

# Census 2021 Briefing

## Qualifications

GMCA Research

April 2023

**Dataset: Highest level of qualification**

**Datalink:** the dataset used for this briefing can be accessed [here](#).

**Definition:** 'Highest qualification' refers to the most advanced qualification held by residents within a specified geography. The 'level' of a qualification is explained in the appendix below.

**Census day:** The 2021 census was held in England and Wales on 21 March 2021. It was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic so may not show 'normal' population and household patterns due to temporary changes in living circumstances during the pandemic.

## Key points

- A fifth (20%) of adults had no qualifications in Greater Manchester in 2021 (compared with 18.1% in England). The proportion was highest in Oldham, where 24.7% had no qualification, and Rochdale (23.2%).
- At high skill levels - level 4+ (definition at the end of this briefing) - 31.9% of GM residents had a level 4 qualification (compared with 33.9% in England). The proportion was highest in Trafford, where 43% of residents had this level of qualification, followed by Manchester and Stockport (37.6%).
- In Wigan, 7.1% of residents had an apprenticeship as their highest qualification (Greater Manchester, 5.6%; England, 5.3%).
- There have been relatively rapid improvements in qualification levels over the last 20 years. For example, the proportion of the Greater Manchester population who did not have any qualifications has fallen from 32.7% in 2001<sup>1</sup>, to 25% in the census of 2011, to 20% in that of 2021.

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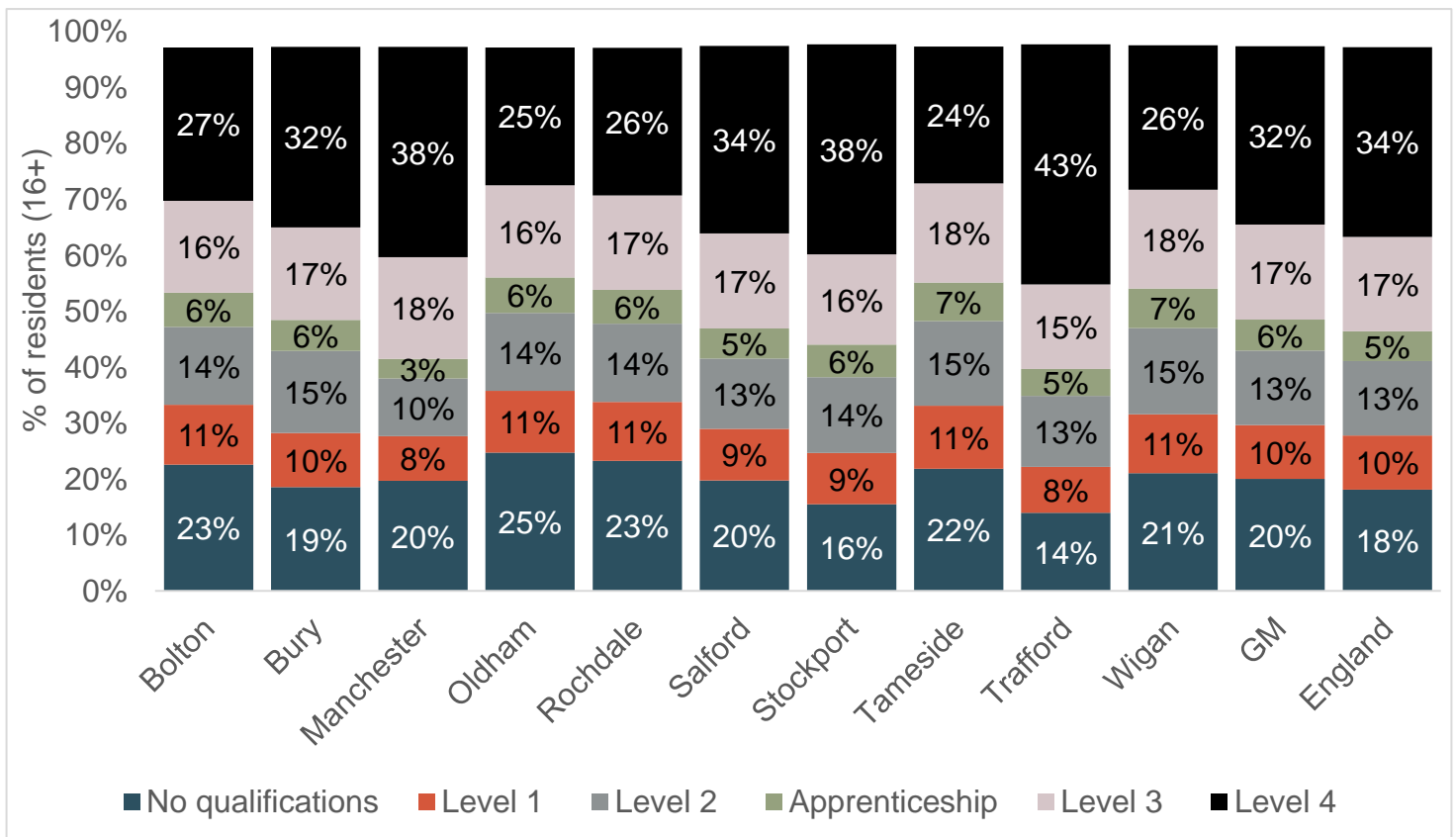
<sup>1</sup> In 2001, the age range of residents was 16-74, whereas 2011 and 2021 refers to everyone over the age of 16+.

## Main Findings

Greater Manchester tends to have slightly lower qualification levels than the rest of England. For example, in 2021, 31.9% of Greater Manchester’s population had a level 4 qualification – the highest level reported by the census. This was two percentage points below the English average. However, these differences are smaller than those *within* Greater Manchester. Trafford had the highest proportion of residents with a level 4+ qualification (43%).

Meanwhile, at the other end of the qualification spectrum, just under a quarter of the residents of Oldham did not have any qualifications (24.7%). This was well above the rate for England (18.1%) and Greater Manchester (20%). Yet the contrast with Trafford (14%) – a few miles across the city - was larger.

### Highest qualification levels of residents, 2021

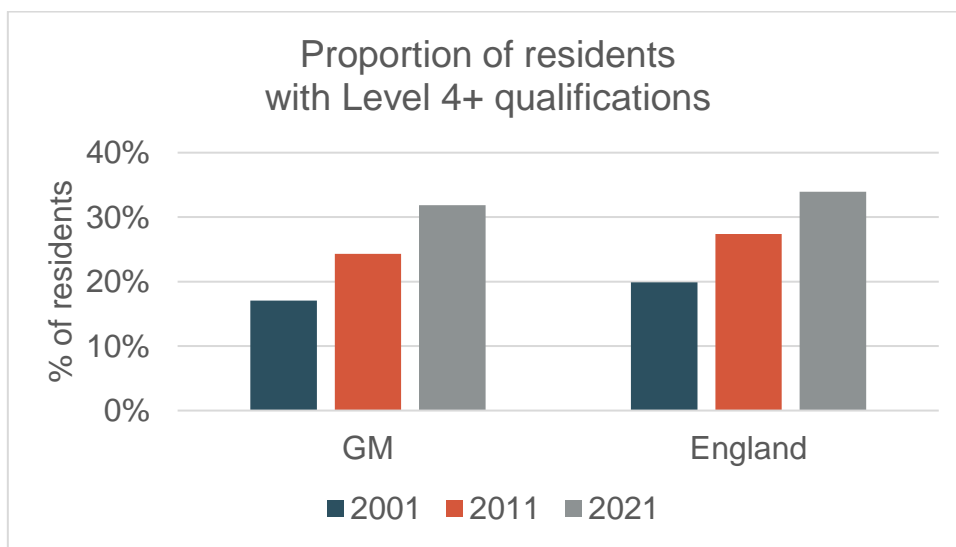


Source: ONS, Nomis - [2021 Census](#)

## Change in qualifications

### Level 4+

There has been some relatively rapid change in the qualification levels of residents over the last 20 years. For example, at level 4+, from 2001 to 2011, there was a 7.3ppt increase in the percentage of GM residents who had a Level 4+ qualification; from 2011 to 2021, there was an increase of 7.6ppts (see below). This suggests that the rate of change over the last twenty years has remained fairly consistent.



Source: Census 2021, 2011, 2001. Note: GM refers to Greater Manchester

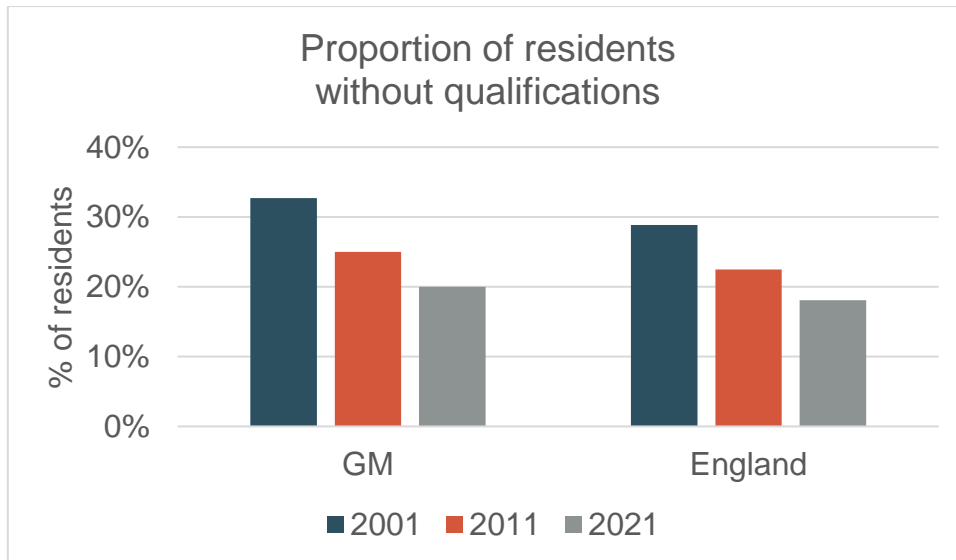
Over the decade between 2011 and 2021 Salford was the district that has increased its proportion of residents with level 4 qualifications the most – by close to double the average. But substantial increases were also recorded in Trafford and Manchester.

## Residents without qualifications

There was also significant change in the data on residents without qualifications - but with the trend in the opposite direction. In 2001, nearly a third of Greater Manchester residents had no qualifications (32.7%). This dropped to a quarter by the time of the census carried out in 2011. Ten years later, in 2021, the proportion was 20%.

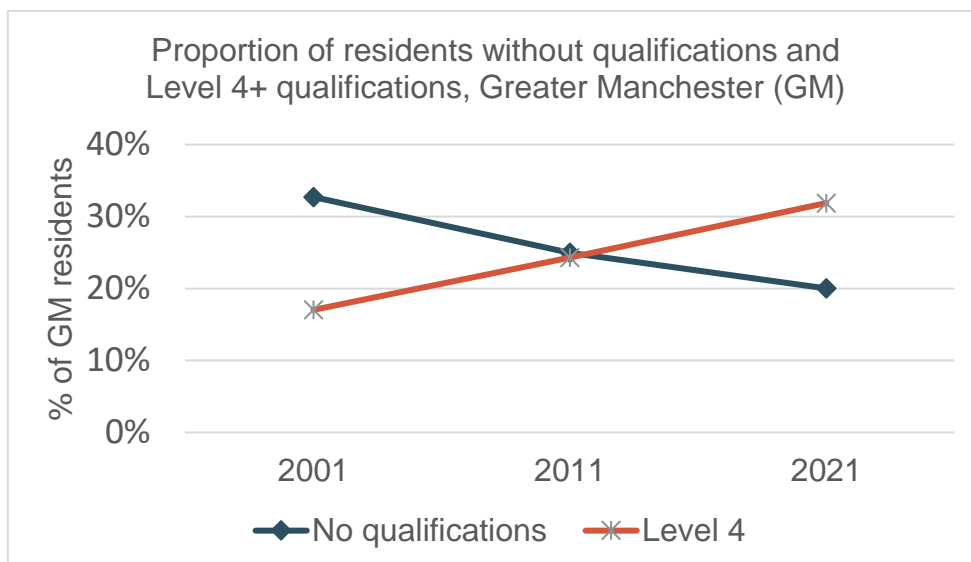
Greater Manchester has therefore experienced a sharper decrease than England in the proportion of its population who do not have any qualifications (a 12.7ppts fall between 2001 and 2021 compared with a decrease of 10.8ppts in England). The rate

of change, however, has been slowing. The decline was smaller between 2011 and 2021 than it was in the earlier decade of 2001 to 2011.



Source: Census 2021, 2011, 2001. Note: GM refers to Greater Manchester

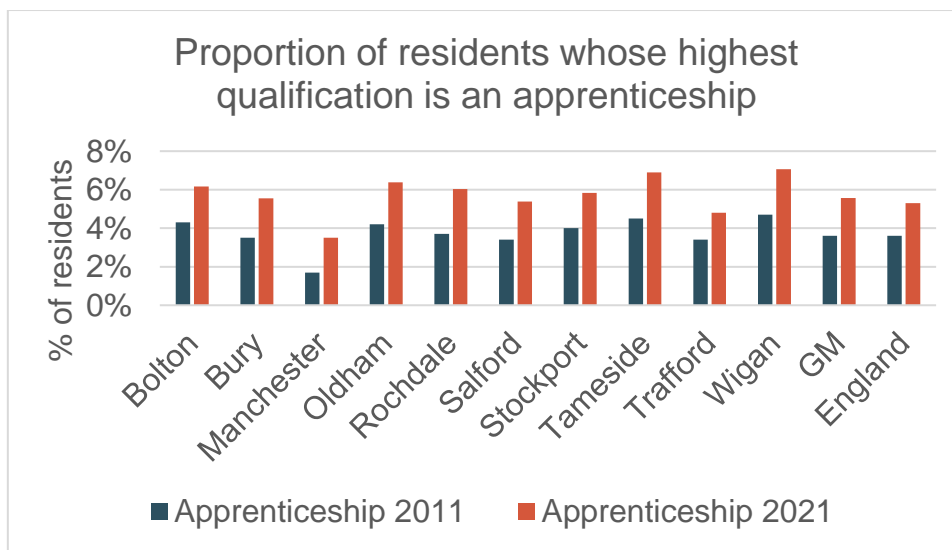
The two ‘extremes’ of the qualifications range have, in effect, almost mirrored each other (as shown in the chart below). In 2001, it was far more common not to have any qualifications than to have advanced ones. By 2021 the number of residents with level 4 qualifications greatly outweighed those without any qualifications.



Source: Census 2021, 2011, 2001. GM refers to Greater Manchester.

## Apprenticeships 2011-2021

The revival of apprenticeships has been the objective of government policy for many years. The census data implies some success. In 2011 3.6% of people in England had an apprenticeship as their highest qualification. In 2021 it was 5.3%. The increase in Greater Manchester has been larger (2ppts) than in England.



Source: ONS, Nomis - [2021 Census](#)

## Reflections

- Qualifications cause and reflect inequality in society. Where qualifications are lowest, opportunities tend to be restricted.
- Despite a generally improving picture, there are enduring disadvantages – for example, just under a quarter of Oldham’s residents did not have any qualifications. Yet the ‘rate of improvement’ (that is, residents who did not have qualifications gaining them) appears to be slowing.
- This is not the case at level 4+. Here, increases have been fairly consistent. The likely explanation is the expansion of higher education.
- Qualifications are widely used as a proxy for ‘skill’. But being more qualified does not necessarily imply being ‘more skilled’. The transformation in qualification levels over the last 20 years does not appear to have led to a

transformation of economic performance. A 'productivity puzzle' remains despite a better qualified population.

## Appendix: Definitions

- All data refers to the highest stated qualification in the census.
- No qualifications: refers to those who say they do not have any qualifications.
- Level 1 and entry level qualifications: 1 to 4 GCSEs grade A\* to C; any GCSEs at other grades; O levels or CSE (any grades); 1 AS level, NVQ level 1; Foundation GNVQ; Basic or Essential Skills.
- Level 2 qualifications: 5 or more GCSEs (A\*-C or 9-4); O levels (passes); BSEs (grade 1); School Certification; 1 A level; 2-3 AS levels; VCEs; Intermediate or Higher Diploma; Welsh Baccalaureate Intermediate Diploma; NVQ level 2; Intermediate GNVQ; City and Guilds Craft; BTEC First or General Diploma; RSA Diploma.
- Apprenticeships are counted as distinct from level 2 or level 3 qualifications.
- Level 3 qualification: 2 or more A levels or VCEs, 4 or more AS levels, Higher School Certificate, Progression or Advanced Diploma, Welsh Baccalaureate Advance Diploma, NVQ level 3; Advanced GNVQ, City and Guilds Advanced Craft, ONC, OND, BTEC National, RSA Advanced Diploma
- Level 4 qualifications: Level 4 qualifications and above: degree (BA, BSc), higher degree (MA, PhD, PGCE), NVQ level 4 to 5, HNC, HND, RSA Higher Diploma, BTEC Higher level, professional qualifications (for example, teaching, nursing, accountancy).
- Other qualifications: Other: vocational or work-related qualifications, other qualifications achieved in England or Wales, qualifications achieved outside England or Wales (equivalent not stated or unknown).