, services, communities and key stakeholders about barriers to the achievement of children up to GCSE-level in Sunderland

**Objective 1.** Establish what conclusions can be drawn about the challenges, experiences and attainment of children in Sunderland throughout their secondary education

**Objective 2.** Establish how factors relating to children's prior attainment and life experiences influence their transition between primary and secondary school, informing their attainment during their secondary school journey

**Objective 3.** Establish how socio-economic, demographic or community factors influence their attainment during their secondary school journey

**Objective 4.** Provide a preliminary understanding of how attainment at age 16 may inform to post-16 destinations and opportunities for children in Sunderland

**Objective 5.** Identify potential gaps and challenges in provision within and outside school environments, that may influence the attainment of children up to GCSE in Sunderland

**Objective 6.** Provide high-level recommendations for establishing a school fund in Sunderland.

**Objective 7.** Propose an effective evaluation framework for evaluating the effectiveness of the school fund that encapsulates learning and local/ contextual perspectives effectively and efficiently.

The methodology for this research is grounded in a phenomenological interpretive stance. A method in which researchers study human experience to understand and interpret how they see their world. Phenomenology was used to conceptualise experiences of factors influencing GCSE achievement at KS4.

Qualitative data was collected through 1:1 and 1:2 semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups with headteachers and senior leaders (n=28), teachers (n=8), service providers (n=8), parents (n=6), children (n=24), and young people aged 16-21 (n=10). The reflections of young people on a vocational Further Education pathway on their secondary mainstream schooling were collected over a five-day creative arts project called 'pullupachair post16'.

The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as a 'flexible, straightforward and accessible' method (MacLeod, 2019, p. 146) and an accepted phenomenological approach (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). Reflexive thematic analysis is the method of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or conceptual themes and subthemes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As proposed by Perry, Meissel and Hill (2022), theme development was directed by the content of the data to identify eventual themes related to the aim and objectives of the research.

The Covid-19 pandemic (herein referred to as Covid) disrupted the academic achievement of some children more than others (Harmey and Moss, 2021). Research has demonstrated links between achievement and pupil wellbeing over time (see Collie et al., 2015; Fernandez-Rio et al., 2017; Herndon and Bembenuddy, 2017; Martin-Denham, 2020; Lindorff, 2021). Fewer children than ever are regularly attending school, with Dame Rachel de Souza, the Children's Commissioner for England (2023), reporting that the number of children regularly missing school has more than doubled compared to pre-Covid pandemic levels, pointing to over 120,000 children missing at least half of their time in school.

Amanda Spielman, His Majesty's [former] Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, highlighted in their 2023 Annual Report reasons for optimism in education. She cited Ofsted inspections identifying improvements for teaching reading in primary schools. However, she noted gaps in children's learning, recruitment and retention issues in the education workforce and overstretched services, particularly for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Mental health needs were also contributing factors.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review from Key Stage (KS)1 to KS5, led by Professor Becky Francis CBE, is welcomed (DfE, 2024a). The reform of curriculum and assessment underpinned by the views of frontline staff and external stakeholders, children, young people and parents is critical to ensuring the review is balanced and representative of all stakeholders. The review's primary purpose is to ensure the curriculum balances ambition, relevance, flexibility and inclusivity for all children and young people.

## KEY FINDINGS

**Finding 1: 'Going the extra mile'** was identified as the overarching theme with five subthemes having the greatest combined potential to positively influence GCSE achievement at KS4.

First, **mental health support** (a school within a school, bespoke support/staffing).

Second, **parents as partners** (parental involvement and engagement and a regulating home environment).

Third, **a focus on literacy** (whole class daily literacy sessions and intervention for reading, comprehension and communication).

Fourth, **supported transitions** (visiting primary schools to build relationships, mindfulness and safe spaces, modifying year 7 and 8 behaviour structures).

Fifth, **promoting careers and pathways** (careers advisors and external visits and embedding a career-based mindset).

**Finding 2:** The second theme identified was challenges to achievement at GCSE with four subthemes.

First, **a fish out of water** (the legacy of Covid and persistent absence).

Second, **not my cup of tea** (memory test and literacy and one size fits all).

Third, **the perfect storm** (being care-experienced, County Lines and substance misuse, parental support and engagement).

Fourth, **glass ceilings** (middle of the pack, limited opportunities for low attainers and pushing apprenticeships).

**Finding 3:** The 84 participants were asked to identify three recommendations for the £11m fund that would, be most likely to positively influence attainment of all children. '**Thinking outside of the box**' was identified as the theme that conceptualises their views with five subthemes.

First, **literacy initiatives** (qualified staff delivering interventions, reading at home and a whole city leadership approach to share good practice).

Second, **SEND and SEMH** (alternatives to isolation as a sanction and the creation of additional alternative provision).

Third, **masterclasses, mentors and independent study** (more tutors and afterschool support, independent quiet study spaces and a consortium of teachers across the city to deliver core subject support).

Fourth, **parent partnership** (financial support for families and the employment of family support workers).

Fifth, **breaking the mould** (funded visits and experiences to raise aspirations and employment and university visits).

## CONCLUSION

This research provides valuable insights into the protective factors and barriers to achievement at GCSE in Sunderland. This research demonstrates the knowledge and understanding held locally on what needs to be done to ensure every child thrives and achieves regardless of their prior attainment, life experiences or current circumstances. The voices of children, young people and their families need to be central to the conversation about how their outcomes can be improved, in what are challenging financial times.

The protective factors influencing GCSE achievement were available teachers to be available to provide 1:1 or group support beyond the scheduled lessons. Teachers raised aspirations and ambitions and motivated children to aim for higher GCSE outcomes through practical teaching approaches, extra-curricular support and a belief in their ability to attain higher GCSE outcomes. Providing exposure to career opportunities

and pathways helps some identify education, employment and training opportunities. Careers advice, external visits and visitors gave children an insight into post-16 options, potentially motivating them to aim high for their GCSEs.

Schools were responsive to the complexity of the mental health challenges experienced by some children by providing bespoke packages of support including within school provision. The provision of mental health support such as within school counselling and bespoke learning environments were seen as beneficial in preventing escalating mental ill health. Working with parents as partners to secure a shared responsibility in preparing for GCSE exams and in supporting children to strive for the best possible GCSE outcomes was influential on outcomes.

One of the critical priorities for the local area is addressing the literacy challenges, particularly reading and comprehension. Other challenges outlined in this report are due to curriculum, assessment and funding shortfalls that need to be addressed nationally. The exam system is a memory test that is not capturing the strengths of all children. There are too many exams in too little time. The curriculum is not broad enough for all children, there needs to be a re-think of how we can best prepare children for life beyond school. Schools were doing their best with limited funding to support children with rising SEMH difficulties, that were increasing in complexity. Waiting lists for health services are too long and this is negatively impacting everyone supporting these children who deserve better. The findings have important implications for the local area in terms of strategic planning and have potential to inform the Curriculum and Assessment review and hopefully change at a national level.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

**Recommendation 1.** Provide access to evidence-based literacy programmes (EEF) for all Y5-Y11s across the city from a ringfenced element of the £11m funding, regardless of whether the child's school applied for the funding or not.

**Recommendation 2.** Provide and distribute a centralised support fund, held within Early Help (Together for Children), to provide the basics for families in crisis. For example, uniform, bedroom furniture, learning and study equipment/resources for school and home.

**Recommendation 3.** Create and implement innovative approaches to creating bespoke provisions to support children with SEMH and SEND, to thrive in school through mental health support and innovative learning and teaching approaches.

**Recommendation 4.** Establish and deliver effective transition approaches between Y5 and Y7 that include better information sharing, parent partnership and child-led approaches.

**Recommendation 5.** Create and deliver a suite of volunteering experiences in and outside of Sunderland to raise aspirations and ambitions for children across the year groups.

**Recommendation 6.** Design and implement alternatives to isolation (removal), co-produced with children, to break the cycle of lost learning, disengagement, suspensions, permanent exclusions and impact on GCSE achievement.

**Recommendation 7.** Establish a leadership collaborative from the education, community and statutory sector, to share learning and teaching evidence-based approaches, resources and training opportunities.

**Recommendation 8.** Provide new publicly available GCSE revision resources (films, flashcards, booklets) that all children and parents in Sunderland can benefit from.

**Recommendation 9.** Provide extra-curricular masterclasses, particularly in the core subjects for children across clusters of schools.

**Recommendation 10.** Expose children to the education, employment and training opportunities they could have if they were successful at GCSE level beyond their immediate area.

## IN THIS REPORT THE TERM 'PARENT' IS USED TO DESCRIBE THE LEGAL GUARDIAN OF A CHILD.

While this study has provided significant insights, further research is needed to determine if the views of the participants in this research are reflected nationally.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the children, young people, parents and professionals who contributed their views to this research.

Special thanks to SHINE for commissioning me to undertake this research and to the philanthropist whose generous financial support made this research possible. Your commitment to improving GCSE achievement for all children in Sunderland is truly inspiring, and it has provided me with the resources needed to pursue and complete this project, which will set the framework for the £11m of funding you have donated.

I also appreciate the support from University of Sunderland colleagues for providing the necessary resources and facilities to conduct my research. The support from information governance and the legal and finance team has been crucial to seeing this project through to completion.

Additionally, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to my nearest and dearest, Ben, Emily and Will, for their unwavering support and understanding during the many long hours dedicated to this project.

Thank you all

Sarah Martin-Denham

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## ACRONYMS

ACE	Adverse Childhood Experiences	HM	Her Majesty
AP	Alternative Provision	HT	Headteacher
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	ITT	Initial Teacher Training
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council	KS	Key Stage
CYPS	Children and Young People Services	LA	Local Authority
DfE	Department for Education	MP	Mainstream Provision
E	English Baccalaureat	Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan	SEMH	Social, Emotional and Mental Health
FSM	Free School Meals	SEN	Special Educational Needs
FE	Further Education	SEND	Special Educational Needs and/or Disability
FG	Focus Group	SP	Specialist Provision
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education		

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Alternative Provision	Education arranged by LAs for children and young people (CYP) who are unable to attend school due to exclusion, illness or other reasons
Achievement	The academic standard achieved following assessment at a point in time
Achievement figures	Data about the performance of a school or college's pupils at the end of a key stage
Attainment 8	Attainment across the same 8 qualifications as Progress 8
BTECs	Specialist work-related qualifications
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services provide services to children and young people with emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties
Parent(s)	Those with parental responsibility for a child as defined under section 3(1) of the Children Act 1989
Education, Health and Care Plan	A legal plan that details the education, health and social care support provided to a child or young person who has a Special Educational Need or disability
English Baccalaureate	A combination of subjects, including English language and literature, mathematics, the sciences, history or geography and a language
Key Stage	How the National Curriculum is divided, from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 5
Free School Meals	If families receive certain benefits or have a low income their child(ren) may be eligible for free school meals
National Curriculum	A set of subjects and standards used by primary and secondary schools
Ofsted	A non-ministerial Government department that has responsibility for the inspection of children's services, schools and local SEND provision in England
Persistent Absence	10% or more of possible sessions are missed; severely absent if 50% or more of possible sessions are missed
Progress 8	Progress across 8 qualifications from the end of primary school to the end of KS4

# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This section provides a brief overview of the curriculum, examination and performance measures adopted in England, namely the National Curriculum (NC) (1.1), the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), (1.2), the EBacc performance measure (1.3), Attainment 8 (1.4) and post-16 qualifications (1.5). The introduction closes by setting the scene for the research including the aims and objectives (1.6).

### 1.1 THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The national curriculum (NC) is divided into key stages and maps out what primary and secondary schools in England should teach children (Department for Education, 2014). The NC has two aims. First, to introduce the essential knowledge to be educated citizens and engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement. Second, to outline core knowledge around which teachers can develop *‘exciting and stimulating lessons to promote the development of pupils’ knowledge, understanding and skills as part of a wider school curriculum’* (DfE, 2014, p. 5). The NC includes what subjects are taught and what standards children should aim for within maintained local authority school provision. While academies and independent schools do not have to follow the NC, the impact of national testing and inspection regimes mean that many continue to do so.

Since Labour came into power in July 2024, the Government has turned its attention to educational reform and in July 2024, commissioned Dr Becky Francis CBE to lead a review of curriculum and assessment from KS1-KS5 (DfE, 2024b). The main purpose of the review is to ensure the curriculum balances ambition, relevance, flexibility and inclusivity for all children and young people seeking to deliver:

- An excellent foundation in the core subjects of reading, writing and mathematics
- A broader curriculum, so that children and young people don’t miss out on subjects such as music, art, sport and drama, and vocational subjects

- A curriculum that ensures children and young people leave compulsory education ready for life and ready for work, building the knowledge, skills and attributes young people need to thrive
- A curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring all children and young people are represented
- An assessment system that captures the full strengths of every child and young person and the breadth of curriculum.

(DfE, 2024a).

Following the review, all state schools, including academies, will be required to deliver the NC.

### 1.2 THE GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

The General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) are the main level 2 qualifications undertaken by children in England at the end of Key Stage 4 (Year 11, age 15-16). Introduced in the 1980s, they are generally exam-based with the current grading system introduced in 2013 by Michael Gove [then Secretary of State for Education] as *‘more challenging, more ambitious and more rigorous’* (DfE, 2013). GCSEs are graded from 1-9 (see Figure 1), previously A\*-U, with a pass considered to be a C or grade 4. While children have some choice in the GCSE subjects they study, this must include GCSEs in English, mathematics, and a science at a minimum with the general expectation that children study eight subject areas.





**FIGURE 1. GCSE GRADING STRUCTURE**

New grading structure	Former grading structure
9	A*
8	
7	
6	B
5	
4	
3	C
2	
1	
U	U

(Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, 2018)

### 1.3 ENGLISH BACCALAUREATE (EBACC)

The EBacc is a school performance measure, not a qualification. It reports the percentage of children who enter and achieve A\* to C grades in specific GCSE subjects: English language and literature, mathematics, the sciences, geography or history, and a modern foreign language. Secondary schools are measured by the number of pupils who take these core subjects (DfE, 2019).

### 1.4 ATTAINMENT 8

Similarly, 'Attainment 8' is also used as a school performance measure, although it is based on the achievement of individual children across 8 GCSE qualifications (DfE, 2023a). Attainment 8 measures how well pupils do in key stage 4, which they usually finish when they are 16 years old. The eight subjects that make up Attainment 8 are English, maths, three subjects from qualifications that count towards the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), like sciences, language and history, and three more GCSE qualifications (including EBacc subjects), or technical awards from a list approved by the Department for Education. Each grade a pupil gets is assigned a point score from 9 (the highest) to 1 (the lowest). Each pupil's Attainment 8 score is calculated by adding up the points for their 8

subjects, with English and maths counted twice. Attainment 8 scores are rounded to 1 decimal place. For the year 2021/2022, the key headlines were as follows:

- The average score per pupil for 'Attainment 8' was 48.8 out of 90.0
- pupils from the Chinese ethnic group had the highest Attainment 8 score out of all ethnic groups (66.1), followed by pupils from the Indian ethnic group (61.3), while Gypsy and Roma pupils had the lowest score (21.0)
- the average Attainment 8 score was 29.4 for children with SEN, compared with 52.5 for pupils with no SEN
- the average Attainment 8 score was 36.9 for children with eligibility for free school meals (FSM), compared with 51.9 for non-eligible pupils

(DfE, 2023a)

### 1.5 POST-16 QUALIFICATIONS

In September 2020, the Conservative Government introduced T-Levels as a levelling up measure, hoping to better equip vocational students for skilled jobs and academic pathways, and replace previous vocational qualifications such as BTECs. The DfE (2023b) website states that T-levels meet the needs of industry and prepare students for entry into skilled employment, an apprenticeship or related technical study through further or higher education. They are 2-year courses taken after GCSEs and are broadly equivalent to three A-Levels. The Guardian in 2024 reported concerns that despite some of the courses being high-quality, there was slow up-take and questions regarding their suitability.

Ministers and civil servants will decide if the government should continue with the proposed defunding of high-uptake courses such as BTECs by December 2024. Bridgette Phillipson MP, Secretary of State for Education stated, 'I am pleased to announce that the department will undertake a short pause and review of post-16 qualification reform at level 3 and below, concluding before the end of the year' (Further Education (FE) Editor, 2024).

### 1.6 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

In recent years, there have been numerous changes to the national curriculum, examination grading and post-16 qualifications, but take up and children's attainment remains low. This review sets out to better understand the impact of these changes for children in Sunderland with the following overarching aims:

**Aim 1:** Investigate the factors influencing GCSE achievement in secondary education in Sunderland

**Aim 2:** Conduct an in-depth consultation exercise to collate and interpret the experiences, perspectives and expertise of children and young people, headteachers, senior leaders, teachers, parents, services, communities and key stakeholders about barriers to the achievement of children up to GCSE in Sunderland

- 01.** Establish what conclusions can be drawn about the challenges, experiences and attainment of children in Sunderland throughout their secondary education
- 02.** Establish how factors relating to children's prior attainment and life experiences influence their transition between primary and secondary school, informing their attainment during their secondary school journey

- 03.** Establish how socio-economic, demographic or community factors influence their attainment during their secondary school journey
- 04.** Provide a preliminary understanding of how attainment at age 16 may inform post-16 destinations and opportunities for children in Sunderland
- 05.** Identify potential gaps and challenges in provision within and outside school environments, that may influence the attainment of children up to GCSE in Sunderland
- 06.** Provide high-level recommendations for establishing a school fund in Sunderland
- 07.** Propose a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of the school fund that encapsulates learning and local/contextual perspectives effectively and efficiently



# 2.0 METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This section sets out the philosophical position underpinning the methodology (2.1), data collection methods (2.2), recruitment of participants (2.3), the participants (2.4), ethical considerations and processes (2.5), consideration of validity, reliability and bias (2.5) and approach to data analysis (2.6).

### 2.1 METHODOLOGY

The research approach is grounded in a phenomenological interpretive stance, which believes that the social world is, 'culturally derived and historically situated' (Crotty, 1998, p.66). This reflects Weber's (1970) theoretical perspective and supports an interpretive theoretical framework. It highlights the importance of examining the lived experiences and views of children, young people, their parents and the professionals engaged with them to gain insight into the factors influencing GCSE achievement at KS4.

### 2.2 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Data was collected through 37 1:1 and 1:2 semi-structured in-depth interviews, as well as focus groups with 84 headteachers, senior leaders, teachers, parents and children. In addition, the reflections of young people on a vocational Further Education pathway on their secondary mainstream schooling were collected over a five-day creative arts project, 'pullupachair'. The scripts from pullupachair were analysed alongside the interview data. The data was collected from January to July 2024.

The interviews were a mix of face-to-face and online, depending on the participants' preference. All focus groups with children and the pullupachair project with young people were face-to-face.

### 2.3 RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

The children were recruited by headteachers who acted as gatekeepers, gaining both parent and child consent. The schools selected the children to take part in the focus groups. It is recognised this enables selective participation by schools rather than open opportunities for participation of pupils. The children who took part were representative of all ability levels, across KS3 and KS4, as identified by school staff.

The young people were recruited through a gatekeeper in a vocational FE provision. They organised the parent and young person consent. Consent was received for all young people under the age of 18 who participated.

The headteachers were contacted via email by the principal investigator (PI, Dr Sarah Martin-Denham) to share the information sheet and the consent form. On return of the consent form, they were given a choice of date/time and venue for interview/conversations (face-to-face or via Teams). Senior leaders, teachers, children and young people were recruited through headteachers of schools in their role as gatekeepers. Parents were recruited through contacts at 'Together for Children', employing an opportunistic sampling approach. They sought agreement from the parents to share an email/ phone number with the PI. Potential participants were then approached and provided with the information sheet and consent form.

### 2.4 THE PARTICIPANTS

All Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) and maintained secondary schools were represented in the interviews with headteachers and senior leaders. As shown in Table 1, the number of participants surpassed the target (n=84). Table 2 provides the breakdown of the type of provision affiliated to the participants. For ease of reading, the following initialisms will be used in this section:

- Alternative Provision (AP)
- Mainstream Provision (MP)
- Further Education (FE)
- Headteacher (HT)
- Specialist provision (SP)



**Table 1. The target/final number of participants and average interview length**

Participant group	Target number of participants	Final number of participants	Average (mean) interview length in minutes
Headteachers or senior leaders	18	28	49.78
Teachers	6	8	53.82
Parents	6-18	6	25.19
Children	12-18	24	43.74
Young People*	8-12	10	N/A
Services	6	8	51.91
<b>Total</b>	56-78	84	N/A

**Note:** \*Participants in the ‘pullupachair’ five-day film project (20 hours) were aged 16-21.

**Table 2. Breakdown of type of provision**

Participant group	Breakdown of interviews (I) and Focus Groups (FG)	Number of participants	Type of provision affiliated to
Headteachers or senior leaders	15 x 1:1 (I)	15	12 x MP
	3 x FG	91 x MP	
	2: x 1:2 (I)	4	MP
Teachers	2 x FG	8	MP
Parents	6 x 1:1 (I)	6	4 x MP
Children (KS3 & KS4)	5 x (FG)	24	MP
Young people (16-21 years)	10 x 1:1/group	10	FE (Vocational)
Services	2 x 1:1 (I)	8	N/A

\* The parents included (three foster carers, 2 birth parents and 1 adopter)

## 2.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND PROCESSES

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Sunderland Ethics Committee (Application 023355). General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines were recognised and adhered to with informed consent, the right to withdraw and safe data storage. Participants’ identifiable characteristics were replaced with pseudonyms (Information Commissioner’s Office, 2020)

throughout. The British Educational Research Association guidelines for educational research (2024) were adhered to.

In preparation for conversations with children and young people, meetings were held with gatekeepers (headteachers and service directors within Together for Children) to address any accessibility issues and to co-create solutions. The role of the gatekeepers was to gain access to potential participants.

A risk could be that parents would agree to participate without understanding what they agreed to. To overcome this, and in collaboration with gatekeepers, a shorter information sheet was prepared (maintaining critical information) and verbal consent was offered as an alternative method. All children, young people and parents were invited to bring a friend or family member to the conversation or for a member of the school staff to accompany them. Involvement of children and young people was safeguarded, and NSPCC guidelines were adhered to (NSPCC, no date). Both parental and child consent were required for any under 18s to take part in the research. A comic strip was used to explain the research, as this was felt to be more accessible than a formal information sheet. All children and young people were given alternative ways to participate (for example, using art) rather than talking to me. It was of utmost importance that alternative approaches to gathering their views were available so that no children’s views were excluded.

As with my other research involving children and young people, ‘interviews’ were reframed as ‘conversations’, to be seen as less threatening and invasive. It was important to acknowledge the position of power held by virtue of my ethnicity (White British) and academic position (Associate Professor) (Wallerstein et al., 2019).

## 2.6 CONSIDERATION OF VALIDITY, RELIABILITY AND BIAS

Everyone has an element of bias in their views, perceptions and understandings. During data collection, I ensured opportunities were given for participants to share and expand on their views, rather than using my own interpretation of what I presumed wording meant – although it is recognised that bias may continue to exist.

The validity and reliability of the research findings were strengthened through triangulation. Three strategies were applied to validate the qualitative conceptual themes and to ensure the participants were fairly represented: peer debriefing (Creswell, 2007), member checking (Merriam, 1998) and analyst triangulation to verify the trustworthiness and establish credibility (Doyle, 2007). The children and parents were involved in member checking as a collective endeavour by ongoing clarification of meaning to their responses (Birt et al., 2016; Livari, 2018).

## 2.7 APPROACH TO DATA ANALYSIS

Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the interview data, as it is a ‘flexible, straightforward and accessible’ method (Pirrie et al., 2011, p. 146) and an accepted phenomenological approach (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). Thematic analysis values subjective, aware, situated and questioning researchers (Braun and Clarke, 2019) and is useful where there are higher numbers of interviews (Chadwick, 2013).

Themes and patterns in the dataset were identified through inductive analysis – reading and re-reading the data (Patton, 2002). This active approach allows for the identification of themes (DeSantis and Ugarriza, 2000). Clarke and Braun (2018) clarified that themes must not be domain summaries of responses on topics but should be conceptualised through a central organising concept that ‘underpins and connects the observations’, the ‘so what’ of the data (Clarke and Braun, 2018, p. 108-109). Refining of themes was continual, as Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 22) urged, ‘one test for this is to see whether you can describe the scope and content of each theme in a couple of sentences. If you cannot do this, further refinement of that theme may be needed’. To address this, ongoing refinement of the themes and subthemes took place until the test was satisfied.

Appendix 1 outlines the six-phase process (Table 3). Appendix 2, Figures 5-10 and Tables 4-12 provide sample raw data for phases 1-5 of the thematic analysis and Figure 12 shares the illustration of the final themes and subthemes. The following section summarises the identified themes, returning to the objectives and providing extract examples from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022).





# 3.0 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## 3.0 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the findings of the thematic analysis from the interviews and conversations with the 84 participants, including 1:1 and 1:2 semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus groups with headteachers, senior leaders, teachers, parents and children, and the scripts from the pullupachair creative arts project.

Overall three main themes and fourteen subthemes were identified, including the protective factors for GCSE achievement, with five subthemes (section 3.1), the challenges to achievement at GCSE, with four subthemes (section 3.2), and the solutions to improve GCSE achievement for all children (with five subthemes) (section 3.3).

### 3.1 PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR GCSE ACHIEVEMENT

A protective factor is defined as, ‘those which serve to increase resilience, minimise the risk of developing more complex long-term emotional/mental health difficulties, instability and emotional insecurity. These are factors which promote healthy development and achievement’ (The British Psychological Society, 2018).

‘Going the extra mile’ was identified as the overarching theme to conceptualise the protective factors for positively influencing GCSE achievement at KS4 (Figure 2).

Five subthemes were identified, **mental health support, parents as partners, a focus on literacy, supported transitions** and **promoting careers and pathways**.

The thematic analysis of the data highlighted the importance of interventions that increase resilience.

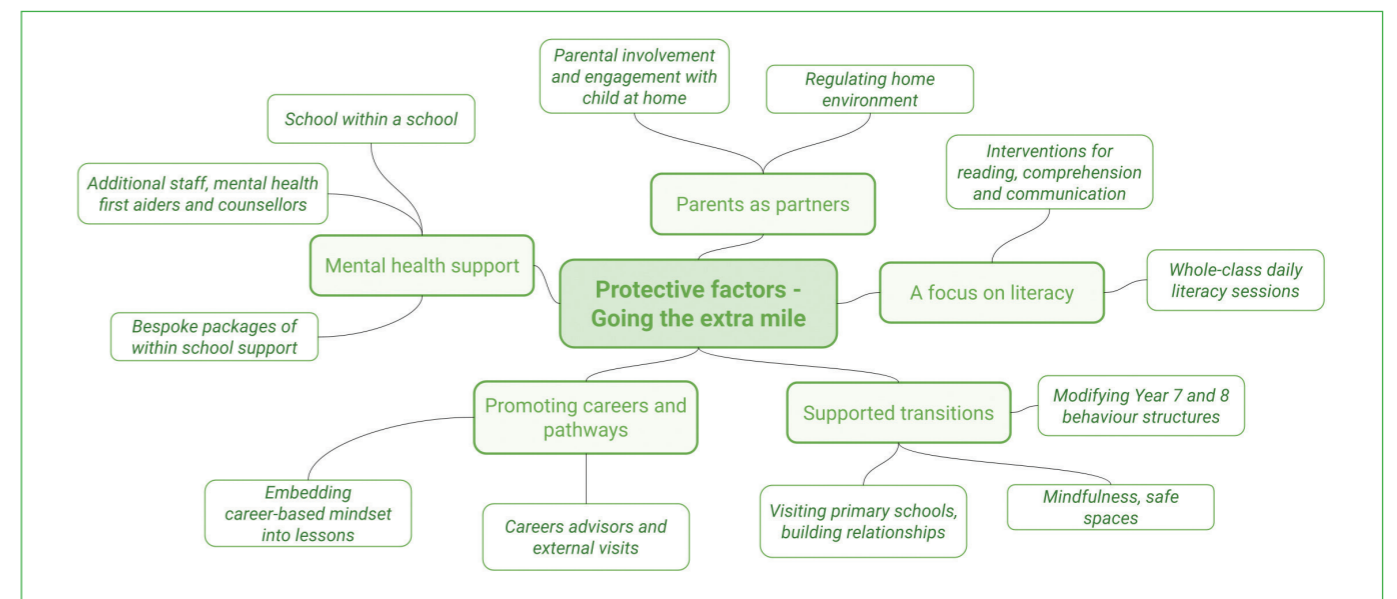
#### 3.1.1 GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Raising the aspirations and ambitions of children by supporting them to engage in their own education was identified as a protective factor for GCSE achievement. The children spoke highly of teachers ‘going the extra mile’ to support them to improve their GCSE outcomes through extra-curricular support:

‘He gives up all his lunchtimes... You get pep talks. Afterschool as well, on a Friday. He still pulls me in the corridor and stuff. Sometimes, it’s not money that we need to motivate us, it’s just people’ (Child, Focus Group (FG)2)

‘Teachers have tried their best by giving you more help during lunch, break, after school’ (Child, FG1)

Figure 2. Themes and subthemes for ‘Protective factors - Going the extra mile’



Parents recognised the instrumental role Virtual School teachers played in positively influencing GCSE attainment. The efforts of teachers in keeping their children focussed was recognised as a protective factor:

*'He's realised, it's time to get really serious. Let's live, eat and breathe exam prep for the next few weeks. He's done everything within his power'* (Parent, 3)

*'It's not just for looked after children, it's for any children who are behind, who are struggling a bit. I think that's helped her massively'* (Parent, 2)

Children predicted to achieve the highest GCSE outcomes described that exam technique training was supporting them towards achieving grades seven to nine:

*'When you have to analyse things for your GCSE papers, one of the main problems is some people don't learn the right technique for the exams, and if they just knew how to answer questions properly, it would really develop the more grades you get'* (Child, FG3)

*'I do have certain staff that would be allocated to our high-achieving pupils, to try and get those sevens to nines. I've got others that are very strong and very skilled at teaching the lower ability, shall we say'* (Headteacher (HT) 18, Mainstream Provision (MP))

The children articulated that the best teachers were those who used teaching approaches that gave them practical experience of the subject and motivated them to have higher aspirations for their GCSE outcomes:

*'The style of teaching was completely different, better, because it was more practical. If you have a really good teacher that wants to help you, you'll be able to move up. They'll say anything's possible. So, don't think since you've been in bottom set ever since Year 10 then there's no hope, there is'* (Child, FG4)

*'My teacher openly said we should try and be ambitious because most people just try and do the minimum. As soon as they reach that point where it's enough, they immediately stop. My teacher was like, try and do more than that to try and get higher'* (Child, FG5)

*'The teaching and support is always there, it's just about whether they can choose by themselves to do this extra work to really try and get there. I think teachers are always trying to help everybody get to the best that they can be'* (Child, FG3)

In summary, teachers raised aspirations and ambitions and motivated children to aim for higher GCSE outcomes through practical teaching approaches, extra-curricular support and a belief in their ability to attain higher GCSE outcomes.

### 3.1.1.1 MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

To protect children's education and wellbeing against rising mental health support needs, schools were adapting provision and practice in a wide variety of ways, including additional staff to provide mental health support, such as counsellors and mental health first aiders, and bespoke provision such as 'a school within a school'.

Some schools employed staff with the specific role of supporting children unable to attend classes due to mental ill health:

*'We've got an additional pastoral early intervention worker who works with Key Stage 3 children who are struggling to adapt back into school routines, who have some of those behavioural issues, SEMH underlying. We have a school counsellor, a part-time counsellor who supports our pupils, and then we've introduced two additional posts as well for behaviour support workers to help triage around mental health and support'* (HT13, MP)

*'A couple of staff work predominantly with that all day they just deal with kids, ones who wander around'* (HT, Alternative Provision (AP)1)

Other headteachers and senior leaders were focussing resources on trying to get children with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) to attend school through a range of approaches, such as:

A school within a school:

*'The children don't spend the whole day in the wellbeing hub. The idea is, first of all come in, feel comfortable, and then start going back out for lessons, building up to being back into mainstream school full-time. We operate with a capacity of 12 to 15'* (HT13, MP)

A school to home tutor: *'There's a teacher, a mental health teacher, she was amazing. She was like her second mum at school. The school itself, they did everything for her, but she just could not cope with being in that situation. She couldn't have gone to school, but she learned. Being with the tutors, she literally - she'd go upstairs, she'd do her homework, she'd be on her computer, and the difference in her was just unbelievable. She passed her GCSEs'* (Parent, 6)

Most schools had Mental Health First Aiders and invested in counsellors with one having trained *'well over a hundred mental health first aiders, staff within our schools. We've invested quite heavily in counsellors'* (HT, FG1).

A few mainstream secondary schools resourced an SEMH provision within the school to support children to attend:

*'We've got a small provision - it's a bungalow we bought - so there's that stepping stone back into the main academy'* (HT18, MP)

*'It's a returners unit, for those students who are really anxious. School-phobic. Massive amounts of social anxiety. There's one member of staff. We do everything we possibly can to alleviate any of those issues that children may have coming into mainstream school. We have done really well in terms of our GCSE achievement'* (HT10, MP)

Preventing suspension or permanent exclusion was important to some headteachers, as they recognised the impact of not attending school regularly on GCSE achievement. Establishing an internal provision for children with behaviour that challenges, undiagnosed SEN, and deprivation was the solution discussed by one headteacher *'as their behaviour problems are so significant'* (HT4, MP). They expressed concern that once they open a provision to meet need, *'it's flooded immediately because the need is so great'*.

To summarise, schools are reacting to the complexity of the mental health challenges experienced by some children by providing bespoke packages of support including within school provision. Without this protective factor in place, headteachers were concerned they would no longer be able to attend or thrive in school.

### 3.1.1.2 PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Partnership with parents is a protective factor for both progress and GCSE achievement. Although headteachers encountered some challenges with collaboration with parents, they recognised the positive influence on children's GCSE outcomes. Headteachers identified the home-school relationship as having:

*'The greatest impact on children's achievement is parental involvement and engagement. Those pupils who have the greatest support from parents, they're the ones who made the biggest progress'* (HT3, MP)

*'The most fundamental thing, and that working together for the good of the child, raising that aspiration, supporting them, encouraging them'* (HT9, MP)

Parents discussed the positive impact of a collaborative relationship with schools on their child's ability to regulate their behaviour:

*'We've already spoken to the teachers, and there's already a plan in place so that she gets the same at home as what she gets at school. We're both aligned in our - I wouldn't say our punishments - but aligned in the ways we deal with it, and in the awareness of how we need to move forward'* (Parent, 3)

*Sometimes she'd walk to school and be back in ten minutes. The school were brilliant. It was a long journey for her, but she seems to have come through it much stronger. If it wasn't for the mental health team up there, I don't think she would have gotten through it'* (Parent, 6)

Children agreed that supportive parents were critical in securing progress towards positive GCSE achievement. Many children talked about how their parents were encouraging and provided a study space (though they recognised other children did not benefit from this).

*'It is about parental support. Our parents are really supportive. I know that my mum and dad really want me to do well. That pushes me to be able to do the best that I can and want to do well in the future'* (Child, FG4)

*'There's lots of pressure, but then they help by asking other siblings to be quieter. My little sisters would often watch lots of loud music, so they're like, be calmer, go upstairs, make*

*yourself comfortable and do your revision. My parents are good at encouraging, that's enough for me' (Child, FG5)*

Headteachers were aware of the value of partnership with parents as a protective factor for progress and GCSE achievement, and for supporting children to thrive in secondary school.

### 3.1.1.3 A FOCUS ON LITERACY

A critical protective factor for achievement at GCSE was established as improving the literacy skills of children. All headteachers had concerns that there were children in their schools who had exceptionally low levels of literacy. All schools were aware of the importance of literacy interventions, including reading, comprehension and communication, if they were to improve their GCSE outcomes. All schools, regardless of the type of provision, were responding to the literacy challenge by implementing interventions and programmes to meet the needs of their school population. For example, many have a daily literacy session focusing on the skills of reading, comprehension and fluency with the whole class.

*'We put an extra lesson in, a reading lesson, for all Key Stage 3, so they have a fortnightly reading lesson when their reading skills are supported' (HT11, MP)*

Schools used a range of reading programmes:

Expert Reader - *'the whole form class will read for three twenty-minute slots a week. We've fully adapted a curriculum for the bottom set Year 7 because they are so weak' (Teachers, FG2)*

*'We're using Accelerated Reader with the STAR Reading tests, so all students in Years 7 to 9 have regular termly reading tests, and we use the Accelerated Reader programme within a wider support programme. We put an extra lesson in, a reading lesson, for all Key Stage 3, so they have a fortnightly reading lesson when their reading skills are supported' (HT11, MP)*

Switch-on Reading - *'it yields fantastic results, in the ten-week period they made, on average, three years' progress' (HT12, MP)*

*'Magazine subscriptions and travel books. We use games, we subscribe to Game Changers. Reading Plus is the other thing we use' (HT2, AP)*

Some schools embed literacy across the curriculum.

*'Wherever we've had success in all subjects, it's been underpinned by success in English' (HT4, MP)*

*'We focus purely on reading, improving reading, that's our whole focus. We know that pupils will not access curriculum and know examination series without the literacy skills; to do that, we spend a lot of our curriculum time focused on literacy and reading' (HT3, MP)*

One headteacher has a reading coordinator and family literacy support:

*'He goes out to family homes, trying to help and support [literacy]. We've just appointed an English member of staff, she's now reading coordinator because the barrier to learn around reading and literacy is increasing and reading ages are dropping' (HT1, AP)*

The children appreciated that form time was frequently used to develop reading skills: *'People who need a bit of extra help, they get intervention in form time' (Child FG3)*. Foster parents also valued additional literacy support provided for their foster children:

*'He has an extra lesson on a Tuesday and Thursday after school and some in-school time as well. Like they have it in their planner where it's like 9:30 on a certain morning where they're pulled out the lessons and they get like half-an-hour tuition. I'm not sure which support is provided by school and which one's virtual school' (Parent, 5)*

Headteachers were aware of the detrimental influence of low-level literacy skills on GCSE achievement. Schools were using a range of interventions and programmes to improve reading and comprehension skills.

### 3.1.1.4 SUPPORTED TRANSITIONS

The secondary school headteachers and senior leaders all recognised the importance of supporting children's transition from primary to secondary school to ensure they were able to access and engage with secondary education. Headteachers described that not all children transition smoothly between primary and secondary school and that this had a negative impact on them. As a protective factor for

transitions between these phases, schools identified a range of approaches:

Modifying their behaviour structures for Y7s and Y8s:

*'We're modifying our behaviour structure for next year, to try and treat the Year 7s and 8s differently in our behaviour structure. Because we also notice that when we come in with our strict high expectations and determination around school, that causes a drop off. It used to be the case they'd kick off in school, but now they just don't come in' (HT5, MP)*

Provision that supports children to feel emotionally secure, *'they might spend 4 to 8 weeks of mindfulness of therapy, of talking therapies, of listening, relationship building' (HT1, AP)*. The importance of supported transitions was expressed by the parents. A parent explained that keeping the same school following placement, *'created a safe haven for him' (Parent, 1)*. Another parent echoed how essential stability was for their child in their home placement to thrive in their transition to secondary school.

Supported transitions between primary and secondary school were crucial:

*'If schools can get that process right, I think it gives children far more chance of being successful in the longer term' (Service provider, 1)*

*'We do a lot more transition days. We do visits to primaries. It's not such a shock to the system' (Teacher, FG1)*

One school has a transition team that starts visiting primary schools in the April to build relationships with *'the most vulnerable, learners with SEN and learners that are looked after. Those learners are the ones where school sometimes is the most stable component of their life' (HT17, MP)*. The schools that had the best transition plans were those who recognised the importance of information sharing and ongoing transition support beyond the move from primary to year 7, *'transitions to classes, transitions to lessons, transitions to subjects, transitions to teachers' (HT2, AP)*.

In summary, supporting transitions between primary and secondary school and beyond is a protective factor for accessing and engaging with secondary school. Well-planned transition policies and processes were critical for children to adapt and thrive in mainstream school.



### 3.1.1.5 PROMOTING CAREERS AND PATHWAYS

One of the most discussed protective factors to raising GCSE achievement was exposing children to career opportunities and pathways to inspire them to aim high for their GCSEs. Exposing children to experiences, visits and speakers increases the likelihood of them identifying and working towards a post-16 pathway in education, employment or training. Schools identified a range of approaches to promoting careers and pathways:

#### CAREERS ADVICE:

*'In Year 11, you get a chance to meet with the careers adviser. That's massively been helpful for a lot of people. We've been able to sort of find a pathway. We've been given websites, loads of information on what we can do to progress after Year 11. It's looking at the different subjects that people offer, like the courses and how to get to the next stage in college, and then different open events that you can go to, and it's really, really good'* (Child, FG4)

#### VISITORS:

*'They invite people from different councils and stuff to come in to do assemblies on, for example, different types of ways to get a job in the future'* (Child, FG3)

One group of children shared how careers were embedded in their school curriculum:

*'When we start a new topic in a subject, we'll get a sheet saying all the topics in it. It says what careers you would need this in. So, in maths, if you're thinking, 'Why would I need Pythagoras's theorem? I'm never going to need that in life.' Then, it has careers that you would need it in. So, if you're quite good at something, then it might help you to know what you might want to get into'* (Child, FG4)

Visits from universities were commonplace:

*'He's always wanted to be a doctor and a consultant, but he's very financially orientated. We're doing some work with his aspirations, which has been with the universities where they go and have tasters for young carers'* (Parent, 1)

*'We've had universities in, and so on. So, we do quite a lot of work there, and we try and involve parents in that. I think it's maybe more trying not to get to the stage at the start of Year 10 where you've already lost one or two, so maybe it's more - if I think now about what we put on for our Year 10 and 11, as far as raising aspiration and giving them insight into where this can take them'* (HT15, MP)

Headteachers recognised the importance of careers advice to tell children about their options after school, *'to give them a flavour of what's coming next and involving local businesses in coming in and saying this is what I am, this is what I'm all about'* (HT17, MP). One commented that their school has the mantra, *'that could be me'* (HT13, MP). This was core to their goal of aiming high, which was part of their core values in the curriculum and was *'making a difference'*. This included working in partnership with employers, children visiting businesses and work experience. Another headteacher talked of their efforts in getting international companies to come to talk to children in school about career options (HT5, MP).

A parent was pleased with the careers advice on apprenticeships at their child's school, commenting, *'they are very much on top of everything, they get so much help'* (Parent, 2).

Providing exposure to career opportunities and pathways helps some identify education, employment and training opportunities. Careers advice, external visits and visitors gave them an insight into post-16 options, potentially motivating them to aim high for their GCSEs.



### 3.2. CHALLENGES TO GCSE ACHIEVEMENT

This section shares the challenges to GCSE achievement in secondary school. Four themes, **A fish out of water, not my cup of tea, the perfect storm, and glass ceilings**, and ten subthemes were identified (Figure 3).

The first theme, **'a fish out of water'**, describes a person who feels unhappy or anxious because they are in a situation that is not familiar, or they feel different to those around them. This theme includes the challenges in assessing, identifying and responding to the needs of children with SEND in mainstream secondary school, with two subthemes the legacy of Covid-19 and persistent absence.

The second theme, **'not my cup of tea'**, explores the influence of substitute teachers and ineffective teaching on GCSE achievement. The two subthemes are *'memory test and literacy'* (impact of the exam regime on children and schools including barriers caused by reading skills), one size fits all (inaccessibility of the National Curriculum and reading).

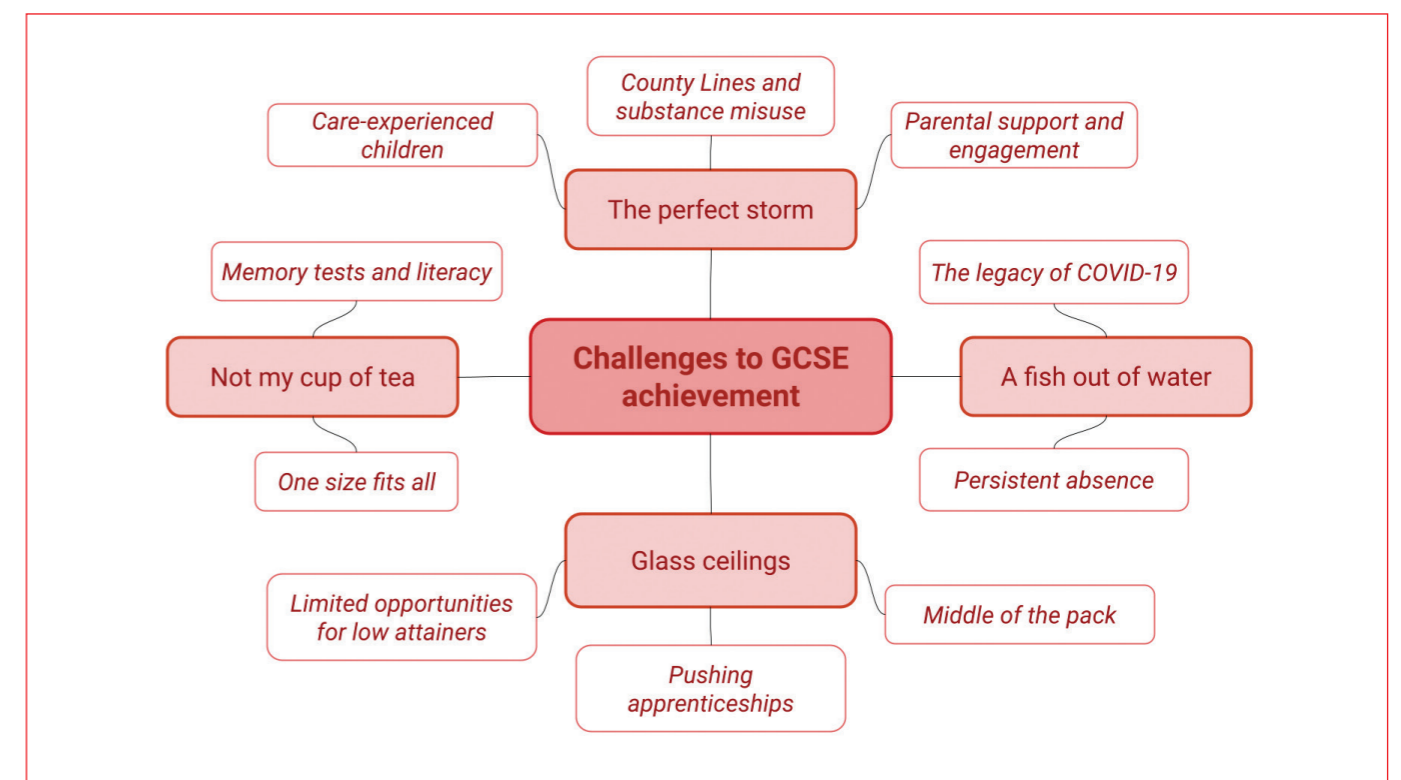
The third theme, **'a perfect storm'**, relates to a culmination of factors including those in the community and home. This theme includes three subthemes, *'care experienced children'*, *'County Lines and substance misuse'* and *'parental support and engagement'*.

The final theme is **'glass ceilings'**, a standalone theme that identifies the barriers to some children achieving beyond their potential of a pass at GCSE.

#### 3.2.1 A FISH OUT OF WATER

The theme **'a fish out of water'** conceptualises children who feel unhappy or anxious due to being in situations or environments that, despite best efforts, are not able to meet their needs. This theme includes the challenges in assessing, identifying and responding to the needs of children with SEND in mainstream secondary school, with two subthemes the legacy of Covid-19 and persistent absence.

Figure 3. Themes and subthemes for **'Challenges to GCSE achievement'**



All secondary headteachers described increasing numbers of children with undiagnosed SEND who are struggling to thrive in mainstream school. The comments suggest that some of these children are caught in a cycle of behaviour and sanction because of unidentified and unmet needs:

*'You feel for those students, because on the one hand, they are being disruptive and they're having to be sanctioned and everything, but on the other hand you can kind of see why, because they're in this cycle. We can't meet their needs. I feel really bad that I come into every SLT meeting and just beg them all to help me with behaviour, with parental complaints, with duties, with picking up naughty kids'* (HT11, MP)

*'I don't think we can get away at the minute from the fact we have so much undiagnosed need that's coming through'* (HT14, FG2)

Headteachers recognised they were sanctioning children for their challenging behaviour when it was the school that couldn't meet their needs. These children were at increased risk of suspension and permanent exclusion, *'What happens to them at school, is that they filter through these students very quickly and suspend and exclude'* (HT14, FG2).

All mainstream headteachers talked of limited resource for children with SEND and felt that this was negatively impacting them and the other children in their classes. They also cited financial challenges to meeting the needs of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). They highlighted that to support the child, they had to put in place 1:1 support that was not funded as part of their EHCP (HT18, MP). All headteachers agreed there was a shortage of specialist provision in Sunderland. The result of this was knowingly placing children in a provision that was not in their best interests:

*'There's a lot of children that are placed with us wrongly in the first place and that's just because there happens to be a space. But when we struggle to meet need, I don't know where else you go. Secondary schools need to be more inclusive. Schools need financial support in which to do that'* (HT2, AP)

There is a high number of children with SEND, including SEMH waiting for assessment through the Children and Young Peoples Service (CYPS). Headteachers were concerned about the time for an appointment following referral:

*'You look for CYPS and you're waiting two years! This the sad reality of it'* (HT, FG1)

They all considered timely assessment for these children as vital:

*'We're in a vicious cycle because the child can't be assessed if the child's not in school. If the child's not coming to school because of some undiagnosed neurological issue, for example, then that child can't be assessed and the right support put in place if they're not at school, because there's no other venue to do that assessment, which again, gets you into a cycle that needs to be broken'* (Service provider, FG2)

Similarly, waiting times for Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) were reported to be approximately 18 months. Children and parents are openly telling schools that they can't attend because of their mental ill health (HT18, MP). Headteachers believed they needed a diagnosis to secure the most appropriate provision for the child, but due to increased demand there was no capacity for this to happen (HT1, AP). Teachers were concerned that many parents believed a diagnosis was going to solve their child's difficulties (Teacher, FG2). They also noted that some parents disengage with the process due to having to repeat their child's history every time they are allocated a new case worker.

Some teachers believed there was an overdiagnosis of neurodiversity and mental health conditions:

*'It's just absolutely ridiculous. Every child now has got anxiety, goes and gets tested for neurodiverse conditions'* (Teacher, FG1)

Some believed the pandemic was instrumental in rising needs, but others reflected, *'it was always coming this way'* (HT14, FG2). A headteacher in AP commented that training is needed to support children with SEND in school. They recounted a recent example:

*'A young man bounced through the door yesterday. I met him for about 30 seconds, and I knew there was SEND. When we asked the member of staff from the school he came from about his SEND. She said "he hasn't got any SEND, and I was thinking honestly, he had like a chew toy round his neck, which he was chewing. I can't understand it'* (HT1, AP)

Headteachers and teachers identified that high-quality professional learning opportunities for teachers and teaching assistants in SEND are limited. Headteachers were particularly concerned about children with designated SEN support who are 'less-well served' because the support plans 'are useless and don't address need' (HT16, MP). Teachers also identified this as a concern, reflecting that early career teachers had limited SEND knowledge due to a lack of training *'you know they'll get a 2-hour lecture'* (Teacher, FG2).

Some children with SEND and SEMH are not thriving in secondary mainstream school due ongoing challenges with assessment, identification and response to their needs. Initial Teacher Training and ongoing professional development of teachers is not currently sufficient to give teachers the knowledge and skills to support children with complex needs.

### 3.2.1.1 THE LEGACY OF COVID

The vast majority of headteachers believed that Covid has left a negative legacy on children in a multitude of ways. They weren't proposing that all challenges were due to Covid; more that the pandemic was an ongoing contributory factor:

*'Schools are seeing some more extreme behaviours [than] they've ever seen over the last two or three years. I'm sure that's partly because they missed two years of primary school. I'm sure that is partly down to Covid and students being out of school for so long'* (HT15, MP)

*'We're in a position where we've got some children who haven't been to school for a year and a half, two years. A lot of kids were isolated, and they find it hard to just get back to the way they were before that happened'* (HT7, Specialist Provision (SP))

Headteachers and parents also noted the detrimental effect of Covid compounding SEMH difficulties:

*'We used to have students who were truanting from school, and they'd be wandering the streets, but since Covid, we have this internal truancy of children who just don't go to lessons. Almost like the need to be seen, but not the need to be in the classroom. They'll wander the building, or if they get fed up with wandering the building, they'll decide to run down the corridors and bang on a*

*wall, or something like that. At [a meeting of] secondary heads just before Christmas, we were having the conversation, and the number of people who were saying, "What's the solution to this?"'* (HT14, FG2)

*'It was terrible anxiety. She didn't like big crowds; she didn't like social situations. I think our young people have been through such a long, horrible, Covid time. She would sit in the house for three years'* (Parent, 6)

Both children and headteachers raised concerns about the influence of Covid on children's knowledge, understanding and skills to achieve pre-Covid expectations at GCSE:

*'My predicted grades went down so much after Covid. Obviously, because we're the year that's no longer getting the support'* (Child, FG2)

*'We're still learning things now that we should have learned months ago'* (Child, FG4)

Some headteachers cited the legacy of Covid as a barrier to children attending, as they didn't see the imperative or value of schooling:

*'School being the place to be educated has been removed unintentionally by the government, and I fully understand why they shut schools during the pandemic, but the impact of that on parents' belief that the kid can do as well at home as they can in school'* (HT5, MP)

Senior post-16 education leaders also shared their concerns about Covid affecting GCSE English and Maths resits attendance:

*'Attendance in English and maths is not good, and I think it was made worse following Covid. What we're seeing, again, I think it's possibly on the back of Covid, a lot of learners really need that from a social point of view of just having that confidence. Covid seems to have ruined people that they have no ability or very little ability to come into class and engage or be challenged or anything'* (Senior leader FG1, FE)

Absence from school during Covid has impacted some children's wellbeing, mental health and attainment more than others. Children have gaps in their learning due to time away from school and this is having an ongoing impact on their school experience and predicted GCSE grades.



### 3.2.1.2 PERSISTENT ABSENCE

The DfE website defines persistent absence as:

*'A pupil enrolment is identified as persistently absent if 10% or more of possible sessions are missed, and severely absent if 50% or more of possible sessions are missed. 10% of sessions translates to around 7 days of absence across the term'* (DfE, 2024c).

Some schools reported levels of absence that they were concerned about, 'Severely absent, their attendance is below 80 per cent or 70 per cent. It's not just that they're missing an extra couple of days, they're missing an extra month' (HT12, MP). All headteachers commented that being in school and in lessons was essential for children to achieve the best GCSE outcomes. The barriers to attending school were varied, including:

Unachievable behaviour expectations:

*'If you look at some of the big Trusts, they're doing this by command and control. You will do this; you will walk in a straight line; you will walk in your corridor in silence. It's not done through emotion. That's having a detrimental effect on their attendance and their progress because they're completely switching them off'* (HT14, FG2)

The use of isolation as a sanction:

*'There's supervision, but you don't do work. You copy out of a book. You just sit down there. You don't learn. It's a full-day detention where you're not in lessons for uniform and things like that, if you're wearing trainers instead of school shoes. I got sent there for a full day for not having a tie'* (Child, FG1)

*They're constantly getting on us about how we need to be in. Every lesson we miss is grades down, and every time we're late, it's grades down, and then they'll just put us in isolation. The textbooks in there are not even the curriculum we're doing now, because they're so outdated. They talk about attendance, and how we need 100 per cent attendance, but technically, they're removing our attendance by putting us in there'* (Child, FG2)

When children are placed in isolation, they are missing lessons and therefore curriculum content, then they fall behind. Children expressed concern about how many were frequently sent to isolation, but on return to class are told to 'sort your grades

out' (Child, FG3). The children recalled that the impact of frequent isolation on their friend was that his expected grades fell to the point where they realised they couldn't pass, 'so then, he just dropped out' (Child, FG2).

The consequence of school exclusions and multiple school moves:

*'We'll get students come to us who perhaps bounced around several different schools [due to multiple suspensions and permanent exclusions] and that could include homeschooling. The experience they've had around that is not always positive, so they see being in school as stressful and somewhere they want to avoid, so that'll obviously affect the attainment'* (HT1, AP)

Headteachers attributed a 'massive increase' in EHE (Elective Home Educate) to pressure to attend school (HT12, MP). Another commented that the numbers of young people entering elective home education because of mental health issues associated with coming back to school are 'prolifically high' (HT17, MP). Most headteachers had parents who had chosen to EHE. The reasons given by headteachers for parents who elected to home educate included:

Pressure from the school to attend:

*'Our electively home-educated learner numbers have rocketed since the pandemic. I think we've had 11 this year, which again, that's a response to putting pressure on them over attendance, putting pressure on them over exams'* (HT5, MP)

Beginning formal attendance procedures:

*'Sometimes it ends up going down the attendance route, then they just decide to take them off role and home school them. I think because there isn't a challenge on their homeschooling really; it's quite an easy option to do'* (Teacher, FG1)

*'If you say the word 'attendance officer' within earshot of a parent, of course, they're not going to send their child in. They're just going to elect home educate because if that child has got difficulties, and it's another layer on top, and you can remove all that by going, "I don't want the letters of the local authority, I don't want the school ringing me", and that seems to be the reaction'* (HT, FG1)

One headteacher is concerned that there are going to be, 'lost children in Sunderland', as their provision is full and there will be more permanent exclusions next academic year: 'We're at crisis point for placement; we're at crisis point with EHCPs. We're at crisis point with all provisions everywhere being full and children are still being permanently excluded' (HT2, AP).

There are many factors causing persistent absence in school, including unachievable behaviour expectations and the use of isolation driving children away from schools, impacting learning.

Being suspended or permanently excluded from school is compounding attendance challenges, as is a shortage of provision. All the secondary schools in Sunderland belong to Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). The Local Authority cannot challenge permanent exclusions in MATs unless they are invited to meetings by the parent.

### 3.2.2 NOT MY CUP OF TEA

The second theme identified was '**not my cup of tea**', meaning something that children do not like; in this case, substitute teachers. The two subthemes are 'memory test and literacy' (impact of the exam regime on children and schools) and one size fits all (inaccessibility of the NC).

All the children expressed concerns regarding the number and quality of supply teachers, or 'subs'; and the detrimental impact it was having on their learning experience, GCSE progress and achievement when compared to teaching from a permanent member of staff, as follows:

Learning experience: 'Most of them just storm out of the classroom or have to get other teachers in to help' (Child, FG5)

GCSE outcomes:

*'I think this is why some of the people are struggling in our year [Year 11]. A few of the topics were taught completely wrong. Really simple things that were taught wrong. We've got to this year, and everybody's a bit panicked. We're thinking, we've totally learned this wrong. I think that's a problem with GCSE. I think substitute teachers definitely make a difference'* (Child, FG4)

*'I feel like a lot of us are quite behind in a lot of lessons because we've had a lot of subs over the past couple of years just because I don't know, but a lot of our teachers are off quite a lot'* (Child, FG5)

All headteachers agreed that there is a teacher recruitment crisis, particularly in the core subjects. One Trust was unable to secure a maths teacher: 'If you put out for a PE teacher, you'll get 50 applications, so I don't believe they don't want to come here. I just don't think they're out there' (HT15, MP). The impact of not having quality teachers would be a fall in GCSE results and parents choosing an alternative school (HT, FG1). Many headteachers felt that without financial incentive, it would be difficult to get an experienced maths teacher, 'good maths teachers can pick and choose their jobs. They're not going to go to a poor school, as in, not very good and Ofsted rating' (HT7, SP).

Children felt that being taught by a non-subject specialist was disadvantageous, 'our teacher left at the start of the year. She didn't actually specialise in that subject, and we didn't learn very much. We learned a lot of things wrong' (Child, FG4). It wasn't just the core subjects where teacher recruitment and retention were problematic; children reported a high staff turnover in the foundation subjects:

*'You can have a teacher for a few months and then another for a few weeks. In science, we changed teachers three times in the last year. In business studies, we haven't had a teacher for over a year. In geography I've had three teacher changes. There are no teachers because one is on maternity leave and the other one has gone. Left randomly'* (Child, FG5)

*'I've had two or three teachers in photography for just two years now. Another one is leaving. We've had about four French teachers over a year. Photography has been taken off [options]. They cannot pick separate science. One of my friends, she's devastated because those are the subjects she likes, but now she's forced to do what she doesn't like'* (Child, FG1)

Headteachers are struggling to recruit teachers in the core subjects. The lack of teachers applying for posts is negatively influencing headteachers' ability to improve GCSE progress and achievement and is limiting the choices that can be made available at GCSE.

### 3.2.2.1 MEMORY TEST AND LITERACY

The theme ‘memory and literacy skills’ identifies the consensus across participant groups that the GCSE exam regime is not an effective assessment of a child’s knowledge, but of their ability to memorise and recall curriculum content and of their reading and comprehension skills. Literacy was cited as the most common challenge to children achieving positive GCSE outcomes. Literacy, as defined by the National Literacy Trust (2024) is, ‘the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world’. The headteachers described the negative impact of low levels of literacy on children’s ability to access the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding of the curriculum and to succeed in GCSE assessments at the end of year 11:

*‘We know that pupils will not access curriculum and examinations without the literacy skills. Children are just so disempowered by the fact that they’re not able to express themselves, read and comprehend’ (HT13, MP)*

*‘Having high literacy is absolutely and utterly fundamental. There’s nothing more important. You can’t access any exam if you don’t have literacy skills; it’s the cornerstone of any school’ (HT18, MP)*

Children and headteachers were concerned that a GCSE result based on your performance on a particular day wasn’t a true representation of knowledge:

*‘GCSE exams aren’t good as they’re based off memories rather than your actual intelligence’ (Child, FG1)*

*‘If your memory fails that day, everything’s gone’ (Child, FG2)*

*‘The whole school isn’t suited to exams. I don’t think 16-year-olds are suited to having a four-week period of their life in which they are judged on their whole academic performance’ (HT5, MP)*

*‘You are asking students who live their lives in a bite-size, small-chunk way to memorise huge amounts of information over two years, and then you have this cliff-edge of, on the day you have to go in and it’s an all-or-nothing situation, and you have to answer*

*those questions and you have to remember everything that comes up’ (HT11, MP)*

Some headteachers reported that children can have up to 39 different GCSE exams:

*‘It’s a ridiculous number. So, there seems to be a lot of exams, and that’s going to be coped with to varying degrees by different students. It’s more of a test of memory; there’s a lot more content than there had been in some of the previous iterations of the specifications, so that’s a bigger pressure, and I suppose some students may struggle with that’ (HT15, MP)*

One headteacher reflected that GCSE exams don’t prepare children for real life:

*‘The reality of life isn’t going to be for any of us exam based. We need to have the skills of how we work with other people, how we find information, how we research. What we don’t need is just to have it all shoved in our brains so we can regurgitate it at an exam. I actually think the system is cruel, really, for a large proportion of our young people’ (HT14, FG2)*

Teachers reflected on the driving up of standards and that children with literacy difficulties are being set up to fail due to the level of language in the exam papers:

*‘The fact that they can’t access [exam papers] because they are reading at the age of a 6-year-old [in KS4], they’re never gonna get access to reading exam papers, which is, you know, what they been judged on’ (HT1, AP)*

*‘If you do an average reading age checker on an average exam paper, by the time you get to the back of the paper, you need to have a reading age of 15 and 16. Out of our cohort of 80 in key stage four, probably only two have a reading age close to that’ (HT2, AP)*

*‘We’re expecting them to read texts that have reading ages of 16-plus, and they’ve got a reading age of 10. How can they possibly access this?’ (Teacher, FG2)*

One headteacher identified that children who are unsuccessful in passing with a four at GCSE was ‘because they can’t read’ (HT12, MP). They shared that half of their Year 7s do not have reading at their chronological age: ‘What you end up with is a bit of fight or flight mode kicking in because they go, well, I can’t do this, so the only way I’m going to get out of this is to throw this pen over there, so I get sent out’.

Key Stage 2 SATs data from primary schools was portrayed as over-inflated by some headteachers. When re-assessing children on entry to Year 7, they were not reflective of their SATS scores: ‘it’s absolutely destroyed our progress 8 figure. I don’t want to destroy relationships, but there are some significant cases where a child will come with a score of over 100, and they can hardly read and write’ (HT18, MP). Another headteacher highlighted that the highest scoring children in SATS had predicted eights at GCSE ‘but they’re not capable of it from the day they step in our school based on Year 7 retests’ (HT5, MP). Teachers commented that in primary school, they can focus their efforts on drilling children for English and Maths and this is not possible in the secondary curriculum (Teacher, FG1). One group of teachers reflected that when children arrive in Year 7, there are significant gaps in their learning ‘particularly those bottom set classes; we’re going to have to spend probably our first term plugging those gaps, because if they have that gap, they’re not going to progress with us’ (Teacher, FG2).

Headteachers also raised concerns about what qualifications bodies were offering those children who were unable to pass GCSEs. ‘It’s not that they don’t try or don’t work hard, but they’re just not bright enough to be able to get these grades’ (HT10, MP). They weren’t asking for a ‘dumbing down’ of GCSEs but ‘a genuine alternative to GCSE examinations. Not every child can sit 23 exams in four weeks and achieve very well, and we just don’t cater to those children at all’ (HT2, AP).

Senior leaders in FE expressed concern about the English and maths resits until the age of 18 in that the young people were disenfranchised:

*‘A lot of learners aspire to get that grade, and you see how important it is to them when they get it. But there are others worn down by the constant repetition of resitting and resitting. It’s really demoralising. Their driver for being at college is a career and it’s the main programme while they’re here’ (Senior leader FG1, FE)*

The current assessment regime for GCSE is not suitable for all children. GCSE exams measure a child’s ability to recall information on a particular day from an extensive amount of curriculum content that may or may not appear in the examination questions. There are too many exams over a short period of time, causing undue pressure

on children to memorise information. Children with reading and comprehension challenges on entry to secondary school are struggling to access the language used in the exam papers and this can lead to disengagement with school.

### 3.2.2.2 ONE SIZE FITS ALL

The theme ‘one size fits all’ represents the view that the curriculum in schools should meet the needs of all children regardless of their academic ability or additional learning needs. The headteachers reflected that a one size fits all approach model is negatively influencing GCSE achievement:

*‘We’ve moved to comprehensive education, but we’re actually expecting a one-size-fits-all model. There’s so little opportunity for young people now to have anything other than a very academic diet, and that really switches them off, and add to the fact that there are so many gaps in their learning’ (HT4, MP)*

Headteachers and teachers were concerned about the academic nature of the curriculum, for children with lower abilities or mental health challenges:

*‘There’s no alternative. You’re just told you’re going down this academic route, and you’re going to study all these subjects that you might not have an interest in, that you might be really struggling with. A lot of our behaviour issues, serious behaviour issues, come from students who are struggling, because they’re struggling with the curriculum’ (HT11, MP)*

*‘Sometimes, some people are just not academically bright with maths, they struggle. Some are the same with English. It’s unfortunate, it’s sad. We’re actually changing exam boards next year because we’re just at a loss as to what to do’ (Teacher, FG2)*

Teachers considered the risks associated with an academic curriculum that didn’t enable children with lower expected GCSE outcomes to succeed. Notwithstanding the impact on their self-esteem, ‘They’re going to detract more and more. It’s just a self-fulfilling prophecy. The less they can access, the worst they feel about themselves, and the easier option is to withdraw’ (Teacher, FG2), the children identified a lack of subject options that they would like to study during secondary school, such as construction, plumbing, hair and beauty, and engineering. They shared that:

*'I think there should be more options. I know a lot of people who don't really care about GCSEs because they can get a job in construction' (Child, FG1)*

Another group of children talked about friends dropping out of school for employment as the curriculum was not right for them (Child, FG2). Some headteachers agreed that the curriculum is driving some to employment instead of attending school. The children and many headteachers struggled to see the relevance of the curriculum to life today:

*'I think English should be re-looked at for the curriculum. I don't understand why we're studying a poem from 400 years ago. From the past. That's not useful to me at all. Obviously, you need to read, write, speak, but past that, there's not much face value with English unless you want to do it further' (Child, FG1)*

*'We're not equipping children for the world of the future; we can't even comprehend jobs there are going to be. We have a very Dickensian approach to education at this moment in time' (HT14, FG2)*

It was clear headteachers wanted a curriculum adapted to future pathways. The challenge was the limit of options they can offer:

*'We are able to offer our children at best two options at GCSE and therefore they're having to make critical choices between drama, or dance, or health and social, or child development. They're having to pick between the subjects that they're really passionate about and that they believe gives them some kind of route out of school and into the working life' (HT5, MP)*

It is understandable why headteachers offer a curriculum that they accept doesn't meet the needs of all children. They reported factors such as external pressures due to Progress 8 and EBacc on their willingness to offer vocational subjects:

*'[Vocational subjects] don't feature in your Progress 8 scores in the same way that your history GCSE would do' (HT10, MP)*

*'We used to have a salon, and we used to do health and beauty; but because all those qualifications went, and they're not in the league tables so we closed them' (HT18, MP)*

Many headteachers expressed concern relating to the impact of Government pressure to increase the percentage of EBacc students to 95%. They were not denying that studying a language to GCSE wasn't valuable, rather that it wasn't *'the right fit for all students'* (HT12, MP). Their concern was that forcing children to do an EBacc would not be fair because it would be at the cost of a subject they enjoy.

*'EBacc limits the ability of higher achieving students to choose subjects that they would like to do because we've got to force them into the French pathway, and that demotivates them' (HT5, MP)*

The evidence suggests that the curriculum in schools is not meeting the needs and interests of all children, particularly those with reading and comprehension challenges. To access the curriculum, children need competency in literacy. Progress 8 and EBacc negatively impacted the curriculum offer, as they disincentivise schools to adopt vocational subjects to children who would benefit from them.



### 3.2.3 THE PERFECT STORM

The theme **'the perfect storm'** conceptualises the risk factors within the wider community and/or home that can detrimentally influence GCSE achievement. This theme includes three subthemes, 'care experienced children', 'county Lines and substance misuse' and 'parental support and engagement'.

Educational inequality is compounded by poverty and parental unemployment. Headteachers frequently raised concerns about not only FSM-eligible children eligible but for the *'working poor'* and the influence on the children's GCSE achievement. Families on state benefits and the working poor were struggling to afford the basics such as study materials (HT3, MP) and food (HT12, MP). Their children were less likely to have access to computers, revision guides or parents *'providing a private tutor and interventions at home'* (HT7, SP). Children talked about families not being able to replace school shoes due to lack of money, *'then they came in trainers, and you are put in isolation for that. What are you meant to do?'* (Child, FG2). One headteacher reflected that they see *'that lack of ambition, that lack of investment, where we find the gaps tend to grow and get bigger'* (HT9, MP) among white working-class families. The cost-of-living crisis is compounding the financial barriers to education, with rising food costs. Some support services suggested that parents need their children to go to college until 19 to keep their benefits:

*'Generational unemployment is a big issue. Kids are not encouraged, in some instances, to progress on to anything because the parents will lose financial income' (Service provider, 3)*

The financial disadvantage experienced by the working poor and those in receipt of state benefits is prevalent in secondary schools in Sunderland. Some children from these families are struggling to buy the basics for their child to be ready to participate and learn in school and this is negatively influencing their ambition, progress and GCSE outcomes.

#### 3.2.3.1 CARE-EXPERIENCED CHILDREN

Care-experienced children are more likely to have challenges gaining the GCSEs they are capable of due to their specific vulnerabilities. What has happened or is happening in the home

environment can be detrimental to the wellbeing of the child. The headteachers were aware of the barriers that care-experienced children can encounter in achieving positive GCSE outcomes. Some headteachers commented that they had *'increasing numbers of children who did not live with their parents'* (HT11, MP) and despite the family's best efforts, e.g. kinship care, *'they are turned off by education'*.

Stretched resources in statutory services meant there was limited therapeutic intervention to support care-experienced children following traumatic episodes (HT13, MP). A parent shared how their higher achieving foster child had attachment issues and with this, had *'developed huge anxiety, always needing an adult present'* (Parent, 2). Another parent expressed concern that *'sometimes schools have lower expectations because kids are in care'* (Parent, 1).

Experiencing school moves was identified as detrimental to accessing and engaging with school. A parent described how his foster child couldn't go to school but would disappear. The issue appeared to be, *'everybody was aware of her family and her life story, so the bullying was quite harsh for her'* (Parent, 4). A parent with two children disclosed that neither of them had been to school until the age of 10 and 11.

*'You can imagine the pressure that was put on school when they got a place because they didn't know how to count. They didn't know their ABCs. They didn't know the days of the week, the month of the year, how to tell the time' (Parent, 5)*

Lower attainment for cared for children is also prevalent in Further Education, where it was reported that despite a small number of students, *'there is a dip in attainment for those who are looked after'* (Senior leader FG1, FE).

Children who are engaged with children's social care for abuse and neglect are more likely to experience challenges with gaining the GCSEs they are capable of due to their specific vulnerabilities.

Being care-experienced increases the likelihood of encountering challenges with accessing and achieving potential at GCSE due to life experiences and exposure to adversity. Care-experienced children are likely to have had more home and school moves than non-care experienced children and this disrupts their education to varying degrees.

### 3.2.3.2 COUNTY LINES AND SUBSTANCE MISUSE

The National Crime Agency website (2024) defines County Lines as:

*'Where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by gangs. The 'County Line' is the mobile phone line used to take the orders of drugs. Importing areas (areas where the drugs are taken to) are reporting increased levels of violence and weapons-related crimes as a result of this trend'.*

Children with low socio-economic status, with persistent absence or exclusions from school were most likely to be exploited by County Lines:

*'There's a huge County Lines issue impacting on the children, and they make ready money. Whilst they get trapped with it, they do have things they've never had and then they are exploited because of that. Weapons, drugs it's all shiny and you can make money, the aspiration of children. Some of the children say 'I'm gonna be a drug dealer because I can make more money doing that' and they are right about that. What they don't see is the danger that leads to or lends itself to and it's only when it's too late that does happen' (HT2, AP)*

There is a range of views on the extent of County Lines in Sunderland. Children were being exploited earlier, as young as nine, but more commonly in years 10 and 11. Some headteachers described the issue as prolific and others suggested it was a small minority of children, though they all recognised the detrimental impact on children:

*'Giving a kid a tenner, a takeaway, a pair of trainers, t-shirt or some dope to go and put a brick through somebody's window. To nick petrol for the quads and stuff like that. It's not just about the County Lines, it's that exploitation of low criminality, to get them doing that antisocial stuff, the graffitiing, smashing a car window, things like that. If I owe you money, I'm not going to go and put a window out. I'm going to get a little 12-year-old to go and do it, and I'm going to give him a joint for doing it, and then he's on joints and then he keeps on' (Service provider, 3)*

Headteachers detailed children dealing in prescription drugs due to the ease of supply. They believed the police knew the adults distributing the drugs to the children, 'but they just don't have enough evidence to actually catch them and pin it on them' (HT1, AP). They added that when children get involved in County Lines, it gives them a debt but, 'it's actually easy money if you don't get caught, it only becomes an issue if you get caught or exploited or hurt or killed or all of those'. The children become tied to paying off their debts to the dealers, missing school as they must 'drop this off'.

The concern, particularly from AP headteachers, was the increase in County Lines over recent years and their ability to keep these children safe. Many mainstream headteachers reported some children at risk of involvement with criminal groups dealing drugs. One commented:

*'We dread the six weeks because they're out there in the community, being offered all sorts by these criminal groups, new pairs of trainers, mobile phones, whatever. I'm not saying all our children are - but they're at risk' (HT12, MP)*

The headteachers who mentioned County Lines all believed the children saw being a 'runner' as easier than school. Teachers supported their view that 'that pull factor is significantly stronger than the pull factor into education' (Teacher, FG2).

Children who struggle academically or with SEMH were more likely to get involved in County Lines:

*'He's got no vested interest in coming to school, or when he's in school attaining because he earns more money doing what he does outside of school. He's living his best life when we suspend him because he'll go out and do what he wants' (HT10, MP)*

Some children blamed parents for allowing children to drop out of school and because the 'education systems failed them' (Child, FG2). They believed not being in school led to them getting involved in County Lines. Some parents of older children do not have influence in their children's lives, due to the easy money from County Lines. Service Provider 3 shared that children who are not attending school, are excluded from school or are on a part-time timetable, are 'ripe for that kind of exploitation'. They outlined the adversity that a child was recently exposed to:

*'We've got one 11-year-old who was targeted and targeted and targeted, and he keeps getting kicked out of school. He looks like a thug and his mum is a local drug dealer and shoplifter. His dad is injecting heroin on the high street, and he lives with his nanna. He has seen people get brought back to life. He's been in the middle of raids. He's 11 years old and he's been wrote-off, like he gets blamed for everything. He's a child' (Service provider, 3)*

Though limited to small numbers of children, headteachers did report drug use within their school population:

*'I wouldn't say it was something that's growing but it's something that's there, as it is in every school. I think any school that said it wasn't, has maybe got its eyes shut, because there will be a segment of the school population who are involved in drug use' (HT15, MP)*

Vaping and recreational use of cannabis was cited by another headteacher as 'risk-taking behaviours' that they were aware of (HT13, MP). The headteachers did not see substance misuse daily but believed that drugs and alcohol were readily accessible to children in their communities. All headteachers who expressed concern about drug use were united in the view that it negatively impacted the GCSE achievement of children. Some felt drug use was more common in children with adversity in their lives, as a coping mechanism.

The children expressed concern about not feeling safe in their local communities, where drug use was commonplace:

*'A lot of people around those areas are just on drugs constantly, and there are people getting stabbed constantly. Loads of the people that I know around there, it's just constant' (Child, FG2)*

Most of the children had been exposed to drug dealing and drug use on the streets.

*'If you're walking about during the day, you'll just see people on crack and stuff like that in the streets, and you'll see people getting jumped, it's just old women walking their dogs, and it's crazy to see that. Someone got stabbed two doors down from me. You see drug deals just as you're walking your dog, heroin needles all over the streets' (Child, FG2)*

Children with low socio-economic status, with persistent absence or exclusions from school were most likely to be targeted and exploited by gangs into County Lines. Children couldn't comprehend the consequences of County Lines until they 'owed debts'. Children involved in County Lines and/or substance misuse have worse attendance and GCSE outcomes than those who do not. Street and prescription drugs were widely accessible in children's communities, and this made many children feel unsafe.

### 3.2.3.3 PARENTAL SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

Some headteachers believed parental support and engagement was a highly influential factor on children's GCSE outcomes. Their experiences of school, their school results and current life situation influence the value they and their child places on achieving their GCSEs. 'If they've had negative experiences of school they think, 'well actually, I've done alright without exams so you don't need any'' (HT2, AP). Teachers added that some families do not value education as it failed them. 'It's like at parents' evening, every parent that you really want to talk to... Never turns up. You can guarantee it' (Teacher, FG1).

Other headteachers believed a lack of discipline in the home was a barrier to success at GCSE:

*'If I tell a child off, or suspend a child, or whatever, the parents almost never back the school. They just want to be friends with their kids, and they just want an easy life, so I think poor parenting is a huge obstacle to us and them engaging. They're just spoilt. They just don't like to be told what to do, and the parents don't like their kids to be told what to do, and the parents want an excuse as to why their kids can't behave. It is a huge issue at the moment' (HT11, MP)*

A service provider shared times when parents had taken their young children shoplifting. They were concerned that some children were being raised by families who didn't place value on education and earning a living:

*'We don't learn our kid's life skills. If you want something, you just get it. You don't work for it; you can just rob it! You can destroy stuff, there are no repercussions for you. I've been face-to-face with a shoplifter who took her kid' (Service provider, 3)*

Across the board, there was concern about the impact of social media on children's mental health and GCSE achievement. There was a widely held belief that social media was negatively impacting children's relationships and their wider development. Parents described that despite their best efforts, it was hard to separate children from social media even though they recognised the impact on their mental health. A headteacher agreed:

*'I sat down with the parent four years ago, and I said to him, 'You have to take that phone off that child,' and he said, 'It's difficult.' I said, 'Because being a good parent is difficult, but I'll be sat opposite you in three years' time telling you that your kid's hit the wall', and I am, but they don't want advice. Parenting is a huge issue'* (HT11, MP)

Teachers blamed social media use at night and into the early hours of the next day on children being too tired to function at school or complete homework (Teacher, FG2). Headteachers supported this view; one said they know of children on TikTok until 4 am (HT3, MP). They proposed that the bite-sized content on social media impacts not only their concentration span in school but also feeds them misinformation. For example, *'like immigrants say, or something like that, they're getting fed some real dangerous stuff'* (Teacher, FG2).

Many headteachers and teachers described social media as the bane of their lives. Most arguments on social media or WhatsApp come into school. *'She posted this last night, der-der-der. It's probably the number one problem. I think it all comes down to the fact that they just don't say it to each other's faces'* (Teacher, FG2). This was also identified as an issue in AP. They agreed that the negative interactions between children would come into school the next day. *'They are seeing each other in a virtual world. Then, they come in here and face up to the fact that I've said last night I don't get on with you but now I'm seeing you face-to-face that's a different matter'* (HT1, AP).

Teachers and children described the pressure to be on devices at home. The discipline required to stay off social media to complete homework or revise was noted as a challenge, particularly when family members are on devices. *'It takes a very hard-working child to break that mould. It's much, much easier to conform and just go with the flow'* (Teacher, FG1). The need to be up-to-date means

they felt they had to be on social media at night (Teacher, FG2). Children agreed:

*'You're always going to be caught up with everything, everything new, and then you never have time to concentrate on schoolwork. For example, there could be a game that could be somebody updated, everyone's playing it. You've got to see this, I've got to do this, and you forget to do homework or schoolwork and you're like, 'oh, I can't remember how I do this now.' You really struggle in certain lessons, just because of one small thing'* (Child, FG3)

Headteachers identified a lack of parental support and engagement as a barrier to children achieving positive GCSE outcomes. If parents had a negative experience in school, they would be less likely to see the value of education. The findings also suggest that social media is detrimental to children's relationships, sleep, and progress in school.

### 3.2.4 GLASS CEILINGS

The **'glass ceiling'** theme was identified as conceptualising the low aspirations of children to achieve the GCSEs, employment and training opportunities that they can achieve.

#### 3.2.4.1 MIDDLE OF THE PACK

Many headteachers recognised that the children expected to attain four or five in a GCSE are less likely to be pushed by teachers to achieve higher grades than those expected to achieve sixes to nines. One referred to them as the 'forgotten third'. *'You've got the pupils who are attaining your four or your five, and in our present climate, they're almost written off, they are the forgotten third as I know they like to talk about nationally'* (HT, FG1). They could be *'slightly neglected'* because they might get the threshold pass mark (HT15, MP).

Children noted:

*'They just give up on them because they think they misbehave, and they're not going to want to try. Instead of actually trying to get them to behave in class and actually listen, they just send them out'* (Child, FG5)

A headteacher commented that children with SEN and higher attaining children are likely to have intervention, but there is a cohort in the middle that is missed (HT2, AP). Parents agreed that their

children who were expected to get a four to five grade were not stretched. *'He's just been allowed to muddle along. Certainly, in my experiences and observation of that school, that's a disservice to a real big chunk of kids'* (Parent, 3). Another parent commented that their foster daughter is content in the lowest set possible to prevent the pressure to get higher than a four at GCSE. This wasn't uncommon; a headteacher recognised this fear of failure in their school population:

*'It's that fear of failure that is the main barrier to quite a few children actually thinking, 'No, I can't do that. I'm going to have a go at this'. It's the fear of not getting there'* (HT13, MP)

The children agreed that a glass ceiling was placed on some in their school. *'If you're in a lower set, they'll say, 'this is what we are teaching you for you to get a Grade 4, just so you can pass'. I know quite a lot of people who have been entered into the Foundation GCSE and they're really upset about that because they want higher grades, and they can't get those because they've been categorised as not as smart as other sets'* (Child, FG5).

#### 3.2.4.2 LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOW ATTAINERS

Some children noticed that only children with higher predicted grades can access weekend booster classes to improve their GCSE outcomes. *'It's about whether you have been chosen'* (Child, FG5). Headteachers shared that they offer trips and experiences ringfenced for higher achieving children only, and *'we have a full programme for our high-performance students, in every year group'* (HT18, MP). A parent was concerned that only her higher-achieving son was given access to additional opportunities:

*'They're saying, "You're within the top 15 learners in science. Therefore, you can access this." It feels that those added value and enrichment activities that would be almost of more benefit to his brother weren't available; he wasn't invited to do any of those types of events'* (Parent, 3)

The cost of university visits is limited to the higher achieving learners due to financial constraints of the school and because schools think they will benefit the most (Teacher, FG1). Some parents struggle to see the benefits of a university education as they have jobs that don't require degrees. *'We've got parents who are cooks, cleaners,*

*electricians, plumbers. I think the perceived cost of university and all the rest of it is still not quite filtering or there doesn't appear to be enough gains to be able to want to go to university'* (HT10, MP).

Children expected to achieve 4s or 5s at GCSE were less likely to be motivated by schools to achieve higher GCSE outcomes, as they have met the threshold for a pass. The entry requirement for college of '4s' was also believed to be capping children's aspirations for higher grades. In some schools, the system of streaming children into ability sets was viewed to be placing a glass ceiling on children's GCSE achievement, regardless of potential. Higher-achieving children were selected for enrichment activities over those expected to achieve mid- to lower GCSE outcomes.

#### 3.2.4.3 PUSHING APPRENTICESHIPS

Children identified that those predicted to get lower GCSEs would be encouraged to do an apprenticeship pathway post-16.

*'Unspokenly, teachers know, or think, that the lower-ability students, academically, are going to go into apprenticeships. They think apprenticeships are the easy way out, so if they're doing badly, I'm just going to get an apprenticeship. I think that's a reason for a lot of the lower grades in Sunderland'* (Child, FG2)

Headteachers described cohorts of children who seem content with getting fours, as that is all that is required to get on a college programme or apprenticeship (HT10, MP). The prerequisites for post-16 programmes were often cited as a critical factor in children not aspiring for higher grades: *'Students immediately cap their efforts once they have achieved this. Pushing post-16 providers to lift this to a grade 5 in English and Maths would automatically raise students work rate and ethic'* (HT19, MP). *'The reality is they can get into college with or without GCSEs and to them there is little difference in a four or a six'* (HT5, MP). Teachers were concerned that some children felt they didn't need any GCSEs, since they planned to be self-employed (Teacher, FG2) or because they would resit maths and English anyway until they were 18 (HT5, MP).

### 3.3 THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

The theme **‘thinking outside of the box’** was identified as conceptualising the solutions to improving GCSE attainment for all children based on the thematic analysis of the data. The five subthemes were **literacy initiatives, SEND and SEMH, masterclasses, mentors and independent study**, parent partnership and breaking the mould (Figure, 4). Specifically, the 84 participants were asked to identify three recommendations for the £11m fund that would be most likely to positively influence attainment of all children.

#### 3.3.1 LITERACY INITIATIVES

Every headteacher and teacher recognised the detrimental influence of low literacy levels across the city on children’s ability to express themselves, read and comprehend. Their priorities for the fund included reading interventions and initiatives, age-appropriate reading resources, specialist English teachers to work across clusters of schools, city-wide leadership to tackle low levels of literacy and the establishment of a community of practice.

#### READING INTERVENTIONS AND INITIATIVES

‘Literacy is a huge one. Literacy programs, literacy family programs, literacy training, literacy staffing because that is it, it’s a barrier. Every child who’s sitting an exam because you’ve got to be able to read that paper, so literacy is massive one’ (HT1, AP)

‘Once a month we will wheelbarrow books onto the drive and encourage people to bring books they’ve read and borrow things, just to get some of that engagement increased as well’ (HT9, MP)

#### AGE-APPROPRIATE READING RESOURCES

‘I guess it needs a teenage kind of cult following. But actually, at the reading level for them, that’s not looking like a baby’ (HT2, AP)

#### SPECIALIST ENGLISH TEACHERS TO WORK ACROSS CLUSTERS DELIVERING INTERVENTIONS AND TRAINING ALL STAFF

‘If there was a way to fund, like a team of highly qualified English teachers, literacy teachers might even be primary in some respects. You had a cluster, but then they went out and they worked with schools within Sunderland?’ (HT7, SP)

‘We should always be encouraging our teachers to have the skills to be able to teach those basic core skills - whether it be reading, whether it be numeracy - and then taking every opportunity possible to be able to deliver that and identifying those youngsters who aren’t achieving and just taking some of those steps back’ (Service provider, 1)

#### CITY-WIDE LEADERSHIP APPROACH TO TACKLING LOW LEVELS OF LITERACY

‘Get senior leaders in schools and the local authority together to talk about how we can have leadership that crosscuts the different silos that we currently work in to look at common strategies and share expertise’ (HT, FG1)

#### ESTABLISHMENT OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

‘I bet there’s loads of really good practice that happens across the city in terms of delivery, resources, practices, interventions, whatever it may be for English and maths, but I guess what I’m starting to question is how much of that is shared across a city-wide forum’ (Senior leader, FG1, FE)

‘Most of our schools now are part of much bigger and wider trusts, which means that they have opportunities to share learning across a bigger group of staff. We’ve got lots of really interesting and exciting programmes going around improving that quality of teaching’ (Service provider, 1)

‘Professional development of SENCOs or senior leaders, it’s of that middle leadership and, you know, front facing staff as well. What are those strategies? How can we support? What are you doing? How are you doing things differently? It would be good to have that network’ (Teacher, FG2)

#### A PROVISION WITHIN THE MAINSTREAM SECONDARY SCHOOLS

‘A school within a school, with life skills, using Forest Schools, reward trips, community, as well as those core subjects with consistent regulatory breaks’ (HT10, MP)

‘To offer more bespoke packages, that’s one thing we’d love to do. We’ve got a couple of kids out on AP placements part-time. We really want to do something bespoke, so when they come back from their placements, they don’t have to try and fit back in. We can support them to do what’s best for them and get them through their academic stuff without having to go back into a class and disrupt the learning of everybody else, because they don’t know what’s going on’ (HT11, MP)

‘I want a larger SEND provision in school. We do have a SEN safe space in school; it’s a room. It’s too small for the mental health issues that we’re coping with. I want a specific designated space. Basically, I want a building’ (Teacher, FG2)

#### A new type of provision between mainstream and AP

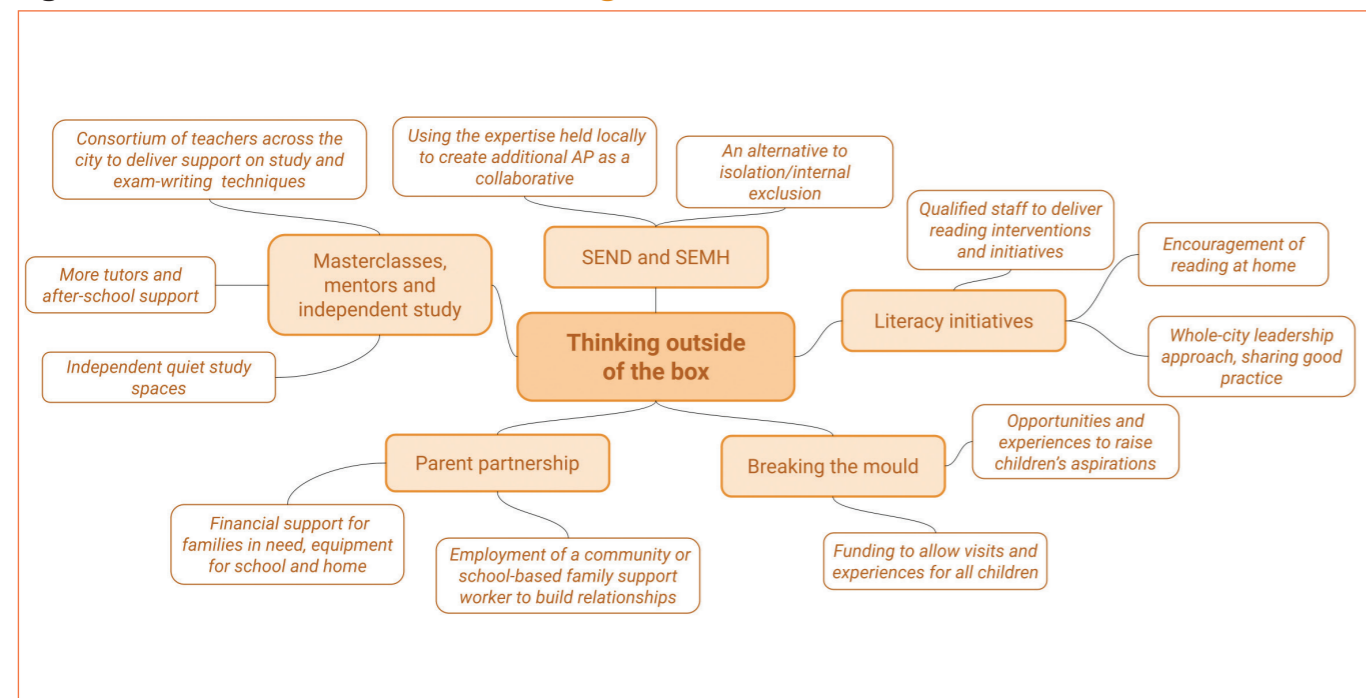
‘My two could do with something in between a special school and a mainstream school. There’s a boundary. You’re either in mainstream school or you’re in a special school. I think something in between would probably be beneficial, where it’s for the likes of the two I have’ (Parent, 5)

‘They’re not far enough down the path that you’ll get an EHCP for them, but they need something in-between. I have said this for years and years, we’ve got a mainstream school and AP, but it’s that tranche in the middle for whom secondary school, some kids, they just can’t do it, but they’re not an AP kid’ (HT10, MP)

#### ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO ISOLATION

‘I think there should be a subject teacher there. They should check the child’s weak points and weak points in subjects. They get that subject teacher and help improve the student because when they’re in BSU they just usually don’t learn anything throughout that day, and they miss important things’ (Child, FG1)

Figure 4. Themes and subthemes for ‘Thinking outside of the box’



*'Instead of isolation, a different classroom with less students in. If they've misbehaved, they can go into that classroom and still learn the subject of the lesson they were in with a specialised teacher'* (Child, FG2)

*'An extra half an hour to 45 minutes after school. For certain subjects throughout the week. All subjects pretty much now do it after school. Going through specific topics that the teachers ask you, 'What are you struggling on?' Everybody's got similar preferences. So, we go through things that we feel like we really need to cover again'* (Child, FG4)

### ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS

*'Somebody needs to invest in educational psychology, an EP who's likely to teach'* (HT10, MP)

*'Educational psychologists. We can't find an educational psychologist anywhere. That has an impact on our ability to understand children's needs and support them effectively'* (HT13, MP)

### 3.3.3 MASTERCLASSES, MENTORS AND TUTORS

The second most frequent recommendation to improve GCSE outcomes across the participant groups was to provide masterclasses (with small class sizes), mentoring and independent quiet study spaces for all children across secondary schools.

#### MASTERCLASSES

*'Instead of the teacher from the school that knows you, get someone else in and they can help you. They wouldn't judge you, because the teachers know you so well, they use their knowledge a little bit too much. Everyone gets the same learning'* (Child, FG5)

*'There's an element of, our staff could do it for another school [masterclasses], another school could do it for our children, but I think it has to be a new phase, new experience, I think that's quite important'* (HT5, MP)

#### MENTORS AND TUTORS (QUALIFIED)

*'Hiring tutors for people that need them, revision guides, like flashcards, they could work on with their teacher one-on-one, instead of being in a class of 30. I think that makes someone more likely to succeed'* (Child, FG2)

*'I just think regular time with the teacher, if they have certain teachers as mentors, they can talk through their anxieties and the problems they've got and just try to encourage them more'* (Parent, 4)

### 3.3.4 PARENT PARTNERSHIP

Many headteachers recommended the employment of family support workers to build relationships and raise aspirations. Both children and headteachers wanted to see some of the £11m spent on support for families in need by providing food, uniform and equipment for school.

#### FAMILY SUPPORT WORKERS

*'We've talked about the need for family support workers, and really getting them to understand families and children. Some families have children in primary and secondary, so you'd be impacting across the phases if you were doing that; building relationships, raising aspirations. Predominantly try to make sure that some of the hardest-to-reach families are getting their children into school'* (HT, FG1)

*'Someone that can just go to a house; work with a parent, work with a child; start to unpick some of the issues. Try to engage them in some sort of learning, to then have that integration process into the school'* (HT18, MP)

#### FINANCIAL SUPPORT

*'Maybe many people can't afford school dinners, or many people can't afford equipment, so maybe £10 million can go to people who can't afford food, or people who can't afford the equipment'* (Child, FG3)

*'Resource for the families learning at home, or to give them some kind of learning capacity at home that encourages the idea that study at home is actually going to benefit them and incentivises them'* (HT5, MP)

### 3.3.5 BREAKING THE MOULD

All participants recommended opportunities and experiences to raise children's aspirations and improve their GCSE outcomes:

#### INSPIRING CHILDREN

*'I really feel that it's about re-inspiring the next lot of kids coming through and getting parents in a space where they're more confident to say, 'Let's break that mould.' It should be about every child on results day, confidently standing there and saying - irrespective of what that number is - 'I know I was given the opportunity to succeed, and I was supported to do that''* (Parent, 3)

*'We need to work with young people for them to understand what the art of the possible is. The young people need to know and to have that sense of what they can achieve'* (Teacher, FG2)

#### TALENT DEVELOPMENT

*'Imagine a child has a talent for engineering, they have a 1-to-1 careers meeting, which leads to a visit to the Nissan car factory where they see the engineers developing some of the best technology around. This then becomes very meaningful'* (HT19, MP)

### OPPORTUNITIES AND EXPERIENCES

*'A real sense of status around skills, like really celebrate young people who achieve. It's almost like Duke of Edinburgh on steroids, if you like. It's celebrate young people who can go above and beyond in their communities to do good things, give them real opportunities and framework and guidance around that, whether that's charity events, attending clubs, working for volunteer organisations, whatever it happens to be, incentivise that somehow because that's very important'* (HT17, MP)

*'Character development, including opportunities to participate in musicals'* (HT1, FG) and *'opportunities to speak to people who had success stories themselves, as a proper structured programme'* (Teacher, FG2)





# 4.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS

## 4.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research aimed to, ‘investigate the factors influencing GCSE achievement in secondary education in Sunderland’ (aim 1) and ‘conduct an in-depth consultation exercise to collate and interpret the experiences, perspectives and expertise of children and young people, headteachers, senior leaders, teachers, parents, services, communities and key stakeholders about barriers to the achievement of children up to GCSE in Sunderland’ (aim 2). Through a phenomenological approach, 84 participants, including headteachers and senior leaders, children, parents and service providers shared their views on the factors impacting GCSE achievement in secondary education in Sunderland. As described in section 3, the process of thematic analysis identified three themes and fourteen subthemes, illustrated in Appendix 2, Figure 11.

The concluding remarks are based on the findings of this research.

### **O1. Establish what conclusions can be drawn about the challenges, experiences and attainment of children in Sunderland throughout their secondary education**

The factors that influence GCSE achievement in secondary school are complex and multifaceted. Children’s experiences of mainstream secondary education were influenced by the protective factors at school and home. The protective factors contributing to GCSE achievement were available teachers to provide 1:1 or group support beyond scheduled lessons. The most valued teachers were those who raised aspirations and ambitions. Exposing children to career opportunities and pathways through careers advice, external visits and visitors gave them an insight into post-16 options and opportunities. These activities are important if children are to understand the possibilities open to them in the future.

The curriculum as it stands is not fit for purpose. Children are expected to be suited to an academic curriculum and for some, it is turning them off education. There is insufficient choice in subjects, particularly vocational subjects such as construction, plumbing, hair and beauty and engineering.

The curriculum should be preparing all children for the jobs in their future and this is not consistently the case. The curriculum offer is negatively

influenced by Progress 8, as schools are penalised for offering vocational subjects. The EBacc is limiting the option choices of higher achieving children, as they are pushed to study a language at the cost of another subject they enjoy.

Low literacy levels, particularly in reading and comprehension are negatively impacting children’s ability to access the curriculum and to pass GCSE exams. Children with reading ages of primary aged children cannot read or comprehend the language and vocabulary in GCSE exams.

The current assessment regime for GCSE is not suitable for all children. GCSE exams measure a child’s ability to recall information on a particular day from an extensive amount of curriculum content that may or may not appear in the examination questions. There are too many exams over a short period of time, causing undue pressure on children to memorise information. Children with reading and comprehension challenges on entry to secondary school are struggling to access the language used in the exam papers and this can lead to disengagement with school.

Covid has heightened the challenges some children had with SEMH difficulties. Many children were not in school for two years and this has left a legacy, to varying degrees, on their social skills, reintegration into school and academic achievement due to lost learning. It is expected that children sit GCSE examinations that do not consider the missed learning. Children have gaps in their learning due to time away from school and this is having an ongoing impact on their school experience and predicted GCSE grades.

Schools were doing their best with limited funding to support children with rising and increasingly complex SEMH difficulties. A wide range of approaches were being adopted, such as mental health support staff, counsellors and mental health first aiders, and bespoke provision within schools. The number of children with EBSA was increasing and schools were struggling to meet demand within their existing capacity to providing packages of support. These children were at high risk of not being able to attend school.

Partnership with parents is a protective factor for thriving in secondary school, improving progress and GCSE achievement. Although headteachers encountered some challenges with collaboration



with parents, they did recognise the positive influence on children's GCSE outcomes. Children are more likely to have high GCSE aspirations when their parents encourage and motivate them.

Low aspirations are creating glass ceilings and this is a risk factor for children reaching their potential. Streaming children into ability sets could be disadvantageous to GCSE achievement. Children expected to achieve 4s or 5s at GCSE were less likely to be motivated by schools to achieve higher GCSE outcomes, as they have met the threshold for a pass. Unsurprisingly, higher achieving children are more likely to have visits to universities and aspire to continue to higher education as a result.

The entry requirement for college of '4s' was also believed to be capping children's aspirations for higher grades. In some schools, the system of streaming children into ability sets was seen as placing a glass ceiling on children's GCSE achievement, regardless of potential. Higher-achieving children were selected for enrichment activities over those expected to achieve mid- to lower GCSE outcomes.

## **O2. Establish how factors relating to children's prior attainment and life experiences influence their transition between primary and secondary school, informing their attainment during their secondary school journey**

Well planned processes that support transition from primary to secondary school was a protective factor for future GCSE outcomes. Schools that focussed on supporting children to feel emotionally secure during transitions were more likely to thrive in year 7 and beyond.

All stakeholders (children, parents and professionals) need to be engaged in the transition process (pre, during and post transition) to ensure children thrive and adapt to the new environment and build enduring relationships. Schools who invested staff resources to work in partnership with their feeder primary schools to get to know the children and vice versa, to share information, had the best transition outcomes. Transition processes centred on providing stability, that were adapted for children who were care-experienced and/or with SEND or SEMH needs were a protective factor in positively influencing their secondary school journey. These children benefitted from additional approaches such as mindfulness, talking therapies and relationship building.

Children with good literacy skills, in particular reading, comprehension and communication were more likely to achieve positive GCSE outcomes. Schools were intervening to improve literacy with a range of interventions at individual, key stage and school level. There was an appreciation across the schools that success at GCSE was underpinned by literacy.

## **O3. Establish how socio-economic, demographic or community factors influence their attainment during their secondary school journey**

Working with parents as partners to secure a shared responsibility in preparing for exams and in supporting children to strive for the best possible GCSE outcomes was fundamental to achievement at GCSE. This partnership was a protective factor for emotional support, particularly during exam preparation and assessment.

Risk factors within the wider community and home can detrimentally influence GCSE achievement. Educational inequality is compounded by poverty and not being able to afford the basics of food, uniform, travel and equipment for school. Some working families, as well as families in receipt of state benefits, are struggling to make ends meet, particularly during the cost-of-living crisis. Families that are unable to buy the basics can negatively influence ambition, progress and GCSE outcomes.

The presence of County Lines in the community of Sunderland has a negative influence on the children coerced to undertake criminal activity. Children with low socio-economic status, with persistent absence or exclusions and lower achievement were most likely to be exploited by County Lines. Children from low-income families are particularly vulnerable to gangs, as the ability to make money is more likely to appeal to them than school. The children do not see the risks of County Lines and being indebted to drug dealers, on their future safety and academic outcomes. Children were more likely to be coerced into County Lines if they were in AP.

Substance misuse, particularly of street drugs negatively influenced attainment. The use of illegal street drugs appeared to be small but not incidental. Drugs and alcohol were readily accessible to children in their communities and use was more common among children with adversity in their lives, who used drugs as a coping mechanism. Some children were exposed to adults

using drugs, and violence in their communities, leading to children not feeling safe.

## **O4. Provide a preliminary understanding of how attainment at age 16 may inform post-16 destinations and opportunities for children in Sunderland**

For a level 3 course at college, the entry requirement is five GCSEs at grade 4 or above. These entry requirements for post-16 learning programmes were believed to be a factor in children not being motivated to aim for higher GCSE grades. Some children are more likely to be encouraged to undertake an apprenticeship if they have lower predicted grades. Children who decide on an apprenticeship or employment route were less likely to aspire to get the higher grades at GCSE.

One of the most discussed protective factors to raising GCSE achievement and informing post-16 destinations was providing careers advice on pathways in secondary school. Exposing children to experiences, visits and speakers increased the likelihood of them identifying and working towards a post-16 pathway in education, employment or training, and aiming for higher GCSE grades.

## **O5. Identify potential gaps and challenges in provision within and outside school environments, that may influence the attainment of children up to GCSE in Sunderland**

Schools were responsive to the complexity of the mental health challenges experienced by some children by providing bespoke packages of support including within school provision. The provision of mental health support such as within school counselling and bespoke learning environments were beneficial in preventing escalating mental ill health.

Despite the best efforts of school staff, there are rising numbers of children with unmet needs in secondary school. If children are not feeling mentally healthy, they are not going to thrive in school. Coupled with this, increasing numbers of children are recognised by teachers as needing assessment and identification of underlying SEND. As these children struggle to cope in secondary school, their behaviour becomes dysregulated and they become caught in a cycle of sanctions. A critical challenge is the lack of provision to meet the needs of children with SEMH and SEND, whether diagnosed or not, in mainstream schools.

The result of this is increasing numbers of children suspended and/or permanently excluded from school. Once these children are excluded from school, their risk of exploitation in the community increases.

Financial barriers are one factor impacting the ability of all mainstream schools to meet the needs of all children and young people. Another is a lack of specialist and alternative provision for children with EHCPs. Too often they are unable to be in the right provision that is in their best interests. Diagnosis is too late, compounding children's challenges at school and impacting their ability to attend. There is a need for high-quality professional development of teachers to give them the knowledge and skills needed to identify, support and mitigate the disadvantage on children with SEND.

This research highlights that a complete reform of the education system in England is needed. There must be bold and innovative changes to the curriculum, assessment and examination system to ensure every child can be included and supported to achieve their potential.

## **4.1 LIMITATIONS**

The findings cannot claim certainty. The research was conducted in a single city in the Northeast of England; the findings may not represent other local areas. Furthermore, gatekeepers of the provisions selected the children and young people who took part in the focus groups and pullupachair. They may not represent the general population of children and young people in the city.

# 5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

## 5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

This section suggests recommendations where a school fund could positively influence pupil experience in Sunderland (objective 6), based solely on the findings of thematic analysis of the data corpus. Section 5.1 shares the proposed general principles for the fund, Section 5.2 details the ten recommendations.

### 5.1 GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR THE £11M FUND

Mainstream secondary schools should apply for funding in 2-3 year cycles to allow for the design, implementation and evaluation of innovative projects. As the grants are ringfenced for mainstream secondary schools, they must state how they will work in partnership with alternative and specialist providers to ensure all children across the city benefit.

It is recommended that the funding applications should include, without exception, the following:

- Which of the ten recommendations their proposal aligns to and how
- Evidence of why the area of focus would benefit from grant funding (why it does not fall in the scope of school revenue/capital funding/pupil premium/SEN/pupil funding)
- Evidence of co-creation in the design of the proposal with children, young people, parents and wider stakeholders
- How the project will benefit all children in the school(s) population
- As the grants are ringfenced for mainstream secondary schools, applying schools must state how they will work in partnership with alternative and specialist providers to ensure all children across the city benefit.
- Where schools do not submit applications for funding in line with the recommendations, they must provide evidence of why the recommendation is not applicable to their school population

### 5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

This section suggests ten recommendations where a school fund could positively influence children's experience in Sunderland.

Recommendation 1. Provide access to evidence-based literacy programmes (EEF) for all Y5-Y11s across the city from a ringfenced element of the £11m funding, regardless of whether the child's school applied for the funding or not.

Recommendation 2. Provide and distribute a centralised support fund, held within Early Help (Together for Children), to provide the basics for families in crisis. For example, uniform, bedroom furniture, learning and study equipment/resources for school and home.

Recommendation 3. Create and implement innovative approaches to creating bespoke provisions to support children with SEMH and SEND, to thrive in school through mental health support and innovative learning and teaching approaches.

Recommendation 4. Establish and deliver effective transition approaches between Y5 and Y7 that include better information sharing, parent partnership and child-led approaches.

Recommendation 5. Create and deliver a suite of volunteering experiences in and outside of Sunderland to raise aspirations and ambitions for children across the year groups.

Recommendation 6. Design and implement alternatives to isolation (removal), co-produced with children, to break the cycle of lost learning, disengagement, suspensions, permanent exclusions and impact on GCSE achievement.

Recommendation 7. Establish a leadership collaborative from the education, community and statutory sector, to share learning and teaching evidence-based approaches, resources and training opportunities.

Recommendation 8. Provide new publicly available GCSE revision resources (films, flashcards, booklets) that all children and parents in Sunderland can benefit from.

Recommendation 9. Provide extra-curricular masterclasses, particularly in the core subjects for children across clusters of schools.

Recommendation 10. Expose children to the education, employment and training opportunities they could have if they were successful at GCSE level beyond their immediate area.

# 6.0 PROPOSED EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

## 6.0 PROPOSED EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The thematic analysis has highlighted the protective factors for and barriers against positive GCSE achievement. Furthermore, the potential solutions to improving progress and GCSE achievement will be explored.

The National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) (2024) describes theories of change as simplifications of a complex reality, to clarify the intended achievement of an intervention, strategy or policy, to identify any underlying assumptions and risks, and for evaluating/understanding how an intervention works or doesn't work in the way we initially intended or expected, including inputs, activities, outputs, achievement and impacts. The suggested evaluation framework is adapted from Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) (2024) and the findings of the research.

### 6.1 STEP 1: DEVELOPING THE THEORY OF CHANGE

1. Situation and rationale: What is the context in which you are working? What problem is your intervention trying to address or resolve? What is the evidence that it is an issue and that it needs to be addressed? Who have you consulted (e.g. Governors, staff, children, parents) and what was the outcome?
2. Aims: What aim/objectives is the intervention seeking to achieve? What is your proposed solution to the problem?
3. Achievement: Which short and intermediate-term achievements need to be in place for the long-term goals of your intervention (or impacts) to be achieved?
4. Impact: What do you expect will be the short- and long-term impacts of the funding?
5. Activities: Outline the interventions you believe will bring about your desired change.
6. Outputs: What evidence will you gather to show the impact of the funding?
7. Inputs: What are the human, financial and organisational resources required to deliver your activities and, in turn, achieve your desired objectives?

### 6.2 STEP 2: PLAN

Using the Theory of Change, applicants for the funding will develop the questions that their evaluation will seek to answer. These overarching questions will determine the scope and approach of the evaluation.

Theme 1: Improving achievement

- Did [the intervention] increase [achievement] among [group]?

For example, did the Y7-Y11 literacy intervention, ReadingWise, increase reading ages among those children with predicted GCSE grades 4-6?

### 6.3 STEP 3: EVALUATION OF THE INTERVENTION

Was the intervention delivered the way we expected?

- Did we target the right children?
- Did we involve parents and children sufficiently in the design of the intervention
- Was the intervention cost-effective?
- What was the impact of the intervention? (Compare achievement with those who didn't participate).
- How will the intervention be sustained/developed as business as usual?



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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1

**Table 3.** Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarisation with the data	Refamiliarising through immersion with the dataset. Listening to 174 audio files of the original interviews (publication 2) and reading and re-reading the transcripts
2. Coding	Coding interesting features in the individual publications, systematic approach across the data corpus
3. Generating initial themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering the data into each theme
4. Developing and reviewing themes	Checking the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data corpus. Generating a thematic map of the analysis
5. Refining, defining, and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine each theme and create the overall story of the data. Generating clear names to define each theme
6. Writing up	Final opportunity for analysis, returning to the objectives and eliciting compelling extract examples

Braun and Clarke (2022)

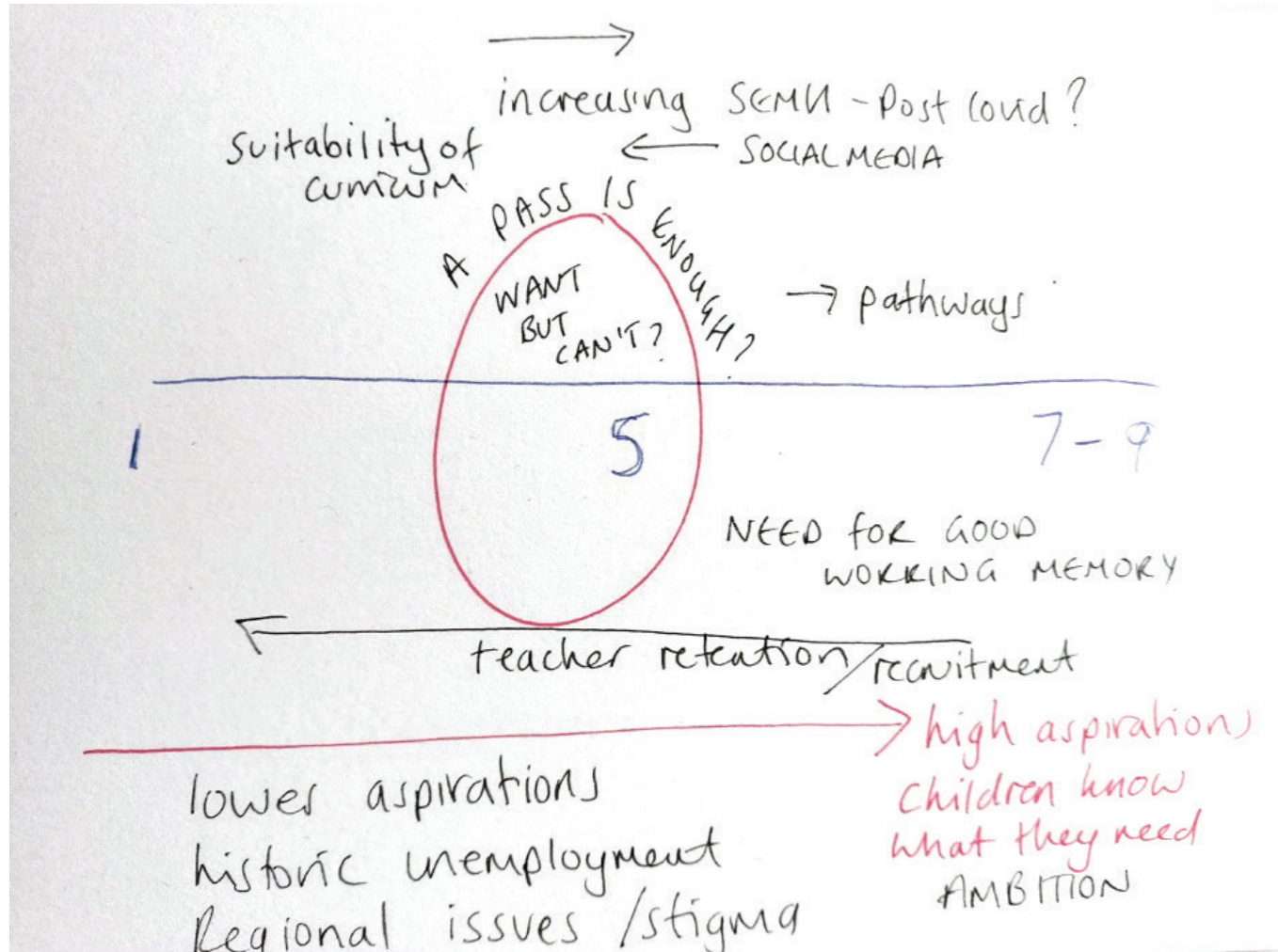


## APPENDIX 2

### Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

Data familiarisation was essential to achieve systematic and deep engagement with the data 'to develop a rich and complex account beyond obvious meanings' (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Notes were taken during interviews with adults and conversations with the children and young people. The audio was re-listened to, and the transcriptions were repeatedly read. This allowed initial notes, thoughts and ideas were captured (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Initial notes taken during interviews with headteachers



The interviews and conversations were uploaded to NVivo 14 for coding of candidate themes and subthemes (Figure, 6).

Figure 6. NVivo 14 coding of candidate themes and subthemes.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS GCSE OUTCOMES	0	0	Tod	Smaller classes & flexible schedule
P1 Attendance protective factors	0	0	Tod	Summary Reference
Bespoke support	6	8	Tod	
P2 Curriculum offer	7	12	Tod	
Careers exposure	18	43	Tod	
coursework	3	8	Tod	
Extra curricular	6	11	Tod	
Range of options	7	12	Tod	
Vocational offer	2	2	Tod	
P3 Gold standard	0	0	Tod	
High expectations & inclusive	13	28	Tod	
Literacy development	15	25	Tod	
Parents as partners	9	12	Tod	
Quality teachers & support staff	15	25	Tod	
Revision resources	6	20	Tod	
P5 Wider school support	2	3	Tod	
SEND & SEMH support	8	10	Tod	
Smaller classes & flexible schedule	8	19	Tod	
Supported transitions	11	19	Tod	
Teacher wellbeing	2	3	Tod	
Timely support	7	8	Tod	
Within school AP as intervention	8	16	Tod	
RISK FACTORS AGAINST GCSE ATTAINME...	0	0	Tod	
A1 - out of school factors	0	0	Tod	
At home	0	0	Tod	
Cared for	9	15	Tod	
Deprivation	13	31	Tod	
Exploitation	6	17	Tod	
Exposure to child & adult substance...	0	0	Tod	

Figure 7. Phase 3 Sample raw data

PROTECTIVE FACTORS GCSE OUTCOMES	0	0	Tod	Smaller classes & flexible schedule
P1 Proactive attendance support	0	0	Tod	Summary Reference
Bespoke support	6	8	Tod	
family support	8	17	Tod	
Mental health support	4	6	Tod	
P2 Curriculum offer	7	12	Tod	
Careers exposure and aspiration building	21	50	Tod	
Pathways to employment and training	7	12	Tod	
Range of GCSE assessment approaches	4	9	Tod	
P3 Teaching and learning	0	0	Tod	
High expectations & inclusive	13	29	Tod	
Literacy development	15	25	Tod	
Parents as partners	9	12	Tod	
Quality teachers & support staff	18	29	Tod	
Revision resources	6	20	Tod	
SEND & SEMH support	17	32	Tod	
Smaller classes & flexible schedule	8	19	Tod	
Supported transitions	11	19	Tod	

Figure 8. Phase 4 Sample raw data

Reference 1 - 2.69% Coverage  
[Adult A] had to put her forward to get, obviously, schooling at home, which the young people's service have, but she [?couldn't - like she did her exams at home 0:07:51.5]. So not being in school for three years, the school sent her books home, things like that, and working with the young people's service as well, she passed her exams.

Reference 2 - 2.92% Coverage  
She couldn't have gone to school, but she learned. Being with the tutors, she literally - she'd go upstairs, she'd do her homework, she'd be on her computer, and the difference in her was just unbelievable. So I don't know if that's an idea as well, maybe, having more children, not necessarily not go to school, but if they've got issues like that, look at [Child A].

Files\S10 - § 2 references coded [ 2.53% Coverage]  
Reference 1 - 1.44% Coverage  
For other children, the evidence, the very small amount of evidence that we've got, suggests that once they start to be persistently absent, they will continue to be persistently absent right throughout their school career, from whenever they started, right through. They're not cured, if you see what I mean, from being persistently absent. There don't seem to be many things that support children to get back into school and keep them there. So once that tendency starts, it's with them from whenever it starts, and of course, if they don't go to school, then they're forever playing catch up.

Figure 9. Visualisation of 'Solutions to improve GCSE attainment' themes

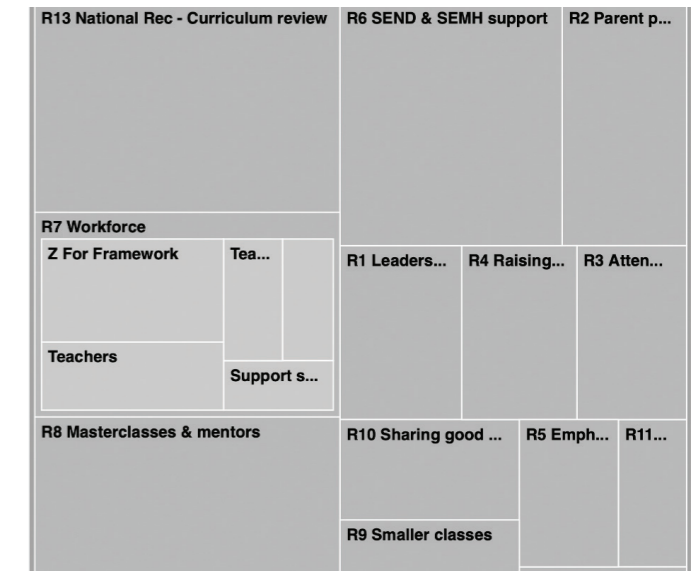


Figure 10. NVivo 14. Phase 5: Thematic Analysis

PROTECTIVE FACTORS GCSE OUTCOMES	0	0
P1 Proactive attendance support	0	0
Bespoke support	6	8
family support	8	17
Mental health support	4	6
P2 Curriculum offer	7	12
Careers exposure and aspiration building	21	50
Pathways to employment and training	7	12
Range of GCSE assessment approaches	4	9
P3 Teaching and learning	0	0
High expectations & inclusive	13	29
Literacy development	15	25
Parents as partners	9	12
Quality teachers & support staff	18	29
Revision resources	6	20
SEND & SEMH support	17	32
Smaller classes & flexible schedule	8	19
Supported transitions	11	19

**Table 4.** Identifying conceptual themes: Protective factors for GCSE achievement

Theme	Candidate theme	Concept
Attendance	Bespoke support	Through thick and thin (Supporting or being loyal to someone through good times and bad)
	Family support	
	Mental health support	
Curriculum	Careers exposure	It's not rocket science (It's not complicated)
	Pathways to employment and training	
	Range of GCSE approaches	
Teaching and learning	High expectations and inclusive	Go the extra mile (To do more than is required)
	Literacy development	
	Parents as partners	
	Quality teachers and support staff	
	Revision resources	
	SEND and SEMH support	
	Smaller classes and flexible schedule	
Supported transitions		

**Table 5.** Identifying conceptual themes: Barriers impacting GCSE achievement - Out of school factors

Theme	Candidate theme	Concept
Out of school factors	Cared for	Elephant in the room (An obvious problem or issue that no one wants to address)
	Clashing with school	
	Deprivation	
	Exploitation	
	Adult drug use	
	Child drug use	
	Lack of family time	
	Gangs	
	Homework and revision support	
	Inadequate parenting	
	Knife crime	
	Multiple ACES	
	Regional inferiority	
Social media		

**Table 6.** Identifying conceptual themes: Barriers impacting GCSE achievement - Attendance

Theme	Candidate theme	Concept
Attendance	Covid 19 legacy	Like a fish out of water (feeling uncomfortable or out of place in a particular place or situation)
	Emotionally based school avoidance	
	Elective home education	
	Reasons for persistent absence	
	Impact of persistent absence	

**Table 7.** Identifying conceptual themes: Barriers impacting GCSE achievement - Curriculum and assessment

Theme	Candidate theme	Concept
Curriculum and assessment	Accessibility of the NC	Not my cup of tea (Something that is not to your liking or preference)
	GCSEs and literacy	
	Memory test	
	Progress 8	
	Lack of NC relevance	
	Too many exams	

**Table 8.** Identifying conceptual themes: Barriers impacting GCSE achievement - Teaching and Learning

Theme	Candidate theme	Concept
Teaching and learning	Rising SEMH/SEND	From bad to worse (Progress from a bad to a worse situation)
	Ineffective teachers	
	Persistent disruptive behaviour	
	Teacher recruitment and retention	
	Teacher workload and wellbeing	
	Teaching methods	

**Table 9.** Identifying conceptual themes: Barriers impacting GCSE achievement - Glass ceilings

Theme	Candidate theme	Concept
Glass ceiling	Inequity	Glass ceiling (A barrier to succeeding)
	Lack of ambition	
	Lack of self-belief	
	Low parental aspirations	



**Table 10.** Protective factors: Going the extra mile

Concept (Main theme)	Sub themes
<b>Going the extra mile</b> (Doing more than is required)	Supporting attendance Excellence in teaching Parents as partners A focus on literacy Supported transitions Careers and pathways

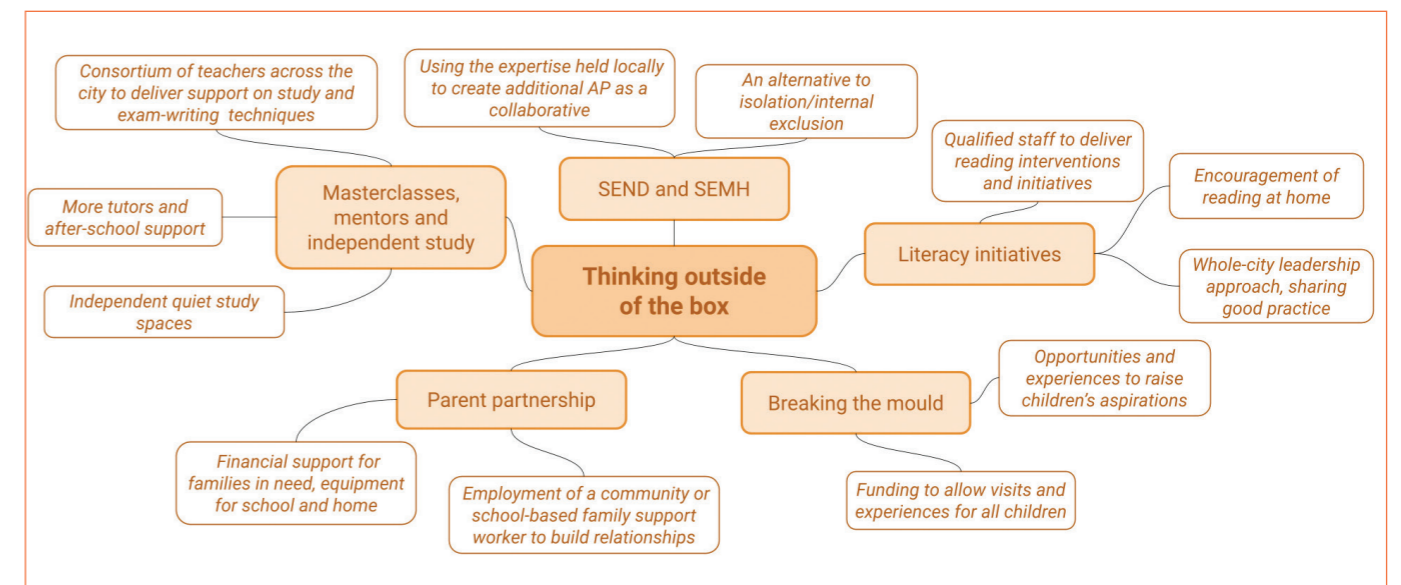
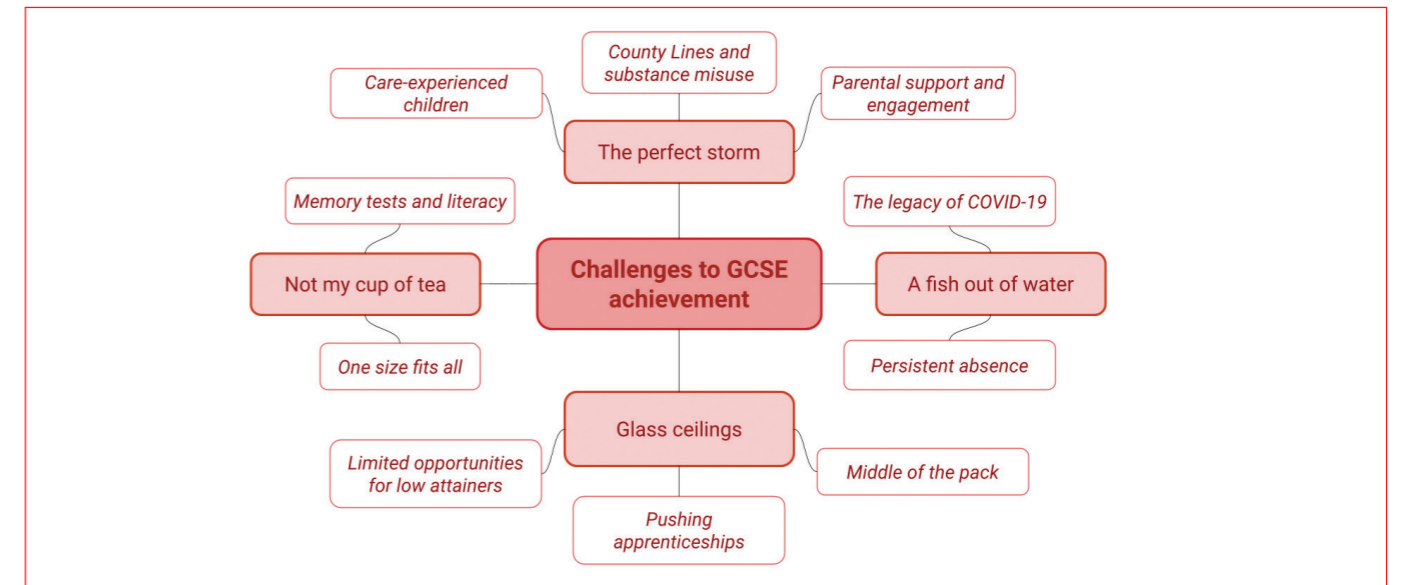
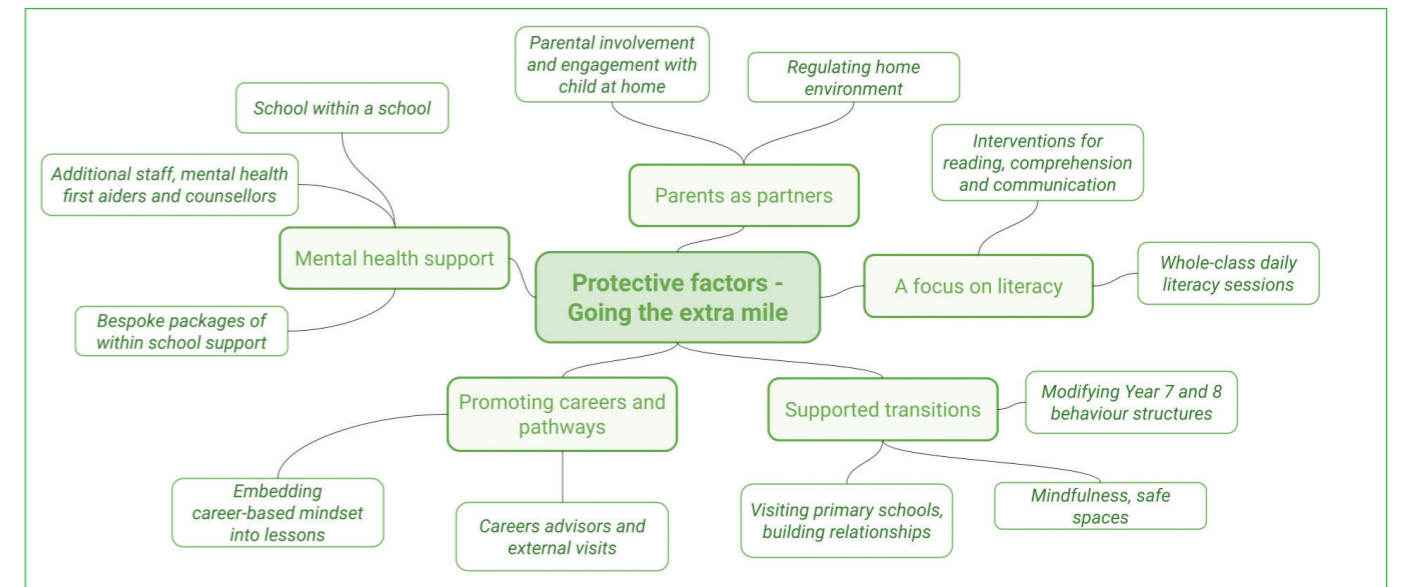
**Table 11.** Barriers to GCSE achievement (1): A fish out of water – Non-attendance

Concept (Main theme)	Sub themes
<b>A fish out of water</b>	Persistent absence Elective Home Education

**Figure 12.** Barriers to GCSE achievement (2): Not my cup of tea – Curriculum and assessment

Concept (Main theme)	Sub themes
<b>Not my cup of tea</b>	Accessibility of the NC (Brain drain) GCSEs and literacy Memory test Progress 8 Lack of NC relevance Too many exams

**Figure 11.** Visualisation of final themes and subthemes



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