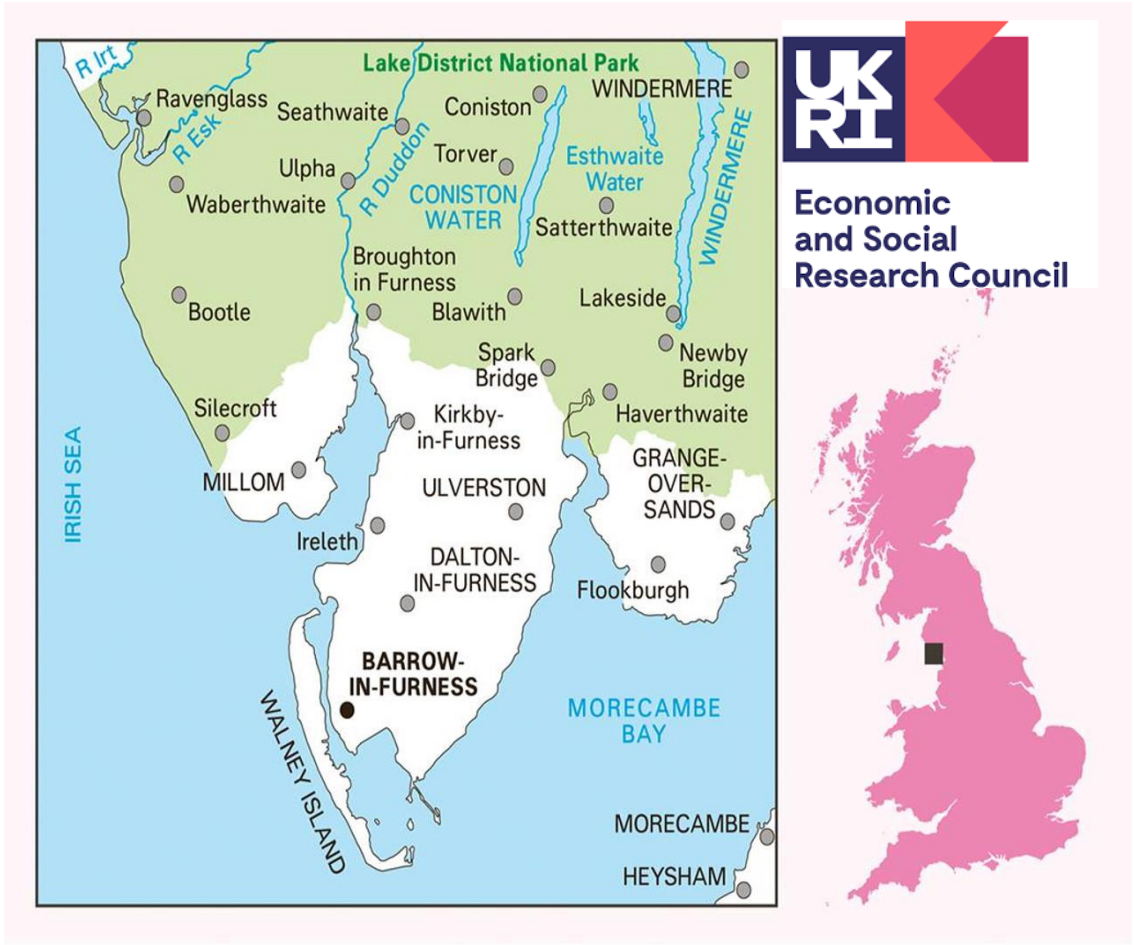

UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

Not settling for the lacklustre life?

The role of local employment opportunities in youth mobility aspirations in coastal towns in England.

Presentation at the seminar series organised by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, January 2025

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Background and Introduction

- Coastal towns in England: famous for beaches, tourism, fishing and oil/ other industry but in policy discourse, identified as problem 'hot spots' because….
  - 'deep pockets of deprivation' and poor economic growth
  - Higher levels of poor health
  - Aging populations (exacerbated by high levels of youth outmigration)

- JOYS paper in 2024 – looked at mobility aspirations on North-East Lincolnshire coast, arguing that young people felt 'pushed out' by various place-based factors.

Lack of employment opportunities was one of several 'push' factors in NE Lincolnshire.

- **One key message from young people?** Geographical mobility is a must if you "want a career, not just a job" (Lizzie, 22, WC).
- Geographical mobility also linked to social mobility and class stigma:
  - 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.
- Also notable: these types of working-class jobs were once a reason to stay in the town (Benchekroun et al, 2022 but are no longer seen as attractive.

Purpose of this paper?

- To examine youth mobility aspirations narratives if (good) employment opportunities *are* available.

- Does this mean coastal youth aspire to stay?

KEY THEORIES & CONCEPTS FOR UNDERSTANDING YOUTH MOBILITY ASPIRATIONS

What are mobility aspirations?

- Young residents' hopes and plans to leave (or stay in) the place that they grew up in order to study, work, or make a life for themselves.

- **Note**: not able to speak about their destinations (ie: where they eventually end up). Many – perhaps even most – won't actually end up leaving.
- Here, we are only speaking about ***desire*** to leave, and what this can tell us about their relationship to place.

Theoretical context: **Push factors** (often inter-linked)

'it feels like a slow drawn-out death for the area [is taking place]'
Dan, 23, MC, Grimsby.

Age, life stage, mobility as a rite of passage on journey to adulthood

Cosmopolitan mobility imperative – seeking experience, bright lights of the big city

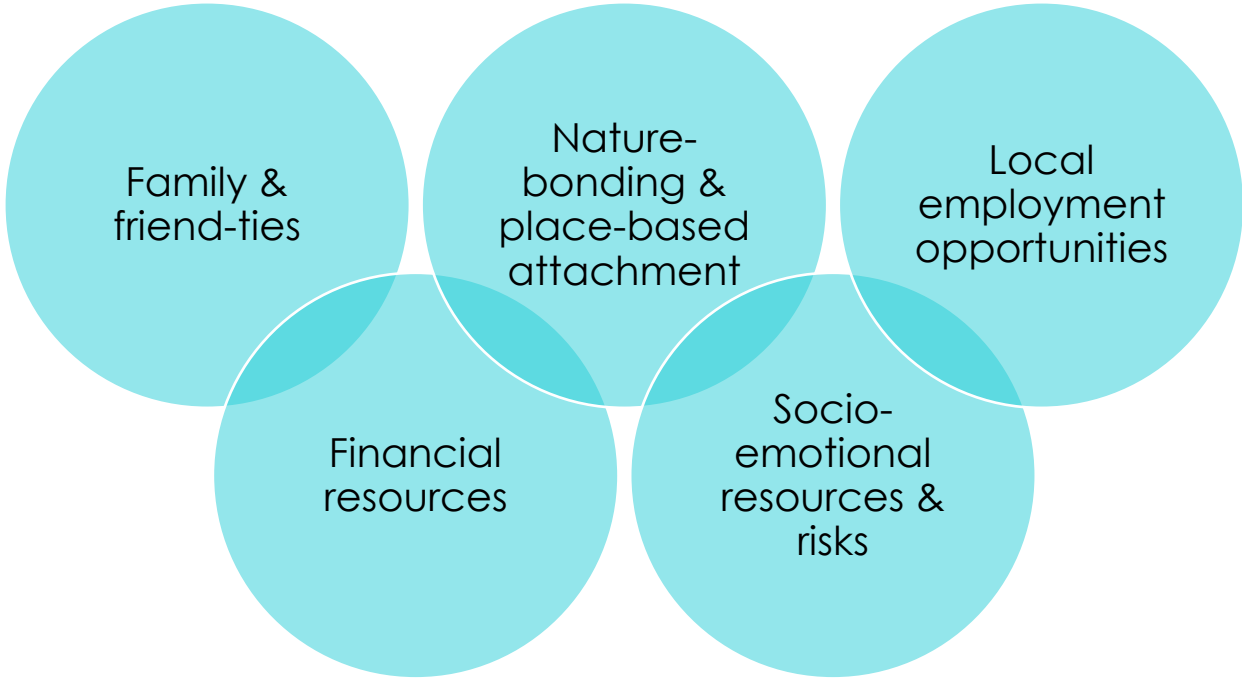
Opportunity structures – lack of (higher) education and/ or (good) employment opportunities

Marginalisation – no future for the towns, no future for themselves in these towns.

Photo credit: Dr R Benchekroun

Theoretical context:

Pull factors in the mobility literature

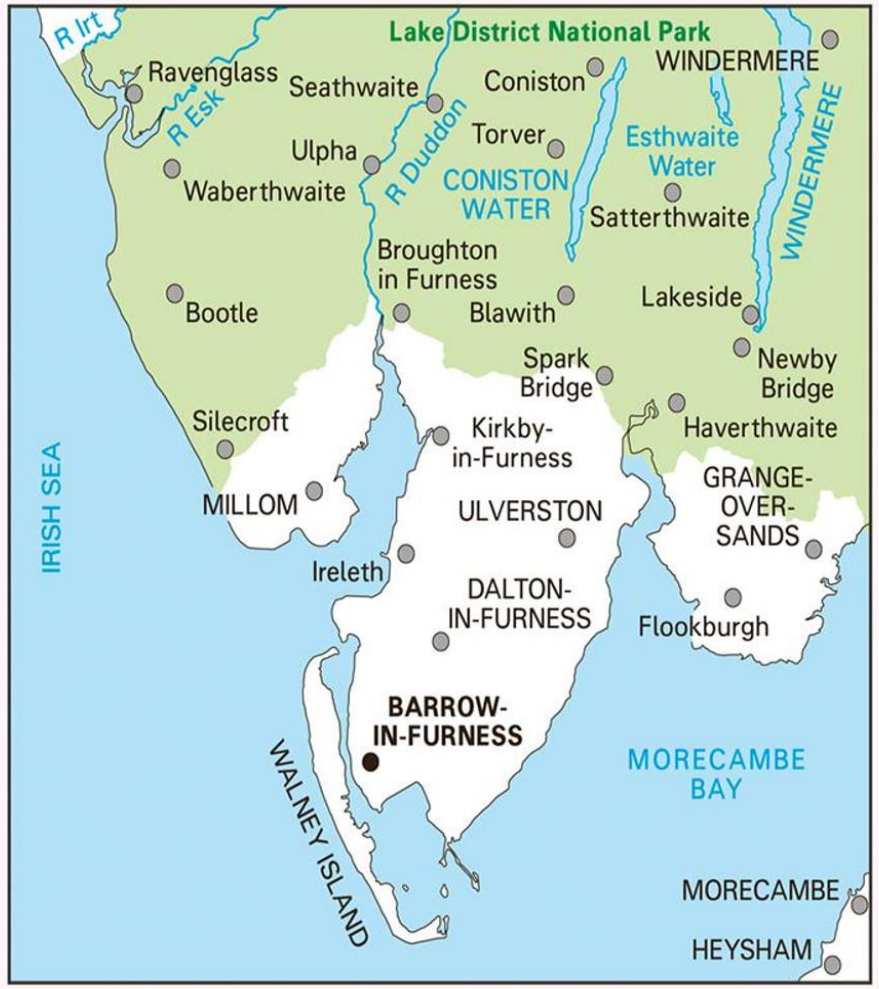


And from sociology of youth: employment aspirations + social class + place-based habitus

- **Intersections with social class, gender, ethnicity**

- **Horizons of action** (Hodkinson & Sparks) shape career employment aspirations

- **Place-based habitus** (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013: 502)
  - Places are 'sticky', keep (Working Class) people in place
  - By contributing to the messages that young people receive about is appropriate, viable (even "thinkable) for people from that place
  - No clear "exit signs"

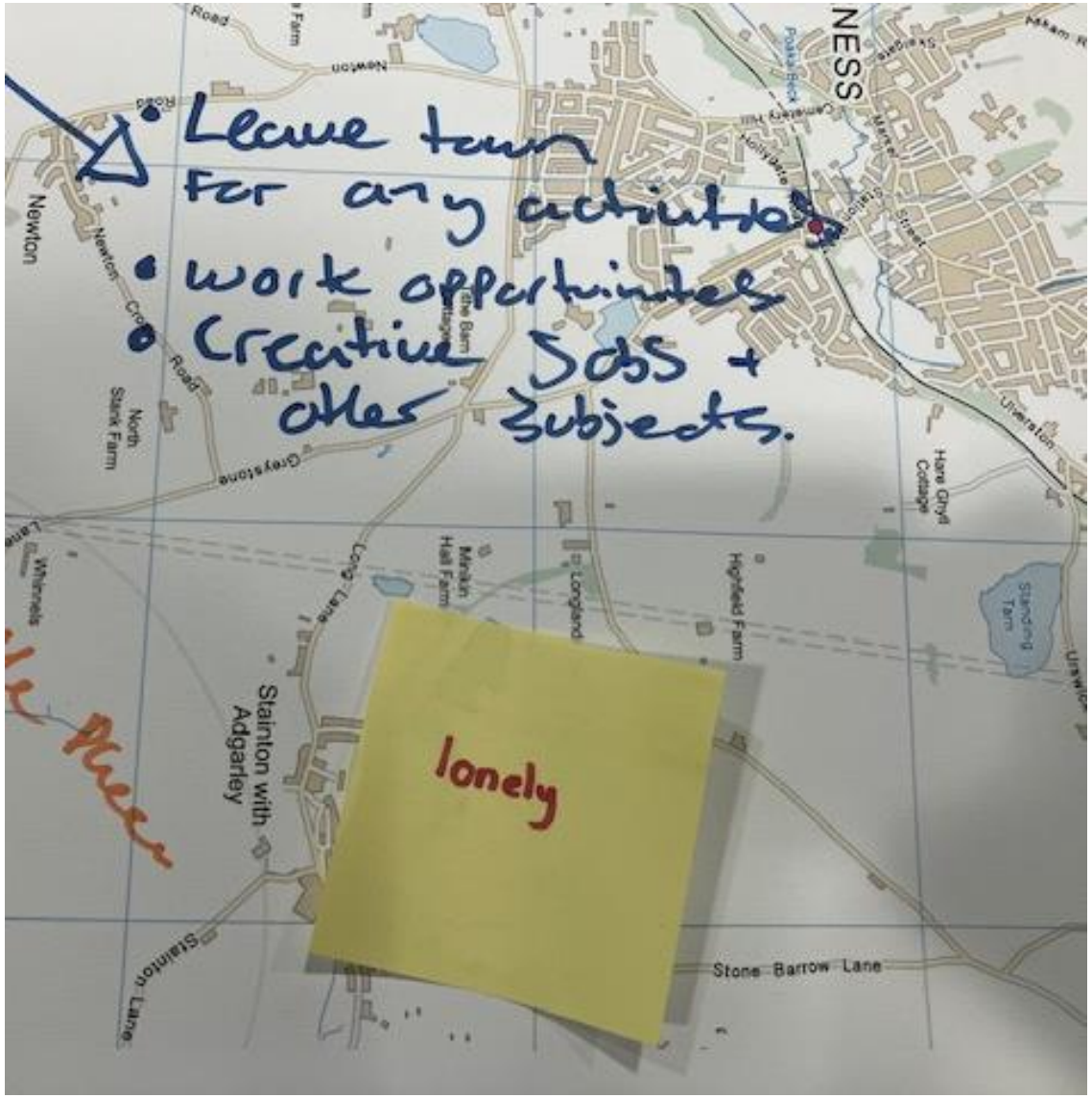


RESEARCH CONTEXT, DATA AND METHODS

Case study context	Barrow-in-Furness, North-West England
Coastal town type (ONS definition)	Larger port town, higher deprivation, (coastal but not seaside)
Main employers	Manufacturing (30% of jobs, 4 x national average), BAE Systems
Average annual earnings	c. £35k (above the national average)
Unemployment (2024)	Below national average but above average for 18-24-year-olds.
Deprivation	• Many neighbourhoods in the 10% most **deprived** nationally in terms of Income **deprivation**; • High economic inactivity (37% long term sick v 27% national average). Poor health outcomes.
Reputation	Submarines. One road in/ out. Longest "cul-de-sac" in UK. Lake District "on the doorstep" but no-one chooses to go to Barrow itself, except to work.

Background characteristics of the Youth sample in Barrow (age 15-20, n = 22)

Gender	Male	Female	Trans/ non-binary
	13	9	0
Race/ Ethnicity	**White British**	**BAME**	**No data**
	17	5	
Social class	**Middle class**	**Working class**	**Not sure**
	8	12	2
Current qualification focus	**GCSE***	**A-level or equiv**	**Degree or apprenticeship**
	12	3	2
Occupation	**School/ College**	**Working FT**	**Apprenticeship**
	15	2	5



Data and methods

- In-depth interviews, mapping workshops, and focus groups
- Creative, participatory activities, such as mapping the local area
- Mapping workshops in conjunction with LivingMaps Network, a collection of artists and ethno-cartographers

FINDINGS FROM BARROW

Photo credit:

Kimbal Bumstead, LivingMaps Network

Employment aspirations in Barrow

Barrow (n = 22)
BAE (5*)
Army (2*)
law or policing (2)
health or education (4*)
creative (4)
not sure (1)
other (5): farmer, youth worker, personal trainer, retail manager

- Very high awareness of local industry employers, particularly BAE.
- BAE widely viewed by young people (and parents) as secure, stable, well-paying work that is (relatively) easy to get.

The stability is a huge 'pull' for some – offers comfort, a safety net, continued proximity to family.

Amber, 15, WC – wants to stay and get BAE apprenticeship because it offers stable work:

> "I used to always want- I was adamant I want to move where I want to get out Barrow but the more I've grown up, the more I realised - I just want to be comfortable. I don't think I could ever move somewhere and like not know where my local corner shop is."

Emma, 15, WC – also wants to stay and get an apprenticeship at BAE. Originally wanted to be a social worker, but now thinks the BAE pathway is easier and safer.

> "Well, I don't know if I want to stay in Barrow but like I feel I've got attachment issues to my Nan [who she lives with as she is estranged from her mother]… I don't think I could leave her or …so I'd rather stay here but I feel like there'd be more job opportunities outside Barrow… But I don't think I would have the guts to leave Barrow because I grew up here and spent most of my life here. It would just be sad to leave."

Yet most told us they want to leave: Mobility is very “thinkable”

Barrow (n = 22)

Mobility aspirations	Move	Stay	no data
	16	6	0
Uni aspirations	**yes**	**no**	**no data**
	7	12	3

Why? Part 1

- **The expected combination of…**
  - Life stage
  - Opportunity structures (mainly in terms of education/ employment, particularly those interested in creative work)
  - “Cosmopolitan” goals: travel, see new things, etc.
  - But also…

Stable but stuck*:

While BAE offers a desirable safety-net for some, for others it's a trap.

Luca, 17, WC, aspiring Personal Trainer: *[You're] trapped, almost. Once you get a job in there.*

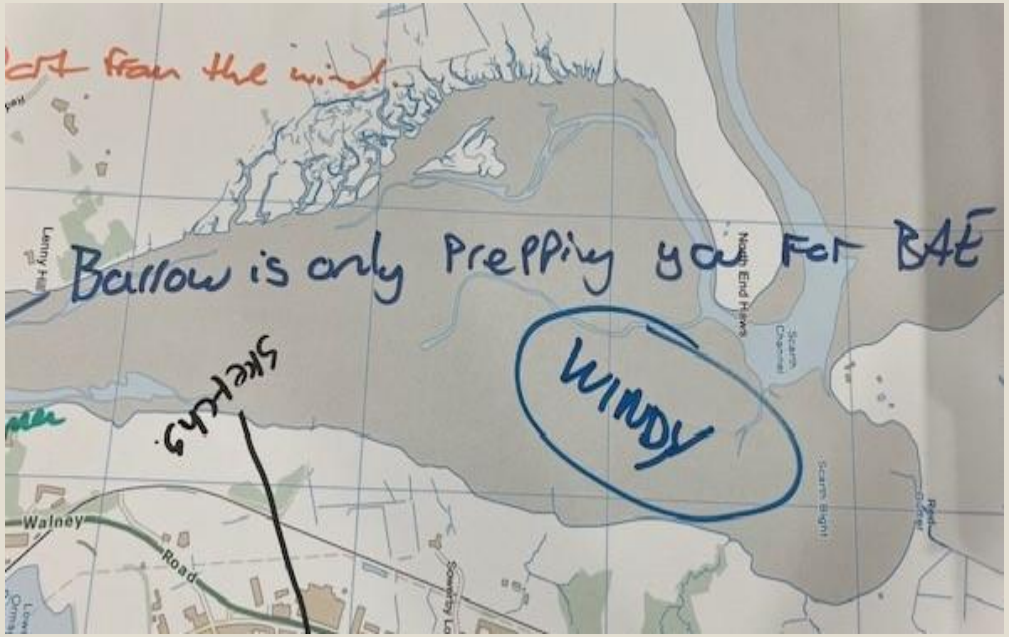
Daniel, 19, MC, wanted to be a dentist but is a BAE apprentice instead: *it's just the norm. Everyone just does it 9-5. Go to the pub every weekend, occasional trip to Benidorm, do that for the next 60 years till you die. Just get a nice pension, watch Coronation Street, with your missus, tell your kids go to BAE, and repeat the cycle for another 5 or 6 generations.*

Alife, 18, MC, degree apprenticeship *My apprenticeship [at BAE] is five years… [and] even though I've only just started, I feel like I've messed up by taking that because* ***I feel like I'm going to be stuck for so long.*** *I feel like the sooner you get out the better really, because there's just more opportunities [elsewhere] as people have said.*

Partly because of the dominance of BAE in the town

Very strong BAE presence in schools, colleges, career-planning

- "It just sort of feels like, yes, you're just kind of always pressured to go into BAE, like at school or whatever." (Riley, 15, WC, aspiring actor)
- "and the college, they're just gearing you up for BAE…(Madison, 17, MC, taking foundational GCSEs)
- "they try and push you to do it." (Callum, 18, MC, taking foundational GCSEs)



Dominates not just the employment opportunities, but also their perceptions and experience of the whole town

How would you describe Barrow?

Luca (17, aspiring Personal Trainer): BAE or nothing.

Nick (20, youth worker): Unless you go to BAE, there's nothing on your doorstep, unless you're travelling away to bigger cities. You've got BAE or there's practically nothing, like they've already said.

Alfie (18, apprentice at BAE): …There's nothing actually in the town. If BAE wasn't in the town, it would just be a ghost town.

Amy (17, WC, A-level student): they own the whole town.

Inspires feeling of trapped-ness and a desire for resistance, agency – fuels mobility aspirations

Joshua, 20, MC, BAME, BAE degree apprentice:

I think - obviously **BAE is the most overwhelming choice.** It is the [job/ workplace] you can see, you know; it's massive. So I feel that that **overshadows** a lot of work around Barrow. And I feel like people see it like sort of like …You need to get into BAE or you are not going to have a job. [But] **because BAE was, like, drilled into us so much, me and all my friends were like, "we don't want to go there, we want to leave Barrow, and we want to do something else".** And then just having them constantly be like it is a great opportunity. **Just as teenagers we were like no, we are not going to do what you tell us to do."**

But “stuck-ness” also viewed as lack of aspiration for a bigger, better life

- not just about social mobility but seeking to be different from the norm (for their town), resisting the inter-generational patterns/ path-dependency?

Alife, 18, MC, BAE degree apprentice, hopes to leave as a springboard to move to Dublin or Manchester:

It's created this cycle, people have said, where people go in because it is a good business, it's **a good job to have. It's a good industry** to be involved in. So people get in there, realise, if I move somewhere else, I'm probably not going to get paid as much as I'm getting paid in here. I'm not going to get as good a qualification as I'm getting in here. And **they end up just staying, and it's sort of like a bit like lacklustre, really. I feel like quite a lot of us are a bit more like we aspire to sort of do a bit more than that and see a bit more than just like Barrow, but quite a lot of people just settle for it, really. And then just stay.**

Daniel, 19, MC, BAE apprentice, hopes to use BAE as a springboard to move to Australia:

You're pretty safe, it's like the classic life path of Barrow, you finish school, go into the yard, work yourself up in the yard for 40-50 years or whatever, get married, have kids, buy a decent house get a pretty decent car, go on a couple of holidays every year. **It's not an uncomfortable lifestyle, most people would be pretty lucky to have that.** But **it's pretty average really, I feel like people settle for that there's not really much aspiration to do much more go further with things.**

Madison, 17, MC, taking foundational GCSEs: a lot of people who go into **BAE, that isn’t their dream,** they go there because it’s their last opportunity and they get paid quite a lot.

Again, linked to perceptions of place

- **General view of Barrow, comparatively positive**
  - Community, nature on the door-step, good pay, safer than a city,
  - Nick (20, youth worker): *It's not too bad. It's an alright place. It's a bit depressing but it's alright*.

- **But… Barrow is Boring, "dead", nothing to do, nowhere to spend your wages.**
  - **Milos (18, music producer):** *It's all just a bit of a dead town.*
  - **Alfie (18, apprentice at BAE):** *…There's nothing actually in the town. If BAE wasn't in the town, it would just be a ghost town.*
  - **Luca, 17, WC, aspiring Personal Trainer:** *Everything's shut. Most shops are just, you know, wooden planks up against the windows. All shut.*

Preliminary conclusions from Barrow

- Leaving this town is very "thinkable" and desirable (even when not very realistic)
- Mobility aspirations are dominant, even though leaving might lead to a less comfortable, less well-paid life + staying close to family and "good" "stable" work makes more rational sense than leaving
    - *unless you want to work in, say, creative jobs, which aren't available
- **Good employment opportunities are not enough – it offers good jobs, but not a good place to live.**
    - No where to "spend their spends" – fewer opportunities to continue the tradition of youth culture activities (see, for example, Todd & Young, 2012)

Not just youth perception: decline confirmed in interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and older residents

Int: We're looking at young people who are aged 15 to 20; what sort of place is Barrow like for them?

Barrow youth practitioner #2: Grim. Grim… I mean, I started working with young people, god, far too many years ago, probably 18, 19 years ago, going into schools, and things like that, and then I got into the youth justice route, and we worked with the top 50 youth offenders in Barrow**. I used to think it was pretty rubbish then, but actually I'd rip my arm off to have it like that.** We had youth clubs, we had detached workers out on the streets, chatting to young people, getting them involved with things. We used to have the Street Soccer Club, where they'd do pop-up soccer pitches around the town, Morrisons car park, things like that, we had activities through the summer. I used to work at [a youth education centre], and we'd have a little café that, you know, young people could drop in, and **it's just gone. Everything's gone.**

Also highlighted the pressures around (not) getting a job at BAE

- **And despite our sample's perceptions, it's not that easy to get a job at BAE:** "There's 3,000 students applied on average this year for an apprenticeship, but there's 600 places… "

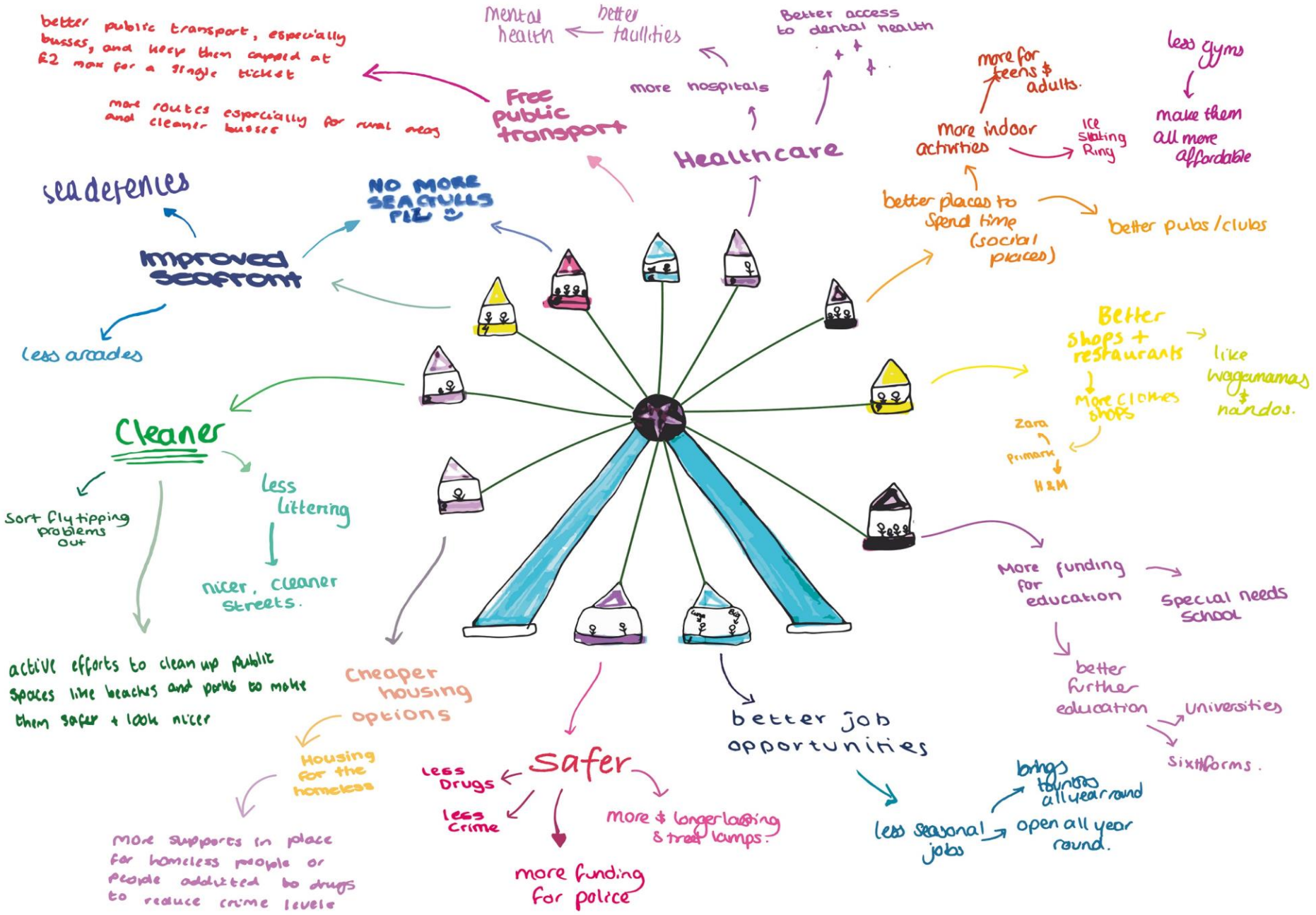
- **Barrow youth practitioner #2:** I think for students [careers advice is] very channelled to, if you don't go in BAE, you've kind of failed, sort of- ... And it is a lot of pressure, I think…. I have students absolutely devastated and sobbing in my office because, "What if I don't get in BAE?"... Because all they see is, "Well, if you live in Barrow, you work at BAE, and if you don't work at BAE then you'll be unemployed." And I think it's that black and white for students. But not as in- College are very good at giving them other opportunities and stuff like that, but I think it's from younger, school age, it's, "You need to get your GCSEs because you can get an apprenticeship at BAE."

Policy recommendations

- Job creation policy should be coupled with community creation policies
- For example, in terms of leisure…. Need a mixture of commercial and community activities (shops, restaurants/ café spaces, youth clubs, Warm Spaces)
    - Activities should be accessible (ie: affordable) and year-round
    - Boosts local economy: they earn good wages, need somewhere to spend the money!
    - Increases sense of belonging, identity, local pride, reduces youth crime/ anti-social behaviour
- Wider conception of youth voice - Ask young people aged 16-24 what they want/ need

My Town 2030: what young people in the East of England told us want for their towns

This visual co-produced with students from East Norfolk 6th form College, LivingMaps Network, and UCL.



To find out more about the Coastal Youth Life Chances project

- 3-year mixed method project, funded by UKRI, 2023 – 2025
- Main outcomes of interest: Education, Employment and Health
- Main research questions:

1. (a) Does growing up in coastal towns, compared to similarly deprived areas in England and Wales, impact on the life chances of young people? (b) Do these inequalities in life chances persist over the life course or narrow in later age?
2. What are the **environmental mechanisms/ place-based characteristics** linking growing up in a coastal town to adverse life chances in adulthood?
3. In what ways does growing up in a coastal town impact on young people's experiences, aspirations and life chances? In light of these experiences, what are the solutions young people propose to improve their coastal communities?

Publications from the project

- Murray, Emily T; Keating, Avril; Cameron, Claire; Benchekroun, Rachel; Whewall, Sam; Booker, Cara; Jivraj, Stephen; (2024) Residence in coastal communities in adolescence and health in young adulthood: An 11-year follow-up of English UKHLS youth questionnaire respondents
- Keating, Avril; Benchekroun, Rachel; Cameron, Claire; Whewall, Sam; (2024) Movers, returners and stayers: the role of place in shaping the (im)mobility aspirations of young people in coastal towns. Journal of Youth Studies
- Benchekroun, Rachel; Keating, Avril; Cameron, Claire; Curtin, Pippa; (2022) Growing up in coastal towns: Intergenerational perspectives from NE Lincolnshire. Emerging findings. UCL Centre for Global Youth: London

Papers in progress

1. Not settling for the lacklustre life? The role of local employment opportunities in youth mobility aspirations in coastal towns in England (qualitative data)
2. Are young people who grow up in coastal towns less likely to get a degree by age 32? (quantitative data)
3. Why is youth mental health in deprived coastal towns lower in equally-deprived towns that are located inland? (quantitative data)
4. Place and belonging: why do coastal youth feel marginalised from the place that they call home? (qualitative data)
5. Local policymaker and practitioners' perspectives on the challenges facing young people aged 15-20 : Coastal Youth Life Chances project interim report. qualitative data)