

Briefing: the children leaving school with nothing

This briefing looks at the children who get to age 19 – the end of free education – without getting 5 GCSEs (grade A*-C) or equivalent technical qualifications. These are children who will have spent 15 years in compulsory education, often having more than £100,000 of public money spent on their education and yet leave the education system without basic benchmark qualifications. These children have multiple options closed to them. Many will not be able to begin an apprenticeship, start technical courses or enter some workplaces because they cannot meet the basic entry requirements.

The percentage of children leaving education without any substantive education fell continuously between 2005 (when the data starts) and 2015, since when it has been rising. This is largely driven by a sharp increase in the proportion of pupils on free school meals (FSM) failing to achieve these targets, which has increased from 28% (22,630) to 37% (28,225 children) since 2015. This is a 25% increase in the number of FSM children leaving school without substantive qualifications.

Our research finds that:

- **Since 2015, there has been a 28% increase in the number of children leaving education without substantive qualifications. Last year it was nearly 100,000 children.**
- **This means that more young people are leaving education without key qualifications to help them begin apprenticeships or start technical or academic courses.**
- **Children in receipt of free school meals are over twice as likely as non-FSM students to leave school age 19 without any substantive qualification, at 37% vs. 15%. This gap is rising.**
- **Education reforms appear to have penalised disadvantaged and special educational needs pupils.**
- **The recent trend reverses more than a decade of substantial progress in reducing the number of children leaving education without substantive qualifications.**

This briefing report analyses the key data and what it means for young people today.

1. Children are in education for longer, yet more are failing to get their basic qualifications.

Level 2 attainment is the equivalent of 5 GCSEs of grade A*-C or equivalent¹. It is a recognised education standard for schools, colleges and employers. For children who fail to achieve this standard at school, they will be expected to take re-sits or equivalent qualifications post-16. Last year 18% of students (98,779 children) left education without achieving this standard, up from 14% in 2015. This is despite the compulsory education age in England extending to 18 during this period and children therefore being in education for longer. In 2015, 6.6% of 16-18 year olds were not in education, employment or training. By the end of 2018 this had dropped to 4%. This means that children spent more time in education, yet were still more likely to leave without basic qualifications.

2. Children in receipt of free school meals are now twice as likely as non-FSM students to leave school age 19 without Level 2 attainment, at 37% vs. 15%. This gap is widening.

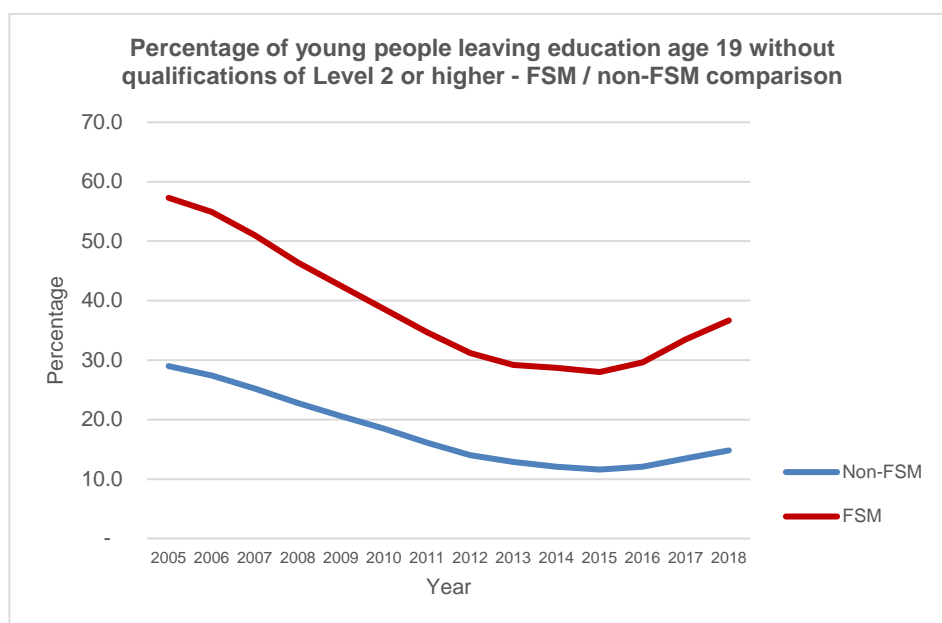
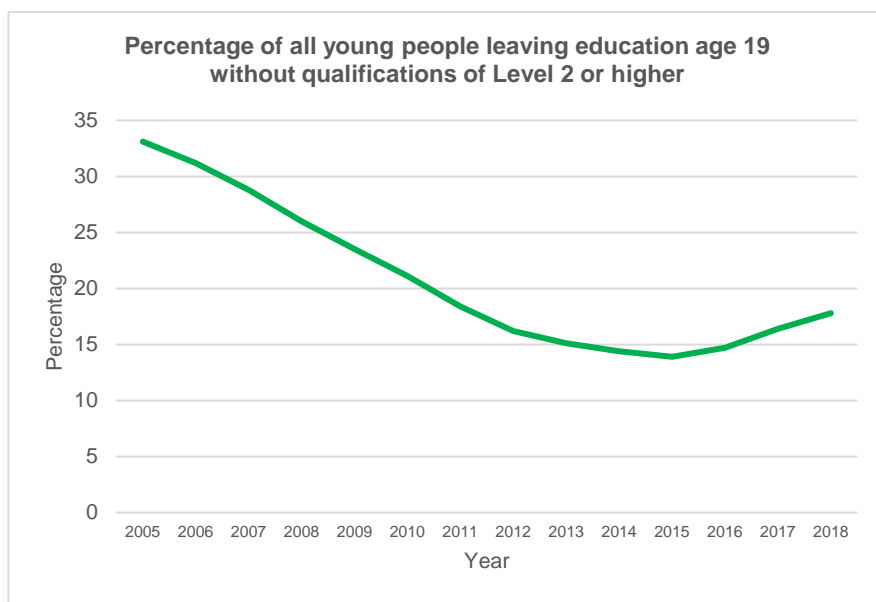
There has been a long-standing attainment gap between FSM pupils and their peers. This fell between 2005

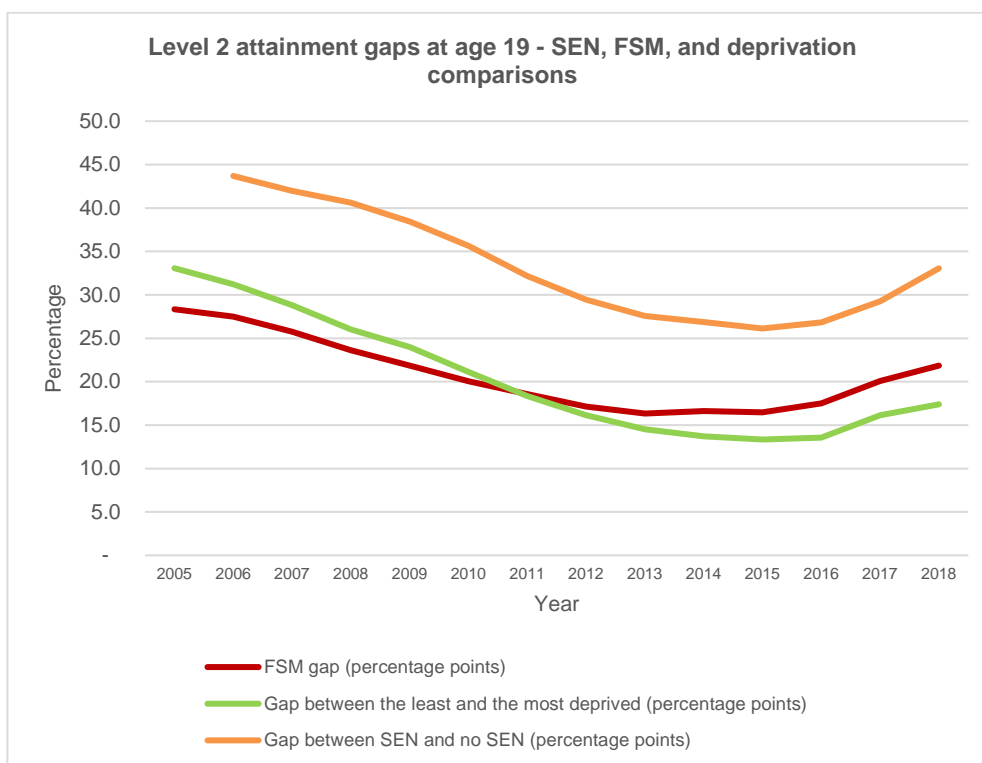
¹ Full details about what constitutes Level 2 attainment are contained in the Technical Document available to download here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19-in-2018>

and 2015 from 28 to 17 percentage points. The latest data however shows that the gap has been widening since 2015, reversing a positive trend for children on free school meals. There has also been a worsening situation for children with special educational needs (SEN) and children living in areas of deprivation (IDACI), for whom attainment gaps are also getting bigger. Vulnerable children who need the highest levels of support are at increasing risk of leaving education with nothing.

We found that:

- Over a third of children who get free school meals – 37%, which is 28,225 children - are leaving education age 19 without Level 2 attainment.
- Since 2015, there has been a 25% increase in FSM children leaving school without Level 2 attainment – this rate has risen at **almost 3 times the rate** of non-FSM children.
- Attainment gaps between SEN and non-SEN pupils by age 19 have risen from 26% in 2015 to 33% in 2018, making **SEN students the worst affected**.
- The attainment gaps between children living in the least and most deprived areas of England has risen from 13% in 2015 to 17% in 2018.
- This signals a **sharp change of direction since 2015**; before this, attainment gaps were closing.





Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19-in-2018>.

Coverage: England, young people in state schools at academic age 15

When looking at attainment by region, FSM students living in London had the best academic outcomes. London stood out for having the lowest attainment gaps between FSM and non-FSM at 11.9 percentage points in 2018 (see table at end for full breakdowns). This contrasts with the East Midlands which had a far greater attainment gap of 27.8 percentage points in 2018.

Notable findings are:

- In 3 Local Authorities across England – Derby, North Lincolnshire and Swindon – less than half of FSM students are achieving Level 2 by age 19.
- Wokingham has the largest attainment gap between FSM and non-FSM students, followed by Cambridgeshire and Wakefield.
- Nottingham has the worst attainment rates across England with around a third of all children (32%) not being qualified to Level 2 by age 19.

3. Education reforms have penalised disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs

The Department for Education cites education reforms introduced from 2013/14 as the reason for falling Level-2 attainment. These reforms were introduced following the Wolf Review. While purportedly to increase the standing of technical education, the result of these reforms has been to change the incentives for schools to offer non-GCSE courses (such as GNVQs), which were often a route for children to gain Level-2 qualifications beyond GCSE (which in turn open up access to other post-16 routes, such as apprenticeships). The affects of the changes has been to reduce the availability of such courses and this, according to the Department, is part of the reason why overall attainment is falling. It appears, therefore, that these changes have had two unintended consequences. Firstly, they have particularly penalised disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs. Secondly, they have closed off access to further study routes including vocational education and apprenticeships for an increasing number of children

4. More young people are leaving education with fewer qualifications to help them secure apprenticeships or advance to other qualifications.

At the same time as fewer children are achieving Level 2 qualifications, there has been a dramatic drop in young people going into apprenticeships. Numbers of young people starting intermediate apprenticeships (generally equivalent to 5 GCSE passes) have dropped by 51%, and take-up by 16 to 18 year olds has fallen by 23%² since 2016 (before the 2017 apprenticeship reforms). In this time, take-up of apprenticeships by those aged 25 and over at levels 4+ has risen by 69%. This comes after the government introduced the Apprenticeship Levy³ and also removed incentives for employers to take on young people. It is true that some apprenticeships take on those who did not reach the Level 2 milestone, if they have potential to complete the programme, however this an increasingly competitive space. As it stands, employers seem to be favouring older, better-qualified candidates who pose a lower risk.

It is also the case that those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs are more likely to pursue employment than further education. In 2016/2017 disadvantaged students were 1% more likely to be in sustained employment than non-disadvantaged students, and 7% less likely to be in sustained education⁴.

In terms of further education, colleges have courses for children of varied abilities and interests, yet still have their own entry requirements that children must meet. September 2020 marks the arrival of vocational T Level⁵ qualifications, which will be Level 3 qualifications, equivalent to A Levels. While entry requirements will be set by individual institutions, progression to T Levels will be judged on prior attainment, and therefore pupils will likely need to obtain a Level 2 qualification prior to, or alongside, their course.

5. Decades of educational progress have been reversed in the last 4 years.

The ambition of government education reforms has been to improve vocational education and ensure that it creates real opportunities for young people. Right now, this is not the case. In fact, we are seeing poorer attainment for certain groups of children and barriers to progression post-16.

There are signs that the government is considering some of these emerging issues, for example, by taking steps to broaden the entry criteria for Early Years Educator staff after finding that the requirements imposed in 2014 were too stringent.⁶ There has not yet, however, been a response which addresses the bigger picture and extends beyond the childcare sector.

As it stands, many years of positive progress leading up to 2015 is being undermined. For these children it seriously undermines their lifetime prospects, which has implications both for children and for society.

The Children's Commissioner has written to the Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb MP, under Section 2C of the Children's Act 2004 to formally ask that the Department of Education undertake the following actions:

² <https://feweek.co.uk/2019/07/12/apprenticeship-starts-for-16-18-continue-to-fall-as-level-2-cuts-exceed-50-per-cent/>

³ Guidance: Apprenticeship funding: how it works (March 2019):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-levy-how-it-will-work/apprenticeship-levy-how-it-will-work#pay-apprenticeship-levy>

⁴ Statistics: destinations of KS4 and KS5 pupils: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-destinations>

⁵ Guidance: Introduction of T Levels (August 2019): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-t-levels/introduction-of-t-levels#grading-and-certification>

⁶ Government consultation response: literacy and numeracy qualification requirements for level 3 Early years Educator staff: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/596157/L3_Government_Response.pdf. This shows that the government has taken a U-turn on its original position, and is now accepting functional literacy and numeracy after previously requiring a Level 2.

- 1) Conduct a review, with an independent chair, into falling level-2 attainment. This should consider what changes within the education system over recent years have contributed to this, and why these changes have particularly impacted on disadvantaged and special educational needs children. This review should consider whether children have sufficient opportunity to gain level-2 qualifications through non-GCSE qualifications. It should also consider the degree to which falls in level-2 attainment is behind the rapid falls in the number of young people commencing apprenticeships.
- 2) The Government should commit to halving the number of children failing to get a Level 2 qualification by the age of 19 within five years. This will require action across the education system, informed by the above review.
- 3) As part of this, the Department for Education should set-out a clear action plan for improving the opportunities and attainment of children who do not achieve 5 GCSEs or equivalents by 16, including access to apprenticeships and vocational courses.

Percentage of young people qualified to Level 2 or higher by age 19, by characteristics and cohort

Coverage: England, young people in state schools at academic age 15

	Cohort (19 in...)													
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
All young people	66.9	68.8	71.2	74.0	76.5	78.9	81.6	83.8	84.9	85.6	86.1	85.3	83.6	82.2
Young people not eligible for FSM	71.0	72.6	74.8	77.2	79.4	81.5	83.9	86.0	87.1	87.9	88.4	87.9	86.5	85.2
Young people eligible for FSM	42.7	45.1	49.0	53.6	57.5	61.4	65.3	68.8	70.8	71.3	72.0	70.4	66.5	63.3
Attainment gaps (percentage points)														
Gap between FSM and non-FSM	28.3	27.5	25.8	23.6	21.8	20.0	18.6	17.1	16.3	16.6	16.5	17.5	20.1	21.9
Gap between the least and the most deprived	33.1	31.2	28.8	26.0	24.0	21.1	18.3	16.1	14.5	13.7	13.3	13.6	16.1	17.4
Gap between SEN and no SEN		43.7	42.0	40.6	38.4	35.6	32.2	29.4	27.6	26.9	26.1	26.8	29.3	33.0

Percentage of 19 year olds qualified to Level 2, by FSM eligibility and Local Authority

LA name	All (%)	Not eligible for FSM (%)	Eligible for FSM (%)	Attainment gap (ppts)
	2018	2018	2018	2018
Gateshead	79.7	82.8	60.0	22.8
Newcastle upon Tyne	77.9	82.7	61.0	21.6
North Tyneside	84.1	86.5	65.2	21.3
South Tyneside	81.5	86.2	61.9	24.3
Sunderland	79.3	83.6	61.3	22.3
Hartlepool	80.7	85.9	59.6	26.2
Middlesbrough	77.4	83.4	63.4	20.0
Redcar and Cleveland	80.5	85.0	59.2	25.8
Stockton-on-Tees	83.2	87.6	59.6	28.0
Durham	80.9	85.3	58.6	26.7
Darlington	83.1	87.0	61.0	26.0
Northumberland	81.5	84.7	56.1	28.6

North East	80.8	85.0	60.3	24.6
Knowsley	70.0	77.6	53.4	24.2
Liverpool	79.3	84.8	63.5	21.2
St. Helens	79.2	83.6	54.6	29.0
Sefton	83.2	86.3	63.9	22.3
Wirral	83.7	87.3	64.6	22.7
Bolton	83.0	86.7	65.2	21.5
Bury	86.2	88.3	73.1	15.3
Manchester	75.9	80.9	63.7	17.3
Oldham	77.9	81.9	61.4	20.6
Rochdale	79.9	83.5	67.1	16.4
Salford	77.4	81.8	59.2	22.6
Stockport	83.1	86.2	63.2	23.1
Tameside	82.0	86.5	60.7	25.8
Trafford	88.3	90.8	67.5	23.2
Wigan	84.4	87.3	65.1	22.2
Halton	82.0	87.6	66.9	20.7
Warrington	85.1	87.4	60.6	26.9
Lancashire	82.4	85.7	58.8	27.0
Blackburn with Darwen	83.8	86.5	69.8	16.7
Blackpool	74.8	79.9	55.9	24.1
Cheshire East	87.4	89.4	62.4	27.0
Cheshire West and Chester	82.8	85.6	57.3	28.3
Cumbria	83.0	85.5	57.6	27.9
North West	82.0	85.7	62.3	23.4
Barnsley	76.2	80.8	53.9	26.9
Doncaster	75.3	79.6	50.7	28.9
Rotherham	78.5	82.3	58.5	23.8
Sheffield	77.4	82.0	54.7	27.3
Bradford	71.9	76.2	55.9	20.2
Calderdale	83.5	87.1	58.2	28.9
Kirklees	84.6	87.8	70.0	17.8

Leeds	77.4	82.4	52.8	29.6
Wakefield	80.2	84.6	51.3	33.3
Kingston Upon Hull, City of	74.9	79.9	59.1	20.8
East Riding of Yorkshire	86.0	88.1	66.1	22.0
North East Lincolnshire	80.7	84.0	59.3	24.8
North Lincolnshire	73.8	77.3	47.4	29.9
North Yorkshire	86.3	88.0	61.8	26.2
York	86.4	88.1	56.8	31.3
Yorkshire & the Humber	79.5	83.4	57.1	26.3
Derbyshire	80.5	84.5	55.2	29.3
Derby	72.2	77.4	46.5	30.9
Leicestershire	84.1	86.0	60.6	25.4
Leicester	74.3	78.1	58.4	19.7
Rutland	91.1	92.1	73.1	19.0
Nottinghamshire	79.5	82.6	55.5	27.1
Nottingham	68.3	73.8	51.5	22.3
Lincolnshire	82.0	84.9	56.1	28.7
Northamptonshire	80.3	83.5	55.7	27.8
East Midlands	79.6	83.1	55.3	27.8
Birmingham	80.6	84.7	70.8	13.8
Coventry	78.3	81.9	60.6	21.2
Dudley	81.5	84.9	60.7	24.2
Sandwell	77.2	80.6	64.6	16.0
Solihull	86.4	88.2	69.6	18.6
Walsall	75.1	79.6	57.2	22.4
Wolverhampton	76.1	81.6	56.0	25.6
Staffordshire	82.7	85.0	59.9	25.1
Stoke-on-Trent	73.8	78.7	53.4	25.3
Herefordshire	84.0	85.7	63.9	21.8
Worcestershire	84.1	86.5	61.0	25.5
Shropshire	85.2	87.8	56.7	31.1
Telford and Wrekin	79.6	83.6	58.1	25.5

Warwickshire	83.3	85.5	58.3	27.2
West Midlands	81.1	84.4	63.8	20.6
Luton	79.2	82.3	66.7	15.5
Bedford	80.5	83.3	56.1	27.2
Central Bedfordshire	83.4	85.6	62.9	22.7
Cambridgeshire	80.6	83.6	50.1	33.5
Peterborough	75.9	78.8	57.1	21.8
Essex	83.7	85.5	64.8	20.8
Southend-on-Sea	84.1	86.7	62.4	24.3
Thurrock	82.4	84.8	65.3	19.5
Hertfordshire	87.9	89.6	65.4	24.2
Norfolk	80.4	83.7	56.0	27.7
Suffolk	83.0	85.8	60.2	25.5
East of England	83.2	85.6	61.0	24.6
City of London	-	-	-	-
Camden	83.6	87.7	74.0	13.7
Greenwich	82.5	85.4	69.8	15.6
Hackney	85.8	88.3	81.0	7.3
Hammersmith and Fulham	84.0	86.1	77.5	8.6
Islington	83.3	87.7	77.7	10.0
Kensington and Chelsea	88.7	90.0	83.3	6.6
Lambeth	83.3	87.9	71.5	16.4
Lewisham	82.1	85.2	71.2	14.0
Southwark	85.4	88.4	77.9	10.5
Tower Hamlets	85.0	88.0	81.8	6.2
Wandsworth	83.4	85.9	73.2	12.6
Westminster	87.7	91.0	80.9	10.1
Barking and Dagenham	81.2	83.4	73.2	10.2
Barnet	89.7	91.8	76.9	14.9
Bexley	85.2	87.0	69.9	17.0
Brent	84.6	85.5	79.1	6.4
Bromley	85.6	87.9	60.3	27.6

Croydon	84.7	87.3	72.5	14.8
Ealing	86.8	88.6	79.4	9.3
Enfield	83.5	86.1	73.0	13.1
Haringey	82.5	85.6	75.4	10.2
Harrow	89.8	91.5	79.9	11.6
Havering	83.1	84.8	67.2	17.5
Hillingdon	86.3	89.0	72.4	16.6
Hounslow	87.9	89.9	77.4	12.5
Kingston upon Thames	88.9	91.1	63.7	27.4
Merton	82.4	86.0	66.1	19.9
Newham	85.3	86.9	81.4	5.5
Redbridge	87.2	89.5	77.3	12.2
Richmond upon Thames	86.3	87.8	75.0	12.8
Sutton	90.4	92.3	73.2	19.0
Waltham Forest	86.9	88.2	80.7	7.5
London	85.5	87.9	76.0	11.9
Buckinghamshire	87.2	88.9	61.5	27.4
Milton Keynes	82.0	84.2	62.1	22.1
East Sussex	80.6	83.6	56.1	27.5
Brighton and Hove	82.3	85.8	59.7	26.1
Hampshire	84.1	86.2	59.3	26.9
Portsmouth	76.3	80.4	59.8	20.6
Southampton	74.4	78.6	55.5	23.1
Bracknell Forest	85.2	87.0	62.2	24.8
Windsor and Maidenhead	86.0	87.1	68.1	19.0
West Berkshire	84.9	86.5	61.0	25.5
Reading	77.4	82.0	53.7	28.3
Slough	87.7	89.7	72.5	17.1
Wokingham	85.5	87.5	53.7	33.8
Kent	79.8	82.5	56.6	26.0
Medway	79.9	83.5	55.1	28.4
Isle of Wight	76.3	78.6	60.1	18.5

Oxfordshire	82.6	84.7	57.8	26.9
Surrey	86.0	88.0	59.2	28.8
West Sussex	83.9	86.0	60.0	26.0
South East	82.7	85.2	58.6	26.6
Isles of Scilly	c	c	c	c
Bath and North East Somerset	83.4	85.8	55.8	29.9
Bristol, City of	77.1	83.2	54.9	28.3
North Somerset	86.2	87.9	68.1	19.8
South Gloucestershire	79.7	81.8	60.8	21.0
Dorset	85.5	87.2	69.0	18.3
Poole	85.1	87.2	60.8	26.4
Bournemouth	80.0	83.2	57.5	25.7
Wiltshire	84.3	86.1	58.5	27.6
Swindon	77.4	80.7	49.3	31.4
Devon	84.2	86.5	64.4	22.1
Plymouth	83.2	85.8	65.3	20.6
Torbay	77.4	81.0	53.7	27.3
Cornwall	82.7	85.0	62.7	22.4
Gloucestershire	83.6	85.7	57.1	28.6
Somerset	84.4	86.7	60.8	25.9
South West	82.9	85.4	60.4	25.0
England	82.2	85.2	63.3	21.9