

The Charity Spark

National Schools Programme: Mapping Regional Variation

2026

NATIONAL SCHOOLS PROGRAMME
Fair Access to University



Contents

5 Glossary

6 Executive Summary

8 Introduction

13 The National and Regional Picture

33 Delivery Barriers and Challenges

50 Discussion

62 Considerations for SFC from the Research

67 About The Charity Spark



Glossary

Care experience
Data on care experience in this report refers to children who are looked after, young people in continuing care, and young people eligible for aftercare services. The definition of care experience used to determine NSP eligibility is broader than this.

SIMD, SIMD Q1 and Q2, and data zones
SIMD is the 2020 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. SIMD divides Scotland into 6,976 areas called data zones. Each data zone represents approximately 700–800 people. The most deprived 20% of data zones are classed as quintile 1 (Q1) and the next most deprived 20% are classed as quintile 2 (Q2). SIMD is due to be updated later in 2026. SIMD Q1 and Q2 in this report are also described as areas of high deprivation.

Registered for free school meals
The figures presented in this report correspond to the number of pupils in S4–S6 who are registered for free school meals. A pupil can be registered for free school meals if their household receives any of the following benefits:

- Universal Credit
- Pension Credit
- Income Support
- Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance
- Income-based Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance and income-based Employment and Support Allowance are closed to new claimants, and recipients are being migrated to Universal Credit.

The figures used do not account for families who meet these criteria but have not applied to the local authority, so they should be treated as minimums.

National Schools Programme Abbreviations:

ACES Access to Creative Education Scotland
NSP National Schools Programme
SHEP Schools for Higher Education Programme

Other Abbreviations:

DYW Developing the Young Workforce
FE Further Education
HE Higher Education
HNC Higher National Certificate
HND Higher National Diploma

Executive Summary

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) established the National Schools Programme (NSP) 2021-22. The NSP aims to support senior phase pupils from backgrounds of socioeconomic disadvantage and from underrepresented groups in accessing higher education in university. It is working with 11 existing programmes that support senior-phase pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education, to support the delivery of targets identified in A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access.

The NSP now operates through four regional hubs, Fife & Tayside, North, South-East, and West, delivering a national offer through three programme strands: Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) and, for pupils interested in high-demand professions, Reach or Access to Creative Education Scotland (ACES).

Following a 2024 review of NSP that identified local variations and delivery gaps, SFC commissioned The Charity Spark to research regional differences in delivery and the reasons for them. The research addressed two recommendations from that review:

- better understanding of regional needs and differences, including eligible pupil population size, distribution, rurality and geography (Recommendation 6a), and
- identification of gaps in NSP coverage, including HEIs, schools and pupils not currently directly involved in the programme (Recommendation 8e).

The research combined three elements:

- mapping regional variation in need using national data,
- reviewing regional engagement using data held by SFC, and
- semi-structured interviews with 12 NSP delivery leads across all four regions and three strands.

Data used to assess regional variation and engagement covered the 2023-24 academic year, and interviews with delivery leads were conducted in March and April 2026.

National data confirms substantial regional variation in both NSP reach and the number of NSP eligible pupils, as defined by current eligibility criteria. In academic year 2023-24, the NSP, through SHEP, Reach, or ACES, supported 51,000 S4-S6 pupils nationally. This represents 92.7% of senior pupils living in areas of high deprivation and 36.5% of all S4-S6 pupils. The West accounted for almost half of Scotland's senior-phase pupils (46.5%) and 72.6% of the NSP supported pupil total, reaching 56.9% their S4-S6 total, the highest of any region. The South-East had the second largest pupil population (23.7%) and accounted for 19.7% of the national supported total. The North (15.8% of pupils, 4.9% of the national supported total) and Fife & Tayside (14.0% of pupils, 2.8% of the national supported total) are considerably smaller, and Fife & Tayside reaches the lowest proportion of its own pupils (7.4%).

These differences reflect more than population size. They also reflect the irregular distribution of deprivation, rurality, attainment and school engagement. Each of these factors is considered in turn below.

- **Deprivation**, as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), is unevenly distributed: half of pupils in the West live in SIMD Q1 or Q2 data zones, compared with 19.4% in the North, where such data zones are comparatively scarce. This is a key issue for NSP aims, as pupils from backgrounds of socioeconomic disadvantage are mainly identified by living in a SIMD Q1 or Q2 data zone. The data shows there were 55,628 S4 and S6 pupils in SIMD Q1 and Q2, compared to a total NSP intake of 51,352, although not all NSP pupils will be in SIMD Q1 and Q2. This suggests high coverage in the West and perhaps evidence of demand not being met in that area. It also suggests good coverage in the South East. It shows the North having less coverage of its SIMD Q1 and Q2 populations, and Fife & Tayside having a low proportion of coverage.
- **Rurality** as measured by the Scottish Government's 8-fold urban/rural classification system is also uneven. Nationally, 68.8% of pupils live in urban areas, but this falls to 39.4% in the North, where remote and very remote areas account for almost 30% of pupils. The West is predominantly urban overall (78.1%) but contains its own remote and comparatively deprived areas, notably Argyll and Bute, where a higher proportion of pupils in SIMD Q1 or Q2 are registered for free school meals than in any of the North's rural local authorities. This is also a key issue for the national monitoring of NSP, as published



evidence shows that SIMD does not fully reflect poverty in rural areas due to its area-based approach. The Scottish Government is working to develop a more individual measure of poverty that better reflects rural areas.

- **Attainment** data, available only at national level, shows that pupils in SIMD Q1 are considerably less likely than those in SIMD Q5 to achieve five or more National 5 passes (22.0% compared with 63.2%). Attainment by rurality is less straightforward: pupils in Remote Small Towns have the lowest attainment of any category, while pupils in Accessible Rural and Very Remote Rural Areas achieve some of the highest, suggesting that rurality alone is not a reliable proxy for disadvantage, though a specific group of high-attaining pupils in very remote rural areas, concentrated in the North, may face a genuine access barrier despite not meeting deprivation-based eligibility criteria. To best answer this question, it may be helpful to consider how well each of the urban / rural classifications are represented in university student populations. This could identify any gaps that fall within the scope of the NSP's aim to support senior phase pupils from underrepresented groups in accessing higher education.
- **School-level engagement** also varies considerably. Of 364 local authority schools nationally, 63 (17.3%) were not supported by any NSP strand in 2023-24. Non-engagement is highest in the North (36.5% of schools, concentrated in Highland) and lowest in the South-East (3.9%), which has the strongest

overall school coverage of any region. In Fife & Tayside, 11.1% of schools were not supported by NSP. These schools are all located within Perth and Kinross. In contrast, the 15.5% of schools not engaged in the West are dispersed across nine of the thirteen local authorities that make up this region.

Fife & Tayside has the highest engagement with Reach (84.4% of schools) of any region, while the West's engagement is more evenly spread across strands. Within engaged schools, Reach and ACES engagement consistently lags behind SHEP, indicating that access to high-demand profession support may remain limited even where a school has an NSP relationship.

Interviews with delivery leads identified five barriers common to all regions and strands. These are:

- the absence of a national pupil identifier to track outcomes and avoid double counting;
- eligibility criteria, particularly SIMD, that under-identify disadvantage in rural and island areas;
- pressure on teacher capacity and school relationships, which underpin the delivery model;
- rising transport and logistical costs that affect both rural and urban delivery; and
- flat-cash funding since 2018 combined with an annual bidding cycle, which every region raised as a constraint on delivery.

Region-specific barriers reflect each area's distinct profile. In Fife & Tayside, long journey times despite short geographical distances can prevent pupils from participating in NSP activities. In Dundee City, where travel times are not a challenge, the barriers are more attitudinal rather than access-related. Historically, the city has low participation in higher education, and options such as creative professional careers are not seen as legitimate aspirations by many families. The North's barriers primarily stem from extreme travel distances and island geography, compounded by SIMD's poor fit with rural needs. The South-East's main barriers are structural rather than geographical: LEAPS' whole-school eligibility model sits alongside Reach and ACES' individual pupil criteria, which can create confusion for pupils and teachers, even where school coverage is strong. The West's primary barrier is scale, covering 13 local authorities and around 160 schools, combined

with a heavy reliance on a large casual tutor workforce and cultural scepticism about higher education in areas of concentrated deprivation.

Interviews also identified **features of NSP delivery that should be retained**: programme impartiality, sustained face-to-face relationships with pupils, on-campus and residential experiences, longitudinal support from S4 to S6, peer community and student ambassador models, contextual admissions linked to programme participation, and integrated regional delivery where SHEP, Reach and ACES work together.

The report's discussion brings together the data mapping and interview findings. It confirms that the four NSP regions are distinct operating environments rather than variations on a single model. The North's challenge is a compounding one of a small, highly dispersed population and consistently high delivery costs. The West combines large-scale urban demand with a separate, remote, and deprived rural population, necessitating two distinct delivery approaches within one region. The South-East and Fife & Tayside have urban cores, but each contains a rural or semi-rural minority whose distance from the regional centre is easy to overlook in aggregate figures.

Gaps in school coverage follow these same patterns: non-engaged schools are concentrated where journey times are longest and delivery staff most thinly spread. Therefore, pupils most likely to be missed are rural and island pupils. Because the underlying differences between regions are structural rather than simply differences in scale, the report concludes that funding, eligibility, and performance frameworks need to account for genuine regional variation to deliver an agreed minimum baseline offer.

The report also sets out limitations to how these findings should be interpreted. The data mapping reflects a single academic year and could not be disaggregated to pupil level. National attainment data could not be broken down by region, and local authority data sources for asylum seekers and care experienced pupils are heavily suppressed due to small numbers. The interviews reflect the perspectives of delivery practitioners only, were conducted around eighteen months after the mapping data, and the research scope did not extend to systematic assessment of gaps in HEI engagement, which would require separate analysis of university-level data.

The report sets out twelve considerations for SFC, grouped under three headings. Some of these recommendations are already part of the NSP review implementation plan and relevant activity is in progress to address them:

Data and definitions considerations include:

- capturing school SEED codes alongside engagement data;
- agreeing standardised definitions of pupil and school engagement;
- and funding a national NSP data infrastructure, including a national student identifier, as a separate capital investment.

Programme and funding structure considerations include:

- progressing work towards consistent national eligibility requirements, with criteria including SIMD20, free school meals and elements of remoteness;
- encouraging consistent recognition of that standard in university contextual admissions;
- and ringfencing funding for transport, catering and residential activities, and moving to a three-year funding cycle aligned with the senior phase.

Considerations around **future research** include:

- further research into the relationship between remoteness and educational disadvantage;
- mapping NSP's position within the wider widening participation landscape in each region;
- monitoring school engagement over multiple years;
- and researching and sharing best practice across delivery partners.

Taken together, the findings show that regional variation in the NSP's ability to deliver a uniform offer to NSP pupils in return for the funds allocated is real, structural, and consistent in both the quantitative and qualitative evidence.

Addressing the gaps identified in this report to achieve a consistent national offer will require a regionally differentiated approaches, supported by better data infrastructure, to ensure that NSP support reaches pupils with the greatest need across all parts of Scotland, and that their outcomes are effectively tracked over time.

Introduction

The National Schools Programme (NSP) was established in the academic year 2021-22, bringing together 11 existing and successful Scottish Funding Council (SFC)-funded activities that support senior-phase pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education. The NSP supports the delivery of targets identified in A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access.

A 2024 review of the NSP clarified the programme's mission as supporting access to university for young people from areas of socioeconomic deprivation and under-represented backgrounds. The NSP now operates through four regional hubs - Fife & Tayside, North, South-East, and West - to create a national offer based on four pillars of intervention:

- impartial information, advice, guidance, and support
- a visit to a campus or residential experience
- a recognised higher education or top-up-type skills development course
- specialist support regarding access to high-demand professions.

Within each region, NSP activities are delivered by a Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) partner and, for pupils interested in specialist support for high-demand professions, Access to High Demand Professions (AHDP) partners.

SHEP is designed to improve awareness of higher education opportunities. It provides pupils with impartial advice and guidance on university options and pathways to higher education. SHEP activities are delivered in various forms, including one-to-one meetings and campus visits.

AHDP consists of two strands that deliver subject-specific support in the form of specialist information, advice, and guidance for subjects with additional admission requirements:

- Reach supports pupils pursuing law, medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry, or (at the University of St Andrews) economics and psychology.
- Access to Creative Education Scotland (ACES) focuses on degrees related to art, design, and architecture.

The 2024 NSP review identified local variations and delivery gaps, including at an individual school level. Consequently, SFC commissioned The Charity Spark to conduct research to evidence and better understand regional differences in provision and the reasons for them.

In addition to providing SHEP, Reach, and ACES, the NSP is aligned with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's Fair Access Programme, which is designed to help young people prepare for higher education at the Conservatoire. Despite this alignment, this programme is not considered part of the core NSP offering and was not within the scope of The Charity Spark's research.

Research aims and methodology

The research aimed to address two of the NSP review's recommendations:

- Recommendation 6a: "Better understanding regional needs and differences including eligible pupil population size, distribution / rurality, geography amongst other factors."
- Recommendation 8e (Part 1): "Identify gaps in coverage of the NSP, including HEIs [higher education institutions], schools and pupils not currently directly involved in the programme."

To address these aims, the research adopted the following elements:

1. mapping regional variation in need using national data
2. reviewing regional engagement using data held by SFC
3. identifying regional barriers and challenges through interviews with NSP delivery partners.

Prior to the research commencing, SFC and The Charity Spark developed a research theory of change to ensure mutual understanding of the detail and scope of the work.



Mapping regional variation in need using national data

The mapping process involved reviewing bespoke data extracts that SFC requested from the Scottish Government. Datasets contained aggregated demographics for pupils who attended publicly funded schools in the 2023-24 academic year, including fields relating to the following topics:

- the number of S4–S6 pupils living in each of SIMD quintiles 1 and 2 (in other words, the 20% and 40% most deprived data zones)
- the number of S4–S6 pupils registered for free school meals living in SIMD Q1 and Q2
- urban–rural variations in S4–S6 pupil locations
- attainment at both National and Higher levels
- number of S4–S6 pupils who are asylum seekers
- number of S4–S6 pupils who are refugees
- number of S4–S6 pupils who are care experienced, defined as currently or previously looked after.

The extracts listed above contained data from the Scottish Pupil Census, except for care experienced pupils. This was sourced from Children's Social Work Statistics. Findings from this mapping work have been provided to SFC as an interactive HTML output, enabling viewers to explore topics of interest in greater detail.

Reviewing regional engagement using data held by SFC

SFC provided The Charity Spark with reports and data on NSP activity and engagement at regional and school levels for the 2023-24 academic year. This included internal spreadsheets related to individual school engagement and regional reports on strategic investments (ROSI reports), which delivery partners submit as part of the annual reporting cycle, along with associated documents. The data provided by SFC was supplemented with published figures from Education Scotland's Secondary School Information Dashboard. This data was reviewed alongside findings from the analysis of national data to estimate programme reach among target pupils.

Identifying regional barriers and challenges through interviews with NSP delivery partners

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 delivery leads covering SHEP, Reach and ACES in all four NSP regions. Most interviews were specific to a single strand of the NSP, with one covering Reach and ACES in the South-East. The interviews were completed between 3 March and 2 April 2026.

In line with SFC's brief, the interview questions focused on barriers and challenges, although, as agreed, they also explored programme features that should be retained. Interviewees were sent an information sheet and outline of the interview questions in advance.

Interview transcripts and notes were subject to initial inductive thematic analysis, which identified barriers and challenges, as well as features for retention, across all strands and regions. Further analysis used frequency and significance to identify the main cross-cutting barriers and success factors that apply across all regions, as well as region-specific barriers.

NSP Strategic Advisory Group

Interim findings and final findings and considerations were presented to the NSP Strategic Advisory Group in April and July 2026, respectively. Where appropriate, their comments and feedback have been incorporated into this report.

This report

Findings from the regional mapping using national data and the review of engagement using SFC data have been combined to provide a detailed understanding of both need and reach. These findings are presented first, followed by the findings from the interviews.



The National and Regional Picture

National data shows that, across Scotland, over 140,000 pupils were in S4–S6 in local authority-funded schools for the 2023-24 academic year. Almost half of these pupils were in the West NSP region, and almost one-quarter were in the South-East.

According to ROSI supplementary tables provided by SFC, the NSP supported over 51,000 pupils through SHEP, Reach, and ACES in 2023-24. The West accounted for the largest share of supported pupils, with over 37,000, representing 72.6% of the supported total. The South-East accounted for most of the remaining pupils, with over 10,000 supported pupils (19.7% of the total supported).

TABLE 1: S4-6 PUPILS IN EACH NSP REGION AND THE NUMBER OF PUPILS SUPPORTED BY NSP ACCORDING TO SFC'S ROSI SUPPLEMENTARY TABLES.

NSP region	Number of pupils in S4–S6 in 2023-24 (percentage of Scottish total S4-S6 pupils in parentheses)	2023-24 supported pupil count from ROSI tables (each region's percentage of total pupils in parentheses)
Fife & Tayside	19,709 (14.0%)	1,454 (7.4%)
North	22,263 (15.8%)	2,515 (11.3%)
South-East	33,396 (23.7%)	10,110 (30.3%)
West	65,507 (46.5%)	37,273 (56.9%)
Scotland (total)	**140,875**	**51,352 (36.5%)**

Nationally, 36.5% of S4-S6 pupils in 2023-24 were supported by NSP. The percentage of pupils supported by NSP was lowest in Fife & Tayside, where 7.4% were involved in at least one strand (SHEP, Reach or ACES) of the programme. It was highest in the West, where 56.9% were supported.

NSP eligibility criteria

Eligibility for the NSP is based on various criteria, with each delivery partner setting its own. Examples include living in an area of high deprivation, being care experienced, and living in an area of significant rural isolation. As pupils only need to meet one of the criteria and because the provided data is aggregated, specific criteria were analysed in isolation where possible. Where results in this section are presented in a table, the total pupil cohort and the number of pupils supported

by the NSP (that is, the pupil count) have been included alongside each figure to provide context regarding programme reach.

Pupils living in areas of deprivation

Around 55,000 pupils in Scotland live in households within SIMD Q1 or Q2. The distribution of SIMD Q1 and Q2 data zones is uneven. This means that the number of pupils living in these areas varies substantially among regions and local authorities. The North has the fewest SIMD Q1 and Q2 data zones. Both the South-East and Fife & Tayside fall below the overall Q1 plus Q2 percentage for Scotland (39.5%), while half of pupils in the West live in households in SIMD Q1 or Q2 data zones. The table below presents, for each region, the number of pupils living in areas of high deprivation along with the total pupil count, and the number of pupils supported by the NSP in 2023-24.

TABLE 2: S4-S6 PUPILS IN EACH REGION WHO LIVE IN SIMD Q1 AND Q2 DATA ZONES

NSP region	Total pupils	S4–S6 pupils living in SIMD Q1 data zones	S4–S6 pupils living in SIMD Q2 data zones	2023-24 supported pupil count from ROSI tables
Fife & Tayside	19,709	3,783 (19.2%)	3,547 (18.0%)	1,454
North	22,263	1,247 (5.6%)	3,080 (13.8%)	2,515
South-East	33,396	4,621 (13.8%)	6,589 (19.7%)	10,110
West	65,507	19,517 (29.8%)	13,244 (20.2%)	37,273
Scotland (total)	140,875	29,168 (20.7%)	26,460 (18.8%)	51,352

Asylum seekers

Data on asylum seekers at a local authority level is heavily suppressed due to the number of asylum seekers living within certain local authorities being fewer than five. For this reason, it was only possible to review data on asylum seeker numbers at NSP region level. According to figures provided by SFC, across Scotland, 457 pupils in S4–S6 are recorded as asylum seekers and 1,319 pupils in these year groups are classed as refugees. These pupils are disproportionately found in the West, which hosts 289 asylum seekers and 764 refugees. Fife & Tayside has the fewest numbers of both groups, with 26 asylum seekers and 107 refugees across this region's four local authorities.

Care experience

Across Scotland, 2,265 pupils in S4–S6 are considered care experienced. Over half of the care experienced pupils are in S4 (1,172), the last year of compulsory education in the Scottish system. The distribution between S5 and S6 is extremely uneven, with twice as many care experienced pupils in S5 compared to S6. The regional pattern seen in the asylum seeker and refugee data is repeated, with 1,163 care experienced pupils found in the West and 285 in Fife & Tayside. At the local authority level, Glasgow City has the largest number of care experienced pupils in S4–S6 (370), followed by Fife (168) and the City of Edinburgh (163).

Rurality

Analysis of data that segments living arrangements using the Scottish Government's 8-fold urban/rural classification system found that, nationally, 68.8% of S4–S6 pupils live in parts of Scotland considered to be Large Urban Areas or Other Urban Areas. The North has the lowest percentage of pupils living in such areas and the West has the highest, as summarised in the table below. The data in Table 3 was aggregated in the following way:

- Large Urban Areas and Other Urban Areas were combined into one Urban category.
- Accessible Small Towns, Remote Small Towns, and Very Remote Small Towns were combined into one Towns category.
- Accessible Rural Areas, Remote Rural Areas, and Very Remote Rural Areas were combined into one Rural category.

TABLE 3: BREAKDOWN OF S4-S6 PUPIL ADDRESSES ACCORDING TO URBAN/RURAL VARIATIONS

NSP region	Total pupils	Urban	Towns	Rural	2023-24 pupil count from ROSI tables
Fife & Tayside	19,709	12,574 (63.8%)	2,812 (14.3%)	4,320 (21.9%)	1,454
North	22,263	8,767 (39.4%)	3,868 (17.4%)	9,612 (43.2%)	2,515
South-East	33,396	24,456 (73.2%)	3,171 (9.5%)	5,692 (17.0%)	10,110
West	65,507	51,162 (78.1%)	5,852 (8.9%)	8,418 (12.9%)	37,273
Scotland (total)	140,875	96,959 (68.8%)	15,703 (11.1%)	28,042 (19.9%)	51352

This breakdown shows a relatively consistent pattern across all regions aside from the North. Over two-thirds of pupils live in urban settings in the other three NSP regions, whereas in the North, this figure is less than 40%. This aggregation does not account for variations in accessibility. For this reason, a second summary that segments the data by accessibility is shown below, and has been aggregated as follows:

- Large Urban Areas and Other Urban Areas were combined into one Urban category.
- Accessible Small Towns and Accessible Rural Areas were combined into one Accessible category.
- Remote Small Towns and Remote Rural Areas were combined into one Remote category.
- Very Remote Small Towns and Very Remote Rural Areas were combined into one Very Remote category.

TABLE 4: BREAKDOWN OF S4-S6 PUPIL ADDRESSES ACCORDING TO ACCESSIBILITY

NSP region	Total pupils	Urban	Accessible	Remote	Very Remote	2023-24 pupil count from ROSI tables
Fife & Tayside	19,709	12,574 (63.8%)	6,410 (32.5%)	691 (3.5%)	31 (0.2%)	1,454
North	22,263	8,767 (39.4%)	6,839 (30.7%)	2,967 (13.3%)	3,674 (16.5%)	2,515
South-East	33,396	24,456 (73.2%)	8,390 (25.1%)	454 (1.4%)	19 (0.1%)	10,110
West	65,507	51,162 (78.1%)	11,001 (16.8%)	1,656 (2.5%)	1,613 (2.5%)	37,273
Scotland (total)	140,875	96,959 (68.8%)	32,640 (23.2%)	5,768 (4.1%)	5,337 (3.8%)	51,352

This breakdown shows the differences between regions more clearly. The North region has the highest number of pupils living in both remote and very remote areas. The West region has proportionally more pupils living in very remote areas than any other region, aside from the North, but proportionally fewer living in areas considered remote but not very remote. The South-East region has the fewest pupils living in remote and very remote areas, both in absolute terms and as a proportion. A full breakdown of pupil distribution by each of the 8-fold urban / rural classifications has been provided separately to SFC.



Attainment

Attainment data, at a national level only, was provided with three separate segmentations. The first split attainment by SIMD status, the second by 8-fold urban / rural classification, and the third by asylum or refugee status.

SFC chose two attainment measures as proxy indicators to identify pupils who might be interested in progressing to university. Those measures are the percentages of S4 pupils awarded five or more National 5 passes and of S6 pupils awarded two or more Higher passes.

The data clearly shows that pupils living in areas of higher deprivation are less likely to meet these standards. Nationally, the percentage of pupils living in each SIMD quintile is, unsurprisingly, relatively equal, whereas the percentage of pupils who achieved five passes at National 5 and live in SIMD Q1 is 22% compared to 63.2% in SIMD Q5. The same pattern is seen for S6 pupils awarded two or more Higher passes. The table below shows this breakdown in full:

TABLE 5: PUPIL ATTAINMENT BY SIMD QUINTILE

SMD quintile	S4 pupils	Percentage of pupils awarded 5 or more National 5 passes	S6 pupils	Percentage of S6 pupils awarded 2 or more Higher passes
1	13,257	22.0%	12,298	30.3%
2	11,675	30.1%	10,863	38.2%
3	10,955	38.9%	10,260	46.5%
4	12,050	50.0%	11,412	47.9%
5	11,019	63.2%	10,564	71.2%



When looking at urban/rural classification, pupils in Remote Small Towns are least likely to be awarded passing grades, while pupils in Accessible Rural Areas are most likely to achieve these standards. This pattern is again consistent at both National 5 and Higher level. The table below shows the breakdown of pupil outcomes considering urban / rural variations:

TABLE 6: PUPIL ATTAINMENT BY URBAN / RURAL VARIATIONS

8-fold classification	S4 pupils	Percentage of pupils awarded 5 or more National 5 passes	S6 pupils	Percentage of S6 pupils awarded 2 or more Higher passes
Large Urban	19833	41.2%	18036	50.8%
Other Urban	20886	37.9%	20048	45.3%
Accessible Small Towns	5154	41.2%	4936	48.3%
Remote Small Towns	820	28.8%	799	39.4%
Very Remote Small Towns	705	34.8%	682	42.1%
Accessible Rural	8327	44.3%	7796	51.7%
Remote Rural	1665	38.6%	1589	47.3%
Very Remote Rural	1566	42.5%	1486	51.2%

Refugees are more likely to meet these passing standards than asylum seekers, and both groups have lower attainment than pupils who have neither status. While the passing rate differs between National 5 and Highers, the pattern described above is consistent across both.

If the standard of obtaining five or more passes at National 5 level is treated as a proxy for interest in attending university, this suggests that many pupils living in more rural settings, especially those in Remote Small Towns, would benefit from accessing NSP support but may not meet other eligibility criteria.

Pupils meeting more than one eligibility requirement

As the data supplied by SFC is aggregated at the local authority level, it is not possible in most cases to assess whether a pupil meets more than one eligibility requirement and is therefore subject to multiple forms of disadvantage. There are two exceptions to this, both of which relate to SIMD Q1 and Q2. Data on urban and rural variation was supplied both for all pupils and separately for pupils living in SIMD Q1 and Q2 data zones. Additionally, data on free school meal registrations was provided only for pupils living in the same quintiles. The data provided offers insight into cases where pupils are affected by more than one of these forms of disadvantage.

Distribution of high deprivation populations

The majority (83.4%) of pupils in S4–S6 across Scotland who live in data zones classed as SIMD Q1 or Q2 live in urban areas. This pattern is consistent across all NSP regions except the North, which includes Na h-Eileanan Siar, the Orkney Islands, and the Shetland Islands among its local authorities. The West features the largest percentage of pupils living in Large Urban Areas, with over half of pupils in this region living in such areas. In both the South-East and Fife & Tayside, over half of pupils live in areas classified as Other Urban.

In the North, 61.3% of pupils in SIMD Q1 and Q2 live in urban areas. The remaining pupils in these quintiles are relatively evenly distributed across the six other regional classifications, with each accounting for at least 4% of the whole population. The largest group (Remote Small Towns) represents just over 9% of pupils.

Free school meals registration among pupils living in areas of high deprivation

Data from the Scottish Census on free school meals registrations was provided at the local authority level for SIMD Q1 and Q2 only. Segmentation of this data by NSP region shows that the North and South-East have lower percentages of pupils who live in SIMD Q1 and Q2 data zones who are also registered for free school meals than Fife & Tayside and the West. At 31.5%, the West has the highest percentage and is the only region where the percentage exceeds the Scottish national average of 28.6%. Variation at a regional level is mostly being driven by differences in the percentages of pupils living in SIMD Q1 data zones. Across all SIMD Q2 data zones, the percentage ranges from 18% to 22%, whereas for SIMD Q1the figure ranges from 24% to 38%.

Four local authorities each have more than 1,000 pupils living in SIMD Q1 or Q2, with a percentage registered for free school meals higher than the Scottish national average. These are Dundee City, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, and West Dunbartonshire. The extent of this overlap shows that many pupils across Scotland are eligible for NSP support based on more than one criterion.

As the data supplied by SFC on free school meal registration only covers SIMD Q1 and Q2, two methods have been applied to determine an estimated number of pupils across all SIMD quintiles who are registered for free school meals:

1. Method one (lower estimate):

The Scottish Government's Secondary School Information Dashboard records the percentage of pupils registered for free school meals across all year groups in public secondary schools. The lower estimate was calculated by applying this percentage to the calculated number of S4–S6 pupils. For two local authorities, Clackmannanshire and Na h-Eileanan Siar, where a range was provided instead of a percentage, the calculation use the midpoint of the range.

2. Method two (upper estimate)

The upper estimate was calculated using the percentage of pupils registered for free school meals who live in SIMD Q1 and Q2 data zones, based on this study's national data analysis. This was used instead of the percentage from the Secondary Schools Information Dashboard.

TABLE 7: ESTIMATES OF THE NUMBER OF S4-6 PUPILS WHO ARE REGISTERED FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS

NSP region	Total pupil count (S4–S6)	Lower estimate	Upper estimate	2023-24 pupil count from ROSI tables
Fife & Tayside	19,709	3,618	5,560	1,186
North	22,263	2,697	4,545	2,575
South-East	33,396	4,847	7,801	11,113
West	65,507	14,463	22,327	39,018

Both estimates should be treated as indicative. They cannot account for factors such as variations in free school meal registrations across different year groups. The upper estimate may also exceed the true figure, as it is based solely on the proportion of pupils living in the most deprived SIMD zones and does not capture the full distribution of deprivation across the wider pupil population.

Pupil reach by NSP strand of delivery

The ROSI supplementary tables provide pupil counts for each strand of the NSP. Across all regions, the number of pupils supported by SHEP far exceeds that supported by Reach, which in turn exceeds the number supported by ACES. This is not surprising given the intended purposes of the respective strands. The West, the region with the largest number of pupils in S4–S6 and the highest percentage of pupils living in SIMD Q1 and Q2 data zones who are registered for free school meals, has by far the highest number of supported pupils.

TABLE 8: NUMBER OF PUPILS SUPPORTED BY EACH STRAND OF THE NSP

NSP region	Pupils supported by SHEP	Pupils supported by Reach	Pupils supported by ACES
Fife & Tayside	694	608	152
North	1,539	525	451
South-East	10,100	250	146
West	36,100	871	359

School level engagement

NSP eligibility is mostly determined at an individual pupil level, and school engagement gives an indicator of pupil coverage. School engagement rates vary by region and NSP strand. Overall, Reach demonstrates the broadest school engagement across three regions, while engagement with SHEP and ACES is more variable.

In Fife & Tayside, Reach has its highest level of engagement in any region, with 38 of 45 schools (84.4%) participating. The South-East shows particularly strong engagement with SHEP, with 96.1% of schools taking part. LEAPS, the SHEP partner in this region, is part-funded by local authorities and targets whole schools rather than individual pupils. In the West, engagement is relatively balanced between SHEP (64.0%) and Reach (64.6%), with ACES engaging just over half of schools (52.8%). The North records the lowest levels of engagement across all three strands, with Reach engaging half of schools, compared with 26.8% for SHEP and 23.2% for ACES.

TABLE 9: SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT IN THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES THAT COMPRISE FIFE & TAYSIDE

Region	Total schools (inc. non-engaged)	Schools engaged with SHEP	Schools engaged with Reach	Schools engaged with ACES
Fife & Tayside	45	22 (48.9%)	38 (84.4%)	31 (68.9%)
North	82	22 (26.8%)	41 (50.0%)	19 (23.2%)
South-East	76	73 (96.1%)	56 (73.7%)	47 (61.8%)
West	161	103 (64.0%)	104 (64.6%)	85 (52.8%)



Schools not reached by the NSP

Documents provided by SFC show that 63 schools were not supported by any strand of the NSP in the 2023-24 academic year. They are located across 17 local authorities. The South-East has the highest percentage of supported schools at 96.1%.

A list of schools that NSP did not reach in 2023-24 has been provided to SFC. Discussions with SFC staff highlighted several points of note relating to this list:

- The NSP may have reached schools non-engaged in 2023-24 in other years.
- Some schools that only teach pupils up to S4 are included in the list. Their pupils may progress to S5 and S6 at a school that is engaged with the NSP.
- Some of the schools were newly opened in 2023-24 and had no senior phase cohort at that time.
- Some schools may also decline the offered support because they feel they have sufficient in-house resources.

Schools cross-programme engagement: NSP region level

As schools can engage with multiple strands of the NSP, cross-programme engagement has been analysed at a school level. However, this does not necessarily mean that multiple strands are supporting the same pupils. The table below summarises the schools participating in more than one NSP strand in 2023-24. It should be considered a snapshot of engagement in this one academic year.

TABLE 10: SCHOOLS SUPPORTED BY MULTIPLE STRANDS OF NSP IN 2023-24

Region	Schools in region	Engaged with SHEP and Reach	Engaged with Reach and ACES	Engaged with SHEP and ACES	Engaged with all	Not engaged with NSP in this academic year
Fife & Tayside	45	21 (46.7%)	29 (64.4%)	17 (37.8%)	16 (35.5%)	5 (11.1%)
North	82	15 (18.3%)	12 (14.6%)	10 (12.2%)	8 (9.8%)	30 (36.6%)
South-East	76	56 (73.7%)	38 (50.0%)	47 (61.8%)	38 (50.0%)	3 (3.9%)
West	161	84 (52.2%)	61 (37.9%)	65 (40.4%)	54 (33.5%)	25 (15.5%)
Scotland (total)	364	176 (48.4%)	140 (38.5%)	139 (38.2%)	116 (31.9%)	63 (17.3%)

Local authority variations

Fife & Tayside

Of the four local authorities that make up the Fife & Tayside region, Perth and Kinross has the lowest proportion of S4–S6 pupils registered for free school meals who also live in SIMD Q1 or Q2, at 16.6%. Dundee City has the highest, at 33.7%. Free school meal registrations in this region follow the same trend: the higher the percentage of pupils living in SIMD Q1 or Q2, the higher the percentage who are registered for free school meals.

Dundee City is, unsurprisingly, almost exclusively urban, with 96.4% of pupils living in a Large Urban Area. Pupils in Angus and Fife mostly live in settings designated as Large or Other Urban areas. Perth and Kinross is more rural, with the largest group of pupils (39.1%) living in Accessible Rural Areas.

Pupils with refugee status who live in this region are mostly found in Dundee City (39) and Fife (36). The majority of the 285 pupils living in Fife & Tayside with care experience live in Fife (168). The remaining care experienced pupils are relatively evenly distributed across the local authorities.

Engagement with the AHDP strands is high across the four local authorities, with 84.4% and 66.7% of schools participating in Reach and ACES, respectively. For both strands, these are the highest proportions in the four NSP regions. Engagement with SHEP is lower, at 48.9% of schools. Engagement in Dundee City is higher across all NSP strands than in the other local authorities, with Perth and Kinross having the lowest engagement for all strands, including no schools engaging with SHEP. Perth and Kinross is also the only local authority in Fife & Tayside which has schools that are not engaged with any strand of the NSP (five schools). All five schools are located outside the city of Perth, making them relatively remote.

TABLE 11: SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT IN THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES THAT COMPRISE FIFE & TAYSIDE

Region (in italics) and Local Authority	Total schools (inc. non-engaged)	Schools engaged with SHEP	Schools engaged with Reach	Schools engaged with ACES
Fife & Tayside	*45*	*22 (48.9%)*	*38 (84.4%)*	*31 (68.9%)*
Angus	8	3 (37.5%)	7 (87.5%)	7 (87.5%)
Dundee City	8	7 (87.5%)	8 (100.0%)	6 (75.0%)
Fife	17	12 (66.7%)	17 (94.4%)	13 (72.2%)
Perth and Kinross	11	0 (0.0%)	6 (54.5%)	5 (45.5%)

North

As highlighted previously, the North has fewer data zones classified as SIMD Q1 or Q2. As a result, SIMD is not used as a major marker of pupil eligibility in the North. The urban centre of Aberdeen City has the highest percentage of S4–S6 pupils living in SIMD Q1 or Q2 data zones, at 31.1%. All other regions, aside from Highland (25.0%), have fewer than 16% of pupils living in these SIMD quintiles. In Aberdeenshire and the Shetland Islands, the rate is under 10%. No pupils in Na h-Eileanan Siar, the Orkney Islands or the Shetland Islands live in SIMD Q1 data zones. In each of these local authority areas, pupils who live in SIMD Q2 make up less than 16% of the S4–S6 pupil totals.

Although a low percentage of pupils in Aberdeenshire live in SIMD Q1 or Q2 data zones, a disproportionately large number of these are registered for free school meals (28.4%) compared to other local authorities in the North. This exceeds the percentage seen in Aberdeen City (24.2%). Although the number of pupils who live in Q1 or Q2 areas in Aberdeenshire is low, those who do are disproportionately disadvantaged. At the opposite end of the scale, in Na h-Eileanan Siar, just 7.8% of pupils living in SIMD Q2 are registered for free school meals.

The degree of rurality varies most extremely for Aberdeen City, where most pupils live in areas considered Large Urban (86.9%), compared to the Shetland Islands, where pupils live predominantly in Remote Small Towns (78.3%). Rurality differs in each of the North's other local authorities, with all pupils in Na h-Eileanan Siar and the Orkney Islands living in Very Remote Small Towns and Very Remote Rural Areas. Pupils in Aberdeenshire, Highland, and Moray live in a variety of settings from Large Urban to Very Remote Rural Areas. Of these three, Highland is the most rural and Aberdeenshire is the most urban. This degree of variation means pupils are far more dispersed in the North than in other regions and therefore greater flexibility in delivery is required to reach all pupils successfully.

Pupils with refugee status are mostly concentrated in Aberdeen City (57), with smaller numbers seen in Highland (29) and Aberdeenshire (25). No pupils with refugee status live in Na h-Eileanan Siar, the Orkney Islands, or the Shetland Islands. Most pupils with care experience live in Aberdeenshire or Highland; 108 pupils in each of these local authorities are care experienced. Most of the remainder are in Aberdeen City (77) and Moray (47).

Engagement with all strands of the NSP is lower in the North than in all other NSP regions. Half (50.0%) of schools engage with Reach, but engagement with SHEP and ACES is lower, at 26.8% and 23.2%, respectively. There are significant variations across the constituent local authorities, with general engagement highest in Aberdeen City and engagement with Reach being highest among all schools in Moray. In contrast, SHEP has no engagement outside the Scottish mainland, and both Reach and ACES engage fewer than half of schools in Na h-Eileanan Siar, the Orkney Islands, and the Shetland Islands.

Five local authorities across the North have schools that are not engaged with any strand of the NSP. Highland has the largest number of non-engaged individual schools of all local authorities, which are dispersed throughout the local authority area.

TABLE 12: SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT IN THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES THAT COMPRISE THE NORTH REGION

Region (in italics) and Local Authority	Total schools (inc. non-engaged)	Schools engaged with SHEP	Schools engaged with Reach	Schools engaged with ACES	Schools not engaged with NSP
North	*82*	*22 (26.8%)*	*41 (50.0%)*	*19 (23.2%)*	*29*
Aberdeen City	11	6 (54.5%)	9 (81.8%)	7 (63.6%)	0
Aberdeenshire	17	4 (23.5%)	7 (41.2%)	5 (29.4 %)	7
Highland	29	10 (34.5%)	13 (44.8%)	2 (6.9%)	11
Moray	8	2 (25.0%)	8 (100.0%)	2 (25.0%)	0
Na h-Eileanan Siar	5	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (40.0%)	3
Orkney Islands	5	0 (0.0%)	2 (40.0%)	1 (20.0%)	3
Shetland Islands	7	0 (0.0%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0.0%)	5

South-East

Clackmannanshire has the highest percentage of S4–S6 pupils living in data zones considered to be SIMD Q1 or Q2, at 57.8%. The percentage of pupils living in these data zones is also high in Midlothian (42.1%), West Lothian (40.7%), Falkirk (35.1%), and the City of Edinburgh (31.8%), all exceeding 30% of the total number of pupils living in the local authority in each case. Scottish Borders has the lowest percentage at 18.9%.



Free school meal registrations across this region are relatively consistent. Just under 20% of pupils living in data zones considered to be SIMD Q1 or Q2 are also registered for free school meals. The rate is highest in Falkirk, at 26.4%. In three local authorities, the rate is under 20% (East Lothian, Midlothian, and Scottish Borders).

Most pupils in these regions live in urban settings: in all local authorities aside from Clackmannanshire, the Scottish Borders, and Stirling, over half of pupils live in areas classified as Large Urban or Other Urban. In Clackmannanshire, 40.6% live in Other Urban Areas. This figure is exceeded by the total who live in Accessible Small Towns (44.1%). In the Scottish Borders, the largest pupil group is those who live in Accessible Rural Areas (40.4%). Similarly, in Stirling, the largest pupil group, aside from those living in urban settings, is found in Accessible Rural Areas (32.1%).

The City of Edinburgh has by far the largest number of pupils with refugee status across the South-East region (204). This is also the second highest number in any single local authority and represents 1.9% of all pupils in S4–S6. There are 27 pupils with refugee status in each of Stirling and West Lothian. Most pupils with care experience in the South-East live in the City of Edinburgh (163), followed by West Lothian and Falkirk (60 and 57 respectively). The remaining 173 pupils are relatively evenly distributed across the other five local authorities that comprise this region.

The SouthEast shows the strongest school-level SHEP engagement of any NSP region, with 96.1% of schools participating. Almost three-quarters (73.7%) of schools are engaged with Reach and 61.8% with ACES. Geographically, engagement is highest in the City of Edinburgh and Midlothian. School-level engagement is lowest in East Lothian, where 85.7% of schools are engaged with SHEP, but fewer than half are engaged with Reach (42.9%) and ACES (42.9%). ACES also reaches fewer than half of schools in West Lothian (46.2%) and only one of the three secondary schools in Clackmannanshire. Three schools across the South-East are not engaged with any strand of the NSP. These are in East Lothian (one) and West Lothian (two). In all three cases, these schools opened in recent years and are unlikely to have senior phase pupils in the 2023-24 academic year.

TABLE 13: SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT IN THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES THAT COMPRISE THE SOUTH-EAST REGION

Region (in italics) and Local Authority	Total schools (inc. non-engaged)	Schools engaged with SHEP	Schools engaged with Reach	Schools engaged with ACES
South-East	*76*	*73 (96.1%)*	*56 (73.7%)*	*47 (61.8%)*
City of Edinburgh	23	23 (100.0%)	22 (95.7%)	16 (69.6%)
Clackmannanshire	3	3 (100.0%)	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)
East Lothian	7	6 (85.7%)	3 (42.9%)	3 (42.9%)
Falkirk	8	8 (100.0%)	6 (75.0%)	4 (50.0%)
Midlothian	6	6 (100.0%)	5 (83.3%)	5 (83.3%)
Scottish Borders	9	9 (100.0%)	6 (66.7%)	6 (66.7%)
Stirling	7	7 (100.0%)	4 (57.1%)	6 (85.7%)
West Lothian	13	11 (84.6%)	8 (61.5%)	6 (46.2%)

West

The West is the largest NSP region by the number of local authorities. The region also has a disproportionately large number of SIMD Q1 and Q2 data zones and, by extension, higher percentages of pupils living in these quintiles. Among the 13 local authorities, six have more than 50% of S4–S6 pupils living in households in these quintiles. East Renfrewshire (15.5%) has the lowest percentage of senior-phase pupils living in these data zones.

Most of these local authorities have a free school meals registration rate of between 19% and 26% among pupils living in SIMD Q1 or Q2. The main exceptions are Glasgow City and Inverclyde, both of which are above this range. In Glasgow City, 46.5% of pupils in SIMD Q1 and Q2 are also registered for free school meals. In Inverclyde, the rate is lower but still comparatively high at 33.3%.

Urban/rural classification also varies across the region. Pupils in Renfrewshire (95.6%), Glasgow City (99.1%), and East Renfrewshire (82.6%) mostly live in Large Urban Areas. Across the remaining authorities, over 60% of pupils live in either Large Urban Areas or Other Urban Areas, with three notable exceptions where over half of pupils do not live in urban settings:

- In East Ayrshire, 30.8% of pupils live in Accessible Small Towns, and 13.4% live in Accessible Rural Areas.
- In Dumfries and Galloway, 24.9% of pupils live in Accessible Small Towns, and 22.5% live in more rural areas.
- In Argyll and Bute, 33.1% of pupils live in Very Remote Small Towns. Most of the remainder (37.9%) live in Rural Areas considered remote or very remote.

While the overall percentage is lower than in these three regions, South Ayrshire is also more rural than other parts of the West, with 37.5% of pupils living outside Large Urban or Other Urban Areas.

More pupils with refugee status live in the West region than in all other regions combined (764). Among these pupils, 459 live in Glasgow City, representing over 3% of the total pupil cohort. The next largest groups of pupils with refugee status are in North Lanarkshire (43) and East Dunbartonshire (36). Care experienced pupils mostly live in Glasgow City (370), Renfrewshire (127), South Lanarkshire (117), and North Lanarkshire (111).

Overall engagement in the West is less variable than in the other regions, with 65.4% of schools engaging with Reach and SHEP, and 56.0% engaging with ACES. All schools in West Dunbartonshire participate in all three strands of the NSP, and overall engagement is strong in Glasgow City.

Engagement is lowest in Dumfries and Galloway, where Reach engages fewer than a third of schools (31.3%), and SHEP and ACES each engage fewer than a fifth (both 18.8%). The rural local authority of Argyll and Bute also has limited engagement for all delivery strands. Schools in nine local authorities across the West are not engaged with the NSP at all.

TABLE 14: SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT IN THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES THAT COMPRISE THE WEST REGION

Region (in italics) and Local Authority	Total schools (inc. non-engaged)	Schools engaged with SHEP	Schools engaged with Reach	Schools engaged with ACES	Schools not engaged with NSP
West	*161*	*103 (64.0%)*	*104 (64.6%)*	*85 (52.8%)*	*25*
Argyll and Bute	10	2 (20.0%)	3 (30.0%)	4 (40.0%)	5
Dumfries and Galloway	16	3 (18.8%)	5 (31.3%)	3 (18.8%)	6
East Ayrshire	7	5 (71.4%)	4 (57.1%)	1 (14.3%)	1
East Dunbartonshire	9	7 (77.8%)	7 (77.8%)	3 (33.3%)	2
East Renfrewshire	7	6 (85.7%)	6 (85.7%)	3 (42.9%)	0
Glasgow City	32	30 (93.8%)	29 (90.6%)	26 (81.3%)	0
Inverclyde	6	6 (100.0%)	4 (66.7%)	5 (83.3%)	0
North Ayrshire	9	7 (77.8%)	3 (33.3%)	4 (44.4%)	2
North Lanarkshire	23	12 (52.2%)	16 (69.6%)	14 (60.9%)	2
Renfrewshire	11	3 (27.3%)	7 (63.6%)	5 (45.5%)	2
South Ayrshire	9	6 (66.7%)	5 (55.6%)	2 (22.2%)	2
South Lanarkshire	17	11 (64.7%)	10 (58.8%)	10 (58.8%)	2
West Dunbartonshire	5	5 (100.0%)	5 (100.0%)	5 (100.0%)	0

Conclusions from data mapping

There are substantial differences between NSP regions and local authorities in terms of deprivation, geography, pupil characteristics, and school-level engagement with the different NSP strands. In many cases, pupils are eligible for support through the NSP because they meet more than one criterion.

NSP engagement broadly corresponds to the highest concentrations of pupils who experience area-based deprivation, particularly in the West. Across NSP, overall depth of engagement is less pronounced in areas where other factors take precedence, such as remoteness. This is most notable in local authorities that are not part of the Scottish mainland. There are also variations in engagement with SHEP, Reach, and ACES within and between regions.

While school engagement levels are strong in many areas, **some localised lack of school engagement may limit eligible pupils' access to all NSP strands**. Variations in levels of engagement across the different strands will also reflect natural year-on-year changes in cohort interests, subject choices, and educational aspirations.



While pupils from SIMD quintiles 1 and 2 are less likely to achieve the academic qualifications used to indicate the likelihood of progressing to higher education than those from less deprived quintiles, the latter are among the groups most likely to benefit from targeted NSP support. This highlights the importance of **ensuring that eligibility and engagement approaches continue to identify and support pupils with the greatest potential to benefit from participation**.

Attainment outcomes vary by the urban / rural classification of where pupils live, but the relationship between rurality and attainment is not straightforward. Remote Small Towns have the lowest attainment among all geographic categories. They are therefore the setting where pupils are most likely to benefit from targeted NSP support in terms of both attainment gap and access barriers. In contrast, Very Remote Rural Areas outperform most urban categories in National 5 attainment. High-attaining pupils in very remote rural areas, which are concentrated in three North region local authorities, may not meet deprivation-based eligibility criteria but still face a genuine remoteness barrier to accessing higher education. The evidence does not establish that rurality broadly constitutes disadvantage. However, it does **identify Remote Small Towns, and specific high-attaining remote rural pupils, as groups that may benefit from closer attention in NSP eligibility and delivery design**.

Lastly, this analysis highlights the value and limitations of available administrative data. Due to low pupil numbers in some local authorities, it has not been possible to report fully on the numbers of asylum seekers and care experienced pupils at a local authority level. Data on certain groups who would be eligible for NSP support is not available in the pupil census. Nor has it been possible in most cases to explore where pupils experience more than one form of disadvantage and therefore meet more than one of the core NSP eligibility criteria. This may be an area of interest to SFC going forward.

Delivery Barriers and Challenges

This section presents findings from interviews with delivery leads about the barriers and challenges they face across all three strands of NSP. It first describes the main barriers reported across all regions, followed by the specific barriers and challenges for each of the four NSP regions.

Repetition across sources was the clearest signal of a 'main' barrier or challenge. Some regional barriers are unique to a given region and show how geography and local delivery structures shape delivery in different ways.

Cross-cutting barriers across all regions

The main barriers that recur in every region and across all three strands of NSP fall into five main categories, as described below in order of the significance attributed to them. Their presence in every region means they require system-level solutions. They also provide some of the context for each region-specific picture.

1. Data, tracking, and reporting

All delivery leads referred to the absence of a national pupil identifier (such as the Scottish Candidate Number) as an important gap: AHDP delivery partners cannot track what happens to a young person who does not progress to their own institution, and reporting frameworks often exclude locally delivered, non-NSP wraparound activity that delivery leads consider integral to impact. Partners consistently described data-sharing agreements between universities, local authorities and the Scottish Government as slow and bureaucratic, sometimes delivering data too late in the cycle to be used proactively. Inconsistent counting and reporting practices between delivery partners were also mentioned. The situation creates multiple challenges:

- Double counting: programmes may unknowingly report on pupils who have also been counted elsewhere.
- Inconsistent reporting: interviewees' perceptions of variation in how different NSP partners count and report participants undermine the reliability of cross-regional comparisons.

- Attribution gaps: if a pupil supported by Reach partner X goes to University Y to study medicine, Reach partner X risks not receiving formal recognition for that outcome.
- ROSI return complexity: the current reporting timeframe is not aligned with programme cycles and does not capture the full range of activity. However, partners acknowledged that NSP evaluation and reporting are being reviewed.

2. Eligibility criteria

Living in areas of high deprivation was repeatedly described as a poor fit for eligibility outside the largest cities. In rural and island areas, the proportion of postcodes in SIMD Q1 or Q2 is small, so this metric alone under-identifies disadvantaged young people who face real barriers. In addition to SIMD, the NSP uses a variety of other individual eligibility markers, such as rurality, free school meal registration, and carer status. These markers are reported to be recognised inconsistently between universities for contextual offers. This means a young person can be eligible for an NSP strand but not for an adjusted university offer, or eligible for supported entry at one university and not another. Whilst university offers are not within NSP's remit, they do confuse young people, parents, guidance teachers, and delivery staff, creating a potential barrier. Specific challenges include:

- SIMD Q1 and Q2 postcodes are heavily concentrated in urban areas and are largely ineffective as a measure of disadvantage in rural settings.
- NSP strands use the Scottish Government 8-fold urban / rural classification, but this classification is not universally recognised by Scottish universities across all course admissions. This means rural pupils may qualify for NSP support but not receive an adjusted offer from a university.
- Different NSP strands use different eligibility criteria, creating confusion when pupils are eligible for one strand but not another operating in the same school.
- The definition of 'care experience' was deemed particularly problematic, as broad self-identification is not matched by consistent institutional or programme guidance.
- Social and cultural barriers about higher education within some communities are not always correlated with formal deprivation indicators.

3. Teacher workload, school engagement and distinction

Because most delivery models rely on a guidance teacher, pupil support teacher, or senior leader as the point of contact for a school, delivery leads in every region described challenges posed by teacher workload, turnover and, in some cases, recruitment and retention difficulties. They described these challenges as worse in remote areas and in schools undergoing leadership change. It was identified as a risk to the relationship-based delivery model that underpins all three strands of NSP. In every region, multiple widening participation or employment-support organisations and funding streams operate in the same schools, and delivery leads described the risk of schools receiving multiple, poorly differentiated offers. Where the offers are genuinely distinct, this is generally manageable through direct relationships. The resulting challenges include:

- When a key contact teacher leaves, delivery leads must rebuild the relationship from scratch.
- In large secondary schools with multiple guidance teachers, only one or two may engage meaningfully with NSP, risking under-representation of eligible pupils.
- Teacher overload means NSP events and visits can be deprioritised, or clashes may occur when different parts of universities schedule similar activities through different school contacts without coordination.
- If distinctions among different offers are not communicated clearly, or if geographic boundaries between NSP partners do not align with how young people actually travel or where their interests lie, there is a risk of duplicated effort.





4. Transport and logistical costs

In all regions, transport was deemed a key barrier to equitable participation. This was described as not solely affecting rural and island communities, as public transport routes, even in suburban areas and towns, can be lengthy and take a disproportionate amount of time relative to the activity or event being attended. Delivery leads deemed on-campus activities and visits to be vital for inspiring and motivating pupils, and transport costs need to be covered because public transport is not always available. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, costs have risen dramatically (quoted as up to 300% for bus hire). Constraints include:

- Rural pupils face multi-hour journeys to attend on-campus events.
- Island communities require ferry or flight support, which is both expensive and logistically complex.
- Delivery is inconsistent. Programmes delivering in urban areas can visit multiple schools in a day; those with more dispersed schools cannot.
- Catering costs for on-campus events have risen sharply. Catering is an essential equity provision for pupils who otherwise may go without food during long days of NSP-related activities.

5. Funding constraints and annual cycle

Although the interview schedule deliberately excluded references to funding, it was mentioned unprompted in every interview as a significant barrier constraining delivery. Every region reported that flat-cash funding since 2018 amounts to a real-terms cut once inflation, rising transport and catering costs, and pay increments (including Real Living Wage rises for student ambassadors and National Insurance contribution increases) are taken into account. The requirement to bid annually, even for programmes that have run for a decade or more, was described as administratively burdensome, causing staff anxiety, and a poor fit for something that is well established. Several delivery leads reported staff being issued contract termination or non-renewal notices pending confirmation of funding, and some institutions have had to underwrite posts permanently from their own budgets to retain staff. However, this workaround is not possible everywhere. All interviewees called for a multi-year funding term. The consequences of the current situation include:

- It will be impossible to cover the rising cost of transport and catering, which are necessary for equitable participation.
- There is difficulty maintaining staffing levels, as NSP posts are often on annual or short-term contracts.
- There is no capacity to extend or expand programmes to additional schools or pupil cohorts.
- Opportunity costs are affecting provision: time spent on annual bidding rounds, even though the process has become less burdensome in recent years, disrupts operations and planning, and diverts effort from delivery and impact evaluation.
- Forward planning continues on the assumption that funding will be renewed, since there is currently no contingency if it is not.

Region-specific barriers and strengths

Fife & Tayside

Geographically, Fife & Tayside combines a relatively compact, accessible core (Dundee City, Northeast Fife around St Andrews) with substantial rural hinterland across Angus and Perthshire. The region is unique in having two universities served a single SHEP partner, which emphasises the importance of NSP as an impartial programme. Teacher overload is the most acute operational barrier, affecting referral quality and school engagement across all three strands of NSP. The region also experiences a notable cultural barrier in Dundee City, where communities have historically had low participation in higher education, and options such as creative professional careers are not seen as legitimate aspirations by many families.

Contrasting geography

- *Long and slow journeys despite looking compact on the map*. Bus journeys that look short on a map can take 1 to 2 hours each way (e.g., mid-Fife to Dundee, or Arbroath to Dundee), compared with 20 to 40 minutes equivalent journey by car or train. Journeys from the most remote schools (around Aberfeldy) are considerably further still.
- *A counter-intuitive engagement pattern*. Dundee City, despite the shortest distances and cheapest travel, has the lowest engagement of any area for ACES, attributed to a strong working-class culture, limited family experience of higher education, and parents who are not easily reached through on-campus events.
- *A small "bubble" effect around St Andrews*. The area within about 20 miles of St Andrews has a noticeably different socioeconomic profile to the rest of Fife, which complicates the application of a single regional model.

Structure and staffing

- *Two Reach universities in one region*. The SHEP partner signposting to two Reach universities within a single region highlights the importance of NSP remaining a neutral, impartial offer.
- *Staffing level limits relationship-building*. A single member of staff covering 44 schools for ACES constrains in-school delivery to brief presentations rather than sustained relationship-building. It means rural, more remote schools receive a lighter touch by necessity.

School-level and cultural barriers

- *Inconsistent school schedules*. Different timetabling structures and varying holiday patterns among schools make it difficult to deliver longer-form activities consistently at scale.
- *College seen as a secondary option*. A perception among some teachers, parents and communities that college is not an equal pathway to university, despite SHEP promoting a range of post-16 destinations, particularly college routes.
- *Digital access inequality*. Some pupils lack reliable digital access outside school, which limits their engagement with online delivery components.

Subject and definitional restrictions

- *Reach subject scope*. St Andrews offers Reach only for medicine, psychology, and economics/management. Pupils on the programme who develop interest in other Reach subjects cannot be supported locally, nor can pupils who express interest in subjects that they and schools perceive to be 'high demand' in terms of careers, such as emerging technologies. This is frustrating for pupils and schools given the broad aim of widening participation.
- *Patchy provision of Higher/Advanced Higher maths*. Inconsistent availability of Advanced Higher maths in rural and smaller schools restricts access to STEM-related high-demand courses for pupils outside the main population centres.

Fife & Tayside region-specific strengths

Delivery leads highlighted the value of hands-on, on-campus experience over digital delivery; the strength of the student ambassador model for building relatability and introducing role models; the community-building and confidence-building benefits of cohort-based portfolio and bridging work; and the well-established, trusted relationships Lift Off, the SHEP delivery partner, has built with local schools despite the structural challenges.

North

The North is, by some margin, the most geographically extreme region, and travel distances dominate the barriers reported across all NSP strands. Delivery costs per pupil are significantly higher than in the central belt: travel bursaries for island pupils for flights and ferries, coach hire for mainland rural pupils, and the time cost of delivery staff travelling hours to schools all amount to significant funding demand. A rural eligibility marker is essential for involving most young people in this region, creating a gap between programme eligibility and admissions recognition. Coordination between the region's multiple widening participation and employment providers, which include Skills Development Scotland and Developing the Young Workforce, along with NSP partners, is inconsistent, resulting in confusion and duplication in some schools.

Extreme distance and island geography

- *Multi-hour journeys are routine*. Delivery partners reported journeys of two to three hours each way to visit some schools. They described a round trip of around four hours (including a two-hour bus journey with no train option) to bring pupils from Fraserburgh to Aberdeen for an afternoon/evening session.
- *Travel by air and sea*. NSP in the North covers Orkney and Shetland, requiring flights and ferries; discounted fares for island residents are capped, and air fares were described as excessive, even with discounts.
- *Unequal access to travel concessions*. Young people in Aberdeen City can use a travel card that those in Aberdeenshire cannot, so ensuring equitable access for Aberdeenshire pupils requires a delivery partner to absorb those travel costs directly.
- *Accommodation barriers for under-18s*. In general, hotels will not accommodate unaccompanied under-18s. On campus activities have had to use student accommodation, which is not available in term time, or cover the cost of family members' hotel stays for younger pupils travelling long distances.
- *Cost of maintaining geographic reach:* The SHEP partner maintains two offices (Aberdeen and Inverness) to remain accessible across its area; this is considered necessary but adds a fixed cost that other, more compact regions do not face.



Eligibility metrics that under-identify disadvantage in some rural areas

- *SIMD Q1 and Q2 capture only a small share of the region's young people*. The North's eligible pool of pupils living in areas of high deprivation relative to the population is smaller than in urban regions, meaning neighbouring universities can find themselves competing for the same finite group of pupils.
- *Free school meal data is more revealing but incomplete*. Delivery partners' own analysis suggests roughly half of pupils officially registered for free school meals do not declare this on UCAS applications, meaning reported eligibility figures likely understate true need.

Pressure on on-campus and in-school delivery

- *Reduced HE capacity to host campus events*. Since COVID, institutions have reduced staff availability for on-campus events, undermining the delivery of core activities, such as the campus experience for S4 pupils.
- *Acute teacher recruitment and retention problems in Moray and the Highlands*. This was specifically flagged as worse than in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire, compounding the general pattern of guidance staff turnover.
- *Limited high-demand profession provision in the Highlands*. Staffing capacity, combined with an extremely dispersed population, means that support for high-demand-professions is limited or absent across much of the Highlands. This can lead to the SHEP partner intervening informally (for example, running mock interviews for medicine and dentistry applicants) without a funded remit to do so.
- *Online delivery does not replace in-person trust-building*. Online engagement, while necessary for remote and island pupils, does not build the same rapport between pupils and delivery partners. This is compounded by pupils often disengaging from email-based contact.

Coordination

- *Overlapping services.* Connections between SHEP and Robert Gordon University's in-school hub presence are managed well through close personal working relationships. There are still instances of genuine overlap and duplication (for example, parallel UCAS sessions) where the two organisations' models do not naturally align.
- *DYW messaging sometimes marginalises higher education.* A strong push by DYW in some schools toward employment pathways and apprenticeships can weaken or override messaging about higher education as a progression route, even though both DYW and NSP are generally collaborative.

North region-specific strengths

Delivery leads valued how ACES funding is supplemented by in-kind support across other widening-access work; the strong, collaborative working relationships between Robert Gordon University, Aspire North and the University of Aberdeen, which keep duplication low despite overlapping activity; and the depth of relationship-building achieved through repeated in-person contact with island and rural schools despite the cost of sustaining this.

South-East

The South-East's barriers are more structural than geographical. Of the four regions, it shows the clearest picture of NSP strands built on genuinely different eligibility logics within the same area. This is partly because some of the funding for the SHEP delivery partner (LEAPS) comes from local authorities rather than the SFC alone, unlike for Reach and ACES. Data management complexity is particularly acute. The Scottish Borders have very few SIMD Q1 and Q2 postcodes, despite delivery leads indicating they contain genuinely disadvantaged communities, illustrating the limitations of SIMD as an eligibility measure.

Two different eligibility logics in the same region

- *Whole school versus individual targeting.* LEAPS works with target schools where every pupil is eligible for support. In contrast, Reach and ACES apply the NSP individual pupil eligibility criteria. The result is that some young people receiving SHEP support are not eligible for Reach or ACES, which can be difficult for the young person involved to understand.

- *NSP eligibility does not guarantee a contextual offer in all cases*. Delivery leads perceive some universities and courses to be more likely to provide Reach participants with a contextual adjustment, whereas others, including some that are NSP partners in the South-East, assess individual circumstances against their own contextual admissions policy. As consequence, applicants who have completed Reach believing it to provide automatic adjustment query why they are not receiving the same concession everywhere. This leads to difficult conversations between pupils and delivery leads.
- *Pupils falling through the gaps*. Young people in relatively rural areas, particularly parts of the Scottish Borders, often do not register as a priority, even though they face real and specific barriers, such as distance from cities, transport costs, and limited access to work experience or cultural and extracurricular opportunities, which their more urban peers can access.

Scale, boundaries and coordination

- *A large school footprint with awkward boundaries*. Delivering consistently across more than 70 schools, spanning Edinburgh, the Borders and Stirling, creates coordination difficulties, particularly when several schools require visits simultaneously. Some schools sit administratively in one NSP region while being geographically closer to a different region's delivery lead.
- *Limited structured collaboration among SHEP providers*. There is no formal joint working structure among SHEP providers across all regions, even though young people's university interests frequently extend beyond their assigned NSP region, particularly towards Edinburgh's institutions, which may complicate support planning.
- *Remote pupils still face access barriers despite a relatively well-connected core*. Pupils in the Borders cannot easily attend in-person events or secure work experience, and online support, while helpful, cannot fully substitute for in-person support and opportunities.

Costs of university hosting

- *Inflexible pay structures*. University pay-increment structures are contractually fixed and must be honoured, forcing cuts elsewhere in the budget to absorb them.
- *University hosting brings real overheads*. SHEP partner hosting within a university confers kudos, stability and access to institutional resources, but also brings burdensome processes. For example, mandatory four-year laptop

replacement cycles, governed by procurement rules, add cost compared to the flexibility available to independent providers.

Data and reporting

- *Heavy data-sharing burden.* LEAPS must maintain data-sharing agreements with eight local authorities as well as Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Government, a slow and bureaucratic process that absorbs significant staff time.
- *A history predating the national reporting framework.* Much LEAPS activity predates the formal NSP structure, which complicates compliance with newer national reporting expectations.

South-East region-specific strengths

Delivery leads pointed to the strong, long-standing working relationship between the University of Edinburgh and LEAPS as a model of effective joint working despite differing eligibility rules; the value of treating a pupil's informed decision that a high-demand profession is not right for them as a genuine programme success; and the benefits, where funding allows, of full contextual admissions adjustments for Reach participants.



West

The primary barrier is scale, as the West region covers a large territory, spanning 13 local authorities and around 160 secondary schools. This represents almost half of all secondary schools in Scotland. It is the most population-diverse of the four regions, combining the country's most concentrated areas of urban deprivation with some of its most remote rural and island communities.

Population scale and capacity

- *Scale and delivery capacity constraints*. There are limited core staffing resources to deliver activities at the scale required in the West, and core staff are supplemented by 80 to 90 paid tutors to make delivery possible at all. Heavy reliance on a large casual tutor workforce creates an operating model that is efficient but fragile.
- *ACES is operating at capacity*. This results in the need to maintain waiting lists and cross-subsidise activity for additional young people using other funding streams or programmes.

Social and cultural barriers in areas of concentrated deprivation

- *High concentrations of poverty and historically low progression to further study*. A substantial volume of young people live in deep poverty in parts of Glasgow, with a local culture not inclined towards further or higher study. This group requires more intense support, placing additional demand on capacity.
- *Debt aversion and stigma despite free tuition*. Low community expectations about university, limited family knowledge of higher education, peer pressure, and a fear of debt arising from further study rather than working deter even highly able pupils from applying, despite the absence of tuition fees in Scotland.
- *Historical scepticism among schools and local authorities*. Some schools in the West were historically doubtful that universities would genuinely support their pupils into degrees such as medicine. This scepticism has eased only as schools have seen direct evidence of pupil success over time, but it remains part of the delivery context for NSP in the region.

Geographical scale and boundaries

- *Long, multi-stage journeys for rural pupils*. Pupils attending on-campus activities have been required to travel from as early as 5 am to late evening using multiple buses, a barrier serious enough to deter even highly motivated individuals.



- *Online delivery may blur geographic boundaries*. Online offers developed to reach rural and remote communities in the West can attract interest from pupils outside the region. This could be perceived as "poaching" students from other NSP regions, even though it may be acknowledged that a young person's interest and access should take priority over administrative boundaries.
- *Boundaries that do not match real access patterns*. NSP regional boundaries sometimes sit awkwardly with practical reality. For example, a pupil living between Perth and Glasgow whose parent commutes to Glasgow may find it easier to reach Glasgow than to travel to a geographically "correct" but practically less accessible delivery partner institution.

West region-specific strengths

Delivery leads valued the breadth of GSA's funnel-style, multi-year model running from S4 through to S6 with a strong emphasis on independent creative practice; the cohort and community-building effect of bringing together pupils from different schools who might otherwise feel isolated in small creative subject classes; and the trust and credibility FOCUS West has built with schools over a long period, which its director described as giving the programme "a fair wind" to build on.

Features of NSP delivery that should be retained

In addition to being asked about barriers, interviewees were invited to explain which aspects of the NSP were most successful and should be retained. Those that emerged were reported consistently across all regions. This section summarises the main success factors identified.

Programme impartiality

The provision of balanced, honest guidance to support participants in making informed choices about post-school destinations was the most universally and strongly identified success factor. This quality distinguishes the NSP from university marketing – meaning it is trusted by young people, families, and schools – and enables honest conversations about whether a particular course or career is right for an individual. Any drift towards using the NSP as a university recruitment channel would fundamentally undermine the programme's value. NSP must explicitly protect this impartiality principle in any redesigned programme framework.

Face-to-face, relationship-based delivery

Sustained, in-person relationships between programme staff and young people are vital. These relationships, built before any specific guidance is offered, create the trust required for young people to be honest about their circumstances, accept challenge, and take risks. Online delivery was consistently described as insufficient to replicate this. It is regarded as useful for information-sharing but cannot substitute for the developmental quality of in-person contact. SHEP providers highlighted that relationships and trust-building must begin early, for example through introductory soft skills activities with S3 pupils, and before specific content related to higher education is introduced.

On-campus and residential experiences

Every interview identified campus visits and residential experiences as the single highest-impact NSP activity. NSP delivery partners believe that for young people who have never visited a university or never left their local area, and whose families have no higher education experience, being on campus, and particularly spending a night away, changes their sense of what is possible for them in ways that no amount of online or in-school outreach can replicate. These are also the activities most threatened by rising transport and catering costs, and all interviewees indicated that protecting them should be an explicit funding priority.

Longitudinal support

Across widening participation more generally, the programmes with the strongest impact are regarded as those offering continuous support, with tailored interventions at each stage. For NSP, early engagement in S4 builds aspirations and inspiration; targeted support at S5 and S6 develops academic and career preparation and supports university application. Practitioners widely regard single year or one-off interventions to be less effective than longitudinal models that follow best practice. Longitudinal models require funding and performance frameworks that acknowledge and reward depth of engagement over participant volume.

Peer community and student ambassadors

All NSP strands are at their most powerful when they create a community of peers with shared backgrounds and aspirations. Many participants are the only person in their school considering medicine, law, creative higher education, or any higher education course at all. Bringing them together with others who share their interests, and with university student ambassadors from similar backgrounds who have succeeded, was consistently described as transformational for confidence and persistence. Interactions between pupils and student ambassadors remain cost-effective, despite increases in ambassador costs, and should be maintained.

Contextual admissions linked to programme participation

Where programme participation is linked to meaningful, portable contextual admissions adjustments, the impact of the NSP can be multiplied. For some delivery leads, this includes credit-rated bridging programmes with results recognised across Scottish universities. LEAPS Transitions and FOCUS West's progression agreements send results to all Scottish universities and enable grade adjustments conditional on programme completion. Their national recognition could serve as a basis for exploring portability and universal recognition in relation to contextual admissions more generally.

Integrated regional delivery

The overall NSP offer is more coherent, efficient, and effective in regions where SHEP, Reach, and ACES work together through joint events, cross-programme referral, and shared relationship management with schools. A regional collaborative approach should be actively coordinated by NSP, rather than left to depend on the initiative of individual delivery partners.

Conclusions from interviews

The interviews revealed that **delivery partners view NSP to have genuine and substantial strengths**. Notably, these include deep practitioner commitment, long-term relationships with schools, transformational experiences, and clear evidence of impact. These strengths depend on stable staffing, sustained funding, and a degree of freedom to deliver in ways appropriate to local context.

The overarching challenge identified is that **the four NSP regions face different barriers, some of which can only be addressed locally**. The North's main challenge is geographical reach, combined with the limitations of SIMD in rural settings. The West's main challenge is the combination of scale and urban deprivation. Although they have the strongest school coverage, the South-East experiences eligibility misalignment across individual strands, as LEAPS targets whole schools, whereas Reach and ACES target individual pupils. This requires clear, careful messaging that is understood by pupils and teachers alike. It is coupled with data-sharing complexity. Fife & Tayside's primary challenges are limited teacher and school capacity and cultural barriers to higher education encountered in Dundee City.

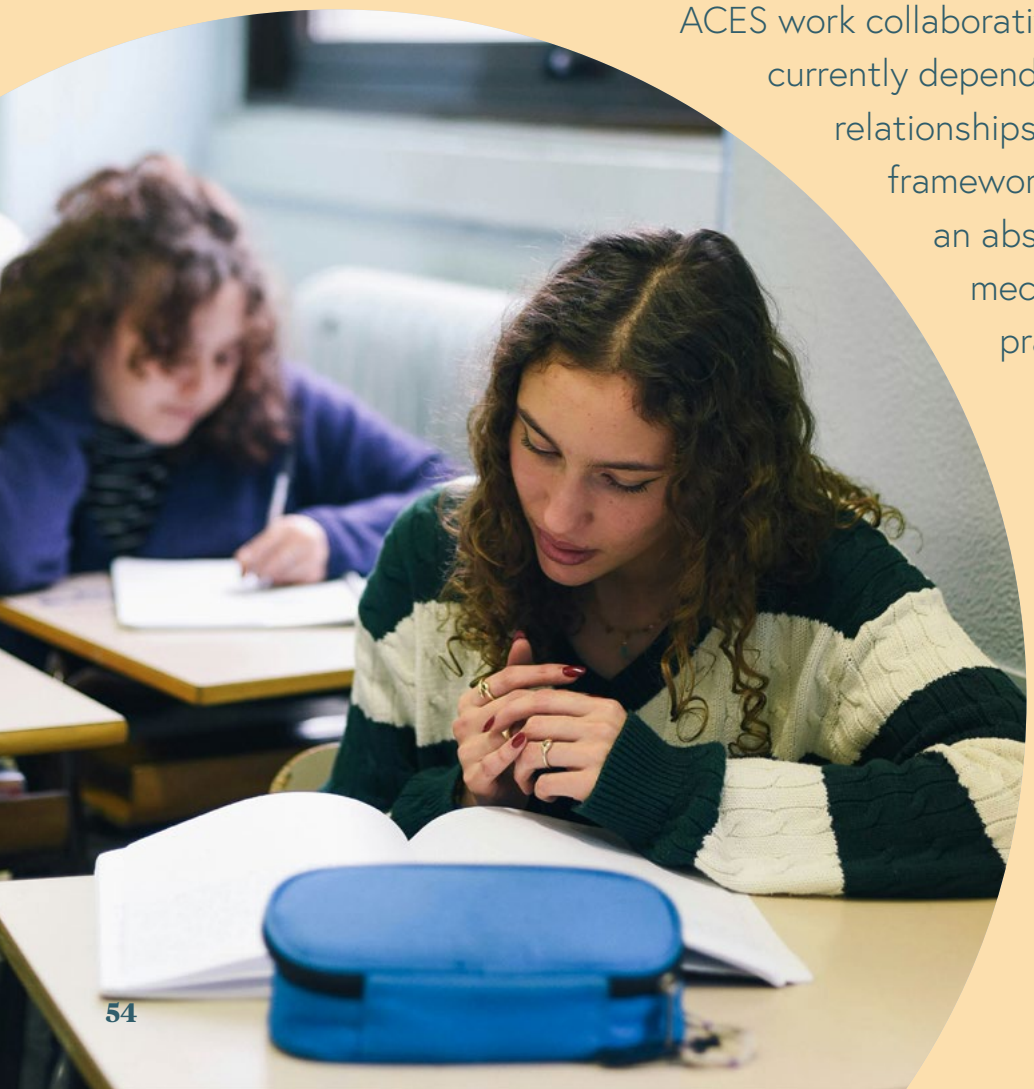
Regional differences have consequences for funding, staffing, delivery models, and performance expectations. **The funding framework may be more effective if it takes greater account of regional structural and geographical differences**, helping to ensure resources are aligned with varying delivery costs and local needs. Similarly, if feasible, a performance framework that recognises structural and regional differences would provide a more balanced assessment of programme effectiveness, particularly where some populations require more intensive support to achieve comparable outcomes.

The NSP review in 2024 identified the need for improved evaluation. However, the foundation of any improved evaluation, **the ability to track individual participants across the system, does not currently exist**. Without a national student identifier, the outcome data is incomplete, vulnerable to double counting, and unable to capture indirect pathways to university, such as a college-first entry route. This limits the scope for valid inter-regional comparison and hinders tracking of ultimate destinations.

Young people can find NSP eligibility criteria and contextual admissions policies confusing and inconsistent. A pupil in Aberdeenshire may qualify for Aspire North but not for a contextual offer from most Scottish universities because university admissions policies do not formally consider their rurality or remoteness from opportunities. A pupil in the South-East may be in a LEAPS target school, where they receive support, but not meet Reach's individual pupil NSP criteria. A pupil that Reach has supported at a particular university may not be recognised for a contextual offer from that university, but could be automatically recognised by another. These inconsistencies undermine trust and potentially deter participation.

Across all programme strands and regions, partners highlighted that the combination of **flat funding and annual funding cycles threatens to limit delivery**. Significant cost inflation has resulted in real-term resources being materially lower than in 2018. Annual funding cycles compound this problem, as the time and management resource consumed by annual bidding rounds is a direct deduction from programme delivery.

Cross-region and cross-strand learning is an underexploited opportunity. Delivery leads across the regions observed that the overall NSP offer is more coherent and effective where SHEP, Reach, and ACES work collaboratively, but that this currently depends on individual working relationships rather than a structured framework. They also highlighted an absence of formal mechanisms for sharing practice across regions.



Discussion

This discussion draws together the quantitative regional mapping ('data mapping') and the qualitative findings from delivery partner interviews ('interviews'). Where findings originate from a specific source, this is mentioned. It should be noted that the mapping is based on data from the 2023-24 academic year, while the interview data was obtained in 2026, reflecting a different point in time. The limitations of both evidence sources are addressed in the Limitations section.

The discussion themes are structured around the two research questions the study set out to address: regional needs and differences relevant to NSP, and regional gaps and opportunities.

Regional variation

The data mapping and the interviews independently point to the same conclusion: the four NSP regions are not variations on a single delivery context, but four distinct operating environments, each defined by a different combination of population size, geography and eligibility factors.

Population size and distribution

The four regions vary in the size of their eligible pupil population, and this difference forms the basis for understanding everything else in the discussion. Data mapping shows that in 2023-24 the West had almost half of Scotland's S4–S6 pupils (46.5%) and accounted for 72.6% of the national total of NSP supported pupils. The South-East had the second largest S4-S6 population (23.7% of S4-S6, accounting for approximately 19.7% of the national supported pupil total). Whereas the North (15.8% of S4-S6 pupils, 4.9% of the national supported pupil total) and Fife & Tayside (14.0% of pupils, 2.8% of the national supported pupil total) have much smaller populations.

Interview evidence explains why this size differential matters operationally. In the West, scale itself is the main barrier, despite the region reaching the highest proportion of its own pupils (56.9%) of any region. Here, a large eligible population does not translate into an easier delivery task, but creates challenges of capacity and reach across a large area. At the opposite end of the scale, Fife & Tayside supports the smallest proportion of its own pupils (7.4%), and interviews suggest

this is influenced by limited staffing relative to the number of schools, rather than by a lack of need.

Geography

Geography is the clearest point of alignment between the two evidence sources. It also shows that 'rurality' is not a single type of challenge, with the contrast between the North and the West being the clearest illustration. It is also important to distinguish between rurality as an operational delivery challenge, affecting travel, staffing, and costs, and rurality as a proxy for disadvantage, which the evidence supports only in specific and limited ways, as discussed below.

Data mapping shows that the North has both the lowest proportion of pupils living in urban areas (39.4%, compared with a Scottish national figure of 68.8%) and the highest combined proportion living in remote and very remote areas (29.8%). This was reflected in interview evidence describing delivery that requires multi-hour journeys, travel by air and sea, and the fixed cost of maintaining two regional SHEP offices (Aberdeen and Inverness) just to be accessible. The exact nature of the North's remoteness varies across its constituent local authorities, from urban Aberdeen to suburban Aberdeenshire, the mixed makeup of Highland, and through to the highly rural Northern Isles, meaning the challenge is best understood as a compounding one: a smaller eligible population, spread across the most dispersed geography of any region, supported by proportionally the least engaged school base.

The West's geography presents a different type of challenge, as evidenced by both sources. Data mapping shows it combines the country's most concentrated pockets of urban deprivation, principally in Glasgow City, with genuinely remote and island communities in local authorities such as Argyll and Bute, where 33.1% of pupils live in Very Remote Small Towns and a further 37.9% in remote or very remote rural areas. Free school meal registration data shows that this rural part of the West is also comparatively deprived: 23.3% of pupils living in SIMD Q1 or Q2 in Argyll and Bute are registered for free school meals, a higher rate than in any of the North's most rural local authorities (16.5% in Highland, 11.9% in Orkney, and 7.8% in Na h-Eileanan Siar). The West's rural fringe, as described in interviews, combines remoteness with above-average deprivation in a way the North's rural areas generally do not. In practice, the region's delivery must simultaneously support concentrated urban poverty in Glasgow and a rural, ferry-dependent, comparatively deprived population in Argyll and Bute.



Given that in-person, relationship-based delivery is consistently identified in interviews as the format with the greatest impact, and for which online delivery is not regarded as an equivalent substitute, this contrast between rurality in the North and West has direct implications for delivery design. The West's combination of large-scale urban demand and a distinct, remote and deprived rural population implies a need for two different delivery formats within a single regional structure: a high-volume, capacity-constrained urban model and a resource-intensive rural outreach model. The North's more generally dispersed profile, by contrast, can reasonably be served by one dispersed-delivery model applied consistently across the region, provided it is resourced to reflect the true cost of reaching remote pupils wherever they live.

The South-East and Fife & Tayside sit between these two patterns. Both are predominantly urban overall, but each contains a distinct rural or semi-rural minority, namely the Scottish Borders in the South-East and Perthshire in Fife & Tayside, whose distance from the regional centre may be overlooked in aggregated regional data. Interview evidence for Fife & Tayside reveals an additional complication: the region appears compact on a map, but as indicated by data

mapping and interviews, bus journeys between towns in mid-Fife and Dundee can take one to two hours, so practical accessibility is more challenging than physical distance suggests.

Across all four regions, geography creates a similar challenge that an aggregate regional figure conceals a less visible minority. The shape of that challenge differs in each region: a single dominant challenge of remoteness in the North, a dual and contrasting geographic challenge in the West, and a less visible minority within otherwise well-connected centres in the South-East and Fife & Tayside.

Eligibility factors

The eligibility picture reinforces the same regional contrasts, while also showing where the current eligibility criteria fit well and less well. Data mapping shows that SIMD-based deprivation is concentrated very differently across the four regions: 50.0% of S4–S6 pupils in the West live in SIMD Q1 or Q2 data zones, compared with 19.4% in the North, where SIMD Q1 and Q2 data zones are comparatively scarce.

Interviews noted that SIMD is heavily concentrated in urban areas and therefore under-identifies disadvantaged young people in some rural and remote settings. This pattern is visible in the data mapping, where Aberdeenshire, for example, has a low proportion of pupils in SIMD Q1 or Q2 but a disproportionately high rate of free school meal registration among those pupils, which represents a concentrated, although numerically smaller, group eligible for support.

Data mapping adds a further dimension through attainment data, which cannot be disaggregated by NSP region, as only national data was supplied. Nationally, 22.0% of pupils in SIMD Q1 and 30.1% of those in SIMD Q2 achieve five or more National 5 passes compared with 63.2% in SIMD Q5. For attainment of two or more Highers, the respective proportions are 30.3%, 38.2% and 71.2%, confirming that deprivation and attainment are closely linked. It is reasonable to propose that lower-attaining, higher-deprivation pupils are among the groups most likely to benefit from targeted NSP support.

An urban / rural breakdown of attainment from the data mapping requires careful interpretation. Remote Small Towns have the lowest attainment of any geographic category at 28.8% for five or more National 5 passes, followed by Very Remote Small Towns at 34.8%. However, Accessible Rural Areas have the highest attainment at 44.3%, and Very Remote Rural Areas are the second-

highest performing group nationally, ahead of all urban categories, even though very remote rural pupils are the group most affected by travel challenges and remoteness from universities. This means the case for targeting pupils based on low attainment is strongest in Remote Small Towns specifically. Additionally, there are high-attaining pupils in Very Remote Rural Areas, concentrated in three North region local authorities, where attainment results suggest strong potential for progression to higher education, but where remoteness may present a genuine access barrier. Without pupil-level or region-level attainment data, it is not possible to compare regional attainment profiles definitively. These findings suggest Remote Small Towns, in particular, warrant attention in any review of eligibility criteria.

Data mapping shows that many pupils are eligible for NSP support through more than one criterion, for instance living in an area of high deprivation and being registered for free school meals. This overlap varies by region in ways that mirror the geographic contrasts described above. In the West, deprivation and free school meal registration reinforce each other most strongly (46.5% of SIMD Q1/Q2 pupils in Glasgow City are also registered for free school meals). At the same time, in parts of the North such as Aberdeenshire, a small overall SIMD Q1/Q2 population is disproportionately likely to be registered for free school meals once identified, pointing to concentrated, if numerically smaller, need.

Gaps

Schools not currently engaged

Data mapping shows that nationally, 63 of 364 schools (17.3%) were not supported by any strand of the NSP in 2023-24. The North has the highest rate of school non-engagement, as 29 of 82 schools (35.4%) were not engaged with any NSP strand. They are concentrated most heavily in one local authority, Highland, which has both the largest number of schools in the region and the largest number of non-engaged schools. SHEP has no engagement at all outside the Scottish mainland, and both Reach and ACES engage fewer than half of schools in the Northern Isles and Na h-Eileanan Siar. This proportion stands even after excluding three Junior High schools in the Orkney Islands that do not teach pupils past S3.

In the West, the non-engagement rate is much lower (15.5%, 25 of 161 schools) but is spread across nine local authorities, with Dumfries and Galloway and Argyll and Bute showing the lowest engagement in the region. Fife & Tayside sits between these two (11.1%, 5 of 45 schools not engaged), with non-engagement concentrated entirely in Perth and Kinross. The South-East shows by far the

strongest school-level coverage of any region (3.9%, 3 of 76 schools not engaged); the three non-engaged schools there are understood to be newly opened schools without a senior-phase cohort in 2023-24, rather than schools declining support.

This distribution corresponds almost exactly to the geography and staffing findings from both data mapping and interviews. There are non-engagement clusters where journey times are longest, and delivery staff are most thinly spread relative to school numbers, rather than where formal deprivation is lowest. Non-engagement is not solely a rural phenomenon, since the West's non-engaged schools are spread across a mix of rural and larger urban local authorities, indicating that capacity constraints, not geography alone, are also a factor. Within schools that are engaged, coverage is also uneven by strand: engagement with Reach and ACES lags behind SHEP in every region, suggesting gaps in access to high-demand profession support may exist even in schools with an active NSP presence.

Pupils currently unreached

A clear gap from combining data mapping and interviews concerns pupils who show evidence of genuine need or potential but fall outside current NSP eligibility criteria. Interviews indicated that rural and island pupils, particularly in the North and the Scottish Borders, as well as semi-remote areas, may face a remoteness-based need without meeting SIMD-based criteria. This group was reported in interviews to face barriers such as distance from cities and limited access to work experience. The fact that remoteness or rurality is not consistently recognised in university contextual admissions also limits the expected benefit of participation for such pupils.

Data mapping identified a specific group of high-attaining pupils in Very Remote Rural areas, concentrated in three North local authorities. These pupils may not meet deprivation-based eligibility criteria at all, but their remoteness alone constitutes a genuine barrier to accessing information about higher education, campus experience, and application support.

Asylum seeker and care experienced pupils may represent another gap that the data cannot validate. Data mapping shows that local authority figures for both groups are heavily suppressed due to small numbers. Outside the West, where these pupils are most concentrated, it is difficult to establish confidently whether coverage gaps exist for either group.

Regional priorities and opportunities



Gaps and priorities correspond to different, identifiable causes in each region. They also create some opportunities as discussed here.

In **Fife & Tayside**, the priority is structural and staffing-focused rather than geographical. Interview evidence suggests that additional staffing capacity relative to the number of schools would directly address the identified gaps. Because Dundee City's low engagement is cultural rather than access-related, delivery there would benefit from sustained, locally credible community engagement. Perth & Kinross engagement is affected by distance from the region's universities and the SHEP partner, as confirmed by interview evidence.

In the **North**, the priority is recognising that its challenge is not simply 'being more rural' but is about needing to be structurally different. Both data mapping and interviews support the need for funding that reflects the genuine, consistently high cost of geographic reach rather than population size alone, and a solution to the accommodation and travel barriers driving the region's high rate of school non-engagement, concentrated in Highland and the Northern Isles. The North presents an opportunity to test whether its socio-economically deprived rural pupils are being reached and benefit from NSP. This may require a revised definition of socioeconomic deprivation in rural areas, work that is already under consideration through the Eligibility Taskforce. Whilst outside NSP's remit to change independently, it is worth noting, based on interview evidence, that formal recognition of remoteness in university contextual admissions could be of substantial benefit in this region.

In the **South-East**, the priority is resolving structural inconsistency rather than expanding reach, since data mapping shows school-level coverage is already the strongest among the four regions. Interview evidence points to the need to reconcile LEAPS' whole-school eligibility model with Reach and ACES' individual-pupil criteria, which leads to eligibility confusion among young people and teachers that could affect individual participation. The region presents an opportunity to test, in a region with strong school coverage, any revised NSP national eligibility standard specifically for pupils that neither current SIMD-based nor whole-school eligibility criteria capture.

In the **West**, the priority is to protect and stabilise delivery, since data mapping shows the region is already the most engaged on almost every measure. Interview evidence highlights the need to address structural fragility, including the operational risk created by heavy reliance on a large casual workforce to achieve delivery at scale, and to recognise that ACES waiting lists indicate unmet demand. Given the contrast between concentrated urban deprivation in Glasgow City and a remote, comparatively deprived rural population in areas such as Argyll and Bute, as identified in data mapping and interviews, resourcing the region for two distinct delivery models could be tested.

Overall synthesis

When read together, the regional data mapping and the delivery interviews describe the same underlying geography of need from two different perspectives and two points in time. Where the data mapping shows a small, dispersed eligible population, the interviews show high per-pupil delivery costs and the highest rate of school non-engagement of any region, most clearly in the North. Where the data mapping shows a large, urban, deprived population, interviews report a well-engaged region under real capacity strain, most clearly in the West, which uniquely combines this urban picture with a remote, comparatively deprived rural fringe. In the South-East, where the data mapping shows a well-connected core, the interviews reveal misunderstanding among pupils and teachers due to perceived differences in eligibility for each NSP strand. And where the data shows comparatively modest overall deprivation, the interviews reveal specific challenges, such as school capacity and cultural attitudes about higher education in Dundee City, that data analysis of Fife & Tayside would not predict on its own.

The regional differences have implications at a national level. Because the differences described throughout this discussion are different in type, not just extent or scale, they suggest that the funding and assessment frameworks for NSP need to be genuinely capable of accounting for structural variations between regions.

Set against the research aims described at the start of this report, the findings from both data mapping and interviews address Recommendations 6a and 8e together rather than separately:

- In relation to Recommendation 6a, the regional data mapping and the delivery interviews show that eligible pupil population size, distribution, and geography do not vary along a single dimension across the four NSP regions. They combine differently in each region to produce distinct operating environments, from the North's relatively small, dispersed population and consistently high delivery costs to the West's combination of large-scale urban need and a separate, comparatively deprived rural fringe.
- In relation to Recommendation 8e, the research has identified gaps in coverage: 63 of 364 schools nationally, disproportionately concentrated in the North, were not engaged with any strand of the NSP in 2023-24. Specific groups of pupils, including those in Remote Small Towns with the lowest attainment nationally, and high-attaining pupils in very remote rural areas who may not meet SIMD criteria, risk falling outside eligibility criteria despite evidence of need. Because the research was scoped around regional and school-level engagement data, the coverage findings speak most directly to schools and pupils; assessing coverage gaps among HEIs, the third group named in Recommendation 8e, would require separate analysis of university data.

The consistent conclusion across both aims is that regional variation in the NSP is structural and that closing the gaps will require a regionally differentiated approach, as evidenced by this research.

Limitations

This research was designed to address the specific aims set out in the NSP review recommendations. The following limitations, some of which have been mentioned earlier in this report, are relevant to how the findings should be interpreted.

Data mapping limitations

Single academic year snapshot. The data mapping covers the academic year 2023-24 only and cannot account for year-on-year trends or changes still being felt during the period of recovery from COVID-19 disruption. Schools recorded as not engaged in 2023-24 may have been engaged in previous or subsequent years. Longitudinal engagement data would provide a more complete picture.

Aggregated data and no pupil-level tracking. Most of the data was provided in aggregated form at the school or local authority levels. It is not possible to identify individual pupil journeys, verify whether the same pupil is counted across multiple programme strands, or assess whether supported pupils subsequently progress to higher education. This limits the ability to estimate true programme reach and to detect double counting.

Attainment data at national level only. Only national attainment data was provided and could not be disaggregated by NSP region, local authority, or school. It is therefore not possible to compare regional attainment profiles directly, and findings about the relationship between rurality type and attainment cannot be confirmed at the level of individual regions or local authorities.

Free school meal data limited to SIMD Q1 and Q2. Free school meal registration figures from the data supplied by SFC cover only pupils in SIMD Q1 and Q2. Estimates for the full pupil population across all quintiles are approximations calculated using secondary sources and should be treated as indicative. There may be pupils in higher SIMD quintiles who are registered for free school meals and who would meet NSP eligibility criteria.

Variable definitions of 'engagement'. Different delivery partners apply different definitions of what constitutes engagement for both schools and pupils. A school recorded as engaged may reflect a sustained partnership or a single interaction in the reporting year. This limits direct comparability across regions and strands and means school engagement should be understood as a proxy for, rather than a precise measure of, pupil coverage.



Suppressed data for specific groups. Local authority data on asylum seekers and care experienced pupils is heavily suppressed due to small numbers.

Interview limitations

Small sample reflecting practitioner perspectives only. Findings are based on 12 semi-structured interviews with NSP delivery leads, covering all four regions and all three strands. This reflects practitioners' operational experience and assessment of barriers, which is appropriate to the research aims. However, it does not capture the perspectives of pupils, guidance teachers, schools, or local authorities, and cannot be assumed to represent all views within any one programme or region.

Time lag between data and interviews. The mapping data is from 2023-24, while interviews were conducted in early 2026. Changes in staffing, funding, other widening participation activities, and the wider post-COVID recovery context in the intervening period mean the two evidence sources reflect different moments in time.

Scope does not extend to gaps in HEI engagement. The research scope was regional and school-level engagement data and practitioner interviews with NSP delivery leads. It does not systematically address gaps in HEI engagement, the third group named in Recommendation 8e of the NSP review. A separate analysis of university-level data would be required to address this element of the recommendation fully.

Considerations for SFC from the Research

All suggestions that emerged from this study are described here for completeness, with the acknowledgement that some are already part of the NSP review implementation plan and are in progress, for example through the work of the Evaluation Framework and Eligibility Taskforces. The suggestions are presented as considerations for SFC in three categories:

- Data and definitions
- Programme and funding structure
- Future research opportunities



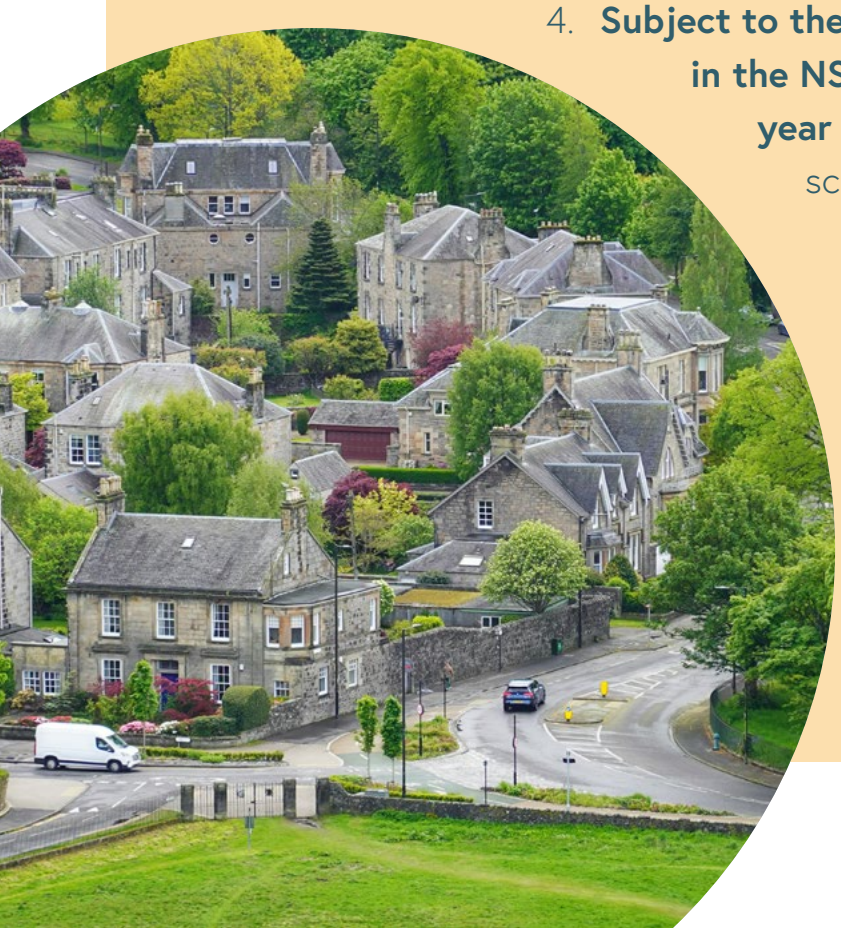
Data and Definitions

1. **Capture school SEED (Scottish Exchange of Educational Data) codes alongside UPRNs (Unique Property Reference Numbers)** when collecting data on school engagement. This will enable SFC to link programme data with publicly available datasets and data that can be requested from government bodies (for example, inspection ratings, attainment and progression data, and school demographics).
2. **Develop and agree standardised definitions of 'engaged' for both schools and pupils**. This would enable direct comparison across different regions, schools, and reports. Use the existing reporting process (ROSI returns and meetings) in conjunction with SEED number to identify gaps in engagement and, if possible, reasons for those gaps.
3. **Fund the development of a national NSP data infrastructure as a separate capital investment** rather than expecting it to be absorbed from programme delivery budgets. This should include a national student identifier or agreed cross-partner use of the Scottish Candidate Number, standardised reporting frameworks aligned with actual programme cycles, and data-sharing protocols across NSP delivery partners. A national student identifier or similar would have the added benefit of enabling tracking of both direct and indirect progression to university, thereby demonstrating NSP's longitudinal impact. The current reporting return should be reviewed and revised in consultation with all delivery leads to ensure it reflects the full range and timeline of NSP activity.
4. **If mapping exercises like this are repeated in the future, explore NSP engagement data across multiple years**. The data used in this report provides a snapshot of a single academic year but does not account for schools that NSP supported in prior or subsequent years. Additionally, future research should request data on free school meal registrations for all SIMD quintiles, not just Q1 and Q2.



Programme and Funding Structure

1. **Continue the work already underway on the feasibility of introducing a universal national eligibility standard for NSP,** as recommended in the NSP review. For example, this could combine SIMD and free school meal registration with specific elements of remoteness as recognised national indicators of need. NSP partner universities could be required to recognise the same baseline standards in their contextual admissions policies. Regional programmes should retain flexibility to add locally appropriate supplementary criteria.
2. **Examine the feasibility of NSP requiring all partner universities to adopt contextual admissions criteria aligned to any new national eligibility standard for NSP.** This would minimise the potential for confusion among pupils and schools about participation outcomes.
3. **Explore the option of a ringfenced budget line within NSP funding allocations for transport, catering, and residential activities, so that funding to support pupil access is protected.** These elements are a fundamental part of the equity infrastructure that enables young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to access on-campus and residential experiences. Without this protection, rising costs will erode the experiential model for pupils.
4. **Subject to the outcome of recommendation 8 in the NSP review, transition to a three-year NSP funding cycle,** aligning with school years S4 to S6 and replacing annual bidding rounds. Any transition to multi-year funding should be accompanied by a one-off review of base funding levels to account for the real-term decline since 2018.





Future Research Opportunities

1. **Explore the relationship between remoteness and educational disadvantage as it applies specifically to NSP eligibility and delivery**. The current research shows that SIMD under-identifies disadvantage in some remote and rural settings, and that Remote Small Towns have the lowest attainment of any geographic category nationally. However, the research does not establish whether remoteness independently constitutes a barrier to participation in higher education in ways distinct from socioeconomic deprivation. Research specifically designed to address this question, including whether and how a rural or remoteness eligibility marker should be defined, measured, and weighted in NSP criteria, would provide a stronger evidence base for decisions currently being considered through the Eligibility Taskforce.
2. **Mapping NSP's position in the widening participation landscape within each region**, including how it complements or overlaps with other provision, would provide additional insights about the regional delivery context. Complementing this with research on the perspectives of pupils, guidance teachers, schools, or local authorities would provide a wider perspective on each region, including regional barriers and challenges.
3. **Monitoring engagement with schools over multiple years** would enable SFC and delivery partners to develop a clear understanding of whether schools are persistently not engaged or whether non-engagement is a one-off occurrence.
4. **Research into best practice among delivery partners** would provide an opportunity to share learning and experiences across regions and programme strands, responding to delivery leads' consistent identification of cross-regional coordination as an underexploited opportunity.



Who are The Charity Spark?

The Charity Spark is a purpose-led organisation specialising in inclusive evaluation, research, strategic development, and targeted fundraising. We support charities and non-profit organisations to increase their impact, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability.

Our work has informed government policy through presentations to All-Party Parliamentary Groups and has helped a wide range of clients demonstrate impact, secure additional funding, and drive organisational and programme-level change.

We take a tailored approach to every contract, developing bespoke delivery plans informed by our experience of similar programmes, sector best practice, and the extensive combined expertise of our team.



Our team for this work was:
Daniel Pledger, Senior Research and Evaluation Consultant
Sarah Jenkins, Research and Evaluation Consultant
Rebecca Denny, Director

The Charity Spark

www.thecharityspark.co.uk



The Charity Spark

www.thecharityspark.co.uk