



# Education Committee

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Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP  
Department for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
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Dear Damian

As you will be aware, we have recently held a short inquiry into the Opportunity Areas programme. We heard from stakeholders from a range of opportunity areas, fulfilling different roles on partnership boards, as well as from Minister Zahawi.

After the announcement of the programme in *Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential*, we have regularly asked Ministers about opportunity areas. We have sought to explore whether opportunity areas will achieve the aims that the programme set out, to improve outcomes for children and young people in the 12 opportunity areas from early years through to employment; and to learn from what works in these areas, capturing which challenges all areas share and what is unique to a particular place, and spread effective practice to other areas.

Although we applaud the Department's aim to improve social mobility through education, we remain unconvinced that opportunity areas are the best way to meet that aim. We have set out our key concerns below.

## **Selection of opportunity areas**

While we understand that the programme has sought to provide additional support to areas of the country where disadvantaged is the most entrenched, we are disappointed that this means that many areas in need of support receive nothing through the programme, including areas which are social mobility "cold spots".

After we pushed for answers about why there was no opportunity area in the North East, the Department created Opportunity North East: a different programme, in the remit of a different Minister. There is very little information about Opportunity North East publicly available. We are pleased that the Department has committed resources to the North East but we are keen to see the funding end up in the right place, with strong accountability structures and evaluation.

## **Value for money**

You told us in March 2018 that there is a "complex architecture" of organisations, funds and boards working on improving social mobility in each area. We were told at our roundtable that the big advantage of the Opportunity Areas programme was that it brought stakeholders together. Graham Cowley, the Chair of the Blackpool Opportunity Area Partnership Board told us that "it is about this sense of coming together, of collaboration, of people sharing a view, being aware of what everybody else is doing and being able to work with them. For me, that is the biggest change that I have seen." We are not convinced that creating a new structure is the best use of resource or that sufficient value for money is created simply by bringing stakeholders together. The £2 million spent on administration costs for the programme could be far better spent directly on the front line, and an additional structure creates confusion in the system.

## **Independence from Government**

We've been told throughout discussions about opportunity areas that they are independent so we were surprised at the extent to which the Department guided input to our inquiry. The Department questioned our initial choice of participants and provided alternative suggestions. Participants in our

roundtable told our Committee staff that they had been briefed as to what to say by the Department. Written submissions from opportunity areas came in a departmental template, with “steers” from the Department left in and some answers exactly the same across opportunity areas. One partnership board Chair told us that they had been required to work with the National Citizen Service, despite the fact that the NCS did very little work in their area. If opportunity areas partnership boards are to be described as independent boards with independent chairs, then the Department must take a step back and allow them to be properly independent.

The Director of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, Henri Murison, told us that in Greater Manchester, there is lots of collaborative work but the opportunity area is “basically in a corner somewhere and is not embedded in any of that work”. He added that “it looked like it was the DfE’s mates that were brought in there with no real understanding of what the needs of that community were”.

The NFER’s evaluation of the initial set-up of the programme found that some local stakeholders questioned why some individuals had been invited to join the board as opposed to others, which “created a mild sense of mistrust among some stakeholders about the DfE’s motivations behind the 20 appointments and the programme overall”.

### **Lack of joined up working in Government**

We are also concerned about a lack of joined up working across Government. While stakeholders told us that opportunity areas were providing a forum for joined up working, the opportunity areas are only receiving input from the DfE, despite there being overlap with work programmes from other departments, including the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Work and Pensions.

### **Evaluation of the programme**

Finally, we were left with questions about evaluation of the programme and how effectiveness will be measured. The programme is relatively short, and stakeholders report good progress, but we are unconvinced that we will be able to see improved outcomes for children and young people from early years through to improvement. We have also not heard in enough detail how the programme’s second objective, to spread effective practice to other areas, will be achieved. This is of particular concern given the number of disadvantaged areas not receiving support from the Opportunity Areas programme.

The Minister said that he remained convinced of the value of the programme and that he is “convinced that this infrastructure is the right infrastructure and is worth us continuing to invest in it”. He also told us that he would “do [his] utmost, strain every sinew, to convince Treasury that this is important work and [...] should carry on”. While we are completely behind the Department’s target to improve, support disadvantaged areas, we have to question whether the Opportunity Areas programme is the best way in which to do it.

Yours sincerely,



**Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP**  
**Chair of the Education Committee**