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# Movers, returners and stayers: the role of place in shaping the (im)mobility aspirations of young people in coastal towns

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the role of place in shaping the (im)mobility aspirations of young people in coastal towns. In the Global North, youth mobility has become a normalised part of the journey to higher education and ‘cosmopolitan’ adulthood. However, we argue that this is only part of the story for young people in coastal towns in England. Many of these coastal towns now face persistent socio-economic and infrastructural challenges. Against this backdrop, many coastal youth feel that they are marginalised within their towns, and that the town itself is on the margins - culturally, economically, and geographically. This sense of marginality simultaneously propels youth out-migration and stigmatises those that stay behind. The stigma associated with staying overlooks the fact that some young people do not aspire to be mobile, preferring instead to stay because of their familial, social, and place-based attachments. To make this argument, we draw on qualitative data we co-produced with young people in two coastal towns in North East Lincolnshire. In these data we identified three types of mobility narratives (Movers, Returners and Stayers) that help us to contribute to the existing literature on youth (im)mobility aspirations and place-based sociology of youth.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Youth; place-based inequalities; mobility; aspirations; coastal towns

## Introduction

This article examines the role of place in shaping the mobility aspirations of young people in coastal towns in England; that is, young residents’ hopes and plans to leave (or stay in) the place where they grew up in order to study, work, or make a life for themselves. Here we focus on aspirations for internal rather than international mobility, and on the attitudes and experiences of young people that live in coastal towns. While there is a long tradition of research on youth (im)mobility from rural areas (see Jamieson 2000; MacDonald 2022) the field of Youth Studies has largely been dominated by studies of metropolitan youth (Farrugia and Ravn 2022). Research in towns therefore enhances our understanding on the distinct experiences of young people in smaller urban places

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and can add much needed research on relationships to non-metropolitan places (van der Star and Hochstenbach 2022). Our place(s) of interest are two adjoining coastal towns in North East Lincolnshire, Grimsby, and Cleethorpes. These towns were once thriving centres of commerce and culture but have experienced steep economic decline since the 1970s. Both towns have higher than average levels of deprivation, child poverty, and unemployment, and lower than average levels of educational qualifications. These patterns are typical of coastal towns around England (CMO 2021; ONS 2020), as are high levels of youth outward migration and 'brain drain' (Stephenson and Harrison 2022).

To examine the role of place in this outward migration pattern, this article draws on data about mobility aspirations we co-produced with 33 young people using in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participatory, place-based activities (see Benchekroun et al. 2022). While analysing these data (and much like Cook and Cuervo 2020) we identified three types of mobility aspirations among young people: *Movers* (who aspired to move away permanently), *Stayers* (who told us they wanted to stay in the town rather than move away), and *Returns* (who told us they planned to move away for a short period – primarily for higher education – but intend to return). Based on previous research (e.g. Allen and Hollingworth 2013; MacDonald 2022) we expected social class to play a key role in youth (im)mobility narratives, and that middle class youth would be considerably more likely to want to leave and working class youth more likely to want to stay. Yet in our sample similar proportions of middle class and working class youth told us that they wanted to move away from their towns. This led us to question what is it about these particular places that is making so many young residents of all social classes feel that they would rather leave than stay? And what can we learn about the role of place from those who prefer to remain? As we demonstrate in this article, place is only one of the factors shaping youth aspirations. However, our primary focus here is to shed light on this dimension, as this theme has received comparatively little attention in the contemporary literature on UK youth.

To make sense of our data, we drew on contemporary theories from place-based sociology and migration studies. Based on these frameworks, we argue that youth mobility aspirations (or lack thereof) are not just shaped by life stage, social norms, or the resources and opportunities available (either individually or in the community), but by their experiences of (and attitudes towards) the place they grow up in and their built environment. Our data suggest that coastal youth feel marginalised within their towns, and that the town itself is on the margins – culturally, economically, and geographically. We argue that this sense of marginality is crucial to understanding the experience of coastal youth, and to creating more cohesive coastal communities in the future.

## Theories of youth mobilities and mobility aspirations

Mobility is closely associated with youth, for practical and cultural reasons, and particularly in the context of globalisation. Young adults are more likely to be mobile as they are less likely to have the responsibilities and relationships that tie older adults to specific places (such as home ownership, children, and permanent jobs). In addition, educational transitions during this life stage (from school to university) often involve geographical mobility, either by choice or by necessity (i.e. lack of higher education institutions locally). The search for employment is another key motivator (SMC 2020);

young people are more likely to move to places where there are educational and employment opportunities, if none are available locally. These are material and infrastructure gaps that explain out-migration, but cultural and social norms also play a key role. In the Global North, youth is also currently constructed as a time of experimentation, a period when young people should be mobile in order to seek both new experiences before they 'settle down' to become adults, and to gain independence and distance (physical and other) from the people and places they know (Frändberg 2015; Robertson, Cheng, and Yeoh 2018). These imaginaries of youth also tend to involve a move to the city (or a bigger city, such as London), where 'cool' things and youth cultures are supposedly concentrated (Farrugia 2020).

The importance of geographical mobility for young people has been further compounded by the twin forces of global integration and cosmopolitanism. Global integration has accelerated both the opportunities and appeal of mobility (e.g. for study, work, and leisure). Geographical mobility is now often viewed as a 'passport' that enables young people to find success and even happiness by facilitating the accumulation of (more) social, economic, and cultural capital (Skrbis, Woodward, and Bean 2014). Farrugia's (2020) work suggests that these trends are compounded by the inter-related rise of cosmopolitanism; he argues that having a cosmopolitan lifestyle has become such a highly valorised pathway for contemporary youth that it can be considered a 'cultural imperative'. Acquiring this cosmopolitan experience is typically associated with international mobility (Robertson, Cheng, and Yeoh 2018; Snee 2016), but it can also be accessed via internal mobility to a large 'cosmopolitan' city or, some argue, by participating in certain creative industries (Allen and Hollingworth 2013; Farrugia 2020) (of course, how accessible or cosmopolitan these experiences are in practice is a matter of debate; see Keating 2021; Snee 2016).

Yet for many these moves are not necessarily about chasing the bright lights and cosmopolitan cool of the city; instead, it is more likely that geographical mobility is being considered as a means of maintaining social status or in the hope that it will facilitate social mobility. Considerable evidence suggests this is an effective strategy. The Social Mobility Commission (SMC 2020) found that Movers tend to have better employment outcomes and incomes than Stayers, and that Movers from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit even more.

### *Understanding immobility aspirations*

While much of the mobility literature has examined why people move, Schewel (2020) argues that it is equally important to consider the reasons for *immobility* and to ask why people stay (see also Cook and Cuervo 2020; Ravn 2022). Furthermore, she suggests that we need to consider not only the structural factors that constrain individual mobility, but also the fact that some individuals *want* to stay and may resist the social, economic, and cultural pressures to be mobile. The latter argument is particularly important because there is often a stigma associated with staying put, and those who stay are often conceptualised (both in policy and popular discourse) as being 'left behind' and even as 'failures' because of their lack of mobility (Allen and Hollingworth 2013; Corbett 2009; Wenham 2020). Schewel (2020, 330), by contrast, reminds us that immobility can be a positive choice, and that 'staying also reflects and requires agency; it is a conscious choice that is renegotiated

and repeated throughout the life course'. To fully understand immobility, then, we should consider both the positive and the negative factors keeping people in place.

One key reason why people of all ages choose to stay is because of family and community ties (Schewel 2020; Simpson et al. 2021). While some young people are keen to forge their own paths away from their families, others prefer to stay close to family, friends, and known networks (Cook and Cuervo 2020). Social networks and connections are also linked to some of the economic factors that motivate people to stay. For example, employment opportunities may be more readily available through local networks than in distant places where one's networks are weaker; in these cases, staying is potentially a way of maximising rather than limiting one's opportunities (Corbett 2009). Attachment to the physical and built environment is another positive factor; for example, local history and/or a beautiful natural environment can generate strong pride-of-place and emotional bonds, although young people are more likely to prioritise structural factors that enable them to achieve typical markers of adulthood (Lewicka 2011). Yet these bonds can also foster risk aversion. Mobility often requires a dis-embedding (Corbett 2009) and detaching (Gulløv and Gulløv 2023; Jamieson 2000) from everything and everyone that one knows. Moving away can thus constitute a social or emotional risk that those with strong social networks and place-attachments would rather avoid (SMC 2020, 25). These risks may be particularly important in the decision-making and aspiration-development of youth from working class communities where, MacDonald (2022) argues, bonding social capital is stronger and a vital source of practical, social, cultural, and emotional support (see also Atkinson and Kintrea 2004).

Acknowledging the positive motivations helps us to avoid stigmatising those who stay but must not obscure the fact that youth immobility is also shaped by material, cultural, and structural barriers. In material terms, Simpson et al. (2021) found that many of the low skill/NEET men they spoke to in the coastal town of Blackpool did not even have enough money to commute to local towns to pursue work opportunities, never mind the financial resources required to move to another place (see also SMC 2020; Wenham 2020). According to Allen and Hollingworth (2013), socio-economic factors also influence youth mobility aspirations by shaping their 'plausibility structures' (Skeggs 2004) and, by extension, how young people imagine their futures and the careers and mobility trajectories they might attain. They found that working class youth were more likely to stay local than become mobile (see also SMC 2020), and that geographical mobility was often viewed as unimaginable for 'people like me'. By constraining what is 'thinkable', they contend, social class produces a 'stickiness' that keeps young people in place, even when wider policy, social and cultural pressures suggest that they should leave (Allen and Hollingworth 2013). This 'stickiness' can also be fostered by internal and external perceptions of the place and the people living there; as they put it: 'places come to be constructed in particular ways – as dynamic and fluid or as sticky or dead-ends – and [the narratives associated with places] shape the aspirations of local young people' (Allen and Hollingworth 2013: 502), for example, by sending messages that mobility is not for 'people from this area'. This argument is evocatively summed up by a teacher who participated in Allen and Hollingworth's study:

For people in Stoke it's hard to escape ... I want to get people to realise there is life outside Stoke, which is quite difficult if you are in Stoke and you don't see any exit signs anywhere. (Teacher, quoted in Allen and Hollingworth 2013: 513)

Thus, even if staying is stigmatised, leaving was unthinkable for some because of a combination of class-based and place-based inequalities.

By contrast, most of the young people in our 'dead end' coastal towns *were* looking for exit routes, even if they came from a working class background. To understand why, in the following sections we tease out the role of place-based dynamics and consider how these dynamics interact with the other individual, age – and class-based factors that are already established by previous literature and discussed above.

## Research context, data and methods

This article draws on data from two projects conducted in a coastal area of North East Lincolnshire that has two prime examples of the main types of coastal town in the UK: seaside and (post)industrial. These cases also reflect many of the challenges faced by coastal communities around England (see CMO 2021; HoL 2019).

The larger town, Grimsby (>85k residents) was once a thriving port town and an international centre for fishing and food processing. In recent decades, these industries have declined, and Grimsby has developed a reputation in UK popular culture for being a 'grim' place; it is commonly characterised by journalists and policymakers as a national symbol of deprivation and decline (Stockwood 2021). The adjoining settlement, Cleethorpes (>38k residents) was a popular seaside town from the nineteenth century onwards and in the 1960s and 1970s, it was also a regular destination for touring pop bands and DJs hosting all-night dance clubs as part of the vibrant Northern Soul scene (Catterall and Gildart 2020). Since the 1970s, however, the economic base of both towns has suffered, and these towns are now categorised as having high levels of deprivation, child poverty and unemployment (NEL 2022; ONS 2020). Unemployment is highest amongst young people (NEL 2021), and residents of these towns are more likely than the average UK citizen to have no or low-level qualifications, be in low-skilled jobs, earn below the national average, and receive welfare benefits (CMO 2021: 105-110).

In recent years, efforts have been made to boost the economic and built environment of these towns. The renewable energy sector has become a new source of high skill jobs for the area, but this has not necessarily benefited locals, as many residents do not have the skills needed to pursue these jobs (NEL 2021, 19). Instead, the majority of jobs locally are in Manufacturing, Wholesale and Retail trades, and Human Health and Social Work (NEL 2021). Jobs in these sectors tend to be part-time, low-skilled, low paid, temporary, and/or seasonal. In terms of the built environment, the local government has received national funds to regenerate the dilapidated town centres through a combination of heritage, cultural, and leisure projects. These 'place-making' plans are intended to address the hollowing out of local town centres and 'ensur[e] our towns are great places to live, work, visit and stay' (NEL 2021, 6). However, these plans were only in their early stages of implementation when our fieldwork took place (late 2021 and summer 2022).

## Co-producing data generation with coastal residents

This article draws on two inter-linked projects that utilised a co-production and participatory approach, wherein the academic team worked together with a local Youth Worker and six Young Researchers to design research instruments, generate data, and share

findings with local policymakers (see Benchekrone et al. 2022). The Young Researchers, aged 16–21, were participating in various youth programmes run by the local authority.

Between the two projects, the team engaged with 39 young people aged 15–26 (28 of whom were aged 18 or under). Local partners helped recruit participants, using both purposive and snowball sampling, and by targeting youth organisations, friendship networks, and a local sixth form that has a high proportion of disadvantaged students and ‘requires improvement’ according to its latest Ofsted inspection report. The background characteristics of these participants are summarised in Table 1.

This table shows that the sample includes a broad range of participants in terms of gender, social class, and (dis)ability. There is, by contrast, very little diversity in the final sample in terms of race or ethnicity; all but one of the participants described themselves as White British. While this is not ideal, it reflects the demographics of coastal towns. As in many coastal communities in the UK, the vast majority of residents of NE Lincolnshire are White British, although the proportion of children with a BAME background is slowly increasing (see NEL 2022; for a comprehensive account of race and racialisation in seaside towns, see Burdsey 2018).

Thirty-three of these 39 participants discussed their mobility plans during our research encounters, and it is these participants’ aspirations that are considered here. The analysis presented here draws primarily on verbal data generated via in-depth interviews and focus groups, but we also collected visual data (such as life maps, photos, and personalised area maps) to help generate discussion during interviews and focus groups (see Benchekrone et al. 2022). The verbal data from the latter activities were transcribed and pseudonymised, before being analysed using thematic analysis techniques including familiarisation, coding, and theme-building (Braun and Clarke 2021). The codes and themes were generated using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches (the latter being drawn from the literature on youth mobilities and the sociology of youth and place that were reviewed above). For the deductive phase, key themes included: opportunity structures in education, employment, and leisure; cosmopolitan lifestyle; place-attachment (e.g. negative/positive attitudes towards the town, local amenities, and its built or natural environment). The main inductive code that emerged from the analysis was ‘feeling of safety’ (or lack thereof).

## Findings

Of the 33 young people who talked to us about their mobility aspirations, the vast majority indicated that they aspired to move away from their coastal town, never to

**Table 1.** Background characteristics of the young participants (age 16–26).

Gender	Male	Female	Other	No answer	Total <i>n</i>
	19	17	2	1	39
Race/ethnicity	White British	BAME	Other	No answer	
	37	1		1	39
Education and/or work status	Studying	Working P/T (F/T)	NEET	No answer	
	28	10 (5)	3	2	39
Mobility plans	Move	Stay	Return	DK/not known	
	20	7	6	6	39
Social class	Middle class	Working class		Insufficient data	
	11	21		7	39
Disability	Yes	No	Prefer not to say	No answer	
	9	23	5	2	39

return ( $n = 20$ ). Only seven reported that they wanted to stay, while six said they planned to move away temporarily (usually to attend university) and then return to settle in the town. In most cases, the young people were focused on internal mobility; that is, moving within the UK. A few participants aspired to move to the US, Europe, or further afield, but this was rare and often presented as a longer-term goal rather than an immediate plan, and some already expressed awareness that their aspirations were unrealistic. London was a desirable destination for some, but many wanted to remain relatively nearby, aspiring to move to a bigger urban centre (such as Lincoln, Hull, or Sheffield), but with easy access for return visits (each of these cities is around 90 minutes or less by train from these towns).

There was a good gender balance amongst our sample of Movers and Stayers; only the Returners category suggest women might be more likely to return (of the six aspiring Returners, five were female). The patterns in terms of social class were more surprising. As noted above, previous research has shown that working class youth are less likely to think that mobility is 'for people like them'. In these interviews, however, we found that working class youth were equally likely to express mobility aspirations as their middle class counterparts (around 60% of both samples told us they wanted to move away). We know that middle class youth are more likely to realise these aspirations (see SMC 2020), but it is notable that in these towns, mobility aspirations are not just for the middle classes. In the next section we consider the mobility narratives of those wishing to stay or return, as well as those hoping to move away more permanently.

### *Stayers and returners*

In line with previous research (e.g. Ravn 2022; Schewel 2020), family ties played a prominent role in the (im)mobility narratives of the Stayers and Returners in our sample. These young people wanted to remain close to friends and family, although some planned to move temporarily (usually to attend university in a not-too-distant city). In these narratives we can also see that family ties are linked to their relationship to the town and the opportunities and resources it *can* provide. For some, their interest in staying was also a matter of liking the town that they live in. For example, Ollie (16, MC) told us 'I think I'm probably going to stay in the area for the rest of my life because I like it here ...' while Jon (26, WC) explained that one of his reasons for staying was that 'it's very nice to live by the seaside, [the] quality of life is really good'. As the oldest of our young adult participants, Jon's plans were also likely to be influenced by the fact that he had a child, and his partner also wished to stay in the town. Although at an earlier life stage, Lisa (18, WC) was also thinking ahead to settling down. She told us that while the town may not offer 'really high paid jobs' it nonetheless provides what she needs to achieve her personal and professional goals:

... I feel like there's already what I need to like settle down and, like, have a really good job and have a really nice house and I can hit all my, like, aspirations for life here.

Thus, while she plans to move away temporarily to obtain the qualifications she needs to pursue her preferred career (as a social worker), Lisa expects to return to the town as soon as she graduates.



Ryan (17, WC) also feels he can achieve his career aspirations (to become a teacher) in his town, and indeed, he does not even plan to move away for university; instead, he plans to study at the HE provider in his town (which offers a limited number of degree-level programmes in partnership with universities in larger cities). Nevertheless, his main motivation for staying is not the opportunity structures on hand, but the comfort and security provided by family ties and social networks:

[Why stay in the town?] Mainly I don't really care where I live, my family's around, some of them. It's just comfort ... It's just what I'm used to and it's comfort. I'm not really a massive fan of change. And granted it may not be the best place to live in the world but it's also not the worst. I'm quite happy here. People I know's here. My family's here ... I don't like big cities, I'm not a fan, it's too busy. I might go there for a week or a weekend or something, but I couldn't live there. (Ryan, 17, WC)

The 'comfort' Ryan feels is contrasted with the discomfort he feels in other, larger, urban spaces. This narrative is echoed by some of the other Stayers and Returners, like Sarah (23, WC) who describe themselves as uninterested in moving as they are 'not a city person' (see also Lewicka 2011). The motivation for staying, therefore, can sometimes be a matter of disliking the alternative, rather than a strong-held and positive attitude towards the town. The reference to 'comfort' also supports the suggestion mobility is viewed by some (particularly working class) young people as too much of a social and emotional risk (MacDonald 2022; SMC 2020).

We also found that some of the Stayers and Returners were not entirely committed to staying. Maya (21, MC), for example, has returned to her home town after completing her degree at a prestigious university and has secured a graduate traineeship that offers good career prospects in local government. She is very attached to the town and likes living close to her family (who provide a 'security blanket' for her, in contrast to her years at a city-based university when she felt more isolated). Yet despite telling us she plans to remain in her town, Maya has not ruled out moving away again, acknowledging, 'I'd never rule that out, but I've got no reason to [move right] now'. She told us that the two factors that might pull her away from the town are (1) pursuing further qualifications or (2) moving 'for the right job'. Luke (17, MC) expressed similar sentiments. He hopes to move to Cambridge University for his undergraduate studies, but at this stage of his life, he still aspires to return to Grimsby after his studies because it is:

... an opportunity to stick to my roots ... we're the sixth or seventh generation [of my family] that's actually in Grimsby. We've got a lot of connections to the fishing industry. So for me that's a real pull to stay in the area.

Despite this preference, he is already aware that opportunity structures may draw him elsewhere: 'ultimately if there are job opportunities that supersede that, that pull, then that's something I'll have to take advantage of'. In other words, at this life stage (early adulthood) the prospect of better education and employment opportunities can override personal preferences and family ties, just as Lewicka (2011) suggested. It is also notable that both of these less committed Returners are middle class. Young people from these backgrounds are more likely to have the economic, cultural, and social resources to move away, and also more likely to bear the expectation that they *should* move away permanently in order to be (perceived to be) 'successful' (MacDonald 2022).

### *Movers' motivations*

As noted above, most of the young people ( $n = 20$ ) we spoke to planned to leave their coastal town and build a life elsewhere. Even if the destination was not always clear, many Movers expressed the wish to end up 'just anywhere that's not here' (Kristina, 17, MC) and ideally 'somewhere as far away as possible!' (Greg, 16, MC). Only a small minority of aspiring Movers expressed ambivalence about leaving, or concern about the compromises involved (primarily the distance from their family).

Education and employment opportunities were a recurring theme in the mobility narratives of these Movers; three quarters of the young Movers mentioned these themes in their responses. Given the age and life-stage of most of our respondents, it is unsurprising that these issues are at the forefront of their minds and shaping their future plans. What is notable here is that these young people felt that they *have* to move away in order to access (better) education and employment. The prevailing view was that there were few good opportunities available for young people locally, particularly if they 'want a career, not just a job' (Lizzie, 22, WC). This view is epitomised by the following exchange during a focus group with three A-level students, who were asked 'what do you think your town needs for young people like yourselves?' Their immediate response was:

Elena (17, WC): More opportunities! You don't have that many opportunities here. To get a decent good job, you're probably going to have to move out of town.

Freya (17, MC): A lot of it's touristy [jobs].

Ricky (17, WC): And if you're not interested in hospitality, there's not a lot you can do ... The jobs that we want to do, we can't really do here.

In theory, there are, in fact, more high skill jobs available locally following the recent growth of renewable energy industries in the area (NEL Council 2021). However, Maria (18, MC) highlights that accessing these opportunities still requires young people to move away, even if temporarily:

A lot of people move away because there is not a lot of jobs for young people that are starting out to get a job. The [high skill jobs that are available] are very much jobs that want you to have certain things [e.g. qualifications, experience] and to get the different things, you have to move away to get them ... [These jobs] need specialised skill, and the local area don't have the [education and training opportunities to foster] those specialised skills. They will also then have to move away to get those skills and then by the time they get back, the job is already filled and gone.

Maria's perception is supported by the NEL Economic Strategy report (NEL Council 2021), which highlights considerable skills gaps in the area and notes that many local people will not benefit from the new industries emerging in the region. These issues are further compounded by the negative perceptions associated with staying. For many Movers, staying in their coastal towns was perceived as getting stuck (if referring to their own future) or as a lack of aspiration (if referring to others' future plans). The way in which staying can be stigmatised as backwards and lacking ambition is distilled in the views expressed in a school-based focus group:

Elena (17, WC): ... if you've got no ambition to leave Grimsby, [you've got] no ambition to get a better job ... I know so many people our age who've got no ambition to do anything but

work in the factory. So the reason they've got no ambition is the way they've been brought up ...

Ricky (17, WC): Adults who live in Grimsby especially, they have very old-timely ideas to [wards] education and work ... They've got no ambition for life, and they give that to their kids.

Statements such as these also reflect a link between mobility, social class, and the negative associations that have developed towards working class jobs (such as factory work) that were once a positive reason to *stay* in the town (see Benchekroun et al. 2022).

It was not just education and employment that concerned aspiring Movers, but the lack of cultural and leisure opportunities. There was broad consensus amongst participants (regardless of their mobility aspirations) that their towns were 'a bit boring', and had 'not much to do' and 'nowhere to go' for young people. Some participants (such as Alex, 17, WC) highlighted the absence of cultural diversity and cultural activities (such as museums), whereas others focused on the decline in leisure and shopping facilities. For many, it seems that the increasing number of empty shop fronts in the town centre contributed to the sense that it was 'not very exciting being in this kind of place' (Noah, 16, WC) and 'it feels like a slow drawn-out death for the area [is taking place]' (Dan, 23, MC). These negative perceptions of the area seemed to be further compounded by the geographical isolation of the town: as Maria (18, MC) put it: 'it's a big world out there and I want to experience everything I can, rather than being in an isolated town at the seaside'. These sentiments could be explained by the well-known tendency of young people to say there is nothing to do. Yet it was striking that when we asked older coastal residents to describe the leisure activities of their youth, they provided long and detailed lists of the cinemas, dance halls, cafes, and shops they visited in their youth during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (see Benchekroun et al. 2022). While memories are unreliable (Mills 2016), their stories suggest that these towns once had thriving town centres with plenty of leisure and shopping opportunities for young people. The lack of these opportunities in the current context is significant, not just because it removes a source of employment for young people; it also compounds the overall sense of loss pervading coastal towns after the decline of their traditional industries, and confirms for residents that 'there's nothing here' for them any more (Telford 2022).

### *Place-based push factors*

In our discussions with young residents, the current dearth of activities and opportunities in the local area was often contrasted with the range of opportunities and attractions in bigger urban areas such as London and Manchester. This tendency echoes the thesis that young people are moving in pursuit of a cosmopolitan lifestyle (Farrugia 2020; Jamieson 2000). Yet it was not (just) the amenities and opportunities available in the city that were pulling aspiring movers away. There are also several place-based 'push' factors contributing to youth motivations to get away. For one, most young people who took part in our study felt unsafe in public spaces in their coastal towns, particularly in the evening or at night. They associated certain public spaces – such as central shopping areas and parks – with drunk and 'rowdy' behaviour, drug-taking and other forms of anti-social behaviour. Several young people, such as Amy (17, WC), described how local places that could be pleasant (such as parks) tended to get vandalised, and that this led to young people

either 'hanging around' outside shops or staying at home. Feeling unsafe is typically associated with larger urban settings but sadly the experience seems to be more widespread.

On the other hand, the coastal location of these towns can potentially provide an additional, and distinctive, relationship between young people and their place of origin. In theory, coastal youth have access to 'blue' spaces (namely beaches, coastal paths, and the sea), benefitting health, wellbeing, and, of particular interest in this article, place-attachment (CMO 2021; Crummy and Devine 2023). Indeed, some of the participants in our study, like Sarah (23, WC) and John (26, WC), told us their local beaches were one of the reasons they were motivated to stay in the area. However, many others took for granted or avoided these coastal spaces because they are perceived to be 'dodgy' and 'dirty' (like the parks) or 'dead' (like the centre of town). Tom (19, WC), for instance, told us: 'it's just dead, there's not very much there. [...] it's just sand. Most of the attractions down the beach ain't open most of the time'. Then, when the amenities are open in the summer, the beaches become too crowded to use because of visitors to the town. In any case, Maria (18, MC), noted that many places in the local area seemed to cater more for tourists than for residents. This tourist-centric focus of the seaside attractions, coupled with the dearth of other safe youth spaces, contributes to the sense that the town was not 'for them', deepens their sense of exclusion and marginalisation, and motivates many to look elsewhere to build the life they want.

## Discussion

The starting premise for this article was to try to understand why so many of the young people in our study told us they wanted to leave the towns they grew up in. Previous literature indicated that various factors shape mobility aspirations – including age, opportunity structures, social class, and place-attachment (see, for example, Schewel 2020). However, this literature also suggested that we need to look more closely at the specific dynamics of a place to understand how it contributes to inspiring youth mobility aspirations, or indeed how these dynamics *foreclose* the mobility aspirations of some young people, particularly if they are working class (see Allen and Hollingworth 2013). Against this background, our focus shifted to a more specific challenge: what is it about our case study coastal towns that makes so many young residents of all social classes feel they would rather leave than stay? And what can we learn about the role of place from those who prefer to remain?

In the process of answering these questions, we too found that our participants' (im)mobility plans were linked to multiple factors, including: (1) the economic, educational, and cultural opportunities in the area; (2) life-stage expectations and social and cultural norms about what is desirable for contemporary youth; and (3) for those who wish to stay, the importance of family ties. These patterns thus echo what we already know from previous mobility literature (e.g. Cook and Cuervo 2020; Farrugia, 2020; Schewel 2020). We also learned, however, that place-based factors seem to contribute to youth mobility aspirations in several important ways. In terms of the built environment, for example, the decline of the high street and degradation of public spaces, combined with the lack of local economic, educational, and cultural opportunities, seemed to signal to many local youth that there is no future for their town and more

importantly, no future for themselves in these towns. We are not suggesting that the mobility aspirations of coastal youth are just about seeking the amenities or opportunities that are supposedly more accessible in urban centres (Farrugia 2020). More crucial, it seems, is that young people do not feel that they have a place in these towns. Instead, young people feel excluded from public space, both because they feel unsafe and/or because public spaces and amenities are geared towards tourists rather than local people like themselves.

It is this sense of exclusion that underlines how marginalisation also plays a key role in how young people feel about their town, and why so many aspire to leave. This sense of marginalisation operates on two levels. First, these narratives suggest that young people feel marginalised within their town (because it offers so little for young people, not even a sense of safety). In addition to this, they perceive that the town itself is on the margins, culturally, economically, and geographically; they feel that these towns are at the end of the line and at the end of their life span. Or as Dan (23, MC) put it in the Findings section: 'It feels like a slow drawn-out death for the area [is taking place]'.

We believe this dual sense of marginalisation is crucial to understanding why so many young residents of all social classes were pursuing an 'exit' route from these towns, whereas working class youth from other struggling towns have found it difficult to envisage a way out (Allen and Hollingworth 2013). This is not to say that social class does not play a crucial role in shaping the 'horizons of action' and future aspirations (for mobility or otherwise) of coastal youth; and indeed, we know that those with lower levels of economic, cultural, and educational resources are likely to find it difficult to translate their aspirations into reality (SMC 2020). As a youth worker from a neighbouring local authority pointed out:

Probably 9 out of 10 of [the young people in this area] would tell you that they want to leave. But then when you sort of start to dissect the demographics there, you immediately find out that probably at least half of them wouldn't have the financial backing to leave ... But then a further probably one or two of them wouldn't have the [confidence] to be up to leaving everything that they that they know ...

In light of these obstacles, it is especially striking that so many young people from these coastal towns want to leave, and especially important that we understand why. Our data suggest that it is not just that they are being 'pulled away' by opportunities elsewhere, but many are also being pushed out by the marginality of their position within the towns, and the marginal position of the towns, culturally, economically, geographically, and otherwise.

We also learned something about place from those wanting to stick around. Family ties and personal relationships were the most prominent themes but there was also some evidence of positive place-attachment and what van der Star and Hochstenbach (2022) call nature-bonding. By contrast, there was little evidence of the pride-of-place that Stephenson and Harrison (2022) identified. The vast majority of the young people in our study viewed their towns negatively, even the Stayers and Remainers. However, while a sense of marginality is also apparent to those wishing to Stay, the negative aspects of place are outweighed by the importance of family-ties and, to a lesser extent, attachment to the natural environment. The extent of these negative perceptions may partly explain why there was so little ambivalence in our Movers' narratives, and so little discussion of what they might lose by leaving. That said, the number of aspiring Stayers and Returners

in our sample was relatively small ( $n = 13$ ), and further work (in this area and other coastal towns) is underway to gain a further and comparative understanding of their motivations. Regardless, it was important to include their perspectives in this paper to provide a more rounded picture of youth (im)mobility aspirations and counteract the tendency to focus on understanding the motivations of those who leave at the expense of understanding those who stay or return (Schewel 2020).

## Conclusions

In this article we have focused on youth mobility *aspirations*, so the hopes and plans we have described here may not come to pass. As we know, aspirations do not necessarily indicate destinations; young people's preferences can change as they progress towards adulthood (Thomson and Taylor 2005) or their plans may be stymied by a lack of financial, social, and/or cultural resources (Atkinson and Kintrea 2004; MacDonald 2022). The narratives we have presented here are thus just a snapshot of youth aspirations at a given time. Nonetheless, we contend that even a snapshot can help us shed light on the role of place in shaping youth (im)mobility aspirations. This focus on place helps us to understand that young people in these towns are not just being pulled away by the prospect of better educational, employment, or leisure opportunities; they are also being pushed out by a sense of exclusion and marginality.

Of course some of the issues identified here are not specific to coastal towns. For example, the decline of the high street is a common challenge throughout the UK (even in 'cosmopolitan' London). Similarly, youth out-migration is not just a coastal problem: a recent survey from the Social Mobility Foundation found that around 90% of 16–18 year olds in the North and East of England felt that they had to move away from their area to access better opportunities and 'find success' (Gecsoyler 2023). This suggests that the sense of 'slow death' and youth marginalisation is not limited to coastal towns. However, the issues may be even more prevalent in coastal towns, which have experienced sharper economic declines than others and have struggled to attract inward investment (HoL 2019; ONS 2020).

Increasing our understanding of youth relationship to place is important for coastal towns because policy discussions about these areas typically focus on educational and employment opportunities for young people (or lack thereof) (CMO 2021; HOL 2019). In this context, outward migration is viewed as concerning as it causes 'brain drain', but those who stay behind are also considered a 'problem' and as lacking sufficient aspirations (to leave) (see Stephenson and Harrison 2022). This article suggests that youth mobility plans are shaped not only by education and employment opportunities, but by their relationship with the place they grew up in and inclusion in public space. Greater attention to how young people feel about their places is needed to understand the reasons young people leave, as well as to support those who end up staying. The latter is particularly pressing because very many of the young people who want to leave will not end up doing so. Further research is required to understand the impact of staying on the young people who were so eager to leave a place that they view as a 'dead end' but have been unable to do so. While Schewel (2020, 330) reminds us that immobility can be a positive and agentic choice, it may not feel like this to those who do not actualise their mobility aspirations, and who feel their towns offers so few opportunities for their agency.

Asking young people what they want and need from the future of their towns would be a good place to start. During our research, coastal youth expressed clear ideas about the opportunities and amenities they would like their town to have, beyond better educational and employment opportunities – such as having safer, more welcoming spaces for young people (Benchekroun et al. 2022). While there are some excellent examples of youth engagement and youth voice work taking place around the country (see CMO 2021), too often youth perspectives are not considered in discussions about the future of coastal towns, perhaps because the needs of the aging population are seen to be more pressing, or because it is assumed that young people will leave so there is no need to plan for their futures. Yet without young people, coastal towns will find it difficult to create the conditions for residents of all ages to thrive. Addressing youth sense of marginality is therefore vital for sustaining the future of these coastal communities.

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## Ethical statement

This research was given full ethical approval by the UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee (REC 1553). The Data protection registration number is Z6364106/2021/09/62. Informed consent was secured from all participants.

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