

£18m extension to Opportunity Area programme

Young people in some of the most disadvantaged parts of England are set to benefit from an extra £18 million investment to build on improvements in educational outcomes, careers advice and attracting teachers.

The Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has today announced the Government's Opportunity Areas (OA) programme will be extended for an additional year, building on its success so far in areas of the country where children have for too long been left behind.

The programme is also showing impact in a wide range of areas from early years education to employment, following an initial £72 million boost for interventions across literacy, maths, attendance, teacher training and recruitment, post-16 options and careers advice since its launch in 2017.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

I grew up in Scarborough, now part of the North Yorkshire Coast Opportunity Area, and having returned recently for a visit I've seen for myself the progress being made and the difference it is making to young people living there.

Ability is evenly spread across the country, but opportunity isn't. We're determined to put right the wrongs of places left behind and see the Opportunity Area programme grow – helping local leaders and schools to tackle some of the greatest challenges young people face.

It's not just about what happens now in these 12 areas but the impact these projects will have on future generations and paving the way for them to overcome obstacles to success.

The programme has been operating in 12 Opportunity Areas across the country – Blackpool, Derby, Norwich, Oldham, North Yorkshire Coast, West Somerset, Bradford, Doncaster, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, Hastings, Ipswich and Stoke-on-Trent. Areas were chosen because they face some of the most entrenched obstacles to social mobility and were set up to improve outcomes and increase opportunities for all young people in these areas.

West Somerset has shown progress in early years' development, with performance historically below the national average for pupil outcomes at the end of reception year, but now showing year on year improvements. The Story Start scheme is one of a range of early years' initiatives, supporting families in rural areas to play, chat and read to boost their child's development so they can start school with the skills needed to thrive.

Across all the Opportunity Areas around 60,000 young people have also been given the chance to develop life skills like resilience, teamwork, problem-solving, confidence and leadership thanks to a share of the £22 million Essential Life Skills programme.

Today's funding extends the programme into a fourth year, which will run until August 2021, to help sustain long term improvements and outcomes.

Schemes put in place to improve maths are showing signs of success across some Opportunity Areas. In Ipswich, six weeks of Saturday maths classes provide targeted support, free bus travel and food for disadvantaged Year 11s at risk of not getting a GCSE level 4 or 5, with the first 75 pupils enrolled showing an average boost in predicted grades of 1.3 in comparison to the start of the programme.