Levelling up in practice ⯈
Interim report from South Tyneside

RESEARCH NOTE

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Introduction

This is the second interim report from Onward's research into Levelling Up in Practice.

Our first interim report set out the purpose of this programme. In summary, we are working to develop a prototype methodology for levelling up, rooted in evidence and informed by the views of local communities. By taking the insights from the Levelling Up White Paper and applying them to specific places across the country, we want to generate an actionable toolkit for local leaders to improve their areas.

We believe this methodology for Levelling Up needs to be different from past attempts at regeneration. It needs to make places great to live in as well as making them wealthier, prioritise the social fabric alongside economic fundamentals, and bring opportunities to where people live already - rather than expecting them to move. And our methodology needs to marry consistency and flexibility: clear and replicable enough as a playbook that different communities can adopt it, but not so rigid that it ignores the nuances of local context.

Our approach combines three steps:

- *Data Diagnostics* – understanding the economic and social characteristics of an area through a range of quantitative datasets and building a typology of places so that local leaders can identify relevant comparators;
- *Field Visits* - conducting qualitative research in a series of places across the UK, including focus groups with members of the public and discussions with businesses, community groups, local and regional government, schools, colleges, and universities;
- *Levelling Up Playbook* – identifying shared challenges to form the building blocks for a set of replicable and scalable interventions. These will primarily be low-cost, fast-acting, evidence-based interventions, within the gift of local leaders without recourse to central government.

In the spirit of sharing and learning, we will regularly publish interim research which summarises what we have learnt in each place and offer initial thoughts and recommendations. These will serve to prompt discussion and unearth common themes, and improve the robustness of the prototype once all the research has been concluded.

Our first report[1] shared our learnings from Oldham, bringing together a range of data with views from members of the public and leaders from the public, private, and charitable sectors.

Our Research in South Tyneside

The second place we have focused on is South Tyneside, which we visited in April 2022. We are grateful to the team at South Tyneside Council for facilitating our work, and particularly Jonathan Tew and Rory Sherwood-Parkin.

We are extremely grateful to the individuals and organisations who gave their time to speak to us - including Cllr Dixon, Cllr Atkinson, and the leadership team at South Tyneside Council, Charlotte Brown at Port of Tyne, Tom Nightingale at Equinor, Michael Dickson of MI Dicksons Ltd, Ian Farrar at Far North, Carl Buckley at Urban River, Paul Smissen at Zenith Training, Arthur Hodgson of the Advanced Manufacturing Forum, Kevin Howell at HTG, Colin Henry at Siemens, Geoff Thompson, at South Shields FC, Eddie Czestochowskiat Cell Pack Solutions, Charlotte Harrison at Inspire South Tyneside, Lesley-Anne Kirk at Northern Rights, Steve Camm at South Shields Football Club Foundation, Lynsey Whitehead at Tyne Coast College, Andrew Watts at Groundwork South & North Tyneside, Rachel Taylor at South Tyneside Homes, Anna Davidson at South Tyneside Clinical Commissioning Group, Brian Thomas at Hospitality and Hope, and Corinne Devine at Women's Health in South Tyneside. While these conversations were highly valuable, the authors hold full responsibility for the contents of this interim research note.

South Tyneside

"It's getting worse, a lot worse, there's no job opportunities or anything, at one time there must have been five or six thousand people working in South Shields. That's all gone, now you have to go away to find work. [We've lost] the shipyards, the mines, Plesseys factory..."
Keith, 58, HGV Driver

The borough of South Tyneside in England's North East includes the towns of South Shields, Jarrow, Hebburn, and a number of smaller villages. Once, it was defined by shipbuilding and mining. The area's first pit opened in Hebburn in 1794, and the world's first steam collier was launched from Jarrow shipyards in the middle of the 19th Century by the Palmer Brothers.[2]

It was the closure of the Palmers shipyard in 1934 that led to the Jarrow March - the infamous protest against industrial closures where workers walked almost 300 miles to Parliament. The majority of shipyards closed in the 1980s, and the last pit closed in South Tyneside in 1993.[3] For the past few decades, the area has struggled with the economic and social dislocations of deindustrialisation.

Our initial data diagnostic reveals the challenging position that this has left the area in.

South Tyneside has low levels of productivity. GVA per capita is only £12,547, over £10,000 below the national average, placing it at the 1st percentile nationally - more productive than only three other local authorities in the country (East Renfrewshire, Castle Point, and Gosport). Household income levels are only marginally better, at £15,915 - placing the authority £5,518 below the national average for gross disposable household income, at the 6th percentile.

Figure 1: GDHI per capita vs GVA per capita, in percentile ranks
*Source: ONS Regional Accounts 2019, Onward analysis*
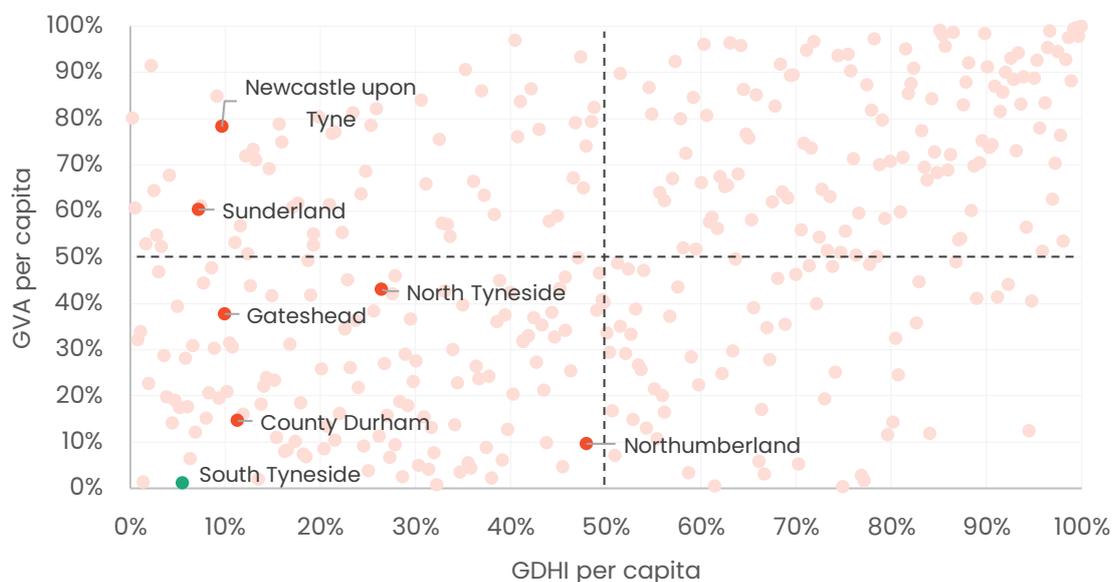
There is more reason to be hopeful when looking at the strength of South Tyneside's society. According to Understanding Society's 'belonging' scores, which measure the extent to which people feel that they belong to their neighbourhood, South Tyneside ranks in the 83rd percentile, higher than the other authorities in the North East shown in Figure 2. Northumberland, County Durham and Gateshead also rank above national averages on this metric, but Newcastle and Sunderland score below average, despite having better material welfare.

According to Onward's Social Fabric Index, South Tyneside places at the 19th percentile. This index includes data on volunteering, membership of local groups, the physical infrastructure of places like shops and green spaces, trust in civic institutions, crime rates and family formation.

Figure 2: Social Fabric and Belonging Scores, in percentile ranks
Source: Onward (2020), The State of our Social Fabric, Onward analysis of Understanding Society
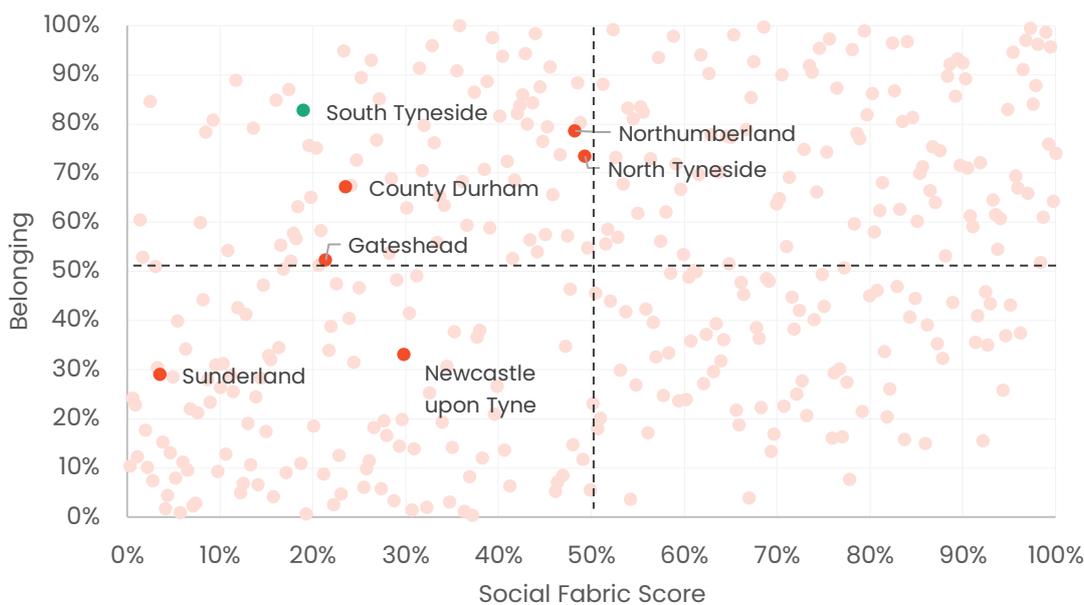
South Tyneside's past was dominated by industry. It's present is defined by domestic tourism and leisure - with a large share of employment in restaurants and hotels, particularly around the South Shields waterfront. Indeed, one business leader expressed frustration at the areas' reliance on its natural environment, saying "If I see another picture of the waves crashing over the North Pier or Long Sands beach… I'll scream."

But the future of South Tyneside lies in the green economy. Dogger Bank, the world's largest offshore wind farm, is being launched around 150 km off the coast, creating hundreds of jobs to support operations and maintenance.[4] The Port of Tyne recently announced a partnership to develop a 2050 Maritime Innovation Hub in the borough, partnering with major companies like Drax, Nissan, Accenture, and Ubisoft. The council is leading the way on geothermal as a way to generate energy, pumping water around former mining shafts deep underground to capture heat which is then distributed through nearby homes.

These harbingers of the new green economy, backed by major industrial businesses and offering the potential for high quality jobs, should be a direct route to levelling up. They may not provide the same levels of mass employment as ship building and mining, but offer a core of good jobs available to local residents, which could complement roles in high-skilled services that might be on offer for those willing to commute to Newcastle.

The challenge in South Tyneside is providing a bridge from the old to the new. Long standing inequalities that cross multiple generations need to be tackled. Opportunities need to be created for young people, so they can "stay local and go far". One business leader told us that there are great things happening in South Tyneside but no ability to connect people to them, and added that "until we do we will have a hell of a job bringing life back into the town". The borough's motto is "Always Ready". Today, that doesn't appear wholly true.

What actions can local leaders take to provide this bridge? What role should be played by the council, business leaders, community groups, and others? The remainder of this report looks in more detail at the challenges and opportunities in South Tyneside, under the four headings of the Levelling Up White Paper, and suggests what this might mean for the Levelling Up in Practice playbook.[5]

1) Boost productivity, pay, jobs, and living standards by growing the private sector

South Tyneside's economy is typical of the North East - a history of heavy industry, and a difficult transition to a new economy in the past few decades. Today, the area maintains a significant number of manufacturing jobs - although less, as a proportion of employment, than the rest of the North East. Most employment is provided by the public sector and the visitor economy - with restaurants, bars, and leisure facilities on and around the waterfront providing jobs that are often seasonal and low paid. Emma, a hairdresser who participated in one of our focus groups, told us that: "I'm having to worry 'can I afford that?' and I'm working full time… makes you think 'what's the point?' sometimes."

Figure 3: Over/under representation of employment by industry
*Source: Business Register and Employment Survey, 2020*
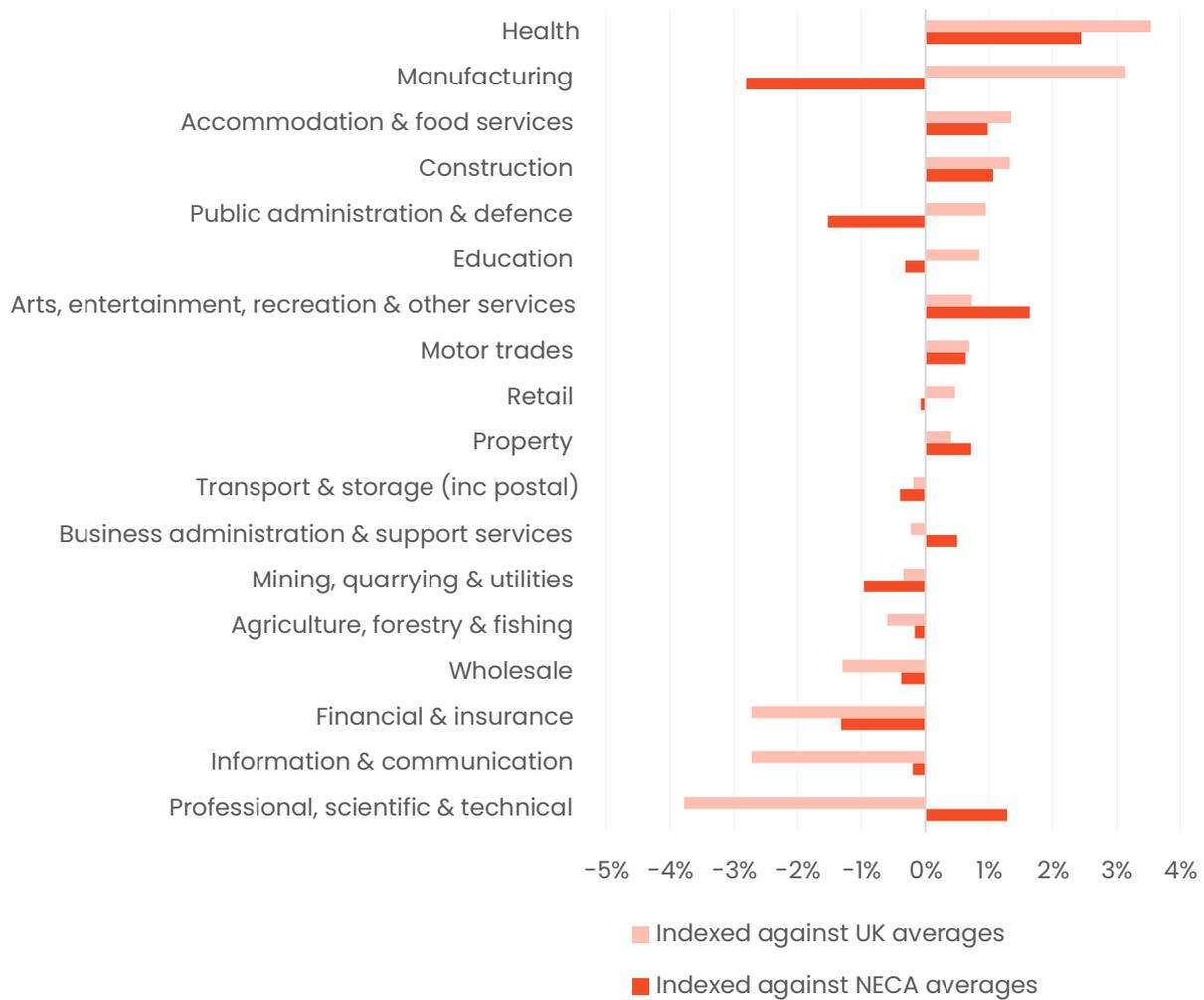
Participants in our focus groups told us that since the closure of the shipyards and the pits, the new jobs they were aware of were in restaurants, shops, call centres, and distribution warehouses. Some pointed to Nissan in Sunderland as the sort of large employer their area was lacking - although highlighted that many friends and family travel to the Nissan factory to work, or are employed in their supply chain.

The paradox is that there are a range of new green jobs coming to the area, but their existence hasn't filtered through to local people. As well as opportunities at Dogger Bank and the Port of Tyne, the local area is developing its broader manufacturing base. The International Advanced Manufacturing Park, officially based in Sunderland but part of a collaboration between the two councils, has been designated as a 'Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project' by the UK Government and is predicted to create more than 7,000 jobs over the next 10 to 15 years. However, in recent years this potential has not been reflected in the number of high growth firms in the borough, which has remained static.

**Figure 4: Change in count of high growth enterprises in the North East**
Source: ONS Business Demography data, 2015-19

Change in count of high growth enterprises, 2015-19
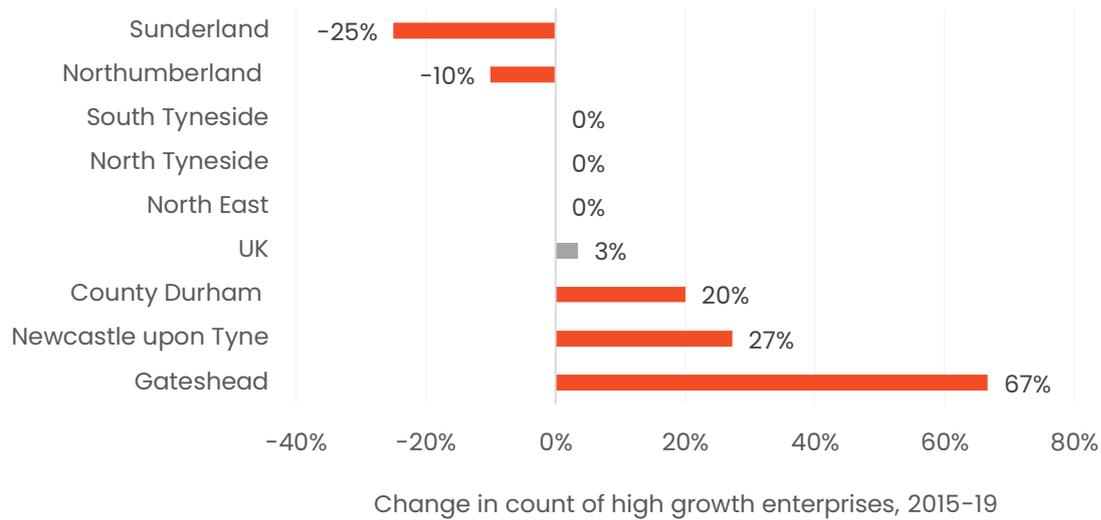
There are multiple barriers to realising these economic opportunities. Skills levels in the borough are low. Under half of adults have a Level 3 qualification, such as an A Level or advanced apprenticeship, compared to around 55% in the rest of the North East and over 60% across the UK. Around 8% of adults - approximately 7,500 people - have no qualifications at all. Participants in our focus group expressed frustration at how this skills gap holds the area back. Jo, a bathroom fitter, said that "the working class worked in the pit and worked in the shipyard and got a really good wage - now unless you've gone to college or university and bettered yourself [you can't] get that high wage... if you were a pitman you didn't need a degree."

Figure 5: Skill levels in 2021
Source: Annual Population Survey, NOMIS
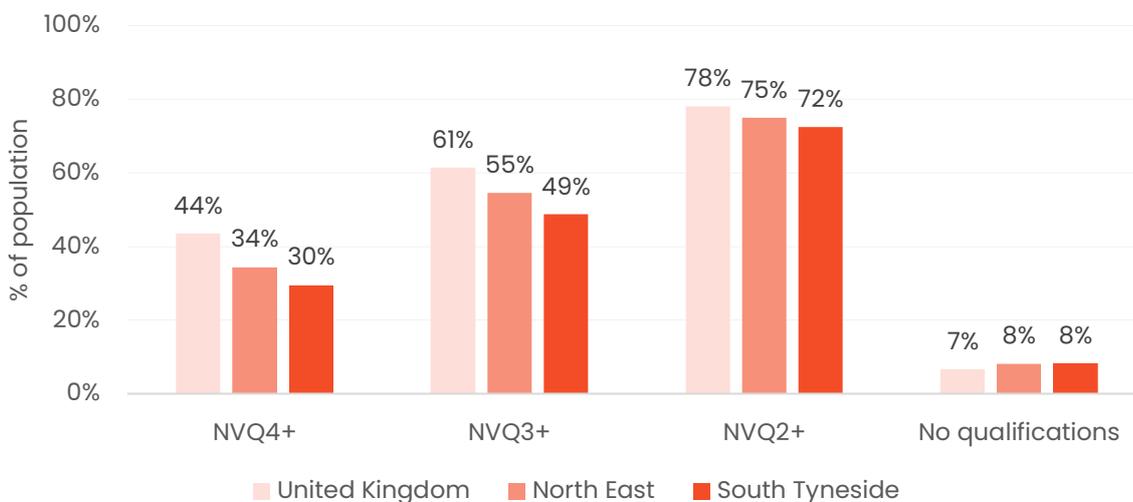
Many residents struggle to enter the labour market at all. Almost one in four households are workless (23.2%) compared to fewer than one in seven nationally (13.6%). This has a particularly negative impact on young people, with the claimant count for 18-21 year olds standing at around double the national average (9.7% against 4.9%).

**Figure 6: Claimant count by age, May 2022**

Source: NOMIS, Labour Force Survey
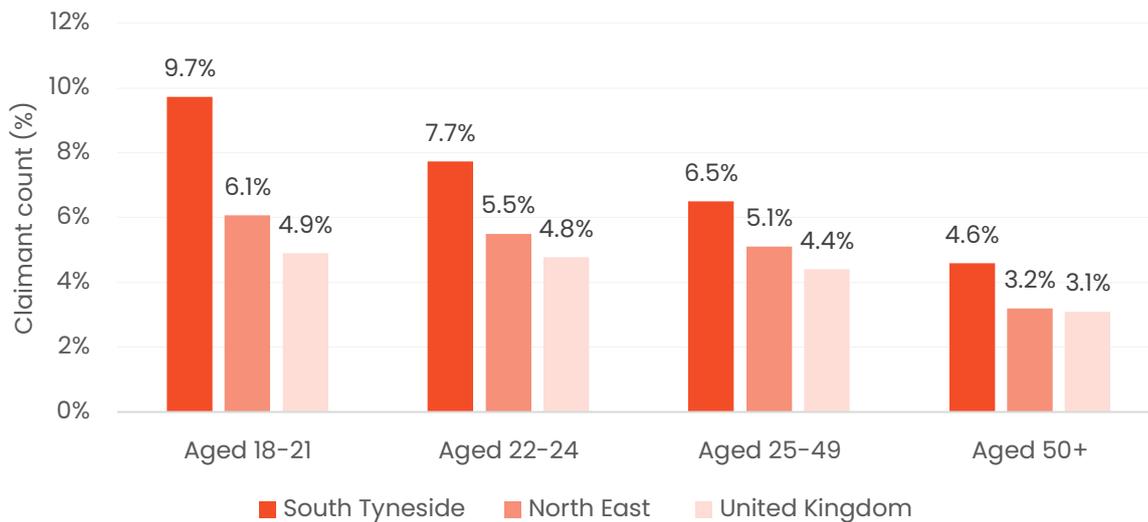
As in many coastal communities, this is driven by poor health - one in three adults who are economically inactive suffer from long term sickness compared to a national average of one in four. As one council officer told us "Some communities are a few metres back from the starting line, others within the borough aren't even on the track." These health challenges are explored in more detail below.

Figure 7: Reasons behind economic inactivity, December 2021

Source: Annual Population Survey, NOMIS
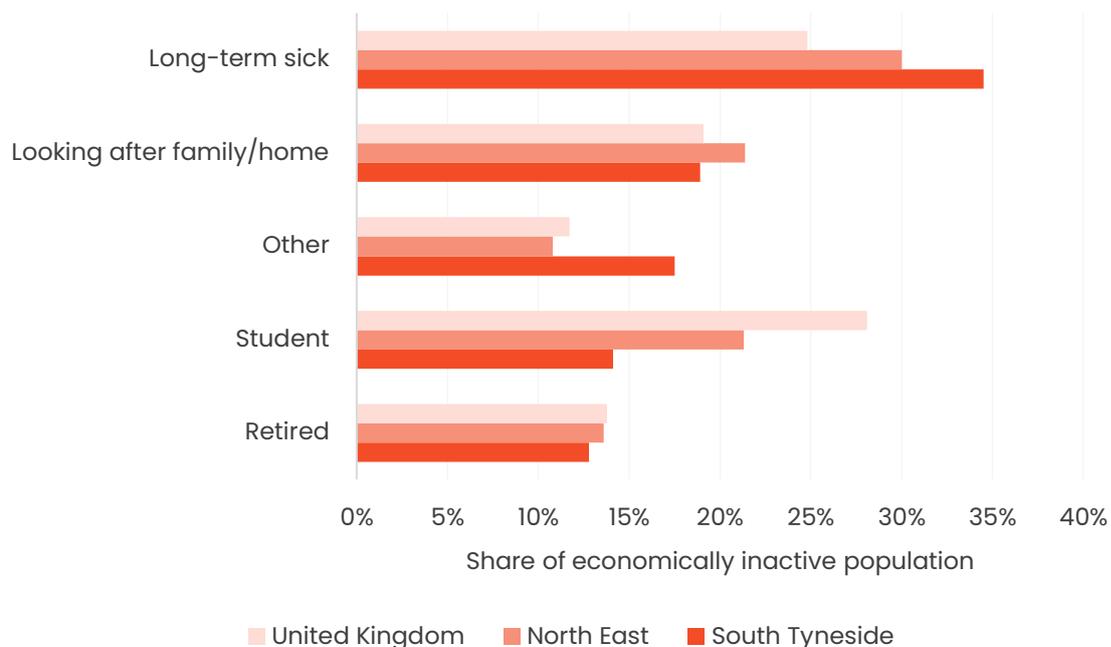
Note: Missing data for those that listed 'short-term illness' and 'discouraged' as reasons for being economically inactive in South Tyneside - they collectively constitute less than 3% of those economically inactive in this age group in South Tyneside, the North East, and the UK.

Businesses told us that this presented them with major recruitment challenges. A representative from one of the firms behind the Dogger Bank project told us of the significant interest they had when they advertised for long-term technical roles, with 450 applicants for 10 positions - but very few from the local area. Other organisations recruiting for entry level roles that have shift patterns told us of the challenges of getting local applicants, which presents them with real difficulty given the need for close proximity to the workplace. But focus group participants painted a different picture, criticising the lack of local employment opportunities. Colin, a factory manager, told us that "in the past, people worked in the pit and they lived here. Now 85% of people go out of South Shields to work". Again, there seems to be a gap between reality and perception when it comes to employment opportunities.

The supply of appropriate commercial land is also a major challenge to South Tyneside's businesses. Firms told us that they struggled to find suitable premises, particularly larger offices and sites for manufacturing. This reflects the findings of a 2019 report into employment land in the borough, which projected an oversupply of specialist employment land around the port and an acute undersupply of general use land for offices and manufacturing - particularly around South Shields.[6]

Concerns regarding land supply were compounded by three factors. First, the absence of any strategic planning. The last local plan was agreed by the council in 2007, and does not reflect the National Planning Policy Framework - although the council is currently undergoing a process to develop a new local plan. Second, the significant pressures on the planning department at the council, with business reporting delays and high levels of complexity - telling us their experience was "just painful" and "absurd". Third, the inability to access funding to bring forward brownfield land that has been provided to the nearby North of Tyne Combined Authority, and other metro-mayors - which limits the council's ability to invest in purchasing, assembling, and remediating sites for development.

South Tyneside has good transport connectivity. Most of the area is within commuting distance of Newcastle, and the borough contains ten metro stations. Travel estimates for door to door journeys, shown in the figure below, may overestimate journey times - with a metro from South Shields to Newcastle often taking under 25 minutes. However, some focus group participants resented the money that had gone into the new metro and bus terminal - Vivian, a foster carer, commented, "why do we need a hub like that, because once you come to Shields you're at a dead end?"

Figure 8: How far you can travel from Newcastle using public transport for 15,30, 45, 75, 90 minute journeys
Source: Analysis of Travel Time data
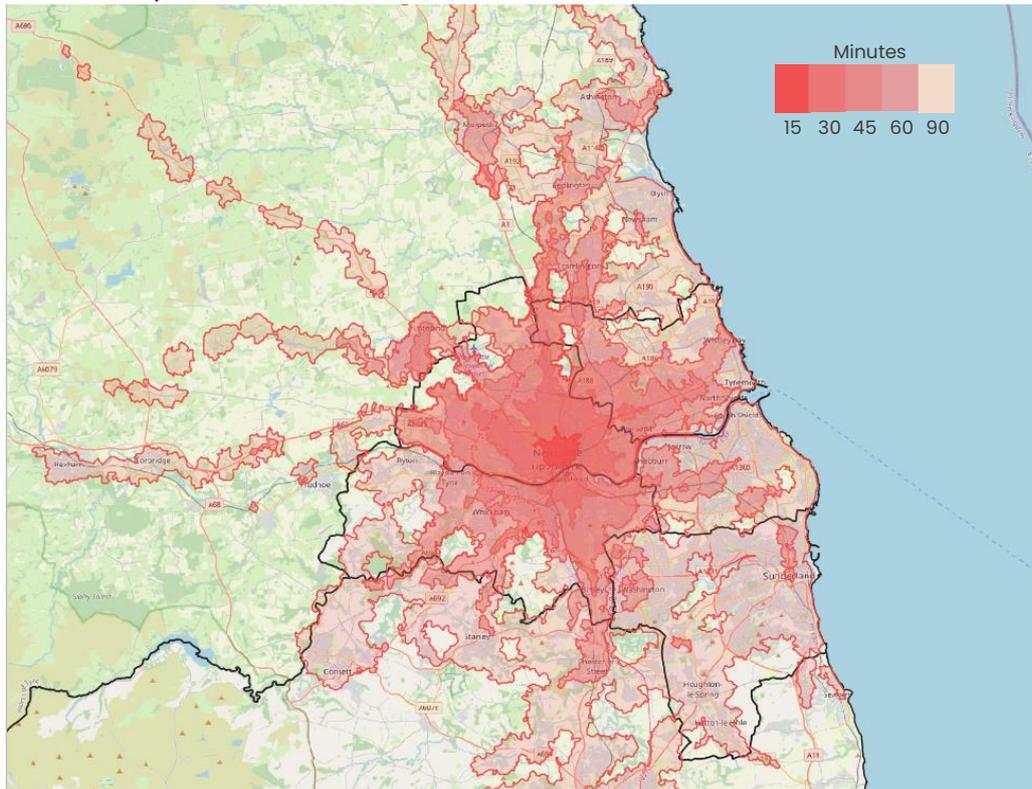
What might this mean for the local playbook?

The key challenge in South Tyneside is linking the local population to new jobs. Local leaders need to take bold actions to move people into employment, and upskill existing workers so that they can access new opportunities. The council have already taken some steps to do this through their economic recovery plan, introducing the South Tyneside Employment & Skills Hub to provide holistic employment support. They could go further, innovating with new forms of employment support that harness relationships within the community - such as Hilary Cottam's "Backr" project, which built relationships between the unemployed and those in work through simple technology platforms to build their aspiration and resilience.[7] This could build on the council's successful 'Mockingbird' approach to foster care, which connects foster families to up to six others via 'hubs' which build their collective resilience.[8]

A more targeted approach should be taken to link local people to new green jobs. New strategic partnerships could be formed between businesses and further education providers to ensure a clear pipeline of local talent for new roles, benefiting both employers and the community. Some of these partnerships already exist in the region, including the collaboration between Siemens and TyneMet College to train engineers. Future partnerships might be between the newly formed TyneCoast College group and the firms behind the Dogger Bank project - Equinor, SSE, and Eni Pletitude. Local school leaders also need to take action to improve the supply of talented young people into apprenticeships and technical routes - business leaders told us that their current incentives meant they could be blockers in their engagement and recruitment activities.

A range of low-cost practical interventions across the borough could also improve access to employment and connect people to opportunity - for example through job fairs or apprenticeships fairs in colleges and secondary schools. In-work progression support could also move people into roles with higher wages, through joint delivery by Job Centre Plus, the local council, and a number of marquee employers forming the first group.

Challenges with land supply also need to be tackled. The clearest first step is for the council to develop and introduce a Local Plan, a process which has now begun. In the intervening period, the council could form an employment land taskforce - working directly with businesses and developers to identify and overcome barriers. This could include expediting planning applications for key employers, brokering agreements to share commercial premises, or using the council's CPO powers to bring forward new sites.

## 2) Spread opportunities and improve public services

> "All the problems here are behind the front door, if you drove round you wouldn't know there was a problem"
> Local Community Leader

Like many coastal communities, South Tyneside faces significant health and wellbeing challenges. In 2021, the Chief Medical Officer Chris Witty's Annual Report focused on Britain's seaside areas, arguing that "if we do not tackle the health problems of coastal communities vigorously and systematically there will be a long tail of preventable ill health".[9] A 2020 Institute for Fiscal Studies report also found that coastal communities were uniquely vulnerable to the economic and social challenges of Covid-19.[10]

Public health data reveals the extent of these challenges in South Tyneside. 91% of neighbourhoods in the borough are below the national average in terms of health deprivation. 41% of neighbourhoods are in the bottom decile. These challenges are not equally felt across the borough - there is a 12 year difference in male life expectancy between the healthiest ward (Cleadon and East Boldon - 83.6) and the least healthy (Primrose - 71.5). [11]

Figure 9: Areas in the lowest national decile for health deprivation and disability

Source: IMD (2019), Health deprivation and disability
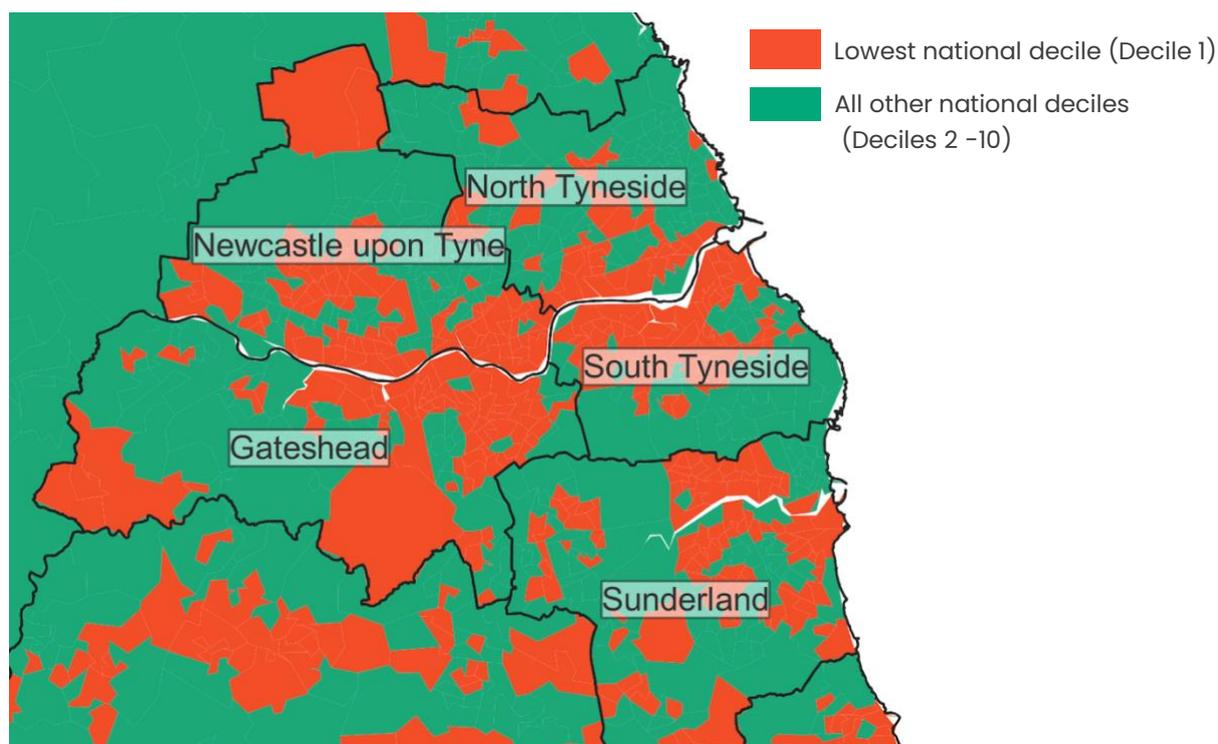
Underpinning these health challenges are a range of behavioural risk factors including high levels of smoking (16.3% against 13.9% England average) and low levels of physical activity (61.5% against 65.9% England average). These risk factors are particularly acute among young people, with the borough having the highest level of childhood obesity in the North East (27%), around a third higher than the UK average (21%).[12]

Despite these challenges, local public services are reasonably strong. A CQC inspection of South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Trust in 2021 rated community-based health services as 'outstanding' and acute hospital care as 'good'. The number of underperforming primary schools is below the national average (11% compared to 12%), although the number of underperforming secondary schools is significantly above average (36% compared to 20%), which may feed through into employment outcomes later down the line. A 2017 Ofsted inspection rated the area's children's services as 'good', with an 'outstanding' rating for adoption services - nationally, around half of local authority children's services receive either a 'good' or 'outstanding' rating.[13]

Public perceptions of public services do not necessarily match official inspections. Participants in our focus groups talked about the closure of schools and downgrading of hospital maternity services as examples of local leaders giving up on their area. Adele, a hairdresser, said that "they've gradually taken more and more away, over to Sunderland, like the maternity, it's just been drip drip". Debra, a sales manager, said that the "hospital has gone downhill… no children's ward, no maternity ward." While this reconfiguration of services may have impacted public confidence, it does not seem to have reduced their quality.

So given this foundation of effective public services, why are there such persistent social challenges? Community leaders told us that the problems had "deep roots", with poverty and unemployment over multiple generations leading to a vicious cycle of deprivation. In particular, both third sector and public sector leaders told us that many challenges developed "behind closed doors" in ways that made them difficult to tackle.

Measuring these "behind closed doors" problems is inherently challenging. In several of our discussions domestic violence was raised as an acute problem, although it is difficult to support this with the available data - rates of recorded domestic crime across Northumbria constabulary[14] are higher than the English average (17.2 per 1000 population, compared to 14.2 nationally) but significantly lower than the rate in the neighbouring Durham and Cleveland constabularies (21.0 and 22.2 respectively).[15] Other indicators point to further challenges in the private or domestic sphere. The borough's population suffers from significant mental health challenges - with 1 in 5 adults suffering from a mental health disorder compared to 1 in 6 across England.[16]

Figure 10: Estimated prevalence of common mental health disorders
*Source: Mental Health and Wellbeing JSNA (by local authority), Public Health England*
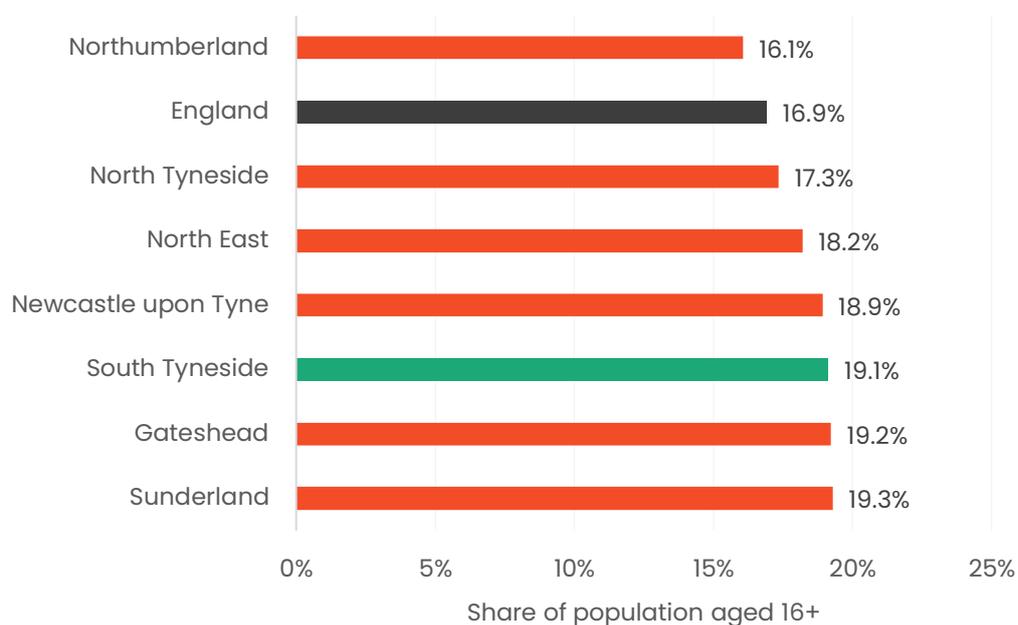
Data on deaths from drug misuse also indicate a worrying increase in South Tyneside, with rates doubling from 5.8 per 100,000 population to 12.6 between 2010 and 2020, over four times the rate of the increase nationally.

Figure 11: Death rate from drug use
Source: ONS data on drug related deaths
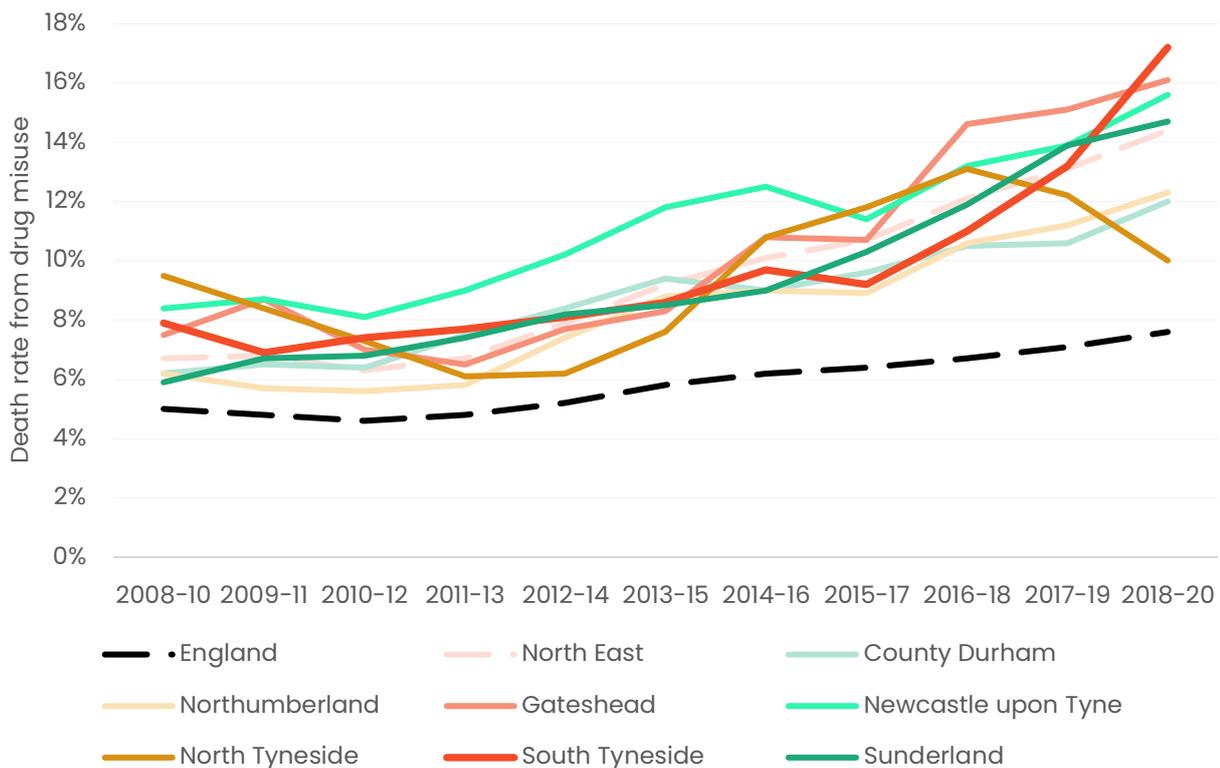
Community leaders told us that this problem was compounded by a distrust of public institutions - saying that the most vulnerable residents were unlikely to engage with the council or central government services. They highlighted the challenges for the third sector to operate within regional or national commissioning frameworks, pointing to the fact that DWP welfare-to-work services were operated over a North East footprint covering over 2.5 million people and over 3,000 square miles, which limits the scope for local specialisation.

Community groups also expressed frustration at the fragmentation of funding, echoing our findings in Oldham that charities needed to manage a highly complex set of funds with differing application requirements, timescales, and reporting arrangements to sustain a strong civic base.

This complexity fed through into a public confusion with how taxes were used to tackle social challenges. Debra, a sales manager, asked "council tax is so high but where is it going?". Other focus group participants specifically called for a greater role for community organisations in tackling deprivation. Samira, a 23-year-old team leader, argued that "the council and police, they don't need to do it by themselves." This led some community leaders to argue for different approaches and priorities for public funding, with one even telling us "we don't need fast broadband and we don't need fast trains, give the community the money instead".

What might this mean for the local playbook?

Tackling deeply embedded health challenges will be key for levelling up in South Tyneside. New leaders at the council have made this a core priority, launching a series of resident engagement sessions called the 'Our South Tyneside Conversation' to shape a long term plan.

Going further could mean a whole community campaign to target determinants of ill health. For example, in Somerville, Massachusetts, the five year programme 'Shape Up Somerville' brought together a series of public and charitable grants around healthy eating and physical activity to tackle ill health. Evaluations found clear evidence of a positive impact, and praised the Community Action Model which built sustainable networks grounded in relationships[17].

Given the "behind closed doors" nature of social challenges in the area, it will be important to harness the reach of community groups into places the public sector struggles to access. New commissioning frameworks could be trialled, to provide public contracts to micro organisations that would otherwise struggle to access them. New community-based initiatives could also be piloted, such as the expansion of social prescribing or the establishment of family hubs to provide multiple services to families within a community setting.

3) Restore a sense of community, pride, and local belonging

"I hate walking down King Street, there's so many shops closed down, it's just awful compared to what it used to be"
Adele, 54, Hairdresser

South Tyneside has a strong sense of community and belonging. This came out clearly in our focus groups, with participants telling us that their area was friendly and neighbourly. Participants often contrasted this atmosphere to the South of England - Vivian, a foster carer, said that " it makes [South Tyneside] different from places like London… you tend to say hello to each other, and most people would go out of their way to help someone else." This is reflected in the Understanding Society survey, where South Tyneside's score for 'Belonging' is well above the national average. This community identity was hyper-local, with participants talking about their street or part of South Shields, Jarrow, Hebburn more than South Tyneside as a borough.

Figure 12: Belonging scores
Source: Onward Social Fabric Index, Onward analysis of Understanding Society
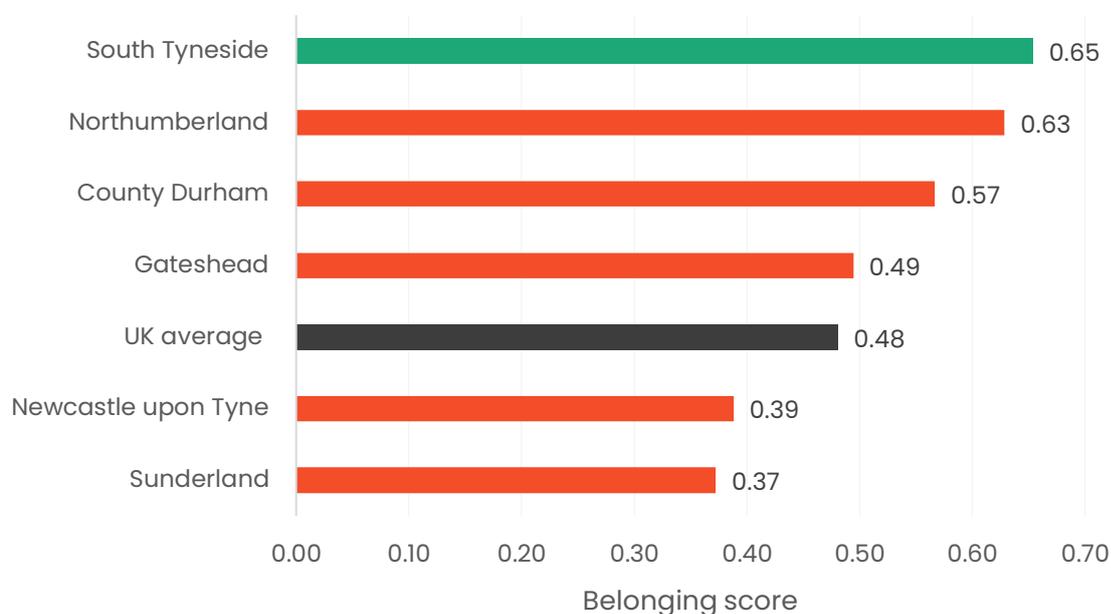
When we asked people what made them proud of their area, focus group participants immediately turned to the natural environment. Adele told us "the coastline is beautiful" while Colin focussed on the "lovely beach and coastal walks". This was also echoed by business leaders, with one describing the area as "the Algarve with a fleece". But there were frustrations at the attention that went to the seafront. Deborah said "If they can keep the beaches so well, why doesn't that extend to the rest of the borough. All that money they've spent near the sea, that's what people see."

This frustration was particularly high in relation to the borough's high streets. As with Oldham, the decline of the primary high street - in this instance, King Street in South Shields, was seen as emblematic of the decline of the area overall. One business deliberately set up their office on King Street to try and be part of the solution, but admitted he found it "embarrassing to invite customers to the office". Another business leader told us that "in the mid-1980s, King Street in South Tyneside commanded the highest retail rents in the country. It's no longer anywhere near."

Figure 13: Vacancy rate for retail and leisure units
Source: Whythawk data on vacancy, 2021
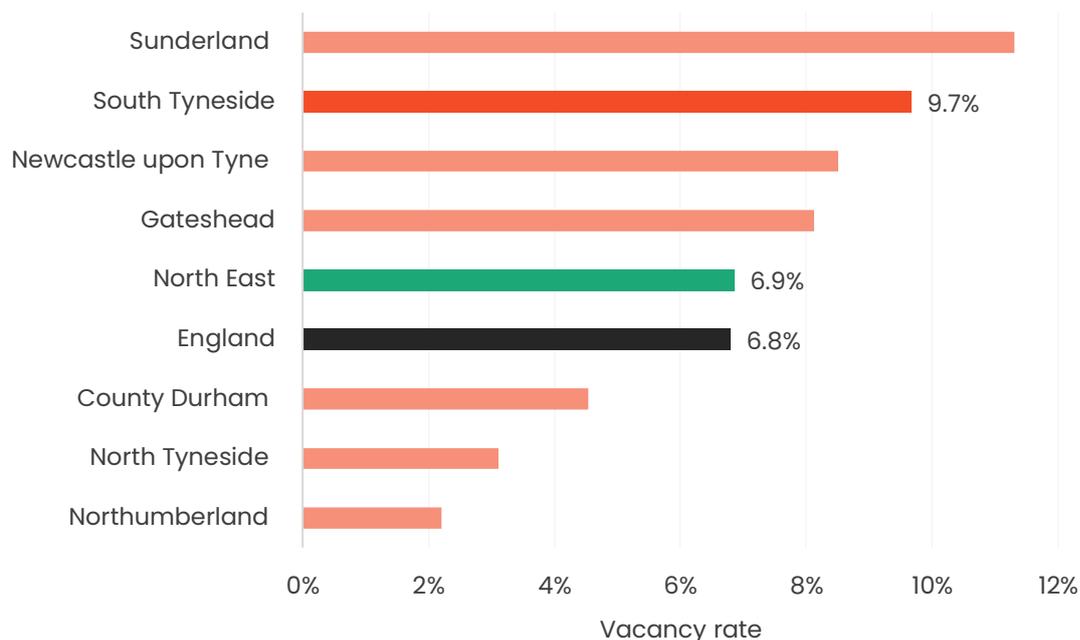
Members of the public also told us about concerns around antisocial behaviour, particularly in the town centre. Some argued this took place around the metro, while others reported shoplifting on the high street or antisocial behaviour around bars. Nick, a security officer, said "it's the crime, the crime is unbelievable, River Island got a few bags stolen from it the other day, they asked the police for help and they just told them to call 911". Few focus group participants had direct experience of crime, but most said they felt it was up. Samira, a team leader, said "you hear more often of people being stabbed or larger crimes" and Lee, a fabrication technician, attributed this to substance misuse, saying "a lot of that is people being drugged up."

Figure 14: Reported crime in South Tyneside over time
Source: ONS data on reported cases of crime
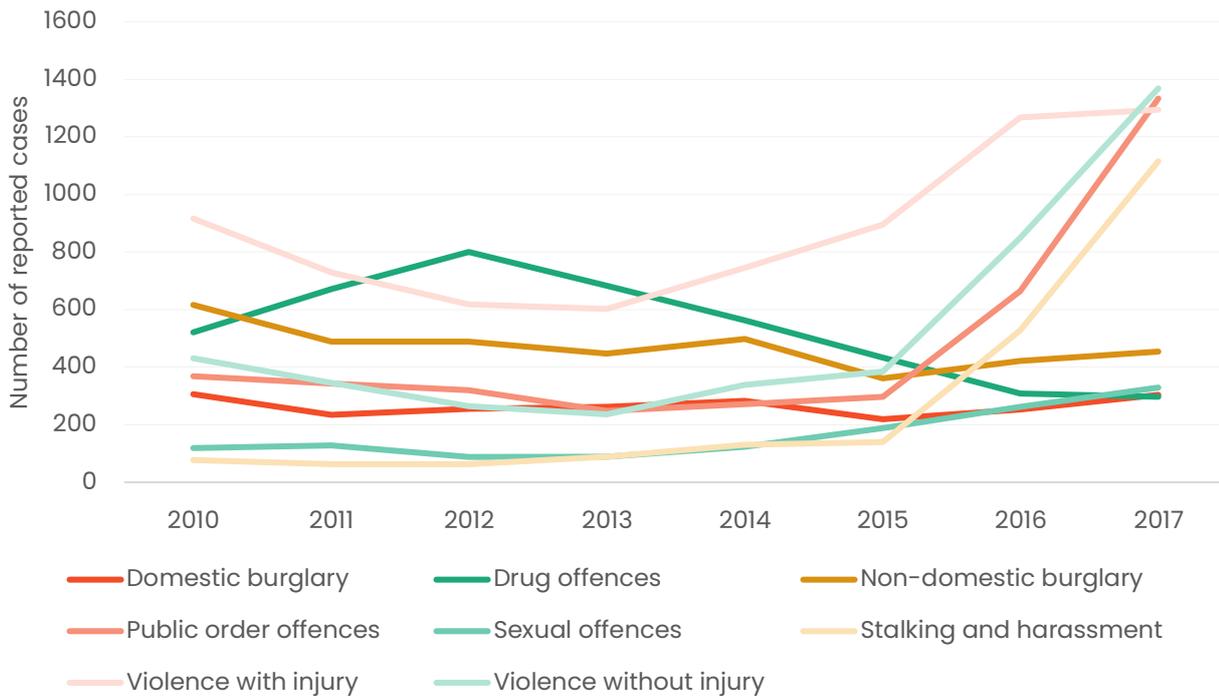
Culture and sport offered an opportunity to build community pride. Civic and business leaders are investing significant amounts of their own funding to revitalise South Shields FC, with £4 million given to regenerate the stadium and a new SSFC Community Foundation established. The council highlighted their recent designation as an Arts Council England priority place as an opportunity to animate the town centre. Focus group participants focussed on the advantage of having strong local heritage assets, including the Town Hall in South Shields, with Adele, a hairdresser, saying "we have a gorgeous town hall, I'm proud of that, I deliberately take the long way to drive past it".

What might this mean for the local playbook?

Restoring the vitality of the public realm and mending the physical fabric of South Tyneside is key to rebuilding trust and pride. The natural environment is clearly an opportunity, but for as long as eyesores remain away from the waterfront they will send the signal that the local population matters less than visitors. The council have taken initial action, with leaders identifying symbolic eyesores that blight each ward and working with the planning department to expedite solutions.

But the council could go further, beginning with vacant business premises that reduce footfall and hollow out the high street. In advance of Compulsory Rent Auctions being introduced as part of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, the council could write to property owners of all vacant units informing them of their intention to trigger a rent auction - encouraging them to reduce prices to find a tenant. The cheaper units could then be used by charities, small businesses or even parts of the public sector, with the NHS opening community health hubs or Northumbria police introducing pop-up police stations.

The opportunities provided by culture could also be harnessed through the introduction of a series of "cultural action zones" in the area. This would see the council work with charities and businesses to designate specific neighbourhoods to concentrate investment and support for arts. New open-air performance spaces, improved cycling and walking links, and the animation of heritage assets could increase footfall, provide activities for young people, and build pride in the area's history.

4) Empower local leaders and communities

> "I do thoroughly support the idea of a figurehead to get the local authorities working together. Because we don't have that and you can smell it across the river."
> Local Business Leader

Providing a bridge between South Tyneside's past and future is a major challenge of leadership. At present, the council takes a lot of this work on its own shoulders. Council officers recognise the scale of the regeneration challenge, undertaking a range of studies and introducing new strategies. But their ability to act was limited by constrained budgets and departments under real service delivery pressure.

The council has also received limited support to date from central government funds. Bids to the Towns Fund, Levelling Up Fund and Freeports programme had all been unsuccessful - limiting the amount of capital investment available. Transport capital that should have flowed to the non-Mayoral North East Combined Authority (responsible for maintaining the network) had been held pending negotiations on further devolution to the North East - causing frustration to local councillors. Understandably, senior officials told us that they "can't see the wiring around levelling up".

Business leaders expressed frustration at the lack of a metro-mayor to provide economic leadership. Many pointed at the successes of Ben Houchen and Jamie Driscoll in securing investment and supporting business elsewhere in the region, arguing that they'd been left out without a dynamic figure who could implement a vision and get things done. One business leader told us "The businesses in Teeside love Ben Houchen. We just don't have that here. He gets things done… They've got this great spokesman and things are happening". Another said "I look at Teeside and I'm embarrassed. South Tyneside is the biggest loser out of the lack of join up at a local government level." Council leaders acknowledged the ongoing process to form a North East Combined Authority that would include the three local authorities south of the Tyne (Sunderland, Gateshead, South Tyneside) along with the existing North of Tyne Combined Authority.

More broadly, there was a challenge in articulating South Tyneside's place in the region. Many local leaders expressed frustration at the "brain drain" of talented young people leaving the area, or the appeal of Newcastle office space for businesses, but there was an absence of strategy for how the borough could benefit from its proximity to a core city or wealthier towns. In the absence of this vision, young people did seem to be voting with their feet - the area, like many coastal towns, has a demographic skew towards older residents.

The council leadership recognised that there needed to be a shared strategy across the region's local authorities, which could be supported by a new Combined Authority. Business leaders also reflected this challenge to us - with one saying "we shouldn't try to compete with North Tyneside. We need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of different places, and try to join them up... We need a vision."

Businesses themselves struggled to work together effectively. They highlighted the lack of connectivity between firms, pointing to a forum that used to convene them that was dissolved when Regional Development Associations were scrapped in 2011. They argued that the North East Chamber played a key role in advocating for the region, but operated at a scale that was at times too large to fully support their borough. One large business told us "We have tried to do SME innovation workshops, but we are having to do this alone. It still feels like we are having to drive this or make this happen ourselves."

Community groups also struggle at times to coordinate among themselves and with the public sector. Models of commissioning required third sector organisations to bid for small and disconnected pots of funding, focussing their attention on the council or Whitehall. This limits their ability to network collectively, although Inspire South Tyneside (the infrastructure organisation for the voluntary and community sector) had taken steps in recent years to address this through hyper-local mapping. Inspire were also working to develop an 'alliancing' approach to procurement in the area, learning from an approach developed in Australia in the 1990s to collaborate more effectively between the public and private sector.[18]

Overall, our impression was a lack of non-public sector architecture to support levelling up. A major shift was needed to develop a more distributed form of leadership, with the council acting as one partner among many. At present, there are a large number of organisations and leaders working to make the area better, but the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

What might this mean for the local playbook?

New leaders at both a political and official level in South Tyneside council are making progress on these challenges. In particular, they have been engaging in discussions with other council leaders about the creation of a single Tyneside Combined Authority to unlock greater funding and support coordination. A stronger strategic layer of governance - to set a vision, convene partners and focus on delivery - is vital for the area's success. In particular, devolution negotiations should focus on local control of the Adult Education Budget to tackle skills shortages and brownfield funds to increase land supply.

At the same time as strengthening strategic governance, the council should also adopt a proactive approach towards what is known as "double devo". This involves the establishment of stronger local governance, such as neighbourhood plans, parish and town councils, and historical heritage-based community trusts, to help communities take on more responsibility themselves and foster a stronger civic society locally. Local philanthropy could also be expanded by match funding the local community foundation or other philanthropic vehicles.

The council have also taken steps to address the limited connectivity of the business community – through initiatives like the Business Survey, South Tyneside Business Week, and the South Tyneside Pledge which encourages business to act as anchors for the area in terms of recruitment and procurement. On top of these initiatives, clearer steps need to be taken by the business community themselves to organise. One concrete step could be the formation of a Business Improvement District in South Shields, to help firms collectively organise and lobby for their interests. Local businesses could also form a South Shields chapter of the North East Chamber of Commerce, to develop their distinctive voice within the umbrella of the broader organisation.

Conclusion

> "The further North you get, the more you're forgotten about."
> Vivian, 68, Foster Carer

As we found in Oldham, members of the public have a broad awareness of what levelling up means. While to some it initially sounded like "something from a computer game", most saw it as about "trying to make things equal" or "improving the area, the streets, the shop".

They also saw levelling up as a long term project. Terry, a retired plumber, told us that "It won't be a quick fix. Not in the next five or ten years". When asked how they felt about the future, there were widely differing views - with some describing it as "bleak" but others expressing "hope".

It was clear that overcoming this scepticism meant making quick and tangible progress. Interventions were needed that both spoke to the immediate challenges, like the state of the public realm, and those that were longer term, like employment opportunities and health inequalities. The prototype methodology for levelling up, and the playbook of practical recommendations for local leaders, will need to balance these types of interventions to level up both fast and slow.

In the next few decades this part of the North East could be at the heart of the green economy, as it was for the industrial economy in previous centuries. The challenge will be ensuring that the residents of South Tyneside can contribute to, and benefit from, new opportunities.

Acknowledgements

Appendix 1 – Focus Groups

This is a short overview of two focus groups that Onward moderated in South Shields on the evening of 28 April 2022. Participants were socioeconomic grade **C2D** in the first group and **BC1** in the second, and demographically balanced with an even mix of Leave/Remain and Con/Lab 2019 voters. All of them lived within South Tyneside.

C2D	BC1
Keith - 58, HGV Driver	Kate - 24, Admin Assistant
Nicola - 55, Customer service advisor	Samira - 23, Team Leader
Emma - 28, Hairdresser	Lee - 41, Fabrication Technician
Nik - 35, Security officer	Joanne - 44, Administration manager
Vivian - 68, Foster carer	Terry - 70, Retired Plumber
Alan - 64, Carer	Colin - 45, Factory Manager
Adele - 54, Hairdresser	Lee - 50, Business Development Manager
Jo - 45, Bathroom Fitter	Debra - 58, Sales Manager

1. How do people define levelling up?

- There was a great deal of variation in the understanding of what levelling up means. For those that knew the phrase, levelling up was an issue of fairness. Vivian, a 68-year-old foster carer, saw it as "trying to make things equal." Participants were also conscious of a geographic element, referring to "the North-South divide" and that levelling up was something that was happening in reference to London, where "transport is much cheaper... and where they seem to get more benefits than we do."

- For those that had not heard the phrase 'levelling up' before, there were still some positive associations. Debra, a 58 sales manager, said levelling up sounds like working on "getting the balance right." When asked what it might mean if a politician said it, Colin, a 45-year-old factory manager, replied that it should mean "more honesty, more forthcoming with information" or "improving the area, streets, the shops." Jo, a 45-year-old bathroom fitter, said it was probably good as it could mean to "take something and make it better" but caveated with a question: "could it mean different things across parties, conservative saying one thing and labour saying something else?" Terry, a 70-year-old retired plumber, was similarly sceptical, saying "it depends, what are they levelling up to." For Joanne, a 44-year-old administration manager, the phrase seemed childish and felt that it sounded like something from a "computer game."

- There was a shared sense that the kinds of areas that need levelling up are those that look and feel run down. For Lee, a 41-year-old fabrication technician, places that need levelling up are those that are visibly struggling, speaking of one area he said "Jesus that's bad, 10 houses all with the windows out." For another participant Lee, a 50-year-old business development manager, it was a nearby borough: "Gateshead is grim. Houses with broken windows, rows of them graffiti on bus stops, shops closed." Debra, 58, saw the problem as closer to home: South Shields because "the market has gone." Joanne, 44, spoke specifically about the problems on Kings Street, with "so many shops closed down and it's just awful compared to how it used to be – depressing." But there was also a feeling that it was a wider problem, on council estates and again between the North and the South.

2. How do people define good places?

- **Support for young people:** There was agreement that 'a good place' meant providing for children. On one level, good places are about opportunity: good schools and education, "like apprenticeships." But equally, it was about extracurricular opportunities, like "community and youth centres…so they (children) don't roam about."
- **Housing:** just having homes isn't enough, Joanne was clear that it needed to be "affordable housing, kept to a good standard" while Colin thought there needed to be more affordable, "community housing." The issue of housing was felt to be a problem most keenly affecting young people, with Debra voicing her concern that there is "nothing for young people" and that there needed to be "more housing for the up and comings."
- **Sense of community:** the relationship between the people in the area. Emma prioritised "nice people." While Terry wanted a "community, where a lot of people live and they try to talk to each other."
- **Health and wellbeing:** good health care and social care meant "not only having a decent hospital or doctors but good support if you need it for mental health."
- **Clean streets:** There was a preoccupation with the cleanliness of the public realm. For Jo, 44, and Lee 41, a good place would have "flowers" but "no fly-tipping." Because, as Kate, a 24-year-old admin assistant, said "if it looks dirty then no one wants to be there."

3. How do people feel about their place – South Tyneside?

When asked how they felt about their place, there was a clear sense of attachment and pride in their local environment juxtaposed against a fear and dislike of the condition of parts of the community and public realm.

- There was a sense that the town and the area were two distinct things. Debra saw South Tyneside as being a "really nice place to live, really beautiful" but that "the town lets it down." The conversation around the area was positive, "a really beautiful" place. Keith partially agreed with Debra, describing it as a "good place to live" but he also said that the area had changed for the worse, with "no good places to shop, in the 70s and 80s it was so busy you struggled to walk down it." There was a general agreement that this was down to poor management and overly high rents, resulting in a street of "charity shops and betting shops."
- This general state of disrepair quickly became a discussion of crime and antisocial behaviour in the area. The stories that were told about crime were almost all anecdotal and impersonal: "the crime is unbelievable, I heard that River Island got a few bags stolen from another day." Interestingly, crime was attributed more to boredom than economic hardship or an unavoidable character of the place, with Nicola, 55 a customer service advisor, and Emma, 28, suggesting it was to do with "kids having nowhere to go" and "children hitting drugs."
- There was a disagreement between some of the participants about the state of the area. Debra felt that the area was "clean" while Terry felt that the area was "filthy." Similarly, Lee, 50, felt his area was "quaint" while Colin described his area as a "shit hole." The character of different parts of the wider area was felt to differ massively, sometimes from street to street.

- There was a feeling that the physical bled into the social. As Debra said: in the nicer areas, people were more trusting (would leave their doors open) and in the less nice areas people were openly aggressive and antisocial to one another - "in Hebburn, they tell you to fuck off."

Despite raising criticisms about things like the high street or employment, participants like Joanne pointed out that South Shields' struggles are countrywide and that "it isn't the worst place," while Colin said that closures were "everywhere, not just South Shields" respectively. And while Terry, a 70-year-old retired plumber, claimed to have nothing positive to say about the area, what emerged from the discussions was the real sense of pride in their environment and one another that they all shared.

- **The people:** A strong sense of local identity was keenly felt - linked to Jarrow, Hebburn, South Shields, or other local areas instead of South Tyneside overall. These identities seemed to primarily centre around niceness and friendliness. This identity was held most strongly when compared to other areas, like London. Emma, a 28-year-old hairdresser, spoke about having visited London when she had been "going up an escalator lugging a suitcase but no one helped," she was upset that "they'd help for a buggy. Why is there any difference." Vivian agreed, she saw South Shields as fundamentally different from places like London, where "if you saw someone that needed help you would but in London, they'd walk past them."
- **The natural environment:** When asked what defined their place, the coast and natural environment were the first answers given. Adele, a 54-year-old hairdresser said "the coastline is beautiful." Colin agreed, highlighting the "lovely beach and coastal walks," while Debra similarly said the beaches are "nice and well kept." But there was a feeling that the natural environment was cared for at the expense of the surrounding town. Joanne, 45, asked: "if they can keep the beaches so well kept why doesn't that extend to the rest of the borough?"
- **Heritage buildings:** there was real pride in the Town Hall. Vivian put this in context, explaining the "council is pulling down a lot of buildings that should have been kept." As one of the pieces people could name and all share the Hall seemed to take on special relevance. Joanne, 45, said the Hall is "beautiful," Adele agreed, saying "I deliberately try to drive past it. It is beautiful."

- Where the council was held to be responsible, the issues that were raised were closely related to the problems affecting South Tyneside specifically. Lee, 41, argued that the "labour councillor" was responsible for issues like housing. Alan, a 64-year-old carer, agreed saying things like "job opportunities, social housing – I can't remember the last time the council built an estate." He also saw the council as needing to address education, "jobs for inside the town" and shop closures. The feeling of responsibility and inaction was linked to council tax. There was a feeling that as a response to any issue the council would just raise its tax, Debra was frustrated, feeling that her "council tax is so high but where is it going?" For those that could identify where money was spent, they

were not happy with the decisions, from housing down on the port to overspending on the metro with Vivian asking "why did we need that, because once you get to South Shields it's a dead end". Nick, a 35 security guard, was not particularly enthused by the calibre of his local politicians, "leaflets same thing it said a year ago just one is red and the other is blue." Vivian was similarly dismissive, "South Shields will always be Labour it has always been Labour."

- Others saw it as a matter for national government - but were pessimistic about whether they would take action, highlighting the "lack of investment... Government don't invest up here." This was expanded on by Vivian and Alan, who explained that the lack of investment as a result of the Government not caring about the North, for Vivian, "the further north you go the more you're forgotten about." This related to a sense of powerlessness and that while the council might want to act it was ultimately not within their power to do so because the Government was preventing them. Debra reasoned that "councils rely on government and loads of towns are like this so it must be the government." This view was shared by Alan, who saw it as a political issue "but not local because their hands are tied."

- The regeneration of South Tyneside was also seen to be a community effort but one that was being stalled by a lack of engagement with members of the community. Samira, a 23-year-old team leader, was frustrated, the "council and police, they don't need to do it by themselves." Debra said, "Councillors need to listen... the community can't do anything on their own. But the council doesn't listen either."

6. What would people do to level up South Tyneside?

- There was a clear feeling that at the moment the area was "going backwards" and had been "for a while." This was mainly evidenced by referencing a lack of opportunity in the area and the closure of local infrastructure, like hospital wards and schools. What Adele described as a "drip drip of closures." Debra described it as a feeling of disassociation, "lots of things are happening but we don't know what's happening." This was made worse by the feeling of a lack of access to essential services with it being "increasingly hard to see a GP" and with Debra saying that the "hospital has gone downhill, no children's ward, no maternity ward."

- Reversing the decline was argued to ultimately rely on adequate funding. They felt there was a need for investment and the feeling that nothing would be achieved without it. And that while policies around education or police might be nice "funding is the thing that will be necessary." This was felt universally - although there were mixed feelings about whether that funding would be received.

- A lack of economic opportunity was raised as a key barrier to progress. For Nik, "there aren't many job opportunities in the area, not like there were years ago." People, as a result, now lack options - where once you could "walk out of one job straight into another" you now might struggle to find work" without travelling to a different area." Debra pointed out that "there are jobs out there" but as Joanne said, they are "minimum wage." Where there had been "shipyards, mines," and "factories" the jobs people were aware of now were largely service roles, like restaurants and telecoms. As Debra saw it, of the available jobs, "you don't get as much for your wage at the moment because of the price of living. Mining shipbuilding, there were jobs for working-class people." Vivian said: "a lot of the industries have died, mining shipbuilding but that's all gone now.

Nothing is replacing that, no big employers." Asked about what they would like to see in the area there was hope for another large employer, like Nissan, to "generate a lot of traffic and jobs" and to kick start regeneration.

- The key areas raised as priorities for levelling up were:
    - **Improving the appearance and security of the public realm.** Making it look nicer and feel safer. People suggested that this should be achieved through an increased police presence.
    - **Providing more activities and opportunities for young people.** These activities would both be a draw to the areas for tourists and would tackle antisocial behaviour.
    - **Fixing the drug and alcohol problem**. Either through increased policing or a more comprehensive education that "educates for a healthy lifestyle."
    - **Regeneration and diversification of the high street**. Bringing in new restaurants and shops, and repairing boarded up storefronts
    - **Creating good jobs** for working class communities, to replace the pits and the shipyards

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