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# SHINE<sup>★</sup>

## **SUMMARY:**

**Investigating the barriers  
and the protective factors  
influencing GCSE achievement  
in Sunderland**

Dr. Sarah Martin-Denham,  
Nathan Scott,  
Dr. Jon Rees

30 September 2024



**University of  
Sunderland**

## ACRONYMS

<b>DfE</b>	Department for Education	<b>SEN</b>	Special Educational Needs
<b>EHCP</b>	Education Health and Care Plan	<b>SEND</b>	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
<b>FE</b>	Further Education	<b>TfC</b>	Together for Children
<b>FSM</b>	Free School Meals	<b>UoS</b>	University of Sunderland
<b>GCSE</b>	General Certificate of Secondary Education	<b>UPN</b>	Unique Pupil Number
<b>KS(4)</b>	Key Stage		



## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<b>Alternative Provision</b>	Education arranged by LAs for children and young people (CYP) who are unable to attend school due to exclusion, illness or other reasons
<b>Achievement</b>	The academic standard achieved following assessment at a point in time
<b>Achievement figures</b>	Data about the performance of a school or college's pupils at the end of a key stage
<b>Attainment 8</b>	Attainment across the same 8 qualifications as Progress 8
<b>Parent(s)</b>	Those with parental responsibility for a child as defined under section 3(1) of the Children Act 1989
<b>Education, Health and Care Plan</b>	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
<b>Key Stage</b>	How the National Curriculum is divided, from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 5
<b>Free School Meals</b>	If families receive certain benefits or have a low income their child(ren) may be eligible for free school meals
<b>Progress 8</b>	Progress across 8 qualifications from the end of primary school to the end of KS4
<b>Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)</b>	A child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability that calls for them to have special educational provision. A child or young person has a disability if they have a mental or physical impairment that meets the definition of disability

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# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In December 2023, SHINE commissioned Dr Sarah Martin-Denham at the University of Sunderland (UoS) to investigate the barriers and the protective factors influencing GCSE achievement in Sunderland.

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 more than £34.5 million to more than 300 education projects that have helped 1.4 million children from 20,000 schools. Charitable donations totalling just over £11m (£1.1m a year for ten years) will support educational change for children in Sunderland from Autumn 2024. Mainstream secondary schools in Sunderland can apply for funding from Autumn 2024 through SHINE.

The research had four elements underpinning the criteria and evaluation of the fund:

Analysis of school census data between 2018/19 and 2022/23 using descriptive statistics and multi-level modelling

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 six parents

A co-created film with ten young people in a vocational Further Education (FE) provision

Mapping key relationships and networks that support GCSE achievement in Sunderland

This summary report shares the methodology, methods, key findings and recommendations for each of the four elements that can be found at [sure.sunderland.ac.uk](https://sure.sunderland.ac.uk) (search Martin-Denham and Nathan Scott/Jon Rees (element 1)).

## 1.1 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overarching research aims and objectives, mapped to each element were as follows:

**Aim 1.** Investigate the factors influencing GCSE achievement in secondary education in Sunderland (Elements 1-3)

**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 (Elements 2 & 3)

## OBJECTIVES

1. Establish what conclusions can be drawn about the challenges, experiences and attainment of children in Sunderland through their secondary education (Elements 2 & 3)
2. Establish how factors relating to children's prior attainment and life experiences impact on their transition from Primary to Secondary school, and their attainment through their Secondary school journey (Elements 1-3)
3. Establish how socio-economic, demographic or community factors impact on their attainment through their Secondary school journey (Elements 1-3)
4. Provide analysis of the available attainment data for children in Sunderland across and beyond the transition from Primary to Secondary school, for example, impacts on and influences of numeracy, literacy, oracy, and other factors such as aspirations, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), inclusion or attendance (Element 1)
5. Conduct an in-depth consultation exercise to collate and interpret the experiences, perspectives and expertise of pupils, teachers, school leaders, families, services, communities, and key stakeholders in relation to challenges around the attainment of children up to GCSE in Sunderland (Elements 2 & 3)
6. Provide a preliminary understanding of how attainment at age 16 may relate to post-16 destinations and opportunities for children in Sunderland (Elements 2 & 3)
7. Identify gaps and challenges in provision both within and outside school environments, that might impact on the attainment of children up to GCSE in Sunderland (Elements 2 & 3)
8. Provide recommendations for where a school fund could impact positively on challenges experienced by pupils in Sunderland. The recommendations should identify gaps in current provision alongside opportunities to act in a way that is complementary to existing work (Elements 1-3)
9. Outline a high-level evaluation framework for assessing the impact of the school fund in a way that encapsulates learning and local/contextual perspectives, as well as key measurement parameters (Element 2)

Identify key partners and collaborations in Sunderland who could work with SHINE to maximise the impact of the fund and ensure that it is locally-led (Element 4)



# 2.0 RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

## 2.0 RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

The following section shares the research activities for each of the four elements in turn. Ethical approval from the UoS was secured in December 2023. Information governance arrangements for the sharing of administrative data from Together for Children (TfC) (Element 1) was secured in June 2024. The data collection and analysis for all elements were undertaken between December 2023 and September 2024.

### 2.1 ELEMENT 1: Analysis of school census data between 2018/19 and 2022/23 using descriptive statistics and multi-level modelling

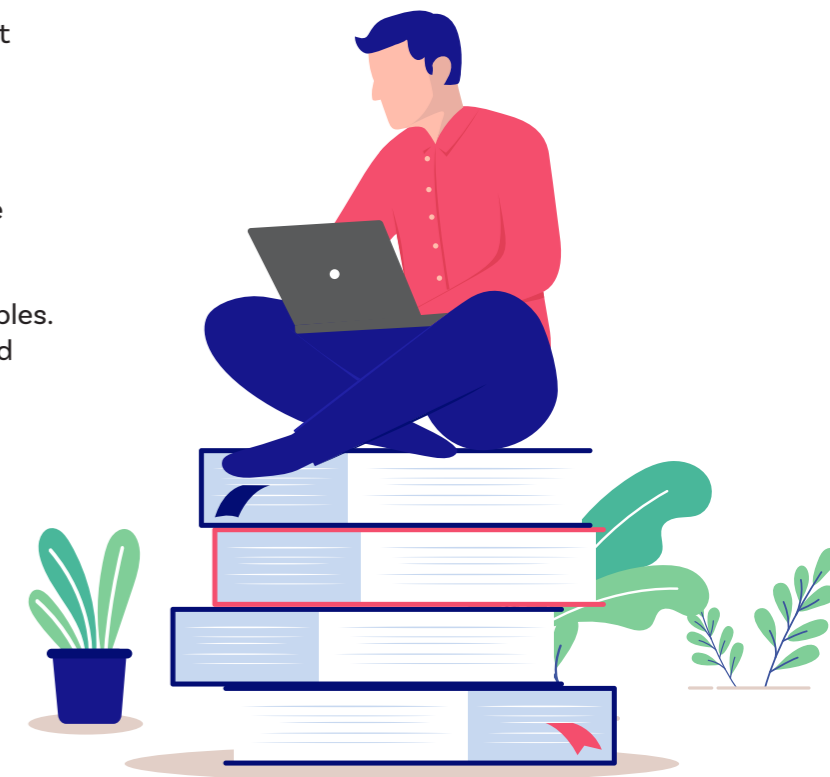
The three key datasets shared by TfC were:

- Key Stage 4 (KS4) Attainment (including prior attainment at KS2 data)
- KS4 Attendance
- KS4 Exclusions (including suspensions and permanent exclusions)

The datasets were linked by the researchers using the Unique Pupil Number (UPN) as a unique identifier. Descriptive statistics were used to highlight the distribution of children throughout demographic categories in Sunderland, and overall Attainment 8 and Progress 8 outcomes relative to these demographic characteristics. A multi-level modelling approach was taken to conduct inferential statistical analysis on these datasets, distinguishing between school-level and individual-level factors, and focusing on Attainment 8 and Progress 8 as outcome variables. The aim was to generate a model that identified factors that significantly predicted attainment and progress outcomes.

### 2.2 ELEMENT 2: Thematic analysis of interviews and conversation with headteachers, senior leaders, teachers, parents, students and wider stakeholders

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 term 'conversation' was used rather than 'interview' with the parents and children due to negative connotations of the term. The data was gathered from December to July 2024 with ongoing thematic analysis until September 2024. The data included scripts from Element 3 'pullupachair post-16' which were analysed alongside the interview data. 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 ELEMENT 3:

#### A CO-CREATED FILM WITH TEN YOUNG PEOPLE IN A VOCATIONAL POST-16 PROVISION

Reflections of ten young people aged 16-21 years on a vocational Further Education pathway on their secondary mainstream schooling were captured over a five-day/20 hour creative arts project, 'pullupachair'. Pullupachair is a creative arts project that supports young people through a range of activities to share their lived experiences of phenomena (in this case secondary school and GCSE outcomes) through film. The pullupachair post-16 element of the project took place between January and March 2024. The young people scripted and performed the film accessed here:

<https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/more/research/thematic-research-areas/interdisciplinary-research-networks/ace/>

The scripts from pullupachair were included in the thematic analysis for element 2.

### 2.4 ELEMENT 4:

#### MAPPING KEY RELATIONSHIPS AND NETWORKS THAT SUPPORT GCSE ACHIEVEMENT IN SUNDERLAND

A mapping exercise was undertaken between January and April 2024 to identify existing provision in Sunderland that aims to improve educational outcomes for children. The researchers are part of various networks in Sunderland and used some of their knowledge of support services to supplement an internet search using the Sunderland Information Point, consisting of TfC services, Charities, Community Interest Groups, Schools and other organisations. The inclusion criteria for the search were as follows:

Services with a Sunderland postcode

1. Services that support
  - a. inclusion in schools
  - b. educational outcomes for children
  - c. children and families

The mapping document provides contact information for these services, as well as a description of the service and criteria for access.





# 3.0 RESEARCH SUMMARY

## 3.0 RESEARCH SUMMARY

This section summarises the methods, key findings and recommendations of each of the four elements of the research.

### 3.1 SUMMARY: ELEMENT 1: ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL CENSUS DATA BETWEEN 2018/19 AND 2022/23 USING DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND MULTI-LEVEL MODELLING

#### 3.1.1 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH METHODS: ELEMENT 1

Information governance arrangements were secured between the University of Sunderland and TfC. The research team received child-level attainment, attendance, exclusion and school census data from the years 2018-19 to 2022-2023. Only the 2018-19 and 2022-23 datasets were used for analysis as there was no attainment data for 2019-20 and 2020-21. The Department for Education (DfE) has specifically advised against making comparisons with the 2021-22 dataset, as there was an alternative approach to assessment used in this year.

Descriptive statistics (a set of statistics such as averages and frequencies used to summarise a given data set) were used to highlight the distribution of children throughout demographic categories (gender, ethnicity, free school meal (FSM) eligibility, etc.) and overall Attainment 8 and Progress 8 outcomes relative to these demographic characteristics. A multi-level modelling approach was taken to conduct inferential statistical analysis on these datasets.

#### 3.1.2 ANALYSIS: ELEMENT 1

Separate analyses were conducted for Attainment 8 and Progress 8 outcome measures. In some cases, English Attainment 8 and Maths Attainment 8 scores were also used as outcome measures. These analyses were first conducted on the 2022/23 cohort of KS4 pupils before being repeated on the 2018/19 cohort.

While the datasets only contained individual-level data, it was possible to compute school-level variables, as the pupils' school was included in the datasets. This allowed for a hierarchical, or multi-level modelling approach.

The levels of the model were:

#### 1) School-level factors

Examples

- Average school attendance
- Average number of GCSE entries per child in each school
- Average proportion of children eligible for FSM at the school

#### 2) Individual-level factors

- Examples
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- KS2 prior attainment band
- Whether a child has ever been suspended



Distinguishing between school-level and individual-level factors was essential, to assess whether children were more likely to perform better or worse at GCSEs due to factors affecting an entire school, or the individual pupils.

Variables were entered into the model individually and retained if they were found to affect Attainment 8 and/or Progress 8 scores significantly. School-level variables were entered into the model first, and their significance as factors affecting Attainment 8 and Progress 8 scores were assessed. Subsequently, individual-level variables were entered, and if the variability in Attainment 8 and Progress 8 scores was accounted for by any of these variables to a statistically significant level, the school-level effects were revisited to check for significance.

The aim of this type of analysis was to construct a predictive model that includes any school-level and individual-level factors that account for a significant amount of variability between Attainment 8 and Progress 8 scores.

### 3.1.3 RESEARCH FINDINGS: ELEMENT 1

The quantitative analysis produced ten key findings, which are each accompanied by a lay explanation (indented):

**Finding 1:** School-level factors explain a small amount of variability between outcomes, but these are non-significant once individual level factors are accounted for.

There were two school-level factors with weak effects:

- Schools with a higher proportion of children eligible for FSM were more likely to have lower attainment scores
- Schools with lower average attendance were more likely to have lower progress scores

However, once individual-level variables were added to the model, these two school-level effects were no longer significant. For this reason, no school-level variables were included in the final models.

**Finding 2:** Individual level factors can account for the majority of variability in attainment and progress scores, with the effects on Attainment 8, Attainment 8 English, and Attainment 8 Maths being extremely similar.

This finding suggests that, at least in this data set, the majority of the differences in attainment between pupils are attributable to individual, rather than school, factors. There were few differences between children's marks on overall Attainment 8, their Attainment 8 English score, and their Attainment 8 Maths score.

**Finding 3:** The largest influence on attainment and progression is KS2 prior attainment – with higher performance being linked to higher attainment and lower performance to higher progression.

One of the statistics that the researchers looked at was KS2 prior attainment. Children were either in the 'High', 'Medium', or 'Low' prior attainment band, and their position in these bands was based on their KS2 ATs. The researchers found that a child's KS2 prior attainment band was the best predictor of their performance in KS4. If a child was in the 'High' KS2 prior attainment band, they were more likely to do well in KS4. However, children in the 'Low' prior attainment band tended to have higher KS4 Progress scores.

Because the effect of a child's KS2 prior attainment band was so large, the researchers decided that, when subsequent analyses were done on other variables (e.g FSM, SEN status), results would be broken down by prior attainment band as well.

**Finding 4:** Across all cohorts and performance groups there are relatively small effects of gender (girls score significantly higher, though this difference is reversed for Attainment 8 Maths in the 2022/23 cohort and is much smaller and non-significant in the low KS2 prior attainment groups, possibly due to girls' performance dropping to meet the boys).

The researchers found some gender differences in the datasets. The main difference was that girls were likely to achieve higher attainment and progress scores than boys. The only instances in which this was not the case were when boys received better Maths scores in 2022/23, and the absence of any difference between boys and girls in Maths scores in 2018/19.

**Finding 5:** There are some differences due to ethnicity but given small numbers in cohorts other than White/ White British, the significance of these is difficult to determine. Generally, Asian/

British Asian children score higher on attainment and progress measures than both White/White British and Black/Black British children. Children of mixed race and 'other' ethnicities perform variably, though the numbers in these cohorts are extremely small.

The researchers investigated differences in attainment and progress due to ethnicity, but there were some challenges involved. The main difficulty was that, outside of White/White British and Asian/British Asian, the number of children in each ethnicity group was very low. In statistics, low sample sizes mean that the tests run by the researchers are less powerful. Regardless, there was one difference worth reporting: Asian/British Asian children scored higher on both attainment and progress scores than White/White British and Black/Black British children.

**Finding 6:** SEN status – both having an EHCP or school SEN support – is associated with lower attainment. The effects on progression and across KS2 prior attainment groups vary with cohort, but numbers are low, and care should be taken not to overanalyse minor differences in subgroups.

- Children in the data fell under three SEN categories:
- No SEN Support
- SEN Support
- Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP)

**Finding 7:** In the 2022-23 cohort, being cared for is associated with lower attainment and progress scores, but this effect is not present in the 2018-19 data set.

'Being cared for' conveys that a child was in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours at some point in their life. In the 2022-23 data, children who were cared for were likely to have lower attainment and progress scores. However, in 2018-19, this was not the case, and cared for children did not differ from other children in a statistically significant manner.

**Finding 8:** Suspension has a strong relationship with lower attainment and progress scores, and this varies by prior attainment group, with the effect most apparent in those with highest prior attainment.

Children who had received at least one suspension in KS4 were likely to have lower attainment and progress scores in both cohorts (2018/19 and 2022/23). An interaction effect was also discovered, suggesting that a child with at least one suspension was even more at risk of receiving low attainment and progress scores if they were in the 'High' KS2 prior attainment band. Essentially, this means that children are more likely to score low on attainment and progress measures if they have been suspended, but this negative effect was even more pronounced for those children in the 'High' prior attainment band at KS2.

**Finding 9:** Being in receipt of FSM is related to lower attainment and progress scores in all groups. This effect is also strongest in those with highest prior attainment.

Whether a child is eligible for FSM is a statistic recorded in most education data, and it is used to make inferences about socioeconomic factors. In the KS4 attainment data, children eligible for FSM were likely to have lower attainment and progress scores. This effect is even greater for children who were in the 'High' KS2 prior attainment band.

**Finding 10:** Absence from school has a consistent negative relationship with attainment and progress scores. This effect is also strongest in those with highest prior attainment.

The KS4 Attendance dataset was used to investigate whether children with more absences were likely to do worse on attainment and progress scores. The researchers found that, in almost all cases, a lower attendance rate meant that a child was likely to have lower attainment and progress scores. Again, this effect is largest for children who were in the 'High' KS2 prior attainment band.

### 3.1.4 RECOMMENDATIONS: ELEMENT 1

The full findings of this research element are reported in the University SURE research repository.

### 3.2 SUMMARY: ELEMENT 2: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS AND CONVERSATIONS

Thematic analysis of contributions from 84 participants (37 interviews), focus groups and a film project, 'pullupachair post-16'.

#### 3.2.1 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS: ELEMENT 2

The methodological approach for this element was grounded in phenomenology. This interpretative approach focuses on capturing and examining the lived experiences of those who have experienced a phenomenon (in this case, secondary school and GCSEs).

Eighty-four participants participated across 37 semi-structured 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 six parents. Through these methods, the views of children, young people, their parents and the professionals gave an insight into the factors influencing GCSE achievement at KS4.

The data was collected face-to-face or online, depending on the participants' preference. All focus groups with children and the pullupachair project (Element 3) with young people were face-to-face in their schools/college. The scripts from pullupachair were analysed alongside the interview data. The data was collected from January to July 2024.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data as an accepted phenomenological approach and is suitable where there is a high volume of qualitative data. Themes and patterns in the dataset were identified through inductive analysis, reading and re-reading the data to identify themes and subthemes. The candidate themes and subthemes were refined through a six-step process, as Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended. This included identifying initial codes, themes and subthemes and ongoing refinement to ensure they told the story of the data. Finally, themes and subthemes were checked to ensure they aligned with the research activities.

### 3.2.2 RESEARCH FINDINGS: ELEMENT 2

Through the process of thematic analysis three themes were identified:

1. The protective factors for GCSE achievement
2. The challenges to achievement at GCSE
3. The solutions to improve GCSE achievement for all children

**Finding 1:** 'Going the extra mile' was identified as the overarching theme to conceptualise the five protective factor themes, which had 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 challenges to achievement at GCSE in secondary school included four themes and ten 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:** 'Thinking outside of the box' was identified as the overarching theme that conceptualises views on the solutions to improve GCSE achievement 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).

The full findings of this research element are reported in the University SURE research repository.

### 3.3 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH METHODS: ELEMENT 3

#### 3.3.1 RESEARCH FINDINGS: ELEMENT 3

Reflections of ten young people aged 16-21 years on a vocational Further Education pathway on their secondary mainstream schooling were captured over a five-day/20-hour creative arts project, 'pullupachair'. Through a range of creative activities, the young people were supported to reflect on their lived experiences in secondary school and what helped/hindered them in achieving their GCSE outcomes. The pullupachair post-16 element of the project took place between January and March 2024. The young people scripted and performed the film accessed [here]. The scripts from pullupachair post-16 were included in the thematic analysis for element 2. The film has been shared locally at a SENCO conference and will be disseminated at further events.

The pullupachair post-16 film is available here:

<https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/more/research/thematic-research-areas/interdisciplinary-research-networks/ace/>

### 3.4 SUMMARY: ELEMENT 4: MAPPING KEY RELATIONSHIPS AND NETWORKS THAT SUPPORT GCSE ACHIEVEMENT IN SUNDERLAND

#### 3.4.1 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH METHODS: ELEMENT 4

The researchers undertook the mapping exercise to identify support services in Sunderland that were aimed at children, parents and educators. The researchers are part of various networks in Sunderland and used some of their own knowledge of support services to supplement an internet search using the Sunderland Information Point.

#### 3.4.2 RESEARCH FINDINGS: ELEMENT 4

The support services identified were predominantly supplied by TfC, charity organisations, and community interest groups. The researchers also included special schools that provided bespoke education for children with specific needs, any relevant miscellaneous organisations.

Other than categorising services by their provider, the researchers also identified the target population for each service. Tags were used to indicate the type of support focus of the support services:

Support type	Support focus
● Clinical intervention	● Inclusion
● Advice service	● SEMH
● Counselling	● Substance abuse
● Social prescribing	● Child safety
● Tutoring	● Sexual health
● Life skills	● SEND
● Childcare	● LGBT+
● Administrative support	● Careers
	● Hospitalisation

The full findings of this research element are reported in the University SURE research repository.

# 4.0 CONCLUSION

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

The following section summarises the implications of the research for the philanthropic donation to secondary mainstream schools in Sunderland (4.1), provides recommendations for an evaluation framework for the fund (4.1) and outlines a summary of wider issues that are unlikely to be addressed by the fund but are worthy of note (4.3). While this research package has provided significant insights, further research is needed to determine if the findings of this research are reflected nationally. It was evident in the research that the impact of national policy (funding, curriculum, assessment and identification and assessment of SEND and teacher recruitment) were one of many explanations as to why schools were struggling to support all children to achieve their full potential at GCSE.

### 4.1 IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FOR THE FUND

#### 4.1.1 IMPLICATIONS OF ELEMENT 1 FOR THE FUND

The findings of Element 1 have considerable implications for early intervention and at-risk demographics regarding attainment and progress scores. The impact of KS2 prior attainment is substantial and wide-ranging and must be addressed if Sunderland is to improve its attainment and progress relative to regional and national averages. Attainment was also found to be highly sensitive to changes in children's attendance rates and school suspensions.

Recommendations from Element 1 (protective factors for GCSE attainment):

1. An emphasis on early intervention, especially for pupils receiving free school meals, looked after children, those with SEN, and White or Black/British Black boys, as attainment and progress scores for KS4 pupils are highly associated with their prior attainment in KS2
2. Reduce suspension and permanent exclusion rates in the local area, as each day of suspension is statistically associated with a drop off in Attainment 8 score

#### 4.1.2 IMPLICATIONS OF ELEMENT 2 FOR THE FUND

Element 2: The qualitative element of this research project allowed for children, caregivers, school staff, and community support staff to share their views about barriers and enablers to GCSE achievement, while also providing their own recommendations for how the fund could be used to positively influence the attainment of all children.

The participants were explicit that improving literacy skills (qualified staff delivering interventions, reading at home and a whole city leadership approach to share good practice) was the most fundamental protective factor for GCSE attainment in Sunderland, this has been reflected in the recommendations. Other protective factors to support children to gain the best possible GCSE outcomes identified as school staff going the extra mile. This included providing mental health support, often bespoke to the needs of the child, working in partnership with parents and a supportive home environment. Supported transitions, particularly between primary and secondary school were also a protective factor to thriving in secondary school.

Many participants commented on low aspirations in the local area, and that more career-focused activities could help raise aspirations and motivation to strive for positive GCSE outcomes. Alternatives to isolation as a sanction and the creation of additional alternative provision was identified as a need to positively influence GCSE attainment. Many felt 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) was needed. A focus on parent partnership (financial support for families and the employment of family support workers) was deemed necessary to ensure attendance at school. Finally, funded visits and experiences to raise aspirations and employment and university visits for all children regardless of expected levels of attainment was recognised as important.

Recommendations from Element 2 (included data from Element 3):

1. Provide access to evidence-based literacy programmes (EEF) for all Y5-Y11s across the city from a ringfenced element of the £10m funding, regardless of whether the child's school applied for the funding or not
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
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
4. Establish and deliver effective transition approaches between Y5 and Y7 that include better information sharing, parent partnership and child-led approaches

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
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
7. Establish a leadership collaborative from the education, community and statutory sector, to share learning and teaching evidence-based approaches, resources and training opportunities
8. Provide new publicly available GCSE revision resources (films, flashcards, booklets) that all children and parents in Sunderland can benefit from
9. Provide extra-curricular masterclasses, particularly in the core subjects for children across clusters of schools
10. Expose children to the education, employment and training opportunities they could have if they were successful at GCSE level beyond their immediate area

#### 4.1.3 IMPLICATIONS OF ELEMENT 3 FOR THE FUND

Element 3: Participants' views from Element 3 are largely represented in Element 2, however it should be noted that the pullupachair post-16 film showcases the importance of child voice outside of structured interviews. There are a variety of benefits to participatory research, and allowing children to co-design an element of this research project was vital to amplifying their voices and agency in the research process. The film provides a detailed outline of the protective factors for GCSE attainment from the point of view of young people who have first-hand experience of secondary school in Sunderland.

#### 4.1.4 IMPLICATIONS OF ELEMENT 4 FOR THE FUND

Element 4: The mapping exercise was predominantly a fact-finding activity, however there are some recommendations concerning the support services that were identified. There are a number of services offering services that participants from Element 2 considered to be protective, such as counselling and social prescribing to support children with mental ill health and challenges arising from having SEND, and advice services for caregivers regarding health and social care. However, there were few services directly involved in educational tutoring and mentoring. It is possible that such services are more likely to be provided internally by schools, if they had the funding. It would be beneficial to conduct a larger investigation into the

identified services to determine levels of engagement from different demographic groups with wider services and referral pathways and networks that likely exist between these services.

### 4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN EVALUATION FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUND

Elements 1-3 have been used to inform a potential evaluation framework for the £10m fund

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 for the fund is adapted from Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) (2024) and the findings of the research.

It is suggested that the applicants for the fund respond to the following steps as part of the application and evaluation process:

#### 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?

#### 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?

#### 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?

### 4.3 SUMMARY OF WIDER ISSUES

A breadth of risk factors influencing GCSE attainment were identified in the research. While this fund cannot seek to address all the challenges in the remit of the philanthropic donation, it is important to highlight their significance on the lives of children and families in Sunderland. The 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. The findings of this research will be submitted as evidence for the DfE curriculum and assessment review.

Wider issues identified in Element 1 relate to local area data collection and data linkage practices, as well as concerning trends discovered in the research:

1. Support data-sharing arrangements and promote opportunities for information-sharing across agencies and data linkage to increase the quality and richness of child-level datasets.
2. Increase the accessibility of school-level statistics such as teacher-to-pupil ratio.

3. Increase the rate of pupils whose attainment data can be matched to their attendance data.
4. Further investigate the extent to which pupils' KS2 attainment is deterministic of KS4 outcomes.

In Element 2, there were reports of dissatisfaction and detriment with elements of the education system in England due to shortfalls in national policy and funding. Although the fund cannot seek to address these challenges such as the cost-of-living crisis, support and appropriate provision for children with SEND and SEMH, alternatives to isolation, they were vital to include. The ongoing impact of Covid-19 on children's learning and mental health needs to be addressed nationally. The current curriculum and assessment regime is not suitable for all children, leading to disadvantage both during school and on the post-16 pathway choices. Other challenges beyond the remit of the fund relate to how children can best be supported to achieve their GCSE potential, considering the adversities they have experienced, trauma encountered and lost learning, and exposure to County Lines and substance misuse. The research also identified that children expected to achieve a GCSE of 4 or 5 were less likely to be the focus of interventions to attain higher grades.

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. It is also recommended that the fund is independently evaluated to determine any impact on GCSE outcomes for children and young people in Sunderland.

### 4.4 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. Readers should take caution in interpreting the results of Element 1 as causal, since the study was retrospective, and the researchers can only identify associations and relationships, not causality. For Element 2 and 3 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.

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Dr Sarah Martin-Denham  
sarah.denham@sunderland.ac.uk



**University of  
Sunderland**

SUNDERLAND.AC.UK

