

DEMOS

MOVERS AND STAYERS

LOCALISING POWER TO
LEVEL UP TOWNS

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FOREWORD

Chris Hearld, Chief Financial Officer and Head of Regions, KPMG UK

After the outbreak of Covid-19, KPMG and Demos explored the extent to which visions for the future of towns were shared by the people that live in them. I found the research striking; residents were divided in their attitudes to jobs, newcomers, and types of investment, exposing a challenge for policymakers, and for the private sector, in delivering levelling up and spreading prosperity.

Certain themes emerged in our Future of Towns report – published in 2020 – warranting closer examination. These included: the importance of local participation and engagement of residents; the types of towns that needed the most support, including ex-industrial areas; and the need for a new kind of inclusive, local decision-making.

Since then, levelling up and efforts to reduce regional inequalities remain in the political mainstream and rightly so; this is a long-term ambition that reflects deep-seated imbalances across the UK.

From our perspective at KPMG, one of the most resonant aspects of the Government's Levelling Up White Paper was the phrase 'stay local, go far', which appears in its opening pages. This recognised that geography can, and does, impact life chances for better or worse, but also that opportunity can and should be spread more widely.

The phrase stuck with me because I think KPMG has a valuable perspective on this. Our approach – which sees us working between our homes, our client sites and our offices – means a significant amount of our time is spent working within towns across the UK.

Furthermore, having recently made an ambitious commitment to ensuring 29% of our Partner group will be from working class backgrounds by 2030, we wanted to better understand how geography limits social mobility.

Our firm has a proud heritage in the regions, and our offices across the UK are our foundations there. But a priority for us is ensuring that our people are connected across our network, wherever they are in the country. This means they can access opportunities, progress their careers, and work on client projects across the firm, without having to relocate.

As employers, businesses like ours have a role to play in understanding the challenges facing towns. 'Brain drain', and access to talent and skills, is a business risk, and unlocking local, productive potential to create stronger places is the prize.

We wanted to find out more about the motivations of those leaving ex-industrial areas, or less connected and struggling coastal towns. We also wanted to understand where the barriers to local investment exist in these places. The report has set out how these areas could be better supported, and what the role for policymakers, and for businesses, should be in doing so.

Demos looked in depth at two archetypal and politically significant 'Red Wall' areas, Blyth in the North East and Mansfield in the East Midlands, and spoke to the residents who have left these and similar areas for new opportunities, and those that have chosen to stay and build a life there.

With these perspectives, the research has allowed us to identify two pathways towards towns' revival, based on the principles of choice, and on harnessing existing and emerging strengths. Specific recommendations are aimed at developing local skills pipelines, embedding remote working locally, devolving specific powers, and improving public engagement.

Our hope is that this research informs the levelling up agenda as it develops further, and we look forward to engaging with policymakers across local and central government on it. I fully support its recommendations and will reflect with colleagues on how these insights can help our firm further support, empower, and connect our people.

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- Sarah McMillan, Assistant Service Director - Policy, Northumberland County Council (representing Northumberland County Council and North of Tyne Combined Authority)
- Dr Abigail Taylor, Research Fellow, City-REDI, University of Birmingham
- Professor Will Jennings, Deputy Head of School, Research, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, University of Southampton
- Andy Hollingsworth, Head of Devolution Strategy, Greater Manchester Combined Authority
- Jonathan Tew, Chief Executive Officer, South Tyneside Council
- Dr Sarah Hall, Professor of Economic Geography, University of Nottingham
- Rayhan Haque, Senior Policy Officer and Community Wealth Fund Manager, Local Trust
- John Foster, Director, Policy Unit, Confederation of British Industry

We would also like to thank the policymakers, industry experts and other stakeholders who attended our roundtable, as well as Adrian Bates, Head of Equalities Strategy at Greater Manchester Combined Authority, for taking the time to share his knowledge with us.

At Demos, thanks must go to Ben Glover for his leadership at the start of this project and guidance throughout. We would also like to thank Polly Curtis, Amelia Stewart, Felix Arbenz-Caines, Kosta Marco Juri, Andrew Phillips, Ciaran Cummins, Sumaya Akthar, Victoria Baines, Ellen Judson and Alice Dawson.

All findings and recommendations of course remain the authors own.

Courtney Stephenson and Kate Harrison

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The need to address place-based disparities has recently taken centre stage in British politics. Both major political parties in Westminster have spoken of their ambitions to address entrenched regional inequalities, with the government seeking to do so through its levelling up agenda. The significant changes at the top of government present an opportunity for a fresh approach to levelling up.

As part of these efforts, both the Conservatives and Labour have - in differing language, but similar terms - described a desire to make 'stay local, go far' a reality. For Johnson's government this meant that people "shouldn't have to leave the place they love to live the life they want".¹ Similarly, Labour have argued that people shouldn't need to "get out to get on".²

In an ongoing period of political change, it is imperative that addressing regional inequalities stays firmly on the agenda. The challenge of supporting people to thrive within the towns they come from is not going away. There is an opportunity for an incoming government to put levelling up at the heart of its ambitions and to prioritise the needs and interests of people in towns.

In this report we investigate the desirability and feasibility of these ambitions. To do so we spoke to people that have left towns and those that have decided to stay. These groups are crucial to making 'stay local, go far' a reality, but have so far been missing from the conversation.

STOP WORRYING ABOUT 'BRAIN DRAIN'

There is something of a moral panic developing in British politics about people leaving towns - a

phenomenon sometimes dubbed 'brain drain'. It's argued that too many people are leaving towns and that the government needs to intervene to do something about it. But if 'stay local, go far' primarily seeks to stop people leaving towns, we believe it will fail. Why?

First, we find that people leave towns for a wide variety of reasons, from economic to cultural factors. Designing policy to respond to all of these in an effective manner would be extremely challenging, perhaps impossible. In addition, leavers told us they left towns for things towns will always find hard to offer, from an incredibly wide range of employment opportunities to a rich nightlife and social scene. Finally, many leavers told us they left simply because they wanted to experience living elsewhere. Regardless of how much their hometown changed, they still would have left.

FOCUS ON THE STAYERS

Given this, we believe the new government should re-conceptualise 'stay local, go far' to focus on helping those that stay. We found stayers had a strong pride of place in the places they grew up, even though they recognised there were elements of their town that needed to improve. What's more, they were often brimming with ideas and enthusiasm for developing their hometowns for the better.

Helping stayers, means empowering communities, local government and businesses to take control of their town. This is essential for two reasons. First, too many stayers we spoke to currently feel shut out from decision making in their town. Second, towns can only reflect the preferences of stayers if they have a

¹ Cole, H. *DO OR DIE Tories risk betraying Brexit voters if they fail to 'Level Up' Britain, warns Michael Gove*. The Sun, 2021. Available at: [Tories risk betraying Brexit voters if they fail to 'Level Up' Britain, warns Michael Gove | The Sun](#) [Accessed 04/04/22]

² Nandy, L. *Trust is the missing ingredient' - Nandy's Levelling up speech to the LGA*. LabourList, 2022. Available at: ["Trust is the missing ingredient" - Nandy's levelling up speech to the LGA - LabourList](#) [Accessed 01/07/22]

greater say in local policy. Below we set out how to achieve this.

1. Devolution of power to local government and communities

Even where towns face shared challenges or have similar demographics, the people who live in those towns often have different priorities. In Mansfield, improving the spaces for socialising was a high priority, whereas in Blyth people were more focussed on making the most of local industrial growth. The difference in attitudes demands a bespoke, town-by-town approach to empowering stayers.

We recommend that power and resources for certain policy areas - such as skills - is devolved to local government. We suggest that the combined authority model of devolution is the most suited to creating strong, well-connected places in which people can 'stay local and go far'.

2. Public participation in policy making

Towns already have a wealth of local expertise: local leaders, residents and businesses are well versed in the challenges their town faces and what it needs to thrive. To give levelling up policies the best chance of success, they should be devised and delivered with local people.

We recommend that public participation is incorporated into local decision making as standard. Existing combined authorities should be required to set out how their levelling up policies would be developed using participatory methods. The approval of new devolution deals should also be subject to the inclusion of a clear plan for public participation.

We have developed specific recommendations which set out how this approach could be applied in the two towns we visited: Blyth and Mansfield.

MANSFIELD: THE CHOICE MODEL

In Mansfield, lack of choices in residents' social and professional life was a clear theme. Our recommendations centre around improving the choices people in Mansfield have to enable them to stay local and go far. We propose:

- The creation of a remote working hub in the town centre to give people more places to work remotely and encourage businesses to offer hybrid jobs in the region.
- A local authority led careers advice service delivered through the school curriculum and the establishment of a Universal Work Service.
- A town-wide social revival, based on a citizens assembly for residents to deliberate on initiatives such as social zones and subsidised rents for local businesses.

BLYTH: THE LOCAL INDUSTRY MODEL

People in Blyth were proud of the industrial heritage in their town and the growth of the green industry in recent years. To ensure people have a share in the prosperity of the green industrial growth in Blyth, we propose:

- Combined authority-led skills pathways to local jobs, working with educational institutions to connect students to local employers.
- 'Split roles' for employees in local businesses where employees in highly skilled jobs work part-time in their industry and part-time teaching in local schools and colleges.
- The local authority develops a long-term public participation strategy to involve residents in decisions about investment in the town.

INTRODUCTION

Fixing regional inequalities in the UK - if at first you don't succeed...

The United Kingdom is a starkly unequal place to live, with higher levels of regional inequality than any comparable country.³ Standards of living and employment opportunities vary between and within regions. This inequality is a long-standing feature of a society that has for too long failed to share the profits of its prosperity and protect people equally from tough times.^{4,5} While the disparities between regions is often discussed, it is inequality within regions that is particularly pronounced.⁶ The impact this has on social mobility is of particular concern - three quarters of adults believe there are large differences in the opportunities available across the country.⁷

Successive governments have developed various strategies in an attempt to address the UK's geographical inequalities. From Thatcher's Urban Development Corporations, to the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal under New Labour, there have been many iterations of what we currently know as levelling up.^{8,9}

Levelling up has been the government's flagship agenda, the details of which were set out in the Levelling Up White Paper in February 2022. This presents the government's strategy to "end the geographical inequality which is such a striking feature of the UK".¹⁰ In the context of the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation, the need to address the disparities that exist within and between regions should not only be driven by politics, but by moral necessity.^{11,12}

In light of the ongoing governmental changes, there may be questions about the future of levelling up as a policy agenda. We argue that this is a key opportunity for the new government to set out a clear plan to bring much needed change to towns and make 'stay local, go far' a reality.

STAY LOCAL, GO FAR?

Patterns of geographic mobility - how people move around the country - have long been cited as a contributing factor to regional inequality. Young people (often graduates) leave their hometowns for pastures new, and it is often argued this is to the detriment of the places they leave. This phenomenon, which is particularly common in

3 Mcann, P. *Perceptions of regional inequality and the geography of discontent: insights from the UK*. Regional Studies, 2019. Available at: Full article: Perceptions of regional inequality and the geography of discontent: insights from the UK (tandfonline.com) [Accessed on 10/01/22]

4 Agrawal, S. and Phillips, D. *Catching up or falling behind? Geographical inequalities in the UK and how they have changed in recent years*. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020. Available at: Catching up or falling behind? Geographical inequalities in the UK and how they have changed in recent years | Inequality: the IFS Deaton Review [accessed 20/03/22]

5 Marmot, M. & others. *HEALTH EQUITY IN ENGLAND: THE MARMOT REVIEW 10 YEARS ON*. Institute of Health Equity, 2020. Available at: the-marmot-review-10-years-on-full-report.pdf (instituteofhealthequity.org) [accessed on: 10/03/22]

6 Cribb, J. & others. *Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2017*. Available at: *Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2017* (ifs.org.uk). [accessed on: 12/03/22]

7 Social Mobility Commission. *Social Mobility Barometer 2021*, 2021. Available at: Social Mobility Barometer 2021: public views on social mobility - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) [accessed 15/03/22]

8 Parkinson, M. *The Thatcher Government's Urban Policy, 1979-1989: A Review*. The Town Planning Review, 1989. Available at: The Thatcher Government's Urban Policy, 1979-1989: A Review on JSTOR [accessed 15/03/22]

9 Mager, C. *National Strategy for neighbourhood renewal. A framework for consultation*. Further Education Development Agency, 2000. Available at: National strategy for neighbourhood renewal A framework for consultation (ioe.ac.uk) [accessed 20/03/22]

10 Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022. Available at: Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper (publishing.service.gov.uk) [accessed 02/02/2022]

11 Duggan, J. *Bank of England warns of worst cost of living crisis since records began after raising interest rates to 0.5%*. iNews, 2022. Available at: Bank of England warns of worst cost of living crisis since records began after raising interest rates to 0.5% (inews.co.uk) [accessed 20/3/22]

12 Patrick, H. *UK heading for worst cost-of-living crisis since 1950's, says economist*. The Independent, 2022. Available at: UK heading for worst cost-of-living crisis since 1950s, says economist | News | Independent TV [accessed 20/05/22]

coastal towns and in regions such as the North East, is sometimes referred to as 'brain drain'.¹³ Brain drain is a more nuanced phenomenon than some might suggest: while some areas do suffer more than others, brain drain is not an exclusively northern problem. Affluent towns outside of these areas, such as Tunbridge Wells, also lose graduates.¹⁴

There are cross-party concerns about these patterns of mobility and their implications for regional inequality. Michael Gove, former cabinet minister and architect of the government's levelling up agenda, spoke of his ambitions to equalise opportunities across the country, so that "no one should have to leave the place they love in order to live the life they want".¹⁵ Indeed, he has referred to this as a "moral obligation".¹⁶

Labour have voiced similar concerns. Lisa Nandy, the Shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, has said that young people in certain parts of the country have to "get out to get on".¹⁷

COASTAL AND EX-INDUSTRIAL TOWNS

The political salience of this topic and absence of a developed policy agenda provides an opportunity to test whether 'stay local, go far' is a desirable and deliverable policy ambition. To do so, we focused on coastal and ex-industrial towns.

Towns in ex-industrial or coastal areas are often cited as primary targets of levelling up. Hartlepool and Hastings are examples of towns receiving funding under the Towns Fund, awarded to towns that were invited to develop proposals for a Town Deal, in 2021.¹⁸ In our research in 2020, we found that while towns face a variety of different problems, coastal and ex-industrial towns face particular barriers to their potential prosperity.¹⁹ Ex-industrial towns, for example, face significant employment deprivation, while coastal towns have lower than average pay and 'significantly lower' social mobility.²⁰

Coastal and ex-industrial towns are prime targets for current and future levelling up policies. The Johnson government identified them both in the Levelling Up White Paper as places that often have poor socioeconomic outcomes.²¹ Many are also losing comparatively high percentages of graduates to the 'brain drain' phenomenon, as IFS research has highlighted.²² The combination of these factors make coastal and ex-industrial towns likely locations for any 'stay local, go far' policy interventions.

OUR METHOD

It is important that a policy agenda seeking to encourage people to stay local and go far in towns should put those people and places front and centre of its approach. There are two groups whose perspectives are essential to understanding whether 'stay local, go far' is a deliverable policy ambition: those who had left coastal and ex-industrial towns and those who had chosen to stay.

Methodologically, this report draws on the following sources:

- A comprehensive literature review, focusing on evidence for the 'brain drain' phenomenon in towns.
- Regular consultations with our advisory group, made up of local leaders, policy experts and academics to aid the development of our research and to provide local expertise. Our advisory group members are listed in the acknowledgements section of this report.
- A roundtable discussion with a range of experts, including representatives from industry bodies and local government.
- Four focus groups in May 2022: two with those who had left ex-industrial and coastal towns, and two with those who had chosen to stay.

13 Britton J, van der Erve L, Waltmann, B & Xu X. *London calling? Higher education, geographical mobility and early career earnings*. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2021. Available at: [London calling? Higher education, geographical mobility and early-career earnings - Institute For Fiscal Studies - IFS](#) [accessed 10/01/22]

14 Britton J, van der Erve L, Waltmann, B & Xu X. *London calling?* Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2021.

15 Cole, H. *DO OR DIE Tories risk betraying Brexit voters if they fail to 'Level Up' Britain, warns Michael Gove*. The Sun, 2021. Available at: [Tories risk betraying Brexit voters if they fail to 'Level Up' Britain, warns Michael Gove | The Sun](#) [Accessed 04/04/22]

16 Lloyd, C. *Michael Gove says levelling up is 'our moral obligation' during Darlington visit*. The Northern Echo, 2021. Available at: [Michael Gove says levelling up is 'our moral obligation' during Darlington visit | The Northern Echo](#) [accessed 15/03/22]

17 Nandy, L. *Trust is the missing ingredient' - Nandy's Levelling up speech to the LGA*. LabourList, 2022. Available at: "Trust is the missing ingredient" – Nandy's levelling up speech to the LGA – LabourList [Accessed 01/07/22]

18 Rt Honourable Robert Jenrick MP and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. *Press Release: Thirty towns to share £725 million to help communities build back better*. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2021. Available at: [Thirty towns to share £725 million to help communities build back better - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) [accessed 10/03/22]

19 Carr, H. & others. *The Future of Towns*. Demos, 2020. Available at: [The-Future-of-Towns-Report.pdf \(demos.co.uk\)](#) [accessed 10/12/22]

20 Carr, H. & others. *The Future of Towns*. Demos, 2020.

21 Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022. Available at: [Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) [accessed 02/02/2022]

22 Britton J, van der Erve L, Waltmann, B & Xu X. *London calling? Higher education, geographical mobility and early career earnings*. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2021. Available at: [London calling? Higher education, geographical mobility and early-career earnings - Institute For Fiscal Studies - IFS](#) [accessed 10/01/22]

Stayers and Leavers

In our focus groups we spoke with residents of two towns, Blyth and Mansfield, as well as with two separate groups of leavers, one from ex-industrial and one from coastal towns. Participants were aged 20 to 40 in all four groups.

In Blyth and Mansfield, we conducted in-person focus groups with people who had grown up in the town and still lived there, including some who had moved away and returned. These towns are interesting and politically salient examples of coastal and ex-industrial towns, considered key battlegrounds in the next general election.

We wanted to explore how stayers felt about their hometowns, their lives there and what they thought could be improved. Drawing on the experiences of Blyth and Mansfield residents in our focus groups, we were able to develop bespoke recommendations for these two towns. Our conversations explored their motivations for staying and whether factors such as remote working had influenced their decision to stay or could improve their lives in the future.

Our focus groups with leavers were conducted online. We spoke to one group who had moved away from the ex-industrial towns they grew up in and another group who had moved away from coastal towns. The ex-industrial leavers had moved away from Corby, Middlesbrough and Mansfield, while coastal leavers had left Grimsby, Blyth, Whitby and Great Yarmouth.

Our conversations with leavers focussed on the factors that had motivated their choice to leave, how they felt about their hometown and whether they would consider returning. By speaking to people from a range of towns, we could identify similarities between their experiences as leavers, as well as similarities between and within place types.

We also spoke to both groups about how they felt about one another: did leavers think those who had stayed led similar lives to them? How did their opportunities compare? We also asked about the future of their hometowns, remote working and whether they had discussed their options for the future when they were younger. Fundamentally, we wanted to determine whether 'stay local, go far' was something that either group wanted and, if so, how they saw that happening in the towns they were from.

CHAPTER 1

WHY DO PEOPLE LEAVE TOWNS?

In this chapter we explore what motivated people who chose to leave the coastal and ex-industrial towns they grew up in.

To assess whether ‘stay local go far’ is a desirable and deliverable policy ambition, it is important to understand why people leave towns. The ‘brain drain’ narrative that dominates this policy ambition generally focuses on the young people who leave towns in search of economic prosperity elsewhere. Subsequent policy solutions would likely seek to cater to those people.²³ Any policy that aims to effectively address outward migration from towns needs to understand what motivates young people to leave the places they come from to examine whether a policy that encourages them to stay is viable.

Drawing on our focus groups with leavers, this chapter explores participants’ reasons for moving away, including career opportunities, social life and diversity. We then discuss leavers’ attitudes to the towns they left and whether they might return.

LEAVERS LEFT FOR A WIDE RANGE OF REASONS

Far from the story often told of young people leaving their hometowns for purely economic reasons, the conversations we had with leavers paint a far more complex picture. This is not to detract from the importance leavers placed on their careers, but to demonstrate that employment is just one factor. For example, diversity and social life play a significant role in determining where young people choose to

live. Often the reasons leavers gave for leaving were highly personal, such as moving to be with a partner or to care for a family member.

Economic factors are important...

In terms of employment, we found two primary reasons for people leaving. First, leavers saw the towns they had moved away from as lacking in opportunities, whether that was in terms of progression or specific career paths, such as in scientific research. Some people said that at home they had to compete for a limited number of jobs compared to cities. This competition meant they felt they had no choice but to leave. One coastal leaver told us, “it just felt like there was not really any career options if I wanted to stay”.

“When I graduated I was like, I want to live in a big city. I want to earn that money.”

– Male, coastal leaver

In addition, some leavers also felt a ‘pull’ to move elsewhere. The places they had moved to, primarily cities, were seen in stark contrast to their hometowns. Cities offered opportunities for development, more jobs and higher salaries. Leavers felt pulled towards these places and the prospect of variation and progression in their careers they offered.

...but so are social and cultural factors

23 Swinney, P. & Williams, M. The Great British Brain Drain. Centre for Cities, 2016. Available at: 16-11-18-The-Great-British-Brain-Drain.pdf (centreforcities.org) [accessed 15/03/22]

Social and leisure opportunities

“London’s more lively, so, I was, kind of, excited to experience, yes, that busy life.”

– Female, ex-industrial leaver

While jobs were important, people told us that their motivations to leave spanned economic, social and cultural factors. Alongside a desire for better wages or a specific career path, a vibrant and varied social life was also important to many of the people we spoke to. When asked his reasons for leaving, one coastal leaver told us:

“Job, I suppose socialising, activities, stuff to do. In the night-time, every night of the week there are things to do in London. Whereas in Grimsby, it was shut by 6 o’clock. So, yes, everything. My whole lifestyle has changed because of it.”

Again, to many leavers, the social life in the towns they had left compared to the places they now lived stood in direct contrast. Choice in their social lives was framed by leavers as both a push and a pull factor - it was something that their towns lacked “massively” and something that cities had in excess.

The lack of activities and social spaces was a prominent area of dissatisfaction among both leavers and stayers - who we discuss in Chapter 2. For leavers however, it was generally a higher priority and, for some, it was a key factor in their choice to move elsewhere.

Diversity

It was not just the chance to shop or socialise in the places that leavers now call home that influenced their choice to move away. A desire to feel accepted and meet a diverse range of people was also important. For some, staying in their hometown was not an option because they felt they could not fully be themselves or socialise with like-minded people. One man we spoke to felt that he had been hiding his identity when he lived in his hometown, as it didn’t feel like somewhere he was accepted or could meet similar people. He told us:

“It just didn’t cut it for me. It wasn’t exciting, it wasn’t accepting... I just couldn’t be myself basically, so therefore for years my identity was, kind of, stolen, or masked, if you like.”

Many of the leavers we spoke to had moved to cities for the diversity that comes from living among people from a wide range of backgrounds. Particularly for LGBTQ+ people, cities were seen as vibrant, diverse places that offered the chance to feel included and to embrace their identity. Others also spoke about how different their lifestyles had become since moving. They had learnt languages, socialised and met people they never would have met if they had stayed at home.

PRIDE OF PLACE TOWARDS THEIR HOMETOWNS MAY BE WEAKER - BUT LEAVERS TAKE PRIDE IN WHERE THEY LIVE NOW

In Chapter 2 we discuss the strong sense of place that was shared by most of the stayers we spoke to. For leavers, however, this was generally not the case. When asked how they felt about their hometowns and specifically if they felt pride towards those places, many leavers had either negative or neutral things to say. One man from an ex-industrial town told us, “I don’t like going back now, because it drags me down a bit [...]. So, [I was] drawn to somewhere else, and wanting to move away.” Another said, “it’s just grim.”

Some said they no longer considered the town they came from as their home. When asked if they had ever considered staying, one man said “No, not even a thought flew through my mind at all. I didn’t want to be there.” The small, ‘conservative’ nature of their towns was viewed negatively by some, while others spoke of not enjoying going back to visit.

With the ability to now look at their hometowns from the outside, they clearly saw the stigma attached to the places they had left, particularly those from ex-industrial towns. One participant told us: “I remember when I went on a date with a guy once and I told him I was from Blyth, and he said, ‘Don’t stab me.’ Legit.”

Leavers disputed the idea that their hometowns were ‘bad’ places. Instead, they saw this perception as a contributing factor in their decline. Lack of employment or high crime rates were viewed as national issues that were too easy to attach to a stereotypically ‘left behind’ town in the north. Leavers felt that the problems their towns faced were due to a lack of funding. “It has got a bad reputation because there is just a lack of investment,” one coastal town leaver told us.

“Everywhere’s got good places, everywhere’s got bad places. But it’s only the bad places that get reported on the media, most of the time.”

– Male, ex industrial leaver

Despite this fair-minded view and a shared desire for their hometowns to improve, most of the people we spoke to would not consider returning. Even coastal leavers, who were typically more positive about their hometowns than those from ex-industrial towns mostly said they would not consider returning in the future.

For the small minority who would consider returning, this was largely only if they saw improvements in their hometown, or to move somewhere else in the wider region. People were sceptical that these places would improve, citing a need for investment from both government and the private sector that has long been lacking. One ex-industrial leaver said, “I think the government needs to cast it’s eye on the North.”

For leavers, a sense of pride was not as consistently rooted in place as it was among those who had stayed. Instead, some felt that their pride stemmed from what they had achieved as an individual, regardless of where they had come from or moved to. Some leavers spoke of feeling a sense of belonging in the places they lived now. For others, staying within the region was enough to retain a connection to their town. This suggests that some leavers may move away while retaining a sense of staying local, if only in a broader regional sense.

“I don’t feel like an outcast. I’m quite happy here. I think that’s been a big factor in why I stayed [in a nearby city]. It’s not too far from home, but it’s also the North East, if that makes sense.”

– Male, ex industrial leaver

EVEN IF THEIR TOWN CHANGED, LEAVING WOULD STILL BE THE MOST ATTRACTIVE CHOICE

This evidence may appear to provide a clear plan of action for policymakers: if towns had better job prospects, vibrant social lives and increased diversity, ‘brain drain’ would cease to exist.

However, importantly, many participants told us that making these changes would not have affected their decision to move away. People we spoke to

wanted the best for their town and recognised that the problems they identified were in dire need of attention. Nonetheless, the opportunity to experience a different lifestyle and move to a new place was so important that no improvement to their towns would have changed their decision. When asked what it would have taken for her to ‘stay local and go far’ in her hometown, one coastal leaver said: “turning it into a huge city probably, which I do not actually want to happen to the place.”

Clearly, this is a nuanced problem. People’s priorities and aspirations are highly complex and towns are not likely to be able to replicate everything that a city can offer.

CONCLUSION

The factors pushing people away from the towns they grew up in are highly varied. Drawing on conversations with people who had left coastal and ex-industrial towns, we present a different picture. People do not solely leave because their hometown cannot offer them the lives they want, but specifically because they want to experience something different elsewhere.

This suggests that trying to stop the flow of people leaving towns to pursue a different life is an impractical and misguided use of resources. Levelling up towns should not strive to create mini-cities to try and match the priorities of potential leavers. If the desire to do something different - leaving - is important for leavers, then who are policymakers to seek to dampen it?

CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE'S CHOICE TO STAY

When policymakers speak of the ambition to enable people to 'stay local, go far', it is often framed in the context of people who leave their hometowns. This can mean that those who stay in those towns are missing from the policy debate. We wanted to turn 'stay local, go far' on its head and ask what it could mean for the people who stay.

This chapter sets out what we found in our conversations with those who have chosen to stay in their hometowns. We explored their experiences and motivations for staying, as well as asking them what is already working well in their towns and what, if anything, is holding local people back from 'going far', in their eyes. This is key to understanding what it means to 'stay local, go far' in coastal and ex-industrial towns.

THE DRAW TO STAY: PRIDE OF PLACE

"I just like that I'm where I feel like I should be."

– Female, Blyth stayer

Pride of place is often talked about as something that needs to be 'restored' in order to level up towns like Blyth and Mansfield.²⁴ Contrary to this idea, we found that stayers in both Blyth and Mansfield already have high pride of place. Many of

them talked about feeling a 'pull' to the place and emphasised that they felt at home there. In Blyth, one person told us that they have a "total sense of belonging here".

Community was also a strong pull to stay in Mansfield. Knowing other people in the area was key, not just in terms of close family and friends, but also in the neighbourhood more generally. For many stayers, the idea that everyone knew each other and the sense of safety that created was a key factor in choosing to live in their hometown. One woman in Blyth said, "I've always lived in Blyth and my friends and family always lived here. I just think I'd feel lost if I went somewhere else."

"The community, the people actually aren't that bad. The majority of the people. You get your wrong ones, like you do everywhere, but generally the people in Mansfield are decent."

– Female, Mansfield stayer

A connection to their town's heritage, particularly its working class industrial history, was also important to people's sense of pride. One person in Blyth told us that she knew her family history went back a long way in the local area. She said, "I just like the idea of coming back to where my roots are from." A participant from Mansfield shared this view, saying,

²⁴ Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022. Available at: [Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/102442/levelling-up-white-paper.pdf) [accessed 02/02/2022]

"I kind of appreciate the history. I mean, I'm from a mining town and I like coming from a working-class background, so I do feel that, which is a sort of tie to this place."

People in Blyth recognised that industry had always been an important part of the town and were proud of the developments in green energy and the jobs in that sector that were becoming important to the area. Talking about a school trip to see the offshore wind farm as a child, one woman commented, "I do think we're pioneering and leading the way". Participants said they were proud of both the town and wider region, telling us that people always come back when they move away. One woman who had previously left but had chosen to return said that Blyth "pulls people home".

Participants felt that the new battery plant being built nearby would offer jobs that could replace some of those lost through the historical closure of local mines and steelworks. One woman said, "it's giving those types of people a career again without having to go somewhere else to do it." Another added, "It's the way forward, yes. It's got to be."

"I've lived in New York. I've been all around the world with work, but I find that our beach is one of the most beautiful in the world."

– Female, Blyth stayer

Pride of place did not mean that people we spoke to were not critical of the town they lived in: almost all expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of their town. However, pride of place was nonetheless an important pull factor.

One woman told us that her family had a negative view of Mansfield when she was growing up and encouraged her to leave. Despite this, she expressed pride in her town and felt she had what she needed there to live a good life, including in raising her child. When talking about towns having what they needed, several people mentioned access to outdoor spaces, such as parks and beaches. In Mansfield, one woman shared her appreciation of local green spaces: "there's a lot of woods. Like, from my house I can take a sort of a green route and walk through a massive section of woods and walk basically to the other side of Mansfield."

THE DRAW TO STAY: SUPPORT NETWORKS

For many stayers, one of the most important factors in staying in their hometown was proximity to family and friends. In both Mansfield and Blyth the people we spoke to generally felt that they had a strong

support network in their town and saw this as a benefit of the area. Even for those who felt that there would be benefits to living elsewhere, such as more varied employment opportunities, their priority was being close to friends and family. For example, a participant in Mansfield told us, "I do want to leave, but part of me is obviously pulled with my family and everything. Like, pretty much all of my mum's side of my family are within, say, a 20-minute drive."

Family was seen as particularly important for support with childcare, which had both practical and financial benefits. One person in Mansfield told us that his brother had moved away, but decided to move back. This had been due to the need for support with childcare: his mum was able to go part-time at work to care for his child, which saved them considerable nursery costs.

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

When asked if they could 'live the life they wanted' in their hometown, almost everyone thought that they could. Their desire was strongly rooted in pride of place and support networks. However, this did not mean they were content with the way things were, nor that they couldn't identify reasons why they might want to leave. Key priorities were increased social activities, work opportunities, education and training, and public engagement in the policy process. The following sections outline these issues.

"I like the idea of living round here, like the family aspect, the cost of living and stuff is quite cheap. It's just the job prospects, I think you would be better moving elsewhere, but I think I would rather travel to work rather than move to a different area." (Male, Mansfield stayer)

Priority 1: Improved opportunities for socialising

Improving the range and quality of social activities was a priority in both towns

"It's like Groundhog Day."

– Female, Mansfield stayer

In Mansfield there was a strong sense that there wasn't enough to do in the town to socialise. A number of people gave this as a reason why they would consider leaving, describing the town as "monotonous". People felt that other nearby towns and cities had more to offer. Generally, people went out of town to socialise and expressed a desire for more places to shop and eat, as well as more activities for children in the town centre.

This was particularly true for young people who left to go to university and enjoyed a better social life in their university towns and cities. Participants with grown-up children explained that this was the reason their children wouldn't return to their hometowns. One mum said of their child, "it was very much a 'I'm out and I'm gone.'" Others agreed that people they knew who had left were hesitant to return because of the limited social life.

"One of my mates moved to Nottingham uni, and he's slowly been moving back towards this way because everyone he knows is here. But he still wants to have – he's torn between the two because he wants the Nottingham nightlife and the social aspect, but everyone he grew up with is still round here."

– Male, Mansfield stayer

People idealised the social lives of those in cities, but were realistic about what their town could offer

Participants compared Mansfield with neighbouring cities, feeling that there was more to do elsewhere. For a small number of residents, this could be a draw to move away. Some romanticised city life: "if you speak to somebody who lives in a city, they don't do, like, a food shop because they go out and they socialise straight from work. I just look at that way of living and think, 'I want that.'"

Despite this somewhat idealised view of life in cities, participants were realistic about the social offer they wanted from their towns. People did not expect their towns to become metropolitan cities and the activities and venues they desired were realistic for the size of town they lived in. For example, participants spoke about having a small music venue, as well as a bigger range of shops or creative spaces.

Participants felt the lack of shops and cafes was detrimental to tourism in the area, as visitors wouldn't have enough to do if they came to stay. In Blyth, tourism was seen as an opportunity for growth in the town as it was already "bringing [in] a bit of money", so there was a desire for more hotels as well as other amenities. One participant said:

"I don't feel like, when you come up to our beach, there is enough to sustain nipping in for a coffee somewhere or nipping in for the little arcades that... There's not enough. Say, if a family came here for four days. You couldn't really spend four days in Blyth with a little family."

There was a general consensus among those we spoke to that change was needed in the two towns. This differs from our last report, where we found that people were generally divided in their desire for large scale change.²⁵ This shift could be attributed to the age of the people we spoke to: participants in this project were from a younger cohort than our previous report. It is also possible that increased time spent in their communities during the pandemic and the current cost of living crisis has exacerbated frustrations and concerns about their towns. This might in turn have made people more willing to see large changes in order to improve things locally.

Out of town shops and misjudged town centre developments had been detrimental to the town centre

"It's a dying town. There's nowhere to shop."

– Female, Blyth stayer

One of the reasons for a lack of activities was the number of vacant shops and restaurants in both of the town centres. In Mansfield, participants said they would prefer to go to Nottingham or Sheffield to go out during the day and in the evening.

Shopping was a particular issue in both towns. One woman in Mansfield said, "I wouldn't shop round here. I think the majority of good shops have closed down now." In Blyth, many people expressed their frustration at the decision to refurbish their local market, which had led to many traders moving elsewhere while the works were carried out. To compound the problem, local shops that had benefited from market customers had also closed. One participant explained, "the market in Blyth used to be brilliant and bustling. There's none of that now and you can tell the shops around the market have just died as well. They're all shut down."

This redevelopment had meant people had actively changed their shopping habits to go out of the town centre, contributing to the feeling that everything in the town was too spread out. There was also frustration at the number of out-of-town shops that drew customers away from the high street. As one woman in Blyth said, "they suck the life out."

Priority 2: Better work opportunities

"I think it's a lot of low skill and low paid jobs around here, but if you wanted a better job, you have to go to the city centre or further down south potentially."

– Male, Mansfield stayer

Employment was a key area of concern for stayers in both towns. When asked the main reasons that they would consider leaving, one participant in Mansfield said, "probably better job prospects, better pay." They typically felt that the work available in the area, in factories, cafes and pubs, were limiting in terms of progression and pay. Some explained that building up the experience needed for career progression took a lot longer than it would in a city.

People were generally positive about the benefits of remote working, with important caveats

Hybrid working was appealing for participants. They felt that having the opportunity to work remotely a few days a week would offer the best of both worlds and would offer economic benefits in the long-term. Many felt that this would allow people to access new job opportunities, while also keeping their money in their hometown.

In Mansfield, where the proximity to multiple cities offers the potential for a range of hybrid or remote jobs, there was a desire for a remote working hub in the centre of town or a dedicated section of a cafe for remote workers. They felt this would offer benefits of remote working for those who did not have space to work in their own homes. Some shared similar views in Blyth, as one participant explained:

"The problem you've got is there might be plenty of opportunities in Newcastle, but they might be 15, 20-hour contracts and by the time you've commuted there, that's half your wage gone, anyway. So, if you've got the option to work from home then yes, a lot more people would be employed, I think."

However, for many people we spoke to, such as those who worked in hospitality and trades, it was

not possible to do their jobs remotely. Others had concerns around remote work, including the potential loss of a social life through work and a lack of distinction between work and home life.

Priority 3: Better education and training

In both towns there was a strong appetite for better access to education and training

A lack of structured support and routes into employment were a concern among those we spoke to. Careers advice was a point of concern for almost all participants, who told us that the advice they or their children had received was lacking or non-existent. Currently delivered after students have completed their GCSE or equivalent qualifications, careers advice across the country is "patchy", with the body charged with providing careers advice - the National Careers Service - also coming under heavy criticism.^{26, 27} There is a disconnect between ambition and opportunity, which was reflected in the experience of those we spoke to, some of whom said that they had been actively discouraged from pursuing their goals due to the lack of relevant jobs available in their area.²⁸

Many felt that they had a binary choice between going to university or straight into work, often in a local factory or shop. While many had not wanted to go to university, a common issue was that careers advisors did not offer suggestions of career paths. Instead, it was expected that students would come with ideas of what they wanted to do and advisors might offer suggestions of how to get there. In Blyth, one participant told us, "nobody ever said, 'Studying this will lead to this.' I didn't really have any guidance from anywhere. Schools or anywhere."

Apprenticeships were widely regarded as a clear route to better opportunities

Participants saw apprenticeships as a way to gain practical experience and earn money while continuing to learn. There was wide agreement that having a greater number and variety of apprenticeships would benefit both individuals and the prosperity of towns. Apprenticeships were also considered a vital part of education post-covid for those who had minimal experience and missed out on education which might have shaped what they wanted to do.

26 Joyce, P. *Careers education: a mixed picture*. Ofsted:schools and further education and skills, 2020. Available at: [Careers education: a mixed picture - Ofsted: schools and further education & skills \(FES\) \(blog.gov.uk\)](#) [accessed 25/06/22]

27 Lane, M. & others. *An economic evaluation of the National Careers Service*. Department For Education, 2017. Available at: [An economic evaluation of the National Careers Service \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) [accessed 25/06/22]

28 Joyce, P. *Careers education: a mixed picture*. Ofsted:schools and further education and skills, 2020. Available at: [Careers education: a mixed picture - Ofsted: schools and further education & skills \(FES\) \(blog.gov.uk\)](#) [accessed 25/06/22]

"I think going down the apprenticeship route is great because from 16, you're earning money and you're learning at the same time. I wish somebody had said that to me at the time."

– Female, Blyth stayer

When asked what it would mean to them to stay local and go far, one person in Mansfield answered simply, "apprenticeships". She went on to explain, "if I'd have done an apprenticeship and then been able to move up, I probably would've been earning better for longer and been further on in my career than going to uni and spending four years at uni and then just starting on the ladder again." Another participant agreed and felt that it would help to "broaden the horizon of people to get them out of the mindset that you don't need to just go into waiting or pulling pints or straightaway into construction or anything."

Priority 4: Public engagement in policy

People want to be involved in local decision making

Across both towns, it was clear that people wanted to have more say in how local decisions were made and much of this was borne out of frustration at the way things had been done in the past.

"I think our council spends too much money on the wrong thing. They're always digging up roads and doing things that aren't necessary, but they don't plough anything into education, jobs."

– Female, Blyth stayer

In Mansfield, for example, participants expressed frustration at the old bus station being replaced by takeaway outlets. A male participant told us, "they could actually have planned and used that money, or asked the people of Mansfield what is it you want, but we never get asked those things." This wish for local people to be better informed and consulted by local government was an important theme, as one participant told us:

"On TV, you see these town hall meetings where you can go and vent your own opinion. I've never had a letter through my door saying, 'Would you like to come to our town meeting with our local MP?'"

People across both towns expressed a strong desire for more public engagement in the policy process, including on priorities for investment. As a woman in Blyth said, "I think people of Blyth should get some kind of say." Participants felt that as locals they were the experts in what their towns needed and were willing to be held accountable for the outcomes of policies if they were involved. In Mansfield, one participant said, "if it doesn't work, we can't blame anyone else." We discuss public participation in more detail in Chapter 4.

CONCLUSION

We found that people were generally proud of the towns they lived in, despite concerns about declining town centres and employment opportunities. Those who stayed prioritised being close to family and living somewhere they felt they belonged. People expressed a clear desire to be involved in the decisions that are made for their towns. Not only this, we found there were clear priorities in each town about what was needed to improve people's opportunities and ideas for how this could be achieved.

While there were key differences between the two towns, the stayers that we spoke to gave some consistent messages. They were proud of the places they came from and wanted to see it thriving. They loved living near their families and friends, but wanted better jobs and training opportunities. They had clear ideas for change and wanted policymakers to listen to those ideas, because they are the experts on what is needed in their towns. However, their priorities were different. Proximity to local cities and local industry shaped the key challenges people identified as facing their hometowns.

These messages are a clear call for what levelling up can and should look like. Given this, we argue that the core focus of 'stay local, go far' should be on those who stay in their hometowns. This will help towns to prosper, offering better opportunities to those who live there and incentivise future generations who grow up there to stay.

CHAPTER 3

OUR VISION: EMPOWERING STAYERS TO GO FAR

Having explored the reasons why people stay and leave towns, this chapter considers what these findings mean for the 'stay local, go far' policy agenda.

In this chapter, we set out our vision for stay local go far - a reframed policy agenda that aims to shift the focus away from convincing leavers to stay. Instead, we think policymakers should focus on stayers and seek to empower regional stakeholders and people in towns to make choices that are right for them and their communities.

TRYING TO CONVINC LEAVERS TO STAY IS MISGUIDED

Our research has demonstrated that there are many reasons people choose to leave their hometowns and attempting to address them all would be too complex. As we outlined in Chapter 1, the opportunity to experience a new lifestyle, meet a diverse range of people and engage in a wide range of social activities appealed to many of the leavers. Practically, there are limits to the extent to which a town can respond to these motivations. For example, it is unlikely that every town can offer a bespoke employment opportunity across all career paths. On sheer size alone, the range of social activities in a small coastal town is unlikely ever to match that of London or Manchester.

Many said that even if their hometowns improved to reflect some of their concerns, they would still have wanted to move away. When asked what it

would take for her to 'stay local and go far' in her hometown, one coastal leaver told us, "I don't think anything would have made me stay at that point. If it had not been London, it would have been somewhere else."

Our conversations expose a potential flaw in any policy agenda seeking to block the flow of leavers, or indeed entice them to return. The priorities that shape people's major life decisions - where to live, whether to have children, what job to pursue - vary hugely. Recognising that different types of places can provide different things depending on what people need, and importantly what they want, is essential.

"I had everything I needed there, but not everything I wanted basically"

– Male, ex-industrial leaver

It is also important to note that the stayers we spoke to did not resent those who left and recognised the importance of people being able to leave to pursue the life they want. Currently, those who want to leave can do so. It is those who stay who are limited by the lack of opportunities available to them in their hometowns.

While it is, of course, important to improve the employment and social opportunities in towns, this should not be done with the sole purpose of enticing would-be leavers to stay. People being free to move elsewhere to utilise their skills and talent benefits

themselves and society as a whole so should be viewed positively.

INSTEAD, POLICYMAKERS SHOULD FOCUS ON THOSE WHO STAY

Concentrating solely on the outward migration of young people from coastal and ex-industrial towns encourages the portrayal of people who stay there as being the 'losers' of this phenomenon. Those who stay risk being an afterthought, only benefitting indirectly from policies that are primarily targeted at enticing future leavers to stay.

Instead, policymakers should focus on those who choose to stay in towns. It is stayers who are affected by public service cuts, a lack of high quality employment opportunities or misplaced investment in the town. They also have a wealth of local knowledge, pride in their towns and a desire to see them prosper.

Stayers have ideas for how to improve their towns

In both Mansfield and Blyth, there was a general consensus on priorities for change and clear ideas for how it could be achieved. Stayers had high ambitions for their town, for themselves and for future generations. This is a valuable resource for policymakers: a bank of ideas for how towns can be improved with the in-built support of many local people. By utilising their knowledge about what needs to change for their aspirations to become a reality, towns can be improved for those who live there. In the long-term, this also stands to benefit future generations and will make living in towns a more exciting and attractive prospect.

Ignoring those who stay is misguided on moral grounds

There is also a clear moral case for focussing the 'stay local, go far' policy agenda on those who remain in the places they come from. Seeking to persuade leavers to stay or entice them to return risks overlooking stayers, implying their priorities are less important. The subtext is that it is sufficient for them to benefit indirectly from the prosperity that their 'more valuable' counterparts would bring if they chose not to leave. This does an injustice to those who already choose to make these towns their home.

An approach that focuses on stayers is one which recognises their potential to drive change in their

own towns. This approach empowers people to take up opportunities for training or high quality jobs, to choose to spend their money in a transformed town centre and to create community spaces. Those who stay are most impacted by policies affecting their towns, so they should be central to those changes, rather than indirect beneficiaries.

Of course, it is undeniable that towns like Blyth and Mansfield have faced the consequences of economic decline. The closing of traditional industries, austerity measures and Covid-19 have all had an impact on opportunities for employment, as well as social and cultural enrichment. Participants in our focus groups were aware of this - they spoke of empty shops in the town centre and limited career prospects. However, this did not affect their pride of place or encourage them to leave. They still felt connected to their town and had logical ideas for how they could be improved.

We are not alone in these findings - research in Yorkshire and the Humber by the Resolution Foundation found that people expressed similar sentiments of pride in their local area, while simultaneously having a clear sense that 'things should be better'.²⁹

This suggests that there will always be 'stayers': people who choose to stay in their hometowns, and remain emotionally invested in those places. It is these people who should be central to any policy ambition that seeks to enable people to stay local and go far. It is these people who bear the brunt of policy decisions that impact a town's prosperity or culture. It is these people who have the local knowledge and will to see those towns change for the better. Policymakers should look to reframe the conversation, moving away from persuading graduate leavers to stay towards creating the conditions for those who already choose to stay to go far.

THOSE WHO STAY LOCAL SHOULD BE EMPOWERED TO GO FAR

We have made the case for shifting the focus of 'stay local, go far' onto stayers. We now set out the final element of our vision: empowering those stayers.

"No one should have to leave the place they love to lead the life they want": this is the mantra that underpins 'stay local, go far'.³⁰ Our research found that while this idea resonated with both groups of people we spoke to, it was stayers who saw it as the most desirable and deliverable prospect for their

²⁹ Judge, L & Tomlinson, D. *All over the place: Perspectives on local economic prosperity*. The Resolution Foundation, 2022. Available at: All over the place - The Inquiry (resolutionfoundation.org) [Accessed 10/06/22]

³⁰ Cole, H. *DO OR DIE Tories risk betraying Brexit voters if they fail to 'Level Up' Britain, warns Michael Gove*. The Sun, 2021. Available at: Tories risk betraying Brexit voters if they fail to 'Level Up' Britain, warns Michael Gove | The Sun [Accessed 04/04/22]

town.

Stayers should be empowered to make choices that benefit themselves and their community, whether that means improving careers advice, places to socialise or the variety of high paying jobs.

Putting those who stay at the centre of this policy is not only desirable, it is imperative.

If policy decisions reflect stayers' needs and priorities, they are more likely to engage with those changes positively and be invested in their success. For example, if investment in shops or restaurants in the town centre reflect what residents advocate for, it is more likely to succeed.

The conversations we had with stayers suggest that, at present, the opposite is happening. The opening of chain takeaways or drive-through coffee shops does not match local residents' priorities so does not draw them into the town centre. It is therefore of economic, as well as moral, importance to centre those who live in towns when making policy decisions that affect them.

Improving towns by developing the opportunities for those who choose to stay is likely to have a positive impact on the towns themselves. They will become more attractive places to live, with better job prospects and social opportunities. The residents of these towns will be actively involved in their prosperity and future generations will be more likely to be invested in their communities. This could make it more attractive for would-be leavers to stay where previously they would not have considered it a viable option.

Finally, reframing the policy agenda to focus on stayers provides an opportunity to change the metrics by which to measure the success of policy interventions. Instead of assessing the impact of policies by measuring the outward migration of students or the number of returning graduates, national and local government should measure the opportunities available to and taken up by stayers. These measures could include access to high-paid jobs or the number of local people who shop, socialise and work locally. This makes success more attainable and also ensures that policymakers' view of the impact of their work in towns has local people at its heart.

CHAPTER 4 LOCALISING POWER TO DELIVER FOR STAYERS

In this chapter we explain how our vision for empowering stayers should be delivered. To enable those who choose to stay local to go far, we believe power must be localised. This localisation of power has two core elements:

1. Devolution of power to the local level
2. Engaging people in decision making

This approach will empower local policymakers to ensure that those impacted by their decisions are properly informed and engaged in the process. As we collected data in Mansfield and Blyth, this report largely relates to England and our recommendations reflect this. However, the challenges they face and the principles behind the solutions we propose are relevant across the UK.

1. DEVOLUTION DEVOLVING MORE POWER TO THE LOCAL LEVEL TO DELIVER A TOWN BY TOWN APPROACH

Devolving power to local government and communities is essential to empowering stayers. Our research has found that there are a multitude of factors that shape towns, including geography,

local industry and historical context. Empowering local people and reflecting their priorities therefore requires a bespoke, town-by-town approach. This can only be achieved by devolving power to local government and to local people. We explore why this is the case below.

Why is devolution needed to empower stayers?

Priorities, people and context all vary between towns

Towns are often spoken about as a homogenous group. Yet our research is a reminder of how inaccurate this picture is. Even coastal and ex-industrial towns, which are often grouped together, can differ significantly. Our previous research found that towns are complex and face very different challenges, with some struggling to cope more than others.³¹

These differences are easy to see in the towns we visited. The geographical proximity of Mansfield to three reasonably sized cities - Lincoln, Nottingham and Sheffield - means that commuting and remote working were more salient there than in Blyth. People in Mansfield also spoke of a desire for social opportunities similar to those in neighbouring cities.

31 Carr, H. & others. *The Future of Towns*. Demos, 2020. Available at: [The-Future-of-Towns-Report.pdf](#) (demos.co.uk) [accessed 10/12/22]

Blyth on the other hand has a strong connection to the broader North East region and particularly to the industry that has traditionally been a source of employment in the town. Compared to Mansfield, Blyth is reasonably isolated from neighbouring cities, particularly owing to the lack of a train station in the town.

Even where residents of both towns highlighted similar concerns, such as empty shops in the town centre, they had quite distinct ideas to address these issues. Whereas Mansfield residents focused on the need for a wider variety of places to shop and socialise, people in Blyth sought better channels of communication about local decision making. Any strategy to make 'stay local, go far' a reality must recognise the fundamental differences between towns that are often thought to face similar challenges.

Currently, the institutions charged with making decisions about the future of levelling up are highly centralised and often distant from the realities of what people in towns need. Improving and strengthening the current model of devolution is, as the Levelling Up White Paper recognises, perhaps the best way to address this.³² This should involve extending long-term devolution deals across England. We suggest that the combined authority model is the optimum way to devolve powers for specific policy areas, such as skills, to a local level.

Councils cannot effectively share power with communities if it is not devolved

Local governments need to have adequate power for them to be able share that power with their communities. Currently, council disempowerment is another related barrier to genuine power sharing, resulting particularly from government centralisation.³³ Withholding power and resources from local authorities threatens the success of levelling up. It prevents places from being able to develop long-term plans and wastes resources on fragmented bidding processes. It can also undermine the ability of local leaders to effectively communicate their plans or powers to local people. Devolution of power is therefore essential to implement the changes needed for those who live there to be able to go far.³⁴

Local actors are better placed to deliver for local people

Local people, business and governments understand the challenges and opportunities within a town better than a centralised government department. Local government, whether that is combined or unitary authorities, can engage more effectively with local people to understand their priorities.

Communities have shown that they are a valuable asset, capable of working together to develop creative solutions in times of crisis. We have seen this most recently in response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Our recent research explored the role that community activism played during this time, highlighting that locally-focused activism builds connection between political processes and lived experience.³⁵ These challenges are not limited to the pandemic. Communities are still dealing with the consequences of large cuts to public services as a result of austerity. By collaborating with and supporting community groups, local authorities can learn from existing local knowledge to address challenges without simply shifting responsibility for delivery.

Delivering Devolution

Empowering councils

This town-by-town approach requires a deeper model of devolution than is currently on offer. The Levelling Up White Paper promises new devolution deals for any place that wants one by 2030.³⁶ While the devolution powers it sets out are a step in the right direction, it does not go far enough. Under current plans, some key areas, such as skills, will remain under national government control.³⁷

A coordinated approach between education and local industries is vital to create the opportunities that people need to lead the lives they want. At present, centralised funding provided in a piecemeal and competitive manner precludes the creation of long-term regional and sub-regional agendas. National government should devolve responsibility for skills and some aspects of education, such as careers advice, to the combined authority level. To help achieve this, combined authorities should be established to cover the entirety of the country.

32 Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022. Available at: [Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) [accessed 02/02/2022]

33 Cummins, C. *Locating Authority, A Vision For Relational Local Government*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [locating-authority.pdf \(demos.co.uk\)](https://www.demos.co.uk/locating-authority.pdf) [Accessed 10/03/22]

34 Kaye, S. *Think Big, Act Small*. New Local, 2020. Available at: [Think-Big-Act-Small_.pdf \(newlocal.org.uk\)](https://www.newlocal.org.uk/think-big-act-small.pdf) [accessed 15/03/22]

35 Cummins, C. *Post-Pandemic People Power*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [Home | Post-Pandemic People Power \(demos.co.uk\)](https://www.demos.co.uk/post-pandemic-people-power.pdf) [accessed 20/05/22]

36 Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022. Available at: [Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) [accessed 02/02/2022]

37 Local Government Association. *Levelling Up White Paper: LGA briefing*. Local Government Association, 2022. Available at: [Levelling Up White Paper: LGA briefing | Local Government Association](https://www.local.gov.uk/levelling-up-white-paper-lga-briefing) [accessed 10/03/22]

Under current proposals, Mansfield would form part of a new East Midlands Combined Authority. This presents the opportunity for a regional approach that goes beyond the current model of city regions.³⁸ Other areas of the country should be offered this same opportunity.

Our research highlighted the importance of improving skills provision and connecting it to local labour markets. We propose that the responsibility for skills policy is fully devolved to combined authorities - mirroring the approach taken for the adult education budget in Greater Manchester, for example.³⁹ This will enable places to develop coordinated skills programmes that local authorities are responsible for delivering, such as apprenticeships. The responsibility and resources for delivering careers advice in schools should also be devolved. In practice this would involve adding careers advice to the national curriculum, with responsibility for delivery devolved to the combined authorities. In 2020, Ofsted said that providing careers advice post GCSEs was often “too late” and that the quality was “quite patchy”.⁴⁰

We have seen the benefits of devolving the responsibility for core services: the launch of the ‘bee network’ vision for public transport in Greater Manchester, which joins buses, trams, cycling and walking networks into an integrated system, for example.⁴¹ Existing policy initiatives, such as the Towns Fund, recognise the value of taking a local approach to levelling up.⁴² However, it is generally felt that long-term and broader devolution arrangements are needed for this to work in practice.

Empowering communities

As well as a long-term devolution deal for councils, our approach advocates for greater devolution to communities themselves. This is sometimes described as ‘double devolution’: the transfer of power from central to local government, then from local government to citizens themselves. Double devolution could operate as a partnership

arrangement between residents and the local authority, as is the case in the ‘Community Deal’ in Wigan.⁴³ Local authorities could begin by working with existing community organisations to understand where they are best placed to take on responsibility and what resources they need to do so.

Essential to the success of this approach is civic infrastructure, such as community groups, charities, local businesses and housing associations, which are needed to create and sustain the spaces in which this partnership approach can take place.⁴⁴ Initial investment and ongoing resources are often needed to establish them. This can come directly from local government, or through initiatives such as the Community Wealth Fund, a proposal to utilise dormant assets and put it in the hands of communities.^{45, 46} If realised, this could provide funding for such areas to develop community spaces and start projects to develop their social capital and long-term resilience.

One priority in the Levelling Up White Paper is to “restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging”.⁴⁷ In the towns we visited, we saw evidence of those things already. Levelling up ambitions needs to go further. Ensuring that any future devolution deals enshrine the role of communities to utilise and develop that existing pride of place is crucial. Devolving power to communities and recognising their role in driving meaningful change is essential to towns’ ability to recover from economic shocks and plan for the future.⁴⁸

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ENGAGING PEOPLE IN DECISION MAKING PROCESSES SO THAT POLICY REFLECTS LOCAL PRIORITIES

To truly localise power, local people need to have a say in decision making. Empowering those who live in towns means equipping them with both the information and the tools to be involved in the

38 Ford, M. *Talks held on East Midlands combined authority*. LocalGov, 2022. Available at: [LocalGov.co.uk](https://www.localgov.co.uk) - Your authority on UK local government - Talks held on East Midlands combined authority [accessed 01/04/22]

39 Greater Manchester Combined Authority. *Adult Education Budget*. GMCA, 2019. Available at: [Adult Education Budget - Greater Manchester Combined Authority \(greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk\)](https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk) [accessed 20/05/22]

40 Joyce, P. *Careers education: a mixed picture*. Ofsted:schools and further education and skills, 2020. Available at: [Careers education: a mixed picture - Ofsted: schools and further education & skills \(FES\) \(blog.gov.uk\)](https://www.blog.gov.uk) [accessed 25/06/22]

41 Transport for Greater Manchester. *The Bee Network*. Transport for Greater Manchester, 2022. Available at: [The Bee Network | TfGM Bee Active](https://www.tfgm.com) [accessed: 20/05/22]

42 Towns Fund Delivery Partner. *Towns Fund*, 2020. Available at: [townsfund.org.uk](https://www.townsfund.org.uk) [accessed 15/03/22]

43 Naylor, C. *Rekindling hope in public services*. The King’s Fund, 2019. Available at: [Rekindling hope in public services | The King’s Fund \(kingsfund.org.uk\)](https://www.kingsfund.org.uk) [accessed 15/05/22]

44 Leach, M. *Social Infrastructure - the foundation for strong, resourceful communities*. Local Trust, 2019. Available at: [Social infrastructure – the foundation for strong, resourceful communities - Local Trust](https://www.localtrust.org.uk) [accessed 10/06/22]

45 Community Wealth Fund. Available at: [Community Wealth Fund](https://www.communitywealthfund.org.uk) [accessed 10/06/22]

46 Local Trust. *Community Wealth Fund Alliance*. Available at: [Community Wealth Fund Alliance - Local Trust](https://www.communitywealthfund.org.uk) [accessed 10/06/22]

47 Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022. Available at: [Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk) [accessed 02/02/2022]

48 Mackenzie, P. *The Gravitational State*. Demos, 2021. Available at: [The-Gravitational-State.pdf \(demos.co.uk\)](https://www.demos.co.uk) [accessed 10/12/22]

policymaking process. Public participation processes are key to this. To ensure people remain engaged, accountability mechanisms should be built into the process whereby citizens can ensure that agreed policies are delivered.

Why is public participation needed to empower stayers?

People told us they crave a greater say in local decision making

Our participants strongly advocated for more involvement in decision making about investment in their town. They felt it was common sense for them to be engaged in the local decision making. As the people who live in the town, they best understand how people use local services, where they shop or where they would most like to see investment.

Their desire to be involved was partly rooted in feeling disconnected from previous investments which had not delivered for their towns. In Mansfield, one man told us, "I've never been asked or had like a flyer through the door, or anything like that. Never once. It's just like, things get thrown up and it's like, 'Oh, it's another takeaway or it's another something, like we didn't need.'"

Similarly, in Blyth, participants expressed a great deal of frustration at the regeneration of the market square. One woman told us, "it's when they regenerated the marketplace because it used to still be quite busy, and they tore it all up. Used to be lovely, dead old-fashioned stone seating areas and all that."

But policymakers should not take that enthusiasm for granted

In our previous research, we found that while people agreed in principle that it was important for communities to be involved in local decision making, they were less likely to express a desire to be involved themselves.⁴⁹ Participants in this project, however, told a different story. There was a clear desire among those we spoke to not only to see changes to their hometowns that reflected their priorities, but to be actively involved in the decision making process. There are several possible explanations for this difference.

First, the demographics of participants were different. In our first report, we spoke to adults of all ages. For this research, we spoke to people aged 20 to 40. It is possible that younger people are more motivated to participate in local policymaking because they have aspirations for greater change

in their local area. Many of the people we spoke to wished to take an active role in determining that change and were willing to accept the accountability that came with doing so.

There may have also been a shift in attitudes to participation as a result of the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, people relied on local support networks more and developed a closer relationship with those around them.⁵⁰ People also became more engaged with their towns and local communities. The pandemic also exposed the weaknesses of local infrastructure and exacerbated the problems of already declining town centres. This increased interest and awareness may have encouraged people to be more engaged in creating policies to improve their hometowns. More research is needed to interrogate these changes and set them in the broader context of levelling up post-pandemic.

However, there is clearly a risk that this willingness to engage can be eroded. Amongst those we spoke to, lack of involvement in decision making in the town had fostered scepticism about the potential for future changes to be successful. Some people said that investment, either in public spaces or in businesses, did not reflect what the town needed. Negative experiences like this risk people starting to align with the 'preservers' of our previous research: people who viewed change negatively and preferred the status quo.⁵¹

"There's the hope for green spaces or just more variety in terms of entertainment or shopping, but it just seems to fall back to what's common and what's mundane, and if it easily makes profit."

– Male, Mansfield stayer

For policy to achieve meaningful change in the future, it is therefore of paramount importance that people see their priorities reflected in investment decisions in their hometown.

People don't just want change, they have ideas for how it should happen

People we spoke to wanted to be involved in addressing the challenges their towns were facing and they had clear ideas about how that should be done. In Mansfield, for example, revitalisation of the town centre was a priority. One of the ideas participants shared was that remote working hubs could be part of a plan to draw people back to the

49 Carr, H. & others. *The Future of Towns*. Demos, 2020. Available at: [The-Future-of-Towns-Report.pdf](#) (demos.co.uk) [accessed 10/12/22]

50 Cummins, C. *Post-Pandemic People Power*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [Home | Post-Pandemic People Power](#) (demos.co.uk) [accessed 20/05/22]

51 Carr, H. & others. *The Future of Towns*. Demos, 2020. Available at: [The-Future-of-Towns-Report.pdf](#) (demos.co.uk) [accessed 10/12/22]

high street and put local money in local businesses. This shows that people have ambitious but realistic ideas that could bring needed change.

Engaging the public in policy making can help achieve a multitude of outcomes. Having locals involved in the process is likely to increase their investment in its success, whether that means shopping on the high street or engaging with community projects. Their engagement not only increases the likelihood of success in the short term, but also offers long-term benefits. Future generations will be more likely to view the town as a positive place to live - somewhere they feel connected to and want to build a life in. Giving those who stay in towns the information and influence to make decisions about the future of their area can empower people and strengthen the connection they feel to their hometown.

Delivering public participation

Currently, the extent of public participation in local government decision making is insufficient to adequately engage people in the process. Instead, both combined authorities and local councils should build participatory policymaking into their processes as standard. This could range from conducting citizens assemblies or priority setting exercises to engaging with people to generate ideas for new projects.

In the first instance, enhancing participation could include early stage consultation and ideas development. This would enable local government to understand the range of views and allow people to respond to one another in a constructive environment. The consultation could be conducted in person or using an online tool such as Polis.⁵² However, public engagement can and should go beyond this to include residents in decision making. This would ensure that residents are actively part of the process of generating, creating and delivering ideas.

Co-creation of policies with those who have lived experience of the policy issue is one example of how this can be achieved in practice. For example, Camden Council have reformed their child protection systems following a family-led consultation.⁵³ This programme forms part of their broader shift towards a relational approach to local government. This approach aligns with our recent calls for councils to build strong relationships

between service professionals and the people they are supporting.⁵⁴

Crucial to the success of participatory policy making is that those involved trust that their efforts are going to be worthwhile. This means that local authorities must be accountable for the outcomes of participatory processes. Accountability measures can be built into the participatory approach. For example, local authorities could create a regional citizen panel to whom policymakers have to report throughout the implementation process.

Devolution and public participation form the underlying principles of a town-by-town approach. In the next Chapter we explain what this approach to policy making could look like in practice. We present case studies of Mansfield and Blyth, offering policy solutions based on the discussions we had with people who live there.

52 For an example of how Polis can be used in practice see: Smith, J. & others. *Polis & the Political Process*. Demos, 2020. Available at: Polis-the-Political-Process.pdf (demos.co.uk) [accessed 20/06/22]

53 Camden Council. *Camden Conversations, Our Family Led Enquiry*. 2019. Available at: 675d7d6c-827b-a4ba-08a9-1fbaa9378d10 (camden.gov.uk) [accessed 25/06/22]

54 Cummins, C. *Locating Authority, A Vision For Relational Local Government*. Demos, 2022. Available at: locating-authority.pdf (demos.co.uk) [Accessed 10/03/22]

CHAPTER 5

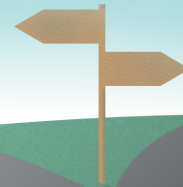
THE TOWN-BY-TOWN APPROACH IN PRACTICE: BLYTH AND MANSFIELD

In this report we have advocated for a reframing of the 'stay local, go far' policy ambition. Our vision is for power to be localised, to give towns the resources they need to enable those who live there to go far. Such a model would take a town-by-town approach to understanding what changes are needed. Therefore, we are not recommending a suite of policy ideas that can be applied to all coastal and ex-industrial towns. Instead, we are presenting two case studies of the towns we visited, Blyth and Mansfield, to demonstrate how our approach could operate in practice.

Based on the ideas we heard from local residents, we propose a body of policies that reflect their priorities, encapsulated in each town's individual 'model'. For Blyth, this is the Local Industry Mode and in Mansfield we propose the Choice Model.

These ideas are not intended to be a prescriptive or exhaustive list of policies, nor should they be taken as an example of how to achieve fully-fledged participative policymaking. The models should be viewed as a demonstration of how localising power can operate in practice. Our recommendations work towards a vision of levelling up coastal and ex-industrial towns that places at its core the goal of enabling those who choose to stay local to go far.

MANSFIELD THE CHOICE MODEL



In Mansfield, the common theme in our focus group conversations was a lack of choices. Options for places to socialise in the declining town centre and career opportunities were seen as lacking. People generally felt they had no choice but to go elsewhere if they wished to work in a cafe, go out with friends or take children to do activities. Participants told a similar story of limited choices when it came to jobs. Those we spoke to had often felt unsupported and constrained by the lack of options when deciding on their career path.

The Choice Model places these recurring concerns at its heart, with policies that aim to revitalise the options people have in both their work and social lives. Three core areas would be at the heart of this model: improved remote working opportunities, a town-wide social revival, and careers and skills capacity building.

PROPOSAL 1: REMOTE WORKING HUBS

Challenge

Mansfield has all the makings of a remote working centre with its proximity to large businesses operating in nearby cities and some in the town itself which provide the possibility of hybrid or fully remote roles. Remote working is popular across the country: our previous research found that among those whose place of work changed due to the pandemic, 65% would like to retain some form of remote working.⁵⁵

However, people we spoke to in Mansfield feel that it currently lacks sufficient remote working spaces. When talking about the current places to work

remotely in the town, one participant commented on the lack of cafes suitable for working:

“Like Costa is the only decent one we’ve got, and it’s just rammed all of the time, so you couldn’t go and work in there. Other than that, then you’ve got Greggs and stuff like that.”

Another participant, who works for the local council, was positive about the benefits of being able to use any of the council’s buildings and the more hybrid approach that had been taken since the pandemic:

“Yes, because some days when you need to be at home, and you can be, that’s better than what it used to be before the pandemic, where it was a 9am to 5pm you’ve got to be in the office and there was no leeway. Whereas now there is that, so that’s the only beauty of it.”

Creating more of these spaces could enable people to consider remote or hybrid work in businesses in neighbouring cities and towns where otherwise a daily commute might have been prohibitive. Strengthening transport links to the cities surrounding Mansfield could also open up the possibility of commuting one or two days a week to more people.

Mansfield, like many towns, also has a significant number of vacant or closed down shops in its town centre. In our conversations, people suggested utilising these vacant shops for dedicated hubs or cafes suitable for remote workers.

⁵⁵ Ussher, K., Rotik, M. & Jeyabraba, M. *Post Pandemic Places*. Demos, 2021. Available at: Post Pandemic Places - Demos [accessed 15/03/22]

"I think it would open more doors for people, and more opportunities, you know, if you had like a remote working space, that whether that be some independent coffee shops or a bigger remote working space, but just sort of availability."

– Female, Mansfield stayer

Proposal

We propose that vacant shops in Mansfield town centre are converted into remote working 'hubs'. These shops could be bought or rented by the local authority. We propose that local council jobs are relocated into a dedicated public service hub, with others for private businesses. This could be achieved by implementing compulsory rent auctions for vacant shops.⁵⁶ This entails giving power to local authorities to require a compulsory rent auction on any high street or shopping centre unit that has been vacant for 12 months or more. Prospective tenants would engage in a bidding process, with no reserve price. Where landlords do not engage, the local authority would be empowered to let the property on their behalf.⁵⁷

Businesses will play a key role in supporting the hub and offering opportunities for remote work. They could choose to purchase a floor in the hub for their employees' use or subsidise the space more generally to enable their employees to work there and meet people from other local businesses.⁵⁸ The Business Improvement District in Mansfield could invest in the hubs through its levy fees, for example. Where possible, employers from Mansfield and the surrounding areas, including Sheffield, Nottingham and Derby, should advertise jobs as fully remote or hybrid with the opportunity to work out of the hub. The hubs could also offer preferential rates for small businesses, to encourage local entrepreneurs.

The hubs would offer a variety of workspaces: traditional desks, meeting spaces, a cafe and pods where people could take calls and meetings. The development of these hubs would follow consultations with potential users to determine how to create the most useful working space.

The Welsh government recently announced a similar approach, connecting remote working hubs for those who do not have the space or resources to work at home.⁵⁹ Hubs open up a larger world of

opportunities for those who are rooted in Mansfield, so that they can 'go far' in the wider region, while staying local.

PROPOSAL 2: BUILDING SKILLS AND CAREERS CAPACITY

Challenge

Remote working alone will not serve to address one of the core problems relating to work that we identified from our conversations with Mansfield residents. This problem is a lack of support in mapping out employment and training options. Young people we spoke to felt that they face a binary choice: going to university or finding a job locally. Many of those seeking to continue their education felt that university was the only option, but were keen to begin earning money and were reluctant to take on the debt associated with a degree. Even for those content with these choices, it wasn't clear what courses or local jobs were available to them and where it might take them in the future.

"So, it's just that if we think you're clever enough to go to uni, whether you want to or not, they'll push you for that, and if you don't want to, they'll just sort of leave you behind, you're sort of left to your own devices."

– Male, Mansfield stayer

Most people felt that they had not had adequate careers advice or support to understand what their options were and how they could achieve their aspirations. Instead, several people had taken jobs that were most available in the area - those in pubs or retail. Where participants had pursued further education, identifying their options had been self-motivated or through family networks. One participant told us that he had only found out about his apprenticeship because his mum had read about it in the local newspaper and said his school had not provided any guidance about accessing apprenticeships.

Currently, careers advice is highly inconsistent and is often not a priority for schools.⁶⁰ In Mansfield, a lack of structured careers advice support is holding people back from realising the opportunities available for them to go far when they choose to stay local. One person told us:

56 Tanner, W. & Blagden, J. *Street Bids: How Compulsory Rent Auctions Could Save Britain's High Streets*. Onward, 2022. Available at: [Street Bids: Compulsory Rent Auctions And The High Street \(ukonward.com\)](#) [accessed 10/06/22]

57 Tanner, W. & Blagden, J. *Street Bids: How Compulsory Rent Auctions Could Save Britain's High Streets*. 2022.

58 Connected Hubs, *About Us*. Available at: [Connected Hubs | About Connected Hubs](#) [accessed 20/06/22]

59 Gye, H. *Remote working hubs in small towns will help 30% of employees stay out of the office under Welsh plans*. iNews, 2021. Available at: [Remote working hubs in small towns will help 30% of employees stay out of the office under Welsh plans \(inews.co.uk\)](#) [accessed 10/04/22]

60 Beckingham, K. *Careers advice 'failing young students'*. Education Technology, 2019. Available at: [Careers advice 'failing young students'](#) - Education Technology (edtechnology.co.uk) [accessed: 10/04/22]

"I don't think we ever had any conversations about that. It was like, 'What do you want to do?' but there was never the conversation of, 'These are your options, you can go to uni,' until it was sort of well into your GCSEs. So, I think probably the conversation needs to sort of be broached earlier on and be like, 'You can leave if you want,' but also, 'These are your prospects if you want to stay, these are the areas.'"

"Just sort of have the apprenticeships and just more job opportunities to sort of broaden the horizon of people to get them out of the mindset that you don't need to just go into waiting or pulling pints or straightway into construction or anything."

– Male, Mansfield stayer - when asked what was most important to enable people in Mansfield to stay local and go far

Solution

A local-authority level careers advice service integrated into the school curriculum.

This locally led service would be better connected to the priorities and challenges in the local labour market than one that is run centrally.

Schools run by local authorities have a duty to provide impartial careers advice to students, as do many academies and free schools through their funding agreements.⁶¹ Implementing this service within the curriculum, with an emphasis on highly-skilled careers advisers delivering course content, is a means of ensuring consistent access to this support for young people.⁶² Academies and free schools could be incentivised to participate in the scheme as part of a regional accreditation programme. This service should be offered from Year 10 to allow time for students' choices to be reflected in the next stage of their education or training.

This policy would create an environment where those in education feel they have the opportunities and support they need to achieve their ambitions. The service should establish links with local employers and education providers to develop localised pathways into varied careers. These pathways should include university, apprenticeships and jobs in the town and wider region.

Increasing access to apprenticeships is a crucial aspect of good careers advice. Apprenticeships were viewed by our participants as a route into a wider variety of jobs, but not all had known it was an option in their chosen field. A devolved careers service would offer tailored information on apprenticeships, to increase awareness of the opportunities available locally and regionally.

For those outside of the education system, a Universal Work Service would support both individuals and employers by offering integrated employment support, skills and careers services.⁶³ This would be especially useful in Mansfield, where many leavers wanted more career support after leaving school. One participant told us that he thought it was important that there was "some better distribution of knowledge and resources available to people." He suggested this was particularly important for adults looking to change jobs or gain new skills, who would currently not know where to find support for this.

DEVOLUTION NEEDED: Currently, towns have relatively little power to address their skills and employment challenges.⁶⁴ For this policy to be successful, national government should devolve responsibility for careers advice and skills, such as apprenticeships and other training schemes. This could be overseen regionally, following the model of devolution to combined authorities for the adult education budget.⁶⁵

61 Loft, P., Long, R. & Hubble, S. *Careers guidance in schools, colleges and universities* (England). House of Commons Library, 2021. Available at: [Careers guidance in schools, colleges and universities \(England\) - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](#) [accessed 15/05/22]

62 Careers Profession Taskforce. *Towards a strong careers profession*. Department for Education, 2010. Available at: [cptf-external-report-from-dfe-website.pdf \(careersengland.org.uk\)](#) [accessed 20/06/22]

63 Phillips, A. *Working Together: The case for universal employment support*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [policy-briefing-uws.pdf \(demos.co.uk\)](#) [accessed 20/05/22]

64 Clayton, N. *Disparities and Devolution: How can the next government close divides in skills and employment?* Learning & Work Institute, 2019. Available at: [Disparities and devolution: how can the next government close divides in skills and employment? - Learning and Work Institute](#) [accessed 15/05/22]

65 Education and Skills Funding Agency. *Adult Education Budget (AEB) devolution*. Available at: [Adult education budget \(AEB\) devolution - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) [accessed 10/03/22]

PROPOSAL 3: TOWN-WIDE SOCIAL REVIVAL

Challenge

A significant concern for Mansfield residents was the lack of options for socialising in the town centre. They felt it lacked spaces for children's activities and places to go out to eat or meet friends after work. A pattern of empty shops in the town centre and short-lived takeaway chains didn't match local people's hopes for the town and discouraged them from making the town centre their social space. Also, people we spoke to said that out-of-town retail parks drew people away from the town centre because they couldn't get what they needed on the high street. Generally, people felt that there were too many pubs and takeaways, meaning they chose to go elsewhere to socialise with friends or spend time with their children.

It was clear from our conversations that residents had good ideas for the kinds of spaces and activities they would like to see in Mansfield. However, they didn't feel that they were listened to by the council when planning decisions were made. When asked if they would like to see more consultation, many emphatically responded "yes".

Solution

A town-wide social revival is needed, beginning with a citizens' assembly to determine how to put social choices at the heart of Mansfield's town centre. This would involve a representative group of residents from Mansfield getting together to learn about the current challenge, deliberate upon potential solutions and make recommendations.⁶⁶

In the citizens assembly, participants would be presented with a range of potential policy interventions to deliberate upon and develop. This could include creating 'social zones': designated spaces in the town where businesses with a social value - such as pubs, cafes and restaurants - would be supported to operate through reduced business rates or subsidised rents. In Newport, for example, the city council is implementing a business rate relief scheme in order to help the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors.⁶⁷

This could go some way to replicating the metropolitan culture that participants enjoy in nearby cities and would like to see in their own town. Importantly, engaging residents in the policymaking process ensures that these zones - and other policy interventions - are tailored to the needs and preferences of local residents.

Participatory policymaking should then be a required element of all social, leisure and cultural policy making in Mansfield. When awarding funding, the combined authority and national government could require local authorities to have an element of public participation in bids for funding in these areas.

⁶⁶ Citizens Assembly, *Citizens' Assembly*. Available at: Citizens' Assembly (citizensassembly.co.uk)[accessed 15/06/22]

⁶⁷ Jones, G. *Unique Newport city centre business rate relief scheme introduced*. Wales News Online, 2022. Available at: Wales News online [accessed: 10/04/22]

BLYTH THE LOCAL INDUSTRY MODEL



Industry has long been at the heart of Blyth. Now, local people are embracing the potential for the town to redefine its industrial identity away from a mining and shipbuilding centre to a green industrial hub. However, insufficient structured support into employment and training was seen by those we spoke to as a barrier to local people achieving their full potential.

People also felt that communication between local government and the community was a barrier to connecting people to opportunities in the town. Investment in Blyth through the green energy boom it is experiencing is a clear opportunity for the people in the town. However, there should be a clear strategy to plug people into employment opportunities and allow them to shape the development that flows from that investment.

Local industry is the greatest source of prosperity in Blyth. The Local Industry Model is about ensuring that the people of Blyth are equipped to get the best possible say and share in that prosperity.

PROPOSAL 1: INCREASING LOCAL JOB PATHWAYS

Challenge

Offshore energy, component manufacturing and a new gigafactory for electric vehicle batteries are just some of the green industries operating in Blyth.^{68, 69} The local authority's 'Energising Blyth' plans reflect

the opportunities that this presents for revitalising the local economy and career pathways for residents.

As investment continues to come into the area and a more varied array of jobs becomes available, it is vital that local people are supported to take them up. Currently, skills provision beyond specialist manual roles is not sufficiently developed. Most importantly, those we spoke to felt that there were not clear pathways between education and jobs in the area. While people recognised that the local industrial growth would bring new jobs, they did not feel that schools and colleges had established links with employers or signposted students effectively. One participant spoke about her daughter's ambition to work in engineering and the benefits of having training courses locally. However, her daughter had found out about these opportunities herself, rather than being helped to find them and develop the necessary skills at school.

As such, improved skills provision and strong connections between education and local employers is essential to ensure that the people of Blyth can reap the benefits of green investment.

Solution 1

Devolve responsibility for skills and careers advice to the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) to establish a regionally coordinated careers service in schools. Within this, Blyth could develop a dedicated localised programme of careers advice.

⁶⁸ Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy & others. *Government backs Britishvolt plans for Blyth gigafactory to build electric vehicle batteries*. 2022. Available at: [Government backs Britishvolt plans for Blyth gigafactory to build electric vehicle batteries - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-backs-britishvolt-plans-for-blyth-gigafactory-to-build-electric-vehicle-batteries) [accessed 15/05/22]

⁶⁹ Port of Blyth. *Offshore Energy*. Available at: [Offshore Energy - Port of Blyth | Leading UK Offshore Energy Support Base](https://www.portofblyth.co.uk/offshore-energy) [accessed 15/05/22]

This programme could include a module in the curriculum focussed on options for careers in the local area. Students should be supported to identify the necessary skills for their chosen career, as well as to access work experience and mentoring from industry professionals.

Education providers and local employers would be required to work more closely to develop clear pathways to employment in Blyth and the surrounding area, connecting people to jobs. Students would also be given the opportunity to gain practical experience, with an emphasis on developing the necessary skills to achieve their specific ambitions. Furthermore, we suggest introducing a Universal Work Service: a new public service proposed by Demos that would provide universally accessible employment support regardless of employment status. This would be run at the combined authority level, and would allow everyone to seek advice and support to change jobs, reskill or progress in their current role.⁷⁰

Solution 2

Businesses should support skills training by offering 'split' industry and training roles. Employees would work in their practical specialism part-time, and deliver teaching on the subject in local colleges part-time. Thinking differently about how businesses and education providers can work together in a mutually beneficial way should be central to this strategy. This approach would follow the example of the technical training centre created within the port.⁷¹ By encouraging employees to take a role in training, businesses will benefit from a stream of new skilled workers, while students will benefit from strong connections to local businesses.

DEVOLUTION NEEDED: Devolution has been crucial for policymakers to deliver the existing initiatives that are driving the green industrial revolution in Blyth. However, local authorities are held back by the fragmented and complex procedures that they have to follow to secure these pots of funding. Greater devolution is needed in Blyth and the North East more broadly. A long-term devolution agreement should transfer responsibility and power for key areas to the combined authority level, such as careers advice and skills.

Place-based responsibilities, such as administering careers advice services, could then be further devolved by the NTCA to the unitary authority of Northumberland. While many policy areas are best dealt with at the combined authority level, this

additional level of devolution would allow unitary authorities to provide truly localised solutions for select issues. By further devolving careers advice, for example, services can work more directly with local businesses and training services to support the specific needs of the local area.

When responsibility and, crucially, funding is more comprehensively devolved, areas are freed from the limitations of resource-intensive bidding processes. Local authorities are then empowered to make long-term plans reflective of their priorities.

PROPOSAL 2: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION OVERHAUL

Challenge

There is a clear sense of community cohesion and shared identity in Blyth and the North East. This is a valuable resource for the town. People are invested in their local area and believe in its capacity to be a great place to live and work.

However, our conversations reflected a frustration with decision making processes. A lack of communication and consultation about local development has left people feeling disconnected from what is happening in the town. To ensure that people in Blyth have a say in how money is invested in the area, public participation should be an essential part of the policymaking process.

Solution 1

Embed public engagement processes into Blyth's ongoing levelling up strategy.

We propose that the local authority develops an ongoing public participation strategy, which embeds public engagement in the policymaking process.

"I would like to know where it's going and I would probably attend a meeting like that, to actually hear where the money was going to spent. Or if there's maybe, three options, which the people would like to see it spent on. I would find that interesting."

– Female, Blyth stayer

Specifically, participatory budgeting would offer residents a stake in the future of Blyth. This method of engagement enables people to directly decide how to spend part of a budget, for example on a

⁷⁰ Phillips, A. Working Together: The case for universal employment support. Demos, 2022. Available at: [policy-briefing-uws.pdf](#) (demos.co.uk) [accessed 20/05/22]

⁷¹ Port of Blyth. £1m Regional Welding & Fabrication Training Centre announced. 2021. Available at: [£1m Regional Welding & Fabrication Training Centre announced](#) (portofblyth.co.uk) [accessed 20/05/22]

town centre regeneration project. This approach is taken by the Scottish government, delivered through a dedicated Community Choices Fund.⁷² There was a clear appetite among participants for a specific say in how money is spent, so this method would fulfil that wish using a tried and tested approach.

⁷² Cabinet for Rural Affairs and Islands. *Participatory Budgeting - Community empowerment*. Scottish Government. Available at: Participatory budgeting - Community empowerment - gov.scot (www.gov.scot) [accessed 20/05/22]

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

We are living through a period of significant economic, social and political challenges. With the current turbulence in government, we foresee an opportunity to reform the levelling up agenda to better reflect the needs of those it seeks to help. In this report, we have proposed a new approach to levelling up which would support those who stay local to go far.

Exacerbated by the cost of living crisis, the inequalities within and between our regions feel more pronounced than ever. In a political climate that emphasises the importance of geographies, it is unsurprising that we are more focussed on addressing inequalities between regions than our European counterparts.⁷³ The importance of place in policymaking is only likely to increase in the run up to the next general election and beyond. However, to bring about effective change, a shift is needed. We need to move away from generalising about regions or constituencies, to focussing on the challenges and priorities of places themselves.

Over the course of this project, we found that the priorities of people in different towns - which are sometimes seen as analogous with one another - are quite distinct. To deliver for these towns, it is imperative that policy makers both recognise their differences and shift power and resources to the local level to deliver bespoke policy agendas.

Currently, too much emphasis is placed on understanding how towns can match the ambitions of those who leave. We argue that this is a short-sighted approach to levelling up. Instead, policymakers should turn their attention towards empowering stayers. They should seek to understand the challenges and priorities of those who stay and create opportunities for them to go far, on their own

terms. To do so requires the localisation of power, to both local government and communities themselves, with public participation in the policymaking process as standard.

In this paper, we have advocated for increased and long-term devolution as the bedrock for a bespoke, town-by-town approach to levelling up. We have set out the model of devolution we think is best suited to deliver this approach and identified policy areas that it would be prudent to devolve in the first instance. However, there are questions that remain unanswered - exactly what policy areas should be prioritised in devolution deals? Is there agreement between local leaders and communities on this? How should the government effectively devolve power in an equitable manner across the country, without exacerbating existing inequalities? Devolution is by no means a silver bullet and to ensure it stands the best chance of delivering for people in towns requires further consideration of these fundamental questions.

This project set out to interrogate the desirability and deliverability of the 'stay local, go far' policy ambition in coastal and ex-industrial towns. We believe that the prosperity of towns largely hinges on the ability of those who choose to live there to take up opportunities, whether that is for employment or simply to socialise in their town. To truly level up towns, policymakers should seek to empower those who choose to stay local to go far.

⁷³ Duffy, B. *British people see geographical inequalities as most pressing- not gender or race*. Kings College London, 2021. Available at: [British people see geographical inequalities as most pressing – not gender or race | Feature from King's College London \(kcl.ac.uk\) \[accessed 15/03/22\]](https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/feature/british-people-see-geographical-inequalities-as-most-pressing-not-gender-or-race)

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