Keeping young people in learning until the age of 18 – does it work?

Evidence from the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) in England

IPR Report

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Executive summary

The purpose of this research is to examine the design, implementation and impact of the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) in England. The 2008 Education and Skills Act included measures for a future government to raise the age at which young people remain in learning (not confined to school-based learning) to the end of the academic year in which they turn 17 from 2013 and to the time of their 18th birthday from 2015. It was intended to (a) improve education and skill levels among young people, and (b) help reduce inequality of opportunity.[1] While these plans were implemented in England, the devolved administrations of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have, to date, not followed this route.

Post-2010, the RPA policy was stripped of its original design and supporting systems, including policy 'building blocks' (*inter alia* the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), Connexions service, National Diplomas); duties on employers to comply, and school management responsibilities. It was also affected by vague enforcement duties and austerity measures, particularly cuts to local authority budgets. As such, the policy as implemented differs markedly from what was originally envisaged.

While the RPA has been in operation for over ten years, there have been no systematic analyses of its efficacy and effectiveness since its implementation. Going beyond pure impact evaluation, this project explores the design of the policy from its inception through to its national and local implementation, to assess the extent to which the RPA as currently enacted has achieved its original objectives. To do so, a mixed-methods approach was adopted. A large, linked administrative dataset covering all pupils in state schools in England in the years immediately before and after the introduction of the policy was interrogated. Alongside the quantitative analysis, a literature and policy review, together with qualitative studies with national policy architects and key stakeholders (including young people) in six case study areas across England were undertaken. The local authority (LA) areas chosen were Blackpool, Bristol, Norfolk, Sunderland, Wandsworth and Worcestershire. The case studies examined the extent to which the RPA is now locally rooted, as well as how its implementation has been affected by other policy changes that have been introduced over the last ten years, for example, austerity measures and the post-16 English and maths resit requirement for some students.

1 Department for Education and Skills (2007). Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16. Norwich: Cm7065, March.

Key findings

Analysis of administrative data shows that RPA is not associated with large changes:

- Year 12: levels of sustained participation initially increased slightly with RPA to 17 but then reduced when the participation age increased to 18; there was a shift away from further education (FE) and into school; there was also an increase in mid-year drop-out from participation, particularly among those in FE.

- Year 13: contrasting with Year 12, there was a reduction in school participation in addition to a reduction in FE participation, so overall participation in education and training fell; employment slightly increased, but we also see a slight increase in the sustained NEET rate (not in education, employment or training), and an increase in starting learning but dropping out, again particularly from FE.

- Overall, the participation picture suggests some improvement in initial engagement but also increased dropout in both Year 12 and Year 13.

- Qualifications: there was an increase in the proportion attaining grade 4 or above (grade C or above pre-2017) in GCSE English by 18, and evidence of small improvements in employment and earnings at age 20.

- Heterogeneity: boys drive the increase in overall participation in Year 12, as they increase school participation offsetting the fall in FE, whereas for girls the reduction in FE participation is larger than for boys in both Year 12 and 13. White students are driving increases in overall participation and school participation, particularly in Year 12, while black students are the only group moving away from school and into FE. Similarly for Year 13, black students are reducing school participation much more than other groups, while they increase persistent NEET rates and dropout from participation in both Year 12 and 13. White students are behind the increase in English GCSE attainment. At the same time, all groups see similar earnings and employment gains by age 20. Focusing in on the impacts among low attainers at Key Stage 4 (GCSE), we see similar patterns to the state school population overall but with slightly larger effects, and some positive impacts persist, i.e. school participation is increased in both Year 12 and Year 13, and sustained employment increases markedly in Year 13. For other outcomes in Year 13 (e.g. non-sustained participation and dropout from FE) we see similar sized effects to the full state school population.

Evidence from six local authority case studies from around the country finds:

- Most young people make a post-16 transition *but* large numbers drop out and fail to re-engage in learning/work or connect with local support services until they hit the benefit system at 18.

- Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) is currently inconsistent in quality, with non-academic routes unevenly covered, despite the Gatsby Benchmarks and Provider Access Legislation (previously known as the Baker Clause[2]).

- There is a lack of support and availability of options for young people who wish to access post-16 work/apprenticeships, and for their employers.

- Cuts to local authority budgets have undermined local collaborative work to deliver their RPA duties, leading to a reduction in their capacity to offer support services to disadvantaged groups and young people who dropout of post-16 education, employment or training (EET). Data collection and tracking are also hindered due to significant reductions in staffing. Destination data are collected via 'snapshot' annual surveys, which are prone to misreporting and inaccuracies. The September Guarantee and the Activity Survey rely on data being supplied to LAs through a range of sources including individual schools and colleges (both within and outside LA boundaries), as well as from young people and their parents/carers, which can lead to variation in the accuracy and timeliness of data received.

- Moreover, timely reporting to LAs of student dropouts from post-16 learning from schools, colleges and training providers is often lacking, which presents itself as a further delay in identifying and supporting young people who have become NEET.

- Lack of funding has led to cutbacks in flexible entry level vocational and 'taster' programmes, which are often a re-engagement option for disengaged groups. Those remaining are often full to capacity with additional students filling waiting lists in some case study areas.

- The English and maths resit requirement is difficult to deliver (especially in FE colleges and by training providers), with maths staff recruitment and retention particularly problematic. There is also an over-reliance on GCSE teaching, instead of offering functional skills programmes.

- Youth poverty is a significant issue which causes young people to choose school or FE courses in order for their household to retain child benefit (CB) payments, thus militating against choosing what may be more suitable apprenticeship or work-with-training routes for which the CB is withdrawn. Families/carers of NEET young people (under the age of 18) do not continue to receive CB. Young people under the age of 18 are unable to claim independent welfare support unless they are estranged from their family or have a long-term sickness/disability and therefore have no requirement to access support services (if they are available/accessible). This hinders early intervention to identify and support their needs.

2 See: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-guidance-provision-for-young-people-in-schools/careers-guidance-and-access-for-education-and-training-providers and https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/guidance_paper_the_baker_clause_9496.pdf

- Multiple barriers prevent young people's participation:
  - Structural barriers: youth poverty; lack of access to education, employment and training opportunities, including dedicated support and placement services, and a lack of affordable transport, particularly in rural areas, limiting access to opportunities.
  - Institutional barriers: a lack of wellbeing/mental health services support in schools and colleges, lack of staff to help identify and re-engage those who drop out, lack of opportunity for starting courses partway through the year, which leads to a dire need for much earlier intervention to curb rising rates of youth unemployment/economic inactivity. The current requirement to resit maths and English, which focuses on GCSE retakes, is expensive, difficult to resource in terms of teaching capacity and has poor returns in terms of qualification outcomes.
  - Social and personal barriers: lack of support for increasing numbers of students with mental health challenges, and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); caring responsibilities for family members, hindering young people's ability to continue in learning.

Policy recommendations

1. The **duties and responsibilities attached to the RPA** should be reassessed to ensure that all groups of young people are supported, regardless of their post-16 destination.

2. Much closer alignment between the **Department for Education (DfE), Skills England and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)** is needed, especially in relation to tackling the NEET agenda and to improve young people's access to training and work.

3. **Strategic authorities** should be given statutory responsibility for RPA duties, including tracking all 16-18-year-olds in their area.

4. The level of resources given to **local authorities** (LAs) should be increased to enable them to fulfil their current RPA duties.

5. **Post-16 destination data collection and sharing methods** must be reviewed to improve tracking, early intervention measures to support young people and data accuracy.

6. An assessment of the returns derived from the current post-16 **maths and English** resit model should be commissioned, in order to determine whether the current policy and its delivery mechanisms provide value for money and meet their original objectives.

7. To tackle **youth poverty** and ensure that financial incentives do not drive choices at 16, Child Benefit should remain payable to all young people until the age of 18, whatever their status.

8. Improvements to **CEIAG provision** must be made, in particular by addressing widespread inconsistencies in accessibility and delivery.

9. To reduce drop-out from full-time learning **post-16, common application procedures** (similar to the university application process) and **attendance performance measures** should be introduced.

10. Support must be provided for the expansion of **mental health services** within schools and colleges, and greater support for young people with **SEND** to meet increased demand for services.

1

Introduction

1 Introduction

For the last 30 years, the UK has had a persistent problem of young people disengaging from education and training at the earliest opportunity, affecting national productivity and contributing to a relatively high and stubborn NEET (not in education, employment or training) rate among 16-18-year-olds.[3] In 2008, the NEET rate for England was 10.3%, and had changed little since 1995, when it was 9.2%.[4] As part of the response to this, the 2008 Education and Skills Act included provision for a future government to raise the age at which young people remain in learning to 17 years old from 2013 and to the time of their 18th birthday from 2015.

Historically, the rationale for increases in compulsory education requirements for young people centred on the argument that a prolonged period in education or training would improve their qualification attainment and acquisition of skills, as well as their future employment and earning potential. An existing body of literature examining the impacts of the most recent raising of the school leaving age (RoSLA) to 16 in the UK in 1972 has established that the cohorts of young people affected by this reform did see a positive impact on their qualifications, employment and earnings as a result of the additional education they received.[5] Around the world, since the start of this century, various countries and a number of US and Australian states have raised their participation age, arguing that it would improve economic output and performance and help to narrow social and economic inequalities.[6] As such, the RPA policy was seen as a way to boost the UK's education and training performance in comparison with other OECD countries and improve young people's economic and social outcomes.[7]

In light of these considerations, the raising of the participation age to 18 was implemented in England, with young people starting the final year of secondary school (Year 11) in September 2012 not able to leave learning at the end of that academic year (summer 2013), but rather required to remain in some form of education or training until the end of the next academic year, by which time they would be aged 17. Those in the school year below that, i.e. starting Year 11 in September 2013, and all younger cohorts, would have to remain in some form of learning not only throughout Year 12 but beyond that into Year 13, at least until the point at which they turn 18 years

3 Department for Education (2024). https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment/2023

4 Department for Education (2010). Participation In Education, Training And Employment By 16-18 Year Olds In England. SFR18/2010. Available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-in-education-training-and-employment-by-16-to-18-year-olds-in-england

5 For a recent review of the literature on UK and related RoSLA policies see Buscha, F. and Dickson, M. 2023. 'Returns to Education: Individuals' in Zimmermann, K.F. (eds) Handbook of Labor, Human Resources and Population Economics, Springer, Cham.

6 Maguire, S. (2021). Raising the Age of Participation to 18. Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy.

7 Department for Education and Skills (2007). Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16. Norwich: Cm7065, March.

old.[8] There is provision for young people to leave education and training before they turn 18 if they have achieved Level 3 qualifications, equivalent to two A-levels. Unlike previous compulsory schooling reforms, RPA does not require young people to remain in a school setting, but is flexible to also include learning taking place in further education colleges, alternative providers, a traineeship or apprenticeship. It can also mean full-time work or volunteering (20+ hours per week) if this is combined with one day per week of formal training.

Ten years on from the full implementation of the policy in England, this project provides the first detailed examination of the design, implementation and impact of the RPA on participation, retention and achievements in post-16 learning and subsequent labour market outcomes. Going beyond pure impact evaluation, we explore the design of the policy from conception through to implementation and assess the extent to which the policy as enacted has achieved its original objectives.

To do this, we implemented a mixed-methods approach, combining a number of interconnected qualitative and quantitative strands of research to provide a holistic view of the RPA. Our initial academic and policy literature review comprised two strands. The first summarises the policy context and reviews the academic and policy literature on related compulsory education reforms. To enhance this beyond a standard review of the literature underpinning the policy, the second strand entailed undertaking a national policy assessment, including interviews with ten of the policy architects who were involved in the development of the RPA policy.

A central aim of the project was to understand the impact of young people's duty to participate in education or training in the first two years beyond compulsory secondary schooling, the settings in which they were participating, their qualification attainment during this time and their subsequent outcomes in their initial years in the labour market. To do this, we used a large, linked administrative dataset covering all pupils in state schools in England in the years immediately before and after the introduction of the policy.

This data analysis was complemented by six case studies in local authorities from around the country, chosen to reflect variation in key metrics such as post-16 participation rate, socioeconomic characteristics, geography, and whether they had been involved in the RPA trials that took place before the roll-out of the policy nationally. The areas chosen as case studies were Blackpool, Bristol, Norfolk, Sunderland, Wandsworth and Worcestershire. In each area, we conducted interviews with a range of key stakeholders, including representatives from the local authority, schools and colleges, training providers and employers. We also carried out multiple focus groups and individual interviews with young people in each area.

8 Statutory guidance does, however, encourage students to complete the education or training they are in beyond their 18th birthday, see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/participation-of-young-people-education-employment-and-training

Following initial analysis of these quantitative and qualitative strands of research, we held a policy co-creation event that brought together some of the policy architects interviewed in our national policy assessment, along with young participants and other key stakeholders from each of our case study areas. Participants were invited to reflect on our initial analysis, consider their conclusions and together suggest and discuss policy recommendations relating to the RPA and the post-16 education and training landscape.

This report provides an overview of our findings, bringing together all strands of the research to present a picture of how the policy was designed, implemented and experienced, along with an assessment of the policy's effect on participation, qualifications and labour market outcomes.

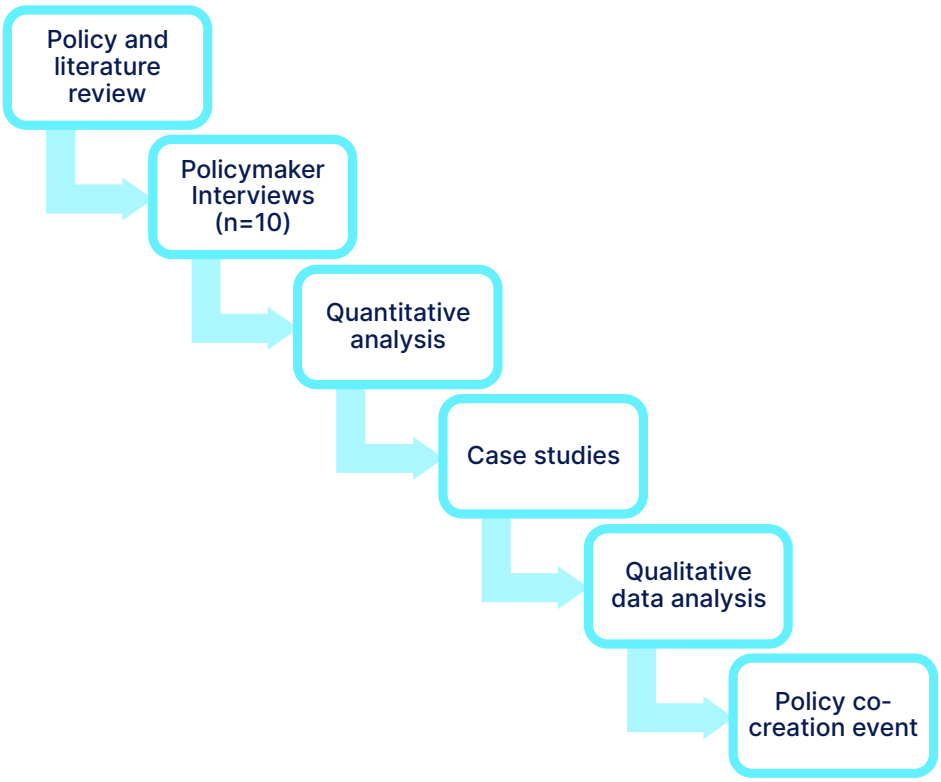
The report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 gives more details of our methodological approach, including the data we use for the quantitative impact analysis and the areas selected for our six case studies. Chapter 3 contains our academic and policy literature review, including the national policy assessment setting out the findings from our interviews with the policy architects for the RPA. Chapter 4 presents the assessment of the impact of RPA on participation, retention, qualifications and labour market outcomes using our linked administrative dataset. Chapter 5 sets out the first set of findings from our six local authority case studies, exploring the implementation and delivery from the perspective of stakeholders from different local organisations. Chapter 6 presents findings from young people interviewed in each of the case study areas. Chapter 7 presents our conclusions and the policy recommendations that we have developed in conjunction with key stakeholders and research participants.

2

Methodology

2 Methodology

In the following section, we set out the interconnected strands of our mixed-methods research methodology. Our approach was layered. To gain an understanding of the underpinning rationale for the policy, the initial stages of the project involved a systematic review of the existing literature on compulsory education reforms augmented by a national policy assessment involving interviews with policy architects of the RPA. This baseline informed the subsequent quantitative analysis and qualitative data collection and analysis.



2.1 Strand 1 – Policy and literature review

We conducted a short systematic literature review of the academic and policy literature on approaches to extending young people's participation in learning both at the national and the international level for comparative purposes. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, public consultations and parliamentary policy debates. This review provided us with an understanding of the policy's rationale and design, allowing us to assess the extent to which the RPA was shaped by the social, political and economic context.

2.2 Strand 2 – National policy assessment

To move beyond a literature-based understanding of the policy rationale, we undertook an innovative national policy assessment that provided us with a unique insight into the formulation of the RPA policy. We conducted a series of nine interviews (ten respondents) with the key policy architects who helped formulate and plan RPA policy in England – including senior (current and former) civil servants, a former schools minister and member of the House of Lords – as well as representatives from the Welsh government and Skills Development Scotland to examine why the devolved governments had not implemented the policy. Their input was vital in the early stages of the research, offering us a clear understanding of the thinking behind the RPA and what were seen as the key issues the policy needed to address. They also helped us explore how the policy has worked in practice for different groups of young people in different local circumstances and the benefits that may have been derived. Their views are therefore a core aspect of our policy review and have been included in the literature review section of the report.

2.3 Strand 3 – Quantitative analysis of outcomes

One key element of the project was to understand how the introduction of the duty to participate affected post-16 participation of young people, their retention in education or training during the first two years following completion of secondary school, their attainment of qualifications by the end of this period, and their subsequent outcomes in the labour market. We also aimed to understand how the effects varied for different groups, i.e. differences by gender and ethnicity and differences for those whose prior attainment made them more likely to be affected by the policy.

To do this, we constructed a large, linked administrative dataset containing information on all state school students completing secondary school in the six school cohorts prior to the introduction of the RPA duty to participate, and the first five cohorts of students after the introduction.

2.3.1 Estimation

To estimate the effects of RPA on participation, qualifications and labour market outcomes, we used a series of linear regression models that aim to isolate the effect of the policy by comparing 'like-with-like' students in the cohorts pre- and post-RPA. Control variables included their demographic characteristics and family background, school absence rate, exclusion record (both temporary and permanent exclusions) and prior educational attainment.[9] The models also allow for existing trends in participation and

9 See the appendix for the full set of control variables included in the models.

outcomes over time, with the assumption being that, having taken account of these trends, we should be able to isolate the distinct effects of the policy on the affected cohorts. The effects of the staged implementation of the policy – with one cohort only having to stay in learning until 17 and subsequent cohorts having to remain until 18 – were built into the model.[10] No other education policies affecting participation were simultaneously enacted with RPA to 17, though the requirement to continue with English and maths if Level 2 had not been achieved by age 16[11] was first introduced in the same year as the RPA to 18, and this cohort and all subsequent cohorts were also affected by a reduction in vocational courses available in FE colleges and schools following the Wolf Review of vocational education for 14-19-year-olds in England.[12] As such, we have to be somewhat cautious in interpreting the effects of RPA to 18 on participation and qualification outcomes.

2.3.2 Data

The administrative data we used comes from the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset. LEO links school information for all state-educated students in England from the National Pupil Database (NPD) to further education enrolment and attainment from the Individualised Learner Record (ILR), higher education information from the Higher Education Statistics Agency student record (HESA) and other post-16 destinations from the National Client Caseload Information System (NCCIS). This is then linked to administrative data on earnings from HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) and benefit receipt from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The NPD data contains information on students' gender, ethnicity, free school meal eligibility, English as an additional language, whether they have ever been looked after by the local authority, special educational needs and disabilities, and their absence and exclusion records. The NPD also contains results for national assessments: Key Stage 1 tests (taken at age 7), Key Stage 2 tests (commonly known as SATs, taken by all state students at age 11) and Key Stage 4 exams (age 16, GCSE and equivalent qualifications).

2.3.3 Outcome measures

The education and training participation measures we used are:

- an indicator for sustained participation in education or training (ET) throughout the first academic year post-16 (Year 12)
- an indicator for sustained participation in ET throughout the second academic year post-16 (Year 13)

10 See the appendix for further details of the econometric models estimated.

11 The 'conditions of funding' reform was introduced from August 2014, requiring that education providers ensure that students without a grade C or above (level 4 or above) at GCSE English and maths are required to continue studying them as part of their course until this level or equivalent is achieved. See: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f9ccbed915d74e622b84e/Wolf_Recommendations_Progress_Report_February_2015_v01.pdf

12 See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf

- for each year: indicators for being in different aspects of ET throughout the year, i.e. being in school, being in further education (FE); an indicator for being in employment; and an indicator for not being in education, employment or training throughout the year
- for each year: an indicator for dropping out after initially making a positive transition to continued education, training or employment at the start of the academic year; an indicator for dropping out specifically from a course started in further education.

Those undertaking apprenticeships or employment with accredited training are recorded in the ILR data under FE and therefore count as participating in education or training.

The qualification measures we used are:

- indicators for the highest qualification attained by age 18: Level 1 or higher; Level 2 or higher (equivalent to attaining five C/grade 4 or higher GCSEs); Level 3 or higher (equivalent to attaining two A-level passes)
- indicators for having attained Level 2 or higher in English, and Level 2 or higher in maths

The labour market outcomes we focused on are:

- number of days in employment at age 20
- number of days on out-of-work benefits at age 20
- annual earnings at age 20

Appendix table A1 shows that we have a total of just over 6.5 million young people in the dataset, with around 600,000 in each of the 11 school cohorts represented. Immediately prior to the introduction of RPA, just over 84% of students remain in education or training throughout Year 12, split between FE (46%) and school (38%). Just over 77% were participating throughout Year 13 (46% FE, 32% school), with only 1% of the cohort consistently in employment throughout Year 12, rising to 4% for Year 13. Those who were NEET throughout Year 12 represented 1% in Year 12, 2% in Year 13.

2.4 Strand 4 – Case studies

This part of the research involved drilling down to the local area level to explore the implementation of the RPA. We used local authority (LA) boundary areas, as many areas had led trials prior to the national implementation of the RPA in 2013 and subsequently carry duties for local delivery since the national roll-out of the duty to participate.

2.4.1 Case study selection

Six case studies of LAs were selected to reflect variation in post-16 education and training participation rates; post-16 education and training provision; NEET/unknown destination rates; youth employment rates; and

overall differences between areas in terms of their socioeconomic profiles; and urban, rural and coastal characteristics. We also sought a mix of areas that had and had not been involved in the RPA trials. The areas chosen as case studies were Blackpool, Bristol, Norfolk, Sunderland, Wandsworth and Worcestershire.

2.4.2 Sampling

We undertook interviews with a range of stakeholders, comprising representatives from regional bodies, the local authority, careers leaders and headteachers of schools and colleges, training providers and employers. Initially, we established contact with relevant senior LA staff to determine an overview of the area, especially in relation to local EET provision, strategic approaches to its delivery and to identify key challenges. Through this initial contact, we also obtained access to local post-16 networks and other key local stakeholders. Topics covered in our interviews included the design, implementation and impact of the RPA policy; funding; sustainability; key challenges in terms of capacity building; reaching young people; and cross-sector working. From here, there were two layers to participant recruitment: following up LA contacts, and 'cold calls' aimed at tapping into local education and training networks and gaining referrals from interview participants, especially local employers who recruited young people.

Through this approach, we were able to connect with a rich sample of participants at the local and regional level to gain a clear picture of the local post-16 agenda, strategy and landscape, together with its challenges. Topics covered in our interviews with young people included their school experiences; access to and perceptions of CEIAG (careers education, information, advice and guidance); barriers to EET; perceptions of post-16 provision in their local area; and their understanding and awareness of the RPA policy.

2.4.3 Data collection

The fieldwork was conducted between March 2024 and February of 2025, comprising a total 60 in-person interviews and 46 online interviews. In addition, we conducted 14 in-person and three online focus groups with young people aged between 16 and 24. In total, the sample comprised 193 participants across our case study areas, 116 of whom were young people. All in-person interviews were audio recorded, with interviews averaging just under 45 minutes. Focus groups were slightly longer, averaging 52 minutes. The audio files were anonymised and then transcribed. Local stakeholders interviewed are referred to in this report by their occupation or institution, while young participants have been assigned randomised pseudonyms.

	Interviews / focus groups	Participants (N)
Schools	11	12
Colleges	11	13
Local authorities	17	23
Charities	11	11
Training providers	13	14
Employers	7	8
Young people focus groups	17	86
Young people's interviews	28	30
Total = 106 interviews. 17 focus groups. 193 people involved.		

Prior to interviews/focus groups taking place, participants were fully informed about the scope and purpose of the study, how any information disclosed will be used, and their right to refuse to answer any questions and to withdraw from the research at any time. A project information sheet was circulated prior to the interview/group session, together with an interview consent form, which required the interviewee's signature. Incentive payments, in the form of gift vouchers, were provided to young people who took part in the research.

2.5 Strand 5 – Qualitative data analysis

The materials from Strands 2 and 4 were analysed using systemic thematic analysis. We first familiarised ourselves with the data by thoroughly reading all the transcripts, which helped us identify emerging patterns and recurring themes across the interviews. Transcripts were then re-analysed and coded into overarching themes (for example, barriers to education) and subsequent sub-themes within them (for example, financial constraints). Given the richness of the data collated in Strand 4 and the distinct contexts of the case study areas, the team decided to produce separate reports for each local authority. These individual reports were later reviewed and synthesised into two chapters, drawing together common issues and key insights from across the case studies.

2.6 Strand 6 – Policy co-creation event

In April 2025, we held a policy co-creation event with the stakeholders and young people from the six case study areas involved in Strand 4 and the policy architects we interviewed for Strand 2. During the session, we shared emerging findings from both our quantitative data analysis and

qualitative strands, inviting participants to reflect on and respond to our key conclusions. This was to ensure our interpretations aligned with their own experiences and views – particularly around whether the RPA should be a policy priority, what barriers might be affecting its wider implementation across the UK, and how it has influenced young people's post-16 options and outcomes. We encouraged participants to draw their conclusions and suggest recommendations, focusing on areas where change is needed to improve policy impact. Their contributions have been directly incorporated into the final section of this report.

Literature review and national policy assessment

3 Literature review and national policy assessment

This chapter covers the literature and policy review, as well as our research with RPA policy architects.

3.1 RPA policy context

For the last 30 years, while participation rates in post-16 learning have increased, the UK has experienced a persistent problem of some young people disengaging from education and training at the earliest opportunity, thereby affecting productivity and contributing to a relatively high and stubborn NEET rate among 16-18-year-olds.[13] The rationale for raising the participation age (RPA) in learning was to boost the UK's education and training performance in comparison with other OECD countries and improve young people's economic and social outcomes.[14] A fundamental difference between the RPA and the raising of the school leaving age (RoSLA), which had raised the school leaving age from 15 to 16 in 1972, is that the Education and Skills Act (2008) does not require young people to remain in full-time learning in school and offers the flexibility to undertake full-time FE provision or to combine work with training and learning. Included in the 2008 Act were provisions for a future government to raise the age at which young people remain in learning to the end of the academic year in which they turn 17 from 2013, and to their 18th birthday from 2015. While these plans were implemented in England, the devolved administrations of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have, to date, not followed this route.

3.2 Evidence on the impacts of the raising of the school leaving age (RoSLA)

While the raising of the school leaving age (RoSLA) in the UK from 15 to 16 years was in 1972, the legislation to do so was originally part of the 1944 Education Act. The delay of 28 years to its implementation was attributed to the cost to the public purse, in terms of new school buildings and the

13 Department for Education (2022). Participation in Education, Training and Employment age 16-18. Website: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment/2024

14 Department for Education and Skills (2007). Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16. Norwich: Cm7065, March

additional teachers required to support such changes.[15] Previous research has provided evidence of positive effects of the 1972 RoSLA, including increasing the proportion of people attaining a Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) in England and Wales by 9.0 percentage points from a baseline of 19.7%[16]; increasing the average years of schooling by 0.25-0.33 years; reducing the proportion of successive cohorts with no qualifications; and increasing the proportion with CSE and O-level qualifications;[17] as well as the education boost resulting in higher wages for those affected.[18]

A comparison of the effects of raising the school leaving age from 15 to 16 years in France and in England and Wales[19] echoed the positive impact of the RoSLA in England and Wales in terms of raising literacy standards; increasing qualification outcomes (in particular among girls); and increasing their hourly wage by 6-7%. However, there was no effect on wages in France. The conclusion was that the returns from extended schooling in France were negligible[20] owing to the increase not bringing students to a point at which exit exams were taken, unlike in the UK where the new leaving age (16) aligned with the taking of CSE and O-level exams.

The enhanced qualifications achieved in England and Wales had a pronounced impact on young people's labour market outcomes. This suggests that if extended education is to have labour market benefits, it needs to result in qualifications that have currency and meaning to employers. At the same time, measuring economic returns ignores the social and individual benefits derived from learning. Importantly, when considering historic analyses, it should be contextualised with different economic conditions prevailing at the time. Within the UK, this included a much wider range of opportunity structures available to young people entering the labour market, such as apprenticeships in traditional industries and a growing service sector, together with much lower rates of educational qualifications being obtained by young people.

3.3 International evidence on the RPA

Many industrialised nations, including EU countries, as well as states in the US, Canada and Australia, have enacted legislation in recent

15 Balls, E. (2007). Raising the Participation Age: Opportunity for all Young People. Fabian Society Lecture, Institute of Education, London, 5 November.
16 Avendano, M., de Coulon, A. and Nafilyan, V. (2020). Does longer compulsory schooling affect mental health? Evidence from a British reform. Journal of Public Economics, vol. 183, 104137
17 Dickson, M. and Smith, S. (2011). What Determines the Return to Education: an extra year or a hurdle cleared?' Economics of Education Review, 30(6), 1167-1176.
18 Buscha, F. and Dickson, M. (2018). A Note on the Wage Effects of the 1972 Raising of the School Leaving Age in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Scottish Journal of Political Economy, vol. 65(5): 572-582.
19 Grenet, J. (2013). Is extending compulsory schooling alone enough to raise earnings? Evidence from French and British compulsory schooling laws. The Scandinavian Journal of Economics. 115:1, 176-210.
20 Grenet, J. (2011). Is it Enough to Increase Compulsory Education to Raise Earnings? Evidence from French and British Compulsory Schooling Laws. Paris: School of Economics, July.

years to extend compulsory learning.[21] These changes have tended to expand the range of options available to young people, allowing them to opt for education, training or employment with training. The drive to introduce changes elsewhere has also been made for economic and social goals, predominantly to enhance skill levels and improve their nation's competitiveness in an increasingly globalised world and to tackle social justice and inclusivity issues.

While in many cases it is too early to assess the impact of such changes on long-term labour market benefits from increased educational participation, the evidence does shed light on cost, capacity and implementation issues. For example, in the USA over recent years, a number of states have implemented legislation to ensure that young people remain in education (and, in some cases, training or work). The extent to which legislation is enforced varies considerably. In some states, young people can drop out of education if they find work, while in others, young people can leave education subject to parental consent. Significantly, early evidence showed that there were no differences in drop-out rates or post-16 attainment rates between states with different leaving ages.[22] A review of USA-based evidence concluded that significant variation existed between states in their assessment of costs associated with raising the learning age, together with patchy and inconsistent data collection on student outcomes. Their study concluded that the benefits derived from policy implementation were inconclusive and that decisions to raise the learning age 'should be part of a package of retention and dropout prevention policies' rather than a single policy change.[23]

Evidence about rushed and inconsistent policy implementation can also be found in Australia. From 2008, young people in the state of Western Australia were required to remain in education, training or approved employment until the year in which they turned 17. Shortly after the implementation of the raised participation age (and despite a raft of programmes and interventions targeting at-risk young people), school attendance was declining and post-16 providers' attendance policies and strategies failed to capture the causes and reasons for non-attendance.[24]

The New South Wales Government raised the school leaving age from 15 to 17 years of age from 2010. An examination of the impact of what were perceived to be hastily introduced changes to the school leaving age

21 Maguire, S. (2013). Will the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) in England solve the NEET problem? Research in Post-Compulsory Education. 18: 1-2, March-June, 61-76 (Special Issue). Maguire, S. (2021). Raising the Age of Participation to 18. Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy.
22 Oreopoulos, P. (2005). Stay in School: New Lessons on the Benefits of Raising the Legal School leaving age. C.D. Howe Institute Commentary No. 233, December. Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute.
23 Mackey, P. E. and Duncan, T. G. (2013). Does raising the state compulsory school attendance age achieve the intended outcomes? (REL 2014–005), p.3. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. Retrieved from: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/
24 Hodgson, D. (2019). Conceptualising the compulsory education policy apparatus: producing and reproducing risky subjectivities. Journal of Education Policy. 34:1, 117-132, DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2017.1410578.

found that many schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods that were often required to support an increased number of learners with a diverse range of needs were struggling to do so, due to inadequate resources.[25]

In contrast, in 2005, the state of Ontario, Canada, raised the age of compulsory learning from 16 to 18 with legal enforcement. It was accompanied by a programme of learning designed to offer a flexible learner-led curriculum, as well as an expansion of the teaching resource to meet the demands of extended participation in learning. Evaluation evidence found that the programme focuses on learner needs; promotes inter-agency working; encourages flexibility in provision; expands choice; and increases a focus on tracking and monitoring students.[26] Although there is little evidence about the extent to which sanctions are applied, between 2004 and 2010 there was a 13-percentage point increase in diploma graduation rates.

3.4 RPA design to implementation in England

While the most recent RoSLA took over a quarter of a century to become operational across Great Britain, plans to raise the participation age in learning took under ten years to be delivered in England. Consistent with international evidence, the roll-out of the RPA was characterised by both hasty implementation, in comparison with the RoSLA, and being driven by a goal to boost qualification attainment, skill levels and young people's future earning potential.[27] Furthermore, in England, the RPA was delivered in a climate of economic austerity, a change in government, and accompanied changes to education management, in particular in relation to local authorities' school governance arrangements, which significantly impeded them in their RPA duties and responsibilities.

The publication of a green paper in 2007[28] (DfES) was followed by a period of consultation, after which the Labour Government's subsequent 2008 Education and Skills Act stipulated that, from 2013, as part of the RPA policy, young people who had reached the age of 16 and who had not acquired a Level 3 qualification would have a legal duty to participate in education and training until the end of the school year in which they turned 17. From 2015, this duty would apply until young people reached their 18th birthday. This was to comprise:

25 Reid, C. and Young, H. (2012). The new compulsory schooling age policy in NSW, Australia: ethnicity, ability and gender considerations, Journal of Education Policy, 27:6, 795-814, DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2012.664287

26 Ungerleider, C. (2008). Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Student Success/ Learning to 18 Strategy. Final Report. Canadian Council on Learning. Retrieved from: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/studentsuccess/CCL_SSE_Report.pdf

27 Department for Education and Skills (2007). Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16. Norwich: Cm7065, March.

28 ibid

> 'appropriate full-time education or training; a contract of apprenticeship; or part-time education or training towards an accredited qualification as part of a full-time occupation or alongside an occupation of more than 20 hours a week.'[29]

While the original proposals set out plans to sanction young people who failed to participate in any form of post-16 education and training, within the coalition government's implementation of the RPA there was no form of enforcement on young people or their parents/guardians.[30] Subsequently, published RPA regulations and statutory guidance made clear that the duties on employers would not be implemented from 2013.[31] The 2008 Act mentioned the adjustments that the UK devolved governments would need to consider following the RPA proposals for England. To date the RPA has not been implemented in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

In the run up to the implementation of the RPA, a number of phased trials were conducted in selected local authorities and sub-regions across England between 2009 and 2013. These were designed to encourage local authorities (LAs) to plan, develop and implement their approaches to the RPA. Evaluation evidence from the RPA trials highlighted that LAs' RPA planning was slow.[32] This was due to a protracted period of uncertainty surrounding the roll-out of the policy, following the change in government. At the end of a two-year period, trial areas had identified key challenges linked to RPA delivery due to reductions in funding and in guidance services, as well as shifts in responsibility linked to the management of schools and the commissioning of post-16 funding. The Phase 2 evaluation report concluded that, in most cases, LAs either did not have a comprehensive plan for RPA delivery in 2013/15 or had failed to undertake a thorough analysis of the eligible cohort.[33]

The final Phase 4 evaluation report on the RPA trials concluded that, where good practice, such as data sharing on young people's destinations, did exist, it relied too heavily on local 'goodwill'. There remained an underlying concern that if data were not shared in a timely, consistent and accurate way, young people who failed to participate, or who dropped out of learning, would simply fall through the net. This was attributed to shortfalls in systems management, reduced information intelligence and, crucially, support and guidance from trained and impartial personnel. Moreover, employer engagement, particularly with regard to identifying and

29 Education and Skills Act 2008, c. 25. Explanatory Notes. http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/25/notes/division/5/1/1/1/1

30 Department for Education (2010). Participation In Education, Training And Employment By 16-18 Year Olds In England. SFR18/2010. Available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-in-education-training-and-employment-by-16-to-18-year-olds-in-england

31 Department for Education (2013). Participation of young people in education, employment or training. Statutory guidance for local authorities. Available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/participation-of-young-people-education-employment-and-training#full-publication-update-history

32 Isos Partnership (2011). Evaluation of the Phase 2 Raising of the Participation Age Trials – Final Report. Department for Education Research Report, DFE-RR135.

33 ibid.

supporting the needs of young people in work without recognised training, remained the weakest link in meeting full participation requirements.[34]

The RPA was operationalised when significant budget cuts were made to education expenditure, due to austerity measures and the introduction of changes to local school management systems, including the rapid expansion of multi-academy trusts and the opening of free schools. These changes impacted negatively on local authorities' overall control over education provision and, consequently, their capacity to fulfil their duties to manage RPA at the local level.[35]

Moreover, the associated costs of implementing the RPA were also withdrawn. Powers granted to local authorities to commission new educational provision were later revoked and the National Audit Office (NAO) discovered a £100 million shortfall in the estimate of the enforcement and monitoring costs of local authorities.[36]

3.5 What the policymakers had to say

In addition to reviewing the literature and policy material, our research included delving into the development and implementation of the RPA through a series of interviews with a group of policy architects who had first-hand experience of the legislation and the issues it faced. In terms of context and background, it was confirmed that the policy ambition centred on a perception that, if the UK was to compete in a global market, it needed to have improved educational attainment and enhanced skill levels that were on par with, or better than, other advanced economies. Closely aligned with these goals was the realisation that the UK had large numbers of young people dropping out of learning at the earliest opportunity and higher than average NEET rates.

Interestingly, some policymakers reflected on the development of the policy idea to raise the leaving age as emanating from a series of 'building blocks' within post-16 education and training policy space. Rather than being a long-term single policy goal, these blocks had developed over a ten-year period. For example, the RPA policy outline did not form part of New Labour's 2005 election manifesto, nor was it included in earlier plans to boost post-16 education participation rates.

> 'Originally, it wasn't with a strong view 'we are going to do this', but the idea was if you start a national debate about the

34 Maguire, S. and Newton. B. (2013). Research into the Phase 4 Locally-Led Delivery Projects for Raising the Participation Age. Department for Education (DfE) RR308. September.
35 Maguire, S. (2013). Will the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) in England solve the NEET problem? Research in Post-Compulsory Education. 18: 1-2, March-June, 61-76 (Special Issue).
36 Woodin, T., McCullough, G. and Cowan, S. (2013). Secondary Education and the raising of the school leaving-age: coming of age? New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

concept of everyone should …. We should increase the leaving age, then it will put it in the forefront of people's minds.'

Policymaker

These post-16 policy 'building blocks' included the piloting and national roll-out of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which offered financial incentives to young people from lower income families to boost participation, retention and achievement rates in full-time learning. Other policy initiatives that were mentioned included the setting up of the Connexions service, which focused on offering support to the under 18s NEET group, Tomlinson's 14-19 Curriculum Review, the introduction of National Diplomas, which offered general/technical learning opportunities, and the expansion of apprenticeships and alternative vocational routes for disengaged students.

The weakest area of the RPA policy development was perceived to be securing employer engagement. While relatively small numbers of under-18s were entering apprenticeships or jobs with training, policymakers had little grasp of the structure and functioning of the labour market for young people entering work with or without training. Hence, there was a much greater focus on harnessing and developing opportunities in full-time education and training.

'There wasn't the same attention to why do we have a labour market like this for young people, where employers do not commit, where training standards are low, where the state ends up trying to pick up provision in low quality courses….. The main successes came in where you were investing in the public sector in schools and colleges….. in all the things that the state could do basically. The failures were in the relationship to employers'.

Policymaker

Respondents reflected on some of the key obstacles that the legislation surrounding the design and delivery of the RPA encountered during its passage through parliament. These included determining the legal responsibility that would be placed on young people or their parents; a debate about sanctions and how these would penalise the most disadvantaged and impoverished in society; and incentives to encourage employers to offer young people training and the penalties that would be applied if companies failed to comply with the RPA. Ultimately, this 'muddle' about roles and responsibilities, which was mentioned by some respondents, led to a duty being placed entirely on young people, without any sanctions being applied for non-conformity. Duties on employers were suspended before the RPA was implemented in 2013.

'Either you don't have an enforcement of a duty, which makes the duty rather meaningless, or you have an enforcement system which doesn't have an ultimate sanction, and then the question is: is anybody going to take you through an enforcement system?'

Policymaker

When the first phase of the RPA legislation was applied in 2012, the policy 'building blocks', which had supported its design and delivery, had been abandoned by the coalition government. At the same time, austerity measures had severely depleted LA budgets. This, in effect, had reduced the RPA policy to having become *'a dead letter on the statute book'* (Policymaker).

> 'One is austerity; the DfE had to cut budgets. And another is the priority given to schools and focusing on schools. All those other things, local authority services, non-school based provisions, FE, cuts to FE, cuts to apprenticeships, all those things, they were secondary in the policy hierarchy at that point, and therefore the supportive policy structure for the RPA just wasn't in place.'
>
> **Policymaker**

Looking to the future, a contrary view centred around the need to build a new legislative framework in order to make the RPA legislation meaningful and relevant. Suggestions included policies that would address the barriers faced by non-post-16 participants, i.e. the NEET group and young people who drop out of post-16 learning, as well as an underpinning commitment to young people that offered a range of post-16 options to meet their needs:

> '.... that might guarantee young people a place in school, college or on apprenticeship at 17 to 18, that required the combined authorities, that placed a duty on them to secure the provisions available, to pass funding to them and give them the duty to collect data.'
>
> **Policymaker**

Changes in participation and outcomes post-RPA

4 Changes in participation and outcomes post-RPA

This chapter outlines the changes in participation and retention during the first two years post-16 following the introduction of the RPA, before looking at changes in qualification attainment by the end of these two years and examining changes in labour market outcomes when the young people are age 20. We then go on to look at how estimates differ for girls versus boys, different ethnic groups and those who had low attainment at Key Stage 4. In all cases, we control for an extensive array of characteristics and cohort-to-cohort trends in outcomes in order to isolate the RPA effects. However, the introduction of the requirement to continue in maths and English for those who have not attained Level 2 at age 16, and the reduction in the supply of vocational courses following the Wolf Review, which were both effective from the time of the RPA to 18 onwards, mean that we need to exercise caution in interpreting the RPA estimates as causal effects.

4.1 Sustained participation

Given that the primary aim of the RPA was to raise the level of participation in education and training among young people in the first two years following the completion of compulsory secondary school, the first set of outcomes we look at are sustained participation in Year 12 and Year 13. Sustained participation is defined as a young person being observed in some form of education or training participation in the October of the academic year and still participating in the January and May of that academic year, i.e. they begin participating and do not drop out during the year.[37]

37 Table A2 in the appendix shows the pre-RPA levels of all outcomes overall and broken down by gender, ethnicity and KS4 attainment. The full set of covariates included in each model is also detailed in the appendix.

Figure 4.1 The association between RPA and activities during Year 12

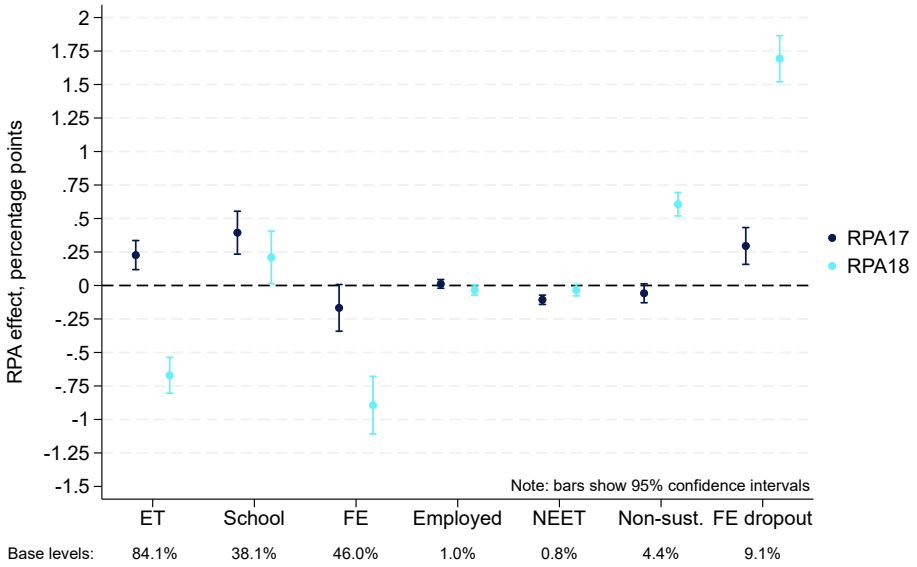


Figure 4.1 shows the changes in various participation outcomes in Year 12 associated with the raising of the participation age firstly to 17 and then up to 18. Each pair of markers represents a different regression model. The estimated effects capture the additional impacts associated with the introduction of the RPA, compared with the levels of participation for cohorts completing secondary school before RPA. In each figure, the dark blue markers show the effect on the cohort impacted by the initial increase in participation age to 17, and the light blue markers show the effect on cohorts affected by the full implementation of the policy raising the participation age to 18. The base levels of these variables in the year prior to RPA implementation are shown below each outcome to give a sense of what these changes are relative to.

The first two markers show the association between RPA and overall participation in education or training. When the participation age was initially raised to 17, participation increased by 0.2 percentage points (pp), rising from 84.1% immediately prior to the policy's implementation. As we move along, we can see how sustained participation in school and further education were affected. The 0.2pp increase associated with RPA to 17 is driven by the increase of just under 0.4pp in sustained participation in school from a starting point of 38.1% of young people participating prior to RPA. There is a small and non-statistically significant decrease in sustained further education (FE) participation. The net effect of these changes is the small increase in sustained education and training participation in Year 12. Employment in Year 12 is unaffected by the RPA to 17, but the proportion of the cohort who are NEET throughout Year 12 falls slightly. The proportion who begin participating in October but then drop out before the end of the academic year, i.e. non-sustained activity, does not change significantly.

Looking at the light blue markers, which show the effect of RPA among the cohorts required to remain in participation until age 18, we now see that overall sustained participation has fallen compared to the cohorts before

RPA. Moving along the figure we can see that this is because while there is an increase in sustained participation in school, this is offset by a larger reduction in the proportion in FE throughout Year 12. The proportion of the cohort who are NEET is unchanged, but we see a large increase in the proportion of the cohort who make a successful transition to continued education (or employment) but dropout before the end of the year. This was 4.4% of the cohort prior to RPA but increases by 0.6pp with the full RPA to 18. Looking into this, we can see that RPA to 18 is associated with a 1.7pp increase in the proportion of those who start a course in FE dropping out. This is a non-trivial effect compared to the 9.1% of FE starters who dropped out before the policy was introduced.

Figure 4.2 The association between RPA and activities during Year 13

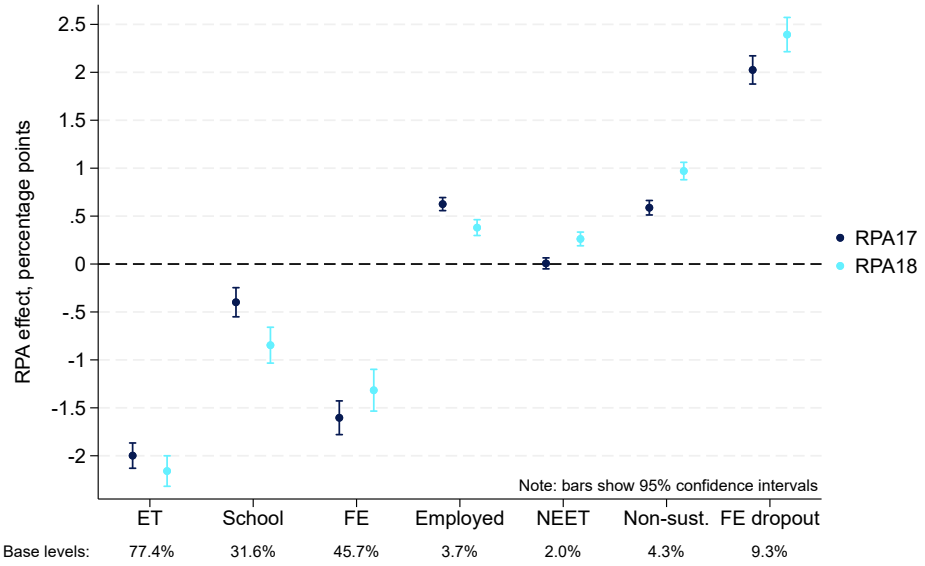


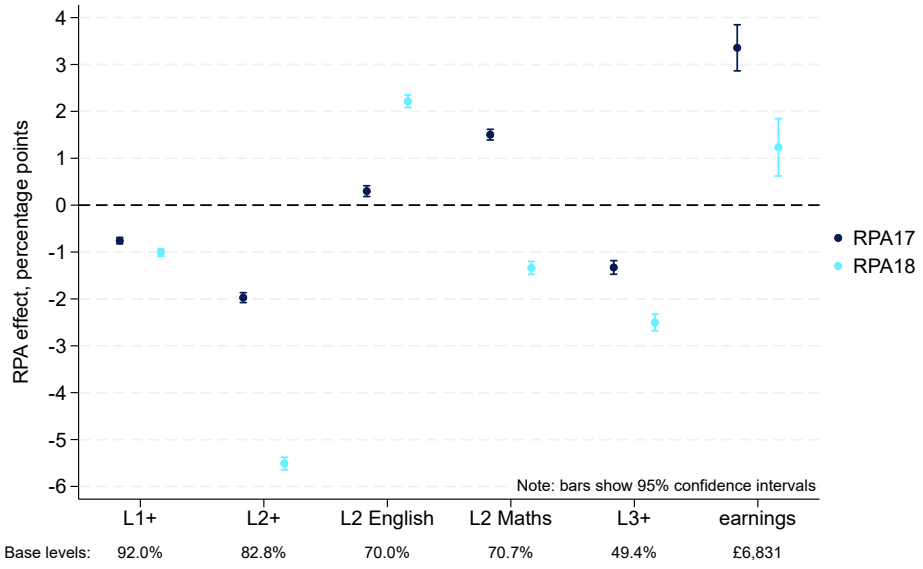
Figure 4.2 shows the same sets of outcomes but for young people during the second academic year after the end of compulsory schooling, Year 13. In contrast to the findings for Year 12, the impacts of the initial RPA to 17 and the full implementation to 18 are very similar in magnitude. Overall sustained participation in education or training reduces by approximately 2pp for all cohorts affected by RPA compared with those that came before. The reduction in sustained participation in FE (approximately 1.5pp) is accompanied by a small reduction in sustained school participation (0.4pp for RPA to 17, 0.8pp for RPA to 18). It should be borne in mind that these cohorts are also affected by the reduction in range of vocational courses available in FE colleges in particular following the Wolf Review. On the positive side, we do see an increase of around 0.5pp in sustained employment. Of particular note again is the increase in non-sustained participation of 0.6pp to 1.0pp associated with RPA. Prior to the policy, the proportion of the cohort who dropped out of participation partway through Year 13 was 4.3%. Thus a 0.6pp to 1.0pp increase in dropout is marked. Again, as with Year 12, it is dropout from FE that increases in particular, by

2.0pp-2.4pp, from the starting point of 9.3% dropping out from FE among the cohort prior to RPA.

In summary, in terms of sustained participation during years 12 and 13, the RPA to 17 initially raised Year 12 participation, driven by increased school retention, but the full implementation of the policy to 18 has seen a fall in sustained participation, along with a shift of students from FE to school. There was a small reduction in persistent NEEThood but one key feature of the participation response has been an increase in dropout, particularly from FE. The picture for Year 13 is less positive: overall participation is reduced, with both school and FE participation falling. Persistent NEEThood is slightly increased and non-sustained participation markedly increased, again especially the rate of dropout from FE. On the more positive side, there is a small increase in sustained employment throughout Year 13.

4.2 Qualifications and outcomes in the labour market

Figure 4.3 The association between RPA and qualification attainment by age 18 and earnings at age 20



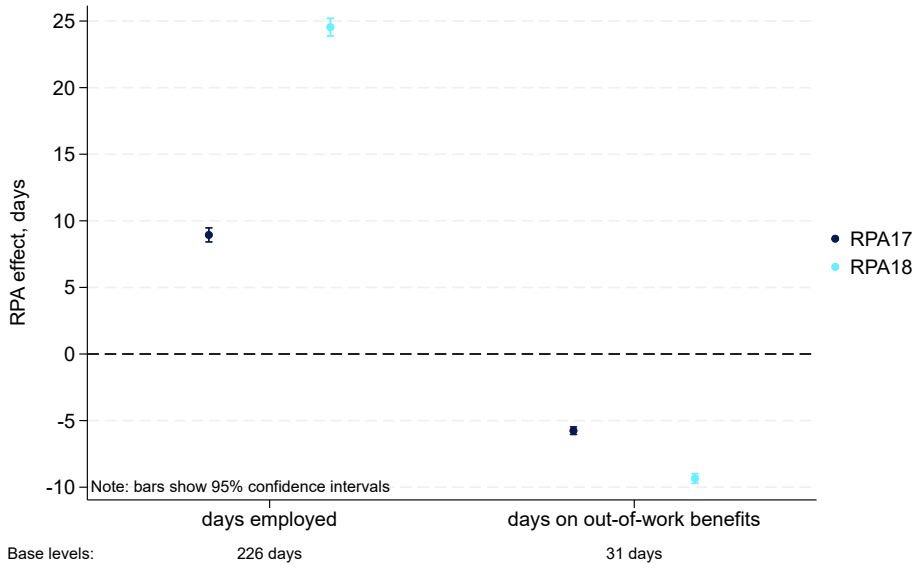
Moving on from participation outcomes, Figure 4.3 shows the association between the RPA and the highest level of qualifications attained by age 18, and annual labour market earnings at age 20. It shows that the likelihood of attaining Level 1 or higher qualifications by age 18 falls approximately 1pp with both RPA to 17 and RPA to 18. The impact on attainment of at least Level 2 qualifications is a larger negative of approximately 2pp for RPA to 17 and then negative 5.5pp for RPA to 18. However, again the latter effect needs to be caveated with the fact that the cohorts affected by RPA to 18 have also been affected by changes to the vocational courses available

following the Wolf Review. Some of the reduction in Level 1 and Level 2 attainment will therefore be the effect of a reduced supply of courses at these levels for cohorts completing Year 11 in 2014 onwards.

We also see a reduction in attainment of Level 3 or higher qualifications of 1.3pp-2.5pp. For context, prior to RPA approximately 50% of young people attained Level 3 or higher qualifications by age 18. The reductions in participation and the increase in dropout, particularly in Year 13, associated with RPA are consistent with lower attainment of qualifications at all levels by the end of Year 13. One exception to the reduction in qualification attainment associated with RPA is the positive change in the proportion attaining Level 2 English – equivalent to a grade 4 (formerly a grade C) or higher at GCSE English – that is associated with both RPA to 17 and to 18. Prior to RPA 70.0% of young people have achieved this by 18, but RPA to 17 is associated with a 0.3pp increase and RPA to 18 with a 2.2pp increase in attainment at this level. Similarly, for maths attainment at Level 2, the initial RPA to 17 effect is positive (1.5pp) but for the cohorts affected by RPA to 18, the effect is a 1.3pp reduction in likelihood of having attained this level in maths. Interpretation of these results again requires caution as RPA to 18 coincided with the requirement that young people continue to study English and maths if they had not attained a Level 2 by the end of compulsory schooling. The effect of RPA to 17 can, however, be isolated and it is notable that for both English and maths there is a positive association between RPA and attaining Level 2 or higher in these subjects.

The final markers in Figure 4.3 show the impact of RPA on young people's annual earnings at age 20. For both RPA to 17 and to 18 it shows a positive impact on earnings of 3.4% (RPA to 17) and 1.2% (RPA to 18). This is consistent with the earlier findings that RPA to 17 in particular is associated with increased employment during Year 13 and increased likelihood of attaining Level 2 English and maths, both of which we would expect to positively impact earnings in the early part of the career.

Figure 4.4 The association between RPA and employment and benefit receipt age 20



Finally, Figure 4.4 shows the association between RPA and additional early labour market outcomes: annual days employed and days in receipt of out-of-work benefits when aged 20. Prior to the policy, young people were, on average, employed for 226 days per year and had an average of 31 days on out-of-work benefits per year. RPA to 17 is associated with an additional nine days per year in employment and a reduction of six days per year on out-of-work benefits. For RPA to 18 the corresponding figures are 25 and nine, reflecting a greater positive effect of RPA to 18 on employment.

In summary, while the associations between RPA and sustained participation were small and for the full implementation of the RPA to 18 negative, there were some positive effects on sustained employment during Year 13, and the attainment of Level 2 (GCSE grade 4 or higher) English, and these positive impacts on human capital acquired in terms of key qualifications and sustained labour market experience are reflected in small impacts on labour market earnings and employment. It should also be borne in mind that the introduction of the requirement to continue with maths and English if Level 2 had not been achieved at age 16, and the changes in course supply post-Wolf review, coincided with the full implementation of the RPA to 18. As such, the pre-RPA period is less of a counterfactual for what would have happened absent the RPA to 18; it might be that without the statutory duty to remain in education or training, participation may have fallen even more than we observe.

4.3 Heterogeneity in the effects on participation and outcomes

We now explore how the effects of the RPA differ by gender, ethnicity and prior attainment of the young people.

4.3.1 Gender

Figures A4.5 to A4.8 in the appendix show the association between RPA and our outcomes of interest broken down by gender. The initial RPA to 17 raised overall Year 12 participation for boys but not for girls, as while both saw a statistically significant increase in school participation, girls saw a fall in FE participation, such that overall there was no change for them. The increase in school participation is sustained with RPA to 18 for boys though not for girls. Both genders see a decrease in FE participation in these cohorts, such that for both genders the RPA to 18 sees a fall in participation overall and among those participating a shift from FE to school in Year 12. For Year 13, overall sustained participation decreases for both genders, with falls in school and FE participation and increases in non-sustained activity. It is notable that for girls, school participation falls less than for boys but FE declines much more.

Regarding qualifications, while for both genders RPA is associated with reductions in attainment of Level 1 or higher, Level 2 or higher, and Level 3 or higher qualifications by age 18, in almost all cases the reductions are larger for boys than they are for girls. The only case where boys have a more positive qualification outcome than their female counterparts is in attainment of Level 2 English by 18 – here boys see an increase of 0.8pp for RPA to 17 (girls zero change) and 3.7pp for RPA to 18 (girls 0.8pp). However, the initial starting points are different, with 77.0% of girls attaining this level by 18 in the cohorts prior to RPA, but only 63.3% of boys, so there was more scope for improvement in this metric for boys. The associations of RPA with labour market outcomes were mostly very similar for boys and girls, each reflecting the overall picture seen in Figures 4.3 and 4.4. The exception is the earnings increase associated with RPA to 18 that is driven by girls, with the boys seeing no effect for these cohorts.

4.3.2 Ethnicity

The state-school population in our administrative dataset is predominantly of white ethnicity (76.8%), with Asian (including Chinese) the next largest ethnic grouping (8.0%), and black students making up 4.3%. Estimating the effects for different ethnic groups reveals some interesting heterogeneity in the RPA impacts, focusing on the three largest ethnic groups: white, Asian and black. Figures A4.9 to A4.12 in the appendix show how the RPA effects on participation, qualifications and labour market outcomes differ by the ethnicity of the students.

The increase in overall sustained participation in Year 12 associated with the RPA to 17 is driven entirely by white students. For Asian students RPA to 17 is associated with no change in overall sustained participation, while for black students it is associated with a reduction. For all ethnicities there is a significant reduction in overall participation associated with RPA to 18, but while for white and Asian students it is around 0.5pp, for black students the RPA to 18 is associated with a much larger 2.3pp reduction in sustained participation. White and Asian students are behind the increased school retention associated with both RPA to 17 and RPA to 18, shifting away from FE, whereas the reverse is true for black students – they move away from school participation and into FE. Of note is a relatively large reduction in school participation by black students, particularly for the RPA to 18 (3.5pp fall from a starting point on 44.1% remaining in school). The increase in non-sustained activity in Year 12 that is associated with the RPA to 18 is seen for all ethnic groups but is particularly pronounced for black students who are the only group who also see an increase in non-sustained activity even with the initial RPA to 17. Black students are also driving the increased rate of dropout from FE, with increases of 0.7pp and 2.8pp associated with RPA to 17 and 18 respectively. These are large effects relative to the 6.9% Year 12 dropout rate from FE for black students prior to the reform. However, black students are the only group who see a small increase in sustained employment in Year 12 associated with RPA to 18.

When it comes to Year 13 (Figure A4.10), the decrease in overall participation for RPA to 17 and 18 is slightly smaller for white students and Asian students than the aggregate figure that we see in Figure 4.2, whereas for black students the reduction in participation is notably larger: 2.5pp for RPA to 17 and 4.6pp for RPA to 18. All ethnic groups see a fall in school participation in Year 13 associated with RPA, with black students seeing the largest reduction, particularly for the full RPA to 18, with school participation falling by 4.7pp from a starting point of 37.4% of black students participating in school throughout Year 13, so this is a non-trivial reduction. It is white students who are behind the reduction in FE participation in Year 13, with around a 1.5pp fall associated with RPA to 17 and 18, whereas for black and Asian students though RPA to 17 reduces their FE participation, both see no change in FE for the RPA to 18 compared with earlier cohorts. So, whereas for white students the reduction in school participation is mirrored in a reduction in FE participation in Year 13, for black students FE participation does not reduce at least for the cohorts affected by RPA to 18. This, together with the Year 12 activities, suggests that RPA has led to a re-sorting of students to settings, which can broadly be characterised as white students moving from FE to school, and black students going in the opposite direction. For all groups there is an increase in sustained employment in Year 13. Though the RPA is associated with an increase in non-sustained activity throughout Year 13 for all groups, it is among black students that there are the largest increases both for RPA to 17 and 18. This pattern is also seen for dropout specifically from FE.

Regarding qualifications, the increase in attainment of Level 2 English with RPA is completely attributable to white students, with black and Asian students seeing either no change or a small fall following RPA. With Level 2 maths it is again the white students who drive the positive effect of RPA to 17 that we see in the aggregate, with no change for black or Asian students. Interestingly all groups see a fall in maths Level 2 attainment with the RPA to 18, though it is particularly pronounced for black students – a 6.0pp decrease, which is a non-trivial drop from the 67.1% attaining Level 2 maths by 18 prior to RPA, a level that was already the lowest compared with 70.0% for white students and 77.3% for Asian students.

Moving on to labour market outcomes, for black and Asian students RPA is associated with similar sized increases in earnings of approximately 4.0pp, whereas the increases for white students are smaller, particularly for RPA to 18. This pattern is mirrored in the impact on days employed (Figure A4.12) with black and particularly Asian students seeing larger positive effects of the policy.

In summary, the differential re-sorting of students to participation settings by ethnicity is associated with white students increasing qualification attainment particularly in GCSE English. Black students appear to be affected the most by RPA, with the largest reductions in sustained participation, particularly in school, pronounced increases in dropout from participation, especially from FE, and no qualification gains. The reasons for these particularly negative participation effects warrant further investigation. Despite black students not seeing qualification gains, there is an increase in sustained employment both in Year 12 and Year 13 for this group, and this can perhaps explain why they see as strong an effect of RPA on early labour market outcomes as students from other ethnic groups.

4.3.3 Students with low attainment at Key Stage 4 (GCSE)

We also looked at the effects of RPA on students who were low attainers in their Key Stage 4 assessments (i.e. GCSE results), defining low attainment as being in the lowest 25% of attainers.[38] Figures A4.13 to A4.15 in the appendix present the effects of RPA for these students with low attainment.

Compared with the aggregate picture in Year 12, for low attainers the patterns of the RPA impacts are similar, only the magnitudes are amplified. The impact on overall participation of the initial RPA to 17 is a 1.3pp increase for low attainers, compared with the 0.2pp effect overall. The pre-RPA levels of participation are lower among the low attainers: 65.1% participating compared with 84.1% overall, but it is still a positive increase in participation for this group. This increase is not continued for the cohorts affected by RPA to 18 however, with no change in sustained participation among low attainers in these cohorts compared with the pre-RPA level. This is more positive than the aggregate picture where participation falls with RPA to

38 This is calculated on a year-by-year basis using the KS4 total points score.

18. Similarly, the increases in school participation are larger among low attainers – 1.4pp for RPA to 17 and 2.3 pp for RPA to 18, compared with 0.4 pp and 0.2pp in the full state school population – but again this is coming from a lower base level of participation of only 12.4% of low attainers pre-RPA compared with 38.1% among the state school population. This is mirrored in a larger drop in FE participation associated with the RPA to 18 for low attainers than we see overall.

Among the low attainers there are more positive findings for NEET and non-sustained activity outcomes. The NEET rate falls by 0.3 to 0.4pp with RPA, whereas for the state school population overall there is only a 0.1pp fall for RPA to 17 and no effect associated with RPA to 18. While non-sustained activity is increased in the full sample for RPA to 18 (+0.6pp), for the low attainers it falls by 0.5pp with RPA to 17 and only increases by 0.4pp with RPA to 18.

For the negative indicators of activity in Year 13 (NEET, non-sustained participation, dropout from FE) the patterns and magnitudes of effects are very similar for the low attainers as they are for the state school population overall. Sustained participation in education and training also follows a similar pattern, though interestingly, school participation in Year 13 is positively impacted among low attainers both for RPA to 17 (+0.4pp) and RPA to 18 (+0.7pp), which contrasts the population overall where school attendance is down for Year 13 (-0.4pp and -0.8pp respectively). It is the much larger decreases in FE among low attainers, particularly associated with RPA to 18, that result in a similar net effect on education or training participation as we see for the population. It is notable that there is a larger increase in employment among the low attainers (approximately 1.3pp) associated with RPA than in the state school population overall where it is only around +0.5pp.

In summary, the RPA effect among low attainers is to shift young people away from FE and into school (and employment) with the net impact being an increase in overall participation in Year 12 at least for the initial RPA to 17. This is mirrored by beneficial effects on the NEET rate and non-sustained activity outcomes in Year 12. For Year 13, the patterns among low attainers are similar to the population overall, other than this notable shift from FE to school participation.

The additional participation, particularly in school, is reflected in the increase in key qualifications, i.e. English and maths at Level 2. The 2.0pp increase in English at Level 2 is a relatively large effect for this group, given that only 14.5% of the low attainers had attained this level immediately prior to the RPA. As with the overall picture, the initial RPA to 17 increased maths attainment at Level 2 – at a time before continuing with maths was compulsory for those without Level 2 – but this was not sustained in the cohorts that followed. In line with greater qualification attainment and increases in employment, in Year 13 in particular, we see larger labour market returns among the low attainers with a sustained impact on earnings especially.

The group with the lowest attainment at Key Stage 4 is unsurprisingly the group where there is the most potential for RPA to have an effect. Prior to RPA only 65.1% were participating in education or training in Year 12, and 53.3% in Year 13, compared to 84.1% and 77.4% for the state school population overall. It is positive to see that despite the issues we identify in this report with regard to the delivery of RPA, there have still been some non-trivial positive impacts on participation and later labour market outcomes for those with the lowest attainment in secondary schooling. This provides encouragement for what might be possible to achieve should some of the issues in the 16-18 education and training space identified in this report be addressed in future policy. This is particularly the case given that, as outlined in the previous chapter, the RPA that was eventually implemented amounted to just the statutory duty on young people to participate but without supporting policies, funding or employer duties. In this light, the small positive effects that we do observe provide encouragement that a recommitment to RPA in a form closer to what was originally intended could reap much greater results.

5

Case study evidence: local RPA implementation

5 Case study evidence: local RPA implementation

This chapter presents the findings from six contrasting case studies that were conducted across England. The areas selected were Sunderland, Bristol, Blackpool, Norfolk, Worcestershire and Wandsworth. In each area, we interviewed a range of stakeholders, including LAs; schools and colleges; training providers; charity and voluntary sector organisations; and employers. Crucially, the fieldwork also captured the voices of many young people through a mixture of focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The purpose of the local area studies was to drill down to community level, in order to determine the strategic and operational management of the RPA within the context of local implementation. We also examine the extent to which the RPA shapes and directs young people's post-16 decision-making and destinations. This chapter reports the findings from organisational stakeholders, with Chapter 6 exploring the evidence from young people.

Operational since September 2013, the RPA has had over ten years to become embedded within local areas, with LAs being charged with offering strategic leadership to other local stakeholders. Moreover, LAs are responsible for post-16 tracking, management of data and data sharing, which places a responsibility on schools and colleges to secure independent and impartial advice for their students; promote good attendance; and inform local authority support services if a young person (aged 16 or 17) has dropped out of learning. In addition to these topics, we also considered issues stemming from austerity measures, staffing cuts, challenges to collaborative working between local stakeholders, and barriers to young people entering and sustaining their participation in post-16 learning.

5.1 Implementation of the RPA

While the RPA policy and its requirements[39] were well understood at the local level, there was an overall consensus that preparation for, and delivery of, the RPA was highly dependent on exploiting existing collaborative links with other local stakeholders. Most notably, these included LAs' senior management, other departments within the LA (e.g., Social Services, Economic Development Units), schools, colleges, training providers, third sector organisations and employers. Positive engagement with local partners was more successful and sustainable where the RPA had become part of existing networks' overall post-16 responsibilities and where there was an established track record of partnership working.

39 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/participation-of-young-people-education-employment-and-training

> 'I have less faith in national strategies working in local areas, if I'm being totally honest with you. I think the solutions are far better sought on a local level, using what's available. I think partnerships are the answer .... I don't think RPA sits outside anything we're trying to do with education and then training. I think it's always around, and I keep coming back to it, having good teachers, and really good trainers, delivering a really good curriculum, and then creating opportunities that young people can see a future in. And actually talking to young people about what that is.'
>
> **LA senior manager**

However, while strong and well-established partnership and collaborative working are the cornerstone for local post-16 delivery, this has been challenged and, in many cases, undermined in recent years by austerity measures and changes to education management systems. Staffing levels within LAs have been significantly reduced across all case study areas in recent years, alongside the nature of the support services offered to young people, which has morphed from a personalised 'boots on the ground' approach that included all young people in the area, to a targeted approach aimed at a much smaller number of vulnerable young people, for example care leavers, young people who are 'at risk' of becoming NEET or who become NEET, and young offenders.

Specifically, the funding allocated to youth services and advice and guidance services (previously Connexions services) had been drastically reduced, thereby heightening the challenge to achieve full participation and re-engagement among the 16-17-year-old cohort. This has significantly affected LAs' capacity to fulfil their RPA duties, specifically in relation to collating accurate destinations data, and, crucially, to identifying and offering timely support to young people who fail to make a post-16 transition and to those who drop out and become NEET. In the majority of case study areas, it was reported that a small number of LA staff are responsible for supporting large caseloads of under-18s who are NEET in their locality. In addition, it was reported in some areas that it was becoming increasingly difficult to recruit skilled staff within LAs (if vacancies occur), due to a reduction over recent years in training capacity within the career guidance field.

> 'We can signpost and flag to the local authority students that we are concerned about and they will make them a priority, but, typically, they tend to focus on just students who are more vulnerable [...] we have our own careers adviser in school here ... is employed by us, and she's here, the students know who she is, and therefore they can relate to her and they know they can come and see her if they've got any problems [...] we're ... doing that personal approach in school because the local authority are very stretched, with very few staff there, and so therefore we've taken it ... on board ourselves'.
>
> **School representative**

The impact of austerity measures during the implementation of the RPA led to the disbanding of the local Connexions service, with careers provision responsibilities changing hands from LAs to local schools and colleges. This coincided with increased academisation of schools and the introduction of free schools, which further increased schools' detachment from local authority control and their individual autonomy over CEIAG (Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance) provision.

In many areas, data-sharing agreements/protocols had been set up with local schools. This is in addition to academies/free schools' duty to provide information on young people's intended destinations and to supply the LA with accurate, timely and consistent data to meet an annual destination return. However, the quality and robustness of data collection from schools remains inconsistent. Concern was also expressed about local FE colleges providing prompt reporting on student enrolment figures and especially information on students dropping out from learning, which impedes early intervention to support young people who become NEET. Data lags present significant issues in terms of identifying young people who need support, especially in a climate where LA services for young people are severely stretched.

Some respondents also commented on the replication of efforts locally to collate destination figures, with, in some cases, the LA, schools and colleges separately contacting young people and parents to collect information. This emanated from the Gatsby[40] Benchmark 3 requirement for schools to track the destinations of young people for three years after finishing school. Furthermore, an over-reliance on collecting 'snapshot' data to capture young people's end-of-year destinations was noted, as opposed to embedding ongoing data exchanges. This approach would ensure that young people who fail to start their intended EET destinations, or those who drop out, are identified at the earliest opportunity and do not 'fall through the net' because they fail to access help and support.

It was also reported that cuts to infrastructure budgets, in particular for local transport services, were affecting RPA implementation. Reductions in local bus services and the high cost of fares were adversely affecting the ability of some young people in rural areas to access suitable learning provision and employment opportunities.

5.2 Delivery of the RPA

The RPA duty requires young people to remain in full-time education, to undertake training, to volunteer, or to enter work with training. The default destination or choice of post-16 provision for most high-/middle-achieving

40 https://www.gatsby.org.uk/education/focus-areas/good-career-guidance

young people largely centres on remaining in full-time academic or vocational learning. The biggest challenge was engaging young people with lower academic attainment, particularly those who struggle with functional skills (maths and English) and offering a range of post-16 pathways to meet their needs.

5.2.1 CEIAG and the 'offer' available to young people

While effective collaborative and partnership working was evidenced to widen the post-16 offer, competition between providers persists, and was largely driven and intensified by funding regimes. The degree of competition among providers was attributed to the current post-16 funding system and, more specifically, the academisation of schools. A lack of independent careers advice was highlighted as an ongoing concern, notably students' access to impartial information on career pathways beyond A-level and mainstream education options, despite changes made to CEIAG provision in recent years. Furthermore, schools with their own sixth form provision were the focus of criticism for encouraging their students to remain in school, without providing students with a broader range of post-16 options open to them. Hence, significant variation existed between schools and colleges, in terms of the quality and scope of their CEIAG offer, which should provide access to one-to-one support, work experience, and visits to and from other local EET providers. While schools invariably had careers events, there was considerable disparity in the help and support offered to young people who wished to remain in full-time learning and those seeking vocational and training provision or employment opportunities. In some areas, efforts were being made to help diminish the monopolisation of sixth form provision and reduce competition through post-16 providers meeting on a regular basis and working together to widen access to opportunities available across schools, local colleges, training providers and employers to students and their parents/carers.

> 'So I think probably why (name of area) [is] now quite strong is because we've maintained those networks a little bit, to keep them going and we're still working together, sharing things, and we're not afraid to invite people in to come and support and things like that. But, you know, I just worry that we're still very much doing things on our own, and if every school across the country's doing that, then you've got a big jigsaw there that's coming together … coming or not coming together.'
>
> **School representative**

Overall, far less local information was available about vocational options, especially apprenticeship and employment opportunities. Critically, young people were largely left to their own devices or sought help from family or friends to access full-time work in the local labour market. Under-18s are less likely to seek support from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) or Jobcentre Plus, as most will not qualify for independent welfare support until they reach the age of 18. There is a lack of clarity about whether young jobseekers should seek support to find employment from the LA (given their RPA duties) or DWP. Feedback from local employers

also suggested that they were more likely to receive job applications and to recruit from young people who had family connections with their organisations. This clearly disadvantages some groups of young people. Moreover, students from disadvantaged backgrounds face additional barriers linked to 'digital poverty' and 'digital literacy' when having to navigate an unfamiliar and disjointed apprenticeship application system, often having to rely solely on their own capabilities and family support.

As well as the imbalance of information available about full-time learning opportunities, which differs between academic and vocational options, disparities are apparent in the scale of opportunities between full-time learning and vocational training/employment.

Apprenticeship opportunities and vocational training provision available to young people were limited in scope and highly competitive to secure. Young people find themselves in competition with older workers and/or existing workers for apprenticeship vacancies, while the cost, the legal restrictions of employing under-18s and the perceived 'risk' associated with managing young workers were barriers for some employers. It was also mentioned that the funding arrangements surrounding the Apprenticeship Levy paid by large employers had reduced apprenticeship opportunities from SMEs (small and medium-sized employers), and intensified the level of competition that young people faced, due to the recruitment of young people being traditionally much higher among this group of employers.

> 'It's always tougher to get an employer to embrace the idea of taking a young person on, which is one of the reasons why (name of organisation) that we have is a really useful offer, because with us having a base... [...] what we do is get employers to come to us, so you know they can sort of mingle a little bit, see what goes on, meet ... they could meet young people without necessarily it being a job interview. [...]. So it's a ... bit less formalised, but gives both parties the chance to sort of suss each other out and see if it's a perfect match.'
>
> **Representative from a Youth Hub**

Opportunities for young people who face barriers to learning are significantly affected by the shortage of local provision. Funding restrictions, short-term contracting arrangements and high demand have led to flexible entry level vocational and 'taster' programmes – often a re-engagement option for disengaged groups – being reported to be cut or full to capacity, with many young people being put onto waiting lists. The withdrawal of European Social Fund (ESF) programmes was mentioned as a contributory factor to the shortage of provision. While some roll-on/roll-off provision that enables young people to be placed on programmes throughout the year was available, it is in short supply and an extension of this type of provision is urgently needed. Concern was voiced about young people 'churning' between short-term programmes with training providers in some localities. This led to little progression in terms of skills development and qualification acquisition.

5.2.2 English and maths resit requirements

Young people in post-16 education and training who have not achieved a grade 4 (or equivalent) in GCSE English and/or maths are currently required to continue studying these subjects until they pass them or turn 18. This means that they are required to resit their GCSEs or take alternative qualifications such as Functional Skills. While this requirement did not form part of RPA policy development, it became operational from 2014 under new conditions of funding regulations governing post-16 study. The maths and English resit requirement generated a considerable amount of reaction from a range of local stakeholders. While there was general agreement for the need to improve literacy and numeracy standards, the current system of delivery was perceived to be resource-intensive, difficult to deliver, and with low rates of return in terms of tangibly enhancing students' outcomes.[41] Colleges and training providers reported difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff to teach maths and English, struggling to compete with schools in terms of pay and conditions. Some respondents questioned the rationale for forcing GSCE resits on students who had struggled with maths and English in school. Consequently, many young people were 'reluctant' learners, which led to lower-than-expected attendance rates and an ongoing challenge to energise young people about the relevance of the GCSE curriculum to their vocational learning and career aspirations. To address these issues and meet both students' and employers' needs, an urgent review was called for, together with a shift to integrate literacy and numeracy teaching and learning within vocational learning to a much greater extent.

> 'There's two schools of thought on the English and maths! On the one hand, it's a massive resource for a very little outcome, you know, 20- 30% gaining the 4s … and it (is) just … just decreasing returns, you know ones that come from school, they come, they do it, they may get it, and then every year after that, that they take it, it's just less and less likelihood of getting it … On the other hand, that is still a massive chunk, more learners who have got the qualification…I think as a policy, personal opinion, is I don't think that … it serves the purpose, I don't think that the English and maths skills that are being taught in the GCSE do really relate to the sectors. […] And also I've seen it be a barrier … to students, and I think it's taken away from the time that could be on their main programme.'
>
> **Senior manager, FE college**

41 In 2024, 20.9% of resitters achieved a pass in English and for maths the figure was 17.4%. (The Observer, 18.05.25: page 32)

5.2.3 Barriers to post-16 engagement: non-participation, disengagement and drop out

While, statistically, a low percentage of young people fail to make a post-16 transition into EET at the end of Year 11,[42] this belies a significant problem of student dropout and disengagement during their post-16 journeys,[43] something that we also see highlighted in Chapter 4. Reasons for disengagement from post-16 learning can be grouped into three broad categories:

- Structural barriers: the rising crisis of child/youth poverty and the range and accessibility of local opportunities in education, employment and training.
- Institutional barriers: a lack of wellbeing/mental health services support in schools and colleges, lack of staff to help identify and re-engage those who drop out, and lack of opportunity for starting courses partway through the year, which leads to a dire need for much earlier intervention to curb rising rates of youth unemployment/inactivity. The current requirement to resit maths and English, which focuses on GCSE retakes and not teaching functional skills within vocational learning, is expensive, difficult to resource in terms of teaching capacity and has poor returns in terms of qualification outcomes.
- Social and personal barriers: negative experiences at previous schools, mental health needs, SEND requirements and caring responsibilities.

Examples from each category are expanded below.

Structural barriers

Youth poverty

An alarming finding from our case study research was the extent to which some young people's decision-making and choices about their post-16 options were driven by their family circumstances in deprived areas. This manifests itself in a number of ways. The financial pressure on families with lower incomes was seen to be a key driver in the post-16 decision-making of young people. Remaining in full-time post-16 education or training qualifies eligible families to continue claiming Child Benefit (CB) and, some argued, helped explain the expanding figures in full-time post-16 learning in their area in recent years. The fear of disruption to benefit receipt was another factor put forward to explain why some young people

42 Latest data from the Department for Education show in 2022/23, 93.2% of pupils continuing to a sustained (for at least 6 months recorded activity) education, apprenticeship or employment destination in England in the year after completing key stage 4 study (after year 11) from state-funded mainstream schools. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-destination-measures/2022-23

43 Latest data from the Department for Education show that in 2022/23, 79.6% of students were deemed to have reached the end of 16 to 18 EET study in 2022. 45% had a sustained education destination, that is students who had six months of continuous activity in higher and further education institutions and other settings between October and March in 2022/23 academic year. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/16-18-destination-measures/2022-23

sustained a full-time education or training post-16 option, as opposed to an employment with training/apprenticeship route. That is, the loss of child benefit was reported to be driving some young people's post -16 decision-making, through the assurance that by remaining in full-time learning, their household would retain entitlement to CB (subject to income-eligibility conditions). This may also act as a deterrent to some young people from exploring other post-16 routes, notably apprenticeships or work with training opportunities. The added importance attached to the receipt of CB had become more acute since the withdrawal of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in 2011, which had been paid to young people from lower income families to encourage their participation, retention and achievement in post-16 learning.

> 'We still find in the city that some young people attend only because there's a legal obligation, not because they want to achieve anything academically or they want to go into work. We do have cases of young people who attend because their parents tell them they have to, otherwise they lose their access to benefits, which is such a shame, but in certain communities there was a huge reliance on the benefits system. And, as you well know, with RPA, if they're not in education until that agreed age, that benefit is at risk of being withdrawn.'
>
> **Charity manager**

While there was some evidence that young people were choosing to remain in full-time education to retain their household's continued entitlement to CB, financial necessity was also forcing other young people, especially in deprived areas, towards early labour market entry and into unskilled/precarious work, in order to 'earn money'. This invariably raised concerns from teaching staff about the increased risk of dropout for 'poor' work, the lack of training offered to young people who enter precarious employment and, consequently, a heightened propensity for them to become NEET. Given the statutory duty on LAs to identify and support young people under the age of 18 who are not participating,[44] a key finding from this research is the *lack* of help and support available to young people who are either compelled to enter the labour market due to their family circumstances or wish to leave education and training at the earliest opportunity.

> 'Because they're coming out of school and being told (by their parents) a lot of the time, "we need money in the house, we need you to go and earn money, you're old enough now, go and earn money." And that is really, really difficult to say to a 16-year-old child, no, you can't do this.'
>
> **Education and training provider**

CB is not paid if a young person enters an apprenticeship or full-time employment either with or without training. Consequently, the relatively low pay offered to young apprentices, together with the withdrawal of CB,

44 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/660e971663b7f8001fde187f/Participation_of_young_people_in_education__employment_or_training.pdf(page 15)

can make the apprenticeship route a less appealing option to those from low-income households, even if there are suitable opportunities available to them.

Institutional barriers

While most case study areas reported a sufficient coverage of post-16 full-time education provision, there were variations and shortages in training options. Shortages of Foundation-level and Level 1 training were widely reported, together with limited roll-on/roll-off provision. This disproportionately impacts young people with low level/no qualifications, as well as those who drop out of mainstream learning. In some areas, it was reported that the number of training providers and, hence, the range of provision available to young people, had declined in recent years due to funding cuts and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had reduced employers' training requirements in sectors such as food and hospitality and retail.

Evidence was strong about the key role that charities and third sector organisations played in supporting hard to help/reach young people to engage in post-16 learning and offer alternative provision. Their efforts to engage with young people in their communities, through outreach work, generated many examples of innovative practice, such as mentorship and bespoke learning options. This helped young people who needed additional 'stepping stones' towards accessing full-time EET options due to issues such as educational or social disadvantage, mental health and anxiety barriers and unmet SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) needs. However, their capacity to sustain and expand their offer was often thwarted by short-time funding mechanisms. Charities and training providers spoke of their difficulties in managing annual funding allocations, which dictate resource and staffing levels. Stakeholders from a charity and training provider reported that funding restrictions had either forced them to discontinue post-16 programmes or withdraw funding from external partners.

Social and personal barriers

While many young people welcome the opportunity to move into post-16 learning to start new study or training programmes and transfer to a new environment, several key challenges and trends affect participation, retention and achievement rates in post-16 education. Mental health is one that seems fundamental and was mentioned by several stakeholders as a barrier for young people sustaining engagement with education and training.

> 'Quite a lot of mental health issues, so a lot of anxiety, depression, social anxiety, dislike leaving the house, confidence.'
>
> **Charity worker**

There were many examples of education and training providers offering enhanced programmes of support, including mentorship and tailored

learning options in order to engage young people and to encourage them to complete their courses:

> 'there's a lot of mental health issues, which obviously … means that we can't then pick them up from one course and put them into another one if there's something available because they can't deal with all the … you know they've got mental health issues, so they need to deal with those. So, it's looking at what we can give them to engage with that's going to help them to move forward, but also help them to deal with the mental health issues. '
>
> **LA representatives**

A significant ongoing issue is the anxiety experienced by students who were home-schooled or spent extended periods of time at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it difficult for them to transition back to full-time learning (or any other alternative provision).

5.3 Impact of the RPA

Feedback from local organisational stakeholders about the impact of introducing the RPA chimed with evidence derived from the policymaker interviews, which suggested that the policy had 'lost its teeth' from design to implementation. This was seen to be due to the withdrawal of policy initiatives that had been set up to support it; the absence of consequences for young people if they failed to comply with RPA requirements; and the withdrawal of the duties on employers to adhere to the legislation. However, the biggest barrier to achieving full participation in learning for under-18s was the impact of austerity measures. In some cases, cuts to post-16 education and training provision had adversely affected opportunities for the most disadvantaged groups of learners, who often require more resource-intensive, bespoke and tailored interventions and support.

Overall, the RPA is not driving local strategic post-16 decision-making among key stakeholders, although it does impact operationally by encouraging education and training providers to work more closely together to deliver post-16 destination data requirements; engage more widely on their post-16 offer; and address barriers to learning that some groups of young people face. The most positive aspect of the policy was that it had created a 'momentum' behind addressing the NEET agenda at the local level. It had also positively shifted a cultural expectation around the need to participate in post-16 education and training among some young people, as well as providing a greater impetus for providers to extend their post-16 offer. There was, however, an overwhelming lack of appetite to compel young people to remain in learning until the age of 18 or for them to face penalties if they failed to comply.

Student cohorts and parents/carers were reported as being well-informed on young people's duty to participate in post-16 education, training or

employment, although the degree to which this information was 'retained' by disengaged learners was called into question. In addition, young people were less aware of their option to enter work with training as part of the RPA 'offer'.

A key drawback of the legislation was a perceived failure to ensure 'connectivity' across post-16 providers, especially with local employers, as well as across government departments. For instance, brokering and embedding data-sharing agreements between different institutions could help to facilitate a well-informed and contextualised local NEET/post-16 strategy.

A reported consequence emanating from the need for schools to produce intended destinations data for their Year 11 students over a strict time period was that some young people were being encouraged to make 'hurried' post-16 course applications so that schools could comply with data delivery requirements. This is something also evidenced among the young people themselves (see Chapter 6). Potentially, this could lead to recording inaccurate intended and actual destinations, as well as to higher dropout rates from post-16 learning.

> 'I would say that the schools work really hard to ensure that every young person has a destination, the issue of course is that as soon as results day comes along, and they've either got their destination or they haven't, the schools lose control of that element of it. So they can make sure that they have a destination in mind, that they've done their applications, that they've got an offer, but beyond that, it's really difficult for them to trace. [...] but of course that's really difficult because people change their contact details, don't answer the phone, don't answer e-mails! So they can only do up to a point. And then having spoken to the colleges recently about how they then track things like their retention and their ... you know whether they have got the students that were supposed to have gone, I think it's still unclear. I think that the data is still lacking.'
>
> **Local authority representative**

The escalating rise in NEET numbers among the post-18 group raised concerns about large numbers of young people falling through policy 'cracks' once they reach the age of 18. Local authorities' RPA duties focus on tracking 16- and 17-year-olds through the September Guarantee and the Activity Survey. Consequently, the destinations of 18-year-olds are not uniformly collected in the same way, which leaves young people vulnerable if they do not seek support from DWP. Prior to the introduction of the RPA, LAs tracked young people until the end of their post-16 learning (end of Year 13), therefore including 18-year-olds in their destination data. Some respondents described this as a shortfall in offering support to young people and a clear lack of joined-up thinking between DfE, which manages the RPA and the16-17-year-old NEET group, and DWP, which manages the post-18 NEET group.

There were differing levels of confidence about the extent to which the RPA had raised students' aspirations and opportunities. Generally, while the RPA was perceived to be a worthwhile initiative, notably in helping to shape a shared agenda around post-16 learning, the way it ended up being implemented had not, in itself, significantly altered post-16 providers' methods of student engagement; widened the post-16 offer; expanded employer engagement; or, critically, enhanced interventions and support provided to vulnerable groups of learners in a substantial way.

However, moving forward, the RPA did offer the potential for developing and harnessing opportunity structures for young people, especially for those who are least likely to participate in post-16 learning, if it was accompanied by enhanced resourcing at the local level. Moreover, it did offer the scope to assist in delivering high quality post-16 provision that was aligned with the needs of the local economy. Crucially, this could be achieved through positive engagement with young people, rather than through compulsion or legal enforcement.

6

Case study evidence: young people's experiences

6 Case study evidence: young people's experiences

In this chapter, we continue to explore evidence from our six case study areas, this time focusing on young people's perspectives on the factors that influence their post-16 destination decision-making. These include Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) received during secondary school; their prior experience of education; the education and training opportunities available to them; influences that affected their decision-making; any barriers they faced in their pre- and post-16 journey; and their perspectives on the practicalities and challenges of the RPA policy. The latter was derived from asking young people about their awareness of being required to stay in some form of post-16 learning. For the majority, this was widely understood, although this focused on the need to stay in full-time learning, as opposed to a demonstrating a clear understanding of the other post-16 options that were open to them.

Each of the six case study areas had distinct characteristics and context-specific challenges. They represented a range of socioeconomic contexts and this variation affected access to the range of post-16 education and training provisions available to young people. While the types of opportunities (sixth form colleges and/or schools with sixth forms, further education (FE) college courses, alternative education and training pathways, and apprenticeships) were broadly similar across the areas, stark differences emerged in terms of the number of options, their local availability and accessibility, and the flexibility they provided to young people. A common finding across the case study areas was the narrow provision available for young people not following 'mainstream routes' (sixth form or FE college provision) and limited accessibility to suitable training provision and apprenticeship programmes, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas.

Finally, the sample was heavily weighted towards including young people in post-16 alternative provision; vocational learning in FE colleges; full-time training options and young people who were NEET. Therefore, the views of high-achieving A-level/Level 3 students are under-represented, due to the expectation that they would be retained in post-16 learning, regardless of the implementation of the RPA.

6.1 Making a post-16 choice

Making an informed post-16 EET (education, employment or training) choice is dependent upon young people (and to some extent their parents/carers) knowing what local opportunities are available and how to navigate the post-16 landscape. In this section, we discuss what influenced young

people's decision-making, including their CEIAG experiences during their pre- and post-16 learning, and their thoughts on the availability and quality of opportunities available to them at their transition point.

6.1.1 Experience with pre-16 learning

Young people's secondary school experiences significantly affected their post-16 preferences. Those interviewed had experienced very mixed educational journeys. Some transitioned seamlessly to their post-16 destination, while others, especially those without a career plan and with previous school absences or exclusions, encountered a non-linear and complex pathway. Some participants described their participation in mainstream education as *'very challenging'*, *'horrible'*, and reported *'hating school'*.

Young people who had experienced difficulties in their learning reported how they felt unable to speak to members of staff about the issues they faced. They described a lack of *'respect'* from teaching staff and instead felt they were being *'blamed'* for their *'failure'* to succeed or participate at school. Poor relationships with teachers were reported: *'I did not like how they were treating me'* (Gabrielle, YP).

Some young people also argued there was a lack of understanding and adequate support in school concerning mental health challenges and learning difficulties. Those who reported behavioural problems in school felt that they were described as 'naughty' by their teachers and other members of staff and often disciplined with detention or isolation. At its extreme, some participants were able to recall instances of being directly discriminated against by teaching staff, due to a lack of understanding around learning difficulties. At times, this led to their eventual disengagement with school. Those with negative school experiences often reported choosing FE provision, apprenticeships or alternative training provision as their post-16 destinations.

6.1.2 Source of information: supporting an informed choice

The process of deciding on post-16 options was informed by young people's varying access to high quality CEIAG. In the following section, we examine the various sources of information and influences that have recently affected – and currently affect – a young person's post-16 decision-making.

Schools' CEIAG

The range of CEIAG available to young people varied greatly depending on the school they attended and the resources available, including access to qualified career advisers. Many young people could not recall their career guidance experiences directly affecting their post-16 decisions. The few who received individual IAG interviews described them as general advice on mainstream pathways, with few finding it genuinely helpful. One-to-one interviews with careers advisers were rare, which was attributed to a lack

of resources: *'there were so many people and so little resources'* (Andy, YP). Several young people reported feeling *'lost'* and having to *'figure it out for themselves'* (Focus Group 1).

Not all interviewees made a conscious post-16 choice. Participants attending sixth forms generally shared neutral to positive experiences about school-based careers provision. A few praised the high quality of CEIAG they had received. However, many young people voiced concern about the lack of breadth and depth in the CEIAG they had received, especially those interested in vocational routes. Options were often presented as binary: vocational college programmes versus A-levels. Sixth form was too often positioned as the default route by many career advisers and school staff, notably for young people who were considered to be 'high-achieving' GCSE attainers. This was reported to be especially true for those attending schools with sixth forms, which questions the impartiality of the advice that some young people received.

Post-16 FE and apprenticeship options were unevenly covered by career advisers, in comparison with school-based post-16 full-time learning routes. There was often little to no information about apprenticeships, which was attributed to advisers' lack of knowledge and to the scarcity of apprenticeship places. Young people wishing to transition directly into the labour market report being offered little to no support from their schools. They often relied on their own time and skills to successfully secure a position, oftentimes in a low-skilled, low-paid job. Those unable or unwilling to transition to sixth form study were reported being directed towards FE provision: *'They didn't speak much about apprenticeships, it was more so like everyone was going to college'* (Debora, YP).

Young people felt their aspirations were largely overlooked: 'th*ey wanted to push us to go to sixth form and go to uni, and kind of not do what you want to do'* (Lora, YP). While young people expected help identifying a career path and applying for it, some reported that support was *'a tick box exercise'*. However, when CEIAG was helpful, it made a substantial difference: *'I want to work on cars, you know and … well they tried getting me to come to this college to do this course, I'm enjoying it now'* (Chris, YP).

Effective CEIAG practices were reported among young people attending a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) in one locality. They benefited from small classes, student-centred support, personalised career advice, and practical help with applications and interviews. Some young people were accompanied to job sites to explore vacancies and to help address travel concerns. Furthermore, some young people in post-16 FE provision noticed an improved CEIAG offer in contrast to their school-based experiences. However, other respondents questioned the ability of some college staff to support students who wished to switch courses or who were 'at risk' of dropping out or who had dropped out from their course.

Career fairs, employer events, work experience and open days

Participants had mixed views on the value of Year 10 work experience programmes. Some found their placement *'very useful'* in informing their future career planning. This highlights the positive effects derived from offering hands-on work experience placements to students to assist with them with their decision-making. Other young people were less enthusiastic and felt it was mostly a tokenistic exercise, often arranged through family or friends and irrelevant to their interests: *'not finding it very helpful'* (Ricky, YP).

Career fairs were also viewed inconsistently, although largely considered to be unhelpful in effectively informing their post-16 choice. Some appreciated meeting college staff and having *'mock interviews'*, while others found them uninformative and dominated by one-way business presentations. Open days in FE colleges were more positively received. One student described attending an open day to *'meet some staff members, other students, and look around the college'* (Focus Group 2), which helped their decision-making. However, there were significant inconsistences in who was able to access to open day opportunities, largely influenced by differences in school resources and a sub-selection of student cohorts.

The influence of teachers, parents and peers

Young people often relied on their family and peers, personal interests, school experiences and the opportunity awareness they had about the range of options open to them in their local area to help shape their career planning. Many cited the influence of parents, siblings or a specific teacher in their decision-making. Young people commonly described their parents as wanting them to be happy and successful, in addition to supporting their aspirations. In some cases, siblings who had completed non-sixth form routes had offered practical guidance.

In Year 11, teachers became a more prominent source of guidance, often being reported as more impactful than school-based career advisers: *'My teachers, specific teachers, gave me guidance'*. Subject-specific advice was valued, and teachers' interest in students made a significant difference: *'what do **you** really want to do?'*. Teaching staff were inspirational for some: *'The biggest thing that made me do the college course I did was because my favourite teacher was in computing'* (Peter, YP).

Pastoral teams were also influential, offering a safe space for discussion and alternative ideas. Some young people often visited pastoral staff because they were comfortable with them and felt listened to.

Peers also played a role, even though at times they appeared to reinforce narrow expectations, such as the pressure to pursue the A-level route. There was a clear divide between the perceived value attached to academic and vocational routes. FE and vocational learning were often stigmatised as *'second-rate'* compared to the traditional post-16 A-level

route. One participant recalled: *'I didn't think it was like normal to go to college, … it was just so like taboo in my life'* (Focus Group 3).

6.1.3 Views on post-16 provision

Participants reflected on the perceived limitations they faced choosing their post-16 options, as a result of programme availability, qualification thresholds, workplace and safeguarding restrictions and how these affected their future aspirations. Across many case study areas, there were examples of some types of provision being oversubscribed. In some instances, this was coupled with providers recruiting young people who are most likely to complete their qualifications (i.e. 'cherry picking'), which was a prerequisite for providers to sustain their programme funding. Many young people shared the view: *'I don't think there's enough options'* (Valerie, YP).

Access to EET opportunities was closely linked to the local socioeconomic landscape of the area. Those living in deprived areas described the highly competitive and scarce range of opportunities available to them. Several young people reported being unable to enter their first-choice college course because of accessibility and affordability issues, especially linked to transport costs, and consequently some felt 'stuck' on an unsuitable pathway. Young people who were unsure about their next step after Year 11, or who had dropped out of their post-16 programme shortly after starting, reported a lack of flexible entry programmes to re-engage and were required to wait until the next academic year to start another programme.

Some young people expressed a strong desire to enter employment at the age of 16: *'I would have honestly just rather go to work'* (Belinda, YP). Regarding direct routes to employment, some participants argued that the job market had significantly changed in the last few years, with fewer opportunities being available, especially for 16-18-year-olds. *'There wasn't many opportunities to explore different work options'* (Robbie, YP). A lack of work experience, as well as limitations imposed through health and safety regulations, safeguarding requirements and licensing laws, were seen as the key barriers to accessing the labour market. Paid learning opportunities, such as apprenticeships and jobs with training, were seen as important options. As one participant put it: *'16-year-olds want to go out and earn money. If academics [cf. Academic studies] isn't for them, they should be able to do that'* (Erica, YP). However, apprenticeship openings were felt to be scarce and highly competitive, while those who managed to secure a job often accessed precarious, seasonal and low-paid work (this is explored further in section 6.2.1 below).

6.2 Barriers faced by young people

The following section examines barriers to post-16 education, employment and training identified by young people. These barriers have been classified into three categories: **structural barriers** relating to economic, social and cultural disparities; **institutional barriers** referring to the education and qualification system; and **social and personal barriers**, that is, how relational dynamics can impact young people's capacity to succeed, and the young people's self-reflections on their mental and emotional experiences. These categories are not separate spheres but instead become interdependent on one another. For instance, structural inequalities have a direct impact on the interpersonal dynamics at play, as income inequality can be particularly pronounced in some cases, which can impact the mental health of the young person and their perceived capacity and material opportunities to succeed in their future aspirations. We will draw on this intersectionality of evidence in the following section.

6.2.1 Structural barriers

Income deprivation and lack of opportunity

Echoing the findings in Chapter 5, the economic constraints experienced by some young people were highlighted as a dominant barrier. Financial pressures forced some young people to prioritise earning over education, particularly in families where their contribution to their household's income was essential.

> 'There's a pressure for kids to start earning money, bring money into the house as soon as possible. [...] If your family is keen for you to not be in education and instead to be earning money, then you're probably going to be less likely to stay in education.'
>
> **Focus Group 5**

In some case study areas, young people's work opportunities were largely restricted to low-paid, seasonal or part-time jobs (see section 5.2.3). Connections to work opportunities through family and friends were seen as an optimal way forward to accessing employment, although they often lacked training or progression.

> 'I've applied to, like, over a hundred part-time jobs and I don't have ... I haven't got any of them, so it's just really difficult to get a job at 16.'
>
> **Justin, YP**

Transport: access, confidence and cost

Resonating with findings from section 5.1, transport was considered to be a key challenge to education, employment and training, both in urban and rural contexts. Transport barriers could take many forms, including

accessibility constraints due to limited and infrequent public transport; substantial costs both in terms of money and time; and young people's resilience and lack of confidence travelling to far or unfamiliar areas.

> 'It's a bit hard to bring yourself to leave your comfort zone if there's never really been anywhere other than (name of city).'
>
> **Focus Group 7**

Regarding accessibility, young people from rural areas commented on the inadequate public transport system available to them to access post-16 opportunities. Furthermore, some young people in urban areas reported the substantial time, travel costs and accessibility issues they faced to access their chosen college/sixth form or training provision.

With regard to direct costs, most local education and training providers offered household income-assessed bursary funding to students to cover travel and study expenses. However, young people are often unable to apply for funding until they start their course, which can cause both uncertainty about eligibility and time lags in the receipt of payments. Staff members commented on how some young people are unaware of their potential bursary eligibility, while in other instances, the bureaucratic steps towards accessing them can be complex and lead, in extreme cases, to a young person not starting or dropping out of their course.

> 'I believe there's laws [...] like up to 16 education is kind of obliged to provide things like travel, help with travel costs and things up to 16, but that doesn't go past 16. So we're asking disadvantaged kids post-16 to still be in education but not provide the support that surrounded that, allows that to happen and that's bad.'
>
> **Focus Group 6**

Issues such as community violence and safety were also considered to affect some young people's willingness and ability to travel. More broadly, crime, gang culture, drug and alcohol addiction and violence were raised by young people as growing problems in their community. Some described instances of community violence that created fears about safety at the local level, including the educational environment, reporting extreme instances of bullying and violence at school.

> '[I] sort of always think someone is out to get me.'
>
> **Focus Group 8**

> 'it's more knives around, it's everyone thinking they need to use it for protection and when it's not used for protection, it just like ... it's getting thrown at someone.'
>
> **Focus Group 8**

6.2.2 Institutional barriers

Funding provision and staffing

Shortcomings in CEIAG provision were discussed in section 6.1.2, and these were echoed in terms of being a recognised EET barrier. Some participants called for the recruitment of career guidance staff who can offer unbiased CEIAG, as well as more wellbeing and mental health professionals and counsellors to address the growing number of students with complex need profiles (see more in section 6.2.4 below).

Reassessing standardised education and the qualification model

Young people reflected on the difficulties they experienced at key transition points, namely from primary to secondary education and from secondary to post-16 provision. They stressed a need for a smoother, more gradual transition, as well as voicing wider criticisms about the education system. It was perceived to be increasingly tied to qualification grade acquisition and standardised testing, which they argued were not suitable for some students.

> 'The jump from primary school to secondary school is quite a large jump, it's scary for some people, and I feel like again, there's not enough support in that area [...] in secondary school it's drilled into your head, your GCSEs are the most important thing in your life. But that's the way it's put to you, they're important, if you don't get your GCSEs, your life's ruined, you can't get a job.'
>
> **Kaitlen, YP**

Thus, a key problem recognised by young people as a barrier to achieving a successful EET transition was rooted in the standardised approach to education, or as a young person expressed, '*it's tailored to, like, your average Joe*' (Ricky, YP). Many considered the focus on GCSE grades as a major driver within schools – '*just trying to get us through a qualification*' (Focus Group 9) – while some young people reduced qualification attainment to just *'a piece of paper'* to enter the job market. Participants reported how failing to attain certain qualifications during Year 11 had either temporarily delayed their access to their desired post-16 destination or derailed their future career plans altogether. Many described struggling with grades and attendance, with several referring to themselves as 'not academic'. This failure was often equated with a sense of questioning their own self-worth:

> 'I didn't meet their expectations. So, I felt like they were just trying to send me off and make it someone else's problem.'
>
> **Gary, YP**

Specifically, the compulsory maths and English requirement was highlighted as a significant hurdle, with some participants having had to retake exams on numerous occasions. Young people considered that this ultimately

hindered rather than expanded their ability to successfully access post-16 provision, including early employment. Furthermore, they questioned the content of the maths and English curriculum, as it was viewed as irrelevant to their future career plans, and unhelpful in offering them concrete life and professional skills.

> 'We have leaned too much [on] "academics" [cf. Academic studies], we should have more just, you know, how to do your taxes, for example, you know, just general life skills, finance, more about our own politics, our systems, how to be a British citizen and that sort of stuff would be a lot more useful than your English and your maths, quite frankly.'
>
> **Focus Group 5**

6.2.3 Social and personal barriers

Family and peer influences

Family expectations about the value attached to educational attainment and labour market entry also challenged young people's thinking, as they considered these influences to be a key factor in their decision-making.

> 'My mum was just like … I'd be excluded, and she'd be like, yeah, whatever. But she was more focused on going out to work than like me behaving in school. Because she knew that, like, I hated it anyway. But what I don't understand with school is I won't like it and I won't want to go, but then I'll get excluded and they'll send me home anyway, and that's where I would want to be.'
>
> **Madelyn, YP**

Another interesting finding was the lack of appreciation and understanding among some young people about the effects that may emanate from their disengagement from the education system, its labelling and, consequently, the potential impact of their wider marginalisation. One young person on a NEET programme spoke of the need to explore the term 'NEET' and its meaning to young people:

> 'Most young people who are NEET don't know what NEET is […] they just think, oh I've dropped out, like I'm not going, they just don't realise that they're actually in that bracket of NEET.'
>
> **Janna, YP**

Caring responsibilities

Participants with family caring responsibilities reflected on the time and emotional toll this could take on their lives, while simultaneously navigating the post-16 system. Caring duties included looking after younger siblings, as well as parents with disabilities or complex needs, which in turn often affected their own mental and physical wellbeing. Participants reported feeling misunderstood by staff members and, in some extreme cases, feeling unable to speak about their circumstances, due to fears of being

displaced from their family. Caring responsibilities were also seen as one of the main drivers for early labour market entry, either to provide households with additional income or to achieve economic independence. A young person reflected on their experience after they had been unable to secure employment after Year 11:

> 'I really struggled because I was obviously out of education, I had nothing to do, I was also ill, but I was also caring for my mum. So life was tough at that point, and I felt like it was going nowhere. And I felt like I was stuck…'
>
> **Ian, YP**

Some young people reported being referred to external support networks after requesting extra help. However, both young people and staff recounted issues with maintaining a collaborative approach between external stakeholders and the school environment, due to communication problems and a lack of partnership working. Some participants with complex barriers to education had found community trusts and youth projects vital in preventing complete disengagement and social isolation.

> 'I went through a stage where me and Mum were homeless for a few months, and the Foundation was just there, all the time, to talk, even if I just wanted to sit and cry, which I did multiple times! They just let me. They were always there.'
>
> **Janna, YP**

Mental health and lack of confidence

One of the key barriers to educational participation faced by young people was seen as the growing mental health crisis, which affected everyday life and future aspirations due to anxiety, depression and a general lack of self-confidence. This mental health crisis among young people was amplified during COVID-19 due to isolation and heightened social anxiety. Experiences of perceived failure – not reaching their target grades to access their desired course – were common among participants, severely affecting their mental health. Young people expressed the need for institutional support under these circumstances, which they considered vital to raising their aspirations. This support was seldom found in their pre-16 school environment.

> 'But I'd say the staff do need some mental health training and like an emotional support training for their students as well, because that is something they're severely, severely lacking in.'
>
> **Owen, YP**

To avoid pre-16 educational disengagement, participants argued there needed to be extra support in schools for vulnerable young people, in the form of support workers, counsellors or psychologists, to address their mental health and behavioural needs. The need to provide early intervention to prevent disengagement (before Year 10/11), was seen as key, as many considered post-16 interventions to be *'a little too late'*.

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

Learning difficulties and disabilities were considered to be a barrier to achieving future aspirations, with several participants reporting living with dyslexia, autism and ADHD. Furthermore, while those with a medical diagnosis could access EHCPs (Education, Health and Care Plans), many young people were undiagnosed or reported delays in the education and healthcare system to provide them with a diagnosis:

> 'Obviously it wasn't really known back then that I did have it, so they just thought I was being difficult for no reason, so it was quite … and then they banned me from like going in certain lessons and stuff, so even if I wanted to, I couldn't do it!'
>
> **Tommy, YP**

Young people with SEND argued that there was a continuous need to re-educate the staff in the education system, training providers, employers and the wider population about the range of needs and support required. Students with SEND expressed how they were treated differently but not fully supported during these stages:

> 'I was in a like side room, and like they branded it like for special people, like for special students, and I was like … I just don't want to go in, just not really where I want to be.'
>
> **Focus Group 7**

6.3 Views on the RPA

Positive impacts

Young people reported some positive reflections on the RPA policy, which fell into three main arguments:

1. **The policy 'helped', by improving young people's life chances, facilitating access to a wider range of learning options and the potential to secure better job opportunities in the future.** The value of remaining in education until the age of 18 enabled young people to have the opportunity to enhance their qualification attainment and to improve their future opportunity structures.

2. Some young people viewed these two extra years in learning as a '**second chance', a 'second life', an opportunity to 'right your wrongs'** and potentially to experience a new learning environment.

3. **The policy has the potential to reduce youth disengagement** by preventing a higher number of young people from becoming NEET. Young people argued that the push to continue participating in EET would prevent young people from falling through the net.

> 'It's probably a good idea, yeah, to stop people from directly transitioning out of secondary to doing absolutely nothing, and then building up an expectation that they are able to live off of doing nothing.'
>
> **Focus Group 10**

While viewing the policy as favourable, young people argued for the need to 'encourage' young people to stay in education, rather than a legal enforcement: *'it shouldn't really have to be a law'* (Grant, YP). Importantly, participants pointed out that the duty to participate needed to be backed by extra support, resources and opportunities available to young people.

Questioning the policy

Alongside these positive reflections, young people voiced three main criticisms of the policy:

1. **The rushed timeline to make a post-16 destination choice.** Many young people felt that their post-16 pathway was not driven by a specific career aspiration, but emanated from pressure to comply with the RPA policy. They reported that they just needed *'more time… just give them time to figure out what they want'* (Focus Group 11). Several young people interviewed described feeling hurried to choose their post-16 destination, as these were often dependent upon, and at times were altered by, GCSE results. Some chose A-level courses, hoping to keep their options open, while others did not make a decision on time and were left without a choice.

> 'Not being able to have that break to be able to kind of recuperate and actually understand the wider world, because for so many years I've just been day in, day out, same outfit, going to the same place, to the same, and seeing the same people, it gets monotonous very, very quickly, it becomes very bland. And again, especially to neurodiverse individuals like myself, it … that kind of monotony is basically hell. So coming out of that and then really seeing, oh OK, you've got to pick one of three things, you don't really get a choice in this, it's either back into the pipeline, or get a job.'
>
> **Individual Interview 3**

2. **The lack of impartial CEIAG.** The post-16 conversation was perceived to be too focused on traditional learning routes, i.e. A-level provision. Young people argued that the implementation of the RPA had failed to ensure that they were provided with impartial and sufficient information on all post-16 options, especially those relating to apprenticeships, training provision or direct employment with training (e.g., volunteering), arguing *'mainstream is not for everyone'* (Focus Group, 7).

> 'Some people just want to explore the practical world, the actual living and working…I think it traps some people that have a different idea of what they want to do.'
>
> **Focus Group 12**

> ‘Actual lessons on [options] … actual 60 minute lessons, where you look at every option there is, even if it’s like you look at apprenticeships for a 60 minute lesson, and then look at A-levels for a 60 minute … and do Army and that sort of … You’ve got to give them those three options, because those are realistically three options they’ve got coming out at 16.’
>
> **Focus Group 4**

3. **Its failure to re-engage young people after course discontinuation.** Young people believed that the duty to remain in post-16 learning is ineffective in re-engaging young people once they have decided, either by choice or by systematic default, to no longer participate in education and training. Participants reported insufficient support mechanisms in place to ensure continuous participation. Those who had completed school and ended up in an unsuitable course shared their feelings of being left alone and unsupported by both their school and/or other post-16 provider.

> ‘The RPA policy itself, it’s a short-termist, sticking plaster solution to the issue of NEET or youth unemployment. […] it doesn’t prevent NEET, it doesn’t prevent unemployment, it just kicks the can down the road.’
>
> **Focus Group 8**

Some young people criticised the reductive nature of the policy, describing it as a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach that fails to recognise local needs and individual circumstances. Participants also expressed that, ultimately, the message that should be shared among young people with regard to this policy is that their post-16 destination or GCSEs do not define future trajectories, and they challenged the mounting pressure to make early decisions on career pathways.

7

Conclusions and recommendations

7 Conclusions and recommendations

Ten years on, the challenge for this research was to determine the impact of raising the participation age in learning in England to 18. In raising the participation age, England followed our economic competitors' model, by not simply raising the school leaving age (RoSLA), but by offering a broad range of post-16 options that young people could follow. Furthermore, we also replicated their tendency to roll out this policy in a relatively short space of time (unlike the most recent 1972 RoSLA), which had implications for its design, funding and implementation.

Our qualitative evidence highlights how there was a contrast in the post-16 landscape during the policy design phase to that which existed post-2013. The latter was characterised by the RPA being operationalised in local areas that had been hit by austerity measures and significant changes to school management arrangements, which impeded local delivery of the RPA. In addition, roles and responsibilities were 'fuzzy', especially in relation to young people's duty to participate in post-16 learning. Therefore, the policy design had significantly altered by the time of its implementation, comprising largely of young people's legal duty to participate in learning until the age 18, together with LAs retaining responsibility for local RPA delivery, although accompanied with little or no additional financial support. It could be argued that we do not need (or did not need) legislation or the RPA, when most young people across the UK make a successful post-16 EET transition and, in any case, many 'choose' to stay in full-time learning. However, this negates responsibility for a vexing and persistent issue for policymakers, that is those who become NEET or enter precarious work between the ages of 16-18 and who disproportionately come from disadvantaged backgrounds. It also fails to shine a spotlight on those who drop out from learning between the ages of 16 and 18 and the benefits accrued from early intervention. The scarring effects of early leaving and youth disengagement are well documented in the academic literature.[45]

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the much changed context in which RPA was introduced compared with what was originally envisaged, our quantitative analysis of linked administrative data finds that there was a limited impact of the policy on overall participation in education or training during the first two years post-16. While the initial increase in participation age to 17 did see a small increase in participation in Year 12, driven by more young people remaining in school, without a drop in FE attendance, the full implementation to 18 saw a fall in overall participation, and a shift of young people from FE to school. For Year 13 the decrease in FE attendance remained but there was also a decrease in school attendance, and an

45 https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/02/18/youth-unemployment-scarring-effects/

increase in NEEThood and non-sustained participation, which was not offset by a small increase in employment. The other notable impact is the increase in dropout during the year, in particular from FE. On the more positive side, the additional attainment of Level 2 English, and the additional employment among Year 13s, does seem to translate into slightly higher earnings and employment at age 20, reflecting the small increases in human capital we identified as relating to the policy. Importantly, the positive effects are larger and, in some cases, more sustained among those with the lowest attainment at Key Stage 4. For all groups the issue of dropout from participation is an increasing issue. These findings on the macro scale resonate with much of the evidence from our case studies.

To a large extent, the case study research focused on the range of post-16 options open to young people, the local post-16 infrastructure, and the challenges of identifying and supporting young people who fail to participate or drop out from learning post-16 and find themselves either NEET or in poor work, rather than the majority who comply with their duty (either consciously or unconsciously) to participate. We have identified shortfalls in funding, policy drivers and infrastructure that adversely affect post-16 tracking arrangements, support services and the availability of post-16 provision to meet all needs. The recognised inequality between information and advice given to young people and their parents about vocational learning versus traditional academic routes was also very much in evidence. Moreover, the lack of identity, help and support given to young people who choose or need to enter the labour market at the age of 16/17 leaves this group as definite 'outsiders' in the post-16 arena. Their routes into the labour market, together with a lack of understanding about their local employers, in terms of who they are, where they are and what opportunities they have for young people, is a huge evidence gap. Furthermore, it was evident from the research that young people under the age of 18 are finding their own routes into the labour market and lack any coherent guidance and support service to help them. Aligned to this, the help given to employers to recruit and train under-18s is patchy and inconsistent.

It is notable that there was a great degree of consistency in the issues identified by the local stakeholders and those raised by the young people interviewed. The lack of funding available at LA level following austerity played a huge role: cutbacks were frequently mentioned by interviewees as affecting many different areas. In particular, the removal of complementary policies to support RPA (i.e. the EMA, the Connexions service) affected the availability of high quality CEIAG, and crucially the post-16 offer. The lack of roll-on/roll-off provision and courses at Foundation and Level 1 was highlighted, as were the limited apprenticeship options. Budget cuts also led to the removal of bespoke support and intervention services and exacerbated these issues, as did reductions in transport availability, particularly in rural contexts.

Youth poverty, and the incentives in the benefit system to continue even in an unsuitable course, was also highlighted as an issue for successful

post-16 participation. The same is true of the increased prevalence of mental health issues complicating post-16 transitions and engagement, and the lack of support services for young people with SEND or caring responsibilities. The current requirement of continuing in English and maths until a grade 4 or equivalent is achieved was identified as of limited value by some educators, and a further issue in successful post-16 transitions by young people. There were also some common positive reflections, with local stakeholders (including young people) recognising that RPA has provided a momentum to policy addressing the NEET agenda, and has changed the culture such that there is an expectation that young people will stay on in some form of learning beyond 16. Notably, they identified the potential of the RPA to develop the opportunity structures for those with the least likelihood of participating – but only if it can be supported by extra resourcing at local level to address the challenges identified.

Despite the challenges facing case study areas, there were identifiable areas of good practice. Firstly, in areas where there was a synergy and commitment between local providers to work together, with tangible efforts to reduce competition between them, the post-16 offer was more coherent and there were noticeable efforts made to identify and meet gaps in provision. In addition, CEIAG provision was better coordinated when local partnership working, data sharing and knowledge exchange were visible. Secondly, there were examples of effective good practice of working with students who had previously disengaged from mainstream education in PRUs and some training providers. This approach centred on individualised targeted work with young people with the aim of designing and delivering bespoke post-16 transition plans. Arranging and accompanying young people on visits to colleges, setting up and monitoring work experience placements and helping with job applications often formed part of this offer. Finally, in some case study areas, strenuous efforts were made by LA staff to contact young people who had become NEET. Staff were not only located in offices in areas of high deprivation but actively engaged in outreach work, which included home visits and regular contact with parents/carers.

The policymakers and many of the stakeholders who we interviewed in the case study areas acknowledged that since the RPA is in statute, we do have a duty to encourage and extend young people's participation in learning until the age of 18, although not through compulsion. While the failures surrounding the policy implementation are well documented in this report, we also highlighted where change, action and intervention are urgently needed. One of these was a perceived failure to ensure 'connectivity' across post-16 providers, as well as across government departments. This could be addressed by brokering and embedding data-sharing agreements between different institutions, in order to help facilitate a well-informed and contextualised local NEET strategy.

Set out below is a list of policy recommendations, which are designed to harness the RPA commitment and its untapped potential to expand learning opportunities for young people, especially with regard to supporting our

most vulnerable groups of learners and early leavers between the ages of 16-18. The recommendations specifically seek to find ways of offering earlier intervention during the post-16 phase, in order to reduce the large number of young people who drop out, may go unnoticed and then surface to enter the welfare system when they reach the age of 18.

7.1 Policy recommendations

1. The **duties and responsibilities attached to the RPA** should be reassessed to ensure that all groups of young people are supported, regardless of their post-16 destination.

   Young people who are NEET or who move into employment/training must be guaranteed equivalent levels of intervention and support to those who remain in full-time learning. This must be accompanied by generating greater levels of awareness about the RPA's underpinning requirements and duties among all groups of stakeholders, especially young people and their parents/carers.

   Moving forward, RPA duties and responsibilities could be closely aligned with the recommendations emanating from the forthcoming publication of the Government's Curriculum and Assessment Review and the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) focus on employment and skills support, linked to 'Get Britain Working' and 'Pathways to Work'.

2. Much closer alignment between the **Department for Education, Skills England and the Department for Work and Pensions is needed**, especially in relation to tackling the NEET agenda and to improve young people's access to training and work.

   Shared responsibility must lead to a much greater shift towards early identification and intervention of young people who are 'at risk' or who become NEET, and establish early intervention measures, attached to combined targets to reduce youth unemployment and youth economic inactivity rates across the 16-24 population.

   Much greater levels of help and support should be provided to young people under the age of 18 who access the **labour market**, and to their employers. Crucially, clear ownership of guidance and **placement** services must be determined for this group, including for Year 11 and Year 12 learners who wish to leave full-time education.

3. **Strategic authorities** should be given statutory responsibility for RPA duties, including tracking all 16-18-year-olds in their area.

   This could be combined with local/strategic authorities taking responsibility for delivery of the existing September Guarantee for 16-17-year-olds and with the new Youth Guarantee for 18-21-year-olds (or a combined offer), integrating the delivery at a sub-national level of the education, training,

employment and social security policies and programmes of the DfE, DWP and Skills England.

We should increase local/regional responsibilities to achieve greater uniformity; fill gaps in local post-16 provision and provide a commissioning role; deliver staff training and development to LA staff and post-16 providers; and enhance local labour market assessment exercises and employer engagement.

4. The level of resources given to **local authorities** (LAs) should be increased to enable them to fulfil their current RPA duties.

   This would ensure that LAs' responsibilities for collating post-16 destination data and identifying and supporting young people under the age of 18 who are NEET are adequately met.

5. **Post-16 destination data collection and sharing methods** must be reviewed to improve tracking, early intervention measures to support young people and data accuracy.

   This should be followed up with a shift towards the implementation of an ongoing data-sharing model at LA level, rather than retaining an over-reliance on snapshot data measures. It must also remove the duplication of resources attached to multiple providers currently collating post-16 destination data and barriers to establishing data-sharing agreements.[46]

6. An assessment of the returns derived from the current post-16 **maths and English** resit model should be commissioned, in order to determine whether the current policy and its delivery mechanisms provide value for money and meet their original objectives.

   A much wider expansion and embedding of literacy and numeracy within post-16 functional skills teaching and learning could replace the current resit policy. Furthermore, money saved by removing the resit policy could be directed towards measures such as reinstating and expanding entry level courses and roll-on/roll-off provision (in line with recommendation 4), continuing the payment of child benefit to all of the post-16 group (recommendation 7), and expanding mental health services in schools and colleges (recommendation 10).

7. To tackle **youth poverty** and ensure that financial incentives do not drive choices at 16, **Child Benefit** should remain payable to all young people until the age of 18, whatever their status.

   By extending eligibility to the families /carers of young people in apprenticeships and in work with training, more young people would be encouraged to follow these routes. This should also reduce the risk of young people electing to pursue school or FE courses to retain CB

46 https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/media/uokfurli/local-destinations-data-report.pdf

that result in dropout. Moreover, due consideration should be given to continuing entitlement to CB (subject to household income) to young people who become NEET. This should be designed to act as an engagement strategy for NEET young people under the age of 18, to ensure that they maintain contact with LA/DWP services, and be subject to agreeing a post-16 action plan towards EET entry. It would improve young people's access to help and support before they reach the age of 18 and help reduce 'activity unknown' statistics among the under-18s group.

8. Improvements to **CEIAG provision** must be made, in particular by addressing widespread inconsistencies in accessibility and delivery.

   Embedding young people's (and their parents/carers') entitlement to access independent and impartial advice services should be prioritised, alongside access to advisers who are confident and competent to offer information and support on the full breadth of post-16 options open to young people (including employment support). At present, the effectiveness of CEIAG provision is heavily weighted towards measuring institutional performance at school or college level, i.e. focused on full-time learning, managed at a national level by the Careers and Enterprise Company. Young people should be at the heart of the CEIAG model of delivery, with equivalent access to help and support being available to young people who are NEET or in employment or training (if needed).

9. To reduce drop-out from full-time learning **post-16, common application procedures** (similar to the university application process) and **attendance performance measures** should be introduced.

   In doing so, the complexity surrounding young people making multiple course applications to different institutions at the end of Year 11 would be reduced and duplication of effort and non-starter statistics would be minimised. Introducing enhanced attendance monitoring procedures, especially in colleges, would improve the monitoring of persistent absence and drop-out rates in post-16 learning, as well as encourage a much wider use of RONIs (Risk of NEET Indicators) in schools and colleges. This would substantially improve our understanding of post-16 student needs and outcomes.

10. Support must be provided for the expansion of **mental health services** within schools and colleges, and greater support for young people with **SEND** to meet increased demand for services.

    Also, additional support pre-16 should reduce the prevalence of dropout at the end of the compulsory schooling transition point, as well as reducing the flow into NEEThood.

Appendix

Appendix

Data

Cohorts

We include in our data students from the six school cohorts prior to the introduction on the policy, along with the first five cohorts affected by the policy.

Table A1 Cohorts included in the data

Birth dates of the school cohort	KS4 (age 16) year in data	Can leave education at end of school year turned 16?	Required to stay to end of school year turned 17?	Required to stay until 18th birthday?	Total
Sept. 1990 - Aug. 1991	2007	✓	X	X	621,670
Sept. 1991 - Aug. 1992	2008	✓	X	X	622,140
Sept. 1992 - Aug. 1993	2009	✓	X	X	603,130
Sept. 1993 - Aug. 1994	2010	✓	X	X	608,820
Sept. 1994 - Aug. 1995	2011	✓	X	X	599,380
Sept. 1995 - Aug. 1996	2012	✓	X	X	594,200
Sept. 1996 - Aug. 1997	2013	X	✓	X	606,410
Sept. 1997 - Aug. 1998	2014	X	✓	✓	592,070
Sept. 1998 - Aug. 1999	2015	X	✓	✓	586,390
Sept. 1999 - Aug. 2000	2016	X	✓	✓	572,700
Sept. 2000 - Aug. 2001	2017	X	✓	✓	559,080
					Total = 6,565,970

Estimation

We estimate a series of linear regression models of the form:

$$p_i = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 RPA17\_D_c + \xi_1 RPA18_c + f(cohort_c) + \gamma_1 X_i + \varepsilon_{1i}$$

in which p_i is one of a number of indicators for sustained participation in some form: education/training, school, further education, employment and finally sustained NEEThood throughout the year. $RPA17\_D_c$ is a [0,1] indicator for the cohort affected by the initial RPA to 17; $RPA18_c$ is a [0,1] indicator for the cohorts affected by the full implementation of RPA to 18. We control for smooth changes between cohorts in participation outcomes using a quadratic function *f(.)* in cohort (year completed KS4, rescaled so that 2007=1). We include a range of control variables X_i detailed below. We then estimate further models with a similar form:

$$y_i = \alpha_2 + \beta_2 RPA17\_D_c + \xi_2 RPA18_c + g(cohort_c) + \gamma_2 X_i + \varepsilon_{2i}$$

in which y_i are other outcomes: a [0,1] indicator for non-sustained activity (starting school, FE or employment during the year but not remaining in one of these throughout), a [0,1] indicator for dropout from FE during the year, [0,1] indicators for different qualification attainments by age 18, labour market outcomes: log of annual earnings, days employed and days in receipt of out-of-work benefits at age 20. *g(.)* is a quadratic function in cohort. In all models we use robust standard errors.

Comparing outcomes at defined ages (i.e. participation at age 17 and 18) while also controlling for between cohort trends means we are unable to simultaneously control for shocks relating to the specific calendar time. However, these cohorts largely faced very similar macroeconomic circumstances.

Statistical controls

The full set of covariates included in each model are indicator variables for female, black, Asian, Chinese, mixed, other ethnicity; English as additional language; the percentage of secondary school time eligible for Free School Meals; ever looked after from age 15 onwards; indicator variables for ever special educational needs, ever special educational needs at secondary; absence rate at age 15, absence rate at age 16; indicator variables for ever permanently excluded; suspended once age 15; suspended two or more times age 15; suspended once age 16, suspended two or more times age 16; prior attainment: KS4 standardised score, KS2 standardised score, KS1 standardised score. We also include a quadratic cohort trend to capture smooth cohort-to-cohort changes in all the outcomes we model.

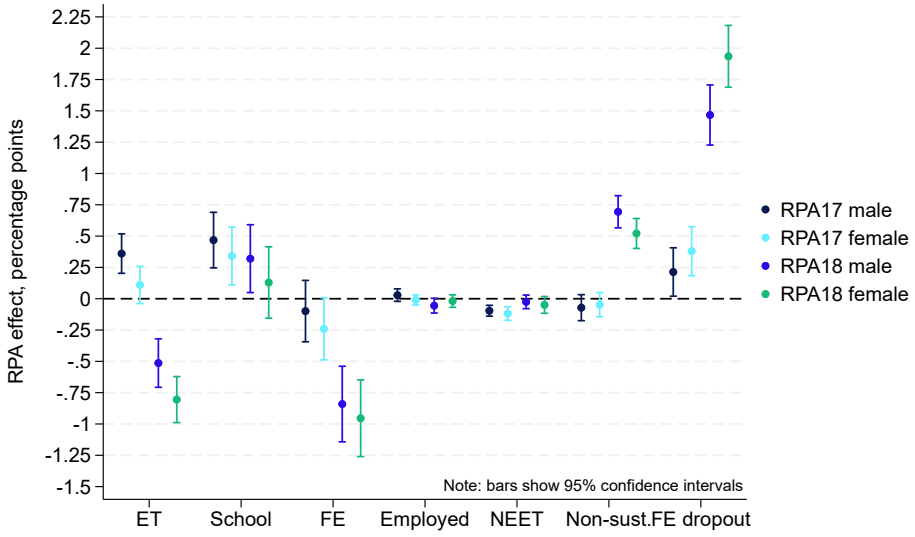
Table A2 Base level outcomes prior to the RPA implementation

Key Stage 4 year: 2012 Activity throughout Year 12	All	Boys	Girls	White	Black	Asian	Low attainers
Education or Training	0.841	0.827	0.856	0.840	0.890	0.889	0.651
School	0.381	0.362	0.401	0.366	0.441	0.495	0.124
Further Education	0.460	0.465	0.454	0.473	0.448	0.393	0.527
Employment	0.010	0.011	0.009	0.011	0.002	0.002	0.015
Not in Education, Employment or Training	0.008	0.007	0.009	0.008	0.002	0.003	0.029
Not in sustained activity throughout year	0.044	0.048	0.040	0.047	0.033	0.027	0.121
FE drop out during this year	0.091	0.093	0.088	0.094	0.069	0.063	0.155
Activity throughout Year 13							
Education, Employment or Training	0.774	0.755	0.793	0.766	0.846	0.855	0.533
School	0.316	0.294	0.340	0.301	0.374	0.431	0.078
Further Education	0.457	0.461	0.453	0.465	0.472	0.424	0.455
Employment	0.037	0.039	0.036	0.042	0.007	0.011	0.052
Not in Education, Employment or Training	0.020	0.018	0.022	0.022	0.008	0.007	0.069
Not in sustained activity throughout year	0.043	0.048	0.039	0.046	0.035	0.025	0.124
FE drop out during this year	0.093	0.094	0.092	0.097	0.074	0.057	0.171
Qualification attainment at age 18							
Level 1 or higher	0.920	0.902	0.938	0.917	0.919	0.945	0.663
Level 2 or higher	0.828	0.794	0.864	0.822	0.840	0.874	0.390
Level 2 English	0.700	0.633	0.770	0.692	0.695	0.755	0.145
Level 2 Maths	0.707	0.697	0.717	0.700	0.671	0.773	0.175
Level 3 or higher	0.494	0.441	0.549	0.479	0.504	0.581	0.048
Labour market outcomes at age 20							
Earnings (annual, £s)	6831	7383	6288	7244	4102	4726	6993
Days employed in the year	226	217	234	237	190	164	176
Days on out-of-work benefits in the year	31	28	34	33	27	19	88

Heterogeneity in impacts by gender, ethnicity and prior attainment

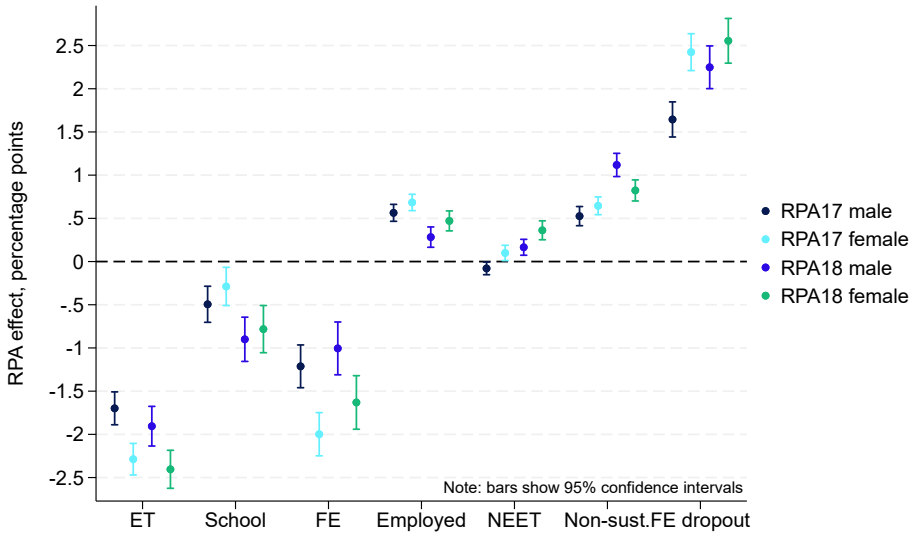
Gender

Figure A4.5 The association between RPA and activities during Year 12, by gender



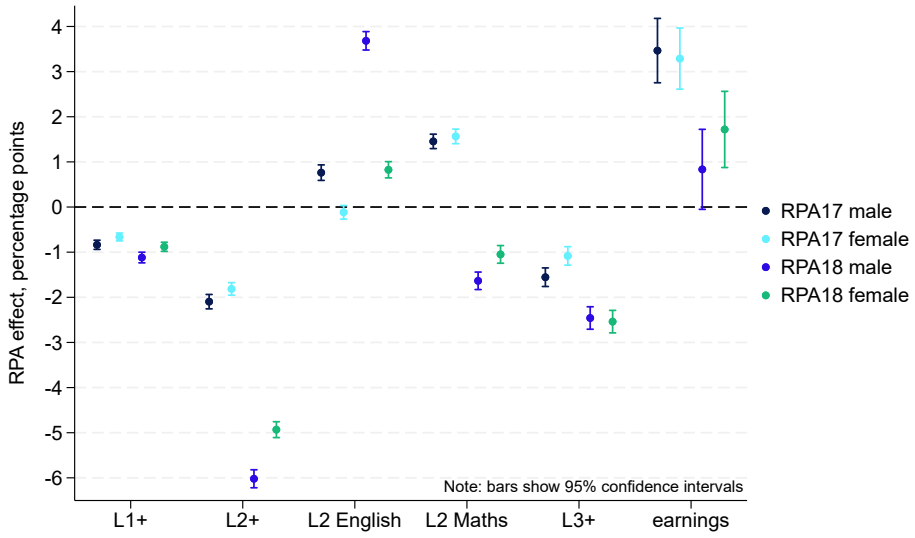
Base levels pre-RPA	Education or Training	School	Further Education	Employed	NEET	Non-sustained activity	FE drop out
Boys	82.7	36.2	46.5	1.1	0.7	4.8	9.3
Girls	85.6	40.1	45.4	0.9	0.9	4.0	8.8

Figure A4.6 The association between RPA and activities during Year 13, by gender



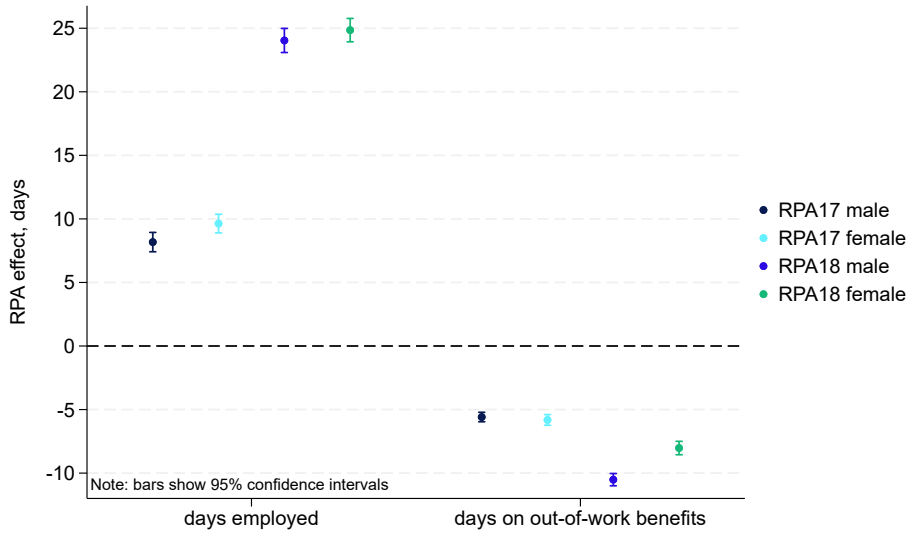
Base levels pre-RPA	Education or Training	School	Further Education	Employed	NEET	Non-sustained activity	FE drop out
Boys	75.5	29.4	46.1	3.9	1.8	4.8	9.4
Girls	79.3	34.0	45.3	3.6	2.2	3.9	9.2

Figure A4.7 The association between RPA and qualifications attained by age 18 and earnings at age 20, by gender



Base levels pre-RPA	Level 1 or higher	Level 2 or higher	Level 2 English	Level 2 Maths	Level 3 or higher	Earnings
Boys	90.2	79.4	63.3	69.7	44.1	7383
Girls	93.8	86.4	77.0	71.7	54.9	6288

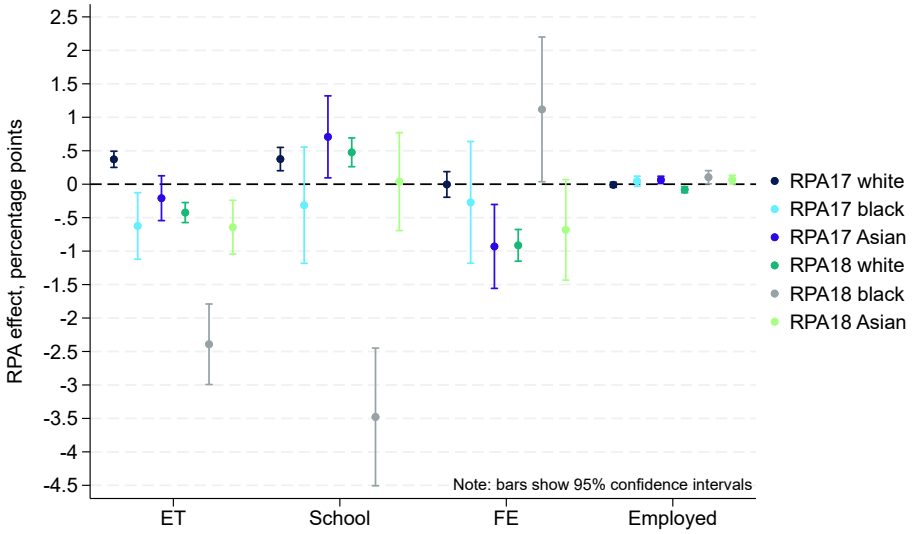
Figure A4.8 The association between RPA and employment and benefit receipt age 20, by gender



Base levels pre-RPA	Days employed in the year	Days on out-of-work benefits in the year
Boys	217	28
Girls	234	34

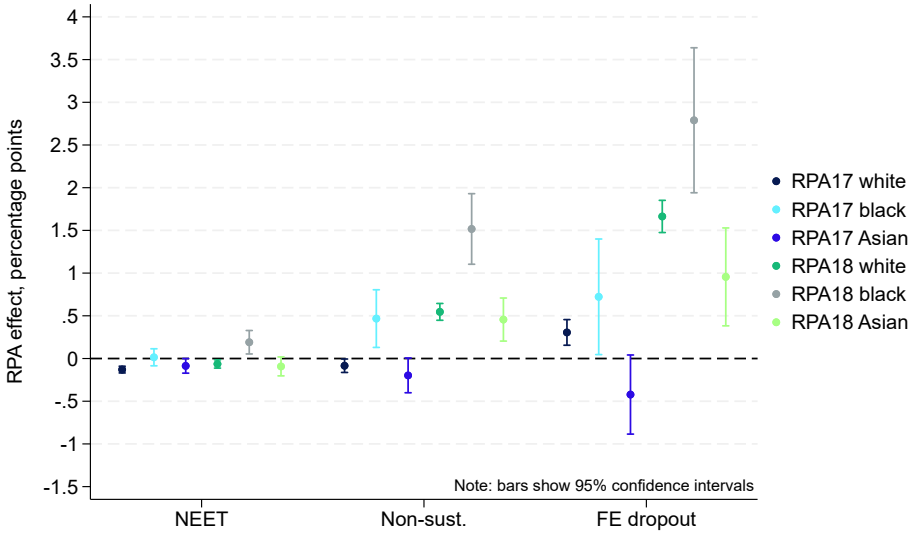
Ethnicity

Figure A4.9a The association between RPA and activities during Year 12, by ethnicity



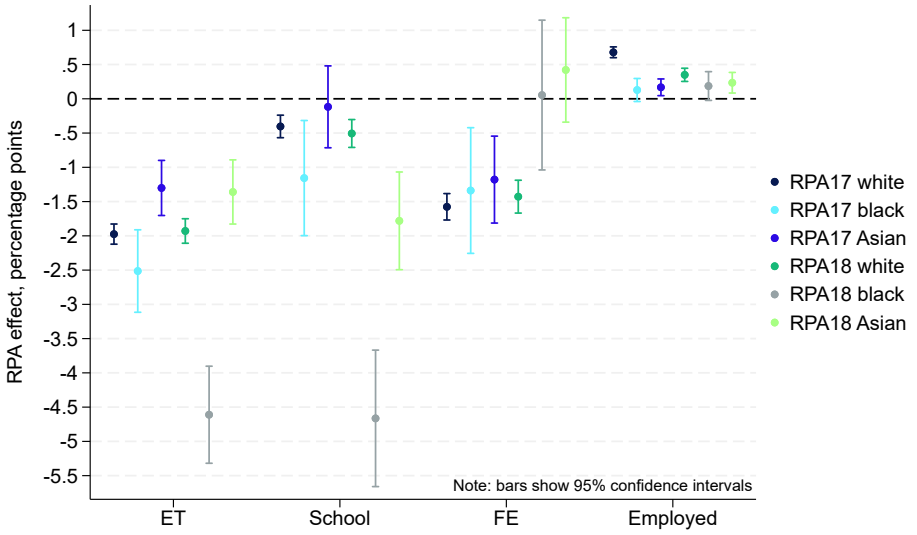
Base levels pre-RPA	Education or Training	School	Further Education	Employed
White	84.0	36.6	47.3	1.1
Black	89.0	44.1	44.8	0.2
Asian	88.9	49.5	39.3	0.2

Figure A4.9b The association between RPA and activities during Year 12, by ethnicity



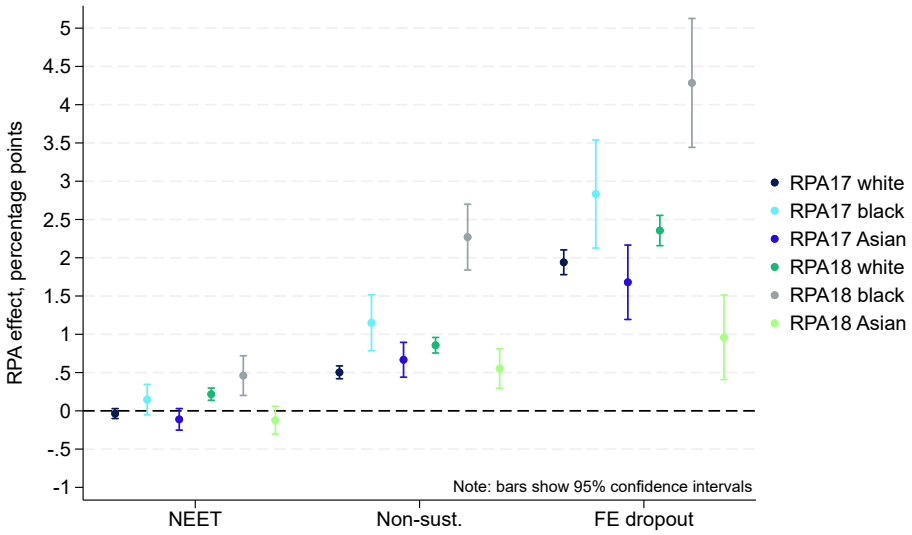
Base levels pre-RPA	NEET	Non-sustained activity	FE drop out
White	0.8	4.7	9.4
Black	0.2	3.3	6.9
Asian	0.3	2.7	6.3

Figure A4.10a The association between RPA and activities during Year 13, by ethnicity



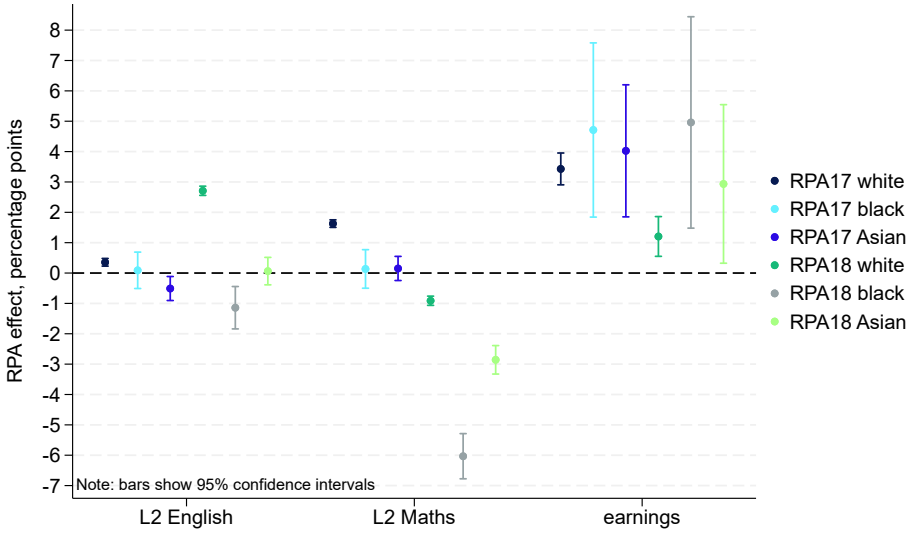
Base levels pre-RPA	Education or Training	School	Further Education	Employed
White	76.6	30.1	46.5	4.2
Black	84.6	37.4	47.2	0.7
Asian	85.5	43.1	42.4	1.1

Figure A4.10b The association between RPA and activities during Year 13, by ethnicity



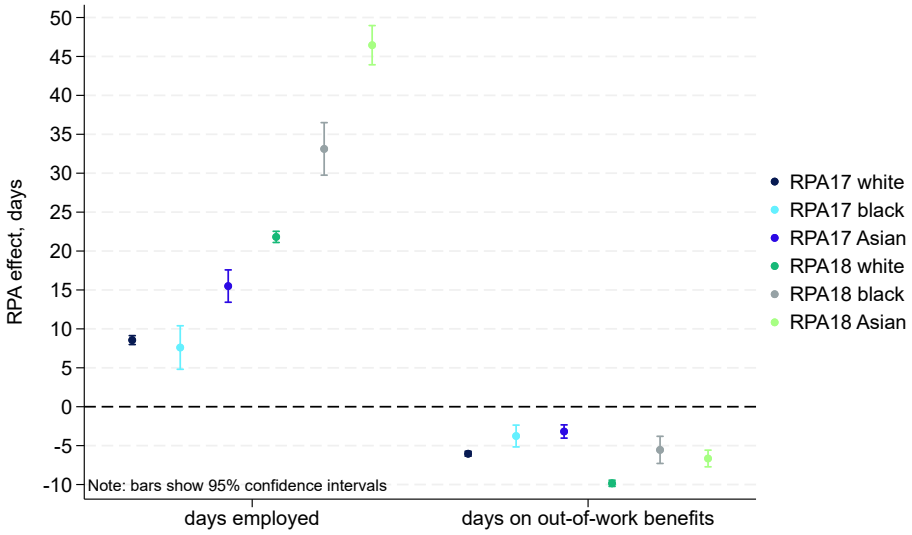
Base levels pre-RPA	NEET	Non-sustained activity	FE drop out
White	2.2	4.6	9.7
Black	0.8	3.5	7.4
Asian	0.7	2.5	5.7

Figure A4.11 The association between RPA and qualifications attained by age 18 and earnings at age 20, by ethnicity



Base levels pre-RPA	Level 2 English	Level 2 Maths	Earnings
White	69.2	70.0	7244
Black	69.5	67.1	4102
Asian	75.5	77.3	4726

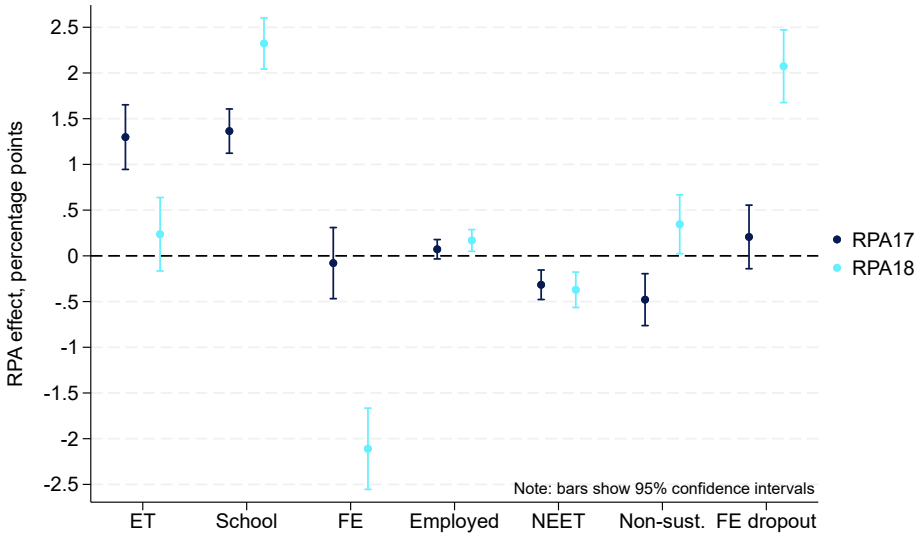
Figure A4.12 The association between RPA and employment and benefit receipt age 20, by ethnicity



Base levels pre-RPA	Days employed in the year	Days on out-of-work benefits in the year
White	237	33
Black	190	27
Asian	164	19

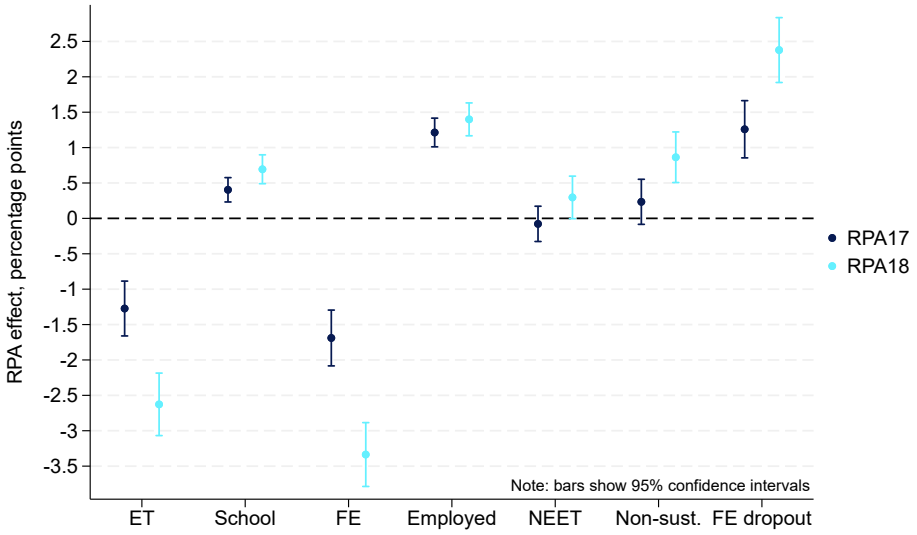
Low attainers at Key Stage 4 (GCSE)

Figure A4.13 The association between RPA and activities during Year 12, low attainers only



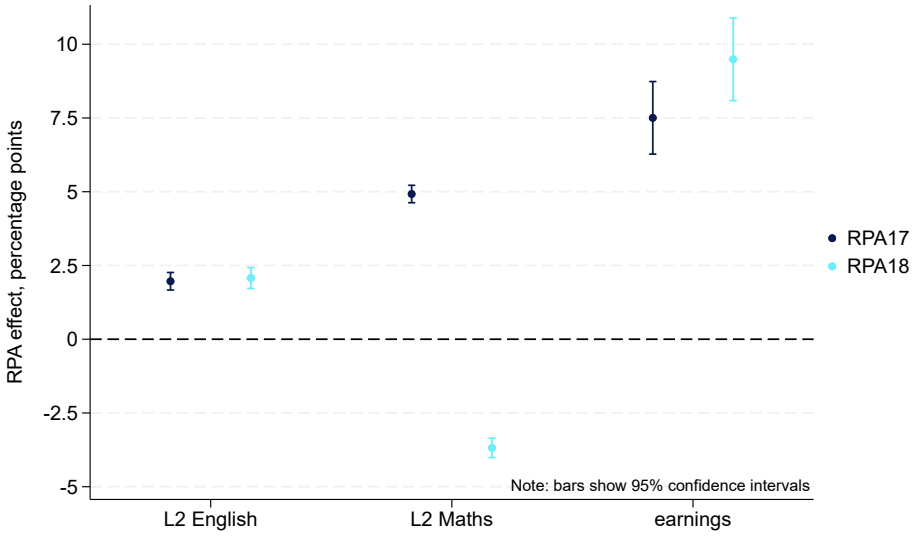
Base levels pre-RPA	Education or Training	School	Further Education	Employed	NEET	Non-sustained activity	FE drop out
Low attainers	65.1	12.4	52.7	1.5	2.9	12.1	15.5

Figure A4.14 The association between RPA and activities during Year 13, low attainers only



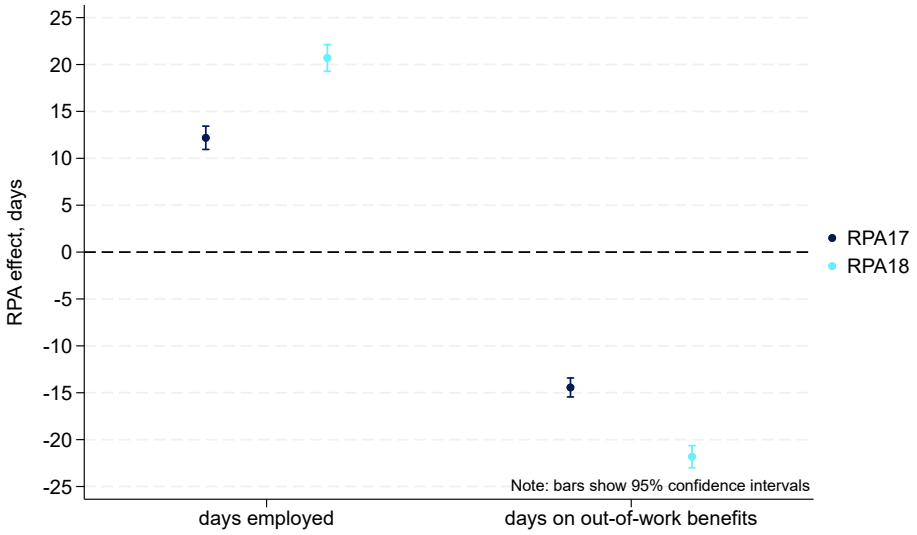
Base levels pre-RPA	Education or Training	School	Further Education	Employed	NEET	Non-sustained activity	FE drop out
Low attainers	53.3	7.8	45.5	5.2	6.9	12.4	17.1

Figure A4.15 The association between RPA and qualifications attained by age 18 and earnings at age 20, low attainers only



Base levels pre-RPA	Level 2 English	Level 2 Maths	Earnings
Low attainers	14.5	17.5	6993

Figure A4.16 The association between RPA and employment and benefit receipt age 20, low attainers only



Base levels pre-RPA	Days employed in the year	Days on out-of-work benefits in the year
Low attainers	176	88

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