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# Place Profiles: Localizing Understandings of Disadvantage

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## Abstract

The everyday economy team at UCL have been investigating the perspective of civil society actors in England, and the longer-term project of economic resilience where the goal is to engage with local knowledge of places for co-produced policies. This working paper on place-profiles is an important iteration. It is a response to contested framings of some places as ‘left-behind,’ in light of the tendency towards ‘othering’ in inequality metrics. It seeks to review the construction of ideas of disadvantage and means to broaden approaches to economic strategy through co-production.

The study presented here adds to a wider debate about how places are understood, and the value of co-produced approaches to profiles. It demonstrates the politics of knowledge of inequalities in economic development, and the complexity of establishing more place-sensitive policy responses. It explores the possibility of using local data on economic factors, as an opportunity for developing place-based understandings. The study focuses on ‘small area’ sets of data and means of interrogation. Using three localities in England that have contested narratives of changes in development, it demonstrates existing public data and stakeholder interpretations of prototype ‘place profiles.’ This ‘localization’ provides a point of deliberation about constructing policy narratives with local stakeholders. The analysis focuses on the challenges associated with localized quantitative metrics, and how data can co-shape understandings of potential socio-economic problems and solutions.

Findings suggest that local concerns are not observable through the data, but that contestations of metrics can bring to light alternative stories of ‘change’ in development through discussion with local stakeholders. On the one hand, reducing the scale of quantitative data is not sufficient and co-production is needed to draw out local interpretations. On the other, the very act of localizing data is highly contentious, and may further alienate local stakeholders foreclosing co-production of knowledge for strategy-making. This reinforces the value of qualitative, embedded work by stakeholders and flexibility in strategy making processes.

Keywords: co-production; local knowledge; England

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## Place profiles: localizing understandings of disadvantage

### Why localize?

The persistence of regional inequalities, as seen in quantitative measures of socio-economic performance in the UK and comparable OECD countries, dominates development policy. The objective of ‘equality’ is seen across policy statements from Government<sup>1</sup> and justifiably dominates debates around social justice and spatial rebalancing<sup>2</sup>. However, there is a growing demand for national policy to pay greater heed to local understandings (Tomaney and Pike 2020). That call for more local understandings of development rests on arguments that: change cannot be ‘delivered to’ places; policy narratives about places need to be more locally sensitive; and development strategies are best produced with local stakeholders. As explained here, understandings produced through inequalities data alone are known to negatively affect the reading of places. This causes us to reflect on the potential of different ways of understanding local development. Localization is particularly important area for research given the drive for strategies to be co-produced, which means acknowledging that local stakeholders have agency within development and should have voice in plans, including formal and informal strategies.

In this paper, we explore the challenges of expanding outwards from inequalities data to co-produced understandings, using illustrative empirics from the UK to create profiles of places. We agree with the premise that localities need to be ‘better understood’ by those shaping development policy in a way that is also meaningful for stakeholders and would add that new understandings of local development also deserve scrutiny. In this study, we articulate understandings in respect of the concept of ‘wickedness’ (Rittel and Weber 1973), which centers on the premise that any definition of a societal problem is bound up with ideas of potential solutions. The implication is that whatever the scale or nature of a wicked problem the understandings of that problem will already be shaping the set of interventions envisaged. To acknowledge states of local development as ‘unequal’ is to define a wicked problem.

Present understandings of inequality tend to rest on socio-economic data that is not easily aligned with co-productive processes, where the starting point is a shared understanding of how places might be understood in order that strategies might be developed together with stakeholders. The extent of regional differences may be a matter of economic ‘fact’, but the definitions create tension for the more deliberative forms of communication needed for co-production. This is a key dilemma for debates on geographic inequality because the proofs quantify the quality of development. National development indicators rely on hard or fixed (and thus regionally comparable) metrics, and such measures must reduce the complexities of lived experience of places to numeric expression. Even though internally valid, such data offer ‘totalizing explanations’ of local development. The epistemological difficulty is fairly well-established, in that statistics do not explain subjectivities and cannot *in themselves* determine what constitutes social justice or appropriate response. However, there is a further difficulty for policy-making in that such data can direct attention away from matters of place quality and (e.g.) existing local assets.

The problems of developing shared understandings of the very real problem of spatial imbalance are well demonstrated by recent events in England. Localities that in GDP (gross domestic product) terms are less economically successful, have been labelled ‘left-behind’ places’ (Tomaney et al. 2019). The very term demonstrates the difficulties already noted in that, even

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance UK ‘Build Back Better’ plans (Johnson 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See particularly the work of the UK2070 Commission, and publications on socio-economic inequalities in the UK.

though ‘place’ is suggestive of local knowledge or some familiarity, left-behindness is ‘othering’ of local communities, positioning their experiences in respect of a supposed norm for moving forwards. This has fueled a sense of social alienation (Tanner et al. 2021) and exclusion from decision-making processes. In short, national data focuses on differences when it articulates quantitative regional comparisons, but the political effects are also significant and may impact on readiness for co-production.

How then to move forwards with understandings of local development, such as can underpin co-produced strategy? Before offering lessons from the Lincoln Institute-funded work on profiling it is worth revisiting how the definitional problems are mirrored in existing international research where there has been both a ‘local’ turn in analyses and a growing social focus in data collection. These works have been spurred on by a concern arising from statistically observed ‘uneven impacts’ within and between regions across the globe, for instance looking both the structuring forces of global capital flows and the local capacities compounded by their historical legacies (Pike et al. 2017). They set the scene for our work.

There are calls for more ‘locally sensitive’ research (Iammarino et al. 2019; Pike et al. 2017) and greater attention to place-based foundational economies (Froud et al., 2018). The uneven geography of opportunities and different local generative capacities have been given high importance for some time since Harvey’s work in the seventies. Increasingly, governance capacities are seen as a critical part of the ‘local picture.’ These can affect whether and how any local assets that exist might be mobilized (Servillo et al. 2012; Tomaney 2017). In a rather pragmatist reading, the governance capacities may even be a product of understandings of the issues at hand, or “socially constructed, both discursively and materially, in relation to specific criteria” (Hudson 2005, 620). Local governance could feasibly have a bearing on the persistence of inequalities, for instance where powers to invest are localized, they may be more responsive to needs, e.g., providing flooding protection, public transport. In the UK, this is increasingly appreciated in policy circles (Jones 2020) and especially in England in view of the weakness of devolution and centralized powers (Hudson 2005). Yet, local governance capacities are also vulnerable to externally-imposed barriers and, as seen in the UK, times of austerity and consequent privatization of services can entrench difficulties (e.g.) through the accrual of long-term public debt (Schäfer and Streeck 2013). As Morgan put it, regions themselves are “unpredictable, contested and contingent” (2004, 874). This underscores both the need for and limitations of a co-productive approach, where local actors are brought into analyses.

Social metrics have risen up the research agenda, but efforts have mainly been focused on indicators that can be treated as comparable or individualized data points, aggregated and reported as regional averages. It is now relatively well established that inequality is not a purely economic concern, GDP, GVA and other such ‘productivity’ indices can only ever be pale proxies for human flourishing (Sen 1999). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’s Better Life Index with its concern for the progress of societies, and Servillo’s work on group dynamics (Servillo et al. 2012), are also notably reorienting towards community well-being as a goal in itself, and as a means to supporting economic goals (e.g. through bridging social capital). *How’s Life? Measuring Well-being* discusses “putting the people in the center of economic, social and environmental policies” (OECD 2011, 3) The indicators ask about people’s lives, framing well-being in terms of material conditions (income & wealth, jobs & earnings, housing conditions), and quality of life using a selection of indicators. The latter includes, health status, work-life balance, education & skills, *social connections, civic engagement & governance*, environmental quality, personal security, *self-reported well-being*. The more socially-oriented of those measures (in emphasis) entail a subjectivity of self-reporting and, as noted by Stiglitz and colleagues’ report to the OECD

(Stiglitz et al. 2009), such subjective measures are fraught with contradictions, and methodological challenges.

Debates over more ‘heterodox economics’ (Perrons and Dunford 2013) have acknowledge the sensitivity of social measures to distribution of socio-economic goods, and the consequent visibility of patterns by ‘social experience.’ Some studies approach this primarily in terms of social groups, for instance lifestyle by gender (Perrons and Dunford 2013), or time poverty by employment status (Strazdins et al. 2011). Others are more concerned with the place implications of these. Hadjimichalis (2006) for instance points out the danger of assuming a positive relationship between higher stocks of social capital and regional economic performance. Both are concerned with the situatedness of the measures, or their meaning as experienced in local social context.

As yet to be fully explored is the alignment of policy-oriented metrics, including social ones, with the local perspective. Rather than insisting on the seemingly impossible task of capturing the local social experience in quantitative measures that are intended for aggregated forms of reporting to identify differences, we propose an analysis that can nurture debate and unlock local understandings of the nature and quality of development. We argue that data must be seen as part of the problem-solution, particularly if co-production is ever to be part of the ‘solution.’

### **Researching place profiles**

This paper explores means of ‘localizing’ understandings of places that are known to have entrenched or long-term and severe levels of disadvantage. The aims are to reconsider narratives of ‘left-behind-ness,’ review interpretations of the diverse existing socio-economic data used to profile places, and foreground the perspective of local stakeholders. This section covers the methods, with examples of place profiles created with sub-regional socio-economic data and other documentary evidence. The analysis focuses on the local knowledge of civil society stakeholders (Natarajan et al. 2020; Cho et al. 2021), including people living and working in places, and representing non-governmental associations. This is not co-production but a demonstration of the challenges of co-creating more locally meaningful understandings of local development.

Profiles are a critical challenge area relevant to political and local readings of information. Data will always matter politically, and interpretations of socio-economic data is particularly important for stakeholders in development planning. We contend that diverse perspectives can enhance understandings of places by (e.g.) contesting an existing knowledge base with local knowledge. Data on historic issues may invite a political reading of the problem at hand, e.g., legacy of de-investment. Economic interests draw the attention of both local communities and government agencies and any previous intervention in local areas that are identified as ‘left-behind’ has, by definition, failed to provide economic activity or at least any that is in reach of existing communities (e.g., impracticable transport or unaffordable amenities). Thus, the very people who might offer local insights might be expected to have a sense of alienation when engaging with inequalities data.

The profiles offered here were built iteratively, and localities where we had started to explore the potential for ongoing dialogue via our work with the UK2070 Commission on spatial inequality, and UCL research on everyday economies. The empirics are focused on England, which as noted earlier is notable for its inequality of GDP and centralised governance. The initial data comes from nationally available information at the finest granularity of standard quantitative socio-economic indicators of disadvantage, as was available in the public domain in 2022. That formed

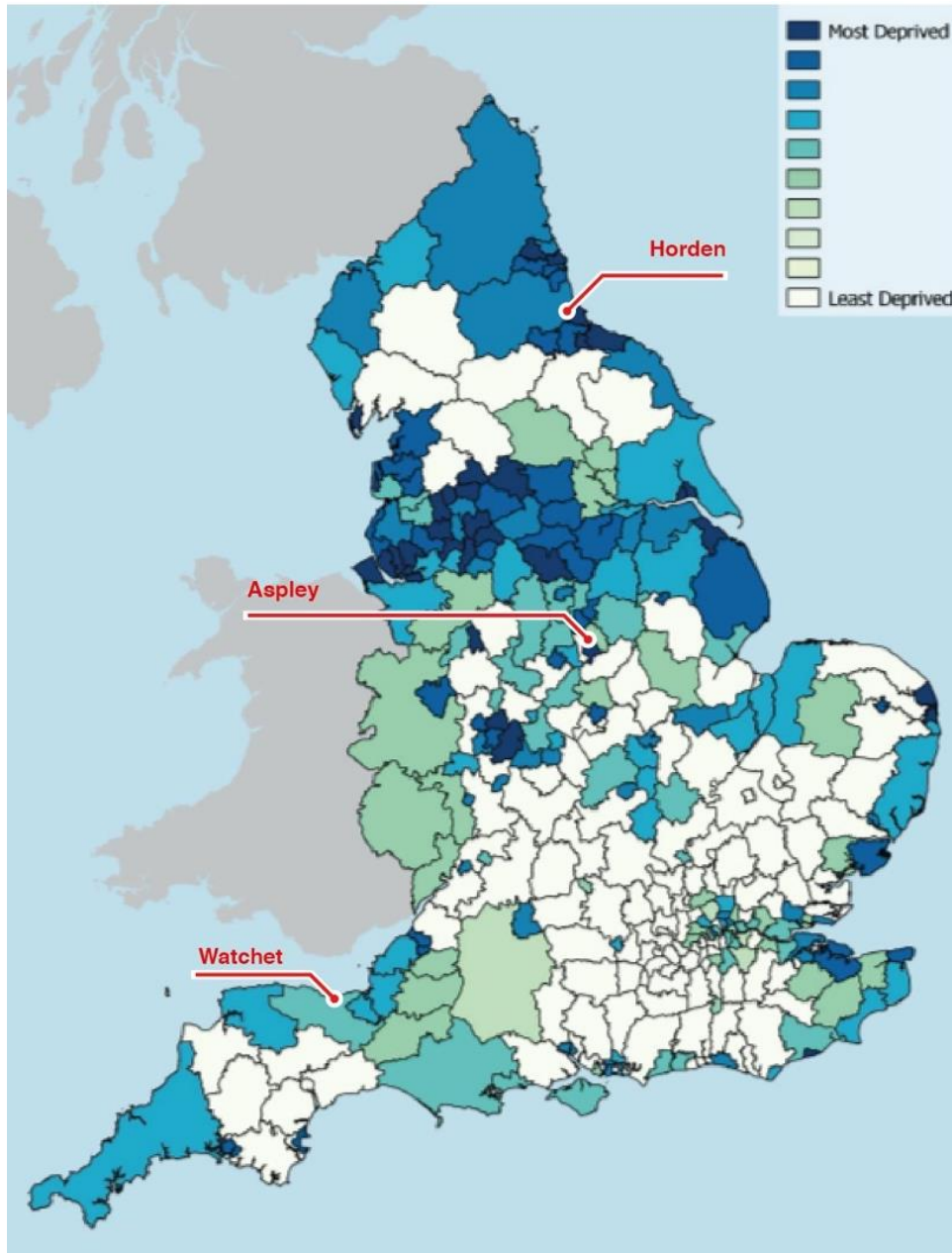
the basis for three ‘place profiles’ that were explored by the research team, and expanded with insights from local contacts and existing socio-economic research on the localities.

The sampling was non-random or ‘purposive,’ which is the appropriate method for such in-depth qualitative work. The sample enabled study of a range of places identified as left-behind in England. Cases were chosen on the basis that it would be possible to scope out new data and localization challenges, with geographic, economic, and logistical sampling criteria as follows. Given the main economic trends in the UK in the past 50 years (UK2070 2020), our cases needed to be in regions outside of London and the Southeast. They also needed to be sites where historic sources of employment (in England these are typically large-scale manufacturing or carbon heavy industry) have slowed down, declined or stopped altogether. Many such places are rural and coastal, and therefore central urban areas were ruled out. However, we did not want to overlook alternative types of economic challenges or that might arise in larger settlements, so peri urban areas were ruled in. More practically, we needed dialogue with civil society. We had established contacts and were hopeful of discussions about the data on multiple deprivation.



The map below (figure 1) shows the location of three places selected spread across England in rural, coastal and suburban districts and from the North, the Midlands, and the South.

**Figure 1: Map of UK district IMD ranking, showing locations of Aspley, Watchet and Horden**



Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019

The settlements have diversity of size density and employment history (table 1). In the West of England, we selected Watchet, and in the North East we selected Horden, both have local industry (details in profiles). Aspley was the third place selected as a larger and denser settlement that had no local site of employment. According to their ranking on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), all three places are experiencing serious deprivation. Aspley and Horden are

in the most deprived 10 per cent of areas nationally, and Watchet in the most deprived 30 per cent.

**Table 1: Overview of places studied**

	<i>Local Authority District</i>	<i>Area (km<sup>2</sup>)</i>	<i>Population (2018)</i>	<i>Population density (per km<sup>2</sup>)</i>	<i>Historic sources of employment</i>
<i>Aspley</i>	Nottingham City	2.82	18,746	6,6483	Residential no local economic core, suburb of Nottingham
<i>Watchet</i>	Somerset West & Taunton	2.51	3,704	1,476	Harbour town, former commercial exports and paper
<i>Horden</i>	County Durham	4.75	7,484	1,576	Former mining village, with local pit & regional industrial base

Source: ONS data, and various others detailed below

The analysis was conducted iteratively on the materials gathered through desk work, which were all available publicly online. Office for National Statistics (ONS) data is particularly valuable in this respect. The work of profile creation focused on drawing out narratives of the character of local socio-economic development as follows. Firstly, it looked at the origins of places. Past rationales of local development were critical as ‘left-behind’ indicates that others have forged ahead, but there may be other factors behind low productivity. Indeed, studies of the history of places and their economies, whether industrial or otherwise can provide insights into changes in fortunes (Tomaney et al. 2021). Secondly, it looked at comparisons of performance. Measures of inequality *by definition* needed to rely on indices. The Index of Multiple Deprivation or IMD was used because it is one of the most common measures. IMD applies weightings to indices of housing, health and well-being, education and skills, income deprivation, crime. Thirdly, it considered local priorities for the future. The current activities of local stakeholders and associated local strategies were reviewed, including planning policies, investments, and other place-based activities.

As set out in the next three sections, Aspley, Watchet, and Horden were considered individually, and analyses brought out insights on place-specific understandings. Each profile is unique, but provide insights on developing deeper understandings of local development in the UK. The findings demonstrate the importance of place legacies and political identities in localization of understandings in England, looking across past rationales, inequality indices, and current local economic priorities. The implications are considered in the final section, in respect of the challenges of articulating inequality and disadvantage as a situated judgement of needs.

<sup>3</sup> London’s population density in 2020 was estimated to be 5,701 per square kilometre.

## Aspley

### *Historic expansion*

The earliest records for Aspley are dated back to 1108, and construction of *Asshelepley Halle* the current Aspley Hall (figure 2) to house dispossessed monks around the start of the English Reformation, triggered by the first Act of Supremacy in 1534 and dissolution of monasteries in England. Aspley Hall was restored and taken over by the Willoughby family, and housed wealthy Nottingham manufacturers until its demolition in 1968.

**Figure 2. The appearance of Aspley Hall in the Ordnance Survey map in 1892-1914**



Source: National Library of Scotland, [CC BY-NC-SA](https://www.nls.uk/)

Nottingham City Council (NCC) developed a residential outer suburban area for Nottingham, to the north of original Victorian areas of city expansion. Nottingham itself had originally grown out of administrative and royal function, then grew in importance with a fortified castle in 1067. It later became a noted medieval market town and region city with expertise in weaving and a thriving hosiery industry until the arrival of lace (Monkton and Smith 2009). Further expansion and light industrial development continued in the 1900s, but ostensibly there were wider economic pressures from rival sources of employment that, combined with the poor quality of the urban centre, threatened the future population of the city.



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*“Railways had already been established in nearby towns, to service the coal industry, and these were now threatening the economic viability of Nottingham.” (Monkton and Smith, 2009, 10)*

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The settlement of Aspley was driven by municipal interventions to maintain the local population of the city. The residential suburb was created through NCC land purchase orders and construction of three estates, Aspley, Broxtowe and Bells Lane (figure 3). Initially, Aspley Estate consisted of 1,200 houses, which was subsequently extended westward.

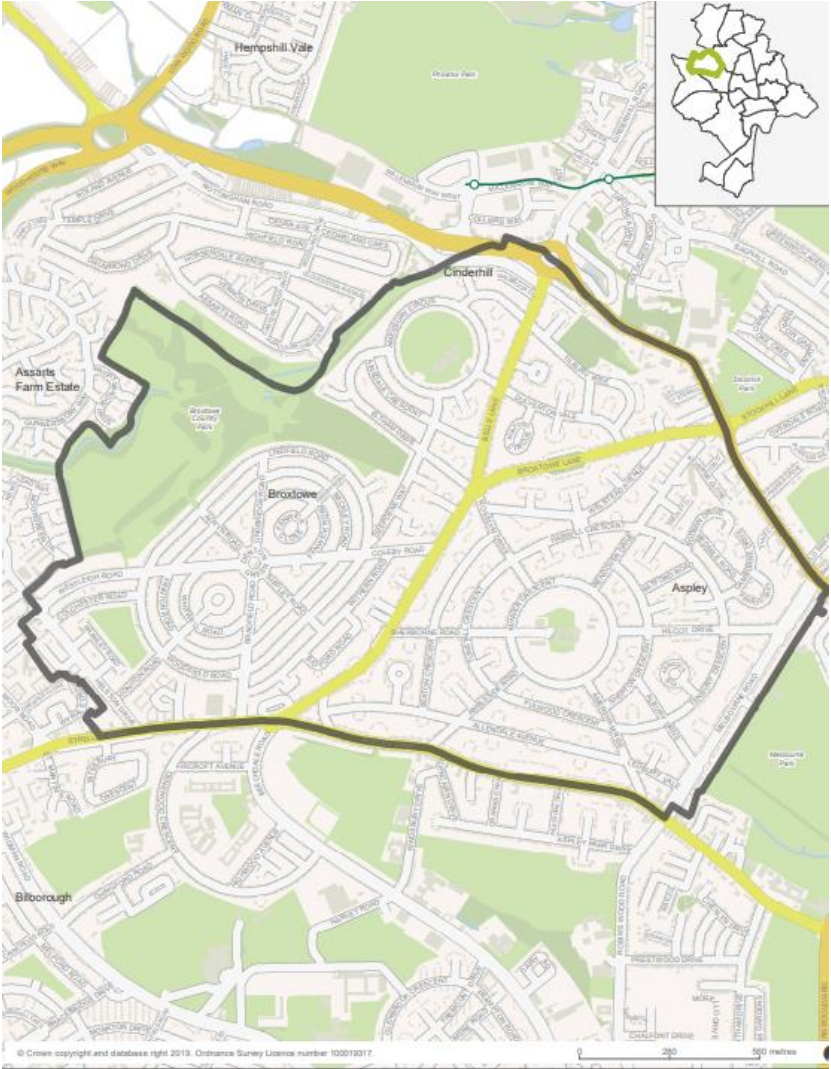
**Figure 3: Aspley, Broxtowe, and Bells Land estate in the map in 1949-1969**



Source: National Library of Scotland, [CC BY-NC-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/), modified by authors

In 1939, further building was suspended until after the war when the estate was filled out into a fairly regular shape (figure 4) bounded on the West by Aspley Lane and on the north by Broxtowe Lane. The development of services for communities was frontloaded, with two schools built in the centre of the estate, as well as shops, recreation grounds, churches, a library and a cinema.

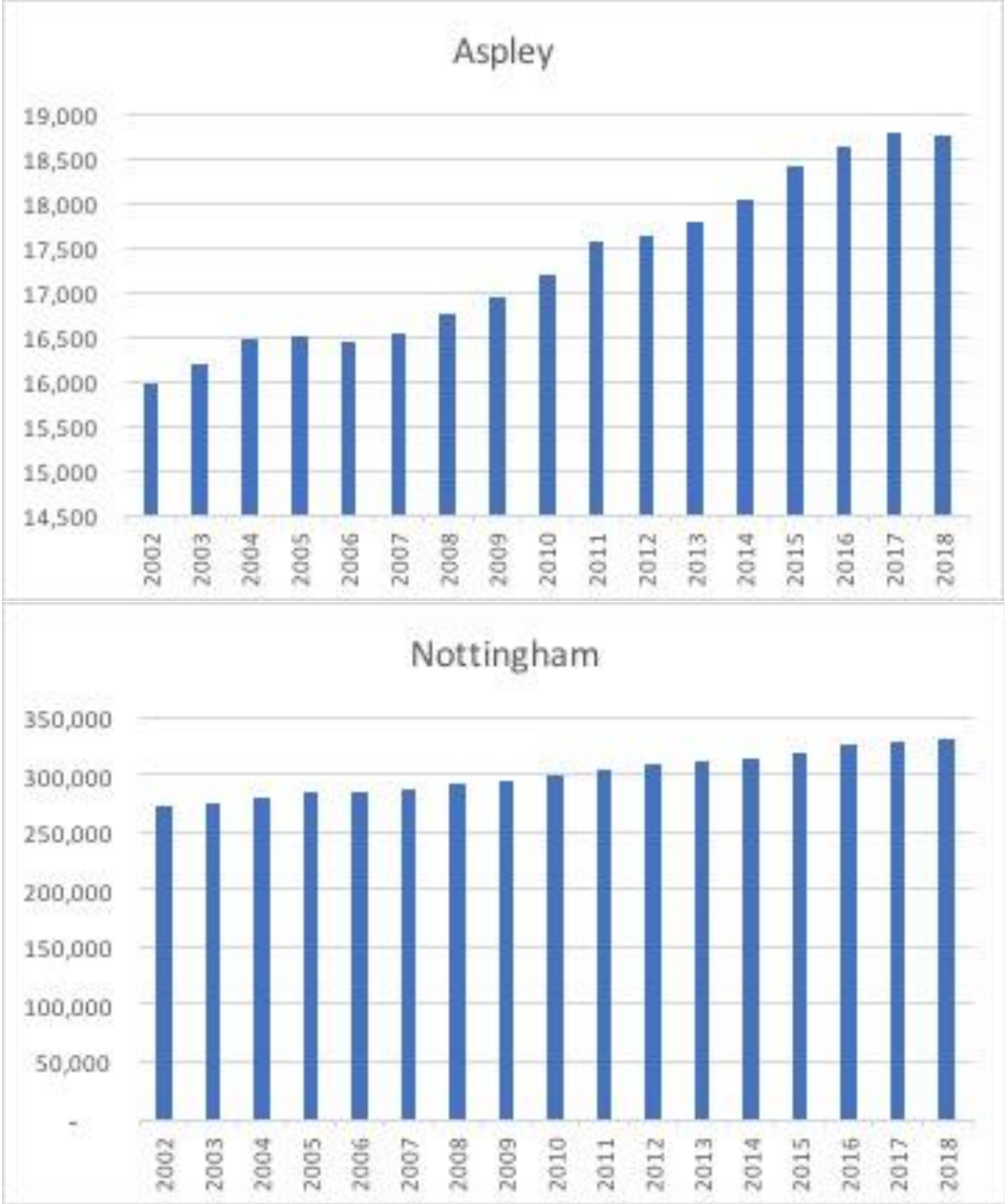
**Figure 4: Boundary of Aspley ward in 2019**



Source: Nottingham City Council

It is notable that Aspley as a neighbourhood has been growing, with rises in population from a high birth rate. This differs from other areas that have declining and/or ageing populations, and we note that the populations of Horden and Watchet, the two other places in this study, are declining while their surrounding regions are expanding. By contrast, the population of Aspley is growing alongside an overall increase in Nottingham population (figure 5).

**Figure 5: Population change Aspley 2002-2018**



Source: ONS Mid-year estimates



Aspley has a young population, and the highest proportion of children locally. Children account for nearly a third of the population here, as compared to less than 20% in Nottingham as a whole. The proportion of the resident population aged 0-4 years is far higher than in Nottingham or England as a whole (see table 2).

**Table 2: Population 0-4 years old, England, Nottingham, & Aspley, 2019 mid-year estimates**

<b>Population</b>	<b>0-4 years %</b>	<b>0-4 years #</b>	<b>Total</b>
Aspley	9.37%	1,834	19,576
Nottingham	6.11%	20,335	332,900
All England	5.86%	3,299,637	56,286,961

Source: ONS Census Data

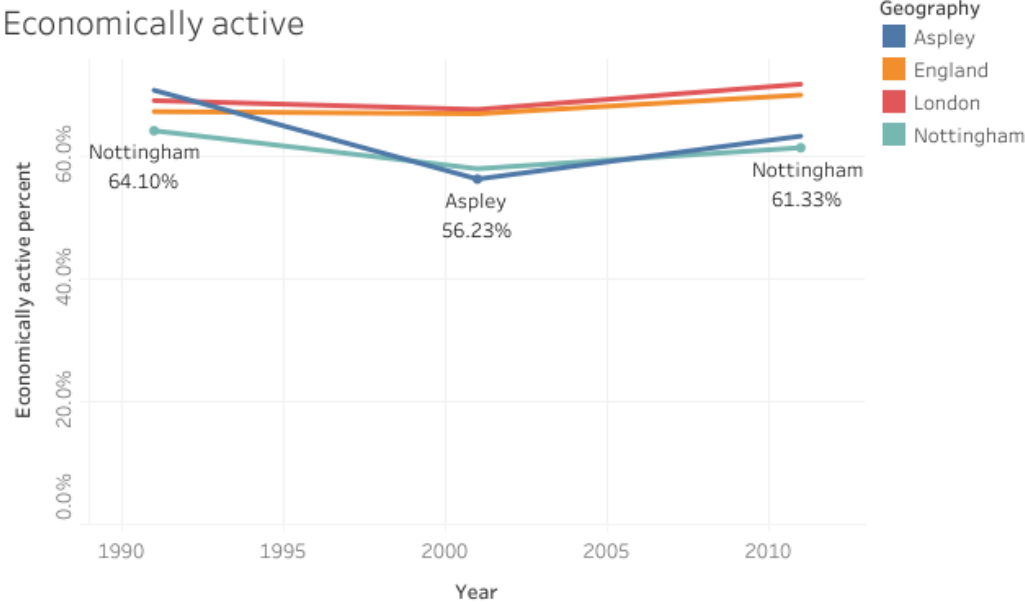
### *Socio-economic indices*

Nottingham has high levels of deprivation and ranks 11<sup>th</sup> out of the 317 districts in England using the average IMD measure. Aspley has the joint highest unemployment rate of all wards in the Nottingham, at 81% of the working age population. Just under a fifth of the working age population in Aspley claim out-of-work benefits, which is higher than the Nottingham and more than double the rate for England.

In the ward of Aspley, all ten of the ‘Super Output Areas’ (SOAs) are amongst the 10% most deprived, with two in the 1% most deprived. One of Aspley’s SOAs covering part of Broxtowe Estate (818) is the most deprived in the City and 28<sup>th</sup> most deprived nationally. The three most deprived SOAs cover the extent of Broxtowe Estate.

In terms of economically active population, as can be seen in figure 6, Aspley has experienced a sharp decrease in economically active population between 1991 and 2001. In 2001, Nottingham showed a lower economically active population, however the significance of the student cohorts needs to be taken into account in Nottingham (as discussed next).

**Figure 6: Percentage of economically active population in Aspley, Nottingham, London, and England**



Source: ONS Census data

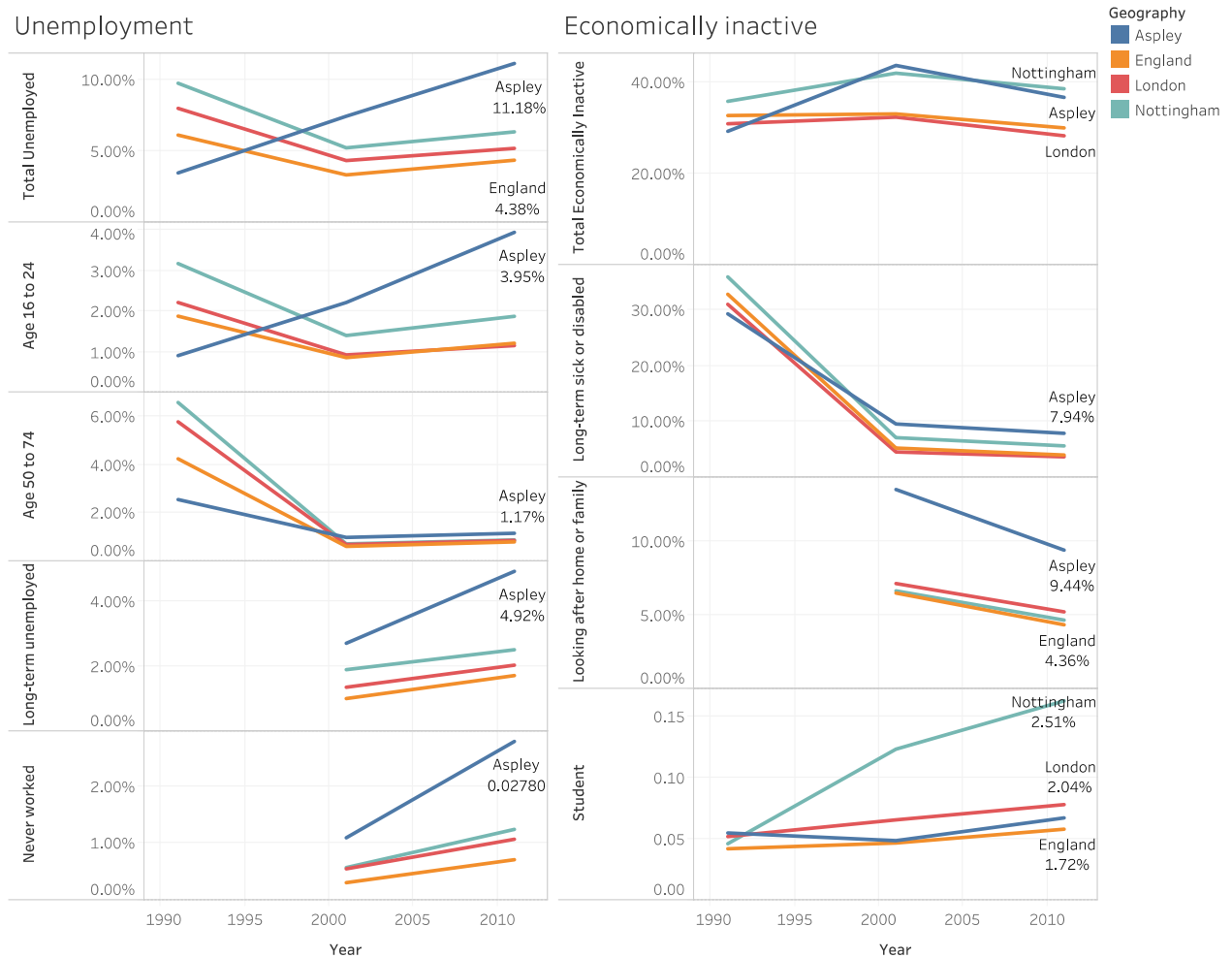
The unemployment rate shows the seriousness of Aspley’s economic deprivation levels. The census collects data regarding unemployment and economic inactivity separately. The former only represents the population actively but unsuccessfully seeking work, whereas data on economic inactivity identifies those who are retired, in full-time study, long-term sick, or not employed due to family care. Therefore, the unemployment rate arguably is a more accurate measure of issues with the local economic base and/or individual financial difficulties.

As shown in figure 7, the level of unemployment in Aspley is higher than in Nottingham, London, and England. This may suggest local difficulties that are not related to wider economic changes. Unemployment rates observed amongst younger cohorts (people aged between 16 and 24 years) is higher in Aspley than amongst older cohorts (between 50 and 74), which are closer to wider trends. Levels of population who are long-term unemployed or have never worked also high and appear to be growing, which raises a concern that Aspley’s younger generations may experience long-term poverty.



The economically inactive population are those people not actively seeking employment, and the lower economically active population in Aspley is mainly due to the high unemployment rate. However, other causes are captured in the ONS data, as shown in figure 7. While economic inactivity due to full-time studentship is not marked in Aspley, the level of economic inactivity due to caring duties is high. This may be related to the large numbers of children (i.e., the large local cohort of 0-4 year-olds noted above), but it might also relate to other caring duties given that the long-term sickness category is also higher in Aspley and Nottingham than in London or England as a whole. We note that any issues with childcare are cannot be identified from this data.

**Figure 7: Percentage of population in unemployment / economic inactivity in Aspley, Nottingham, London, and England**



Source: ONS Census data

As noted earlier, Aspley’s expansion was due solely to municipal development of residential development to sustain the light industry of Nottingham’s core. Housing policies in England since the 1980’s that are framed as ‘right to buy,’ coupled with a steep decline in new council-built housing this century, have eroded inherited stocks of non-market housing (Edwards 2015). Yet the prevalence of social housing in Aspley remains high (table 3).

**Table 3: Households in Aspley, Nottingham, and England, social renting tenure & with dependent children aged 0-4 years**

	Aspley		Nottingham		England	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
All households	6,554	100	126,131	100	22,063,368	100
Social renting tenure	<b>3,164</b>	<b>48.3</b>	37,486	29.7	3,903,550	17.7
With dependent children 0-4 years	1,587	24.2	15,661	12.4	2,606,564	11.8
Lone parent	<b>1,543</b>	<b>23.5</b>	11,957	9.5	1,564,681	7.1

Source: ONS 2011 Census

As shown in table 4, lone parent households are predominantly female headed, which is also the trend in Nottingham and England. In contrast to wider trends, in Aspley, the majority of ‘lone head of household parents’ are not in employment. Considering Aspley’s large cohort of pre-school children (discussed above) lone parents with dependent children, it might be unsurprising that there is a high level of households with dependent children (table 4). However, the level of lone parent households locally is harder to account for.

**Table 4: Lone parent households (where parent aged 16-74 years and there are dependent children) in Aspley, Nottingham, and England**

	Aspley		Nottingham		England	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
All lone parent households	1,543	100.0	11,957	100.0	1,564,681	100.0
Female lone parent	1,426	92.4	10,848	90.7	1,412,937	90.3
Parent not in employment	<b>881</b>	<b>57.1</b>	5,703	47.7	634,019	40.5

Source: ONS 2011 Census

The local data suggests that a major socio-economic concern for Aspley is the likely impact on those living in households with young dependent children and unemployed female lone parent, who are social renting. Previous studies have noted the strong relationship between poverty and gender throughout the UK (Clery et al. 2019). Sayers and Trebeck (2015) point to the high level of women living below the Minimum Income Standard (MIS)<sup>4</sup>. In addition, there is a wealth of evidence about the impacts in social provision, which arise from underestimation of costs of

<sup>4</sup> The MIS is defined as “... the income that people need in order to reach a minimum socially acceptable standard of living in the UK today, based upon what members of the public think. It is calculated by specifying baskets of goods and services [including housing costs] required by different types of household in order to meet these needs and to participate in society.” (Hirsch and Hartfree, 2013)

household budgeting for children of lone parent (see for instance Hirsch et al. 2021). There are further concerns about school aged children in Aspley reflected in the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index or IDACI comparisons (table 5). IDACI is central Government’s measure of the likelihood that a child is in a household experiencing socio-economic deprivation and used in ranking and funding allocation formulas.

**Table 5: IDACI rates, all England, Nottingham, and Aspley 2019**

	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Base</b>
England	17.08	1,777,642	10,405,050
Nottingham	29.79	17,632	59,185
Aspley	<b>42.87</b>	2,567	5,989

Source: MHCLG

### *Current sources of support*

Insights from local stakeholders highlight the importance of understanding social experiences of economic inactivity. Guidance from Evolve Nottingham’s website, a Community Interest Company that works with young parents in Aspley, points towards explanations of circumstances and social impacts of low income. Key concerns raised are psycho-social isolation, and the location of amenities in the neighbourhood. The issues for single-mother households in Aspley and the resulting burden of caring that prevents unemployment is worst for those without extended families. Therefore, while recognising the financial burdens of lone parent households, Evolve Nottingham puts great emphasis on well-being impacts, arising from a lack of social connections within the local neighbourhood or wider communities. This is reflected in their goals of raising aspirations as well as opportunities in the locality.

Schools and education centres are key social infrastructures for residents of Aspley. Local schools, Ambleside Primary School, and Rosslyn Park Primary & Nursery School are located at the centre of Aspley estate and Bells Lane estate, where they were originally planned. In addition, there are two children centres, Aspley/ Bells Lane Children's Centre and Broxtowe Children's Centre, which are located within Aspley ward though not centrally.

There may be issues of access and inclusion in social infrastructures for the large cohort of children aged 0-4 years (table 2). The average user group of children’s centres in a year was 770 children aged 0-4<sup>5</sup>, and in Aspley there are around 900 places but considering the high number of lone parents locally (2019 estimate of 1,834) this still represents inadequate provision. In addition, due to the size of local estates, Aspley is physically isolated by major road arteries and reliant on car or bus services for access to amenities in central Nottingham.

The local action of civil society is supported mainly through volunteering and incremental growth of provision. Evolve Nottingham has for instance received small grants from national charities, that enable programmes run by volunteers. For example, Evolve’s women's fitness club started with one morning a week and expanded to five mornings a week, and then two more evening sessions per week were added. These services continue to grow in part because

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Evaluation of Children’s Centres in England published in 2014

programme participants often also contribute as volunteers. Another example is the food-related programme where the group makes different meals every evening and teaches people how to prepare them.

Key initiatives of civil society are around creating a community, but the underlying goal is to offer social support in the face of lack of employment and low local services around families with young people. While employment and training continue to be important, the immediate issues relate to economic legacies and demographics by earlier development strategies. As such, the efforts of those who are building relationships within the community, especially for mothers with young children, are a key source of community resilience and vital to socio-economic considerations.

## **Watchet**

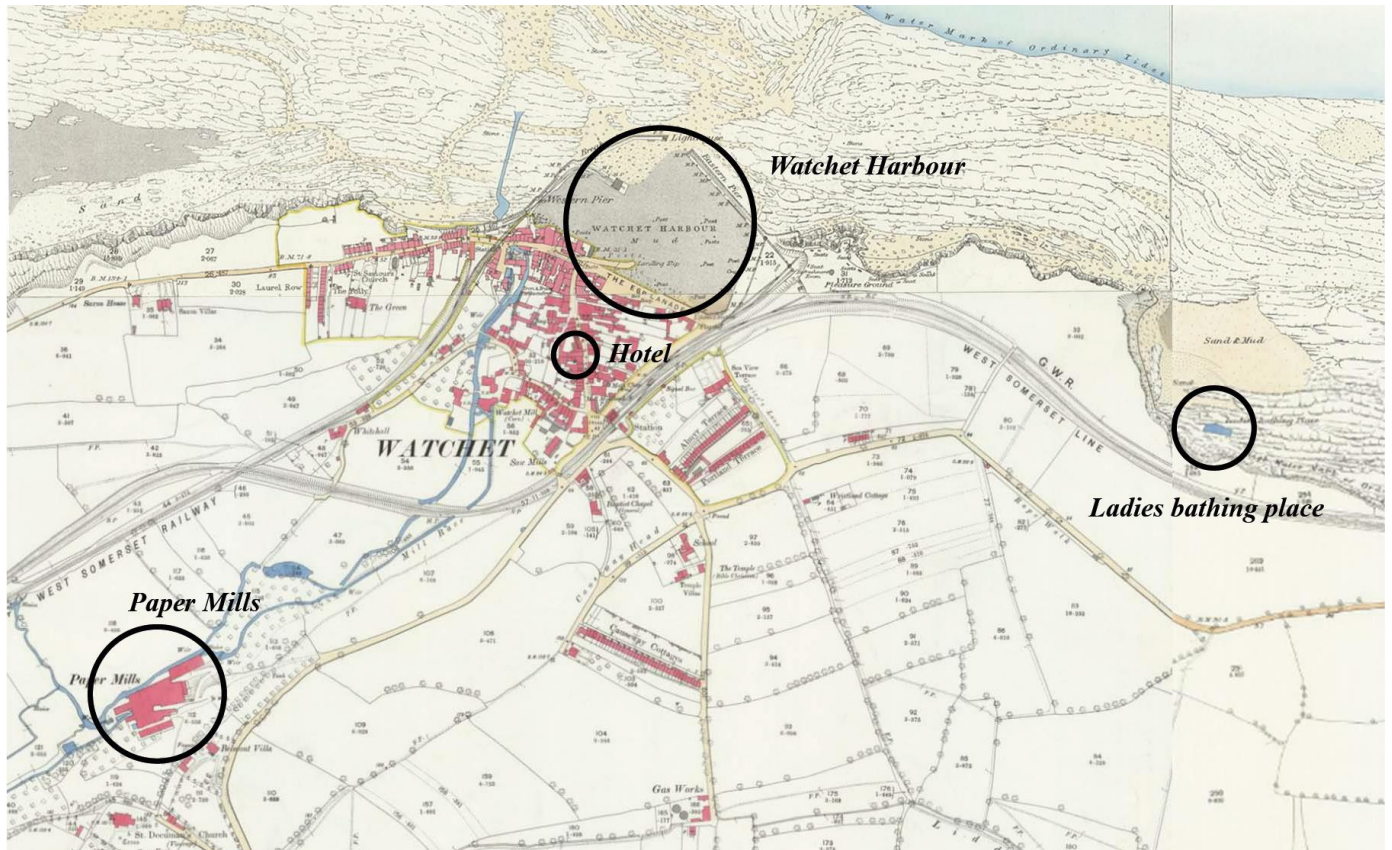
### *Early development*

Watchet is a harbour town on the North Somerset coast, one of two large villages in the parish of St. Decumans. The village of Watchet sits on the coastline and Williton is 2 km inland on the south boundary of the parish. The coastal plain is bounded by geologically significant limestone hills known as the Quantocks and the Brendons, where there was “scattered but not inconsiderable mining, largely for iron ore in the sixteenth to early twentieth centuries” (Dineley 1977, 1). Agriculture initially sustained the local parish, then Watchet became a centre for industrial trading, and later had local industry in paper and tourism.

Watchet’s location between South Wales and South West England encouraged its early development as a market town. In the 1600’s, it grew in importance as a landing site, with the expansion of mineral shipping across the River Severn. With European imports such as port, wine, salt, canvass, and other commercial products, Watchet was arguably one of the many smaller ports on the Bristol channel where domestic and overseas trade was underestimated (Taylor 2009). Meanwhile with strong international demand for coal and iron, the development of local mineral industry and local railway lines underwent many false starts (infrastructure and investment was eventually wound up in the 1920s), and Brendon Hill iron mines closed in 1883 (Jones 2006).

Watchet harbour was of considerable importance in the nineteenth century with growing trade and even a brief period of ship building (Gathercole 2003). By the mid 1800's, Watchet was regularly with regional centres in the UK in coal, hides, and other items as well as exporting corn, timber, flour, malt, and leather (Baggs et al. 1985). Growth was fuelled by harbour developments, and construction of a rail line to Taunton around this time. The local character and economic vibrancy drew tourism, which was further encouraged with a pleasure ground overlooking the harbour, and a 'bathing place for ladies' on a secluded beach (sites shown in figure 8).

**Figure 8: Part of Somerset XXXVI.13, surveyed 1886**



Source: National Library of Scotland, [CC BY-NC-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/), modified by author to indicate sites



Transport was clearly an anchor for local development. Between the two world wars the harbour remained open. The harbour was leased by Cardiff Scrap and Salvage company Ltd. servicing paper mills and exchange of industrial goods, including car parts and coal. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the port traffic declined, and the harbour is now mainly used for tourism and leisure. The West Somerset Railway was extended from Watchet to Minehead, ran under British Rail until 1971, and now operates as heritage railway (figure 9).

**Figure 9: Watchet, West Somerset Railway 2007**



Source: Martin Bodman via [Geograph](#), [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

Key to the Watchet economy was paper making, which provided local employment for over three centuries. There is evidence of production in 1652 near the site of the present Watchet paper mill known as Snailholt (Baggs et al. 1985). The original mill was worked by local men, women and children, and the village continued to grow in population.

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*“Watchet's population thereafter rose slowly, from 1,880 in 1901 to 1,936 in 1931, and to 2,597 in 1961, but in the next decade reached 2,900.” (Baggs et al. 1985)*

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Several generations of the Wansbrough family started producing paper bags in 1866, also investing in mechanisation and labour. The industrial history charity, Grace's Guide To British Industrial History notes that Wansbrough was a devout Methodist who "built a chapel within the factory grounds and insisted that his employees worship there at least weekly" (Grace's Guide 2020). The mill suffered massive damaged from a fire in 1889 but was rebuilt and would become reputed as the largest manufacturer of paper bags in the UK. The mill became a limited liability company in 1896, and changed ownership several times, with continual production and varied level of success, until 2015 when operations ceased (figure 10). The buildings have since been demolished, and plans for redevelopment of the site are a matter of current debate.

**Figure 10: Tower of the disused Watchet Paper Mill summer 2011**

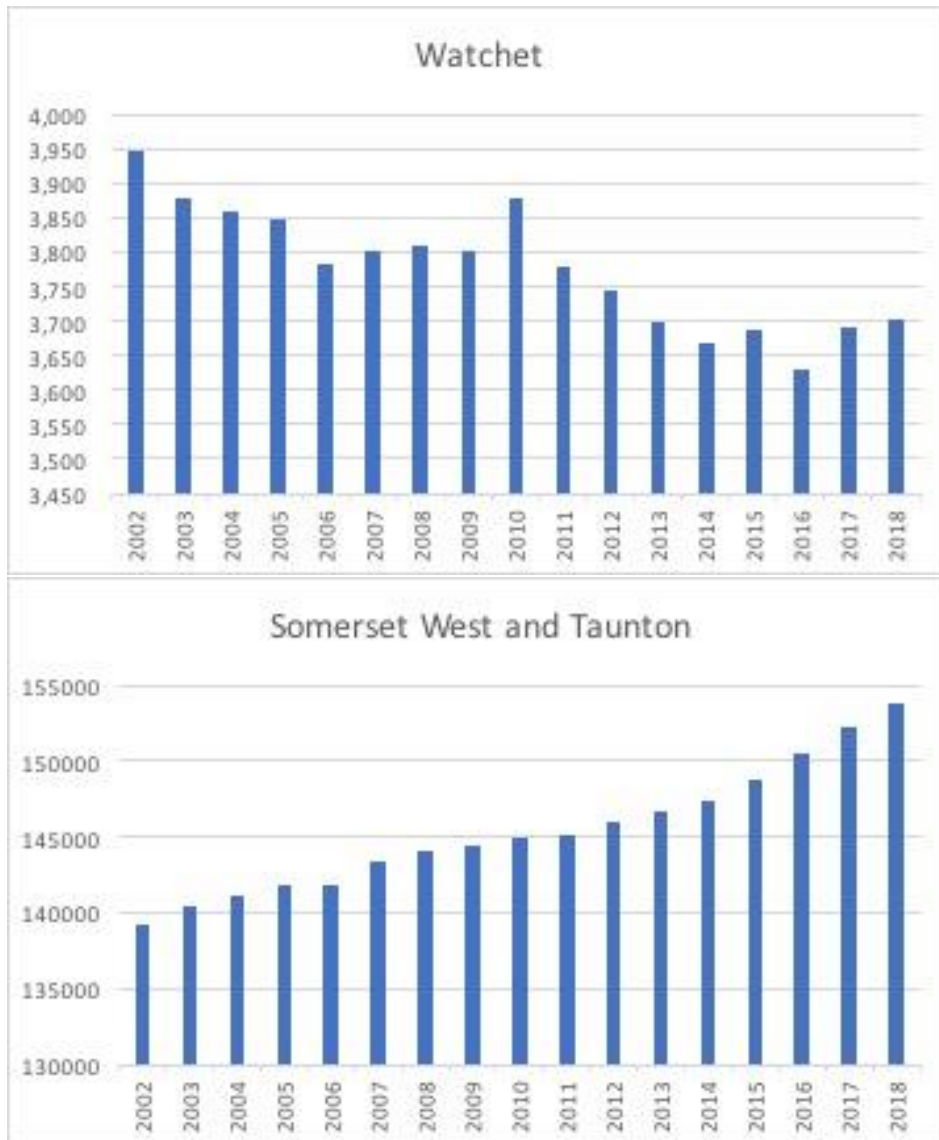


Ashley Dace, [via Geograph](#), [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

### *Socio-economic indices*

Watchet population appears to be in decline (figure 11). We note that the figures are for Somerset West and Taunton, which is a new local authority formed when two councils merged in 2019.

**Figure 11: Population change Watchet 2002-2018**



Source: ONS Mid-year estimates



Watchet appears to have a relatively large older cohort, when levels of 65+ year olds are compared to the national average. However, the proportion of 65+ year olds is lower than the wider region (table 6).

**Table 6. The population by age bands in 2011**

<b>Population</b>	<b>Watchet</b>	<b>Somerset West &amp; Taunton</b>	<b>England</b>
Age 0 to 14	15.17%	12.88%	17.68%
Age 15 to 64	<b>62.62%</b>	58.05%	65.98%
Age 65 +	<b>22.22%</b>	29.07%	16.34%

Source: ONS Census data

Current projections from the Office for National Statistics suggest five of the 88 neighbourhoods in Somerset West and Taunton are amongst the 20% most income deprived in the country. According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation for 2011, Watchet is amongst the most deprived 30% of areas.

Watchet shows a particularly high level of economic inactivity due to long-term sickness (table 7). The proportion of inactivity due to the retirement is lower than in West Somerset, although this may be accounted for in relation to the smaller proportion of the local population aged 65 and older.

**Table 7: Watchet, West Somerset, and England % of population 16-74 years, economically inactive by reason 2011**

%	Watchet	West Somerset	England
Any reason	35.8	35.3	30.1
Retired	20.1	23.1	13.7
Student (including full-time students)	3.4	3.0	5.8
Looking after home or family	4.5	3.4	4.4
<b>Long-term sick or disabled</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>4.0</b>
Other reason for inactivity	1.6	1.6	2.2

Source: ONS Census Data

More detailed analysis about the health issues experienced by local people in Watchet is beyond the scope of this study. However, the connection between poor health and low income is reflected in a report of the present chief medical officer to government (Whitty 2021) that calls for a strategy for coastal communities, arguing that people in those places have a distinctive set of health concerns. The quote below from that report indicates the importance of factors related to relative spatial isolation and concerns that impacts may have worsened during the recent pandemic.

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*“There are many reasons for poor health outcomes in coastal communities. The pleasant environment attracts older, retired citizens to settle, who inevitably have more and increasing health problems. An oversupply of guest housing has led to Houses of Multiple Occupation which lead to concentrations of deprivation and ill health. The sea is a benefit but also a barrier: attracting NHS [national health service] and social care staff to peripheral areas is harder, catchment areas for health services are artificially foreshortened and transport is often limited, in turn limiting job opportunities. Many coastal communities were created around a single industry such as previous versions of tourism, or fishing, or port work that have since moved on, meaning work can often be scarce or seasonal.” (Whitty, 2021, 2)*

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### **Current strategies**

Local activities have been promoted by civil society actors particularly the Onion Collective Community Interest Company, which has been actively working in Watchet since 2021. Meanwhile the Local Authority’s *Somerset Recovery and Growth Plan* of 2020 works cautiously

towards action: “We will develop full plans for the integrated regeneration of Chard, Shepton Mallet, Watchet and Wincanton in 2021.” (SCC 2020, 62).

Residents have developed a place-based strategy, and the Onion collective itself, has implemented a series of socio-economic development activities (Create Streets Foundation, 2021). Leading on the Watchet Coastal Community Team economic plan of 2018, their work centres on growing the marina. According to the local urban review panel’s report, this plan for East Quay is “a ground-breaking scheme to bring the quayside back to life while complementing current marina activities” (Design South West 2020, 1). While heritage buildings may have been lost, the intangible legacies have underpinned new strategies.

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*“East Quay is now home to a handmade paper mill once again - Two Rivers Paper is a tenant at East Quay - bringing the connection of paper making and maritime history full circle.” (Onion Collective, cited in WSFP 2022)*

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**Figure 12: Statue of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘ancient mariner’ Watchet**



Source: N Chadwick [via Geograph](#), [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

## Horden

### *Historic economy*

The final place examined is Horden, a ward in County Durham. The prehistory of this coastal settlement, established through local excavations of e.g. flints, suggests there were activities in the area during the Mesolithic and Neolithic eras. In Roman times, Horden is thought to have been involved in outpost functions, with later farming and monastic settlements between the 6th and 8th centuries, and some feudal patronage in local land division is evidenced by the medieval manor house 'Horden Hall'.<sup>6</sup>

The local economy of Horden was expanded in the more recent industrial history, when fortunes were shaped by the production of coal. This period of development focused on 'pitmen' i.e., the workers in the coal mines. From 1900, coal mining was developed in Horden with sinking of shafts for a local colliery and construction of associated mining infrastructure. This marked the beginning of a period of socio-economic growth and the Colliery in Horden became one of the largest in England, with infrastructures for working from underneath sea coal seams. It was operated first by Horden Colliery Ltd, and from 1947 by central government via the National Coal Board. Production peaked in 1930, with around 1/2 million tonnes of coal a year and employment of over 4,000 men.

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<sup>6</sup> Grade II listed on Historic England's National Heritage List for England, see <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1120944?section=official-list-entry>

A map published in 1922 (figure 13) shows the station with local amenities such as hotels. There were several new settlements built to house workers from the nearby Horden Colliery. New terraced housing built was 1920 and is described as being ‘for pitmen,’ and by 1951 the population reached its peak of 15,000.

**Figure 13: Durham Sheet XXVIII Published: 1923**



Source: National Library of Scotland, [CC BY-NC-SA](https://www.nls.uk/collections/england-and-wales/england-and-wales-1923/)

In the growth period, Horden also developed some social infrastructure. The wider community was always apparent, that is to say the housing was family homes, rather than (e.g.) rooms for individual workers. No doubt others in the pit village have been less visible in the local economy narrative of ‘pit village,’ but for instance local landowners established religious buildings notably St Mary’s and St. Hilda’s churches with a wider community in mind.

In 1987, Horden Colliery was closed permanently, leaving a legacy that is still tangibly memorialised (e.g. figure 14). On the parish website, the pit closure is accounted for in relation to productivity and environmental considerations<sup>7</sup>. In particular, the geology of the coastal area and water systems affecting the infrastructure and water tables were problematic. These were understood to be bound up with a lack of profitability of this villages’ mine. It is noted that treatment systems have been invested in works to remediate any potential drinking water contamination from rising mine water, and that former Colliery sites have been converted for sporting and council facilities.

<sup>7</sup> See Horden Parish council website for instance, at <https://horden.parish.durham.gov.uk/about-horden/>



**Figure 14: Horden Colliery Memorial Wheel**



Source: George Hurrell, via [Wikimedia, CC-BY-SA 2.0](#)

The reasons and mitigations of socio-economic impacts of the colliery closure are no doubt complex. Certainly, there may have been local fears about water contamination but the work of mining was also inherently dangerous as is evident from historical archives<sup>8</sup>. In addition, the politics of pit closure deserve attention. This was a major local event bound up with the conservative Government's national policy and local people's participation in industrial action. Anecdotally, those generations became politicised<sup>9</sup> and such sensibilities can be seen within political discourses around current energy strategy<sup>10</sup>.

Horden gradually lost much of its amenities and services after the 1980s. After the peak in local population, the original train station closed. It station has been used by residents of Horden and nearby Peterlee but was recommended for closure in a British Railways Board report<sup>11</sup> in a drive to improve 'efficiency,' part of central Government efforts to modernise. The strategy was a regional change, for instance nearby stations at Blackhall Colliery and Easington were also closed. This left Horden without a rail station and, until 2021, passengers were reliant on "a

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<sup>8</sup> See Durham Mining Museum for instance, at <http://www.dmm.org.uk/colliery/h012.htm>

<sup>9</sup> See for instance the resonance of Ray Lonsdale's mining statues <https://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/16203665.unveiling-ray-lonsdale-statue-last-shift/>

<sup>10</sup> See for instance the ongoing salience to discussions in Westminster <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-58107009>

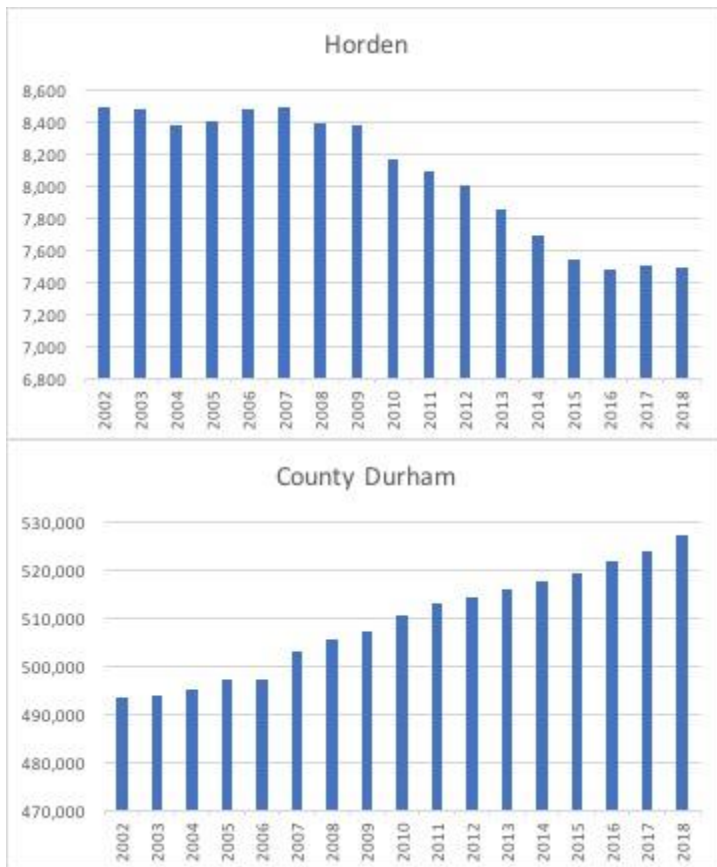
<sup>11</sup> The first 'Beeching Report', *The Reshaping of British Railways* (Beeching 1963), summarised and archived at <https://www.railwaysarchive.co.uk/docsummary.php?docID=13>

circuitous sequence of buses that turns what should be a straightforward trip into an odyssey” (Townsend 2017).

### *Socio-economic indices*

Turning to the quantitative data on Horden, there is strong evidence of a decline in population. This is shown in figure 15 for the first two decades of this millennium. Since closure of the mine in 1987, Horden’s population has fallen, measured at around 8,500 in 2011, and ONS projects suggest that it continues to fall. This can be contrasting with the surrounding region County Durham, and England overall, both of which continue to rise.

**Figure 15: Population change Horden 2002-2018**



Source: ONS Mid-year estimates

There is also data on deprivation levels, indicating concerns and problems of low income and poor health. These are higher than both regional and national averages. Using currently available data from ONS, the differences are very striking.

As, shown in table 8, the economically inactive population in Horden is significantly higher the surrounding district. Looking at economic inactivity, the relatively higher levels are associated

with a prevalence of long-term sickness and disability amongst the local population (13.8%) that is in stark contrast to that of the country (4%).

**Table 8: Economically inactive population and reasons**

	Horden		County Durham	North East	England
<i>Economic inactivity</i>	%	<i>Count</i>	%	%	%
<b>Long-term sick or disabled</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>822</b>	<b>6.5</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>4</b>
Looking after home or family	5.5	328	3.7	4	4.4
Retired	16.8	996	17.1	16	13.7
Student (incl. full-time)	4.1	242	6.2	5.9	5.8
Other	2.7	162	2.2	2.2	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>42.9</b>	<b>2,550</b>	<b>35.6</b>	<b>33.9</b>	<b>30.1</b>

Source: ONS Census Data

Between 2020 and 2022, the percentage of adults in receipt of statutory benefits (currently bundled into a Universal Credit<sup>12</sup>) was 8.5%. Again, the figure for Horden is notably higher than average, more than twice that for England overall (table 9).

**Table 9: Universal Credit claimants**

	Horden	County Durham	North East	England
<b>Rate of Claimants</b> % of people aged 16 years or older	<b>8.5</b>	4.2	5	4.4

Source: ONS Claimant Counts 2020-01 to 2022-02

These health-employment issues observed in Horden are also found in other places, including former pit villages. A similar decline in industry and local population, and a high level of unemployment due to ill health is present in former mining communities. When seen collectively these places have a population of 5.5 million, accounting for around one in twelve people in the UK. Together, the communities of former coalfields are statistically distinct from the rest of the UK, with very significantly higher levels of deprivation, in terms of illness and unemployment. Across all former mining regions, 7.9% of the population – nearly 440,000 people – claim disability benefits, compared with 5.6% nationally and 4.3% in the south-east (Townsend 2017).

<sup>12</sup> For a brief explanation see <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit>



### *Current assets and activities*

Not visible in the data or necessarily obvious from the accounts of the economic past, is a legacy of infrastructure and intangible assets that continue to attract investment and improvements in Horden. The local infrastructure has changed over time and public transportation is key particularly the railway station, which closed alongside a decline of the population and key source of industry. As set out in the previous section, Horden had experienced a serious set of economic difficulties from the late 1980s, and the limited transportation and health concerns are clear local priorities. However, some services have recently been reopened with public investment and are explicitly geared to supporting revitalisation of this part of County Durham.

The local government has pursued the opening of the rail line for Horden for around two decades, as part of its regeneration masterplan for Peterlee and Horden<sup>13</sup>. In the late 2010s, plans for investment in a station on the Durham Coast Line came to fruition. The nearby town of Peterlee – a new town of the mid 1900s and ‘near enemy’ for Horden’s place identity<sup>14</sup> - played its part in site selection for the station with the joint population adding weight to the rationale for a stop. The investment strategy is clearly aiming to reverse the direction of local economic trends.

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*“A new station at Horden (Peterlee) will improve access for passengers on the Durham Coast Line. It will connect areas of high population with areas of employment (such as the Tees Valley and Tyne and Wear conurbations) as well as making East Durham more attractive for inward investment. It is expected that the newly constructed station will generate 71,000 trips per annum by 2024.” (DCC, 2015)*

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<sup>13</sup> The masterplan can be viewed at <https://www.durham.gov.uk/media/3680/Peterlee-Masterplan-Part-2/pdf/PeterleeRegenerationFramework2.pdf?m=636736392903600000>

<sup>14</sup> See for instance through the (failed) name change petition <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/65138>

With £10.55m investment, a new railway was built and is presented as a success in terms of speed and direction in terms of Beeching policy reversal<sup>15</sup>. Horden Rail Station (figure 16) is positioned by Durham County Council (DCC) together with other sites across the county, as a means to support further regeneration strategy, including new business parks. For instance, Jade Business Park and Forrest Park<sup>16</sup> plan for a mix of office and industrial uses, and highlight the locational benefits for logistics and other businesses. It is expected that the implementation of infrastructure will improve the vitality of the town and increase opportunities for local and regional development. It is also noteworthy that the local rail heritage has helped unlock funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for improvements of local assets in coastal walks and conservation efforts<sup>17</sup>.

**Figure 16: Northern Trains Super Sprinter at Horden Station on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2021**



Source: Anonymous via [Wikimedia](#), [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/stories/how-we-built-a-railway-station-in-six-months/>

<sup>16</sup> The webpages for those developments provide details of the plans <https://www.jadebusinesspark.co.uk/masterplan/> and [https://www.barberry.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/FOR015\\_Brochure\\_V9.pdf](https://www.barberry.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/FOR015_Brochure_V9.pdf)

<sup>17</sup>Details are available at <https://durhamheritagecoast.org/our-story/what-we-have-done/horden/>

Local welfare continues to be a focus for Government interventions, and there are notable efforts for services targeted at younger cohorts. However, education remains a priority. A local partnership *Horden Together* and a *One Point* centre<sup>18</sup>, which respectively provide community safety support, and support for children, young people, and families. Historic Miners Welfare Hall building, which was taken over by the Parish Council in 1986 when the colliery closed, is now the base for *Horden Together* while the *One Point* centre is in Cotsford junior school. Horden’s educational services still closely monitor the demographic trends. Nationally there is a concern in respect of the flattening of the baby boom curve<sup>19</sup>, but there may be more significant issues in Horden. This interpretation is supported by the 2018 DCC review of education (see table 10), which also notes staffing reductions as a means to balancing budget. There are currently several schools including a Nursery, Infant, Junior and two Primary schools in the Horden area and, with the exception of the Nursery school, pupil numbers across all schools have been falling.

**Table 10: Capacity & occupancy primary schools Horden, 2018**

	<b>Cotsford Junior</b>	<b>Cotsford Infant</b>	<b>Yohden Primary</b>	<b>Our Lady Star of the Sea</b>	<b>Total</b>
Enrolled #	110	64	158	112	444
Space not filled #	54	56	112	7	229
<b>Total capacity</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>673</b>
<i>Occupancy %</i>	<i>67%</i>	<i>53%</i>	<i>59%</i>	<i>94%</i>	<i>66%</i>
<i>Spare capacity %</i>	<i>33%</i>	<i>47%</i>	<i>41%</i>	<i>6%</i>	<i>34%</i>

Source: Durham Country Council (DCC, 2019)

<sup>18</sup> The webpages provide details of the services <https://www.durham.gov.uk/hordentogether> and <https://www.durham.gov.uk/familycentres>

<sup>19</sup> See for instance reports at <https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/investigation-why-primaries-fear-their-falling-rolls>

## Reflections & Conclusion

Having explored diverse data to create profiles for three places in England, which could be understood as ‘left-behind,’ we return in this section to reflect on the study and consider the issue of how to create understandings that are more meaningful. The key question is what counts as a problem in respect of local development? We are mindful of Rittel and Weber’s point (1973) that definitions of problems shape ideas of solutions, and interested in the potential for greater co-production. Without doubt there are important concerns for the places studied, but in view of the principles of co-production we do not attempt to ‘settle’ understandings. We also question simplistic narratives of difference when places are seen solely through the lens of generalised productivity. Instead, we propose that it might be possible to understand places in a more situated or localized way.

We explored three places in England using historic information, socio-economic indicators, and insights on current activities of local development. This offers a different type of profiling that is more rounded, synthesizes data on local economies, and highlights problem-solution areas in understandings of local development. Interestingly, the profiles created in this way did not lead to local problem-solutions, i.e., issues were not seen as purely local matters. Instead, the study revealed details of how places are connected to wider economic forces. In England, the bigger picture of industrial development was important, with national changes triggering local activities – historically and currently – for growth, urbanism, and community formation, which clearly impacted on local economies. At the same time, each place’s unique character was made visible, and it was possible to identify locally-specific types of vulnerability in respect of wider socio-economic changes.

Local socio-economic details certainly mattered to the profiles, e.g., the IMD rank of a local authority was not well matched with the rank of smaller areas. So did points of comparison for local data, e.g., whether performance was seen relative to region or nation. Importantly though, some of the key details were only observed on inspection of current activities with input from local stakeholders, including those with formal responsibilities and those who volunteered or ran enterprises. These included details of community provision and social infrastructure in a locality, which mattered greatly (e.g.) in relation to issues of capacity in schools. In the cases examined, activities of local stakeholders revealed the importance of psycho-social wellbeing in the community. Local individuals’ capacities to raise charitable funding, and the commitment of local schools’ premises were all critical in sustaining communities, and local engagement was considered a vital step towards local redevelopment. That is to say that the renewal of local economies was not manifest only in employment opportunities but also in community building and other social functions.

The implication is that situated understandings connect to locally specific dimensions of place quality and the intrinsic value in existing development. For instance, there could be threats to local attractors or important uses of heritage and community assets for economic renewal. There might also be intangible value in social relations, which can help in activities supporting communities’ well-being. What is new is that these dimensions are defined in context. For instance, the precise nature of ‘social isolation’ varied from place to place, thus the factors of

importance differed locally. Isolation could be linked to difficulties of geography or demography with implications for (e.g.) whether staffing might be part of the problem.

The place profiles presented in this paper demonstrate the potential learning value of localization; the question remains whether in practice this might help towards co-production. The study suggests that community-based sets of knowledge - the unique lay, evolving, and deeply rooted forms of local knowledge that 'belong' to local places - could be recognised as a source of insight on the 'performance' of a place. In the age of austerity, with current pressures on both government resources and household costs of living, how might it be possible to encourage more diverse and local input to redevelopment plans. Further, there is an important caveat to such objectives. If costs of policy learning fall on the shoulder of civil society organizations, who rely on voluntarism and are likely to be overstretched, inequalities might in fact worsen. Indeed, the very people implicated in localization processes may be those with fewest resources, and this is likely to be an additional cost for the least well off. Therefore, co-production processes need to consider how to support and resource civil society engagement.

In conclusion, interpretive capacity as well as data is needed to understand places, and place-based communities may have a role in both of those. Localized understandings bring awareness of factors that are normally hidden and can help explain the significance of choices and changes in local development. This involves the uncovering of local socio-economic dynamics and an appreciation of the connectedness of localities with wider development landscapes, which – we would argue - may also create new situated understandings of places that can underpin the co-production of strategies in the face of socio-economic inequality.

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