Norwich Opportunity Area Synthesis Evaluation – summary

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Opportunity Areas programme was launched in 2017, with the aim of improving the social mobility for young people across 12 geographical areas facing substantial and longstanding challenges.[1] The programme adopted a place-based approach, which both identified a local area and devolved high-level decision-making to local leaders. This report presents findings from the synthesis evaluation of the Norwich Opportunity Area (NOA). The NOA programme was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) for three years (2017 to 2020), before it was extended for two further years (2021 to 2022).

This evaluation sought to:

1. Understand what the NOA did in trying to meet the original delivery aims set out in its delivery plan.

2. Examine the perceived and/or measured progress that has been made in achieving these aims.

3. Explore what could be said about approaches that have seemed successful to improve social mobility via a place-based approach.

Suffolk County Council commissioned the University of East Anglia to conduct a synthesis evaluation of the NOA during February 2022. The evaluation took place between March 2022 and June 2022. Specifically, documentary analysis and seven interviews with the Programme Manager and other stakeholders involved in the delivery of the programme were conducted between mid March and mid May (approximately eight weeks). The research team also attended multiple legacy groups and Network meetings, which provided additional context and an opportunity to speak to stakeholders about their understanding and experience of the NOA.

Key Findings

- **Evidence Base and Measured Progress.** The evidential base on which this evaluation draws does not allow for quantifiable, systematic and robust data to be obtained in relation to headline targets set out in the initial delivery plan and the degree to which they have been achieved.

- **Perceived Progress.** A key finding from interviewing stakeholders was the way the NOA programme had prompted softer changes, such as culture shifts in ways of working. The programme has encouraged capacity-building and infrastructure that would enable ongoing improvements across several areas. At an individual project level, stakeholders felt they could demonstrate positive

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[1] DfE (2017). Opportunity Areas. Policy Paper. 9 October 2017.

significant outcomes for beneficiaries (e.g. pupils, staff, parents and schools) as well as some tangible quantifiable progress in the data.

- **Legacy and Sustainability.** The Partnership Board and programme leadership have worked to ensure some NOA projects have a good chance of being sustainable once OA funding ends. Where they fit, some of these legacy assets are currently being adopted into the County Council frameworks. Some legacy work will sit outside the Norfolk County Council. Some large-spend projects, such as Communication Champions, have already started to be rolled out across the county. Responding to the DfE's request for OAs to share their learning and 'twin' with new areas, the NOA has started to cascade successful projects across the priorities with Greater Norwich, Great Yarmouth and some parts of the Breckland District.

- **Partnerships and Collaboration.** This evaluation points to significant positive changes in the way working practices developed between educational settings and multiple local stakeholders because of the NOA programme. This involves relationships amongst different schools, including between primary and secondary schools. There has been strong engagement and collaboration amongst practitioner networks, which has enabled good practice to be shared and joint solutions to be pursued. For many stakeholders, this collaborative focus has increased collective responsibility.

- **Coronavirus (COVID-19).** The flexible and responsive design of the NOA programme helped to mitigate against some of the disruption to pupils' learning during COVID, with examples of positive outcomes on pupil engagement and reintegration back into the classroom. The inclusive ethos resulting from the whole-school changes and staff development delivered via the NOA underpinned school responses during the COVID-19 lockdowns. There was a feeling amongst stakeholders that uptake of some NOA provisions was higher and more successful than some national schemes, such as the national tutoring programme.

- **Social Mobility via a Place-Based Approach.** Broad lessons have been learnt about tackling social mobility through a place-based approach. Key stakeholders have drawn attention to the sense of local identity and ownership that has been forged through working with the NOA programme. Practitioners have been empowered to become leaders in their area of work through the chance to access support, training, new ideas and opportunities, lead new initiatives and tailor projects to their own schools. Moreover, some stakeholders noted that the fact the OA was focused on Norwich meant that there was a higher engagement and focus than there might have been if the programme had included the whole of Norfolk. The OA programme was positioned outside the Local Authority. This was perceived by several of the

NOA team as allowing the programme to work as an independent and objective facilitator, to secure a stronger sense of co-ownership amongst local partners, potentially improving project outcomes.

Findings

This chapter presents findings from the synthesis evaluation research conducted by the UEA research team. It begins by reiterating the key findings from across each of the four priorities. Each priority is then set out in its context, as well as the targets that the NOA developed in its original 2017 delivery plan. This evaluation then assesses what was done by the NOA for each priority, as well as any measured and perceived progress that was made towards achieving headline targets.

2.1 Key Findings

- **The evidential base on which this evaluation draws does not allow for quantifiable, systematic and robust data to be obtained in relation to headline targets set out in the initial delivery plan and the degree to which they have been achieved.** Multiple potential reasons for this came up throughout the evaluation. First, COVID-19 disrupted national benchmarking, which made it difficult to assess local progress at a national level. Second, at a programme level, not enough was done from the start to build a robust quantitative evaluation of project impact. Finally, echoing a theme from the national evaluation,[2] demonstrating a marked impact on social mobility takes longer than the programme's lifecycle and so the capacity-building and infrastructure set up to tackle deep-rooted problems will need to be considered over a longer period.

- **Several individual projects were perceived to provide positive significant outcomes for beneficiaries of the funding (such as pupils, staff, parents and schools).** Through documentary analysis and interviews, this synthesis evaluation found that the NOA delivery team was able to deliver several innovative projects over the five years of the programme Across the four priorities, some projects specifically targeted outcomes for a specific group of schools, whereas others provided schools with discretion to use funds to target priorities in a way that made sense for them. A significant number of practitioners benefited from professional training. Though many of the projects were school based, there were also examples of direct interventions for young

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[2] NatCen (2022). Opportunity Areas Process Evaluation. Research Report (viewed on 20 June 2022)

people and their families. Moreover, some projects demonstrated tangible quantifiable progress in the data for individual cohorts involved with projects.[3]

- **A key finding from interviewing stakeholders was the way the NOA programme had prompted softer changes, such as culture shifts in ways of working.** The NOA programme has encouraged stakeholders across sectors to consider capacity and infrastructure-building to enable ongoing improvements across several areas, including inclusion and transitions provision. Examples were given, such as schools coordinating with one another to ensure open evenings would not clash. NOA schools and their teachers have been keen to investigate and implement a broad range of evidence-based approaches to improve outcomes for pupils in Norwich and beyond. This was seen as a substantial new change in ethos by the stakeholders the evaluation team spoke to in stakeholder meetings and interviews.

- **The Partnership Board and programme leadership have worked to ensure many of the NOA projects have a good chance of being sustainable once OA funding ends.** Where it has been relevant and strategic for stakeholders involved, legacy assets are currently being adopted into the local authority frameworks. Some large-spend projects, such as Communication Champions, have already started to be rolled out across the county. Responding to the DfE's request for OAs to share their learning and 'twin' with new areas, the NOA has started to cascade successful projects across Greater Norwich, Great Yarmouth and parts of the Breckland District. The Transitions Project was also mentioned as a key legacy asset. Although this started in Norwich, it has now been extended to the Greater Norwich areas as a twining project. Learning and resources have also been shared with the Norfolk Learning Board sub-group on transitions, who are considering which principles, practices and resources can be extended more widely across Norfolk

  The NOA tried to either provide elements of sustainability in its projects or offer the opportunity for local partners or schools to assess costs and benefits to inform future decisions about whether they would wish to support projects in future. Where this has not been taken up, some projects have ended.

- **This evaluation can point to significant positive changes in the way 'working practices' developed between educational settings and multiple local stakeholders because of the NOA programme.** This

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[3] An example here would be the What a Difference a Day Makes, which showed that pupils from one cohort taking part on the programme (English and maths) increased their GCSE grades by 1.6.

involves relationships amongst different schools, including between primary and secondary schools. There has been strong engagement and collaboration amongst practitioner networks, which has enabled the good practice to be shared and joint solutions to be pursued. For many stakeholders across the sectors, this collaborative focus has increased collective responsibility. Some strategic stakeholders felt it had been harder to get collaboration between primaries. There was a mixed response amongst stakeholders about how much the council had been involved in the strategy of the NOA programme, especially in the early stages of the programme; however, there was an overall appreciation that it had shifted practice.

- **The flexible and responsive design of the NOA programme helped to mitigate some of the disruptions to pupils' learning during COVID, with examples of positive outcomes on pupil engagement and reintegration back into classes.** The inclusive ethos resulting from the whole-school changes and staff development delivered via the NOA underpinned school responses during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Inclusion staff said that specific inclusive practices were important to prepare for school closures, whilst funding allowed for bespoke and targeted interventions that could demonstrate tangible outcomes. There was a feeling amongst stakeholders that uptake was higher and more successful than some national schemes, such as the national tutoring programme.

- **Broad lessons have been learnt about tackling social mobility through a place-based approach.** Key stakeholders have drawn attention to the sense of local identity and ownership that has been forged through working with the NOA programme. Practitioners have been empowered to become leaders in their area of work through the chance to access support, training, new ideas and opportunities, lead new initiatives and tailor projects to their schools. Moreover, some stakeholders noted that the fact the OA was focused on Norwich meant that there was a higher engagement and focus than might have been if the programme had included the whole of Norfolk. The OA programme was positioned outside the local authority. This was perceived by several of the NOA team as allowing the programme to work as an independent and objective facilitator, to secure a stronger sense of co-ownership amongst local partners, potentially improving project outcomes.

Conclusions and Considerations for the Future

4.1 Conclusions

This synthesis evaluation of the NOA aimed to:

1. Understand what the NOA did in trying to meet the original delivery aims set out in the delivery plan.

2. Examine the perceived and/or measured progress that has been made in achieving these aims by the NOA.

3. Explore what could be said about approaches that have seemed successful to improve social mobility via a place-based approach.

In this chapter, we discuss the findings for each of these questions and we discuss some considerations for the future.

4.2 Programme Delivery (RQ1)

This evaluation noted the diversity of activities across each of the four priority areas. The beneficiaries of these activities were equally substantial and included schools, teachers, parents and pupils. Some themes emerged in terms of the way the programme was delivered:

- The NOA regularly procured third parties to develop interventions. Several of those commissioned to do work were local to the area or involved in funding schools directly.

- Activities were generally backed up by the development of groups or networks to ensure that lessons, reflections and future planning were both bottom-up and sustainable. The evaluation team met several of these working groups and networks during the synthesis evaluation work.

- The local programme team were originally hosted by the New Anglia Local Economic Partnership, which gave them a neutral identity, enabling them to work quickly to engage stakeholders and encourage buy-in and a sense of co-ownership. The Programme Manager and Programme Coordinator were moved into Norfolk County Council in Year 5 of the programme, though some of the NOA team had been embedded from the start.

- Across the four priorities 66 projects were conducted, which involved 96 discrete activities. These ranged in size and scope (in terms of spend and beneficiaries involved).

- The NOA team noted that the delivery of some projects was severely disrupted by COVID-19. However, the pandemic also led to adapted or new interventions being adopted, such as the virtual tours of schools or bespoke mentoring programmes.

4.3 Perceived and Measured Progress (RQ2)

Through secondary document analysis and interviews with local stakeholders and the programme Manager, this evaluation sought to understand the perceived and measured progress that has been made in achieving the aims set out in the initial priorities.

- As already noted, the evidential base on which this evaluation draws does not allow for quantifiable, systematic and robust data to be obtained in relation to headline targets set out in the initial delivery plan and the degree to which they have been achieved.

- The potential reasons the evaluation team identified for not having an evidential base by which to assess headline targets were: 1) COVID-19 disrupted national benchmarking, which made it difficult to assess local progress at a national level; 2) at a programme level, not enough was done from the start to build in robust quantitative evaluations of project impact; 3) it was felt by NOA that demonstrating a marked impact on social mobility takes time.

- In interviews and conversations with stakeholders, a great deal was made of the significant positive changes in the way working practices developed between educational settings and multiple local stakeholders because of the NOA programme. This includes relationships between different schools, including primary and secondary schools. There has been strong engagement and collaboration amongst practitioner networks, which has allowed good practice to be shared and joint solutions to be pursued. For many stakeholders, this collaborative focus has increased the feeling of collective responsibility that Norwich (and its schools) has for its children.

    It really has shifted practice there. It's really, really interesting. I think what we do have to be mindful of though is that what that has enabled and what that has created is something which sits in autonomy and a separate space to other things that are taking place across the local authority.[4] (Local stakeholder)

- Practitioners' feedback that the norm in Norwich has changed and approaches to how schools work together and their ambitions for education is different. Schools and settings feedback there is an increased awareness of,

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[4] UEA evaluation team interview.

and focus on, the needs of disadvantaged pupils, and a strong and shared understanding of evidence-based approaches and tools to make improvements for all.

- In terms of measuring progress, the evaluation team can point to the number of legacy assets that have emerged from the NOA programme. An early ambition of the OA rationale was to allow the identification of "new approaches and innovation in a different setting – and actively spread this to other similar places that can benefit".[5] The Partnership Board and local programme team have worked to ensure several NOA projects are sustainable once OA funding ends. These legacy assets are currently being adopted more systematically (where it makes sense) into the County Council frameworks. Some large-spend flagship projects, such as the Communication Champions, have been rolled out across Norfolk and lessons are being cascaded through the DfE's 'twinning' objective. NOA has started to cascade successful projects across with Greater Norwich, Great Yarmouth and the Breckland.

4.4 Place-based Approach to Social Mobility (RQ3)

The OA was set out to give local stakeholders ownership over the kinds of projects and interventions they felt most effectively tackled disadvantage in their respective locations. Justine Greening set out the vision for opportunity areas in a 2017 speech she gave: "Tackling regional disadvantage means drilling down into the local factors which have concentrated poor educational outcomes and lack of capacity to improve in certain parts of the country."[6]

According to several stakeholders, the OA approach allowed key stakeholders to take ownership of the direction that they wanted to take on several big issues, such inclusion and exclusion. Achieving a local identity allowed schools to work towards shared goals and not just think in terms of just their individual school. Tangible results of this include the NIC, which has secured the collective support of 98% of schools.

> *If it had been a Norfolk priority area, I don't think we'd have had in any way the same type of stakeholder engagement or local ownership of it. So I think the place-based approach is absolutely something that I would highlight as being the most important thing about the opportunity area, but also within that the sense of.*[7] (Programme Manager)

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[5] Justine Greening (2017). Education at the core of social mobility. 19 January 2017 (viewed on 30 May 2022).
[6] Ibid.
[7] UEA evaluation team interview.

In Chapter 3, this evaluation highlighted how the programme's place-based design had shaped it to encourage cross-sector collaboration, put young people at the centre and focus on the importance of leadership.

4.5 UEA/OA Seminar

As noted earlier in this report, the evaluation team was able to share the full report prior to publication with several OA stakeholders who attended a half-day seminar held at the UEA. This section includes some reflections from stakeholders at both Norwich and Ipswich OAs, CEOs, some Partnership Board members, Norfolk and Suffolk county councils, school leaders, OA Programme Managers, DfE leads and members of UEA's Outreach and Widening Participation teams.

Three questions were circulated to attendees in advance of the seminar and formed the basis of a group discussion and feedback session. The feedback from six groups of participants (including one conducted on Microsoft Teams) were collated by the OA delivery team and shared with the evaluation team to summarise and take account of in the final reports.

- **Q1: Do you agree with the evaluation findings and recommendations? Are there any surprises?** Five of the six groups commented on this question. On the question of measurable outcomes, multiple groups recognised the report's findings that there were issues around data and agreed it was very hard to make conclusive links between the work of the OA's and the outcome improvements stakeholders had seen, though they expressed disappointment that this had been the case. Similarly, across each group that answered this question, there was a shared recognition that both OAs had approached the programme to achieve the longer-term goals of the programme and not just to shift data in the short term. Referencing the softer changes to working practices, another group commented that the OA had helped set up systems that made sense for everyone and that these would continue. Although in some cases, funding support roles would mean issues for schools for next year, including some of the NOA inclusion work.

  One group felt the evaluation team might have tried to do more to show how different parts of the school improvement offer and landscape had been improved because of OA work. Another group felt the evaluation team should have spoken to more people and, as a result, the evaluation was unlikely to be a broad enough reflection of the programme. Stories of practical change on the ground may have been missed as a result. Though the evaluation team had suggested the geographical boundary of the OA had been helpful in providing focus, one group cited an example when it had been divisive and undermined collaboration between schools in the same catchment area. This occurred when one school had fallen within and another outside of the OA boundary. One group disagreed with the report's comment about the creation

of a cliff edge for funding. Many of the things that had generated impact did not need significant funding (such as Transitions Work) and it was the collaboration and partnerships that were most important.

- **Q2: What difference has the OA programme made in Norwich and Ipswich that will contribute to greater social mobility?** All six groups answered this question. There were reoccurring discussions about the positive impact on working practices, system, and culture change. At secondary school level, there was now a different landscape with improved communication between schools, less of a catchment focus and more support for Norwich families and children. Broadly, there was a willingness to ask for help, career progression and promotion between city schools.

  Stakeholders identified certain priorities and projects as being very successful. For Norwich, this included Communication Champions, which was being rolled out to other parts of Norfolk. Additionally, the inclusion work had improved cultural changes. Although there was no hard data to improve impact, there were significant improvements in networking and attitude changes towards tackling inclusion. For Ipswich, most difference has come in the last year with projects such as Learning Behaviour Leads and the Implementation Leads. Supporting Wellbeing and Emotionally Resilient Learning (SWERL) and the Wellbeing & Resilience hub has had the most traction, with schools reporting these as being helpful in supporting pupils in schools.

  Some stakeholders discussed how the programme has been extremely successful in raising awareness of deprivation in Norwich and the needs of disadvantaged learners. There were now more regular and open conversations about this in schools and with parents. OA schools were better placed to respond to the challenges of the pandemic as a result.

  Nearly all groups noted that social mobility was a long-term (generational) issue and that the programme had not been happening in a vacuum. Most recently this included the cost-of-living crisis that would make it harder to disentangle the long-term impact of the programme. As the world had changed over the past two years, so likely had many of the barriers, therefore making it difficult to say what the impact had been. One group noted that the barriers to social mobility had not necessarily been removed, because the social inequalities the OAs faced were wider than the remit of the programme. However, the programme had increased schools' capacity and strength to tackle barriers. It was raised that analysing the changes to Ofsted reports since 2017 would be an interesting study to see if themes such as culture change and working practices were referenced.

Q3: What would you recommend to others setting up a similar programme? Five out of six groups answered this question. Overall, groups noted that any future programme should set a clearer framework from the outset with tighter, measurable parameters. More time should be invested up front in planning the theory of change and what measures would be used to track and evaluate impact, as well as to establish connections with local providers. Multiple groups commented how targets could and should have been put in place from the start and that an in-house data analyst could have been embedded into the programme early on.

Though the extension of funding had been positive, multiple stakeholders across groups had only been able to able to plan a year at a time and so focus was often short term. If they had known the programme would be five years of funding from the start, they could have been more ambitious with community change. Some stakeholders noted that the sustainability of projects should have been explicitly built in at the very start and to ensure that learning would be taken forward

Over 180 activities had been conducted between both OAs. This scattergun approach had been overwhelming for schools. In future programmes, less activity and more time spent considering how to tackle and address inequalities, with joined-up thinking on housing, health and the long term could be beneficial.

4.6 Considerations for the Future

This report offers some thoughts on considerations for the future.

- The centrality of place was significant in our conversations with stakeholders. Norwich has a unique set of circumstances, which have been tackled using local knowledge, provision and bottom-up planning. This has been effective in engaging stakeholders. The place-based approach ensured that schools and other stakeholders considered disadvantage through a holistic lens that went beyond just the school gate. Future projects and policies should consider the lessons of a place-based approach to tackling disadvantage and the importance of trusting local leaders to improve social mobility outcomes.

- More consideration should be given to developing projects with a robust evaluation framework from the start. The evidence base of this evaluation was too reliant on small-scale surveys and interviews conducted by the UEA evaluation team to say anything significant about the measured progress of the programme on headline targets. The DfE leads and local programme

team noted that lessons had been learnt and that projects had tried to embed evaluation more robustly in later-stage projects.

- The long-term legacy of the NOA programme is now partially dependent on ensuring new teachers in the Norwich/Norfolk region are introduced to tackling disadvantage and social mobility through a place-based approach. For the joined-up ways of working between schools to continue, new teachers must appreciate the value of engaging with networks, revisit NOA learnings (such as through the online sharing learning hub) and be aware of the unique circumstances of disadvantage and its impact, including Norwich's. This process would ideally begin the moment teachers are inducted into teacher training programmes.

- The successful continuation of many of NOA's most impactful projects is contingent on the ability of local partners or schools to sustain these and where possible to extend and scale them up in Norwich and in the wider area. In part, this will be dependent on future funding from different partners. A fully developed framework of how to achieve these three aims (extend, scale-up and sustain) ought to be developed and shared with all stakeholders.

- The range of stakeholders involved in the design, implementation and sustainability of all NOA initiatives is wide and it kept growing as the programme developed. More consideration ought to be given to creating meaningful and long-lasting relationships amongst all stakeholders so that the benefits of such a place-based and close-partnership approach can outlive the duration of the NOA programme. The DfE could consider a more embedded way of leading such programmes in the future and ought to consider the impact of leadership styles on the children and young people of NOA.

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