

# Pupils with Declining Attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4

Profiles, Experiences and Impacts of  
Underachievement and Disengagement

Meg Callanan, Rachel Kinsella, Jenny Graham,  
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National Centre for Social Research



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## **Research summary**

### **Background and research objectives**

This research was carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) on behalf of the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF). In 2005, the Government's 14-19 White Paper established targets of increasing young people's participation in post-16 education and training to 90% by 2015. In 2008 the Education and Skills Act was passed, raising the participation age to 17 from 2013 and 18 from 2015.

This study sought to inform this agenda by furthering understanding of why a group of young people who have perform well up to Key Stage 3 (KS3), then disengage from education or under-perform at Key Stage 4 (KS4). It also aimed to inform policy thinking on how young people can be better supported to achieve their potential and make a successful transition to post-16 education, training or work. These issues will become of particular importance in thinking how to retain young people in compulsory education post 16. The study explored specific key objectives which were to:

- Analyse matched administrative records to identify the young people who underachieve at KS4 relative to their KS3 attainment, profile their characteristics, and to track them into post-compulsory education and training;
- Explore why young people underachieved or disengaged from education at KS4;
- Explore the roles played by experiences of school, the curriculum and delivery of education in contributing to young people's disengagement as well as the role of factors outside the education and training experience;
- Identify the circumstances, processes and pathways leading to underachievement and disengagement;
- Explore how school experiences impact on post-16 destinations and pathways.

### **Methods**

The study was comprised of four research strands, combining existing data with data generated specifically for the study. These strands were: statistical analysis of matched administrative databases; and qualitative in-depth interviews with young people; school staff; and parents or significant others of young people involved in the study.

### **Key findings**

#### **Characteristics and profiles of underachievement and disengagement during KS4**

Underachievement was defined by a drop in attainment level between KS3 and KS4. Analysis of the matched administrative databases showed that the characteristics most associated with underachievement were being male, being White British, having entitlement to Free School Meals, having Special Educational Needs (particularly the category School Action Plus) and living in a deprived area.

Underachievement was distinct from disengagement. Disengagement refers to a set of attitudes relating to a young person's motivation, the value they see in school and the importance attributed to the impact of school attainment on later options. These attitudes translated into behaviours; attendance levels, effort made in completing work, and how a young person conducted themselves in school.

Whilst the research uses the term 'underachievement' to refer to a drop-off in attainment between KS3 and KS4, young people and teachers had more varied views. Teachers felt that alternative and vocational qualifications were appropriate aspirations for some groups of young people. Some young people were satisfied with their KS4 achievement level whereas others were more or less dissatisfied. For those who were satisfied with their KS4 results, the concept of underachievement was not a label they would have applied to themselves.

The profile of young people's underachievement and disengagement varies across two key dimensions. The first is the route by which underachievement occurs. This can be seen as a spectrum ranging from an event or crisis-driven pathway to a gradually occurring process.

The second key dimension was the extent to which disengagement occurred. Young people's experiences fell into three groups: those who underachieved but remained engaged; those who moderately disengaged; and those who severely or completely disengaged. Young people's pathway of disengagement was marked by movement between these levels at different points in time.

### **Causes of disengagement and underachievement**

There were a range of factors that could lead to educational disengagement both within the education system and external to it. These encompassed: curriculum and learning style; workload and coursework; teacher relationships; school and classroom environments; peer relationships; aspirations and future plans; family context and life events.

In addition to the causes of disengagement, there were also a range of protective factors identified by participants that could reduce or mitigate against the factors described above. These protective factors were often the converse of the causes of disengagement.

Young people's experiences of underachievement and disengagement were complex and could be triggered by multiple factors. Factors impacted on one another and this could result in a downward spiral. It was evident that the presence of protective factors could halt or reverse this process but the extent to which this was effective was dependent upon the complexity and severity of the causes and the nature of the protective factors in place.

### **Identifying and tackling disengagement and underachievement**

Schools collected and used information on attendance, attainment and behaviour in identifying underachievement and disengagement. There were a range of mechanisms for achieving this. There were also a range of factors that could help or hinder this identification. These related to effective use of data on students, resources; awareness of issues; and effective communication between staff, staff and students and staff and parents or guardians.

A range of support was offered to students who disengaged or underachieved. Two distinct types of support emerged; universal and targeted. Universal support was either received by all students automatically, or was available to any student but required the young person to actively take up or ask for this support themselves. In comparison, targeted support was directly offered to a young person in order to address a specific need and was not available to all young people. These two types of support were offered in three key areas; curriculum, personal support and careers advice.

The levels of take up of different types of support varied considerably. There were a range of factors that influenced both the take up and the effectiveness of support. These included the stage at which support was offered, a young person's aspiration, attitude and general engagement, perceived relevance and appropriateness of support on offer, the nature of the school's response to problems, staff relationship and approachability, the timing and location of support, the extent of school resources, and peer relationships. The relationship between home and school was also important because parents played an important role in encouraging young people to take up support.

A number of support gaps were also identified. These were largely based on young people feeling that a particular need had not been addressed. Teachers emphasised the need for more tailored packages of support geared towards an individual's needs and ability. Benefit was also seen in using more appropriate measure of achievement than the traditional five A-C grades for particular groups of young people.

### **School experiences and the impact on post-16 destinations**

Analysis of the matched administrative databases showed that when compared to the total cohort, underachievers had distinctive destinations. They were less likely to be in school, slightly more likely to be in FE or work-based learning and more likely to be either NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) or in Jobs Without Training (JWT). They were more likely to be NEET or in JWT in the year after KS4 than those young people they had outperformed at KS3.

Young people who participated in this study pursued a variety of post-16 destinations, including 6<sup>th</sup> Form, Further Education College, Work Based Learning, Employment and periods of time not in education, employment or training (NEET). Young people often described a great deal of movement between different destinations over time.

The extent to which young people perceived their KS4 attainment to impact on their post-16 destinations varied widely. For some there was no perceived impact, for others there was no perceived impact currently but they anticipated future impact. In other cases, attainment at KS4 was felt to have slowed or prolonged a chosen path, but had not prevented it, while another group felt that their KS4 attainment had limited or changed the options available to them. One key issue raised by young people was a limited awareness when at school of the extent to which KS4 attainment would impact on later options.

Alongside school experiences, a range of other factors were found to influence post-16 pathways. These included peer group, aspirations, family, finances, health and advice and guidance.

Disengagement at KS4 did not necessarily equate to disengagement post-16. Post-16 options could offer young people the chance to re-engage in education and training. However, it was also true that particularly negative school experiences could have a sustained impact post-16 both because of a lack of qualifications but also because of a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

The study has highlighted that the patterns, causes and extent of disengagement are complex and varied. This therefore makes identification at an early stage particularly challenging for schools and school staff. Early identification is key in the provision of effective support. Schools faced a range of barriers in identifying disengagement, not least a gap between the wealth of data collected and the use made of it. More systems and resources may be needed in schools to improve identification.

Questions are also raised by particular characteristics associated with this group; more young men have worsening achievement and the incidence of learning difficulties and SEN could suggest that experiences of barriers raised by these issues worsen over time. Understanding why these characteristics are associated with KS4 disengagement will be increasingly important as the age of compulsory participation is raised.

The range of options available during KS4 needs to meet young people's interests, aspirations and abilities. Thus having a wider curriculum and covering vocational courses (as is planned by Diplomas) could help sustain engagement and achievement. Similarly, extending KS4 over a longer period and securing qualifications earlier could ensure young people who do still disengage leave with some qualifications.

Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) and other forms of support were found to be critical to young people's educational careers at three key points: in selecting KS4 options, during KS4 where disengagement or underachievement occur; and in selecting post-16 destinations. Support during KS4 is most effective when tailored to the individual and proactively offered early. This kind of provision requires a high level of skill and resource. Post-16, the study also identified a gap in the availability of IAG once GCSE results are known and before the next academic year begins. IAG at this point would help in the selection of appropriate post-16 learning destinations.

Parents and the home-school relationship were important factors in disengagement and underachievement. Improvements in this relationship would facilitate parents' role in communicating about a young person's problems. Parents would also benefit from an improved awareness of the importance of GCSEs, and the range of options and qualifications available after 16. This could bolster an important source of potential support for young people.

In relation to the increase in age of compulsory participation to 18, several findings are of key relevance. Young people whose attainment dropped between KS3 and KS4 were *more* likely to not be either NEET or in JWT at 16-17 than the young people they outperformed at KS3. Engagement is therefore a critical issue for post-16 participation and can be more important than attainment alone. Young people identified as NEET were not characterised by a lack of activity or motivation but struggled to sustain post-16 destinations. This suggests that this group would benefit from good IAG and an improved understanding of the barriers they experience. This finding is further reinforced by the link between deprivation and a drop in achievement between KS3 and KS4.

The study also found that some young people re-engaged with learning in a post-16 environment despite having previously completely disengaged. This was attributed to key qualities of the post-16 learning environment, including choice, autonomy and 'adult' relationships with tutors. In extending the age of compulsory education, care needs to be taken not to replicate elements of the current compulsory learning environment that contribute to disengagement.

Further research would be particularly beneficial in the areas of protective factors, resilience to disengagement as well as work around NEET young people's post-16 motivations and experiences of barriers to sustained (re)engagement.

# **1 Introduction and research methods**

## **1.1 Research background**

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned this study to explore disengagement and underachievement during Key Stage 4 (KS4) and the impact of this on post-16 education and training. The research focused on a specific group of young people; those whose attainment drops between Key Stage 3 (KS3) and KS4.

In 2005, the Government's 14-19 White Paper established targets of increasing young people's participation in post-16 education and training to 90% by 2015. The implementation plan linked to the White Paper also established a target of increasing the number of young people achieving Level 2 by the age of 19 to 85% by 2015. In 2008 the Education and Skills Act was passed, raising the participation age to 17 from 2013 and 18 from 2015.

This study sought to contribute to this agenda by furthering understanding of why young people who perform well up to KS3, disengage from education or under-perform at KS4. It also aimed to inform policy about how these young people could be better supported to achieve their potential and make a successful transition to post-16 education, training or work. These issues will become increasingly important as young people will be required to stay on in education until 18. Understanding how and why these young people currently disengage can offer useful insight to policy development for future initiatives on sustaining engagement.

## **1.2 Research objectives**

Within this context, the study sought to explore the disengagement and underachievement of young people at KS4 and the impact on post-16 education and training.

The study explored the following specific key objectives:

1. To undertake analysis of matched administrative records to identify the characteristics of young people who underachieve at KS4 relative to their KS3 attainment, and to profile their post-compulsory education and training destinations;
2. To explore why young people underachieved or disengaged from education at KS4;
3. To explore the roles played by experiences of school, the curriculum and delivery of education as well as factors outside the education and training experience in contributing to young people's disengagement;
4. To identify the circumstances, processes and pathways leading to underachievement and disengagement;
5. To explore how school experiences impacted on post-16 destinations and pathways.

### 1.3 The study design

The study was comprised of four research strands. These combined analysis of existing data with data generated specifically for the study.

#### Research strands

1. *Statistical analysis of matched administrative databases.* This data analysis served two functions. Firstly, it identified a group of young people who underachieved at KS4 so that they could be contacted for the qualitative study. Secondly, it allowed investigation of the incidence of underachievement at KS4, the personal characteristics of young people who underachieved and their destinations post-16.
2. *Qualitative in-depth interviews with young people* identified through the matched administrative databases as having underachieved at KS4 relative to their KS3 achievement.
3. *Qualitative in-depth interviews with school staff.* This strand of the research sought to explore educational disengagement at KS4 from the perspective of school staff.
4. *Qualitative in-depth interviews with parents or significant others.* This strand of the research sought to gather the views of parents about their child's school experiences, including views on their child's attainment and engagement and post-16 experiences.

### 1.4 Methodology

#### Strand 1 - Quantitative analysis of the matched administrative database

As explained above, the data analysis was used to identify young people who were underachievers at KS4 so that a sample of them could be drawn for qualitative interviews. Some analysis of these underachievers was also conducted to show the incidence of underachievement at KS4, the personal characteristics of young people who underachieved and their destinations post-16.

The data analysis of matched administrative records looked exclusively at underachievement rather than underachievement and disengagement. Underachievement is considered to be a significant drop in attainment between KS3 and KS4 and as such could be identified through the available data whereas disengagement could not be. It was only by conducting qualitative interviews with young people who had underachieved that it was possible to explore how and why disengagement occurs as well as its impact.

The method used to define underachievement was based on a study by McIntosh for the Learning and Skills Development Agency<sup>1</sup>. That study described underachievement in terms of pupils' attainment at a given key stage relative to attainment at a previous key stage, using data for KS2, KS3 and KS4. The underachieving group for a particular key stage was defined as those who scored more than one standard deviation below the average score for a given result at the previous key stage. The same broad principles were followed for the present study, although some adjustments needed to be made to the definitions (please see the methods appendix (A) for more detail).

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<sup>1</sup> McIntosh, S with Houghton, N (2005) Disengagement from Secondary Education: a story retold; LSDA.

A matched administrative dataset supplied by the DCSF was used to identify and analyse the underachieving group. Appendix A provides detailed explanation of sources and components of the dataset, as well as clarification as to why certain groups of young people were not captured in this dataset. Additionally, more in-depth information about how pupils' attainment at KS3 and KS4 was defined and why certain groups of pupils had to be excluded from the analysis can also be found in Appendix A.

### **What achievement and underachievement groups were defined?**

As a first step, young people for who there was no KS3 data were excluded from the analysis. This amounted to 23% of the total.

Remaining young people were classified into three categories based on their attainment at KS3<sup>2</sup>:

- High achievers: those pupils who achieved 18 or more points out of 24 at KS3.
- Moderate achievers: those pupils who achieved between 15 and 17 points at KS3.
- Low achievers: those pupils who achieved less than 15 points at KS3.

Low achievers were then excluded from the definition of underachievement as achievement of zero GCSEs at A\*-C fell within the normal range of achievement for this group, so it was not possible to identify a group here where there had been a significant drop in attainment between KS3 and KS4. This group constituted 22% of the cohort.

Three under-achieving groups were then defined on the basis that their KS4 result was substantially below the average of their KS3 score (following the greater than one standard deviation guideline of the McIntosh research):

- **Group A (High to reduced)**: High KS3 achievers with moderate achievement at KS4. These pupils scored 18 or more points at KS3 but fewer than 5 GCSEs at A\*-C at KS4. This group constituted 0.8% of the cohort.
- **Group B (Moderate to reduced)**: Moderate KS3 with reduced achievement at KS4. These pupils scored between 15 and 17 points at KS3 and achieved some GCSEs at A\*-C grade at KS4 but much less than the average for their attainment group. This group constituted 1.6% of the cohort.
- **Group C (High or moderate to poor)**: High or moderate KS3 achievement with no A\*-C achievement at KS4. These pupils scored 15 points or more at KS3 but achieved no GCSEs at A\*-C at KS4. This group constituted 2.3% of the cohort. For the purposes of the qualitative study it was later divided into two groups of C and D - group C, where young people had taken GCSEs but had not achieved any grade A\*-C passes, and group D who did not take GCSE exams.

Overall, five per cent of young people in the 19 in 2009 cohort fell into the under-achieving category. However, the actual proportion of the underachieving group could possibly be higher if KS3 data was available for all pupils.

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<sup>2</sup> Please see Appendix A for explanation how attainment at KS3 and KS4 was measured.

The remaining young people who had high or moderate achievement at KS3 were then reclassified as *consistent achievers* since their level of attainment at KS4 has been at the expected level with reference to KS3, or higher. Thus, consistent high achievers were those high achievers at KS3 who achieved at least 5 GCSEs at A\*-C. These constituted 25% of the cohort. Consistent moderate achievers were those moderate achievers at KS3 who achieved close to or better than the average for their group at KS4<sup>3</sup>. These constituted 25% of the cohort.

The size and characteristics of these achievement groups are investigated in chapter 2.

## **Strand 2 - Qualitative in-depth interviews with young people**

The in-depth interviews with young people identified by the statistical analysis and sampled through the matched database sought to explore the following issues:

- Their perception of their engagement and achievement through KS3 and KS4
- Key circumstances and events outside of school life through KS3 and KS4
- Experiences of making the transition between KS3 and KS4
- Experiences of the curriculum and delivery of education through KS3 and KS4
- Broader experiences of school during KS3 and KS4; friends, peer groups, support networks and any extra help or support offered by the school
- Choices since KS4 in relation to education, training and employment
- Impact of KS4 experiences on current and future pathways

A total of thirty-nine in-depth interviews were undertaken with young people in four geographical areas between June and August 2008. The areas were purposively selected to include two large cities, one smaller town, and one rural area. At the time of interview, all the participants were aged 18 or 19.

Young people who had underachieved at KS4 relative to their attainment at KS3 were identified from the matched administrative databases. From this sample, participants were then purposively selected to achieve diversity across a range of key sampling criteria including gender, post-16 destination and level of KS4 achievement in order to capture a full range of views and experiences.

Each interview lasted between an hour and an hour and a half and was conducted by a researcher using a topic guide. The interviews were recorded and transcribed fully and analysis undertaken using the Framework method, a qualitative analysis research method developed by the Qualitative Research Unit at NatCen. Appendix B gives more detail about the research methods, including discussion about the sampling, conduct and analysis of the in-depth interviews with young people.

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<sup>3</sup> The qualifying level was at least 2 GCSEs at A\*-C for those who scored 16 points at KS3 and at least 4 GCSEs at A\*-C for those who scored 17 points at KS3.

### **Strand 3 - Qualitative in-depth interviews with school staff**

The in-depth interviews with school staff sought to explore the following issues:

- Factors perceived to be involved in disengagement and underachievement amongst young people whose attainment drops (including interaction between school related and non-school related factors)
- How schools identify KS4 disengagement and underachievement
- Provision and approaches to supporting pupils who disengage and underachieve at KS4
- Recommendations and suggestions for identifying and tackling KS4 disengagement and underachievement

A total of 12 in-depth interviews were undertaken with school staff across three secondary schools in three of the four geographical areas where interviews with young people took place. Interviews were conducted between December 2007 and April 2008.

Schools were purposively selected to achieve diversity in size, locality and attainment at KS3 and KS4. Within each school four school staff were recruited to achieve a range of roles and experience. This included staff at senior levels, and those who had academic and pastoral responsibilities.

Each interview lasted up to an hour and was conducted by a researcher using a topic guide. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Analysis was undertaken using the Framework method. Appendix B gives more detail about the research methods, including discussion about the sampling, conduct and analysis of the in-depth interviews with teaching staff.

### **Strand 4 - Qualitative in-depth interviews with parents or significant others**

The in-depth interviews with parents sought to explore the following issues:

- Their view of the young person's school experiences from KS3 onwards
- Factors encouraging or inhibiting the young person's performance at KS4
- Forms of support offered to the young person at KS4 and views on what might have helped them at this stage
- Views on their involvement with the young person's education including the nature of the home / school relationship
- Views on what the young person is currently doing in relation to education and training or work
- Perceived impacts of the young person's performance at KS4 on their subsequent path

A total of fourteen interviews were conducted with parents and significant others. Thirteen were with parents and one was conducted with another family member. Interviews were conducted between June and September 2008.

Parents were sampled through young people in order to give a fuller view of specific 'cases'. This was mentioned to young people at the outset of the research. This issue was then discussed after each young person's own interview and they were asked if they would be willing to nominate a parent or other significant person in their lives to take part in the study. If consent was given, contact was then made with the parent or significant other by phone. Young people and parents who took part in these "linked" interviews were reassured that information given in their interviews was confidential and would not be discussed with the linked individual in their case. Young people's participation was in no way contingent on their willingness for their parent to be approached.

Each interview lasted up to an hour and was conducted by a researcher using a topic guide. The interviews were recorded, transcribed fully and analysed using the Framework method. Appendix B gives more detail about the research methods, including discussion about the sampling, conduct and analysis of the in-depth interviews with teaching staff.

## **1.5 Structure of the report**

**Chapter 2** presents the analysis of the matched administrative database in identifying the characteristics of the young people who underachieve at KS4. It then draws on the qualitative data, to describe how underachievement and disengagement differ as well as describing the profiles of disengagement and underachievement at KS4. **Chapter 3** explores the causes of educational underachievement and disengagement, **chapter 4** looks at identifying and tackling educational underachievement and disengagement and **chapter 5** explores the impact of KS4 disengagement and underachievement on post-16 destinations and pathways. The report concludes with **chapter 6** which identifies the key findings, cross-cutting issues and potential implications of the research.

Verbatim quotations and case studies are used to illustrate the findings. They are labelled to show the gender, age and current activity of the participant. Quotes are drawn from across the sample. No sample member is quoted or used as an example more than twice throughout the report.

## **2 Characteristics and profiles of underachievement and disengagement during KS4**

This chapter presents findings from both the qualitative and quantitative elements of the study. It looks at the characteristics, profile and patterns of disengagement and underachievement at KS3, and begins by presenting data from the quantitative analysis of the matched databases. This work identifies the prevalence of underachievement during KS4 and identifies the characteristics associated with a drop in achievement during KS4.

The qualitative findings look at defining and differentiating between underachievement and disengagement. These later sections go on to look at different patterns of underachievement and disengagement and at how the extent of disengagement varies for different groups of young people.

### **2.1 What proportion of young people are underachievers?**

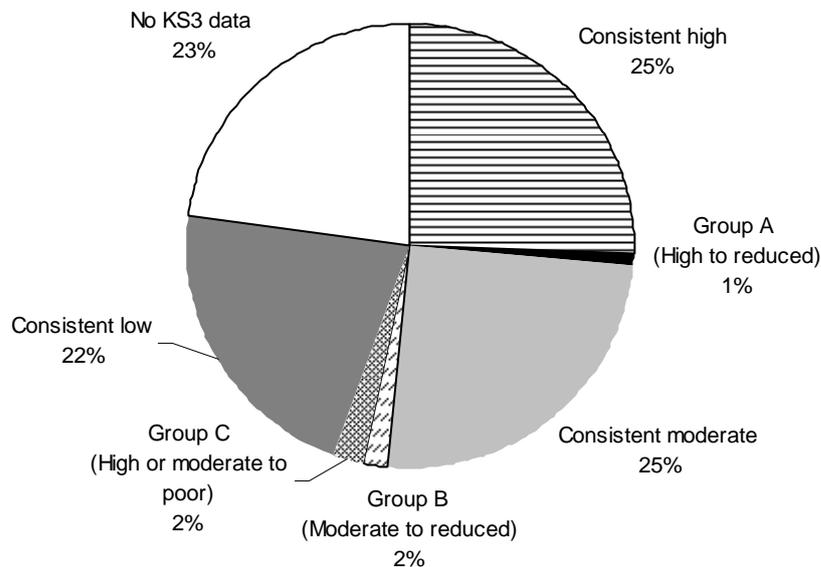
The data analysis identified a group of young people in the 19 in 2009 cohort whose achievement at KS4 (measured by GCSEs at A\*-C) was substantially worse than would be expected based on their level of achievement at KS3 (based on combined test scores for English, maths and science). Based on the definitions used for the research (see section 1.4 for details), this defined an underachievement group of about five per cent of the cohort. This under-achieving group was further classified into three sub-groups, as follows:

- Group A (High to reduced): High achievers at KS3 who only achieved moderately at KS4 (0.8% of the cohort).
- Group B (Moderate to reduced): Moderate achievers at KS3 who only had low achievement at KS4 (1.6% of the cohort).
- Group C (High or moderate to poor): High or moderate achievers at KS3 who achieved no GCSEs at A\*-C KS4 (2.3% of the cohort).

In the analysis, these three under-achieving groups (Group A, Group B and Group C) were compared with three other groups where the pattern of achievement between KS3 and KS4 had been more consistent (or had improved): consistent high achievers, consistent moderate achievers and low achievers. The relative size of these groups is shown on the chart below (Figure 2.1). 23 per cent of the cohort had no KS3 test data recorded and so were excluded from the analysis.

**Figure 2.1 Proportions of under-achieving groups vs. consistent achievers, 19 in 2009 cohort.**

Base: 19 in 2009 cohort: 673,294



In the following section the characteristics of the under-achieving groups are explored by comparison with more consistent achievers.

## 2.2 Who are underachievers and how do they differ from other pupils?

The matched administrative dataset used for the data analysis contained a number of variables, derived from Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) that could be used to describe characteristics:

- gender
- ethnic group
- whether the pupil had Special Educational Needs (SEN)<sup>4</sup>
- whether the pupil had a learning difficulty<sup>5</sup>
- whether the pupil has a disability<sup>6</sup>
- whether the pupil received Free School Meals (FSM)
- the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) for the pupils' home address
- Government Office Region

<sup>4</sup> The 'Special Educational Needs' classification identified three SEN groups: SEN with a statement, SEN without a statement - School Action, SEN without a statement - School Action Plus.

<sup>5</sup> The learning difficulty category included: moderate learning difficulty, dyslexia, other specific learning difficulty, other.

<sup>6</sup> The disability category included: visual impairment, hearing impairment, disability affecting mobility, other physical disability, other medical condition, emotional/behavioural difficulties, mental ill health, temporary disability, profound complex disability, multiple disabilities, other.

## Regression analysis

Logistic regression was used to explore the relationships between these variables and underachievement in order to look at which characteristics are more associated with this type of underachievement. All those scoring 15 points or more at KS3 were included in this analysis (that is all young people except low achievers). Regression analysis was chosen because it allows us to study the independent effect of each characteristic, whilst controlling for the influence of the other factors included in the model. Therefore, by looking at them together, we can identify which of them most strongly predict the likelihood of a young person underachieving at KS4.

Before conducting the regression analysis, the relationships between candidate variables were considered. As a consequence it was decided to exclude disability<sup>7</sup>. This was because we wished to look at the effect of Special Educational Needs (SEN) on underachievement without the mitigating effect of (controlling for) disability. Many pupils with SEN also have disabilities and, in particular, some types of SEN are strongly related to some types of disability. For example, 56 per cent of those in the category "SEN without a statement School Action Plus" were coded as having emotional or behavioural difficulties. Learning difficulties are also associated with SEN but to a lesser extent than disability. Inclusion of this variable was seen to have little impact on the results for the SEN groups and therefore it was left in the model.

The model identified which characteristics were most strongly associated with a young person who was a high or moderate achiever at KS3 and who then saw a drop in achievement during KS4, as differentiated from a young person who was a consistent achiever throughout KS3 and KS4.

The full and final model is shown in table 2.1 in the form of *odds ratios (ORs)*. It shows the odds or likelihood of underachievement for each category of the 'predictor' variables (male, female etc). Odds are expressed relative to a reference category e.g. for gender the reference category is female<sup>8</sup>.

Also shown are *95% confidence intervals*<sup>9</sup> for the odds ratios. Where the interval<sup>9</sup> does not include 1, the odds for this category are significantly different from those for the reference category. Missing values were included in the analyses, that is, people were included even if they did not have a valid score or classification on one or more of the predictors.

Finally, *p-values*<sup>10</sup> are shown for each predictor variables. The association of any variable with underachievement is statistically significant if  $p < 0.05$ . The p-values indicate that all the variables in the model are significant predictors of underachievement.

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<sup>7</sup> The 'disability' category here includes: visual impairment, hearing impairment, disability affecting mobility, other physical disability, other medical condition, emotional / behavioural difficulties, mental ill health, temporary disability, profound complex disability, multiple disabilities, other.

<sup>8</sup> The odds ratio for males therefore represents the odds of underachievement for males divided by the odds for females. If the odds are greater for males, the odds ratio will be greater than 1, whilst an odds ratio less than 1 would indicate lower odds. The odds for the reference category (female) is equal to 1 by definition.

<sup>9</sup> 95% confidence interval (95% CI): an interval which, 95 times out of 100, will contain the "true" odds ratio for the (theoretical) population of pupils.

<sup>10</sup> p-values: the probability of obtaining the given results under the hypothesis that there is no difference between the categories of the variable in the (theoretical) population of pupils. When  $p < 0.05$ , we reject this hypothesis and accept the alternative that differences exist.

The findings of the regression model were<sup>11</sup>:

- The odds of underachievement for boys were much higher (OR=1.86) than the odds for girls, in other words boys were more likely to be underachievers than girls.
- The ethnic group with the highest rate of underachievement is White British (shown as the reference category on the table): the odds ratios for all other groups were less than 1. 'White Other' pupils were less likely to underachieve than their British counterparts (OR=0.67), whilst the odds of underachievement for Irish pupils, although lower than those for White British, were not significantly different.
- Asian pupils were the least likely to be underachievers, with Bangladeshis having the lowest odds of underachievement (OR=0.18) compared with White British pupils. Indians (OR=0.26), Pakistanis (OR=0.34), Other Asians (OR=0.26) and Chinese (OR=0.29) also had significantly lower odds of underachievement.
- The odds for Black pupils varied amongst the different groups. Black African pupils were least likely to underachieve (OR=0.29) whilst Black Caribbeans were also less likely than White British pupils to be underachievers but their odds (OR=0.63) were higher than those for Black Africans.
- Mixed race groups had lower odds of underachievement than White British pupils, apart from the Mixed White and Black Caribbean group, whose odds of underachievement were the same (OR=1) as the odds for White British.
- Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) were much more likely to be underachievers than those without. Pupils in the category "SEN without a statement - School Action Plus" were the most likely to be underachievers with odds (OR=4.97) nearly five times the odds for those without an identified SEN. The odds for SEN with a statement (OR=2.24) and "SEN without a statement - School Action" (OR=2.78) were also significantly higher.
- Young people who had a moderate learning difficulty were more likely to be underachievers than those with no learning difficulties (OR=1.17). On the other hand, pupils with dyslexia (OR=0.59) and those with other specific learning difficulties (OR=0.59) were less likely to underachieve than those who had no learning difficulty.
- Entitlement to Free School Meals was also associated with underachievement (note that we are controlling for area-level deprivation). The odds of a child who was entitled to Free School Meals being an underachiever were nearly twice (OR=1.97) the odds for those who were not. This confirms that there was an association between family income and underachievement during KS4.
- Deprivation was also associated with underachievement. The model shows an odds ratio of 1.02 for deprivation meaning that an increase in the IMD score of one point (on a scale of 0-100) is associated with an increase of around 2 per cent in the odds of underachievement for a typical pupil.

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<sup>11</sup> All findings reported here are statistically significant.

- Finally, there were some differences between regions in the odds of underachievement, although these are difficult to interpret. Pupils in the East Midlands were most likely to be underachievers (OR=1.10), whilst those in London (OR=0.73), the North East (OR=0.75) and North West (OR=0.75) were least likely.

The McIntosh (2005) study<sup>12</sup> suggested that there might be an interaction between gender and ethnicity, in other words the confluence of gender and ethnicity might in certain cases have an effect over and above the independent effects of “being male” or belonging to a particular ethnic group. This idea was tested by comparing two models, one including and one excluding the relevant interaction terms. The results showed some evidence of a statistically significant interaction between gender and ethnicity. This appeared to be driven mostly by the difference between the odds for Black African males and Black African females, the former being more likely to underachieve when compared to their White British counterparts.

No other interactions were considered.

To summarise, all the variables in the model were significant predictors of underachievement. The characteristics most associated with underachievement are being male, being White British, entitlement to Free School Meals, having Special Educational Needs (particularly the category School Action Plus) and living in a deprived area.

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<sup>12</sup> McIntosh, S with Houghton, N (2005) *Disengagement from Secondary Education: a story retold*; LSDA.

**Table 2.1 Logistic regression model of underachievement**

|   |               |                   | 95%             |
|---|---------------|-------------------|-----------------|
|   |               |                   | Confidence      |
| <b>Base: 369,246</b>                                | <b>Number</b> | <b>Odds Ratio</b> | <b>Interval</b> |
| <b>Gender (p=0.000)</b>                             |               |                   |                 |
| Female  | 188,496       | 1                 |                 |
| Male  | 180,750       | 1.86              | 1.81-1.91       |
| <b>Ethnic group (p=0.000)</b>                       |               |                   |                 |
| White - British                                     | 314,608       | 1                 |                 |
| White - Irish                                       | 1,506         | 0.89              | 0.74-1.08       |
| White - any other White background                  | 7,236         | 0.67              | 0.61-0.74       |
| Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi                | 2,742         | 0.18              | 0.15-0.22       |
| Asian or Asian British - Indian                     | 9,247         | 0.26              | 0.23-0.30       |
| Asian or Asian British - Pakistani                  | 6,131         | 0.34              | 0.30-0.38       |
| Asian or Asian British - any other Asian background | 2,508         | 0.26              | 0.02-0.32       |
| Black or Black British - African                    | 4,218         | 0.24              | 0.20-0.28       |
| Black or Black British - Caribbean                  | 3,964         | 0.63              | 0.56-0.71       |
| Black or Black British - any other Black background | 1,186         | 0.76              | 0.63-0.93       |
| Chinese   | 1,590         | 0.29              | 0.22-0.39       |
| Mixed - White and Asian                             | 1,855         | 0.57              | 0.47-0.70       |
| Mixed - White and Black African                     | 759           | 0.65              | 0.49-0.85       |
| Mixed - White and Black Caribbean                   | 2,830         | 1.00              | 0.89-1.13       |
| Mixed - any other Mixed background                  | 3,062         | 0.80              | 0.70-0.91       |
| any other   | 2,428         | 0.37              | 0.31-0.45       |
| <i>Not known/not provided</i>                       | 3,376         | 0.94              | 0.83-1.07       |
| <b>Special Educational Needs (SEN) (p=0.000)</b>    |               |                   |                 |
| No Identified SEN                                   | 349,058       | 1                 |                 |
| SEN with a statement                                | 1,809         | 2.24              | 1.94-2.58       |
| SEN without a statement - School Action             | 13,363        | 2.78              | 2.64-2.93       |
| SEN without a statement - School Action +           | 5,016         | 4.97              | 4.62-5.34       |
| <b>Learning difficulties (p=0.000)</b>              |               |                   |                 |
| No learning difficulty                              | 349,412       | 1                 |                 |
| moderate learning difficulty                        | 4,689         | 1.17              | 1.07-1.27       |
| Dyslexia  | 6,003         | 0.56              | 0.51-0.61       |
| other specific learning difficulty                  | 977           | 0.59              | 0.47-0.74       |
| Other   | 1,005         | 0.79              | 0.66-0.95       |
| <i>No information provided</i>                      | 7,160         | 1.24              | 1.15-1.33       |
| <b>Free School Meals (p=0.000)</b>                  |               |                   |                 |
| Not entitled to Free School Meals                   | 343,637       | 1                 |                 |
| Entitled to Free School Meals                       | 25,609        | 1.97              | 1.89-2.04       |
| <b>Index of Multiple Deprivation (p=0.000)</b>      |               |                   |                 |
|   |               | 1.02              | 1.02-1.02       |
| <b>Govt Office Region (p=0.000)</b>                 |               |                   |                 |
| South East  | 62,191        | 1                 |                 |
| East Midlands                                       | 33,158        | 1.10              | 1.05-1.16       |
| East of England                                     | 43,297        | 1.00              | 0.96-1.05       |
| London  | 42,419        | 0.73              | 0.69-0.76       |
| North East  | 18,832        | 0.75              | 0.70-0.80       |
| North West  | 53,192        | 0.75              | 0.71-0.78       |
| South West  | 37,796        | 0.94              | 0.90-0.99       |
| West Midlands                                       | 41,086        | 1.00              | 0.95-1.04       |
| Yorkshire and The Humber                            | 37,275        | 0.94              | 0.90-0.99       |

## 2.3 Comparison of profiles of underachievers and consistent achievers

Further to the regression analysis set out above, this section presents percentage profiles of the underachievers compared with consistent achievers for the cohort who are 19 in 2009. Table 2.2 shows the profiles of the three underachievement groups, and underachievers as a whole, compared with the total cohort for the characteristics included in the regression model.

Most of the characteristics associated with underachievement were present to a similar extent within each of the Groups A (high to reduced attainment), B (moderate to reduced attainment) and C (high or moderate to poor attainment). However, Group C underachievers, who went from high or moderate achievement at KS3 to achieving no GCSEs at A\*-C at KS4<sup>13</sup>, were more likely than the other underachiever groups to have SEN, a learning difficulty or a disability. This suggests that these factors were particularly influential for those whose level of achievement had fallen the most between KS3 and KS4.

**Table 2.2 Proportions of underachievement in 19 in 2009 cohort**

| Pupils' characteristics                                 | Group A:<br>High KS3 to<br>reduced KS4 | Group B:<br>Moderate<br>KS3 to<br>reduced KS4 | Group C:<br>High or<br>moderate<br>KS3 to poor<br>KS4 | All under-<br>achievers | Total cohort   |
|---|--|---|---|-------------------------|----------------|
|   | %                                      | %   | %   | %                       | %              |
| Male  | 63                                     | 63  | 63  | 63                      | 51             |
| Female  | 37                                     | 37  | 37  | 37                      | 49             |
| White   | 91                                     | 91  | 91  | 91                      | 80             |
| Minority Ethnic Groups                                  | 8                                      | 8   | 7   | 8                       | 14             |
| Asian   | 3                                      | 3   | 2   | 2                       | 6              |
| Black   | 2                                      | 2   | 2   | 2                       | 4              |
| Mixed   | 3                                      | 3   | 2   | 3                       | 2              |
| Other ethnic groups                                     | 2                                      | 1   | 1   | 1                       | 1              |
| Special Education Needs <sup>14</sup>                   | 10                                     | 12  | 18  | 14                      | 16             |
| Having any type of learning<br>difficulty <sup>15</sup> | 12                                     | 14  | 21  | 17                      | 19             |
| Having any type of<br>disability <sup>16</sup>          | 10                                     | 10  | 17  | 13                      | 4              |
| Having emotional or<br>behavioural disability           | 7                                      | 8   | 14  | 11                      | 7              |
| Receiving Free School Meals                             | 11                                     | 13  | 16  | 14                      | 12             |
| Living in '50% most deprived<br>areas' <sup>17</sup>    | 52                                     | 55  | 55  | 55                      | 45             |
| <i>Base</i>   | <i>5,261</i>                           | <i>10,715</i>                                 | <i>15,718</i>   | <i>31,694</i>           | <i>673,294</i> |

<sup>13</sup> The database does not differentiate between young people who took GCSEs but failed to gain 5 A-C passes and those that did not take any GCSE exams.

<sup>14</sup> The 'Special Educational Needs' category includes: SEN with a statement, SEN without a statement – School Action, SEN without a statement – School Action+.

<sup>15</sup> The 'Having any type of learning difficulty' category includes: moderate learning difficulty, dyslexia, other specific learning difficulty, other.

<sup>16</sup> The 'Having any type of disability' category includes: visual impairment, hearing impairment, disability affecting mobility, other physical disability, other medical condition, emotional/behavioural difficulties, mental ill health, temporary disability, profound complex disability, multiple disabilities, other.

<sup>17</sup> The '50% most deprived areas' category has been created by combining categories '25% most deprived areas' and 'lower middle deprived areas'.

Further variations can be observed when underachievers are compared with pupils defined as consistent achievers (Table 2.3). In particular, some interesting patterns can be observed between underachievers and consistently high and low achievers.

As noted above, White people and males are more likely to underachieve than others. Indeed, the proportions of underachievers who are White and male are higher than for either consistent high achievers or consistent low achievers.

In contrast, the proportions of underachievers who have SEN, learning difficulties and disabilities are higher than for the consistent high achiever group but lower than for the low achiever group.

Similarly, the proportions of underachievers who are entitled to free school meals or live in a deprived area are higher than for the consistent high achiever group but lower than for the low achiever group.

**Table 2.3 Underachievers compared with consistent achievers, 19 in 2009 cohort**

| Pupils' characteristics                    | Consistent achievers |                  |                      |                 | Total cohort % |
|--|----------------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------|----------------|
|  | Underachievers %     | High achievers % | Moderate achievers % | Low achievers % |                |
| Male                                       | 63                   | 47               | 48                   | 51              | 51             |
| Female                                     | 37                   | 53               | 52                   | 49              | 49             |
| White                                      | 91                   | 87               | 86                   | 83              | 80             |
| Minority Ethnic Groups                     | 8                    | 11               | 13                   | 16              | 14             |
| Asian                                      | 2                    | 5                | 6                    | 8               | 6              |
| Black                                      | 2                    | 2                | 3                    | 5               | 4              |
| Mixed                                      | 3                    | 2                | 2                    | 2               | 2              |
| Other ethnic groups                        | 1                    | 1                | 1                    | 1               | 1              |
| Special Education Needs                    | 14                   | 2                | 7                    | 29              | 16             |
| Having any type of learning difficulty     | 17                   | 3                | 9                    | 33              | 19             |
| Having any type of disability              | 13                   | 2                | 5                    | 18              | 4              |
| Having emotional or behavioural disability | 11                   | 1                | 3                    | 11              | 7              |
| Receiving Free School Meals                | 14                   | 4                | 9                    | 19              | 12             |
| Living in '50% most deprived areas'        | 55                   | 31               | 45                   | 62              | 45             |
| <i>Base</i>                                | <i>31,694</i>        | <i>172,652</i>   | <i>170,603</i>       | <i>145,896</i>  | <i>673,294</i> |

## Changes in characteristics of underachievers over time

In order to check whether the characteristics of underachievers had changed in recent years, the analysis for the 19 in 2009 cohort was repeated for the three previous (older cohorts) 19 in 2006, 19 in 2007 and 19 in 2008. This analysis showed that both the proportion of the cohorts that were classified as under-achieving was fairly consistent over time.

For most of the characteristics used in the analysis, underachievers in the 19 in 2009 cohort were very similar to those in the 19 in 2006 cohort (Table 2.4). In particular, the proportions of underachievers who were male, White and entitled to receive school meals had remained almost the same.

Where the profile of underachievers had changed between the 19 in 2006 and 19 in 2009 cohorts, the variation appeared to reflect changes in measurement rather than in the specific characteristics of underachievers. Thus, the proportions of underachievers who were classified as having SEN, a learning difficulty and a disability increased between the 19 in 2006 and 19 in 2009 cohorts, this reflects a change in proportions recorded for the cohorts as a whole rather than being something specific to underachievers.

**Table 2.4 Change over time in proportions of underachievement, 19 in 2006 vs. 19 in 2009**

| Pupils' characteristics                    | 19 in 2006          |                | 19 in 2009          |                |
|--|---------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|
|  | Underachievers<br>% | Total<br>%     | Underachievers<br>% | Total<br>%     |
| Male                                       | 62                  | 51             | 63                  | 51             |
| Female                                     | 38                  | 49             | 37                  | 49             |
| White                                      | 91                  | 78             | 91                  | 80             |
| Minority Ethnic Groups                     | 6                   | 15             | 8                   | 14             |
| Asian                                      | 2                   | 7              | 2                   | 6              |
| Black                                      | 2                   | 4              | 2                   | 4              |
| Mixed                                      | 2                   | 2              | 3                   | 2              |
| Other ethnic groups                        | 1                   | 2              | 1                   | 1              |
| Special Education Needs                    | 10                  | 13             | 14                  | 16             |
| Having any type of learning difficulty     | 7                   | 9              | 17                  | 19             |
| Having any type of disability              | 4                   | 4              | 13                  | 4              |
| Having emotional or behavioural disability | 0.5                 | 0.4            | 11                  | 7              |
| Receiving Free School Meals                | 13                  | 6              | 14                  | 12             |
| Living in '50% most deprived areas'        | 48                  | 40             | 55                  | 45             |
| <b>Base</b>                                | <b>27,456</b>       | <b>698,216</b> | <b>31,694</b>       | <b>673,294</b> |

## 2.4 Underachievement and disengagement

The remaining sections in this chapter look at profiles of underachievement and disengagement based on analysis of the qualitative data from young people, teachers and parents. The quantitative analysis focused on underachievement. The qualitative data sought to understand experiences of disengagement as well as achievement.

Underachievement and disengagement are distinct and separate terms. A young person can underachieve whilst remaining engaged with school, or could see only a moderate drop in achievement whilst disengaging from education.

The term underachievement is used throughout this report to refer to a drop in attainment levels between KS3 and the end of KS4. In this sense underachievement is a measurable characteristic. The extent of this 'drop' varied amongst the qualitative sample, with young people in the qualitative study sampled to represent a range from the groups A (high to reduced), B (moderate to reduced) and C (high or moderate to poor) used in the quantitative analysis.

Defining disengagement relies on a more subjective interpretation. We use it throughout the report to refer to a young person's attitude and behaviour toward, and in, school. Attitudes include the extent of a young person's interest in school as described in their motivations to study, to complete assignments and attend school and their classes. It also refers to the extent to which young people saw value and purpose in school and believed in the importance of school attainment for outcomes in later life. These attitudes manifested themselves in behaviours: in a young person's attendance, whether they completed assignments and coursework and how they conducted themselves whilst in school. Defining the extent to which a young person was engaged or disengaged is based on a young person's description of these attitudes and behaviours during KS4.

## 2.5 Perceptions of attainment, underachievement and factors influencing perceptions

We use the term underachievement to refer to a drop off in attainment level between the core subjects in KS3 and a young person's KS4 attainment. It is important to note, however, that young people varied in their perception of their own achievement and the extent to which they would recognise their KS4 results as underachievement.

There was an argument made by teachers that defining attainment targets at 5 A-C GCSE's was not appropriate for all young people. In some cases, they felt, it may be more appropriate for a young person to take a few core GCSEs alongside other vocational qualifications. For these young people, this may improve overall attainment and so increase their options post-16.

*"I think.. the obsession with 5 A to Cs can be a very negative one and perhaps that student who got level 5s at KS3 SATs, for that student to then go on and see... ..teacher predictions of Es and Fs, it can be a completely de-motivating factor. So, I wonder if our obsession with.. that benchmark, is particularly helpful. "* (Head of KS4, male)

Young people's views of their achievement at KS4 demonstrated that they had varying level of satisfaction with their own attainment level:

- **Satisfied with attainment levels.** These young people were content with their KS4 results and did not see themselves as underachievers. Teachers described how for some young people a drop off in attainment between KS3 and KS4 could be due to the increased demands of the KS4 curriculum. Young people in this group may have '*bumped along at the average*' prior to KS4 but found themselves doing less well as the KS4 curriculum became progressively more demanding.
- **Satisfied with their attainment considering other circumstances happening during KS4.** In this group, young people felt that their achievement was satisfactory given a context of adverse circumstances. This was often a view expressed amongst those whose pathway into underachievement was driven by a particular event or set of barriers.
- **Mixed view of overall achievement.** Young people who expressed this view were more content with some GCSE results compared to others. This view was sometimes driven by having done better or less well than they had expected in certain and particular subjects. It could also be marked by an overall sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, coupled with a different view of particular subject results.
- **Dissatisfied with exam results and saw self as having underachieved.** This group expressed clear dissatisfaction with their overall attainment level at GCSE, felt that they had achieved below their potential and often expressed regret at their own lack of effort in school. These young people were often those who described severe or complete disengagement during KS4 (see 2.7 below).

The factors that were considered when assessing satisfaction with KS4 exam results were: the presence or absence of mitigating circumstances; young people's expectations of their attainment prior to receiving results; perceptions of the effort they had made during KS4; the value placed on attainment; and the impact of KS4 results on post-16 options. Issues relating to the impact of attainment on post-16 pathways are discussed fully in chapter 5.

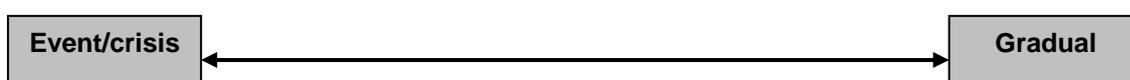
## 2.6 Profiles of disengagement & underachievement

Two key dimensions emerge from analysis of young people's profiles and pathways of disengagement and underachievement. The first dimension is the *routes* by which underachievement and disengagement take place. The second dimension is the *extent* of disengagement occurring alongside underachievement and how this varies for different groups of young people.

### The routes of disengagement and underachievement

Young people, parents and teachers described two types of route by which disengagement and underachievement occur. The first is where disengagement or underachievement are driven by a particular event or crisis. The second was a process of disengagement and underachievement of a more gradual nature.

These two routes of disengagement and underachievement can be helpfully seen as a spectrum rather than two entirely distinct and separate categories.



At the 'event-based' end of this spectrum a particular issue or life event could suddenly and dramatically impact on a young person's attainment and engagement with school. This event could drive significant changes to a young person's priorities as well as their capabilities. The events driving this type of process are explored in detail in chapter 3, but included pregnancy, bereavement, family break-up, or a chronic or acute health problem. Where an event occurred outside of school, the school's awareness was reliant on either the young person or their parent.

In the mid points in the spectrum were cases where important issues or events were ongoing but, over time, could culminate into disengagement and underachievement. The issues experienced here were not as sudden as those at the 'crisis' end, but could, in time worsen, or they could have an ongoing impact which eventually 'tipped' a young person into worsening attainment and disengagement. Examples of the driving issues here were ongoing or progressively worsening bullying and the effects of an increasing interest in a social life outside school or the influence of a peer group who were themselves not engaged with school.

At the end of the spectrum where disengagement and underachievement happened as a more gradual process it was harder for young people to pinpoint a particular starting point or a singularly significant and causative factor. The process was described as occurring over varying periods of time, sometimes taking several years and for others taking place over a period of months. At this end of the spectrum there were two groups in particular. The first were young people whose underachievement (and sometimes) disengagement happened quietly and was easily unnoticed by schools

*"There are the silent girls... ..who sit there and don't necessarily contribute. ..When you've asked them to go away and do their homework, they will do just enough to get by, so you don't perhaps notice them and then when the results come through on results day you think "Oh [no], that child." (Teacher, male)*

The other group who gradually underachieved and disengaged were those did so more visibly and noticeably. These young people were often those with more disruptive behaviour in school and who were likely to be increasingly absent or truant over time.

### **The extent of disengagement**

Alongside differing pathways, the other key dimension in profiles of disengagement and underachievement was the *extent* to which disengagement occurred alongside a drop in attainment between KS3 and KS4. Three differing levels of disengagement can be defined here:

- young people who despite a drop in attainment remain engaged;
- young people who moderately disengaged;
- young people who severely or completely disengaged.

Those that disengaged either moderately or severely can be seen on a spectrum of disengagement rather than as two distinct and separate groups. Each of these three levels of disengagement are described in turn here.

Young people moved between differing levels of engagement over time. Especially where disengagement was marked by a gradual process, different points during KS4 were described with varying levels of engagement and engagement levels could improve as well as deteriorate.

## **Remained engaged and underachieved**

There was a group of young people who remained engaged with school despite a drop in their attainment during KS4. These young people retained their motivation to attend classes and complete assignments. This motivation could vary from subject to subject. They saw value in school, wanted to learn and felt that school attainment was an important issue for their future.

This group of young people were often those for whom underachievement was driven by a particular crisis or event. This in turn had an impact on their attendance level and their ability to keep up with the demands of learning and coursework during KS4. This continued motivation is illustrated by the following quote from a young woman who had health problems throughout KS4:

*“I was always in when it was possible, if I wasn’t in hospital .... I always tried, every morning, I got up and I’d try, ‘cause then at least they knew I was trying and if they sent me home that was their choice to do so, but I would always go in unless I was really poorly or I was in hospital.”* (Female, aged 18, at college)

## **Moderately disengaged**

Young people in this group had a drop in their attainment level as well as a moderate level of disengagement. Moderate disengagement is used to describe a presence of some of the ‘ingredients’ of disengaging, without having all elements or without disengagement applying wholesale to a young person’s school experience.

These young people often had varied interest and motivation in different subjects, and also varied in their attendance of different subjects. This may have meant failing to attend classes or complete coursework in one or two subjects, but doing so in other subjects. This group of young people saw some value in school but may not have been convinced that it was important to their own aspirations. Fluctuating levels of effort were described by these young people, particularly at different periods during KS4. These fluctuations could be driven by factors and events outside school. They could also relate to the curriculum stage; these young people often described making a more concerted effort toward the end of year 11:

*“Back then I really couldn’t be bothered with it ‘cause it was just like, “Oh yeah I’ll get them later on .., I’ll definitely get them. I’ll do the work at the end. ..then all of a sudden it was just like, “Oh...I’m not gonna get it done””* (Male, 18 years old, at college)

## **Severe or complete disengagement**

This group of young people described having all of the ingredients of disengagement in terms of attitudes and behaviours and these largely applied across their school experiences.

Amongst this group little or no value was seen in school, young people were not motivated to undertake school assignments or to attend classes. They described themselves as having made ‘zero effort’. Where they did turn up for classes they were described by teachers as often being ‘mentally truant’. Young people’s priorities here were described as lying elsewhere by both young people and parents. Young people’s focus was described by teachers as concentrated exclusively on the day-to-day, rather than thinking about their future. Their behaviour in school was often (although not always) disruptive.

These young people often had very low attendance, particularly during the later stages of KS4 or fell away completely, seeing themselves as having left school before the end of year 11. This group were more likely to have a larger drop in attainment from KS3 to KS4, and often had very low attainment (those in group ‘C’ or ‘D’- i.e. those who did not attain any A-C passes at GCSE).

### Case study 2.1

At the time of interview, this young man was 18 and currently looking for work. He was bullied throughout secondary school and the school's efforts to tackle the bullying were ineffective. The bullying had several impacts. He started to truant to avoid being at school, was unable to concentrate on school work and when bullied in class he would respond aggressively. His aggressive behaviour meant his relationships with teachers deteriorated which made him more inclined to truant. His situation got to the stage where he described himself as getting into a mode where nothing '*bothered him anymore*' including how well he did at school and what happened in the future and consequently he was reluctant to seek help or support. Around the same time he fell out with his family and lived with a friend for a while. He also suffered from depression and described several attempts to commit suicide.

A package of support did help him continue a lowered level of attendance later on in year 11 and he had some positive relationships with some teachers. By this stage however, he was already behind with his courses, and his resilience to set-backs was reduced so that when a piece of coursework went missing, he dropped that subject rather than re-do the coursework. Incomplete coursework and his poor attendance record meant that he was not entered for some exams, and took lower papers in others. At the end of KS4 he achieved one C, three Ds and 2 Gs at GCSE.

This level of disengagement was usually described as a gradual process. Where particular events or crises contributed they were more likely to exacerbate or speed up an existing process of disengagement rather than be described as a driving cause.

## 2.7 Chapter summary:

This chapter presents findings from the quantitative analysis of matched databases as well as descriptions and profiles drawn from the qualitative data on underachievement and disengagement.

Underachievement is defined here by a drop in attainment level between KS3 and KS4. Analysis of the matched databases has shown that the characteristics most associated with underachievement are being male, being White British, entitlement to Free School Meals, having Special Educational Needs (particularly the category School Action Plus) and living in a deprived area.

Underachievement is distinct from disengagement. Disengagement refers to a set of attitudes relating to a young person's motivation to attend lessons and complete assignments, the value they see in school and the importance attributed to the impact of school attainment on later options and pathways. These attitudes were seen to translate into behaviours - attendance levels, effort made in completing work, and how a young person conducted themselves in school.

Whilst the research uses the term 'underachievement' to refer to a drop-off in attainment between KS3 and KS4, young people and teachers had a more varied view of achievement. Some young people were satisfied with their achievement level whereas others were more or less dissatisfied. For those who were satisfied with their KS4 results the concept of underachievement was not a label they would have applied to themselves.

The profile of young people's underachievement and disengagement varies across two key dimensions. The first is the pathway or process by which underachievement occurs. This can be seen as a spectrum ranging from an event or crisis driven pathway to a gradually occurring process.

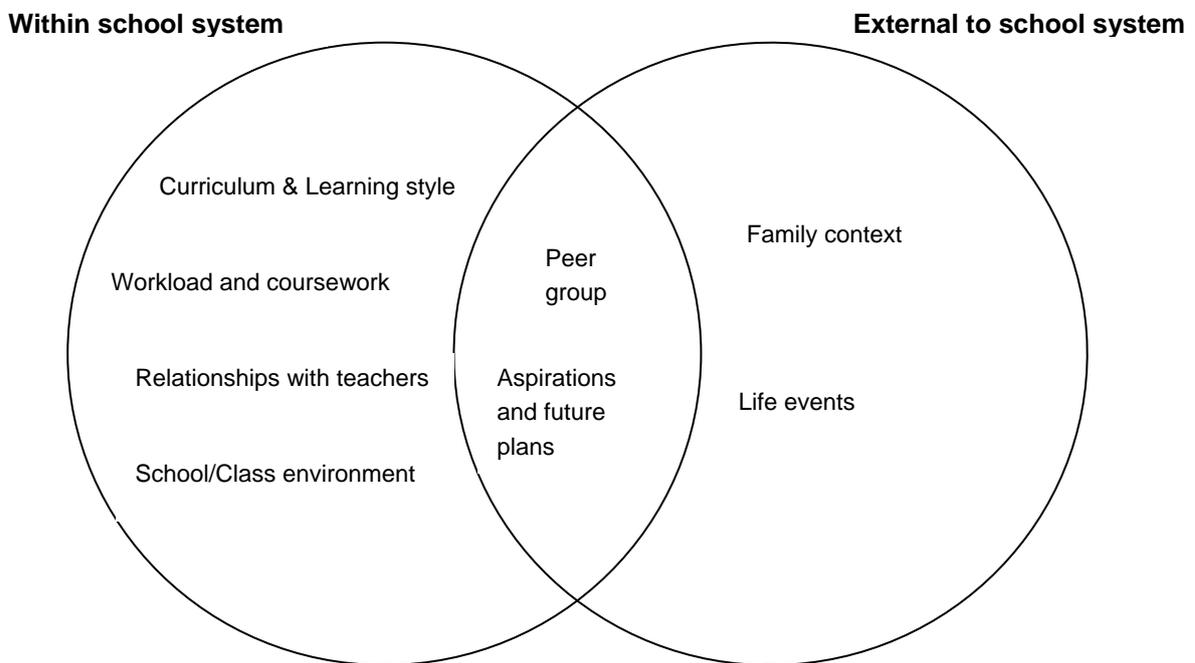
The second key dimension was the extent to which disengagement occurred. Young people's experiences fell into three groups: those who underachieved but remained engaged; those who moderately disengaged; and those whose disengagement was severe or complete. Young people's pathway of disengagement was marked by movement between these groups at different points in time during KS4.

### 3 Causes of disengagement and underachievement

This chapter explores the causes of underachievement and disengagement from the perspectives of young people, teachers and parents. As discussed in chapter 2, underachievement and disengagement are not synonymous and young people who underachieved at KS4 were not necessarily disengaged from education. As the focus of this study is educational disengagement, this chapter will focus primarily on the nature of factors contributing to disengagement, but will also highlight how these factors are the same as (or different to) factors that may contribute to underachievement more broadly.

The factors and experiences leading to disengagement in KS4 were varied. These can be grouped as factors that relate directly to the school system, those external to the school system and those that overlapped, as illustrated here:

**Figure 3.1 Causes of disengagement**



The first section of the chapter describes the range of factors contributing to disengagement. The second section explores the nature of protective factors that may mitigate or prevent disengagement. The third section then goes on to explore *disengagement pathways*, focusing on the timing of disengagement, the ways in which disengagement and underachievement are manifested in different circumstances, and how different factors combine and interact to propel disengagement. As the focus of this study is on disengagement that occurs at KS4, this chapter will also highlight *triggers*, or potential *turning points* for young people during KS4 when disengagement may be instigated, exacerbated or lessened.

### 3.1 Causes of disengagement

This section maps and describes the causes of disengagement as set out in the diagram above. It is important to note that not all young people interviewed experienced all these factors. Some experienced a single cause, while others experienced a combination of causes. How factors combined will be discussed further in section 3.3.

#### Within the school system

##### *Curriculum and learning style*

A key issue that affected levels of engagement was how far the curriculum reflected current interests or was perceived to be useful for the future. Young people described “switching off” or becoming disruptive in subjects they felt were irrelevant or truanting to avoid those subjects entirely. Teachers also acknowledged the central importance of curriculum and raised concerns that the curriculum can be too prescriptive and unresponsive to the interests of young people.

Because of the importance of curriculum in engaging young people, choosing KS4 options at the end of year 9 was highlighted by teachers as a potential *turning point*. If KS4 options met the needs and interests of the young people concerned, they had the potential to sustain engagement and motivation. Conversely, where GCSE options failed to meet these needs, the opposite was true. Bad experiences could *trigger* disengagement or exacerbate a process of disengagement that had already begun.

Young people described a range of reasons for not being able to access options of their choice. There were not courses of interest available, limited space for some subjects, timetable clashes preventing them taking up preferred options and limited choice because of the number of compulsory subjects. Young people felt that the experience of some courses had not matched their expectations - this was particularly the case where subjects were new in year 10.

Equally as important as curriculum content was learning style and a recurrent theme amongst young people was a preference for “*hands-on*” learning. Young people felt they retained information better and enjoyed subjects more when they involved practical elements. Examples of lessons they particularly enjoyed involved a range of teaching methods and included demonstrations, experiments, drama, field trips and film. The introduction of Diplomas in 2008 which incorporate practical hands on experience with class based learning may help to address these needs.

##### *Workload and coursework*

The transition from KS3 to KS4 with an increased emphasis on independent learning and coursework was identified as a potential *trigger* for disengagement by teachers as young people struggled to adapt. Young people themselves echoed this, and in particular described finding it difficult to complete work outside school hours where other interests and priorities occupied them. Where previously not completing a piece of homework did not have far reaching implications, the failure to complete a piece of coursework could have a significant affect on KS4 attainment. The demands of KS4 workload also had the potential to exacerbate a process of disengagement that may have been initiated by other factors.

### *Relationships with teachers*

Relationships with teachers were central to young people's experiences of school and if a relationship with a teacher broke down this could have serious consequences for levels of engagement in that subject. Young people described difficult relationships with teachers they felt were impatient, overly strict, or patronising. In particular, where young people felt that a teacher was not interested in them or disliked them, they would describe being "*turned off*" the subject and not wanting to attend the lesson. Other impacts of a poor relationship with a teacher included being disruptive in class and being less willing to ask for help or extra support. In some cases, changing teachers at KS4 was a trigger for disengagement.

### *School and class environment*

The school and classroom environment were key issues. Lessons disrupted by other pupils and large class sizes were raised as negative experiences that affected attainment. While these factors were not necessarily a primary cause of disengagement, they had the potential to exacerbate disengagement by making it harder to engage and progress.

## **Cross-over factors**

### ***Peer Group***

Friendship groups and peer relationships had a complex impact on educational disengagement. In some accounts, friends had a hugely positive impact on school experiences and this will be discussed in further detail in section 3.2. However, a number of issues including peer pressure, changes in peer group and experiences of bullying were highlighted by young people, parents and teachers as causes of disengagement. These issues are discussed in turn here:

#### *Peer pressure*

Peers were described as having a strong influence on young people. Being distracted in class, being disruptive or not paying attention were some of the ways peer groups influenced levels of engagement, reflected in the following comment: "*The group I was in..., we never learnt in lessons, we mucked about. We annoyed the teacher.*" In cases like this, young people attributed their educational disengagement wholly or in part to the influence of their peers and their desire to fit in. Teachers also highlighted peer pressure as a key cause of disengagement.

#### *Peer group change and breakdown*

The transition from KS3 to KS4 could be a period of upheaval for young people. The start of KS4 often meant that peer groups that had previously been in the same class were split into new groups to take account of GCSE option choices, and as classes were set according to ability. While for some, these changes were welcomed as an opportunity to make new friends and try new subjects, in other cases this separation from a friendship group acted as a trigger for educational disengagement. In classes without their friends, young people described feeling uncomfortable and not having anyone to turn to for support. In these circumstances it was not uncommon for young people to describe truanting to avoid these lessons.

For others, KS4 coincided with the breakdown of key friendship groups. Groups grew apart, developed different interests or fell out over issues including friendships and relationships. KS4 was identified as a period of transition during which young people were maturing and developing different interests. This transition could place strain on peer groups and contribute to the breakdown of friendships. When this occurred, young people felt alienated from school, and in some cases formed alternative friendship groups with young people who were older or did not attend their school. Where this happened, these new friendships outside school were prioritised and the young person's focus was drawn away from school, increasing their disengagement.

### *Bullying*

Verbal and / or physical bullying by peers was raised as a primary cause of educational disengagement by those affected by it. Impacts of bullying were wide ranging and included loss of confidence, not being able to concentrate in class, and "*switching off*". In some cases where bullying was persistent and prolonged, it led to truancy as individuals sought to avoid the situations in which they were being bullied. In very severe cases young people described depression and attempting suicide as a direct result.

How well the school tackled bullying was key to young people's experiences. Where bullying was addressed quickly and effectively by the school, it was less likely to lead to disengagement. However in other cases, failure to address these issues further increased young people's alienation and disengagement from school, reflected in the following comment from one young woman who was bullied throughout year 10. Here she described how the school's failure to support another student who had been bullied, affected her own levels of engagement with school:

*"We all noticed then that.. .. nothing ever happened about it 'cause she'd been to see every teacher in that school and nothing happened... ..So we just gave up trying to help ourselves.. ...Just switched off."* (Female, 18yrs old, employed)

### ***Aspirations and future plans***

Aspirations and future plans had a clear affect on levels of educational engagement. Clarity of future plans, the perceived relevance of KS4 attainment and extent to which young people felt their plans were achievable all impacted on levels of engagement:

#### *No clear plans for the future*

This group of young people described having no clear plans for what they wanted to do in the future. A lack of future plans meant that they did not see any clear purpose for GCSE attainment and described feeling unmotivated. When reflecting on their school experiences, a recurrent theme amongst this group was that at the time they did not feel GCSEs were important for their future (although these views often changed after leaving school).

#### *Clear plans for the future but academic achievement not seen as relevant*

This group of young people had clear aspirations and future plans, but did not feel that academic achievement was important in order to pursue these plans. Aspirations here included joining the army, becoming a professional skateboarder or motorbike racer. In these cases priority was given to pursuing these aspirations (usually outside the school setting) and as a result these young people were less engaged with school.

### *Clear plans for the future but not able to achieve them*

Young people in this group had clear aspirations but described barriers or problems that meant they did not feel able to achieve their ambitions. In one case for example, a young woman described giving up her dream to become a professional dancer because of an injury and consequently losing interest in school. In another case, a young man had a clear ambition to be a mechanic but was unable to pursue this ambition because of a lack of appropriate courses available at his school. This failure of the school curriculum to be relevant to his aspirations had a negative impact on his levels of engagement.

### *Clear plans for the future but unclear how to reach goals*

In this group, young people had clear plans for the future but were less clear on how to achieve these goals. Not knowing what qualifications they needed and what pathways they could take to reach their goals could have negative impact on levels of engagement. In one case for example, a young woman expressed an interest in interior design, but was unclear how to pursue this aim and at time of interview remained uncertain as to what steps she needed to take to achieve her aim.

### *Clear plans for the future and clear pathway*

This group of young people had clear aspirations and were clear about their pathway to achieving these goals (including how KS4 attainment would contribute). Having aspirations for the future and a clear view of how to achieve these aims was an important protective factor against disengagement at KS4. This will be discussed further in section 3.2.

The extent to which young people held high aspirations for the future was influenced by a range of different factors including family, friends, school and locality. In some instances, a lack of positive role models lowered personal aspirations which in turned reduced engagement, reflected in the following comment from one young woman:

*“I just, I couldn’t be bothered, I thought why should I, there’s no point, I’m never going to get anywhere in life, nobody ever does from [name of neighbourhood], nobody from [name of school] [has] ever done anything good, apart from one lad in my year that got 11 A stars, but that’s it, I didn’t see the point.”* (Female, 18 yrs old, unemployed).

There was also evidence to suggest that aspirations were downgraded as young people disengaged from education as a result of other factors. For example, young people who had wanted to be solicitors or nurses in KS3, described lowering these ambitions as they disengaged from education; they increasingly perceived earlier ambitions to be out of reach. In these circumstances, the perception that a once hoped for ambition was out of reach itself had a demotivating affect. The relationship between aspirations and educational disengagement is therefore complex and multi-directional. For some, a lack of clarity over future plans could initiate or reinforce a process of disengagement, while for others, a process of disengagement triggered by other factors could quickly lead to a lowering of aspirations, and a re-evaluation of what they felt they were able to achieve.

## **External to the school system**

External to the school system, a range of factors were found to influence experiences of school and levels of engagement. The nature of these factors and their impact on school experiences is described here.

### *Family context*

Family circumstances impacted on young people's experiences of school in a range of ways:

#### *Parent and sibling experiences of school*

Young people described older siblings who had truanted or dropped out of school. These family experiences had a negative impact on how they themselves viewed school, to the extent that some truanted with older siblings. In other cases, there was a perception that the behaviour of siblings impacted negatively on how teachers and other students perceived and treated them. In these cases, young people felt it was harder to build positive relationships with teachers and peers as their sibling's behaviour led to negative expectations of the young person. The perceived unfairness of this had the affect of reducing their interest and engagement with school.

Teachers also raised the problem that parents who had had negative experiences of school themselves, could pass on these negative attitudes to their children. This inter-generational perception could be particularly challenging when trying to build up effective home-school relationships.

#### *Parental support and knowledge of the education system*

The extent to which young people were encouraged and supported to work hard and value school by their families varied widely. In many cases, parents worked hard to support their children and this was an important protective factor against disengagement (see section 3.2). However, in certain circumstances families were less well placed to provide this support, and this meant that some young people needed to be more self-motivated and independent in order to achieve. This was more likely to be the case if the young person was not living with their parents or if they had a difficult relationship with them which meant they were less likely to discuss school and less likely to approach them for support.

In the same way that some young people themselves were not always clear about what qualifications they needed to reach a particular goal, there was also evidence that parents were also not always clear about how the school system worked, the nature of different types of qualification and what was required for progression. It follows that this lack of knowledge limited their ability to provide support to their children.

### *Life events*

A range of life events impacted on school experiences at KS4. These are outlined here:

#### *Pregnancy*

Young women who became pregnant and had children during KS4 described disrupted school experiences during KS4 as a result of their life changes and caring responsibilities.

### *Health*

Mental and physical health problems could have a profound impact on KS4 attainment. In particular, absence as a result of poor health and medical appointments meant that some young people struggled to keep up with the curriculum.

### *Family break-up*

In certain circumstances a family break-up could have a negative impact on school experiences. Young people described missing the absent parent and feeling unsettled and this drew their attention and focus away from school. If a family break-up coincided with KS4 this had the potential to act as a *trigger* that would either precipitate disengagement, or exacerbate a process that had already begun.

### *Bereavement*

The death of a family member during KS4 could have a profound impact. Where bereavement led to absences from school, young people described getting behind with school work and struggling to catch-up. While this did not necessarily lead to disengagement, it could make it harder for young people to reach their potential.

For many, these life events also meant that their priorities shifted, and their focus was no longer on educational attainment. However, young people affected by these types of event were not necessarily disengaged from education. Indeed, in a number of cases, young people remained engaged, but struggled to achieve because of their circumstances. While not necessarily causes of disengagement in themselves, these events had the potential to trigger a process of disengagement if the barriers to achievement caused by these life events were perceived to be insurmountable. For this reason, the support available to young people in these circumstances needed to be appropriate and timely in order to ensure that they remained engaged. (This will be discussed fully in chapter 4.)

## **3.2 Protective factors**

In identifying causes of educational disengagement, young people, parents and teachers also identified a range of protective factors that could reduce and mitigate the impact of the factors described above. These protective factors were often the converse of the causes of disengagement.

### **Relevant curriculum**

A curriculum that felt relevant and was tailored to the interests and abilities of young people could be an important protective factor against disengagement. Teachers described successfully re-engaging students by offering courses that met their interests. In particular, vocational courses that included college day-release could re-engage students that had particular career ambitions or who found the traditional school environment difficult.

### **Aspirations and future plans**

As already discussed, clear aspirations and a clear pathway to achieving these aspirations was a major protective factor that could mitigate against educational disengagement.

### **Positive teacher relationships**

A positive relationship with a teacher could have a real impact on a young person's attitude to and engagement with school. Young people particularly valued teachers that they felt talked to them with respect, listened to their views, showed an active interest in their attainment and treated them more like an adult. They were also particularly appreciative of teachers who were flexible and willing to bend the rules in order to help them. Examples of this included being allowed to eat or take breaks during class if it helped them to continue to participate. Where there was a strong positive relationship with a teacher, young people would describe working harder and attending those lessons more regularly.

### **Positive peer relationships**

Young people often described socialising with friends as a positive part of their school experiences. Friendship groups could provide support with schoolwork and act as a major incentive to school attendance. Strong friendships also helped reduce the extent and impact of bullying and provided crucial emotional support when a young person suffered a bereavement or was going through a difficult time in their personal lives. Friends were also one of the main sources of information and advice when deciding on post-16 destinations.

### **Effective home-school relationships**

A positive home-school relationship was a protective factor that was focused on by both parents and teachers. Parents characterised an effective home-school relationship as one with regular communication that kept them up-to-date with progress and informed them of any difficulties or problems. When a particular issue did arise, having one key contact that was easy to reach, and feeling that the school was responsive to their concerns were crucial ingredients for an effective relationship. For teachers, having the support of parents was hugely valued both in terms of encouraging young people to engage with school, and in ensuring effective communication around issues external to the school that may be affecting levels of engagement with school.

### **Family support**

The support and interest of family was a key protective factor identified by young people, teachers and parents alike. Providing support with homework, intervening in problems including bullying, and providing encouragement and emotional support helped motivate young people. Where families understood the school system and the range of qualifications available, this knowledge also helped young people to negotiate the system to their best advantage.

### **Specialist support**

For some young people, specific needs required specialist support and where this was available and effective this acted as an important protective factor against disengagement. In one case for example, a young woman who had a baby in Year 11 was able to continue with her GCSEs at a specialist school which provided childcare and provided support in small classes. Without this specialist support, it was unlikely that she would have been able to achieve any GCSEs.

### 3.3 Disengagement pathways

This section explores the causes of disengagement further by examining levels of disengagement and how causes and protective factors interact with each other. It uses the concept of “disengagement pathways” to illustrate how a primary cause of disengagement can lead to impacts which further exacerbate that initial disengagement, leading to a downward spiral from which it is increasingly difficult for the young person to extricate themselves. The concept of a disengagement pathway as outlined here has implications for identifying and tackling disengagement.

For the three groups of young people who differed by their extent of disengagement, it is possible to identify different ‘pathways’ or routes into disengagement. These will be discussed here:

#### Underachieving but not disengaged

Young people in this group underachieved at KS4 for a range of reasons but continued to value their education, and put effort into school. Instead, a range of barriers and difficulties made it harder for them to reach their potential at KS4.

For some in this group, underachievement was the result of an event or crisis, including health problems, pregnancy or a bereavement. How these events impacted on school experiences varied, but were usually characterised by long periods of absence which in turn made it more difficult for them to complete coursework and learn the curriculum needed at KS4.

For others in this group, underachievement was a more gradual process. In these cases, a range of factors led to underachievement. Young people described struggling with the curriculum and workload at KS4, lacking confidence in themselves, and struggling with a classroom environment with large class sizes, disruptive students, and high staff turn-over. These cases were usually characterised by continued good attendance and a positive attitude towards school, coupled with a gradual drop-off in attainment.

For both the group that underachieved as a result of an event and those that underachieved more gradually, protective factors could play an important role in minimising the extent of underachievement. As discussed in section 3.2, these factors included the support of family and clear aspirations for the future. Because of their continued interest and engagement with education, young people in this group were also more likely to be receptive to support from school and specialist support that met their needs. This will be discussed further in chapter 4. The following case examples illustrate the experiences of young people who fell into this group. For each example, the extent to which causes of underachievement could be mitigated by the presence of protective factors is notable:

#### Case study 3.1: Event based underachievement

At the time of interview, this young woman was 18 and was attending college. Up until the end of Year 9 she had enjoyed school, got on well with her teachers and had a close group of friends. However, as she entered Year 10, the depression and panic attacks she had suffered from for some while became more severe. Soon after, she reached a crisis point where she no longer felt able to attend school and was subsequently hospitalised for some months. As she recovered, she did not feel well enough to return to her old school. Instead she was offered a place at a small specialist school that had small class sizes, supportive specialist staff and a flexible curriculum which allowed her to return to school in her own time. With this support and the support of her family, she was able to sit four GCSEs, which was something a few months earlier she had not felt she could achieve. She has since gone on to study at college and at the time of interview was doing well.

### **Case study 3.2: Gradual underachievement**

At the time of interview, this young woman was 18 and was at college. She described herself as one of the “*quiet ones*” that were not disruptive at school. She never truanted, only having time off if she was ill. Although she worked hard and wanted to do well, she was struggling for a number of reasons. In particular, by Year 10 she was finding it difficult to keep up with maths. She found the teacher unapproachable and lacked the confidence to ask for help so was getting further and further behind. Although things were difficult for her, she described how supportive her family were and how much they helped her with homework and encouraged her to do well. In Year 11 she also accessed the support of a school mentor who helped her by talking to teachers on her behalf and helping her manage her work. She also went to lunchtime maths classes which gave her extra help for a couple of months before her exams. These classes were small so she got more attention from the teacher, and didn’t feel so shy about asking for help. In the end, she achieved 5 Ds and 3 Cs (including a C in maths) GCSE. She was pleased with this maths result.

### **Moderate disengagement**

Young people in this group showed signs of moderate disengagement. A distinction has been made between this group and those young people who were severely or completely disengaged because of differences in the extent of their disengagement. Indeed, all the young people in this group completed at least some KS4 courses, although their KS4 attainment varied. For young people that fell into this group, there was still some enjoyment of some aspect of school. For some this was being able to socialise with friends, while for others it was a specific teacher or subject.

Disengagement within this group tended to be gradual in nature, with a wide range of factors contributing. The range of factors included issues relating to peer group relationships, the curriculum, relationships with teachers, family context and young people’s aspirations for the future. For this group, while the factors contributing to their disengagement could often be complex, they tended to be less severe than those with severe or complete disengagement. The presence of some protective factors also prevented them from becoming severely or completely disengaged.

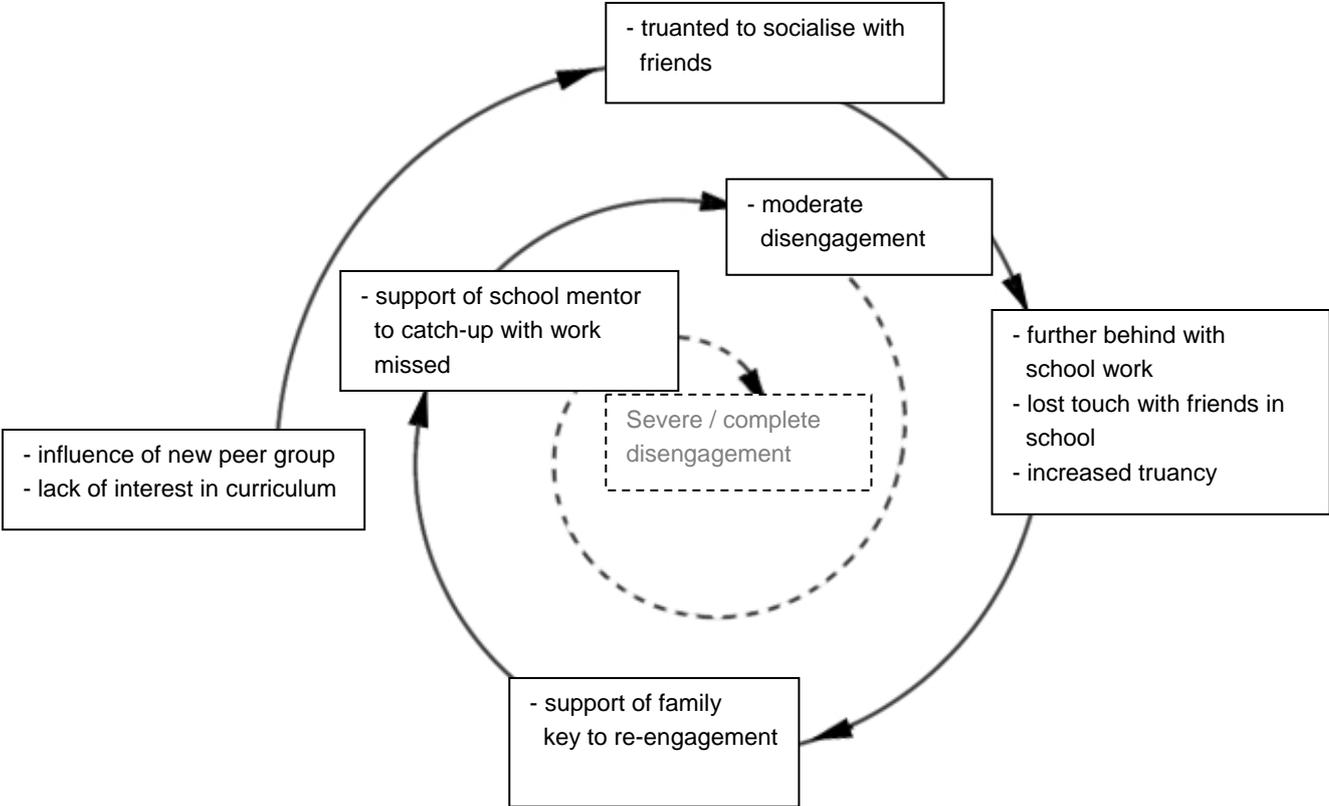
As mentioned in the introduction to this section, the process of disengagement from education could begin with one or two primary causes and the impact of this initial disengagement could further exacerbate the process, degenerating into a downward spiral of disengagement from which it became increasingly hard for young people to extricate themselves. How far a young person travelled along this path, depended on the nature and complexity of the causes of their disengagement, the presence of protective factors, and the extent to which effective support was offered and at what stage. A case example, illustrates this process:

### **Case study 3.3: Moderate disengagement**

At the time of interview this young woman was 18 and was working full-time. At KS3 she had been a high achiever. She was initially expected to continue this level of attainment at GCSE and was predicted ten A-C grade GCSEs. However, at KS4 she did not like a lot of the subjects on offer and would have preferred more practical subjects. She would also have liked to have done business studies because she felt this was more relevant to getting a job in the future, but this was not available. From Year 9 onwards she fell in with a new group of friends who did not go to her school and because they were truanting, she truanted so that she could be with them. As a result, she got further and further behind with her school work and lost touch with the friends she had at school and this in turn made it more difficult for her to go back. Despite this, support from her family and the help of an Educational Welfare Officer helped her re-engage with school in Year 11 where she got help from a school mentor to catch-up with what she had missed. With this help she achieved 5 GCSE passes, 4 of them at A-C.

This pathway is depicted in the following illustration which shows how a complex range of factors contributed to disengagement in this case. It also shows the extent to which the pathway to severe or complete disengagement was arrested by the presence of protective factors and effective support:

**Figure 3.1 - Pathway to moderate disengagement for case Study 3.3**



**Severe or complete disengagement**

Those that severely or completely disengaged from school suffered a serious drop in their attainment and had multiple complex factors contributing to their disengagement. Some dropped out of the education system entirely and did not pass any KS4 courses. As with young people who experienced moderate disengagement, this group often had a range of complex and multifaceted factors contributing to their disengagement. What distinguishes them from the moderate group, is the extent and severity of these factors. Young people in this group had few positive things to say about school and it is this absence of protective factors against disengagement that also distinguishes them from young people with moderate disengagement. A case example illustrates this:

### Case study 3.4: Complete disengagement

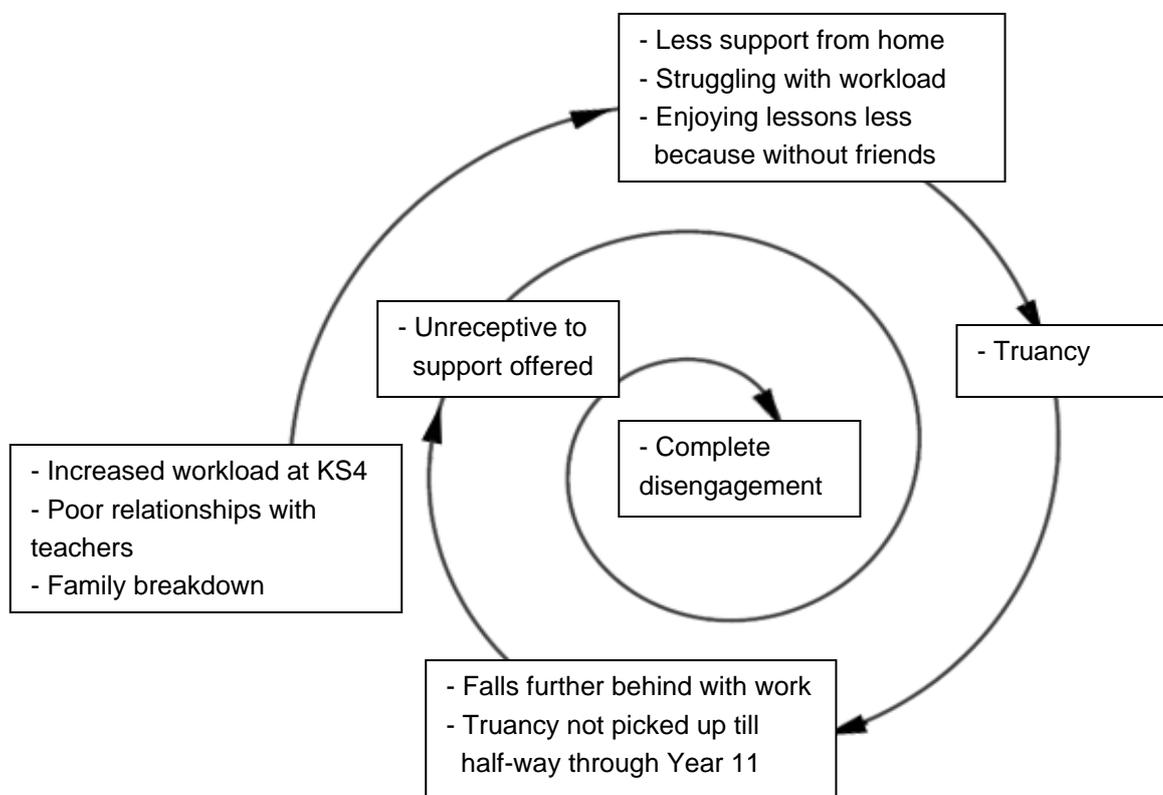
At the time of interview this young woman was 18 and currently caring for her young son. In Years 7 and 8 she had done well at school and got good marks. However, as she got older she grew to dislike school for a range of reasons. She had difficult relationships with some of her teachers and felt that they looked down on her. Sometimes she couldn't answer questions in class and this made her feel stupid. Although she enjoyed Art and was doing well in it, she didn't get along with the teacher and so dropped out. She also found the workload harder to deal with in KS4, particularly having to complete coursework on her own. She had a good group of friends, but in Year 9, all her classes were split and she was separated from most of her friends. Not being with her friends made her not want to go to class and it was at this point she began to truant.

At the same time, outside of school, her parents split up. Her dad had previously helped her with homework but now he was not around. In the end she went to live with him for a while.

At first she only truanted a few days here and there in Year 10 and nothing was done about it, but by Year 11 she was truanting for whole weeks at a time. To avoid her dad finding out about her truancy, she didn't tell him about parent evenings, and it was only half-way through Year 11 that the school contacted him about her attendance. By this stage she had fallen behind in lots of her classes. The school let her drop some lessons so that she could catch-up and offered her extra classes. She did not go because the lessons were after school and she saw this as her time. When it finally came to her exams, she did not go to any of them because she felt she had missed too much.

How the factors described in this above case-study combined into a complex downward spiral of disengagement is illustrated here:

**Figure 3.2 - Pathway to complete disengagement for case study 3.4**



What distinguishes the example of moderate disengagement from that of the above example of complete disengagement is the extent to which in the first example the presence of protective factors were able to lessen or mitigate the extent of disengagement. In that case the support of family and a school mentor played an important role in encouraging her to re-engage. However, in the second case example, there were fewer protective factors in place. In this case, the lack of friends in class, lack of positive relationships with teachers and minimal contact between the family and the school meant that this young woman disengaged entirely.

What this section has sought to do is to illustrate the complexity and multiplicity of young people's experiences and highlight the extent to which factors combine and exacerbate one another. As illustrated here, the longer factors are left unaddressed, the more likely additional factors and impacts will combine to reinforce and escalate disengagement, and the harder it is to establish protective factors that mitigate against a downward spiral.

### **3.4 Chapter summary**

A range of factors contribute to educational disengagement both within the education system and external to it. These are:

- Curriculum and learning style
- Workload and coursework
- Teacher relationships
- School and classroom environment
- Peer relationships
- Aspirations and future plans
- Family context
- Life events

Protective factors that reduced or mitigated levels of disengagement reflected the flip-side of the causes highlighted above. For example, while poor relationships with teachers could increase levels of disengagement, positive relationships could be a major protective factor.

To understand the complexity of young people's experiences, it is helpful to use the concept of a "disengagement pathway". This illustrates how a wide range of contributing factors can trigger disengagement, leading to impacts that lead to further disengagement. The presence of protective factors can halt or reverse this process but the extent to which this is effective is dependent upon the complexity and severity of the causes and the nature of the protective factors in place, including the timing and effectiveness of support and measures to tackle disengagement.

## 4 Identifying and tackling disengagement and underachievement

This chapter looks at two key issues: the processes of identifying disengagement and underachievement; and the support that is offered to lessen the impact or avert potential disengagement or underachievement. People often did not explicitly differentiate between disengagement and underachievement in discussing support even though they are separate and sometimes distinct issues. As a result, it was not always clear whether the support offered was aimed at averting or preventing underachievement or educational disengagement.

### 4.1 Identifying potential underachievement and disengagement

This section maps and describes the range of signs of disengagement and underachievement, mechanisms for identifying them and the factors that influence successful identification.

#### Signs and signals

There were a range of different signs of disengagement and underachievement which varied considerably according to the extent of disengagement (across the three groups identified in chapter 2). There were also clear differences in how these signs manifested in different circumstances, occurring either gradually or with a more sudden onset. Chapter 3 gave a detailed description of how disengagement and underachievement occurred for the three different groups. The range of disengagement and underachievement signs can be grouped into issues relating to attendance, attainment and behaviour.

#### Mechanisms and responsibility

Schools varied in how they went about identifying disengagement and underachievement, including ranges in the information used, who was responsible for gathering and using information, and *when* in the school year identification of problems occurred. Staff described monitoring attendance, attainment and behaviour in order to identify potential disengagement and underachievement, which clearly mirrors the signs identified by young people in chapter 3. A range of data and means of monitoring these three areas were described across the different schools in our sample. These were:

- *Attainment*

This was a key area for identifying potential underachievement and there were a range of different mechanisms for monitoring attainment that varied in their levels of sophistication between the schools. In some cases schools described how senior staff observed lessons and school work for changes in the standard or uncompleted pieces of work, whilst others talked about setting targets based on current attainment levels and reviewing these against attainment on a regular basis through reports each term. Similarly, other schools described using more sophisticated electronic systems, such as the Fischer D Family Trust Scale, which allowed school staff to monitor trends in attainment against targets and consequently helped in identifying signs of underachievement.

- *Attendance*

School staff reported monitoring attendance records to identify any patterns in low attendance or a lack of punctuality. In some schools teachers also spoke about how they had introduced automated systems and electronic registers, which would automatically record whether a student was absent from school and send the student and guardian a text message to check whether they were truanting or off school for a specific reason. These systems enabled schools to track changes in attendance levels and to communicate with parents and guardians early on. Not all schools shared the same systems and young people sometimes described an issue with attendance that was not always picked up by their school:

*“In year 11 I actually didn’t go to a single maths lesson..I wagged it for two weeks and then I thought ‘oh, it’s too late to go back in now’ and then two weeks, it was two months.. Actually, no-one found out about it, I never got pulled [up] on it, so I suppose they missed that one.”* (Male, 18 yrs old, at college)

- *Behaviour*

Observing students’ behaviour in lessons also allowed staff to monitor any changes which could signify potential disengagement. School staff were sometimes required to record any changes in behaviour, such as aggression or violence in incident reports and electronic databases. They also recorded which lessons disruptive behaviour took place in, as this allowed them to identify any patterns in behaviour and look for possible causes, such as a lack of interest in a certain subject, or a poor relationship with a specific teacher.

School staff also described how they had developed databases whereby staff could input data on all three areas as they were often interlinked, although not all schools had the facilities to collect all types of information or record them in a joined up manner. However, amongst those who did not have these databases, some schools described how they planned to make changes to their tracking systems in order to make better use of existing data.

Staff members stressed the importance of staff at all levels taking responsibility for inputting information on attendance, attainment and behaviour and regularly reviewing this information and informing other staff members, again at all levels about any significant changes. For some schools, there were designated non-teaching staff members whose sole responsibility was to monitor and interpret this data in order to identify any signs or patterns emerging, which could signify potential disengagement or underachievement.

The stage at which monitoring started varied between schools and different groups of young people. For some students, monitoring commenced from day one at the beginning of year seven. This was particularly noticeable for students whose feeder schools had identified problems, whilst for others signs were picked up at a later stage. There were also differences in the frequency of monitoring, ranging from continual monitoring throughout the year, for example, reviewing progress on a weekly or monthly basis, to reviewing reports at the end of each term or half way through the year. This has clear implications for how early disengagement or underachievement was identified.

School staff, in particular, highlighted the need for students to also take some responsibility for identifying any problems and flagging these up with staff members. Outside school, parents and guardians were cited as key people for informing schools regarding any events or circumstances external to school that could potentially lead to disengagement or underachievement.

## Factors influencing identification

School staff described a range of factors that impact on the identification of disengagement and underachievement. These can be discussed in terms of four broad areas and for each area the section outlines what helped and hindered identification.

- *Data usage*

School staff described the importance of having appropriate tracking and recording systems in order to collect data on attainment, attendance and behaviour. These systems should ideally be accessible to all members of staff. However, schools admitted they were less efficient at collating, interpreting and using the data to identify signs. This could mean a school had a good deal of data without good use being made of it. Some schools described how they had designated non-teaching staff whose responsibility was to monitor these systems, interpret the data and inform the relevant staff members of any problems.

It was also important for data to be monitored on a regular basis to avoid signs going unnoticed and to allow support to be implemented early on. School staff stressed the importance of identifying signs of disengagement and underachievement as early as possible, as this allowed them to implement suitable support measures in order to avert disengagement or underachievement.

- *Resources*

Closely bound up with data usage were issues with limited resources. High staff turnover and the use of supply teachers were cited as barriers to frequent monitoring and sound information sharing. Teachers spoke about how they had limited time to spend with students and devote to pastoral care. They also described how large class sizes and high volumes of students meant problems could go unnoticed as staff had less opportunity to get to know students.

- *Communication and relationships*

Effective communication and relationships between staff and students was another important factor for identifying problems. Both staff members and young people described how they were more likely to talk to teachers about problems if they had a good relationship with them and felt comfortable around them. Teachers also talked about the importance of having effective communication between all levels of staff to ensure information was passed on and not lost in the system. Closely bound up with this was the home-school relationship, which was highlighted by both parents and teachers as a key factor in aiding identification, in particular around issues external to the school.

- *Awareness*

As a result of a poor home-school relationship, issues could go unnoticed if events that triggered disengagement or underachievement were external to the school, for example, divorce or bereavement. These issues were difficult to notice unless they manifested themselves in obvious changes in behaviour, such as becoming disruptive in lessons or aggressive and violent, which signified disengagement. In comparison, school staff described how they were less aware if underachievement and disengagement occurred gradually and was less visible

*“...it’s the ‘grey’ children who sit quietly at the back, don’t cause a problem, get on with their work and they might just be continually dropping, you know. But it’s the teacher recognising that and having the time to recognise that that level’s dropping, or that piece of work’s not come in. ‘Why has Johnnie not brought that work in where in Key Stage 3 he was doing it all the time?’ You know, it’s very, very pressured for teaching staff at Key Stage 4 with all the coursework, they’ve got such big classes and... it’s hard to keep track of the young people, and I think that’s very, very important that teaching staff have the support with regards to that’ (Senior Learning Mentor, female)*

This highlights how resources and awareness are closely interlinked, as limited resources made it difficult for teachers to pick up on signs that are less obvious or more gradual.

## 4.2 Tackling disengagement and underachievement

This section explores the range of support on offer to young people, who was offered what type of support and under what circumstances. It also looks at the factors that influenced whether young people engaged with support and how effective different types of support were for different groups of young people.

### Support available

Two distinct types of support emerged - universal and targeted. Universal included support which everyone received or support that was on offer to everyone but the young person had to actively take up or ask for it themselves. In comparison, targeted support was specifically offered to a young person, usually by teaching staff, learning mentors or external organisations in order to address a particular need or issue. Broadly speaking however these two types of support were offered across three key areas which are described below:

- *Curriculum*
  - *Universal* support involved extra classes at lunch time or after school, coursework or homework sessions and internet revision sites to help students who were struggling with work. Young people also spoke about receiving peer mentoring and access to teaching assistants to help them with learning.
  - *Targeted* support in comparison involved booster lessons, sending work home, telephone access to teachers and sitting exams outside school to accommodate students who had difficulty attending school, which could be for a variety of reasons such as health issues, bullying or becoming pregnant. In addition, one-to-one tutoring or learning mentors were offered to young people for support with learning and coursework and ‘referral’ rooms or learning units provided less disruptive environments for learning for those with behavioural issues.
- *Careers and options advice*
  - *Universal* support centred on two areas; careers advice and help choosing GCSE options. Young people described receiving careers advice from teachers in school or external organisations with Connexions being the most commonly cited organisation. In addition, some students had work experience placements to give them a taster of possible career pathways. In terms of options advice pupils had been given sessions with subject teachers at the

end of year nine to help them choose their GCSE options. More unusually some schools invited Year 9 students to question and answer sessions with Year 10 and 11 students about options they had taken.

- *Targeted* support took the form of encouraging some young people to pursue particular option choices where this was felt to be appropriate. Teachers also discussed the value of providing targeted and tailored careers advice above and beyond the universal support offered as a way of re-engaging young people in education.

Discussions with young people around support largely centred on what was offered once a problem had arisen. However, teachers also spoke about different types of support that could be implemented to try and avert disengagement or underachievement, in particular in relation to option choices and learning styles. In relation to options, they discussed how tailoring curriculum choices and options according to a young person's interests and ability could help prevent disengagement and underachievement. Similarly, changing teaching styles to include more interactive learning through games, drama or information technology could help avert disengagement in particular. This clearly echoes young people's accounts where learning styles were identified as a key contributor to disengagement.

- *Personal support*

- *Universal* some schools held 'drop in' sessions with counsellors or school nurses where any young person could access support.
- *Targeted* support involved being assigned a 'wag officer' if there were issues with truanting and attendance. In addition, young people described how they were offered counsellors, anger management sessions, school nurses and psychiatrists to address issues such as health, bereavement or divorce. Personal tutors, specialist advisors or specialist schools were also available for young parents or people with health issues. In addition, teachers also discussed involving external support organisation, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to address issues such as mental health.

## **Types of support offered to different groups of young people**

This section explores what support was offered to young people in the three different profiles of disengagement and underachievement identified in chapter 2. It is worth noting that all three groups received both universal and targeted support. What differed however, was when it was offered and what was taken up or refused. These issues are explored for each group. The reasons why young people in these three groups engaged with certain types of support more so than others will be explored in greater detail in the next section.

### *Underachieving but remaining engaged*

Young people in this group were offered support in all three areas of curriculum, personal support and careers and options advice.

Individuals whose underachievement was a result of a life event or crises, such as health or pregnancy were offered targeted support geared towards addressing their personal needs as soon as issues became apparent. For example, one young person was unable to attend school due to health issues, so the school sent work home, gave her telephone access to teachers to help with work and when she was no longer able to attend school they referred her to a specialist school which provided a more appropriate learning environment. These

young people all took up the targeted support on offer to them and were more likely to refuse universal support such as extra lessons or homework clubs as this was not a priority for them.

In comparison, the group of young people whose underachievement occurred more gradually (and was a result of factors such as struggling with workload or classroom environments), were more likely to access universal support largely centred on curriculum and learning. This took the form of extra lessons, coursework and home work sessions, peer mentoring and careers and GCSE options advice. These young people described how advice regarding GCSE options was available at the end of year 9 and support around issues to do with the curriculum or learning was predominantly available in years 10 and particularly 11, in order to prepare young people for exams and help them catch up with work they may have missed or struggled with.

Although these young people were more likely to take up universal support than the other two groups who were less engaged with education, there were some young people who did not take up universal curriculum support, as they did not feel they needed it. This was particularly noticeable for those young people who did not perceive themselves to have underachieved (see chapter 2.5).

#### *Moderately disengaged*

Here, young people were more likely to receive universal support centred on the curriculum and learning. This may be due to the fact that their disengagement was more gradual and less easy to identify than the first group, as highlighted in chapter 3, which subsequently made it difficult to pinpoint a specific trigger point and offer targeted support in response. The type of universal support taken up and the stage at which it was available was the same as for the first group. Young people in this group reported that careers advice and guidance was available towards the end of year 11 and support around the curriculum, such as revision sessions or extra lessons was available in the last couple of months of year 11 as preparation for their GCSE's. There were no clear patterns in terms of what universal support this group took up or refused and it was largely based on their own needs and how appropriate they felt the support was (discussed further later on in this section).

In some extreme cases where issues were marked by a change in behaviour, for example attacking a teacher, young people did receive targeted support, such as anger management courses. The stage at which support was offered was largely dependent on when their behaviour manifested itself into identifiable problems.

#### *Severely or completely disengaged*

These young people received universal support centred mainly on the curriculum and careers advice. Young people in this group described how universal support, such as careers advice and extra lessons were available towards the end of year 11, which they felt was too late for support to be effective (see later in this section for further discussion of timing of support)

*"...there was a Connexions [officer] in year 11...but I never went [because] I wasn't really interested. That's when I didn't like school."* (Female, 18 yrs old, NEET)

They also described how these types of support were often available during lunchtime and/or after school. Out of the three groups of differing disengagement, this group were the least likely to take up universal support centred on the curriculum or careers advice.

Targeted support was offered to young people in this group in order to tackle personal issues such as bullying or health problems and it took the form of counselling, personal tutors or school nurses. What differed however, between this group and the first group of young people who remained engaged was *when* this type of support was offered. It was reported by young people in this group to often be offered “*too late*”, in stark contrast to the experiences of young people in the first group whose support was a response to a particular event. This may be due to the fact that there were often multiple causes of disengagement for this group which made it harder to identify and address the key causes of disengagement.

This group of young people were more likely to take up targeted support, rather than universal support because it addressed their specific needs.

### **Factors influencing take up and the effectiveness of support**

This section explores the key factors that influence different levels of take up of support between the three groups of young people, as well as how take up varies with different types of support and support areas, and how this in turn impacts on the effectiveness of support.

The evidence suggests that those who were more engaged with education more broadly were more receptive to support and had higher attainment. It also suggests that appropriate and targeted support could help avert or prevent further disengagement. This illustrates an important two-way relationship between engagement more broadly and engagement with support; each type of engagement could assist the other. The relationship between engagement and willingness to take up support underlines the importance of identifying issues and offering support as early on in the process of disengagement as possible.

As discussed in chapter 2, young people moved between different levels of engagement over time. Consequently there were also changes in the take up of support depending on a young person’s varying level of engagement.

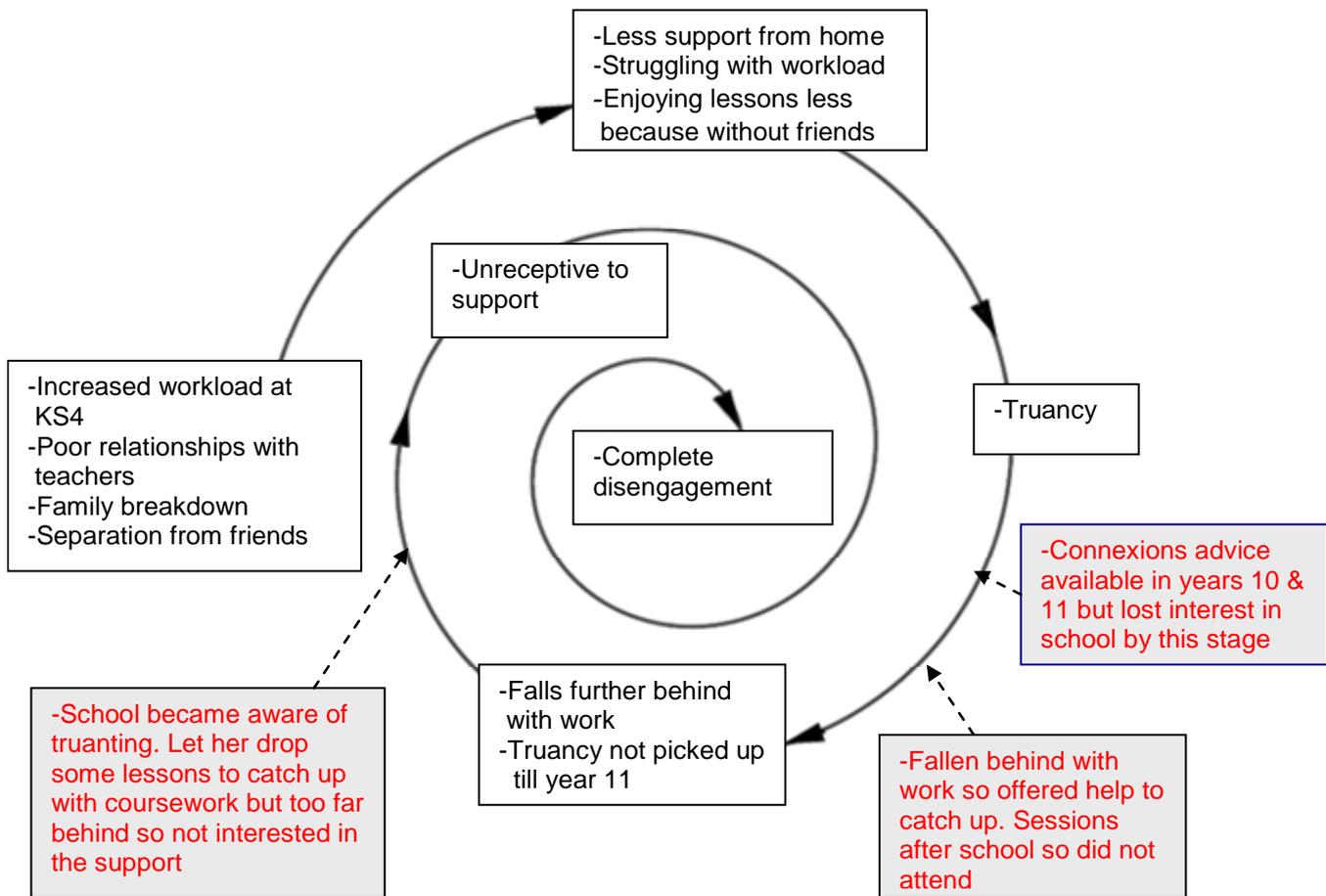
In addition to overall engagement, there were a range of other factors that affected the take up and effectiveness of support, which will be explored below. These factors were shared across the three profiles of disengagement and underachievement, but where there were differences between groups these are drawn out in the following sections.

#### *Factors underpinning take up and effectiveness of support*

- *Stage at which support is offered*  
This was a particularly key factor in influencing take up and the effectiveness of support, in particular for the group of young people who completely disengaged. For some young people in this group targeted support was offered “*too late*” and they had lost interest or completely “*switched off*”, which made take up and engagement unlikely. Others felt they had fallen so far behind it seemed impossible to catch up. In extreme cases the initial causes of disengagement had escalated and therefore the complexity of needs had become far greater over time, thus requiring a full package of support, some of which would be provided external to a school. In these cases, personal issues were particularly dominant and often needed to be addressed before the causes of disengagement related to school. The stage at which support was offered clearly affected how effective support was at addressing particular issues.

The case illustrated here is taken from chapter 3 and added to in order to demonstrate the importance of timing in offers of support.

**Figure 4.1 - Pathway to complete disengagement for case study 3.4 showing stages at which support was offered and the importance of timing.**



- *Aspirations and attitude*

Young people's own attitude and engagement with school was closely associated with their aspirations and ambition and these significantly affected the extent to which they took up support. Three distinct groups emerged in relation to this. Firstly, there were young people who had a very clear idea about what they wanted to do in the future and were subsequently more likely to access both targeted and universal support. These young people saw clear purpose in accessing support as they wanted to do well in order to achieve their goals. This was particularly apparent amongst the group of young people who underachieved yet remained engaged with education. They were the most likely out of the three groups to take up universal support, which required them to attend voluntarily, such as extra lessons or revision sessions. There was also evidence that these young people would actively seek outside support such as career guidance or targeted support, as illustrated in the following account:

*“...that was done off my own back...by me sending my friends to my teachers to ask for work [to be sent home]...towards the end of the year they’d figured out my routine and if I wasn’t in they’d send the work to me...but I initiated it.”*  
(Female, 18 yrs old, in college)

This clearly reflects the fact that this group of young people were still engaged with education and learning.

The second group of young people were those who knew exactly what they wanted to do when they left school but they did not see school as relevant to achieving these ambitions, consequently they were less likely to take up support, in particular universal support.

Finally, there were those who lacked ambition and aspirations for the future or were unclear about how to achieve them. As a result they were less likely to access universal support, in particular support centred on careers advice.

*“...we had meetings every so often with careers advisors at the end of the year [10 and 11]...so we could see what we wanted to do with our lives, but I still wasn’t sure what I wanted to do, so it didn’t really help me.”* (Female, 18 yrs old, at sixth form)

These young people were predominately from the two groups of young people who had underachieved and either disengaged moderately or completely. Where young people lacked aspirations, were unclear how to achieve their aspirations or did not see school as relevant to achieving their goals, they held themselves responsible for not engaging with support;

*“I had all the help I needed...but if you want to choose to take the help, that’s a different story...it’s up to the person whether they want to take the help or not”.* (Male, 18 yrs old, looking for work)

There was a recurrent and clear acknowledgement amongst these young people that the schools often did everything they could, but it was down to their own attitude and not realising the importance of school and qualifications at that stage. This was a view echoed in parent’s accounts.

Young people who had severely or completely disengaged described multiple causative factors, including issues such as severe bullying. They described “switching off” and were getting by on a day to day basis. As a result this group of young people were unlikely to take up universal support based on the curriculum or careers advice as these were a low priority. They were more likely to engage with targeted support that was tailored towards their specific needs.

Finally, young people in the groups who underachieved and disengaged also described how they were attending sessions with ‘*wag officers*’, but they were not really engaged as they ‘*didn’t listen to them*’. This was a type of support that young people were not offered, but that was given to them regardless of their attitude. Where their attendance improved as a result, this was usually only for a short period. In these cases, attendance was driven by threat of the negative consequences of not doing so, for example, parents getting fined or imprisoned.

- *Perceived relevance / appropriateness of support on offer*

Young people across all three groups of disengagement level were less likely to engage with support if they thought it was unlikely to effectively address problems. This was particularly apparent with support measures aimed at tackling bullying.

There were no clear patterns between the three groups of young people and the perceived effectiveness of different responses to bullying varied. For example, some young people described positive responses from schools which included tackling the issues immediately, splitting up a group of bullies, providing spaces where people experiencing bullying could “escape”, offering alternative learning environments and keeping in regular contact with home and the young person. In contrast, others described how issues were ignored, disbelieved, not followed up or addressed too late (see below). In some cases young people held a view that talking to teachers about bullying, or attending support groups could actually make the situation worse as this account reveals;

*“...if you go and tell the teacher and they find out it makes it a whole lot worse for you...changing lessons to avoid them would mean they would know you’d been to the teacher so that would make it worse again...so you just put up with it and don’t say nothing, but that just gets you nowhere .”* (Male, 18 yrs old, Work Based Learning)

- *School response and attitude*

A school’s response to behaviours linked to disengagement was important. Where young people and parents described a negative response they felt the school had failed to try to understand the root causes of their problems, instead disciplining them for the resulting behaviour.

This perception of the school’s response was particularly recurrent in the two groups who underachieved and either moderately or completely disengaged. They described how struggling with work resulted in them not completing homework or coursework, or personal problems led to truanting, which resulted in detentions rather than targeted support aimed at understanding what drove this behaviour and addressing the issues involved. Young people felt a more helpful response may have been to offer appropriate support. A case example illustrates this:

**Case study 4.1 - Negative school response**

At the time of interview this young man was 18 and studying at college. He described struggling with progressively worsening insomnia from KS3 onward. By year 11 he felt tired all the time and found it difficult to get up in the mornings. His attendance deteriorated. When in school he had difficulties concentrating and as a result his coursework suffered. His mum was concerned about him during this time. He was often withdrawn and ‘angry’ and their relationship deteriorated. It was only later she realised it was likely her son had been suffering from depression during this period. He had spoken to the teachers about his problems, but described how the school’s only action was to fine his mum for his poor attendance. Both he and his mum believed the school was too concerned with his attendance and paid scant interest to the underlying causes. Both felt the school could have been more understanding and supportive. He also described how he would have liked a learning mentor to help balance his workload and catch up with the work he had fallen behind on.

However others, in particular those who underachieved but remained engaged, described how they had received targeted support that was very effective in addressing specific problems. For example one young person in this group described how after becoming pregnant in year ten she received an advisor regarding pregnancy and was referred to a specialist school for young parents which provided a more appropriate learning environment, which offered one-to-one support and childcare facilities, which ultimately allowed her to sit her GCSEs.

- *Staff relationships and approachability*

This was another factor which could influence take up and the effectiveness of support. A positive relationship with teachers could encourage young people to become involved with support or keep them engaged with support. Young people across all three groups described how they were more likely to take up universal support such as extra lessons or methods to address bullying if they had a positive relationship with the staff delivering the session. Teachers at all levels were cited as key sources of support for many young people, as they could talk to other teachers on their behalf, provide places to escape and someone to talk to.

A negative relationship with staff could undermine engagement with support. Young people talked about how they felt embarrassed asking for help and some described feeling stupid if did not know the answers and consequently less likely to take up curriculum support that was group-based. Not getting on with support staff like learning mentors meant young people were reluctant to engage and “*didn’t listen*”. Similarly, feeling like teachers had ‘*given up*’ on them made them “*switch off*” and support was therefore less effective. Because of the importance of the relationship with teachers, continuity of staff was also important, as a change in staff member required young people to establish new relationships. Parents also highlighted the importance of continuity so staff members could get to know young people and their individual needs.

*“... if they could stick to the same teacher I think that could help...if they’ve got used to a teacher in year 9 and they can still have them in year 10 and year 11, they grow a relationship with them...you get to know people, get to know their weaknesses, you get to know their strengths [and] where they need help”*  
(Mother of 18 yr old daughter)

Parents also stressed the importance of them feeling supported rather than judged, as some parents described how they themselves felt their children’s behaviour reflected on them as bad parents.

- *Time of day and location*

Universal curriculum support, such as extra lessons or revision sessions were often held at lunch time or after school. Young people described how they were less inclined to attend these sessions because they viewed this as their own time and other activities such as socialising with friends took priority over such support. This was particularly noticeable for the group of young people who completely disengaged. Conversely, young people who were still engaged with learning and education were more likely to attend these sessions despite the timing, as they saw them as relevant to their own needs.

The locations of these support measures could also affect take up and effectiveness across all three groups of young people, and unsuitable environments reduced the effectiveness of support. For example, one young person described how extra lessons held in a room with a snooker table were ineffective because very little work was achieved.

The size of extra support classes was also an issue. Some young people reported finding support classes with large numbers of students less useful because there was more likely to be disruptive behaviour in large groups. In contrast, young people who attended extra lessons in small groups described this as more effective; there was less disruptive behaviour and smaller groups allowed for more one-to-one support. There was also less embarrassment in asking for help because all young people attending were there for the same reason. These findings suggest that location of extra support and the size of these groups may impact on take up and effectiveness.

- *Peer relationships*

Peer relationships were a key issue in the take up of universal support, in particular for extra lessons or revision sessions. Young people described how they were more likely to attend these sessions if their friends did so, as illustrated in the following account:

*“...I didn’t really go to them [coursework lessons]. I just didn’t like staying after school because once school had finished I just wanted to come home. Some people did stay but not many, not me or my mates...we just wanted to go home...If I had one or two mates stay with me then I probably would have gone more, but you don’t really want to do things on your own.”* (Male, 18 yrs old, working part-time)

This was an issue that was particularly apparent with the group of young people who had moderately disengaged from education, as they were still engaged with certain aspects of school and friendship groups were particularly important for this group. Therefore they were also important in influencing take up of support for this group.

School staff also highlighted a number of factors that could influence the effectiveness of support in particular. The issues raised by staff were the same issues that were highlighted as barriers to identifying disengagement and included, limited resources, large class sizes, high staff turnover and the importance of the home-school relationship. Staff members and parents both stressed the importance of effective and continual communication between parents and the school to ensure parents were aware of what support was on offer and how young people could access that support to enable them to encourage young people to take up appropriate support.

## **Support gaps**

Parents and young people across all three groups identified a number of gaps in support. These gaps were perceived in the three key areas of curriculum, personal issues and careers and options advice. Gaps were identified based largely on an individual’s needs and the extent to which they felt the school had appropriately responded to these needs. Other support gaps were where certain types of support were not available in particular schools. This was particularly noticeable in terms of vocational options and learning styles. Another distinct area that was identified as a gap was offering support in helping young people in dealing with emerging issues around identity and sexuality.

In addition to the three areas described above, teachers also highlighted two distinct improvements needed in support. These were the need for tailored packages of support, geared towards an individual's needs and based on individual ability. The evidence would also suggest that young people who have already started to disengage required either targeted support to be offered to them directly or encouragement from teachers to access appropriate universal support. Young people were unlikely to initiate seeking support when experiencing disengagement, as they found this difficult to do.

Teachers also described how the benchmarking of five A-C grades could act as a self esteem barrier for many young people, which could ultimately become a mental barrier and result in young people *'switching off'*. They felt schools needed to move away from the traditional measures of achievement in terms of 5 A-C grades and offer more flexibility to students. Teachers suggested the possibility of mixing GCSE's with BTEC or other qualifications that were more appropriate to individual needs.

### **4.3 Chapter summary**

There were a range of mechanisms for identifying disengagement and underachievement which focused largely on attendance, attainment and behaviour. Staff members, non-teaching staff, young people and parents were all felt to be responsible for helping with the identification of signs of disengagement and underachievement. Similarly, there were a range of factors that impacted on a school's ability to identify issues. These included data usage, resources and awareness and communication.

In terms of the support that was on offer two distinct types emerged; universal and targeted and these were centred around three key areas, which included curriculum, personal support and careers advice.

There were different levels of take up across the three groups of young people identified in chapter 2 and the factors that influenced engagement and effectiveness of support were as follows:

- Stage at which the support was offered
- Attitude and general engagement
- Perceived relevance and appropriateness of support
- School response
- Staff relationship and approachability
- Timing and location
- Peer relationships

Alongside the different types of support on offer to young people there were a number of support gaps identified. These again centred on the three key areas of curriculum, personal support and careers advice. In addition to these three areas, tailored packages of support were also identified by teachers as needed.

## 5 School experiences and the impact on post-16 destinations

This chapter presents the findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of post-16 destinations. Section 5.1 gives an overview of the post-16 destinations of young people who had underachieved and/or disengaged at KS4 using the matched administrative databases to compare their destinations, to those of the cohort as a whole. Sections 5.2 to 5.5 draw on the findings of the qualitative study to explore the nature of these post-16 destinations further, focusing on the range of destinations pursued and the factors influencing these destinations including the role of school experiences on post-16 choices and pathways for those that underachieved and/or disengaged during KS4.

### 5.1 Overview of post-16 destinations of young people How do pathways of under-achievers differ from those of other young people?

The matched administrative dataset for the 19 in 2009 cohort that was used for the analysis of the incidence and characteristics of under-achievers (see sections 2.1 to 2.2) also held records of young people's post-16 destination. This classification was compiled by DCSF at the end of the academic year 2006/07 (see section 1.4). From the data available, post-16 destinations have been classified into four groups: school<sup>18</sup>, further education or other<sup>19</sup>, work-based learning (WBL) and a final group that is not recorded as being in any form of education or training. This group is likely to be made up of young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and a number of people who were working in a job without training (JWT).

The data show that underachievers had distinctive destinations.

Compared with the total cohort (Figure 5.1) underachievers were:

- Less likely to be in school (particularly those in Group C who had achieved no GCSEs at A\*-C),
- Slightly more likely to be in FE or work-based learning and
- More likely to be in NEET / JWT (especially Group C).

Compared with consistent achievers (Figure 5.2), the destinations of underachievers were most comparable with those of the low achiever group. In fact, their likelihood of continuing in some form of learning was actually worse than for the low achiever group (28% of underachievers were classified as NEET/JWT compared with just 21% of KS3 low achievers). This shows that underachievers' worsening academic performance between KS3 and KS4 took them to a position where they were less likely to continue in education post-16 than young people who they had outperformed in KS3 tests.

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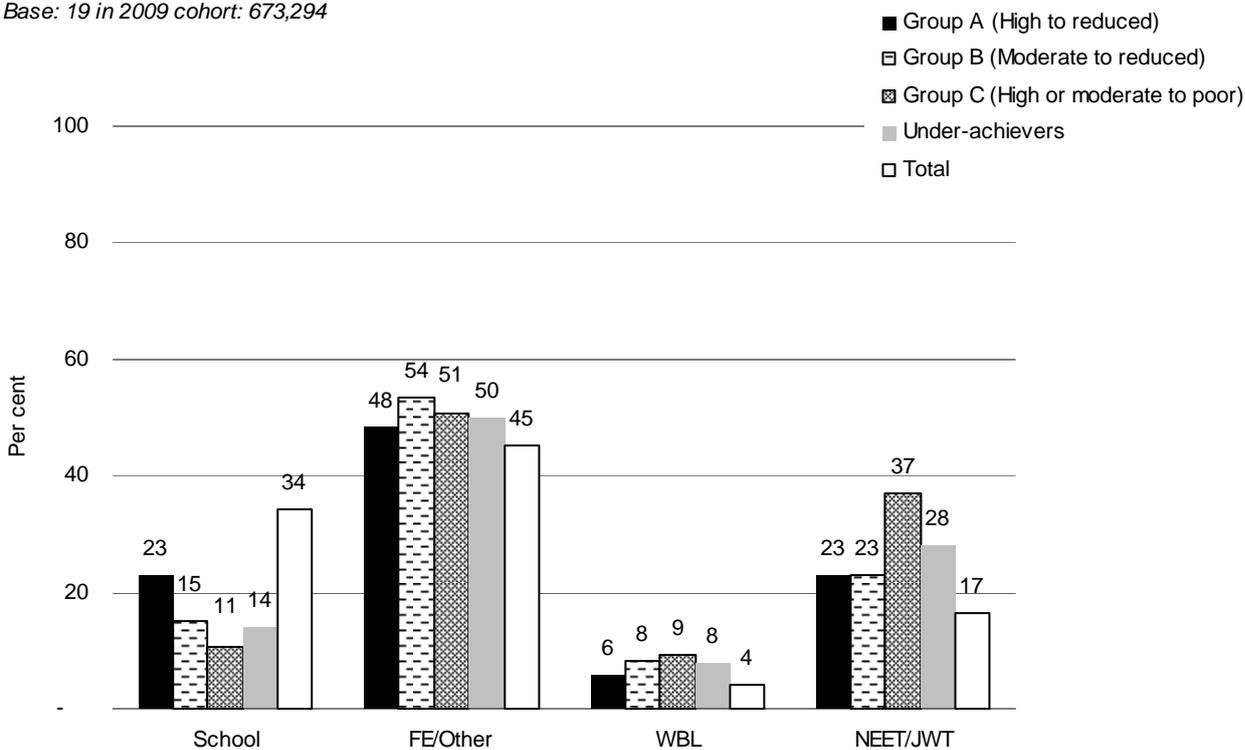
<sup>18</sup> The 'School' category has been defined using the following values in the filed 'Main\_inst 06/07': maintained school, Pupil Referral Unit / special school, independent, academy/City Technology College.

<sup>19</sup> The 'Further Education/other' category has been defined using the following values in the filed 'Maintained school 06/07': Sixth Form College, other Further Education, Entry 2 Employment, other.

Figure 5.1 shows how young people’s post-16 destinations differed according to extent of their underachievement at KS4:

- Those who were high achievers at KS3 and achieved moderately at KS4 (Group A: High to reduced) were more likely to be in school than other underachievers (but still less likely than cohort as a whole).
- Contrastingly, those in Group C (whose underachievement at KS4 was the greatest) were most likely out of all other groups to be recorded as not being in any form of learning (37%). With reference to Groups A (High to reduced) and B (Moderate to reduced) the same proportions of young people were in NEET/JWT (23%).
- Similar proportions of underachievers from different groups and of underachievers as a whole were in FE (on average half of each group), which was slightly higher than of a cohort as a whole.
- Also, underachievers were slightly more likely than cohort as a whole to be in work-based learning. However, there were no substantial differences between under-achieving groups.

Figure 5.1 Proportion of young people in post-16 destinations: all under-achieving groups.

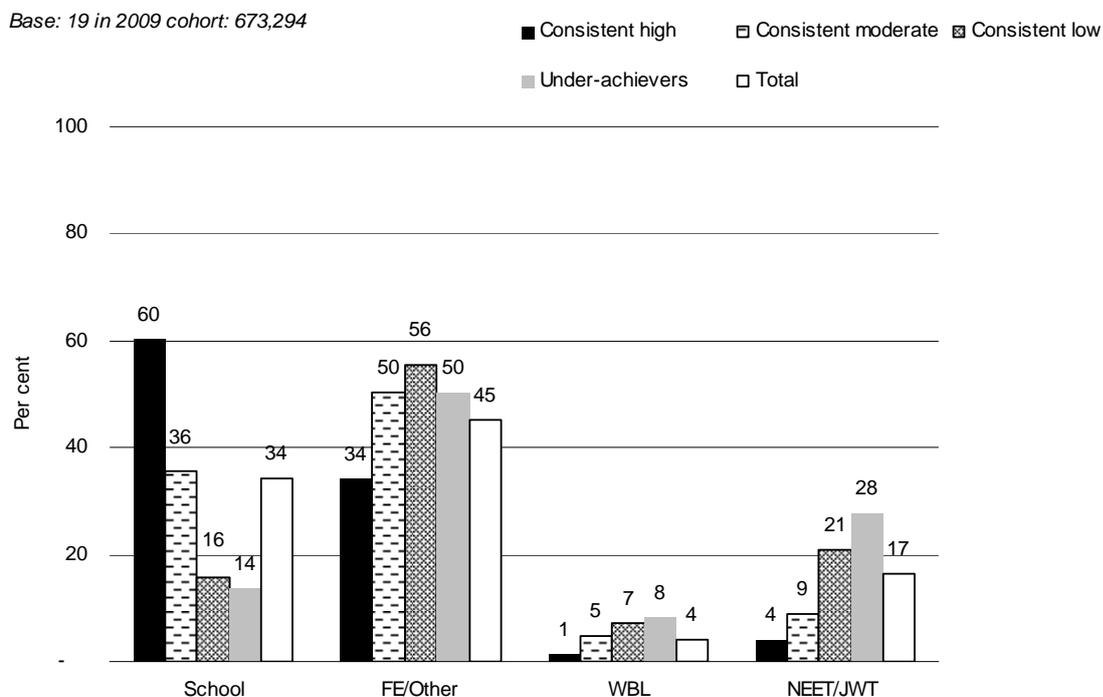


Additionally, further variations in post-16 destinations were noted between underachieving group and more consistent achievers. Figure 5.2 compares the proportions of underachievers as a whole with proportions of consistent achievers, and the total cohort:

- Under-achievers were most likely to be classified as NEET/JWT group (28%), followed by consistent low achievers (21%).
- Under-achievers were least likely to be in school (14%), closely followed by consistent low achievers. In comparison, 60 per cent of consistent high achievers were in school.

- Consistent low achievers were most likely to be in FE (over 50%), followed by half of underachievers and consistent moderate achievers.
- Significantly lower proportion of young people from each group was in WBL compared with other post-16 destinations. Slightly higher proportion of underachievers and low achievers than those from other groups chose this destination.

Figure 5.2 Proportion of young people in post-16 destinations: Under-achievers vs. consistent achievers.



## 5.2 Post-16 destinations - findings from the qualitative study

To understand the impact of school experiences, disengagement and underachievement on post-16 pathways, it is important to briefly map the diversity of these pathways.

This section draws on the experiences of the young people who took part in the qualitative study to describe these, looking at how different pathways were accessed and experienced. These findings provide context for the discussion to follow in section 5.3 which explores the impact of school experiences on post-16 destinations.

Young people often described a shifting pathway since school, characterised by movement between different destinations over time. It is this fluidity of post-16 destinations that is explored in this section.

This movement also highlights the potential benefit of longitudinal research to give greater insight into the dynamics of post-16 destinations. Further research of this kind is currently being undertaken using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) and the Youth Cohort Study (YCS).

The young people who took part in the qualitative study were sampled specifically to reflect a range of post-16 destinations. These destinations were: sixth form, further education or college, work based learning and those not in education, employment or training (NEET). The study did not specifically seek to include young people in employment but this group was also present in the sample.

## **Sixth Form / Further Education College**

### *Range of courses studied*

The range of courses studied by young people who stayed on at sixth form or further education college included AS Levels, NVQs and BTECs. Those who had not achieved five A-C grade GCSEs were more likely to choose Level 2 vocational courses. There was also a clear gender split in course choice. Young women were more likely to focus on beauty therapy, childcare, hairdressing and health and social care, although leisure and tourism, drama, business and IT were also chosen. Young men chose construction, carpentry, mechanics, sport and IT, although also took up graphic design and hairdressing.

### *Experiences of sixth form / College and progression*

Young people often changed courses during the academic year or after the completion of one year and before the start of the next. Reasons for changing courses varied although there was also evidence to suggest that the first post-16 course had not been a carefully selected first preference. For example, young people described choosing a course simply because there were no spaces left on the course they were interested in, or because their friends were doing it. In other cases, a course was chosen quickly with little time for reflection or planning because of the short amount of time between receiving GCSE results and applying for sixth form or college.

While some young people switched courses but remained in education, others dropped-out of sixth form or college entirely. Reasons here included not enjoying the curriculum, financial concerns, and health issues. Frustration at slow progression could also be a factor, particularly if poor attainment at KS4 meant that they had to complete courses at Level 1 or 2 before they could progress further.

It is also worth noting here that some cases young people and parents were unclear about the level of a young person's qualifications and what was required for progression. This suggests that clearer guidance may be needed to ensure that young people and their families are aware of what type of qualification they are taking and what options are open to them upon completion.

## **Work Based Learning**

### *Routes into work-based learning*

Young people accessed apprenticeships and work-based learning via Connexions and through family and friends. There were also young people who would have liked to pursue this type of qualification but who found it hard to find opportunities. These young people either found an alternative college course or were NEET. There was a perception that there were not many apprenticeships available, and low attainment at KS4 was felt to be a barrier to access.

### *Range of courses studied*

For those who did take work-based learning options, the range of courses pursued included apprenticeships in joinery, hairdressing, business administration and electrics.

### *Experience of Work-Based Learning and progression*

Experiences of work-based learning were largely positive. Amongst the young people who were completing three year apprenticeships there was a clear sense of progression. These young people planned to complete their apprenticeships and then either remain with their current employer, find alternative employment or become self-employed.

### **Employment**

#### *Routes into employment*

Employed young people found work via Connexions, family and friends, Job Centres and newspaper advertisements. Where young people struggled to find work, perceived barriers included low achievement at KS4, age and lack of experience, and lack of good quality jobs in their area.

#### *Range of employment*

Young people were employed in a broad cross-section of sectors including the armed forces, retail, hospitality, health and beauty, childcare, clerical and admin, legal services, communications and construction.

### **Not in education, employment or training (NEET)**

For those young people who were NEET there was variation both in the amount of time spent NEET and reasons for their NEET status.

#### *In and out of activities*

One NEET group was characterised by varied post-16 experiences that involved short periods of work, aborted attempts at training/college and periods of unemployment. For this group barriers to sustaining employment included low attainment low pay, unwillingness of employers to provide training, poor quality unstable work and a lack of self confidence. In more rural locations, difficulties with the cost and availability of transport also limited where they could find work.

Efforts to engage with education and training were also short lived for a number of reasons. In some cases, financial concerns made it difficult to continue particularly if young people needed to pay rent or contribute to the household income. In other cases, courses failed to engage them and negative experiences of school continued in experiences of post-16 education.

The fact that young people in this group had tried a range of employment and training options suggests that they remain motivated. All of them expressed dissatisfaction with being NEET. Indeed, a number of young people in this group had clear ambitions for the future but these were curtailed because of the barriers they faced.

Where young people successfully made the transition into work or training after being NEET for a long period, support of family and friends was an important facilitator. In one case for example, a young woman who had been NEET for a year after leaving school, attributed this to a lack of confidence in herself to the extent that she was reluctant to go to a job interview or take a college course. However, with the support of her boyfriend she built up her confidence and has now found work.

### *Caring and parenting*

Young women who were the primary carer for a young child were NEET because of their caring responsibilities. In some cases, the lack of childcare for young children was felt to be a barrier to continuing in education. The young women in this group planned to return to training or work once their children started school.

### *Continuously NEET*

It was unusual for young people to be continuously NEET for the two years since leaving school. Where this did happen, young people described a lack of confidence in themselves. This group was also less likely to have clear ambitions for the future and to a certain extent were comfortable with their NEET status, resulting in less motivation to change the status quo. There was some evidence that support from professionals including JSA and Connexions advisors may be helpful in motivating and supporting this group.

## **5.3 Impact of attainment and school experiences on post-16 destinations**

School experiences and attainment at KS4 were found to impact on post-16 destinations in a range of ways.

### **Attainment**

The extent to which young people perceived their KS4 attainment to impact on their post-16 destinations varied widely. For some there was no perceived impact, for others there was no perceived impact currently but they anticipated future impact. In other cases, their attainment at KS4 was felt to have slowed or prolonged their chosen path, but had not prevented it, while another group felt that their KS4 attainment limited or changed the options available to them. These groups will be discussed here in turn:

#### *No perceived impact*

This group of young people did not feel that their attainment at KS4 had impacted on their choices since leaving school. Young people who felt this way were usually happy with their post-16 pathways and did not feel that these had been limited by their attainment. These were likely to be young people who did not see themselves as having underachieved. In some cases people were pursuing or wished to pursue vocational courses that did not have entry requirements. In others it was because they were able to take courses that interested them despite not having 5 A-C GCSEs.

#### *No perceived impact currently but future impact anticipated*

This group did not feel that their attainment at KS4 had impacted on their post-16 destinations so far, but anticipated that it may impact on their future plans. In one case for example, a young man who had a clear ambition to become a mechanic was able to get a place on a mechanics course at college despite not achieving any A-C passes at GCSE. At the same time however, he was conscious that his low grades may hinder him when he found work in his field and this was a source of concern:

*“If I happen to get a job doing something better and they wanted more grades from school, they’d be a bit disappointed.. and I’d feel disappointed that I could have done better.”* (Male, 18 yrs old, in college)

### *Prolonged post-16 pathway*

For this group, there was a feeling that low attainment at KS4 had delayed or prolonged the route they wanted to take and there could be frustration associated with this. However, despite these difficulties, this group did not feel that their chosen pathway was impossible, but that it would just take longer to achieve. Examples of young people who felt like this included one young man who wanted to pursue a career in computer game design. In his case, he failed his ICT GCSE so had to take a college course that was equivalent to a GCSE before he could progress. Despite finding this frustrating it did not prevent him from continuing to pursue his ambition.

### *Limited or changed post-16 pathway*

For this group of young people there was a real sense that low attainment at KS4 had limited their choices post-KS4 and in some cases, forced them to pursue alternative pathways to the ones they had wanted. Examples of this included young people who had wanted to study AS Levels and go to University but were unable to do this because they did not meet the entry requirements. For some of the young people in this situation, there was a perception that to continue trying to pursue this path would take too long and be too costly. Indeed, in some cases, young people started out along a chosen course, but dropped out as progress was perceived to be slow and they grew bored and felt under-stimulated. Instead, some pursued alternative courses, or took vocational qualifications and moved into employment. For others, they felt that their attainment at KS4 had prevented them from finding employment, or where they had found employment they felt that this was of lower quality because of their qualifications.

When asked to reflect on their school experiences, many of the young people who took part described not realising when they were at school how important KS4 attainment would be both in terms of finding employment and pursuing further education. Young people regularly expressed surprise at the difficulties they had finding work and the limits their KS4 attainment placed on their choices at college. Many reflected that armed with the experiences and knowledge they had gained since leaving school, they would work harder at KS4 if they could repeat that time again:

*“..If I was going back, I would ..not muck about as much and get a bit more stuck in with the work.... I can't do anything now; I can't get a job or nothing 'cause I haven't got any good grades..”* (Male, aged 18, NEET)

These reflections suggest that finding ways to impress on young people the importance of KS4 attainment is crucial. However, young people acknowledged that finding ways to do this would be challenging. Often their priorities were elsewhere and many reflected that despite being told that KS4 attainment was important at the time, they did not always listen.

### **School experiences and extent of disengagement**

To explore the impact of school experiences on post-16 destinations, it is useful to re-visit the groups that were identified earlier to explore the extent to which educational disengagement during KS4 impacted on post-16 pathways:

#### *Underachieved but remained engaged*

As might be expected, this group of young people largely remained engaged with education post-16, although courses and pathways chosen varied. Young people in this group took courses in subjects including childcare, sport, drama, beauty therapy and retail and in some cases re-took GCSEs alongside these courses to try to improve grades. The success of

these post-16 destinations often depended on the extent to which the factors that contributed to their underachievement at KS4 had been successfully addressed. For example, in one case a young woman who had suffered from health issues during KS4 which created difficulties for her, was able to thrive at college because of the support package that was put in place. This included a learning mentor, a taxi to and from college, and a sympathetic response from the college to her absences for health reasons. In another case however, a young woman who had a baby in Year 11 was unable to pursue a qualification in hairdressing because her local college could not provide childcare for a child under 6 months.

#### *Moderate disengagement*

For this group of young people, post-16 pathways were very varied and largely depended on the extent to which their earlier underachievement affected the options open to them and the extent to which the causes of their earlier disengagement were addressed by these post-16 options. In some cases therefore, moderate disengagement at KS4 did not necessarily equate to educational disengagement post-16. In one case for example, a young man who disengaged largely because he felt the curriculum was irrelevant to his interests at KS4, re-engaged post-16 when he was able to choose courses that matched his interests. In his case, his attainment at KS4 did not restrict the options he was interested in, he enjoyed the courses he took at college and at the time of interview planned to go on to University. In other examples, young people re-engaged post-16 when the reality of finding work hit home and the relevance of training and qualifications was clearly understood. In these circumstances, an apprenticeship which combined relevant training with work experience was a positive experience for those who took this route.

Where post-16 experiences were less positive, a number of factors contributed to this. For some young people in this group their low attainment at KS4 was felt to restrict their options and there was a considerable amount of regret that they had not done better. One example of this was a young man who has struggled to find work since leaving school and attributed this partly to his low attainment at GCSE. In other cases, the causes of their KS4 disengagement continued to affect their experiences in post-16 education. For example, one young woman struggled at school because of poor relationships with teachers, behavioural problems and a family background of siblings who had also disengaged, continued to struggle with education post-16. In her case, two attempts to start college courses were abandoned as she struggled to maintain her motivation. In particular, she found relationships with college tutors difficult and this continued a pattern established at school.

This experience was in marked contrast to others who stressed the importance of a more relaxed and adult relationship with staff at college and sixth form in comparison to KS4. For these young people, this more relaxed atmosphere and the greater independence and autonomy afforded them at sixth form or college was very important and had a strong impact on their engagement and motivation. In particular, young people spoke positively about taking responsibility for their own attendance and felt this element of choice and control was hugely important in maintaining their engagement.

#### *Severe and complete disengagement*

Like the moderate disengagement group, those who severely or completely disengaged at KS4 did not necessarily remain disengaged post-16. If the primary cause of KS4 disengagement was removed, then young people in this group would go on to further education or training. In one case for example, a young man who disengaged entirely from education, largely because of persistent and long term bullying, re-engaged in training outside a traditional educational setting by starting an apprenticeship. To some extent, the

post-16 phase also offered young people a fresh start, enabling them to put aside their negative previous experiences and re-engage.

However, young people who had had particularly negative experiences at KS4 were more likely to describe a continued negative impact on their experiences, particularly on their levels of confidence and self-esteem. Because of their low levels of attainment at KS4, this group were also more likely to express concern and worry that this would hold them back, if not immediately, then perhaps at some point in the future.

#### **5.4 Impact of factors external to school on post-16 destinations**

Alongside school experiences, a range of other factors were found to influence post-16 pathways for this group of young people. The impact of factors external to the school system are outlined here to provide context to the discussion in 5.3 of the impact of school experiences, and to illustrate the complexity of factors that contribute to post-16 pathways and experiences.

##### **Peer group**

Friends were an important influence on young people when choosing post-16 destinations. Friends were often given as the main source of information on college and training opportunities, and it was not uncommon for friends to enrol on courses together. While this could have a positive motivational effect, it was also acknowledged that the influence of peers could have a negative effect, and some parents felt that friends had directly influenced their son or daughter to drop out of a course. The desire to be with friends also meant that some young people chose courses that they were not interested in and this had a negative impact on the likelihood that they would complete the course.

##### **Aspirations**

Just as aspirations could act as a motivating factor at school, clear aspirations could also facilitate post-16 pathways. In one case for example, a young man who had always had a clear ambition to become a mechanic moved seamlessly from school into college to pursue this aim. However, for a successful transition from KS4 to post-16 destinations, clear aspirations had to be coupled with clarity about how to achieve these aspirations, and where young people were less clear about what they needed in order to achieve their aims, they were more likely to express frustration with their post-16 experiences. One example of this was a young woman who took a leisure and tourism course and completed the first year but dropped out in the second year because she had not realised it was a two year course and because some of the modules did not interest her. In another case, a young woman expressed an interest in pursuing a career in interior design but had no clear sense of how to pursue this ambition or what steps she needed to take.

##### **Family**

The support of family was hugely important to young people when choosing post-16 destinations. In a number of cases, young people found work and apprenticeships through family connections and the encouragement and support of family could also be instrumental in ensuring that young people did not drop out of college courses. In other cases, there was a suggestion that parents were not always aware of what options were available to young people, including the levels and types of qualification, as a result improving information for both parents and young people may be important in ensuring that young people make informed choices post-16.

## **Finances**

In cases where young people needed to support themselves financially and contribute to the household income, financial concerns were a major barrier to continuing in education. For some this meant that they were focused primarily on finding work when they left school. In other cases, young people would initially start a college or sixth form course and then drop-out to pursue looking for work when financial concerns became pressing. Concerns about getting into debt were also raised as barriers to University.

The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was an important facilitator for many young people to remaining in education post-16. This money helped to fund travel, college equipment and phone costs, all of which helped young people stay on in education. Where there were delays or problems in accessing EMA this could have serious consequences for young people, and in one case delays in receiving EMA directly contributed to a young man dropping out of his college course.

## **Health**

Just as health concerns could impact on KS4 experiences, they also had the potential to impact on post-16 experiences. Where health conditions affected levels of attendance, young people struggled to keep up with courses and in some cases dropped out of courses because they had missed too much. There was also evidence to suggest that young people took health conditions into consideration and structured their future plans accordingly. For example, in one case a young woman who had suffered from mental health issues chose a course that she felt would not be too stressful. Having successfully completed this course, she then moved on to study more challenging courses.

## **Information, Advice and Guidance**

Young people accessed a range of advice and guidance when deciding on post-16 pathways. Sources of advice included Connexions, College/School advice services, and Job Centres. In a number of cases, young people also utilised programmes included Entry to Employment (E2E) and other employment schemes:

### *Connexions*

There was wide awareness of Connexions amongst young people. Nearly all those spoken to had had some contact with Connexions but the level of support varied considerably. In some cases, Connexions was used simply as a drop-in facility to look for jobs. In other cases young people had accessed individualised support including meetings with a Connexions advisor, support with finding college courses, and help filling out applications for college courses, employment or apprenticeships. In general, this support was found to be valuable and young people appreciated it. However, in some cases it was felt to be less useful and this was generally where young people were using Connexions solely to look for work and there was a perception that it was too busy and too many people were looking at the same jobs to make it useful. More unusually there were some misconceptions about the remit of Connexions. In one case for example a young man felt Connexions was solely focused on helping people find employment and could not offer advice and guidance on post-16 education and training. In another case, a young man did not think they could offer help or support once he had turned 18.

### *College and sixth form advice and guidance*

For those staying on in education, their college or sixth form could prove to be a useful source of advice and guidance. Where young people came from families with no history of further or higher education, the advice and guidance of teachers on applying to university was particularly appreciated. A gap in this kind of advice was also noted by young people who left school at 16 and who would have valued advice once their GCSE results were known. At this stage they perceived themselves to have left school, and so advice from their school on future options was not sought. In one case for example, a young man who had been excluded in Year 11 and only returned to school to take his exams, did not receive any support or advice on post-16 options. Instead, he researched possible courses himself. In another case, a young man who did not achieve the GCSE results he needed to pursue his preferred option of sports physiotherapy, did not receive any advice from his school once his GCSE results were known. Instead, he made his own alternative plans by visiting a local sixth form open-day and selecting an alternative course that way. For this group, the support of Connexions was valued (discussed above), but support from school was also felt to be useful.

### *Job Centre Plus*

Job centres were mainly accessed by young people looking for employment and in most cases contact was limited to looking at job advertisements. However, the support of a JSA Advisor in the case of a young man who had been NEET for a long period was appreciated. In another case, a young woman was supported by a Lone Parent Advisor and this was helpful in providing her with information about possible college courses.

### *Entry to Employment / Youth Employment Schemes*

A number of young people, particularly those who had been NEET had experienced a range of youth education and employment schemes. Those who attended Entry to Employment (E2E) schemes received help with literacy and numeracy, and interview techniques. These skills were valued by young people but they were quickly disillusioned if E2E failed to help them find work and this was the primary reason for ceasing attendance. Where courses like this worked well however, they had the potential to have a major impact on young people's lives. In one case for example, a young man had a very positive experience on an Education and Youth Training scheme which provided him with free driving lessons, a five month construction course, first aid training and help with literacy and numeracy. This support, and in particular, the support of a committed member of staff was instrumental in helping this young man who now has clear and focused plans for his future.

## **5.5 Young people's recommendations for post-16 services**

Young people had a number of recommendations for improvements to post-16 services. These included:

- Childcare places at colleges for children and babies of all ages to allow mothers of young children to study
- Greater investment in apprenticeships to increase the number of places available
- Improved advice and guidance post-16 to ensure that young people make informed decisions when deciding on post-16 courses. Suggestions included the use of taster lessons and open days at sixth forms and Colleges. In particular, emphasis was placed on advice and guidance after GCSE results were known to ensure that advice was tailored to the opportunities available to a particular individual

- Greater support from Connexions or similar agencies to help young people find employment. Suggestions included a more pro-active job brokering system to link young people with potential employers in their fields of interest

## 5.6 Chapter summary

Analysis of the matched administrative databases shows that under-achievers had distinctive destinations.

Compared with the total cohort, under-achievers were:

- Less likely to be in school (particularly those in Group C who had achieved no GCSEs at A\*-C),
- Slightly more likely to be in FE or work-based learning and
- More likely to be NEET / JWT (especially Group C).

Young people experienced a variety of post-16 destinations, including sixth form, Further Education College, Work Based Learning, Employment and periods of time not in education, employment or training (NEET). Post-16 pathways were often complex and there was a great deal of movement between different destinations.

The extent to which young people perceived their attainment and school experiences to have impacted on their post-16 destinations varied. Those who found it difficult to find employment, or had to take alternative routes to the ones they had hoped to take because of low attainment at KS4 were more likely to feel that their post-16 pathways had been limited by underachievement and disengagement at KS4. One key issue for young people was that they had not realised earlier the extent to which KS4 attainment would impact on their future options.

Disengagement at KS4 did not necessarily equate to disengagement post-16. In many cases, post-16 options gave young people the chance to re-engage in education and training. This was particularly true in cases where the original cause of their disengagement was removed (e.g. bullying, curriculum, teacher relationships). However, it was also true that particularly negative school experiences could impact on post-16 destinations both because of a lack of qualifications but also because of a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem. Other factors that were found to influence young people's post-16 destinations included peer group, aspirations, family context, finances, health and access to advice and guidance, both prior to and after GCSE results were known.

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

This final chapter identifies key findings from the qualitative and quantitative elements of the study. It discusses findings and their possible implications in the context of current and future policy development.

### 6.1 Identifying disengagement and potential underachievement

This research has highlighted the challenges in identifying disengagement and underachievement amongst the group of young people whose attainment drops during KS4. The findings also emphasise the importance of early identification of disengagement in providing effective support. The importance of these issues suggests that systems and resources are needed in schools to develop a more sophisticated awareness of these types of disengagement and underachievement as well as facilitate better and earlier identification. Schools described a gap between the wealth of data collected and the use made of it. It was suggested that non teaching staff resources were needed to better analyse the information collected.

The patterns, causes and extent of disengagement amongst this group are complex and varied. The process of disengagement can be gradual, quiet and prompted by multiple factors which effectively 'spiral' into and exacerbate one another. The nature of this process makes identification at an early stage particularly challenging for schools and school staff.

The statistical analysis showed that this group of underachievers are more likely to be male. This raises questions about the 'gendered' nature of particular experiences and causes of disengagement. Further research may lead to improved understanding of this issue, particularly in answering questions like: are some causes of disengagement more likely to affect boys? Are boys more likely to experience a particular pattern of disengagement? <sup>20</sup>. In developing the new Diploma system, knowledge and research on issues relating to gender and experiences of curriculum learning will be important to policy development.

The prevalence of learning difficulties and SEN are also of significance. While not surprising that these issues are prevalent amongst consistently lower achievers, the fact that they are present amongst young people whose achievement drops between KS3 and KS4 is of interest. Do the barriers presented by learning difficulties and SEN worsen across the Key Stages? With increasing the participation age, it will become even more important to understand how the barriers created by learning difficulties and SEN change over the course of a school career.

### 6.2 Options and curriculum: education and training activities

Findings from this research point to a range of issues relating to the curriculum and options available during KS4. KS4 options need to meet young people's interests and be relevant to their aspirations, as well as match their abilities. Engagement and achievement are more easily sustained where young people these choices. This implies benefit in wider curriculum choice including more practical learning in work-related contexts. This type of variety is a feature of the new Diploma qualifications.

Given the need to ensure a curriculum appropriate to young people's abilities, measuring attainment success at five grade A-C GCSEs may be inappropriate for some young people.

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<sup>20</sup> No difference was found in the *factors* driving disengagement between young men and women in the qualitative research. Further quantitative research on the prevalence of the presence of particular causes may help illuminate this issue further.

These young people may achieve higher attainment and have a wider range of options available to them post-16 if they were to combine qualifications like BTECs with some core GCSEs.

Year 11 was experienced as a 'critical period'. Where young people fell behind in coursework, it was felt to be a point of no return. Without coursework, young people were excluded from some exams, lowering their possible attainment and further exacerbating disengagement. There may therefore be benefit in elongating the period for qualification attainment, perhaps by extending KS4. Ongoing earlier attainment could help to sustain student engagement. Where complete disengagement does occur, earlier qualification attainment could mean that young people leave school with at least some qualifications.

Curriculum and courses were also a key issue for post-16 options as well as at KS4. Sustaining engagement post-16 and facilitating attainment at this stage requires relevant, high-quality and accessible post-16 options. The courses available for this group of young people need to meet their interests and aspirations, whilst being accessible to their qualification or ability level. Young people in this study ended up in a limited range of subjects with particular subjects recurrent amongst lower achievers (such as beauty therapy). This and young people's lack of enthusiasm or selection of these particular subject choices suggest a risk that young people are 'shoe-horned' into particular subjects, or take up subjects *only* because of their lower entry requirements.

### **6.3 Information, advice, guidance (IAG) and support before, during and after KS4.**

IAG and support have been shown to be critical to young people's educational career at three key points: in choosing KS4 options; during KS4 where underachievement or disengagement begins; and in choosing post-16 destinations. The considerations and qualities needed for IAG and support at these three key stages differ from one another.

Options advice and guidance during Year 9 was something young people felt could be improved; they did not always feel that a course they had chosen matched their expectations or understanding of what it would entail. Year 9 options IAG needs to give young people a realistic expectation of what a course entails. Guidance is also needed to match subject and qualification choices to a young person's ability and potential.

Where young people disengage or underachieve during KS3 support can avert this process and act as a protective factor. Support of this kind is most effective when it is tailored to the young person's individual situation and needs; is offered early on in the process of disengaging or underachieving; and is delivered within appropriate environments by staff who have a good relationship with the young person. Identifying and providing support of this kind requires a high level of both resource and skill.

Young people underlined the importance of being offered support rather than having to seek it out themselves, even with universal support provision. Support was seen as more effective than a sanctions approach; where young people were threatened with parental sanctions for non-attendance, this failed to have a sustained impact on attendance.

When reflecting on post-16 options, young people expressed regret at not having understood sooner that a minimum number of GCSEs was required for most college courses, worked-based learning settings, and 'decent' jobs. This lack of awareness may have been driven by a young person's unwillingness to 'listen' and was acknowledged as such by some. However, there may be value in underlining and making real the importance of GCSE outcomes for later destination options during KS4. This may be particularly important for the group of young people who started post 16 education but fell away because they were

frustrated at having to take a longer route toward their aspiration, or found themselves having to retake Level 2 qualifications.

In choosing post-16 options, there was evidence of an IAG gap at a critical period. Until the age of participation is raised to 18, it may be beneficial to provide easily accessible advice and guidance in August and early September once GCSE results are available and to promote awareness of how and where to access this support. This period was where choices were made if they had not already been selected prior to leaving school. Young people in this group were typically those who had fallen away from school before the end of year 11 and those who had done less well in their GCSEs than expected. Providing IAG during this period would be especially valuable where a young person's family may have low awareness of the options available or are less well equipped to offer support in moving forward.

#### **6.4 Parents and family; the home-school relationship**

The home-school relationship can be an important factor in the pathways of disengagement and underachievement. It can act as a causal factor, exacerbating other factors already in place. Importantly, it can also operate as a protective factor mitigating against underachievement and disengagement. Promoting and improving these relationships may lessen and avert disengagement and underachievement.

Parents have a key role to play in identifying problems to the school, particularly where underachievement is driven by a particular life event happening outside school. Parents need to understand who to contact in school and how. They also need to be reassured of a non-judgemental response from a school. Benefit would also be had where parents' awareness of the support available in school for a young person is improved, in order to help them ask for appropriate support and to see a purpose in alerting a school to issues in a young person's family life.

Improved parental awareness of the importance of GCSEs, options and qualifications after 16 could bolster an important source of potential support for young people. As well as giving a young person support in choices post 16, this would also better equip parents to support a young person during KS4 by underlining the importance of attainment.

#### **6.5 Increasing the participation age; enabling young people to remain engaged or to re-engage**

The group of young people who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) are of particular policy interest and importance in the current agenda of raising the participation age. When the age of compulsory participation is raised to 18 years old, the group of young people who would be NEET under the current system are likely to present a particular challenge. How can their engagement be effectively sustained? Where they do become disengaged how can they be effectively re-engaged in order to continue their participation?

In profiling the characteristics of young people whose attainment drops between KS3 and KS4, analysis highlighted a particularly key finding. Young people whose attainment was average at KS3 but dropped in KS4 were *more* likely to not be NEET or in JWT at 16-17 than their counterparts who were low achievers at KS3. This suggests that a lack of engagement is a critical issue for post-16 participation and can be more important than attainment level alone.

The current research showed that the NEET group are not simply characterised by a lack of activity or motivation. There was often a pattern of unsustainable engagement in learning and short periods of employment. Work based learning was often a particularly attractive option for this group, but one that was difficult for young people to find and access. The young people engaged in this destination had often had family help in accessing places, suggesting a potential disadvantage for those without such support.

This group would benefit from ways to facilitate sustained and productive engagement in post-16 options. Successful and sustained engagement needs good IAG, provided at critical decision points. Post 16 environments need to be able to capitalise on motivation, sustain engagement, meet aspirational needs, provide appropriate and high quality options, whilst tackling the barriers driving earlier disengagement.

Statistical analysis demonstrated a link between the likelihood of worsening achievement and deprivation. In enabling prolonged participation in education, key issues associated with deprivation need to be considered and barriers addressed. Good IAG provision is needed, as well as efforts to facilitate and improve parents' abilities to support their child as they navigate educational careers and choices. Work-based learning provision may be a useful area in which to expand provision. This is in part because of young people's interest but also because young people from deprived families may be under more acute pressure to contribute to a household's income post-16.

There were young people who re-engaged with learning in a post-16 environment despite having previously severely or completely disengaged. Important learning can be taken from these cases. Re-engagement of this nature was attributed to key qualities of the post-16 learning environment. These were having choice (in both subjects and courses undertaken as well as choice in whether to attend or undertake assignments); autonomy; and what were perceived to be adult relationships with tutors.

In raising the participation age, care needs to be taken not to replicate elements of the current compulsory learning environment that contribute to disengagement. A continuation of compulsory participation also needs to avoid removing the feeling that post 16 education can provide a 'new start'.

The current research contributes to the understanding of this group of young people. It has illuminated the characteristics of those more likely to disengage and underachieve during KS4, it provides insight into the pathways and processes of disengagement and underachievement, as well as the impacts on post-16 destinations. Further research would be particularly beneficial on the curriculum needs and barriers to re-engagement amongst the NEET group, as well as improving understanding of how to build on resilience or protective factors.

## **Appendix A    Methods: statistical analysis, strand 1**

This data analysis served two functions. Firstly it identified a group of young people who under-achieved at KS4 so that they could be contacted for the qualitative study (details of the qualitative interviews with young people are provided in section 1.4). Secondly it allowed investigation of the incidence of under-achievement at KS4, the personal characteristics of young people who under-achieved and their destinations post-16.

### **What datasets have been used?**

A matched administrative dataset supplied by the DCSF was used to identify and analyse the under-achieving group. Datasets were available for four cohorts of young people: those aged 19 in 2006 cohort, 19 in 2007 cohort, 19 in 2008 cohort and 19 in 2009 cohort. It was decided to use the most recent cohort, 19 in 2009, for drawing the qualitative sample and for the bulk of the analysis. This cohort would have completed KS4 in 2006 and some data for their subsequent destinations post-16 would also be available for analysis when the data set was supplied (in early 2008). Data for the earlier (older) cohorts was used to a more limited extent, for comparative purposes. In fact, because there were few differences between the cohorts this report has restricted its analysis to a few key comparisons between the 19 in 2009 cohort and the oldest of the others available, the 19 in 2006 cohort.

Each dataset was based on records from the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), which included all learners enrolled in a school in England at age of 14. In addition, anyone in this age group who had taken a vocational or academic course in England since the age of 14 should also have been included in the dataset. In addition to PLASC the following component datasets were included in the matched dataset:

- The School Exam Results Analysis Project (SERAP) awarding body data, which consist of all academic qualifications achieved by each learner. These data were collected by Bath University.
- The Individualised Learned Record (ILR) collected by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).
- The National Information System for Vocational Qualifications (NISVQ) awarding body data, which consisted of vocational qualifications achieved by each learner.

Potentially, this matched administrative dataset allowed young people's qualifications at KS3 and KS4 to be compared and for learning activity post-16 to be identified. However, there were some limitations to coverage in the dataset and these are discussed below.

### **How complete was the matched dataset?**

The following learners had been captured in the dataset: all pupils participating at a maintained school, an academy or a city technology college (from PLASC), all pupils participating on LSC-funded further education or work-based learning (captured via the ILR) and, finally, all those who achieve a qualification during the academic year (via SERAP or NISVQ).

In terms of KS3 and KS4 the dataset was expected to be reasonably complete aside from the exclusion of pupils studying at independent schools.

Data for participation post-16 was expected to also exclude those in independent schools, as well as learners who studied FE or HE provision at a university without achieving a qualification, learners on FE provision that was not funded by the LSC who did not achieve a qualification and anyone studying at a special school or pupil referral unit who did not achieve a qualification.

In addition, pupils who only appeared in post-16 attainment were excluded because they had no KS3 or KS4 data. This group included, for example, new migrants.

### **What data were available to measure under-achievement?**

Under-achievement at age of 16 has been defined by comparing pupils' KS3 results with those at KS4. Data for achievement at KS2 was not available, so it was not possible to assess how achievement at KS4 related to achievement before KS3.

In order to arrive at overall attainment score at KS3, point scores based on English, maths and science results were combined. As each test had a score of 8, the maximum value for the combined score was 24.

Unfortunately, the database lacked scores for a number of pupils for all of the subjects. So, where pupils scores were incomplete, they were excluded from this analysis. For the 19 in 2009 cohort these exclusions accounted for 23 per cent of the cases. The excluded proportion was even higher for earlier cohorts - for example, 29 per cent of the 19 in 2006 cohort had missing KS3 scores.

Achievement at KS4 was measured by pupils' total number of GCSEs at grade A\* to C. It should be noted that this was a more limited measure than the one that had been used for the McIntosh study for which the total number of GCSEs of any grade had been available. Consequently, the calibration of achievement at KS4 lacked detail and it was not possible to define under-achieving groups with the precision of the previous study.

## **Appendix B    Methods: qualitative research strands 2, 3 and 4**

### **Strand 2: Qualitative in-depth interviews with young people**

Strand 2 involved interviews with young people who had been identified as underachieving at KS4 relative to their attainment at KS3. At the time of interview, these young people were all aged between 18 and 19 and had finished compulsory schooling two years previously. The purpose of these interviews was to explore their school experiences and their post-16 pathways, focusing on experiences of KS4. As already discussed in chapter 1, underachievement at KS4 did not necessarily equate to disengagement. Therefore, the aim of these interviews was to explore young people's own perceptions of their school experiences and their attainment at KS4. Where young people identified themselves as having disengaged, the nature of this disengagement was explored.

#### ***Sample design***

Young people who had underachieved at KS4 relative to their attainment at KS3 were identified from the matched administrative databases (see chapter 1.4 and Appendix A for further detail). This sample was drawn from four geographical areas selected to represent a range in terms of region, urbanity and population characteristics.

Within each area, participants were then purposively selected to achieve diversity across a range of key sampling criteria in order to capture a full range of views and experiences. These were gender, and post-16 destination. The post-16 destinations sampled for were: further education college; sixth form; Work Based Learning (WBL) and Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). A decision was made not to sample specifically for young people who moved directly into employment after leaving school because it was felt that the sample was not of sufficient size to ensure diversity across five post-16 destinations. However, despite not sampling specifically to include this group, young people who had spent some time in employment in the two years since leaving school were present in the sample.

#### ***Sample selection and recruitment***

Once young people had been identified in the matched administrative databases, an initial letter and leaflet was sent introducing the research study and giving them a two week period to opt-out of the research if they would prefer not to take part. Young people's addresses were included in the database, but this did not list telephone numbers. After the opt-out period, a specialist recruitment agency was used to conduct door-step recruitment of young people. Sampling quotas were set to ensure diversity across key sampling criteria. At the point of recruitment, the research was explained carefully to potential participants, a screening questionnaire was conducted (see below) and once eligibility to participate was confirmed, agreement to participate was sought. Those that agreed to take part in an interview were sent a confirmation letter including details of the time and location of the interview.

#### **Screening for achievement group D and those that were NEET**

As discussed in chapter 1, the intention was to include young people in four achievement groups - A, B, C and D (see chapter 1.4 for more detail):

- Group A: High KS3 achievers with moderate achievement at KS4. These pupils scored 18 or more points at KS3 but gained fewer than 5 GCSEs at A\*-C at KS4.
- Group B: Moderate KS3 with much reduced achievement at KS4.

- Group C: High or moderate KS3 achievement with no A\*-C achievement at KS4, but which achieved some GCSEs at A\*-G
- Group D: Moderate KS3 achievement and no GCSEs at any grade.

Because the matched administrative databases were not able to distinguish between young people in Groups C and D, a short screening questionnaire was used during recruitment in order to establish young people's GCSE outcome. The matched administrative databases were also not able to distinguish between those who went straight into employment after leaving school and those that were NEET. To ensure diversity in terms of post-16 destination, a screening question was therefore used to screen for NEET status at the point of recruitment. The definition used for this was whether a young person had not been in education, employment or training for twenty consecutive weeks since leaving school.

The study design included forty interviews with young people. Thirty-nine were completed. A break down of the achieved sample is given here:

**Table B.1 Achieved sample of young people**

|                              |                                 |           |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Gender</b>                | <b>Male</b>                     | <b>20</b> |
|                              | <b>Female</b>                   | <b>19</b> |
| <b>Post-16 destination</b>   | <b>State/ Maintained School</b> | <b>13</b> |
|                              | <b>Further Education</b>        | <b>13</b> |
|                              | <b>WBL</b>                      | <b>3</b>  |
|                              | <b>NEET</b>                     | <b>10</b> |
| <b>KS4 achievement group</b> | <b>Group A</b>                  | <b>10</b> |
|                              | <b>Group B</b>                  | <b>10</b> |
|                              | <b>Group C</b>                  | <b>17</b> |
|                              | <b>Group D</b>                  | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>Area</b>                  | <b>Area 1</b>                   | <b>7</b>  |
|                              | <b>Area 2</b>                   | <b>12</b> |
|                              | <b>Area 3</b>                   | <b>10</b> |
|                              | <b>Area 4</b>                   | <b>10</b> |

Good diversity was achieved across most of the study's key criteria. However, in terms of KS4 achievement group, we were not able to include as many young people who fell into Group D as we would have liked. This group were identified through the door-step screening exercise. Prior to screening, the size of this group within our sample was unknown. One possible reason for finding fewer young people who fell into this group is that Group D (young people who did not sit any GCSEs) exist in very small numbers and are therefore hard to find.

The other sampling criteria that proved difficult to achieve was locating young people in Work Based Learning. Relatively small numbers of young people were in this group in comparison to the other post-16 destinations. Given the small numbers, this group were also very geographically spread making door-step recruitment on an area basis particularly challenging.

### ***Data collection***

A topic guide was designed for young people to ensure a similar set of issues were explored with every participant. This was designed in collaboration with DCSF.

Interviews were conducted in young people's homes and lasted approximately one-and-a-half-hours. Interviews took place between June and August 2008. Young people who participated in an in-depth interview received £20 as a token of appreciation for their participation.

### **Strand 3: Qualitative in-depth interviews with school staff**

To complement the interviews with young people and give the fullest perspectives possible on the research objectives, the research design also included interviews with school staff. It was felt that school staff would provide particular insights and expertise in the issues of disengagement and underachievement at Key Stage 4.

### ***Sample design***

A school in each of the study's four geographical areas was purposively selected to reflect diversity in size of school and KS3 and KS4 attainment. The DCSF website data on schools were used to draw up a sample frame of secondary schools in each area, from which to achieve diversity across sampling criteria. Within each school the aim was to speak to four members of staff who had different roles, in order to ensure the fullest range of perspectives. The range of school staff included senior management, teaching staff and staff with pastoral roles e.g. school mentors, or teachers responsible for inclusion.

### ***Sample selection and recruitment***

Selected schools were initially sent a letter explaining the purpose of the research. The letter was followed up by a phone call to the Head teacher to seek their school's participation. Once participation had been agreed, the school was asked to identify staff they thought it would be appropriate to include in the study. These staff were then sent further information about taking part.

Recruiting secondary schools was challenging and resource intense. Speaking to Head teachers required persistence and schools reported being over burdened by research requests. Participation in research is a lower priority for schools compared to delivering education, and the level of refusals was high. Following a high level of refusals, the advice and support of a DCSF 16-19 education advisor in one of the areas was sought. In total, head teachers were contacted in nineteen schools across the four areas, and three agreed to participate. From these three schools, twelve members of staff were interviewed (four in each school). Interviews took place between December 2007 and April 2008. The achieved sample is shown here:

**Table B.2 Achieved sample of schools**

| School   | Size           | KS3 & KS4 attainment                     | Sixth Form |
|----------|----------------|--|------------|
| School 1 | <1000 students | At national average at KS3, below at KS4 | No         |
| School 2 | >1000 students | At national average KS3&KS4              | No         |
| School 3 | >1000 students | At national average KS3&KS4              | No         |

**Data collection**

A topic guide was designed (in collaboration with DCSF) for interviews with school staff to ensure that a similar set of issues were explored with every participant. To accommodate differences in staff roles, this topic guide was used flexibly and focus paid to different sections depending on their relevance to the staff member. All four interviews in each school took place in a single school day. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes, and one hour depending on the availability of amount of the individual staff member. To facilitate the participation of schools in the research and to minimise any inconvenience, each school received £200 to cover the costs of providing supply staff to cover participant's absence from any of their lessons.

**Strand 4: Qualitative in-depth interviews with parents / significant others**

To obtain a range of perspectives on the factors underpinning disengagement and underachievement and the support required, it was felt that interviews with parents or other individuals that had played an important role in a young person's school experiences, would provide valuable insights.

**Sample design**

In order to provide comparable perspectives of individual circumstances, a decision was made to carry out "*linked*" interviews with parents or significant others, nominated by the young people who took part in Strand 2 of the research. As young people's accounts were central to the research design it was important that their participation was not contingent on the inclusion of interviews with parents. To ensure this, it was made clear to young people that the participation of a parent or significant other in the research was entirely their choice and should not stop them from participating themselves. In total, the aim was to include fifteen interviews with parents/significant others nominated via the thirty-nine young people who took part in Strand 2.

**Sample selection and recruitment**

When young people were recruited to take part in Strand 2 they received a leaflet which explained that in some cases the researcher would like to speak to a parent, carer or guardian. The leaflet made it clear that they did not have to nominate someone if they did not wish to do so. At the end of each young person's interview, the researcher raised the possibility of interviewing a parent/significant other and consent to do this was sought. It was made clear to the young person at this point that no information from their interview would be shared with the individual they nominated and vice versa. Where consent was given, the young person was asked to nominate an individual and a leaflet was left with them to pass onto the individual concerned.

This initial approach was then followed up by a phone call to the parent/significant other in which the research was explained in more detail and consent to participate was sought from the person themselves. Where the parent or significant other was willing to take part, an interview date and time was arranged that was convenient. Of our sample of thirty-nine young people, twenty-nine gave their consent for a parent/significant other to be contacted regarding the research. Of these twenty-nine parents/significant others nominated, seven declined to take part, and a further eight could not be reached during recruitment. In total fourteen interviews were carried out with parents / significant others. Twelve of these interviews were with mothers, one was with a father and one was with a sister.

### ***Data collection***

A topic guide was designed for parents/significant others. This guide mirrored the young person topic guide quite closely to ensure that a similar set of issues were explored, while also taking account of the different perspectives and experiences of parents/significant others. Interviews lasted between one hour and an hour and a half. Family members who participated in an in-depth interview received £20 as a token of appreciation for their participation.

### **Qualitative analysis of strands 2, 3 and 4**

All interviews were digitally recorded with participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim. Data management was conducted using *Framework*, a software package for developed by NatCen and based on the qualitative analysis research method of the same name developed by the Qualitative Research Unit at NatCen. Analysis was conducted using Framework.

The first stage of analysis involves familiarisation with the transcribed data and identification of emerging issues to inform the development of a thematic framework. *FrameWork* is then used to create a series of thematic matrices or charts, each chart representing one key theme. The column headings on each theme chart relate to key sub-topics, and the rows to individual respondents. Data from each case is then summarised in the relevant cell. The context of the information is retained and a link back to the original transcript is maintained, so that it is possible to return to a transcript to explore a point in more detail or extract text for verbatim quotation. This approach ensures that data management is comprehensive and consistent and that links with the verbatim data are retained. Organising the data in this way enables the views, circumstances and experiences of all respondents to be explored within an analytical framework that is both grounded in, and driven by, their own accounts. The thematic charts allow for the full range of views and experiences to be analysed and compared and contrasted both across and within cases, and for patterns and themes to be identified and explored.

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