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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Do Government Interventions Improve Local Public Service Performance? Evidence From a Synthetic Control Approach

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**Received:** 29 June 2025 | **Revised:** 28 January 2026 | **Accepted:** 20 February 2026

**Keywords:** government intervention | local government | organizational turnaround | public service performance | synthetic difference-in-differences

## ABSTRACT

Governments in many democratic countries have the mandate to require local authorities to address failures in the management and performance of the public services that they provide. Such policies often involve the takeover of authorities to implement improvements assumed to result in organizational turnaround. However, critics argue that locally-directed change remains a more reliable means for achieving service transformation. To cast light on these issues, this paper applies a quasi-experimental synthetic difference-in-differences approach to investigate whether partial takeovers of poorly-performing education services in four Welsh local authorities in 2013 were effective in turning them around. The findings suggest that the establishment of independent recovery boards to oversee local education policy helped some of them to improve educational outcomes, but that local authorities were not always able to sustain improvements after the recovery boards were decommissioned. The study highlights that government interventions to improve local public service performance need to be focused on supporting long-term organizational change.

## 1 | Introduction

Public administration scholars have long debated the impact of political centralization on local public services (Graham 1980; Treisman 2002). In recent times, these debates have become increasingly urgent as governments across the globe have adopted an array of centralizing strategies for ensuring that public services meet desired performance standards. From issuing unfunded mandates to subordinate authorities (Ross 2018), providing financial incentives and administrative support to enable service improvements (Du and Yi 2022; Fernandez and Madumo 2024) through to actively intervening in the management and structure of organizations (Greenstein 2024; Mughan 2019), governments increasingly seek to steer local services towards better outcomes (Van Dooren et al. 2015). At its most extreme, direct government intervention via the takeover of local authorities has become a common practice for addressing perceived performance failures (Berman 1995; Hagen and Kaarbøe 2006). Such interventions may involve the removal of specific powers from local authorities and can even entail higher levels of government neutralizing the authority of lower levels of government altogether (Reingewertz and Beeri 2018). At the local level, central government takeovers of this kind raise important questions about self-government and the costs and benefits of political centralization (Beeri and Yuval 2015; Schueler 2025). However, despite longstanding concerns about the merits of government takeovers of public organizations (Anderson 2011; Stoker 2004), surprisingly little research has addressed whether takeovers of services provided by multipurpose authorities result in the desired improvements.

To date, scholarship dealing with takeovers and the performance of local public services has largely focused on state takeovers of single-purpose school districts and student achievement (e.g., Hayes et al. 2025; Schueler 2025), emergency financial management to address the financial difficulties experienced by multipurpose local authorities (e.g., Singla et al. 2023; Zabler 2019) or the replacement of elected leaders with convened committees

tasked with turning around the finances of multipurpose authorities (Reingewertz and Beeri 2018). This research has revealed much about the relationship between centralization and local outcomes, but rarely addresses the effects of partial centralization through targeted takeovers of specific public services. Furthermore, almost no attention has been paid to the use of independent recovery boards appointed with the power to support and (if necessary) direct local authorities to undertake reforms to the management and delivery of a service. The principal contribution of this article is to examine whether takeovers of a single service provided by multipurpose authorities by a government-appointed board can succeed in turning that service around.

Government takeovers of local authorities are guided by the idea that organizational leaders lack the capabilities necessary to turnaround failing services (Kelly 2003; Turner et al. 2004). By contrast, central government has the authority and capacity to deploy expertise from across the public sector to develop solutions that are more closely aligned to the organizational problems than the managers who are associated with those problems (Jas and Skelcher 2005). Indeed, it is argued that the dysfunctional effects of political interference, patronage, and partisanship on service provision can only be minimized through direction from independent experts (Burns 2003; Reingewertz and Beeri 2018). At the same time, takeovers can potentially provide a valuable opportunity for a reset in central-government relations, with both parties recognizing the need to work together productively to achieve service improvements (Schueler 2019). Importantly, all of this implies that partial takeovers may be a more appropriate response to failings in a single service area than full neutralization of a multipurpose authority because a more limited takeover can blend outside expertise with local knowledge, and signal central government's commitment to a collaborative approach to achieving service recovery (Anderson 2011).

To understand whether centralization through government intervention in the management of a locally provided public service might represent an effective strategy for improving performance, this paper presents an analysis of the Welsh Government's establishment of independent recovery boards in 2013 to support the turnaround of education services in two urban local authorities (Merthyr Tydfil and Torfaen) and two rural local authorities (Monmouthshire and Pembrokeshire). To evaluate whether these interventions spurred performance improvements, it is necessary to adopt a method capable of approximating causal inference. In this case, a synthetic control approach, which is increasingly being used by public administration researchers (McDonald III et al. 2022), is employed because it is well suited to analyzing "idiosyncratic historical events" that affect only one or a small number of units (Hollingsworth and Wing 2020). Specifically, a quasi-experimental synthetic difference-in-differences (SDID) method is applied to education outcomes in Welsh local authorities between 2007/08 and 2017/18. Analyses using SDID match the pre-treatment time trends of treated units with the trends of a donor pool of untreated units and then compare posttreatment outcomes (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021). The SDID analysis presented here compares examination results and pupil absences in Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Pembrokeshire and Torfaen with synthetic versions of the time trend for each local authority constructed using weighted data drawn from other Welsh local authorities. Potential mechanisms explaining the impact of the interventions are also explored by analyzing educational inputs.

In the next section of the paper, the literature on government strategies for improving local public service performance is reviewed. In the third section, the study context is described. After that, the data and empirical approach are explained. In the fifth section, the SDID estimates are depicted visually, and graphs of the estimated treatment effects for each year of the posttreatment period are assessed. In the final section, the theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

## 2 | Government Strategies for Improving Local Public Service Performance

During the past 40 years, the drive to improve public service outcomes has become one of the defining themes of the theory and practice of public administration (Ashworth et al. 2010; Boyne 2003; McDonald III et al. 2022). Since the advent of NPM, efforts to make public organizations more like their private sector counterparts have emphasised the role of performance management for making public services more efficient, effective and equitable (Lapsley and Miller 2024). As a result, governments across the world have sought to measure, monitor and manage the performance accountability of public services in myriad ways (Barbera et al. 2025; Van Dooren et al. 2015). Although such "performance regimes" are believed to be essential for promoting service excellence (Martin et al. 2016), there has also been a recognition that governments committed to managing performance require strategies for supporting public services perceived to be performing poorly (Walshe et al. 2004).

The definition and interpretation of organizational performance in the public sector is different from that in the private sector, with citizens and governments playing a critical role in determining which aspects of organizational performance matter most in which circumstances (Andersen et al. 2016). Sectoral differences in the nature of performance become especially stark when analyzing public service failure (Dodd et al. 2025). Unlike private sector firms, poorly performing public organizations are rarely able to exit the market for the services that they provide through closure or takeover by a hostile competitor (Jas and Skelcher 2005). As Meyer and Zucker (1989) highlight, in the public sector, "social constraints impede the operation of economic or economic-like forces that would sustain high performing organizations and shut low performers" (p. 115). Indeed, the social and political obstacles to terminating poorly performing public organizations may be so great that such organizations are at risk of "permanent failure"—persistent, but chronic low-performance (Meyer and Zucker 1989). The challenge of escaping the trap of "permanent failure" is especially daunting for local authorities that provide multiple services on a statutory basis (Turner et al. 2004). There are few, if any, rival organizations capable of replacing local authority-led provision and none with the democratic legitimacy to do so. In this context, "authoritative external intervention" on the part of higher levels of government is often perceived to be necessary to rectify poor performance and encourage service improvement (Jas and Skelcher 2005).

According to the literature on political centralization, central governments design and implement a range of different strategies to address performance failure in local authorities. These are encompassed within four broad approaches to supporting turnaround: enabling, promotion, intervention, and neutralization (Coe 2008; Reingewertz and Beeri 2018; Stoker 2004). *Enabling* entails discussions behind closed doors with local authorities about the challenges that they face and flexible interpretation of rules and regulations for a short period while the authority aims to achieve service recovery. *Promotion* implies that central government and local authorities work together to agree upon a set of incentives and penalties likely to encourage necessary organizational changes. *Intervention* can involve the allocation of exceptional financial support, the appointment of new managers, and the removal of some local powers. *Neutralization* occurs when central government replaces the political management of a local authority and appoints a leadership team to run all or part of the authority.

Takeovers of school districts in the US and of municipalities in Germany, Israel, and the US are prominent examples of a neutralization approach to turnaround, which involves higher levels of government entirely superseding the political management of local authorities during a "recovery" period. The partial takeovers of Welsh local authorities using independent recovery boards, however, are an example of an intervention-style approach to public service turnaround, since the political leadership of each authority was not replaced, but the management of education was overseen by a centrally appointed board. Nevertheless, the rationales for partial takeovers are similar to those for full takeovers, with centrally directed interventions being authorized because local political pressures are assumed to render local actors incapable of undertaking meaningful reforms (Turner et al. 2004). Importantly, such interventions assume that poor service performance is the result of fixable internal organizational problems, rather than the external challenges confronting local authorities (Dodd et al. 2025).

The overarching aim of turnaround policies is to address the managerial and organizational causes of persistently poor performance by prompting changes that drive improvements that would not otherwise have occurred (Pearce and Robbins 1993). Such changes center on retrenchment (cutting costs), repositioning (developing new markets), and reorganization (replacing managers) (Boyne 2006). Turnaround is then achieved when an organization achieves either a recovery of its former performance levels or strong substantial growth (Trahms et al. 2013). In the public sector, the achievement of turnaround is a political process, with some organizations needing "only a small improvement in performance to be judged a success, whereas others may face much higher hurdles" (Boyne 2004, 377). Ultimately, this indicates that the effectiveness of central government interventions to improve local public service performance is largely evaluated according to whether those interventions achieve the goals set for them.

In the UK, the use of recovery boards to support local public service turnaround was pioneered by the Labor national government in the 2000s, when they were first employed to assist local authorities in England aiming to address unsatisfactory performance standards identified during service inspections (Turner et al. 2004). Boards comprising external advisors, typically senior local government managers from other local authorities, are intended to bolster the performance management capabilities of authorities and to provide challenge to them as they target improvements in statutory indicators of performance (Murphy and Jones 2016). This was regarded as especially important for local education services in Wales because service improvement capacity and experience in those services had arguably been dissipated after local government reorganization in 1996 (Andrews 2020).

Although it is difficult to disentangle achievements on local public service standards from the circumstances in which organizations operate, the assumption behind the use of recovery boards is that outside experts are less constrained by the politics of local decision-making and can help organizational leaders to focus on core targets (Turner et al. 2004). This assumption is consistent with more general arguments about the potential benefits of centralization in well-developed administrative systems (Hutchcroft 2001). Indeed, central government interventions in local public services may be especially efficacious in the education field because it is possible to identify accepted measures of good and poor performance, which can form the basis for the centralization of educational standards (Costrell 1997). In particular, student achievement measured via examination results is often considered a good proxy for the effectiveness of local education services by both policy-makers and citizens (O'Toole Jr and Meier 2011; Reynolds et al. 2014). It is also the performance measure typically used to justify central intervention in those services (Wilcox and Gray 1996) and therefore one of the key metrics employed to establish whether turnaround has occurred (Rutherford 2014). Nevertheless, despite widespread external interventions in local public services, there is currently a limited evidence base to support the use of partial takeovers of local authorities to achieve improvements in educational performance and mixed findings from previous studies of full takeovers.

Prior research on the effectiveness of full takeovers has revealed inconsistent results, with few noticeable benefits for student achievement observed in US school districts that are completely taken over by state governments (Schueler 2025). Beyond the education field, research has uncovered mixed effects of full takeovers for the financial health of municipalities in the United States (Singla et al. 2023), but better financial performance in German and Israeli municipalities undergoing neutralization of the political management (Reingewertz and Beeri 2018; Zabler 2019). These equivocal findings may reflect failures in implementation, rather than flaws in the policy itself. Turnaround scholars emphasize that to be successful improvement strategies should be closely aligned with the needs of poorly performing organizations (Rutherford and Favero 2020)—something that presents a challenge for external actors unfamiliar with local needs and demands (Murphy and Jones 2016). By combining independent professional advice and embedded expertise within local authorities, partial takeovers may offer a more context-sensitive approach to turnaround.[1] Evidence on the effectiveness of recovery boards can therefore provide vital insights into the relative merits of partial centralization in general and, more specifically, on partial takeovers as tools for driving service

improvement. We turn next to a fuller description of the background behind the interventions analyzed here.

## 3 | Ministerial Interventions in Welsh Local Education Authorities

In Wales, recovery boards became part of the performance management framework for local authorities after disappointing results for Welsh school pupils in the OECD's 2009 PISA ranking. Following the Welsh parliamentary elections of 2011, the Labour Party-led government introduced a school ranking system and a more rigorous inspection framework in 2011 to improve PISA performance, with a central School Standards Board and four regional educational consortia to support school improvement (Evans 2022). Allied to this new performance management regime was a willingness to intervene in the management of education by local authorities deemed to have unsatisfactory education performance by *Estyn* (His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales). In 2013, the Welsh Minister for Education directed the creation of recovery boards to oversee education services in four local authorities. These interventions present a valuable opportunity to explore whether centralization through partial takeovers of local authorities can improve service performance.

The first intervention occurred in Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, a deprived urban local authority in South Wales. Estyn's (2012a) inspection of Merthyr's education provision rated its services and capacity for improvement as "unsatisfactory," after which the Welsh minister for education decided that "responsibility for Merthyr's education should be held by a recovery board which will oversee education" (Welsh Government 2013a). The board comprised a local authority chief executive, a senior local authority manager, an academic and a politician from another authority who delegated day-to-day powers to run education back to Merthyr (Estyn 2016c), before working with managers to develop a Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP) (Merthyr Tydfil Council 2014a, 2014b).

A similar intervention was announced in 2013 for Monmouthshire County Council, an affluent rural authority, after Estyn (2012b) rated Monmouthshire's education services and capacity to improve as "unsatisfactory." In this case, the minister for education left the authority "solely responsible for its services," but established a recovery board with "reserve powers" to "issue such instructions as it considers reasonable to ensure the compliance of the authority" (Welsh Government 2013a). This board, comprising a local authority chief executive, a senior youth worker, an auditor, and a former Welsh parliamentarian, held PIAP progress meetings with the authority every 6 weeks (Monmouthshire Council 2015).

In 2011, a Ministerial Recovery Board specifically addressing child safeguarding concerns had been appointed in Pembrokeshire County Council, a rural authority in South–West Wales. In 2012, after Estyn rated the authority's education services "unsatisfactory," a new board was established in 2013 with "a far wider ranging ambit, covering the whole of the education service" (Welsh Government 2013b). This board, comprising two experienced local authority managers, an academic and a consultant, held PIAP progress meetings with the authority every 6 weeks (Pembrokeshire Council 2013).

The final intervention in 2013 was in Torfaen County Borough Council, a small urban authority. Estyn (2011) stated that Torfaen's education services required "significant improvement," but found in its Estyn's (2013) monitoring visit that the authority had "made insufficient progress to address the recommendations in the inspection report." In October 2013, a recovery board was established to "provide support and challenge to the authority as it addressed the recommendations from its core inspection and monitoring visit" (Welsh Government 2014). The board, comprising a former local authority chief executive, a senior local authority manager, two academics, an educationalist and a local councillor, developed an improvement plan in partnership with the authority (Torfaen Council 2014).

## 4 | Methodology and Data

A SDID approach is applied to estimate the effects of the recovery boards on educational outcomes in Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Torfaen, and Pembrokeshire. The SDID method combines insights from conventional DID approaches with the Synthetic Control Method (SCM) (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021). Conceptually, it is similar to the SCM. However, the SDID estimator creates a synthetic control by matching the pre-treatment time trends of treated units and the donor pool, whereas SCM approaches focus on matching pretreatment outcomes. As a result, pretreatment differences in levels can be accounted for by unit fixed effects in SDID analyses.

In terms of the procedure, the SDID approach first constructs a synthetic control unit using a weighted combination of potential control units that matches the pretreatment trends of the treated unit. Then, the difference in outcomes between the treated unit and its synthetic control before and after the treatment is estimated (see Arkhangelsky et al. 2021). By combining DiD and the SCM, the SDID estimator can overcome the absence of pretreatment parallel trends that threaten the validity of DiD approaches and does not require that the treated unit be within a "convex hull" of control units—an important constraint on SCM approaches (Clarke et al. 2023). The time weights applied for the analyses undertaken here are illustrated in Figures 1–4 below, which depict time, denoted as Lambda, weights applied to the estimates for each of the treatment effects investigated. The unit-specific weights included in each SDID specification are reported in Figures S1–S4.

### 4.1 | Data and Sample

The units of analysis for the study are the 22 local authorities in Wales.[2] These are multi-purpose "unitary" authorities that provide nursery, primary and secondary school education, as well as adult and children's social care, environmental services, social housing, land use planning, and leisure, and culture services. Unitary authorities are governed by ruling political parties that appoint a Westminster-style cabinet to develop policies together with professional administrators led by a chief executive officer. Since devolution in 1999, local education policy has been guided by policy frameworks developed by the Welsh Government and

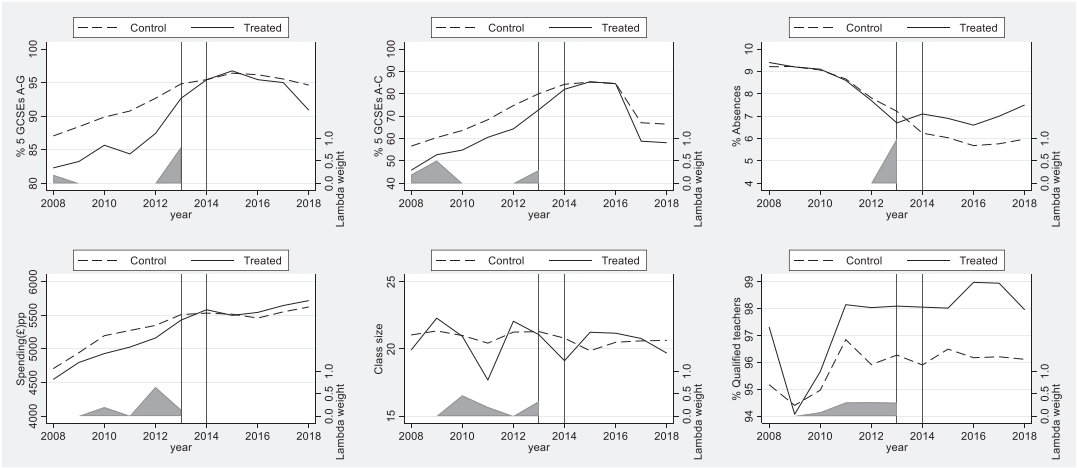


**FIGURE 1** | Educational outcomes and inputs: Merthyr Tydfil versus Synthetic Merthyr Tydfil. The horizontal solid lines show educational outcomes and inputs for Merthyr Tydfil. The dotted lines show the corresponding series for the synthetic controls based on the SDID method. The first vertical line shows the year when the intervention was implemented. The second vertical line shows the first post-intervention year. Time (Lambda) weights (i.e., year fixed effects from preperiod weighting) are represented by the gray area. Bootstrap iterations (100), common seed (4927).

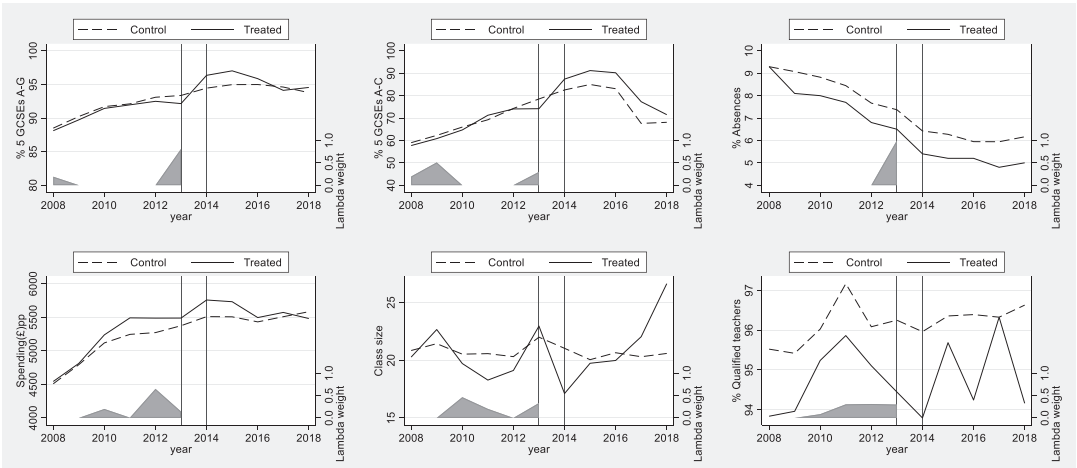


**FIGURE 2** | Educational outcomes and inputs: Monmouthshire versus Synthetic Monmouthshire. The horizontal solid lines show educational outcomes and inputs for Monmouthshire. The dotted lines show the corresponding series for the synthetic controls based on the SDID method. The first vertical line shows the year when the intervention was implemented. The second vertical line shows the first post-intervention year. Time (Lambda) weights (i.e., year fixed effects from pre-period weighting) are represented by the gray area. Bootstrap iterations (100), common seed (4927).

is formulated by local authority cabinets in consultation with directors/heads of local education.

To estimate the potential effects of the Welsh Government interventions in local education in 2013, publicly available educational outcomes data were collected and analyzed for Welsh local authorities for the school years 2007/2008 to 2017/2018.[3] Recognizing that local authorities must prioritize multiple goals simultaneously (Chen and Jia 2023; Zhong et al. 2025), indicators capturing different aspects of performance are employed. First, two indicators of academic attainment are analyzed to capture effectiveness, an essential component of good performance (Fernandez and Madumo 2024): (i) the percentage of pupils achieving at least five A*–G GCSE grades (or equivalent) in schools maintained by LAs; and, (ii) the percentage of pupils achieving at least five A*–C GCSE grades (or equivalent). GCSEs are public examinations normally taken by pupils in England and Wales in their fifth year of high school (ages 15–16). The proportion of pupils achieving the top four grades (A*, A, B, and C) has long been a key measure of the effectiveness of British high schools, with the proportion of pupils achieving GCSEs of any grade (i.e., A*-G) regarded as an important measure of basic educational standards in Wales (Foreman-Peck and Foreman-Peck 2006). Next, to gauge social equity (i.e., fair access to and treatment by public services) (McCandless et al. 2022), pupils' absence rates are analyzed, calculated as the number of half-day school sessions missed as a percentage of the number of half-day sessions available. In the education literature, absence rates are widely considered a proxy for social inclusion (Reid 2005)—a key concern of the Welsh Government (Knight and Crick 2022).

To explore the potential mechanisms through which the recovery boards might have influenced outcomes, three key educational inputs known to influence academic attainment were analyzed.

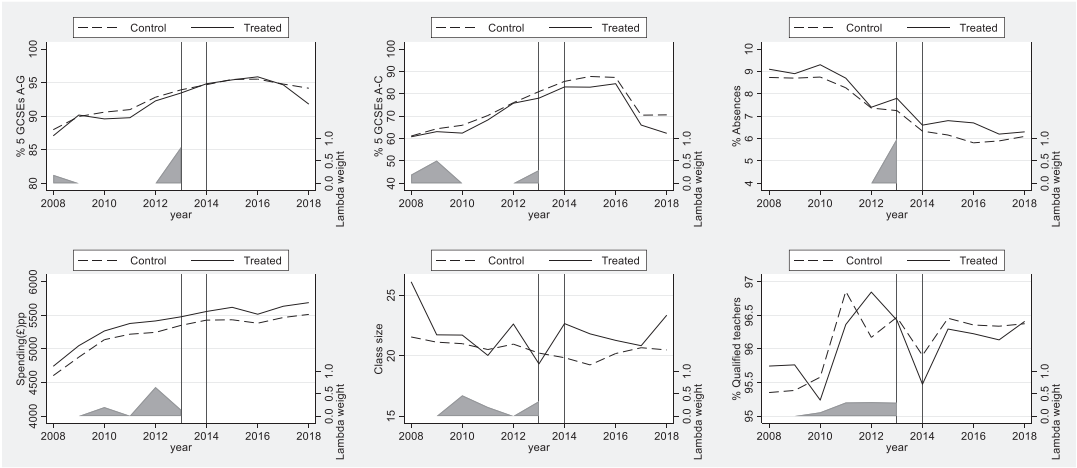


**FIGURE 3** | Educational outcomes and inputs: Pembrokeshire versus Synthetic Pembrokeshire. The horizontal solid lines show educational outcomes and inputs for Pembrokeshire. The dotted lines show the corresponding series for the synthetic controls based on the SDID method. The first vertical line shows the year when the intervention was implemented. The second vertical line shows the first post-intervention year. Time (Lambda) weights (i.e., year fixed effects from pre-period weighting) are represented by the gray area. Bootstrap iterations (100), common seed (4927).

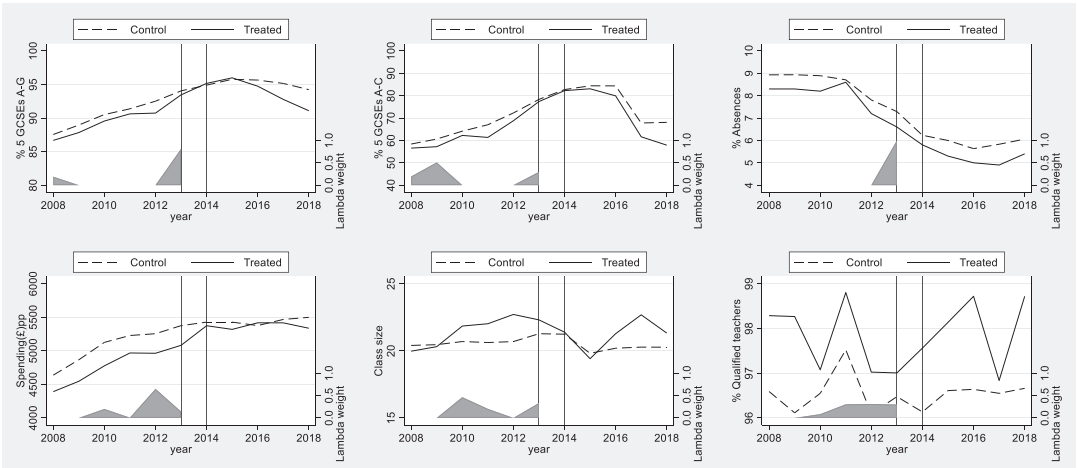


**FIGURE 4** | Educational outcomes and inputs: Torfaen versus Synthetic Torfaen. The horizontal solid lines show educational outcomes and inputs for Torfaen. The dotted lines show the corresponding series for the synthetic controls based on the SDID method. The first vertical line shows the year when the intervention was implemented. The second vertical line shows the first post-intervention year. Time (Lambda) weights (i.e., year fixed effects from pre-period weighting) are represented by the grey area. Bootstrap iterations (100), common seed (4927).

First, *expenditure per pupil*, since studies have suggested that resources are positively related to achievement (Verstegen and King 1998). Second, the average examination year *class size* because smaller classes are frequently regarded as being better for learning and, therefore, outcomes (Krueger 2002). Third, the percentage of Qualified Teachers employed in schools by each local authority, as comparative research suggests teaching quality may be a more important input than either the resources allocated or the size of classes (Woessmann 2016). The data source for all of the variables is StatsWales (2025).

## 5 | Results

Table 1 presents the summary statistics for the mean levels of educational outcomes and inputs in each of the "treated" local authorities and the donor pool before and after the interventions occurred in 2013. The table highlights that outcomes were worse and most inputs lower in Merthyr Tydfil than in the donor pool before the interventions, with a similar pattern for Torfaen, excepting the absence rate. There is a more mixed pattern of educational performance in the other treated authorities. Monmouthshire resembles the donor pool but has a smaller proportion of qualified teachers; Pembrokeshire is also similar to the donor pool but has higher spending per pupil. The postintervention performance of the treated authorities is better than in the preintervention period, with the exception of class sizes in Monmouthshire and Pembrokeshire, which grew slightly. Merthyr Tydfil and Monmouthshire achieved substantially better exam performance, with all the authorities other than Merthyr also experiencing considerable improvements in absence rates.

**TABLE 1** | Summary statistics: Before (2007/08–2012/13) and after (2013/14–2017/18) the interventions.

| | Merthyr Tydfil | | Monmouthshire | | Pembrokeshire | | Torfaen | | Donor pool | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Before | After | Before | After | Before | After | Before | After | Before | After |
| % 5 GCSEs A*-G | 85.94 | 94.70 | 90.98 | 95.59 | 90.39 | 94.52 | 89.81 | 93.95 | 90.96 | 94.84 |
| % 5 GCSEs A*-C | 58.55 | 73.78 | 67.12 | 83.53 | 68.08 | 75.79 | 63.92 | 72.95 | 67.89 | 77.89 |
| % Absences | 8.45 | 7.02 | 7.73 | 5.12 | 8.53 | 6.52 | 7.87 | 5.28 | 8.34 | 6.05 |
| Education expenditure (£s) pp | 4982.43 | 5599.09 | 5176.49 | 5607.11 | 5222.16 | 5604.30 | 4787.57 | 5372.52 | 5088.57 | 5460.41 |
| Year 11 class size | 20.66 | 20.40 | 20.49 | 21.09 | 21.91 | 21.97 | 21.52 | 21.22 | 20.64 | 20.15 |
| % Qualified teachers | 96.89 | 98.39 | 94.74 | 94.84 | 96.06 | 96.11 | 97.74 | 97.99 | 96.08 | 96.33 |

We turn next to the SDID estimates of the impact of the interventions on educational outcomes in each of the "treated" local authorities. The results for all the analyses use the same number of randomized bootstrap iterations (100) and a common seed (4927). The bootstrapping procedure permits the calculation of standard errors for the computation of confidence intervals around the parameter estimates by repeatedly sampling the donor pool with replacement, thereby creating a placebo value of the treatment effect (see Arkhangelsky et al. 2021). Accordingly, the SDID estimates presented in Figures 1–4 below are supplemented with estimates of the year-on-year treatment effects in Figures A2–A5. The pooled posttreatment effects are shown in Table S1.

### 5.1 | Merthyr Tydfil

The top row in Figure 1 depicts the educational outcomes for Merthyr Tydfil and its synthetic counterparts for the school years 2007/2008–2017/2018, while the bottom row graphs the educational outputs. The synthetic controls follow a similar trend to Merthyr in the pre-intervention period for two out of the three outcomes—that for % 5 GCSEs A*-G is not such a good match, so these results should be treated with more caution. Overall, the trajectory in educational attainment for Merthyr during the study period is akin to that for all Welsh local authorities (see Figure A1). In particular, % GCSEs A*-C rise until formal examinations received more weighting in the grading system in 2016/17 (Titley et al. 2020)—a change that seems to have led to a fall in attainment levels. Importantly, though, the raw figures shown in Figure A1 highlight how Merthyr performed poorly on the two attainment measures when compared with other authorities before the intervention in 2013, but did better thereafter. By contrast, absence rates worsen after the intervention.

The SDID estimates shown in Figure 1 suggest that attainment improved after the intervention that is, that performance improved relative to what would have happened without the intervention, especially immediately after establishment of the recovery board. Analysis of the treatment effects associated with the intervention confirm that the improvements in attainment were statistically significant during the first 2 years of the intervention (see Figure A2). Nevertheless, the SDID estimates imply an increase in absences post-intervention—a finding confirmed by the treatment effects analysis.

The results likely reflect substantive changes in educational outcomes. After the recovery board began its work, basic educational standards improved by around 2%, with the rate of "good" examination grades (i.e., A*-C) improving at an even faster rate. Nevertheless, these positive treatment effects were not sustained, as Merthyr's attainment trend lines return to those for the synthetic controls from 2015/2016. The turnaround literature suggests organizations often resume their preintervention trajectory (Balgobin and Pandit 2001). However, the return to counter-factual performance levels also coincides with the decommissioning of the recovery board (BBC 2016c), indicating that the impetus for improvement may have been lost without the support of the board.

In terms of absences, the SDID estimates suggest the intervention was associated with a 1% increase in absence rates, despite ongoing efforts to reduce absences in Merthyr's schools (Merthyr Tydfil Council 2014a). School inspectors noted the need for better school attendance at the time the recovery board was decommissioned in 2016, and the SDID estimates and postintervention treatment effects analysis highlight that this became a more urgent concern as rates grew thereafter. To explore mechanisms that can potentially explain these findings, the estimates for the educational inputs are discussed next.

Figure 1 suggests that spending per pupil may have increased as a result of the work of the recovery board. The treatment effects analysis indicates that spending in Merthyr was significantly above that in the synthetic control in every year, except 2015. Examination class size also increased after the intervention, particularly in 2015, which may partly explain the subsequent increase in absences and, later, declining examination performance (Havik et al. 2015; Moos and Moos 1978). However, this increase was not found to be statistically significant (see Figure A2). At the same time, the SDID estimates indicate that around 2% more qualified teachers were employed after the intervention, which might account for the initial improvement in attainment and how the authority spent additional resources.

### 5.2 | Monmouthshire

Figure 2 shows that the pre-intervention fit for Monmouthshire and its synthetic controls is very good for the educational outcomes, though less so for inputs. As for Merthyr, the attainment

trajectory is similar to all Welsh authorities (see Figure A1). However, there is a sharp improvement in performance after the intervention, which raises Monmouthshire from the middle to among the best-performing authorities in Wales. Absence rates are comparatively low before the intervention and follow a downward trajectory afterwards.

The SDID estimates shown in Figure 2 confirm that the recovery board may have spurred better attainment—something corroborated by the postintervention treatment effects analysis, with Monmouthshire displaying a statistically significant improvement in basic educational attainment for 2 years after the intervention and for the % of 5 GCSEs A*-C for 4 years after the intervention (see Figure A3). Although the SDID estimates indicate a drop in absence rates, the downward trend is roughly parallel to that of the synthetic control, suggesting no meaningful effect—as confirmed by the treatment effects analysis.

Substantively, the SDID estimates suggest that after the intervention basic educational standards improved by more than 3%, with "good" examination grades improving by more than 10%. In this case, the positive treatment effects for "good" attainment are sustained beyond the departure of the recovery board in 2016 (BBC 2016a), though convergence between Monmouthshire and its synthetic counterpart occurs for basic educational standards from that date onwards.

The educational input results suggest spending grew by around £200 per pupil immediately after the intervention. Although post-intervention treatment effects analysis suggests that there was no statistically significant difference in the spending of Monmouthshire and the synthetic control, new investments in the authority's "capacity for strategic and operational leadership and management" including through the appointment of "a permanent chief officer for children and young people" (Estyn 2016a) may have helped to improved performance. Monmouthshire's spending per pupil fell below that for the synthetic control after the recovery board concluded its work, perhaps explaining the performance dip shortly after. Average examination class size decreased by around nearly five pupils more in 2014 than if the intervention had not occurred, a statistically significant effect (see Figure A3) that could partly explain improved attainment (Moos and Moos 1978). Nevertheless, class size began to grow considerably after the recovery board was decommissioned. By contrast, the SDID estimates indicate a higher degree of volatility in the employment of qualified teachers in Monmouthshire than the synthetic control after the intervention. Taken together, these results suggest additional resources allocated after the recovery board was established may have been directed towards class size reductions and management capacity development, rather than strengthening human capital at the "street-level."

### 5.3 | Pembrokeshire

Figure 3 illustrates that the pre-intervention fit for Pembrokeshire and its synthetic controls for the educational outcomes and inputs is mostly good. Again, the attainment and absence trajectories are similar to all authorities (see Figure A1). However, for Pembrokeshire, those trajectories appear unaffected by the intervention. The SDID estimates shown in Figure 3 suggest establishment of the recovery board led to neither an increase or decrease in attainment—as is confirmed by the treatment effects analysis (see Figure A4). In fact, an unanticipated downturn in attainment seems to have occurred in 2018. The SDID estimates and treatment effects analysis point towards a small spike in absences of about half a percentage point in 2016, but otherwise the intervention made little difference to this outcome.

The educational input results suggest spending per pupil was not influenced by the intervention. The average examination class size was about three pupils per class larger in the 2 years after the intervention, a statistically significant effect (see Figure A4) which may explain why attainment did not improve before the recovery board was decommissioned in 2014 (BBC 2014). Pembrokeshire and its synthetic counterpart follow a similar trend in Qualified Teachers before and after the intervention. Overall, then, the results suggest no impactful changes in inputs occurred while the recovery board was in operation, which, coupled with the short tenure of the recovery board, may explain why outcomes did not change markedly in this case.

### 5.4 | Torfaen

The preintervention fits for Torfaen and its synthetic controls are very good for educational outcomes, though slightly less strong for educational inputs (see Figure 4). The attainment trajectories are similar to elsewhere (see Figure A1), though they fall further compared to other authorities in 2016 after the recovery board was decommissioned (BBC 2016b). Absences in Torfaen were comparatively low before and after the intervention.

The SDID estimates shown in Figure 4 suggest establishment of the recovery board led to better attainment in the year after the intervention, with basic educational standards and "good" examination grades improving by about 1%. However, the treatment effects analysis indicates that these improvements were not statistically significant (see Figure A5), and that after the recovery board was decommissioned "good" examination grades were worse than anticipated by 2018. The trajectory for absences in Torfaen follows a similar trend to its synthetic counterpart, with no statistically significant differences observed (see Figure A5).

The input estimates indicate education spending grew by about £200 per pupil immediately after the intervention, a statistically significant increase when compared with the synthetic control that was present in 2014, 2016, and 2017. This suggests that the allocation of additional educational resources may have driven the initial improvements in outcomes, but did not sustain those gains. The SDID estimates indicate that there was a growth in class size after the recovery board was decommissioned and a small drop in the percentage of Qualified Teachers. However, the treatment effects analysis suggests that these changes were not statistically significant, indicating that it is not possible to identify with confidence the potentially negative impact of these changes on educational attainment.

## 6 | Discussion

This paper presents quasi-experimental evidence that political centralization through partial takeovers of local authorities can potentially spur improvements in public service performance. The appointment of recovery boards to oversee education services in four local authorities by the Welsh Government in 2013 was associated with better effectiveness in two cases, but improvements in equity (i.e., pupil absence) rates were not observed. Importantly though, performance did not deteriorate in any of the "treated" authorities. Furthermore, analysis of educational inputs indicates that establishment of the boards was associated with the allocation of additional resources that may have been responsible for improvements, especially through more spending per pupil and class size reductions. In addition, inspection reports (Estyn 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c) indicate that the recovery boards generally supported the development of better performance management capabilities and partnership-working within local authorities. However, the quasi-experimental analyses also highlight that local authorities may struggle to sustain performance levels when central government interventions end. These findings have important theoretical and practical implications.

### 6.1 | Theoretical Implications

By addressing the performance effects of partial takeovers, this study advances research focused on political centralization and the role of government intervention in supporting public service improvement. Drawing upon indicators of effectiveness (educational attainment) and equity (absence), the quasi-experimental results suggest that independent recovery boards can potentially help local authorities turn around poorly performing services by bringing in outside expertise. While previous research has addressed full takeovers in single-purpose US school districts (e.g., Schueler 2025) and multipurpose local authorities (e.g., Singla et al. 2023), systematic analysis of the impact of partial takeovers has been lacking. By analyzing educational inputs, this study also explores some potential mechanisms through which improved outcomes may have been achieved. Nevertheless, subsequent research could employ survey-based methods and qualitative approaches to investigate in more depth the impact that partial takeovers have on the management of key services and the dynamics of political-bureaucratic relations when outside experts steer the process of public service turnaround.

The paper clarifies the role that partial centralization can play in addressing public service failure, but it is important to acknowledge that the deployment of recovery boards to help improve local education services was initially driven by a minister with a managerial approach to public service improvement (Evans 2022). Although the subsequent shift to a more collaborative style of government support for local education means that it has become more difficult, politically, for ministers to intervene in cases of poor performance (Davies et al. 2024), partial takeovers of local services are occurring in other parts of the public sector across the UK (Royce 2022; Vindrola-Padros et al. 2022). Research investigating the effects of partial takeovers in other human services, such as health and social care, and in technical services, such as water management (Lloyd Owen 2024), would therefore shed invaluable light on the generalizability of the findings reported here.

In addition to analyses of takeovers of different types of public services, international comparisons would provide essential insights into the influence of place and context on outcomes (McDonald III et al. 2022). Takeovers of, and interventions in, local authorities are increasingly common in countries with very different political systems, such as Germany, Israel, and the US (see above), but also New Zealand (Hardcastle 2015), Russia (Minaeva et al. 2023), South Africa (Khaile 2025), and Turkey (Adiguzel et al. 2024). Comparative research analyzing the dynamics of government interventions in local public services in countries with different administrative traditions could therefore tell us much about the impact of alternative approaches to political (de)centralization on public service performance.

As well as the literature on centralization and state takeovers, this study contributes to theories of public service turnaround by highlighting how an intervention-style approach can potentially support service improvement in poorly performing organizations, at least for short-term gains in effectiveness. Subsequent research should therefore seek to compare different types of intervention and the speed, depth and longevity of turnaround with which they are associated, as well as why outcomes might vary across different dimensions of performance. Another related question is what happens when multipurpose authorities experience multiple interventions in different services simultaneously (as in the Isle of Anglesey) or in multiple different time periods (as in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets) (UK Government 2025). Scholarship addressing these complex scenarios would provide vital insights into the dynamics of central-local relations in situations of chronic service failure, and the long-term impact and sustainability of government interventions to turnaround local public services.

### 6.2 | Practical Implications

The quasi-experimental results reported here provide useful insights for policymakers searching for effective measures to improve local public services. Although takeovers are politically controversial (Schueler 2025), they are potentially a means for supporting service improvement and for re-setting central-local relations in struggling local authorities (Anderson 2011). In particular, partial takeovers may represent a politically acceptable middle ground between a full neutralization and a promotion approach that enables national and local policymakers to draw upon outside expertise to help them work together towards shared goals. For example, Estyn's (2016c) monitoring report for Merthyr Tydfil draws attention to how the recovery board encouraged the "effective use of statutory powers to challenge the leadership and management in those schools whose performance is causing concern" and more effective scrutiny of educational outcomes by local politicians. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider how best to institutionalize and embed good practices developed during the period of intervention.

After the partial takeovers examined here ended, performance typically reverted to a preintervention trajectory or even worsened. Researchers have long argued that the capacity for evaluating and

managing performance needs to become embedded in the culture of local authorities if continuous improvement is to become a reality (Sanderson 2001). Policy-makers contemplating the use of takeovers and/or recovery boards to turnaround local public services should therefore be mindful of sources of resistance to long-run change within local authorities and be prepared to take the time required to develop a service improvement culture.

The findings also have important implications for the leaders and managers of local public services. Although accepting outside assistance to drive service improvement can be challenging, an openness to difficult conversations can potentially spark the creation of the capabilities required to achieve better performance (Jas and Skelcher 2005). For instance, in Monmouthshire, once the local authority had fully acknowledged the concerns raised by Estyn (2016a), "senior leaders responded more vigorously and the pace of progress improved considerably." Nevertheless, the authority was encouraged to continue engaging with external experts, especially from other authorities, to "ensure that there is no easing in the pace of improvement" (Estyn 2016a; Monmouthshire Council 2016). Private sector research suggests that such advice-seeking behaviors can generate better organizational performance, especially when external advisors have different viewpoints from organizational leaders (McDonald et al. 2008). Moreover, public administration research highlights how successful local authorities can serve as role models for their peers (Lundin et al. 2015).

## 7 | Conclusion

This study explores whether partial takeovers of local authorities can be an effective vehicle for improving services. The findings furnish evidence of some mechanisms that may have enabled recovery boards to support service improvement in authorities. Nevertheless, more research is needed to better understand whether direct interventions such as those studied here are more efficacious than locally developed turnaround strategies. Moreover, due to data limitations, it was not possible to analyze the full spectrum of educational outcomes for which local authorities are responsible. Partial takeovers may have been especially likely to result in improved examination performance given the emphasis on national educational standards and pupil attainment in most countries. However, a focus on examination results could divert local authorities' attention away from other important outcomes, especially those pertaining to social equity (Andersen 2008), which are increasingly at the forefront of public administration theory and practice (McDonald III et al. 2022). Research investigating the intended and unintended effects of government interventions in local public services in greater depth than was possible on this occasion would therefore reveal much about the challenges of achieving sustainable service improvement.


### Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Herb Andrews for collecting the data on which the analysis is based and the reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments.

### Funding

The author has nothing to report.


### Ethics Statement

Research based on publicly available secondary data, so ethical approval not required from institution.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Endnotes

[1] The Welsh Government used independent recovery boards because they believed that struggling authorities would benefit more from the input of external experts than having their responsibilities completely removed. For Merthyr Tydfil, the recovery board would provide support and challenge to the authority as it sought to address "systemic weaknesses." In Monmouthshire and Pembrokeshire, boards were necessary to "oversee the improvements needed, monitor the progress made and provide accountability" (Welsh Government 2013a, 2013b). For Torfaen, the board would "provide support and challenge to the authority" (Welsh Government 2014).

[2] Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Isle of Anglesey, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Neath Port Talbot, Newport, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Swansea, Torfaen, Vale of Glamorgan, Wrexham.

[3] Due to changes in the performance measures used by the Welsh Government to evaluate examination achievements in 2018/19, the data are not extended beyond the 2017/18 school year. Blaenau Gwent is excluded from the donor pool for the analysis because it was subject to a ministerial intervention relating to education services in 2011. The Isle of Anglesey is excluded because the whole authority was taken over by government-appointed commissioners in 2011.

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**Supporting Information**

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** padm70050-sup-0001-Supinfo.docx.

**Appendix A**

**Figures A1–A5**

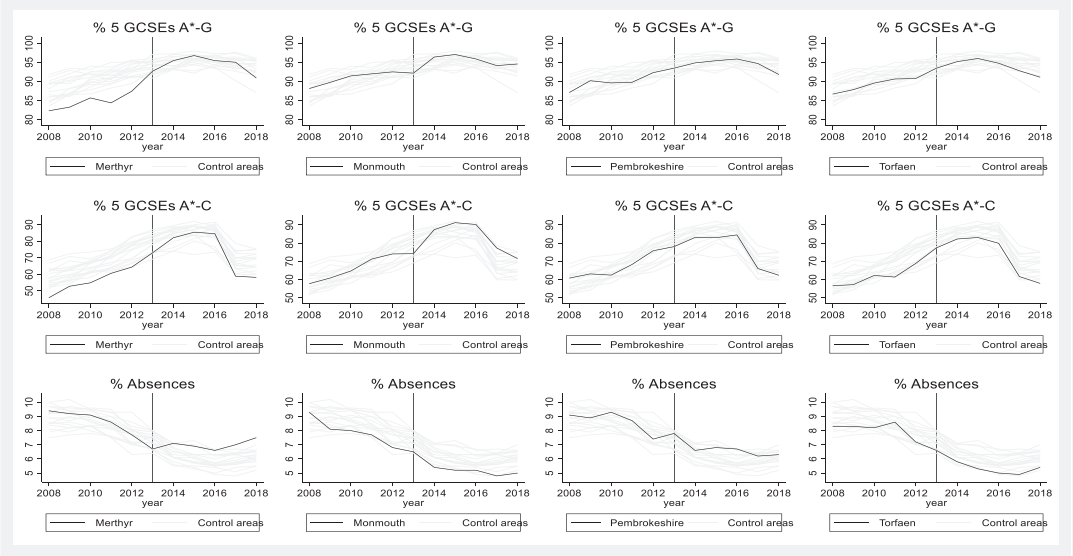


**FIGURE A1** | Educational outcomes in Merthyr, Monmouthshire, Pembrokeshire, and Torfaen.

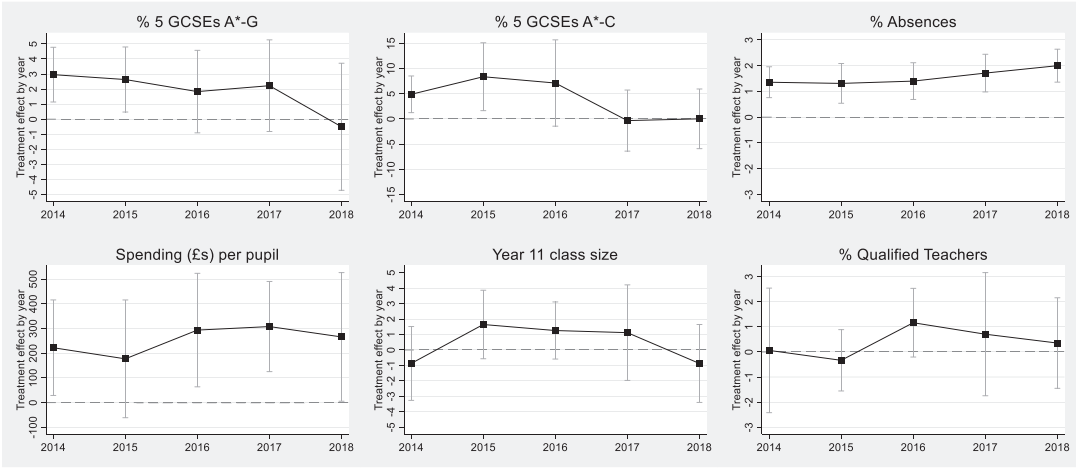


**FIGURE A2** | Post-intervention treatment effects: Merthyr Tydfil (point estimates with 95% confidence intervals).

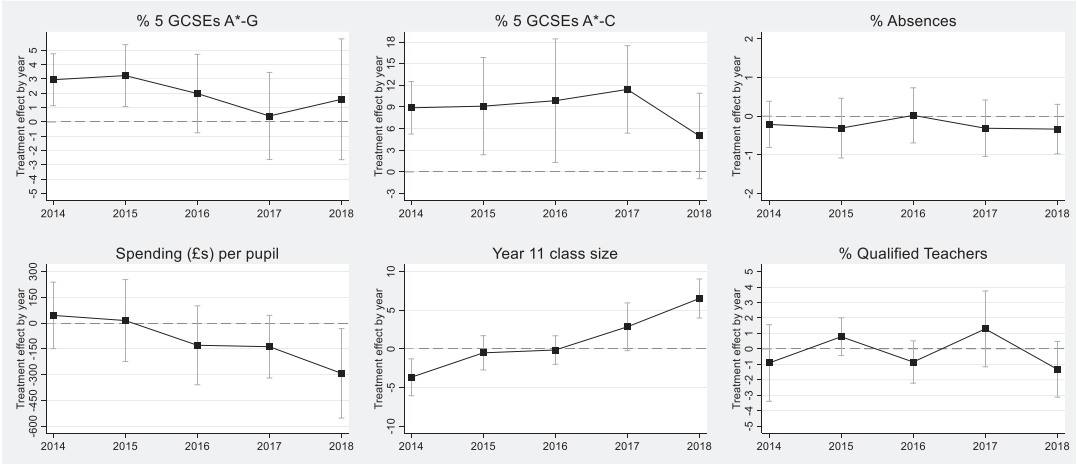


**FIGURE A3** | Post-intervention treatment effects: Monmouthshire (point estimates with 95% confidence intervals).

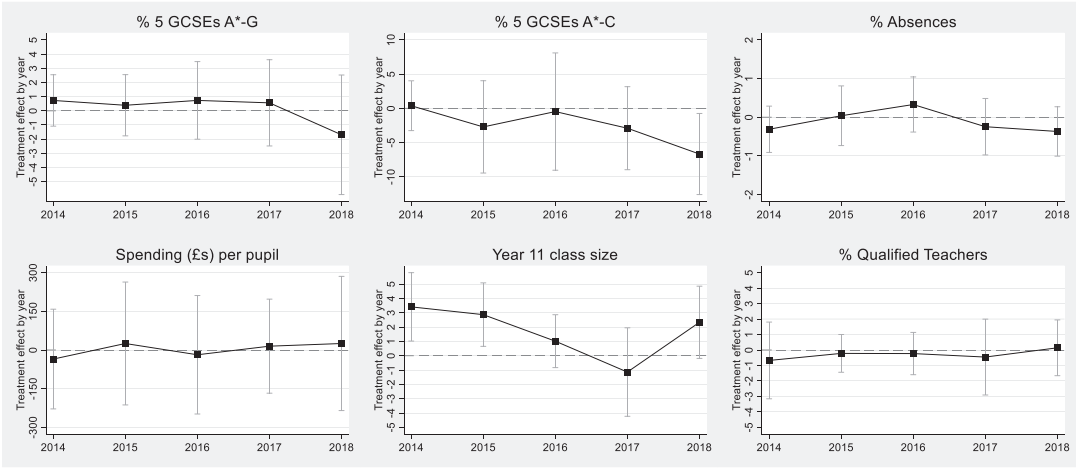


**FIGURE A4** | Post-intervention treatment effects: Pembrokeshire (point estimates with 95% confidence intervals).

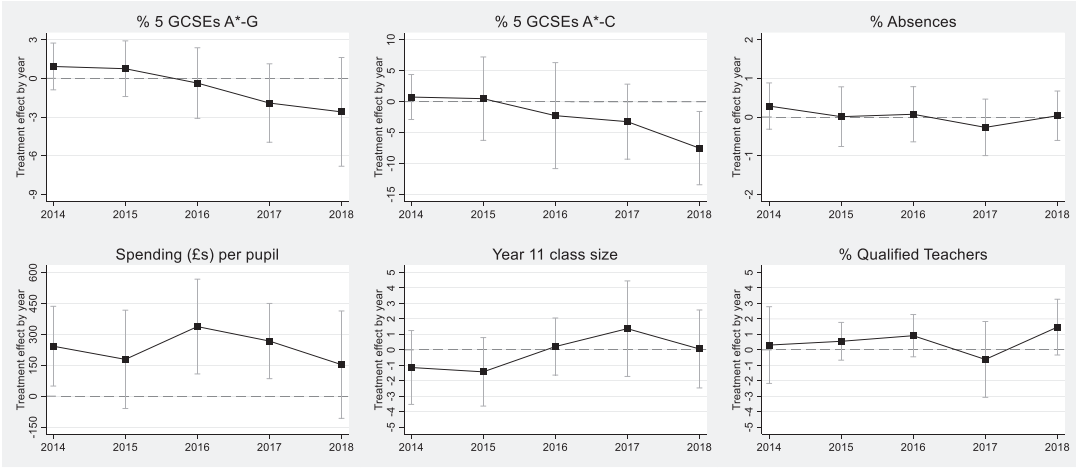


**FIGURE A5** | Post-intervention treatment effects: Torfaen (point estimates with 95% confidence intervals).