Secondary School Choice in England

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Executive Summary

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- School quality is a key driver of pupils' later educational outcomes so it is important to understand the process by which parents choose schools
- This report uses new national data on parental preferences to provide insights on how parents choose secondary schools and the outcomes of those choices
- We consider the number of schools that parents apply to, the quality of those schools (based on their Ofsted rating as a proxy) and who is successful in getting their first preference. We look at these descriptive statistics for different demographic groups and in different areas to assess whether school choice works better for some than others
- **There is clear variation in how parents choose secondary schools and who is offered their most preferred school by geography, ethnicity and to a lesser extent, Pupil Premium eligibility**

Key Findings

Number of Applications

- Nationally **one-third of parents apply to only one school**, with **nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of parents stating fewer preferences than the maximum allowed** by their local authority
- There are marked differences between local authorities: **the proportion of parents stating only one preference is highest in Northumberland (83 per cent), Central Bedfordshire (75 per cent) and East Riding of Yorkshire (74 per cent) and lowest in Lambeth (7 per cent), Wandsworth (7 per cent) and Hackney (8 per cent)**
- Some parents are more likely than others to apply to only one school: **white British families, those with English as their first language and parents of children with low prior attainment are more likely to express a preference for just one school**

Ofsted rating of First Preference School

- **One-in-six parents (17 per cent) nominate a most preferred school that is rated less than good** by Ofsted – and **of these, over a quarter (27 per cent) do so despite having a good or outstanding school as their *nearest* school**
- **Parents who are eligible for the Pupil Premium are much more likely than others to be in this group** who bypass their good local school for a less good one further away

Executive Summary

Likelihood of being offered First Preference School

- Success rates are high nationally: **84 per cent of parents are offered their most preferred school** and **95 per cent get an offer from one of their top three preferences;** but as with the number of preferences, there are stark geographic differences

- **Virtually all parents in some areas – such as Northumberland (99 per cent), Central Bedfordshire (99 per cent) and Cornwall (98 per cent) – are offered their top preference school,** so applying to just one school in these (typically rural) areas is low risk

- At the other extreme, **parents are much less likely to be offered their first preference in the London authorities of Hammersmith and Fulham** (53 per cent), **Westminster** (54 per cent) **and Lambeth** (58 per cent). Of the 20 local authorities with the lowest likelihood of being offered first preference, 19 are in London – with the exception being Birmingham (69 per cent)

- **5 per cent of parents miss out on *all of their top three* preferences nationally** but there are 24 local authorities where this share is at least 10 per cent*. The highest prevalence is in Hammersmith and Fulham, where one quarter of parents miss out on their top three, followed by 19 per cent of parents in Westminster and 17 per cent in Kensington and Chelsea. 18 of the 24 local authorities are in London - the rest comprise Thurrock (12 per cent), Birmingham (12 per cent), Bradford (11 per cent), Gateshead (11 per cent) North Tyneside (11 per cent) and Slough (10 per cent)

- 90 per cent of **white British parents are offered their most preferred school compared to only 66 per cent of black parents**; by contrast **there are only modest differences in success rates by Pupil Premium eligibility.** However these raw gaps can be misleading as they fail to take into account factors like school quality or local context. As a simple way to address this we focus on just those parents whose most preferred school is *good or outstanding* and who *live in London*

Likelihood of being offered First Preference School for London Parents Applying to Good or Outstanding Schools

- Among parents in London who apply to good or outstanding schools as their first preference (as a simple way to account for population density and school quality) we find:
  - **White British families are 4 percentage points *less likely* than black parents to apply to a good school yet when they do so they are 19 percentage points *more likely* to be offered their first preference school**
  - **Parents of children with low prior attainment are 3 percentage points *less likely* to apply to a good school** than those achieving the expected standards at key stage 2 **yet when they do so they are 3 percentage points *more likely* to be offered their first preference school**
  - **Families eligible for the Pupil Premium are 2 percentage points *less likely* to apply to a good school** than non-Pupil Premium families **yet even when they do so, they remain 3 percentage points *less likely* to be offered their first preference school**

- It is not clear from this first look at the data whether and to what extent these stark ethnic gaps are replicated elsewhere in the country and what is driving these. We are planning further research over the next two years on the role of parental preferences and admissions in unequal access to good schools, including for primary schools

* These are Hammersmith and Fulham (25%), Westminster (19%), Kensington and Chelsea (17%), Lewisham (16%), Ealing (15%), Hounslow (15%), Southwark (14%), Brent (14%), Lambeth (14%), Greenwich (14%), Wandsworth (14%), Richmond upon Thames (13%), Barking and Dagenham (13%), Thurrock (12%), Birmingham (12%), Barnet (12%), Merton (11%), Redbridge (11%), Bradford (11%), Gateshead (11%), North Tyneside (11%), Slough (10%), Harrow (10%) and Bromley (10%)

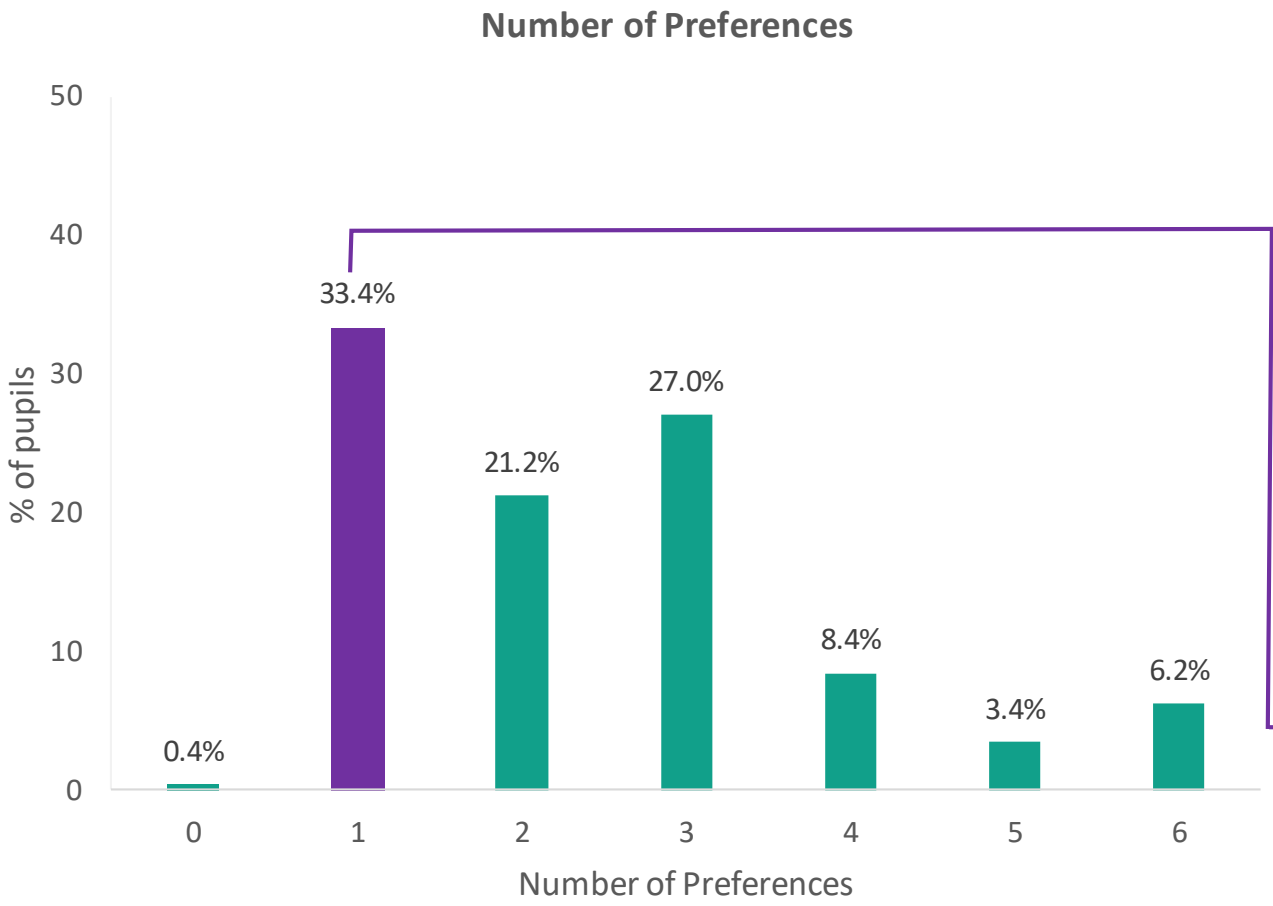
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Data

- **We use a newly-available national census of the preferences stated by all parents applying for a place at an English state secondary school for entry in September 2016**
- This contains for each child a list of up to six schools that parents rank in order of preference. These are submitted by parents to their local authority who then allocate children to schools based on these preferences and the availability of places at schools
- Children are allocated to their parents' most preferred school but where schools are oversubscribed, local authorities use a set of published school prioritisation criteria – for further details of the school admissions process, see Weldon (2018)
- **We link preferences data to pupils' characteristics** using their spring census records for 2016/17. This allows us to consider whether school choice operates differently for different groups – such as by family income (based on Pupil Premium eligibility), ethnicity, first language and prior attainment (based on the pupil's Key Stage 2 performance at age 11)
- Our linked preferences to pupil-level dataset contains over half a million pupils. This is a very large, rich sample of all pupils who make a choice through the centralised admissions system and subsequently enter the state secondary sector. This will include some pupils with a statement of special educational needs or an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan, though many secure a place outside of this process as they have a legal right to request a particular school
- The dataset will not capture pupils who enter state schools through other routes or who do not subsequently enter state schools
- **We also link the preferences data to rich school-level characteristics** for the schools that parents are applying to, the schools that parents receive an offer from and their nearest school
- This includes Ofsted data, GCSE performance data (from DfE performance tables), school-level demographic data (from the DfE school census) and DfE capacity data
- Of particular interest is **whether some groups of parents are served poorly by school choice by systematically missing out on a good school, even when they apply to it**

How many preferences do parents state when applying to schools?



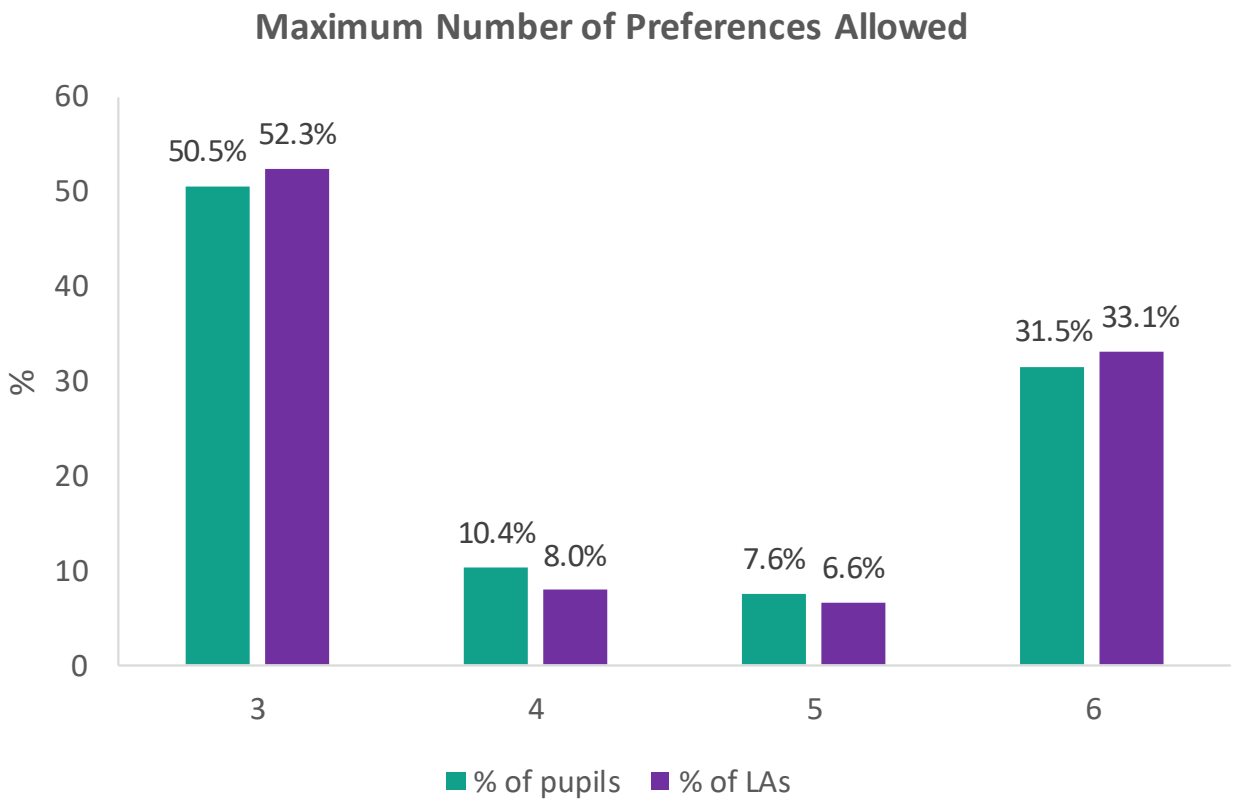
- Parents submit a set of preferences for schools to their local authority. The number of choices they can express varies by local authority but it is at least three and at most six
- **One third of parents (183,000) express only one preference** - this is the most common response
- Only a tiny minority (0.4 per cent or 2,000 parents) submit no preference at all*
- In contrast nearly one-fifth of parents (18 per cent) express at least four preferences, with 6 per cent stating the maximum of six preferences

- Stating only one choice of school could mean parents are highly confident of getting into their preferred school
- However it may also reflect a misunderstanding about how the admissions process actually works or simply a lack of engagement with it
- Unless parents are genuinely indifferent between all other schools, it is risky to leave 'unfilled slots'. Parents who do not get into their most preferred school will typically be allocated to the nearest school with capacity, after the preferences of all other parents have been considered
- Given that the number of schools that parents apply to is closely linked to the local schools that are available, in slide 8 we consider how the share applying to just one school varies between local authorities

N= 547,479

* Parents stating zero preferences comprise those who are captured in the 2016 Preferences data but do not state any preference

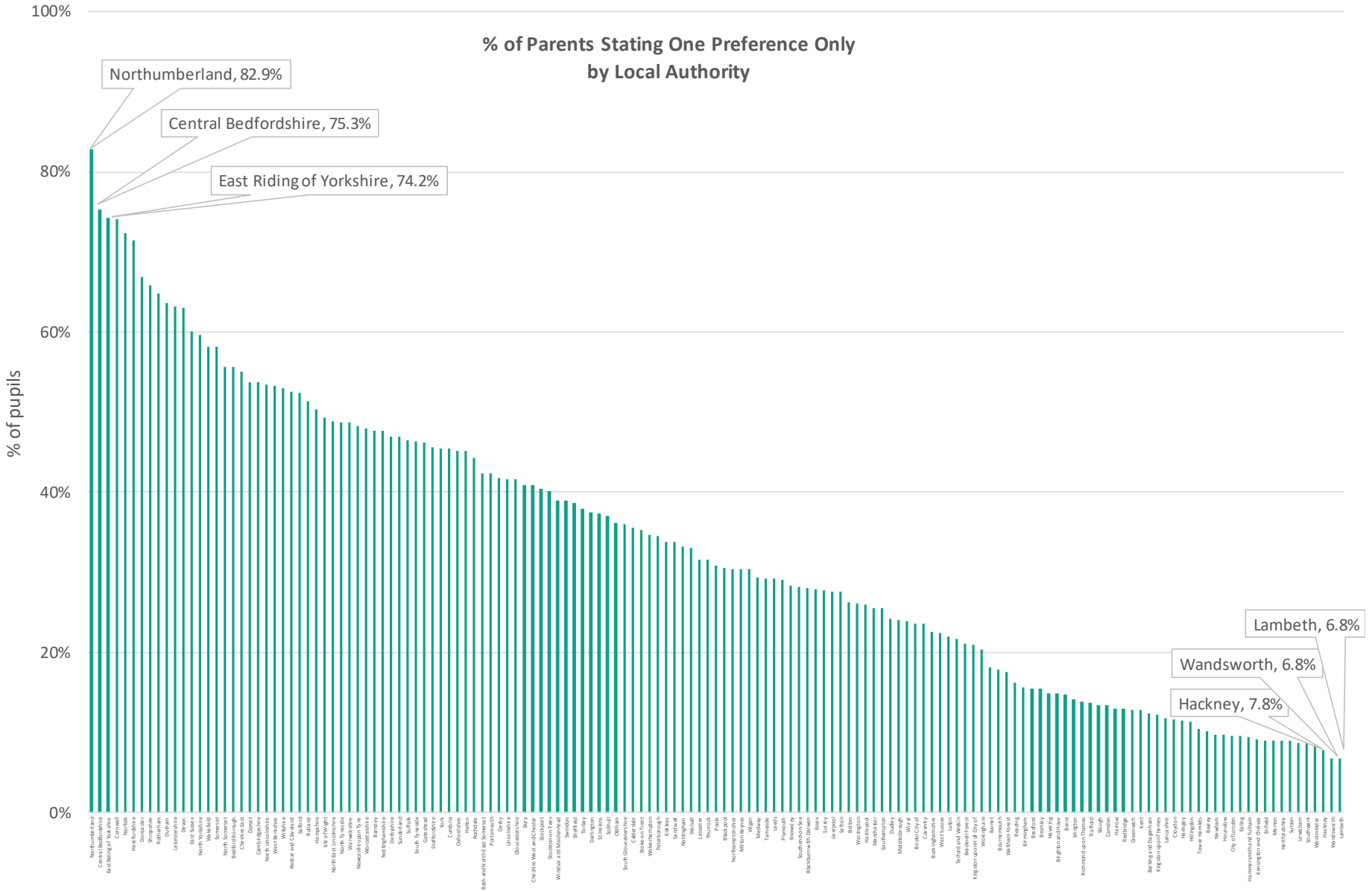
How does this compare to the maximum number of preferences allowed?



- Local authorities vary in the maximum number of preferences that they allow parents to submit when applying to schools
- **Just over half (52 per cent) of local authorities cap the number of preferences at three**
- **One third (33 per cent) of local authorities allow a maximum number of six preferences**. These include all London local authorities
- Comparing the number of preferences that parents state (in the previous slide) to the maximum allowed shows that **over half of parents (54.6 per cent) submit 2 or fewer preferences despite at least three being available to all parents**
- In fact **nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of parents state fewer preferences than the maximum allowed by their local authority**

N= 547,479

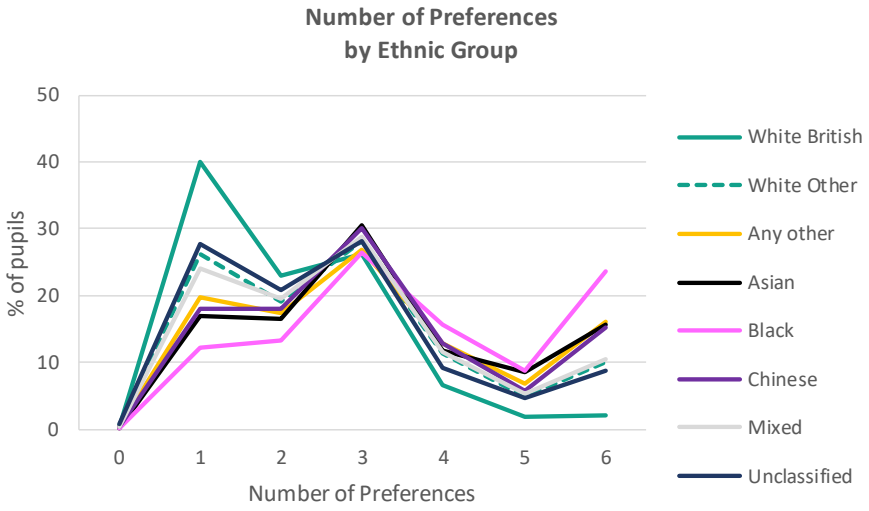
Where are parents most and least likely to state only one choice of school?

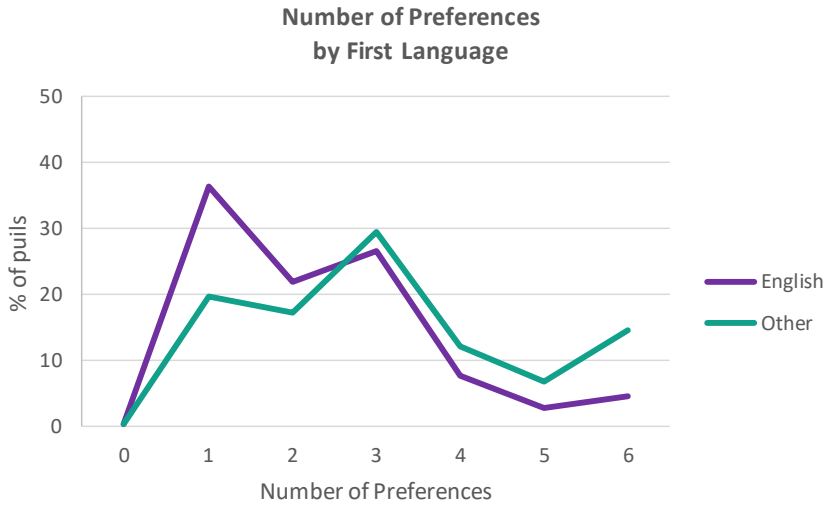


- Parents living in some parts of the country are more likely to express a preference for just one school. The **three local authorities where parents are most likely to state only one preference are Northumberland** (83 per cent), **Central Bedfordshire** (75 per cent) **and East Riding of Yorkshire** (74 per cent)
- Although the top ten are dominated by rural local authorities – where parents might only have one viable option – they also include Doncaster (67 per cent) and Rotherham (65 per cent)
- At the other extreme, **parents are least likely to state just one preference in the Inner London authorities of Lambeth** (7 per cent), **Wandsworth** (7 per cent) and **Hackney** (8 per cent)
- Indeed **only one of the twenty local authorities with the lowest share of parents stating one preference is outside London** (Hertfordshire, 9 per cent)
- We see in slide 14 that parents are more likely to state one preference in areas with a higher probability of being offered that preference

N= 547,479

Who is more likely to state only one choice of school?





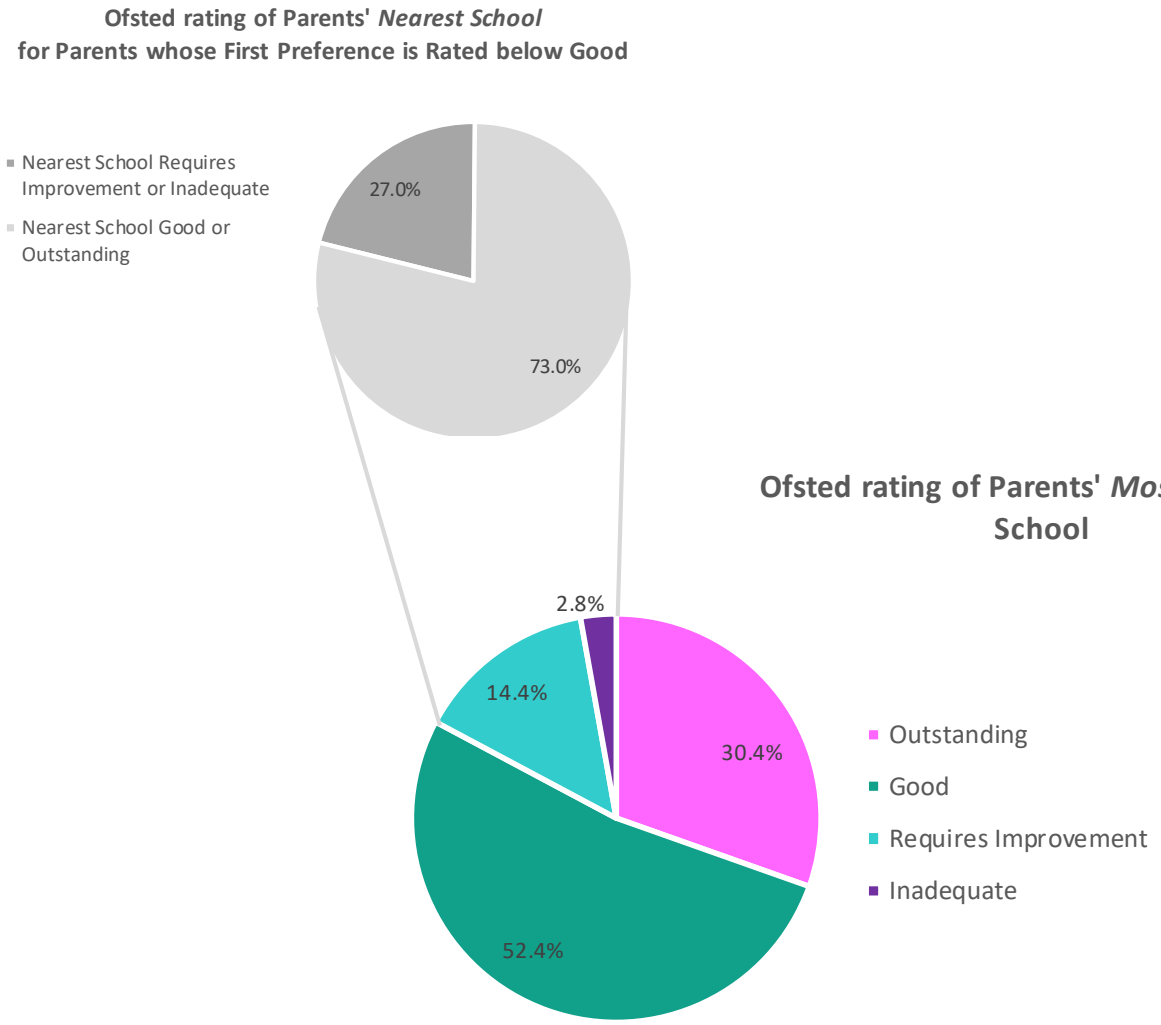




- Some parents are more likely than others to express a preference for just one school: **families identifying as white British, and those with English as a first language, are more likely to apply to just one school**
- **Parents of children with low prior attainment are also more likely to express a preference for just one school** compared to those meeting or exceeding the expected standard at Key Stage 2
- By contrast, **there is little difference in the number of preferences between families eligible for the Pupil Premium and those who are not**
- We later consider how applications vary between demographic groups for just those parents living *in London*, given that parental decisions are closely linked to local conditions
- Yet even when taking factors such as school density into account, other research has similarly found that there are **striking gaps between ethnic groups and by EAL status in the number of schools that parents apply to** (Burgess et al, 2017)

N = 527,170 for demographic breakdowns; for prior attainment N=516,636

How many parents apply to a good school?



- Not only do the number of preferences matter, it is also their quality. For the purposes of this analysis, we use Ofsted judgements as a proxy for quality
- Whilst there are concerns about the reliability of Ofsted judgements as a measure of performance (EPI, 2016), parents cite these as one of the most important factors when choosing schools (NAO, 2018). Of specific interest are parents whose most preferred school is rated as less than good by Ofsted
- Most parents (52 per cent) apply to a good school as their top preference, with a further 30 per cent nominating an outstanding school. However **one-in-six parents (17 per cent) have a most preferred school that is rated as less than good by Ofsted**
- This could partly reflect differences in parents' access to good schools. Yet **of those parents who nominate a school rated as less than good as their top preference, over one-quarter (27 per cent) do so *despite having a good or outstanding school as their nearest school.*** (And more, still, will have a good school within a reasonable travel distance)
- This is potentially a concern. One of the key conditions for school choice to raise educational standards is that "*parents must value and be able to correctly identify educational success as a school characteristic*" (Allen and Burgess, 2010). Recent research has shown that **different demographic groups do vary in their willingness and ability to travel to high-performing schools** (Weldon, 2018)
- However we cannot infer from the preferences data alone that these parents do not value educational success. It may be that some parents do not apply to their good local school if they think they will not get into it, even if they truly prefer it. There is some tentative evidence to support this in the next slide

N= 539,206 based on 2016 Preferences data matched to Ofsted data providing ratings for *most preferred* school; N=470,576 when include further match to *nearest* school

Are there differences between good local schools that are bypassed in favour of less good schools further away?

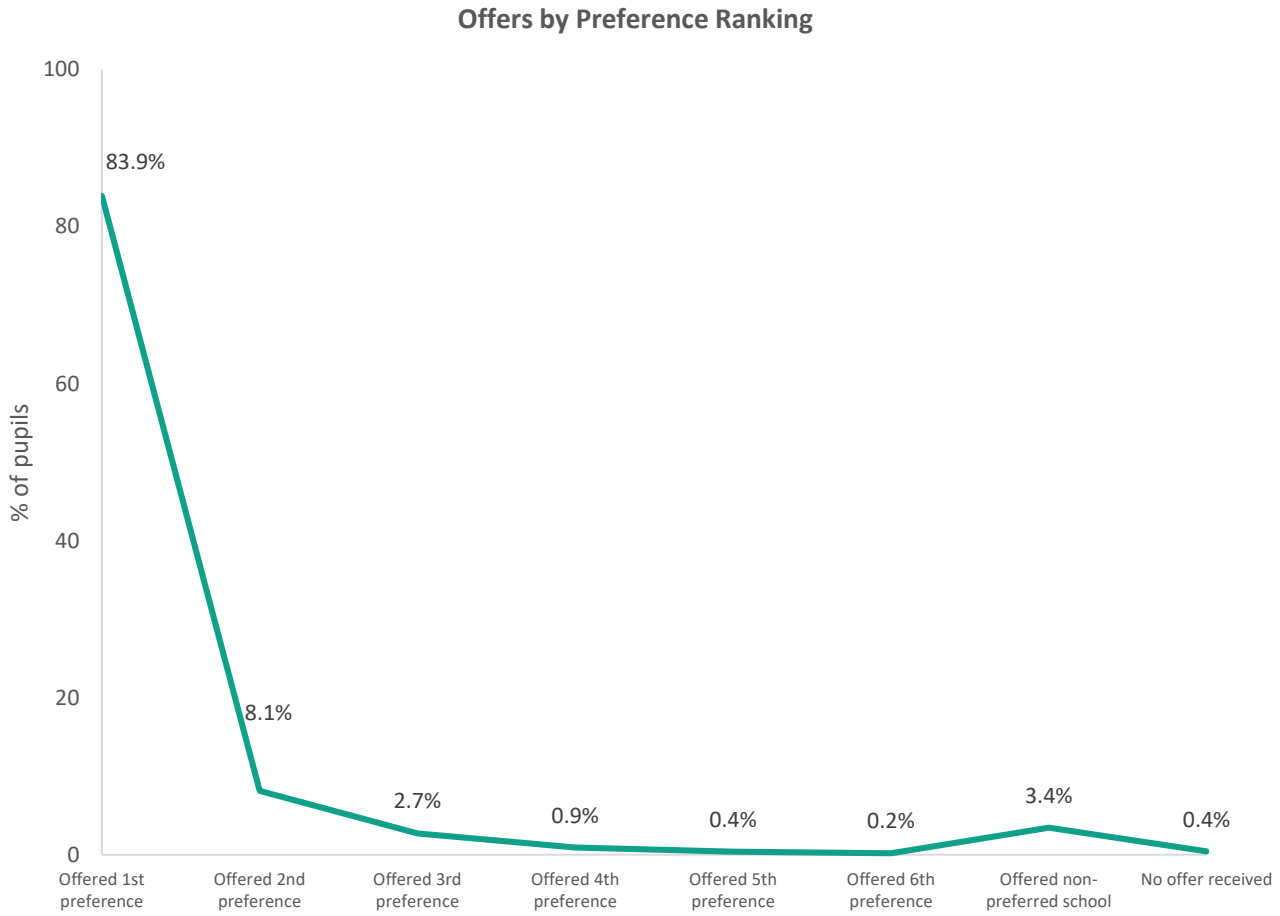
- In the previous slide we saw that **of those parents who nominate a school rated as less than good as their first preference, over one-quarter (27 per cent) do so despite having a good or outstanding school as their nearest school**
- Although this is a small group nationally (5 per cent), **families eligible for the Pupil Premium are much more likely than others to fall into this group**
- Here we take a closer look at the characteristics of these two sets of schools and see some key differences

	'Preferred' Schools rated as below Good	Good or Outstanding 'Bypassed' Schools
Average school size	1,296	1,514
per cent Spare capacity	18.6%	12.5%
% achieving 5+ A*-C or equivalents including English & mathematics	49.4%	58.5%
% likelihood of being offered top preference	94.8%	*

- Relative to good or outstanding 'bypassed' schools, 'preferred' schools that are rated less than good tend to:
  - Be smaller
  - Have more spare capacity
  - Have worse GCSE performance
- They also have a higher offer rate (94.8 per cent), around 10 percentage points above the national average (see next slide). This might mean parents who apply to schools rated as less than good are making practical choices based on their likelihood of admission, particularly where their good local schools are oversubscribed
- **Understanding why some families do not apply to good schools even when they are local is a key evidence gap**
- In the next few slides we look in more detail at the likelihood of parents being offered their most preferred school

* By definition these schools are bypassed and so not chosen by parents as their top preference

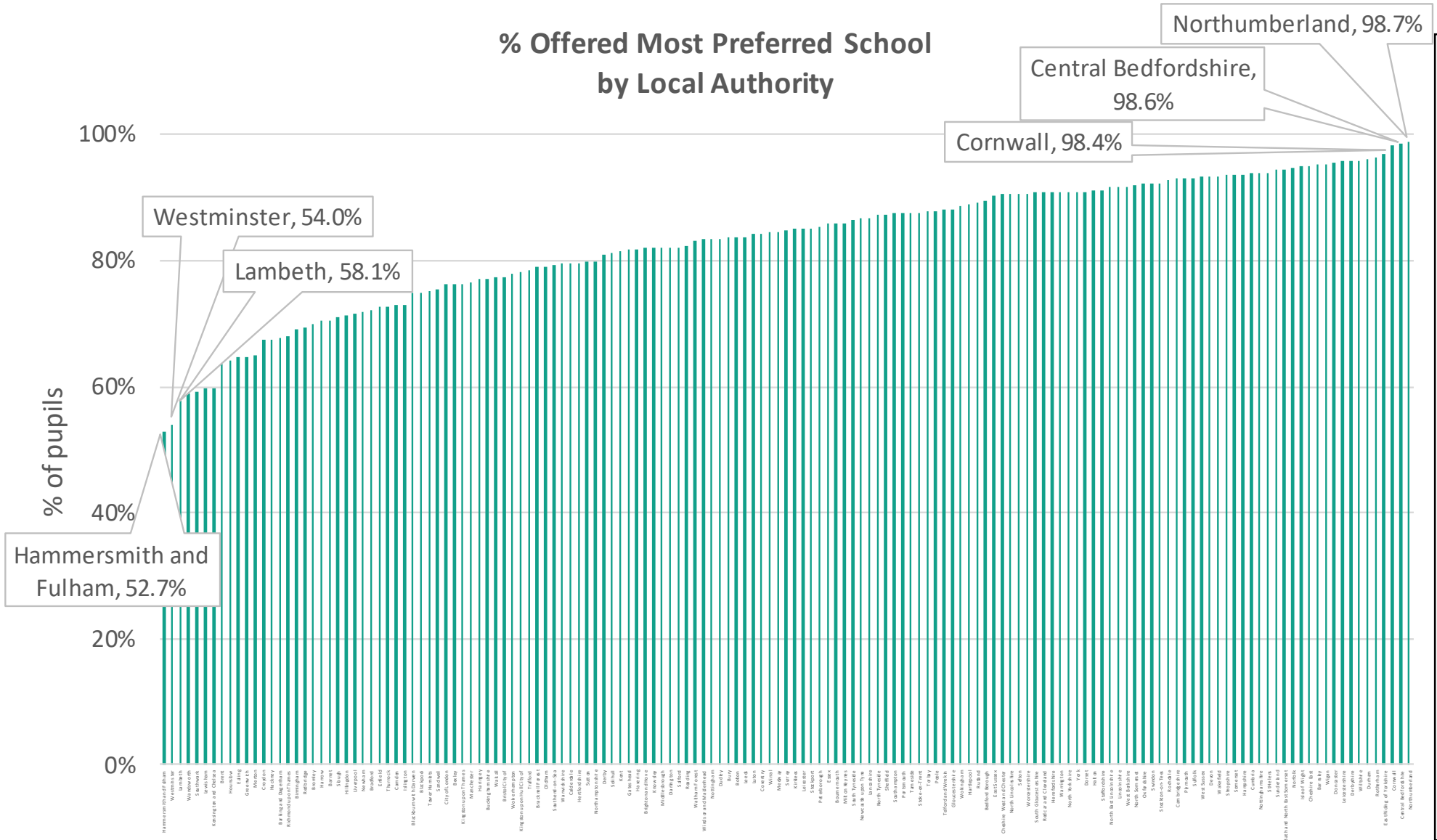
How likely are parents to be offered their first preference school?



- Nationally **the majority (84 per cent) of parents get an offer from their first preference school** - we refer to this as the 'success rate'
- Of those who don't, half (or 8 per cent of all parents) get offered their second
- **The vast majority of parents (95 per cent) get an offer from one of their top three schools**
- However there is big variation by geography – for example **in London, only 69 per cent parents are offered their first preference school** – as well as for different demographic groups
- The differences in success rates for different groups of parents (slide 15) partly reflects geography, namely the local balance between:
  - *Demand for school places among parents* – parents will differ in their appetite for risk and the value they place on characteristics like school quality. If some groups are more ambitious in their preferences or place a higher value on quality, they are less likely to be offered their most preferred school
  - *Supply of school places* – where supply is limited relative to demand, competition for places is steeper. If some groups are more likely to live in densely populated urban areas, they are less likely to be offered their most preferred school

N= 547,479

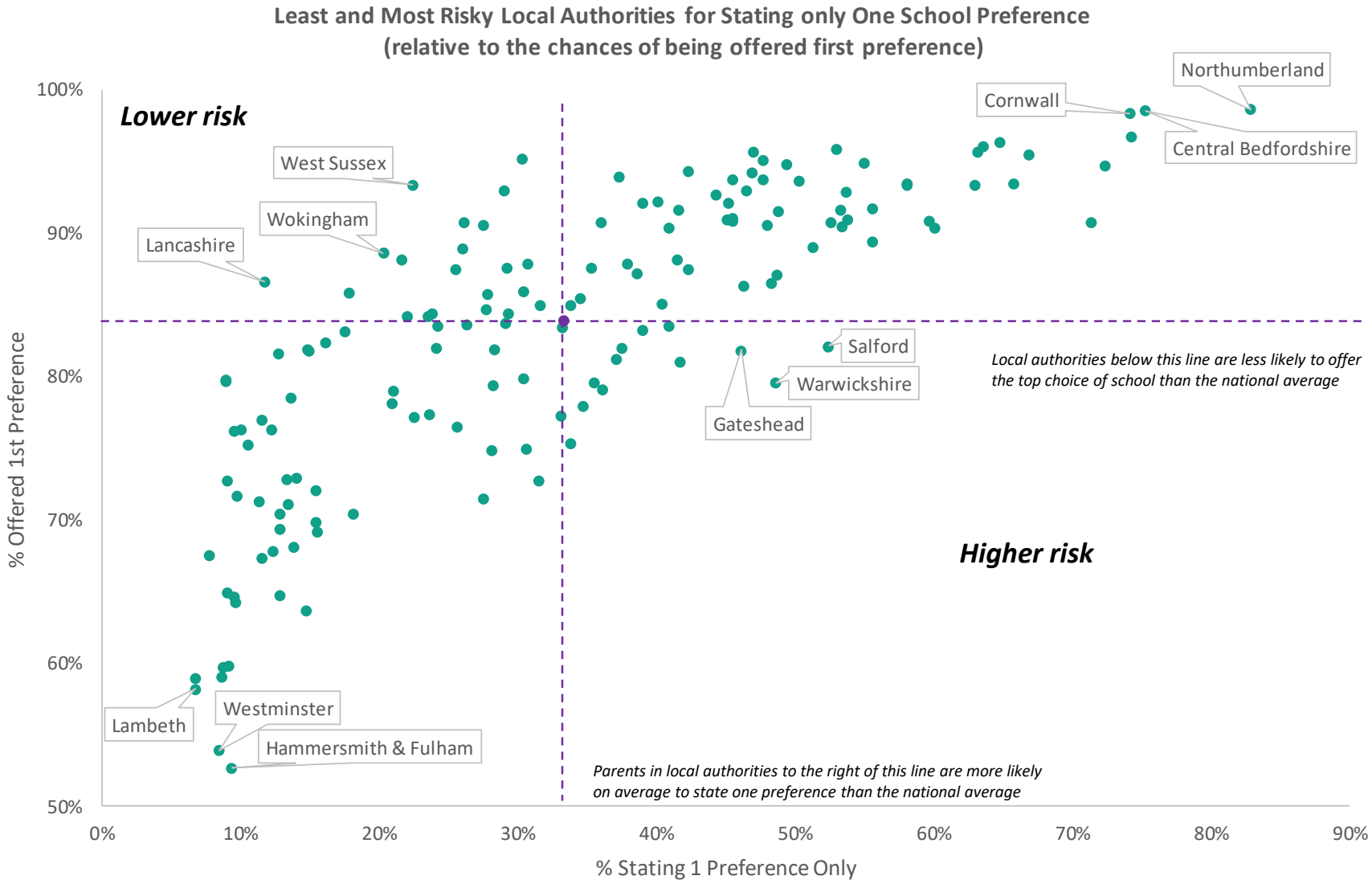
Where are parents most and least likely to be offered their first preference?



- Parents living in some parts of the country are more likely to be offered their most preferred school. **Virtually all parents in Northumberland** (99 per cent), **Central Bedfordshire** (99 per cent) and **Cornwall** (98 per cent) **are offered their first preference school**
- At the other extreme, **parents are much less likely to be offered their first preference in the Inner London authorities of Hammersmith and Fulham** (53 per cent), **Westminster** (54 per cent) **and Lambeth** (58 per cent)
- **5 per cent of parents miss out on *all of their top three* preferences nationally** but **there are 24 local authorities where this share is at least 10 per cent***
- The highest prevalence is in Hammersmith and Fulham, where one quarter of parents miss out on their top three, followed by 19 per cent of parents in Westminster and 17 per cent in Kensington and Chelsea. **18 of the 24 local authorities are in London**

N= 547,479. * These are Hammersmith and Fulham (25%), Westminster (19%), Kensington and Chelsea (17%), Lewisham (16%), Ealing (15%), Hounslow (15%), Southwark (14%), Brent (14%), Lambeth (14%), Greenwich (14%), Wandsworth (14%), Richmond upon Thames (13%), Barking and Dagenham (13%), Thurrock (12%), Birmingham (12%), Barnet (12%), Merton (11%), Redbridge (11%), Bradford (11%), Gateshead (11%), North Tyneside (11%), Slough (10%), Harrow (10%) and Bromley (10%)

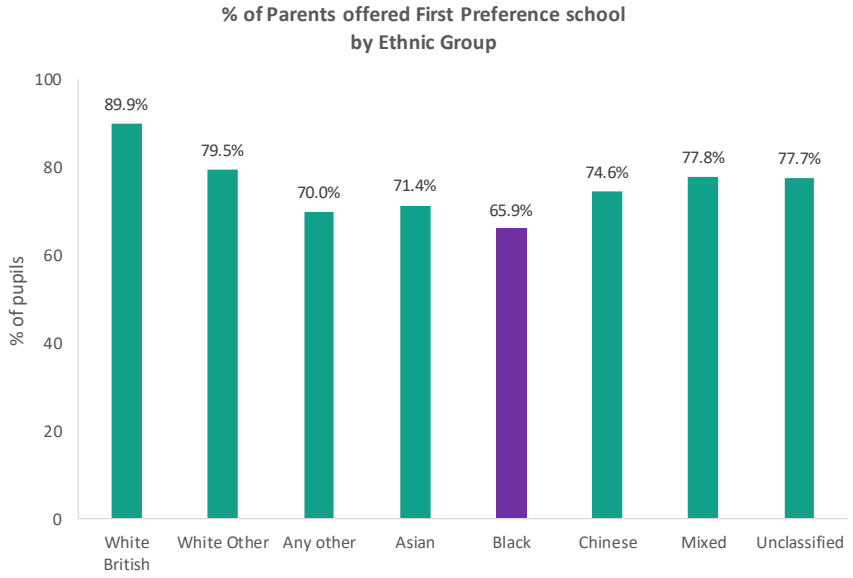
Where is it most and least risky to apply to one school relative to the chances of getting into that school?

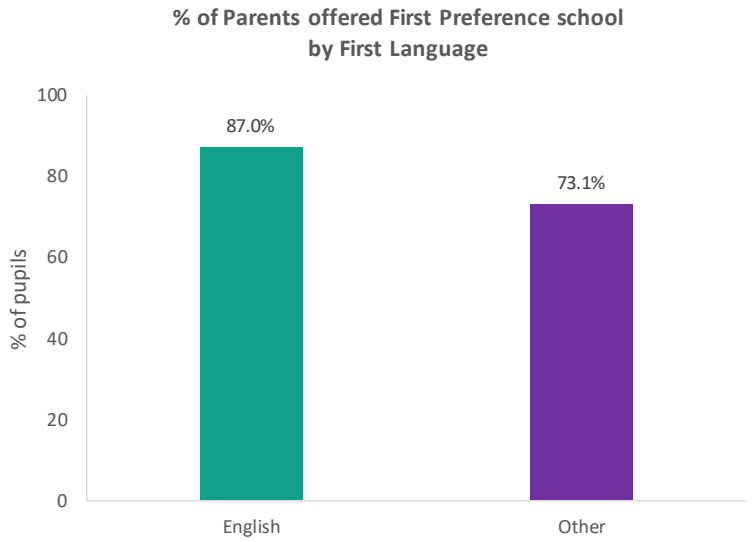


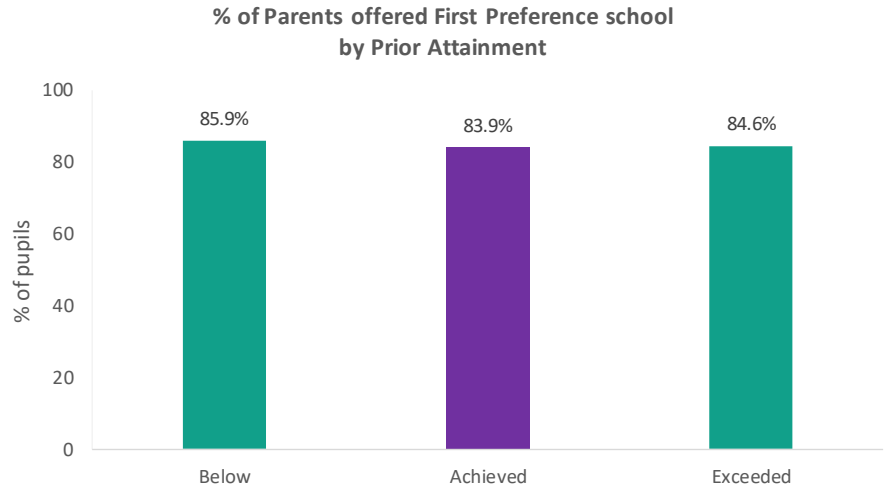
- Here we combine local authority-level data on the likelihood of stating one preference with the likelihood of being offered that preference
- **In some areas with high competition for places and a relatively low probability of being offered first preference – such as Hammersmith and Fulham, Lambeth and Westminster – parents tend to 'hedge their bets' by applying to multiple schools.** Parental choice appears to be operating strongly in these areas
- **In other – often rural - areas with virtual guarantee of being offered the first preference, parents are very likely to apply to just one school.** In areas like Northumberland, Central Bedfordshire and Cornwall, choice is limited but applying to just one school is low risk
- **Riskier areas where parents tend to apply to just one school, despite having below-average chances of being offered that school, include Gateshead and Warwickshire**
- Conversely parents in West Sussex, Wokingham and Lancashire are unlikely to apply to only one school, despite having above-average chances of success

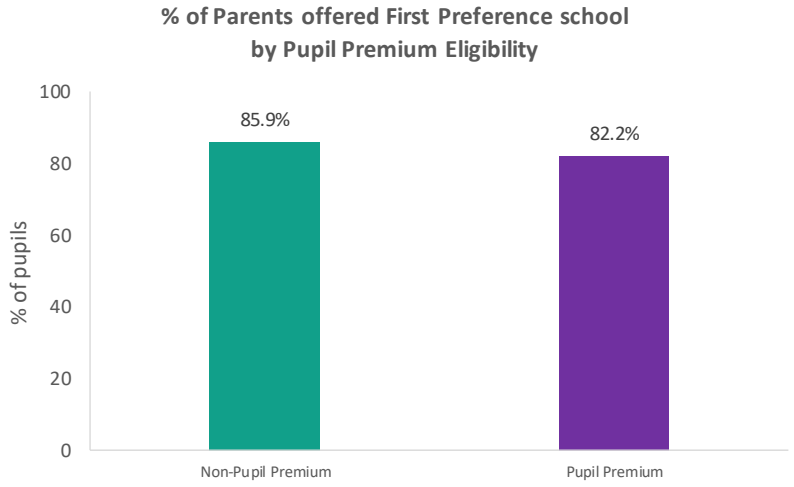
N= 547,479

Who is more likely to miss out on their first preference school?









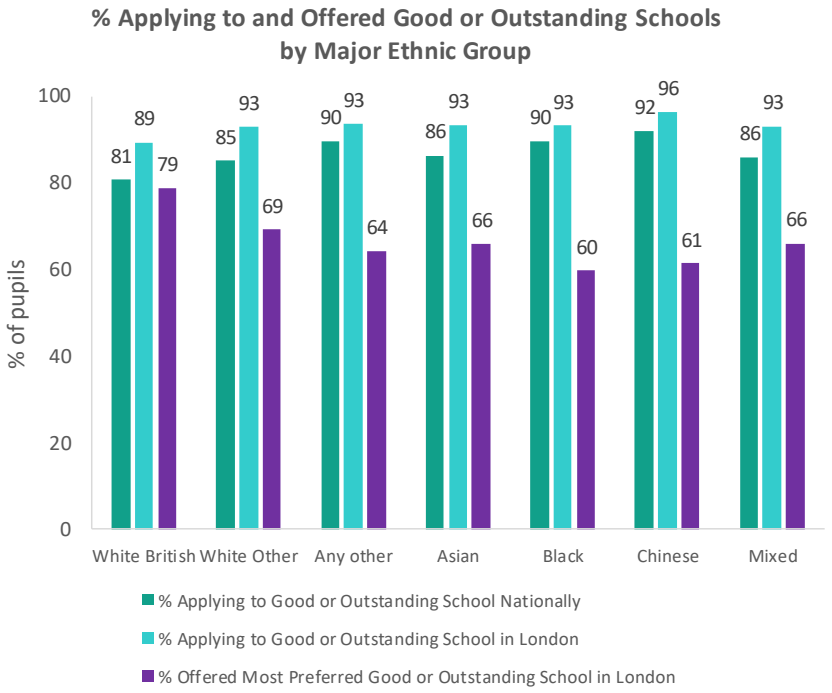
- Some groups of parents are less likely to be offered their most preferred school
- As with the number of preferences (slide 9) **there are bigger differences between ethnic groups and by EAL status than by income**
- **White British parents are most likely to get an offer from their most preferred school** (90 per cent success rate)**, whereas black parents are least likely** (66 per cent) on average
- Similarly **those with EAL are much less likely to get offered their most preferred school**
- By contrast, **there are much smaller differences in success rates by Pupil Premium eligibility and prior attainment**
- These findings are consistent with Burgess et al (2017) who show that ethnic minority families and those with EAL are less likely to be offered their preferred school, even allowing for local school density. In other words, **it is not just location which explains these gaps**
- We explore this in more detail in the next slide

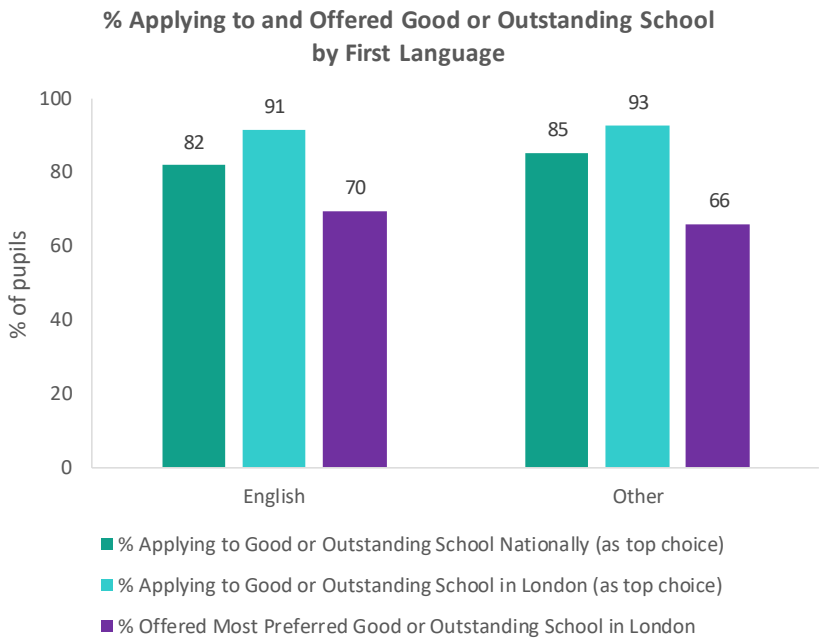
N = 527,170 for demographic breakdowns; for prior attainment N=516,636

Who is more likely to miss out on a good school, even when they apply to it?

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- Some parents are more likely than others to miss out on their most preferred school. However the raw data fail to take into account school quality or locality which directly affect the likelihood of different groups applying to, and subsequently being offered a place at, a particular school
- What we really want to know is: ***even when parents apply to good schools, are some still more likely than others to miss out*****?** As a simple way to consider this, we focus here on just those parents whose most preferred school is *good or outstanding* and who *live in London*
- School choice is distinct in the capital: **for all groups, London parents are more likely to apply to a good or outstanding school.** This will at least partly reflect London having more good and outstanding schools than elsewhere
- This also means that London pupils are more likely to be admitted to a good school even if they are not offered their most preferred school

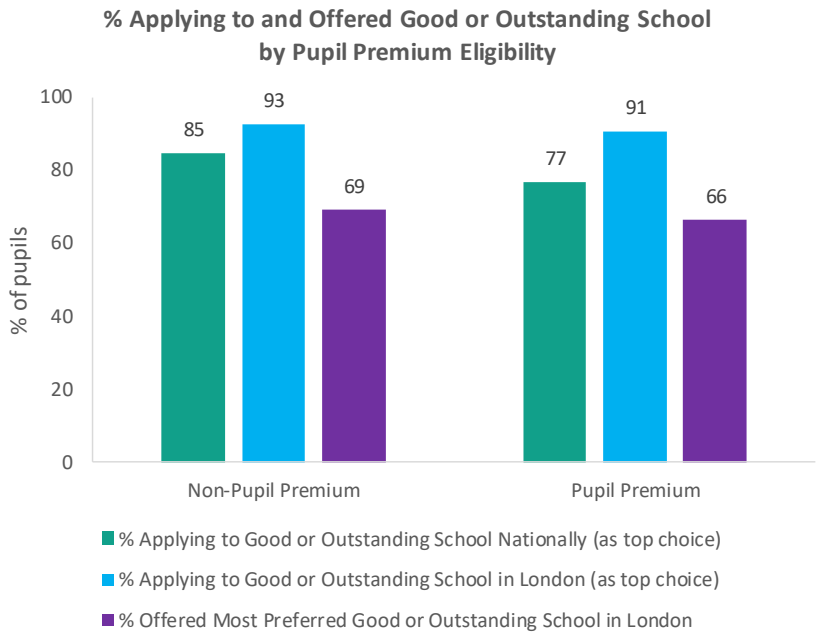


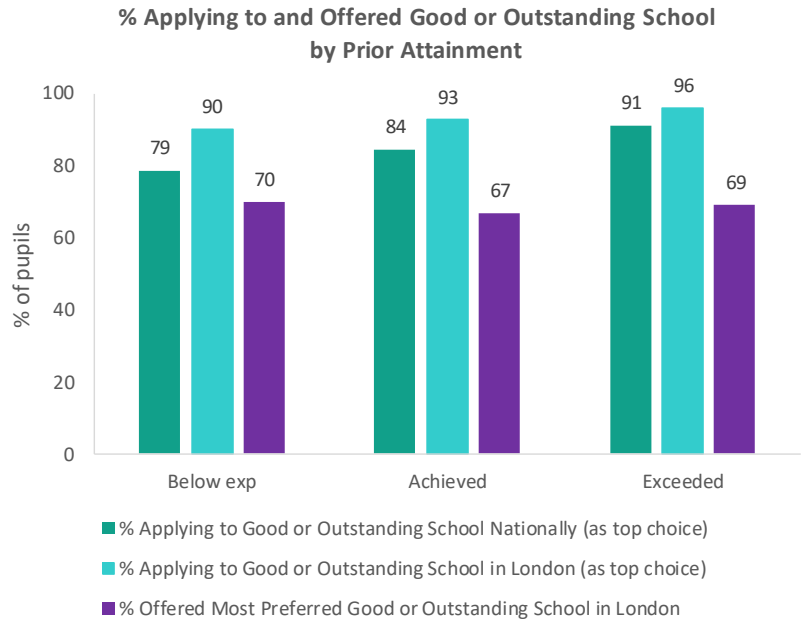


- Nationally **white British families are around 10 percentage points *less likely* than black or Chinese parents to apply to a good school** as their first preference
- These gaps remain – but are much smaller – in London suggesting part of what explains different application rates to good schools between ethnic groups is location
- However **when white families do apply to good schools in the capital they are 18-19 percentage points *more likely* than black or Chinese families to be offered their first preference**

- We see a similar picture for first language
- **Families with English as a first language are slightly *less likely* to apply to good schools** as their first preference, both nationally and in London
- **Yet when families with English as a first language do apply to good schools in the capital they are 4 percentage points *more likely* to be offered their first preference**

Who is more likely to miss out on a good school, even when they apply to it?





- Nationally **families eligible for the Pupil Premium are 7 percentage points *less likely* to apply to good schools** as their first preference than other families
- This gap shrinks to 2 percentage points in London – suggesting location is part of what explains Pupil Premium families being less likely to apply to good schools
- Nevertheless **when Pupil Premium families living in London do apply to good schools, they remain 3 percentage points *less likely* to be offered their first preference**

- Nationally **parents of children with low prior attainment are *less likely* to apply to a good school** as their first preference, than those meeting or exceeding the expected standard at Key Stage 2
- These gaps are halved in London suggesting location is part of what explains parents of children with low prior attainment being less likely to apply to good schools
- However **when parents of children with low prior attainment in London do apply to good schools they are *more likely* to be offered their first preference**

Conclusions and Areas for Further Research

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- School quality is a key driver of pupils' later educational outcomes so it is important to understand the process by which parents choose schools
- Overall on some measures, school choice appears to be working well:
    - Success rates are high nationally: **84 per cent of parents are offered their first preference school** and **95 per cent get an offer from one of their top three**
    - Nearly one-third (30 per cent) of parents apply to an outstanding school as their first preference, comprising around one-fifth of state secondary schools
- However we also see that:
    - **One-third of parents apply to only one school**, with **nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of parents stating fewer preferences than the maximum** allowed by their local authority
    - There are marked differences between local authorities, both in the proportion of parents stating only one preference and the likelihood of being offered the top preference
    - **One-in-six parents (17 per cent) nominate a most preferred school that is rated less than good** by Ofsted – and **of these, over a quarter (27 per cent) do so despite having a good or outstanding school as their *nearest* school**
- There are also some striking demographic differences and it appears that **some groups of parents are served less well** than others. When we consider parents in London who apply to good or outstanding schools as their first preference, **of key concern are ethnic minority families who, despite being *more likely* to apply to good schools than white British families, are *less likely* to be offered their first preference school**
- **Pupil Premium families also face a lower chance of being offered their most preferred good school, though these gaps are smaller than between ethnic groups**
- It is possible that these differences reflect ethnic minority and Pupil Premium families living further away from good schools. However this is unlikely to be the full story as recent research taking home-to-school distance into account similarly finds clear differences in success rates by ethnic groups living in big cities (Weldon, 2018)
- **More research is needed to better understand how and why there are differential numbers of applications to – and offers from – good schools among different groups and whether the gaps we see in London exist elsewhere in the country**
- From a policy perspective, it is important to understand the relative roles of parental preferences (reflected in applications) and school admissions (reflected in offers) and how the two interact. For example, is it the case that Pupil Premium families are less likely to apply to good schools because they believe that they are less likely to get into them?
- We are planning further research over the next two years to explore the role of parental preferences and admissions in unequal access to good schools, including for primary schools

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