Opportunity Area

Fenland and
East Cambridgeshire

Delivery Years 2017-2020 (Year 1 – 4)

Evaluation Report - Executive Summary

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The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area

Low social mobility continues to be a substantial barrier to the realisation of children and young people's full potentials. A key lever for improving social mobility rests in addressing the educational inequality associated with differences in socio-economic background. This is because socio-economic disadvantage continues to be linked to fewer educational opportunities, lower educational attainment, and worse labour market outcomes.

The Opportunity Area (OA) programme is a Government flagship programme, announced in 2016 and launched in 2017 to tackle low social mobility and entrenched regional disadvantage among young people through place-based educational interventions. The programme focuses on pupils who are most likely to encounter barriers to social mobility. A key part of the programme's strategy is to improve education, by addressing deep-rooted issues that affect children and young people's outcomes.

The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area (FECOA) is one of twelve Opportunity Areas across the country, selected because of low levels of social mobility. The initial challenges for FECOA revolved around the attainment gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds; the fact that disadvantaged children in the area performed relatively less well compared to similar children in other parts of the country; enduring gaps in literacy and communication skills; and the provision for children with disabilities or special educational needs. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues and posed further barriers to social mobility nationally and in the area. FECOA programmes have adapted to the pandemic context to address the substantial disruption to the educational process.

> **FECOA Priorities and Themes**
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> **Priority 1, Themes: Early Years and School Improvement**: Accelerate the progress of disadvantaged children and young people in the acquisition and development of communication, language and reading.
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> **Priority 2, Themes Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) and Special Educational Needs (SEND)**: Strengthen the effectiveness of support for children and young people with mental health concerns and those with Special Educational Needs.
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> **Priority 3, Themes Post-16 routes and Youth Voice**: Raise aspirations and increase access for young people to a wide range of career choices and post-16 routes.
>
> **Priority 4, Theme Recruitment and Retention**: Recruit, develop and retain the best leaders and teachers in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire.

Background to this document

The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area (FECOA) commissioned researchers from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, to generate a synthesis of evidence of impacts of FECOA programmes delivered during the first four years of the programme (2017-2020). The synthesis reviewed just under 200 distinct documents, monitoring forms, evaluation reports, and external evidence. In determining the impact of FECOA and its constituent programmes, the synthesis also accounted for the impact of the pandemic on the ability to generate evidence of impact at a time of substantial disruption. The impacts reported here represent a snapshot of the wide range of evidence reviewed and do not cover all elements of the provision, given the diverse range of activities undertaken during the first four years of the programme.

Impacts, by theme

Priority 1

Theme: School Improvement

The School Improvement Programme made up a large proportion of the delivery under this theme, alongside the **Evidence-based Practice Fund**, a **Phonics Resource Grant Scheme**, provision for **Teaching Assistants** and others. Many schools' plans for both implementation and evaluation of programmes under this theme were disrupted by the pandemic. Pandemic impact notwithstanding, participants reported overwhelmingly positive experiences of engagement with the programmes, positive outcomes at school level, and very clear self-identified positive impacts on pupil knowledge and confidence.

> Schools participating in the universal offer under the School Improvement Programme in Year 4 reported improvements in language outcomes for children; teachers benefiting from professional development opportunities; and diversifying pupil experiences.

Theme: Early Years

Activity under this theme covered a range of programmes, including **Phonics for Success**, **Five to Thrive**, **Keep Talking FEC**, the **Library Community Work** project, and others, and at times overlapped with the School Improvement Theme, particularly around literacy outcomes.

> Practitioners participating in Phonics for Success reported increased knowledge, confidence and engagement with phonics; In the community, library memberships and reading time increased.

Evaluation results by the training provider around **Phonics for Success** pointed to substantial increases in knowledge, higher for childminders than for qualified teachers, and linked to increases in self-reported confidence to deliver phonics. Additional increases in confidence were noted by the provider from engagement with participants during their own recording of their process and while working together. While always possible to strengthen the evidence base around impact, such conclusions suggest that this element of the provision was successful.

Priority 2

Theme: SEMH and SEND

A wide range of programmes was delivered in Years 1 to 4 under this theme, covering a range of issues around inclusion, the provision of education for children with special educational needs and the training of professionals (including teachers) to support this provision. The **SENDIASS FEC** programme aimed to increase the time for which parents received support in relation to a child with SEND. Evaluation evidence estimated a 13% increase in the time spent directly supporting parents, clear progress towards the expected aim. The **STEPS** programme saw the generation of a case study around a school

> A case study from a school whose staff received STEPS training showed a reduction of exclusions from 85 to 15 over 2 years.

whose staff had engaged with the training, noting the shifts in staff practices and an associated reduction in the number of exclusions – the ultimate aim of this programme – of over 80% over 3 years. The **EHWS** programme, engaging with children's wellbeing practitioners, was also seen to be effective, with broad indications that staff had been successful in reducing anxiety, improving low mood and reducing behaviour problems for the children with whom they had worked. Other elements of the provision under this theme saw disruption from the pandemic both in terms of implementation and the collection of any evidence around impact.

Priority 3

Theme: Post-16 Routes

From the pupil perspective, work under this theme is the closest to the point of final outcomes from education and a potential move into further/higher education and the world of work. Programmes reflected this, and included amongst others, a **Careers Information Advice and Guidance** programme. While the pandemic disrupted the collection of data and therefore the generation of evidence of impact, teachers participating in this aspect of the provision reported being more knowledgeable about talking about career options for their students, being better prepared and more confident to support their students, and improvements to their own career guiding skills as a result of their engagement with the programme.

> While the pandemic significantly impacted implementation of post-16 activity, emerging evidence suggests increased student and teacher knowledge and confidence in careers planning.

The **Cultural Enrichment Programme**, another element of the provision under this theme, saw both teachers and students reporting an increase in students' skills and knowledge and teachers' abilities to deliver effective in-school activity. More than half of participants in the **Aim Higher** programme (part of the Essential Skills for Life initiative) reported it had supported their thinking about their post-16 future, with two school case studies suggesting better social and emotional outcomes too. Monitoring documents revealed steady though somewhat uneven progress towards the Gatsby benchmarks which is underpinned by the desired outcomes from this theme.

Theme: Youth Voice

Programmes under this theme looked to generate engagement from young people, higher aspirations and expectations and stronger community links. The **Youth Advisory Boards** saw sustained engagement from young people, key community stakeholders, and relevant local institutions. The informal evaluation of the Youth Advisory Boards suggests improved visibility for young people's voices, with young people reporting improvements in feelings of empowerment around issues they deemed important.

> Despite the pandemic, Youth Advisory Boards have become well-established and sustainable across the region. Long-term relationships are still being developed.

Similarly, the varied and provider-led **detached youth work** carried out alongside the Youth Advisory Boards were deemed in early monitoring reports to be a "definitive success" despite pandemic-related disruptions, with reports from the different providers all offering positive accounts of the implementation of their respective activity.

Priority 4

Theme: Recruitment and Retention

Activities falling under this priority involved training provision for existing teachers, including early career teachers, a **recruitment marketing campaign**, **apprenticeship/internship programmes**, **bespoke local careers guidance** and others. Sign-up to the programme was consistently high and more than 90% of programme participants gave positive or very positive feedback, with a range of self-reported positive impacts. The 1-2-1 guidance led to significant recruitment increase: 199 participants in 2019-20, 86% applied for a post being offered, and the programme generated 37 additional teacher trainees in the region.

The **foundation teacher training programme** in FEC also achieved increased applications and recruitment. 100% of the 45 early career teachers participating in in-house mentoring to address Covid-19 training gaps reported increased knowledge and confidence, as did their mentors. Outcomes do not yet exist for the recruitment marketing programme, but gaps were identified for improving its reach and sustainability: the website was combined with 'Teach in Cambridgeshire'. The observed impacts of the recruitment incentive varied between schools. This suggests that the provision of grants should be accompanied by a better understanding of the change mechanisms and support to schools around the deployment of these resources.

> Evidence suggests that the theme activities increased the recruitment of local people into teacher training, the mentoring of early career teachers, and recruitment and retention of teachers in the region.

Impacts, overall

While the pandemic has disrupted the implementation of many activities and, in some cases, the generation of evidence regarding their impact, the data collected suggests a range of positive impacts from the programme. Beyond participant satisfaction, which was consistently very high, these impacts involved increased participation in development activities, and in self-reported knowledge and confidence, of both practitioners and young people themselves, as well as reductions in pupils' behavioural issues and teacher turnover. Moreover, while evidence of impact on pupil outcomes was largely self-reported, quantitative evidence, as well as Ofsted reports, where present, also pointed to positive impacts on pupil outcomes. At programme level, the evaluation suggested a high quality of leadership by the local FECOA team and a high level of support for the programme from local stakeholders, both individuals and institutions. The perhaps even greater programme level impact involves the development of and support for networks and collaboration opportunities across the region which have mediated successful work within institutions.

Conclusion

This systematic review of evidence is a first step towards ascertaining the programme-level impacts of FECOA. The full report is available here. The evidence review suggests that a meaningful, yet minority, proportion of institutions were able to engage in school-led evidence generation and independent (self-) evaluation activity as part of improving their practice, despite the challenging public health circumstances. Such activities were well supported by the FECOA team. This in itself is evidence of significant learning and improvement in the region as a result of FECOA and offers a foundation for further engagement to counter the negative effects of the pandemic. Further support for schools, early years settings, and other providers in engaging in evaluation and evidence generation activity will support both the successful implementation of future provision and the continuous evidence-informed improvement of educational practice to help close the attainment gap in this region. This evaluation suggests the FECOA programme has provided a significant starting point for this work which is worth sustaining. What this evaluation shows is that there is now a substantial opportunity within the FECOA to build on and enhance existing approaches, to move towards systematically evaluating outcomes that matter in a way that can feed directly into improving education, equity, and social mobility.