



A WAY OUT THE DARK?

STEPS TO A BETTER FUTURE FOR WANSBECK'S CHILDREN

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And thank you to the residents of Wansbeck who have come together as a community throughout the pandemic to support one another, and who inspire me to do the best job I can as your Member of Parliament every day.

Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations

Child poverty continues to rise rapidly in the North East and shows no signs of stopping. The full effects of the pandemic are yet to be known, meaning potentially thousands more children are in poverty than we are already aware of.

Growing up in poverty negatively affects practically every facet of life, putting those children at a major disadvantage compared to their peers, from the very beginning.

A number of local and national recommendations to help stem the tide of child poverty and breath life back into our communities include:

Better Deal on Jobs & Infrastructure

- Introduce a national living wage for all workers to ensure nobody currently in employment can find themselves in poverty and encourage the creation of well paid, stable, and fulfilling jobs in the area.
- Forge strong ties between local businesses of all sizes and schools and colleges in the area so local children understand the opportunities available to them and are in a position to take advantage of them.
- Focus on developing and promoting vocational & technical training courses and apprenticeships for those children opting not to go to university ensuring they still have secure routes into work.
- Advocate community wealth building and local procurement to help breathe life into the local economy and small local businesses from the community up. Help support local businesses to becoming living wage employers and upskill local workers.
- Encourage and support the development of worker ownership and cooperatives to democratise the local economy, giving people a share in the places they work.
- Hold a review of the full effects of our poor transport infrastructure on poverty in the region and develop a plan on how to upgrade our transport network, making it both more available and affordable- centred around a mayoral led solution currently being proposed in the North of Tyne.

More Support for Families

- Immediately commit to maintaining the £20 uplift in Universal Credit. Scrap the 5 weeks wait for UC payments and develop a better system for paying for childcare upfront rather than retrospectively for parents receiving UC.

- End the ‘two-child’ limit and lift the benefit cap. Extend free school meals to all families in receipt of UC/equivalent benefits and increase child benefits by £10 per child a week.
- Introduce a comprehensive package to support parents to give their children the best start in life. This should include but is not limited to: allowing flexible working from home where possible; a more comprehensive package of support for those struggling to pay for childcare; a system in place to educate inexperienced parents on the fundamentals of raising children; better systems in place to nurture early years learning to reduce the attainment gap, and a generous paternity/maternity leave to support child development in those crucial early weeks, months, and years.
- Fund sporting bursaries to children growing up in poverty to help them get active and away from the streets where they are vulnerable. Help promote and educate on healthy eating and how to budget for healthy diets, developing the template used by Full Circle Food and the YMCA’s Y-Cook project in more places around Wansbeck.

Empower Communities

- Have a meaningful devolution of powers and resources at regional level and work more closely with those in the community when delivering funding and resources rather than the current top-down approach.
- Work as a community to re-imagine the highstreets for the future in our run-down towns and develop a plan to implement any findings.
- Introduce a system of selective licensing to hold landlords accountable for the maintenance of their properties. All landowners must be held accountable for looking after and maintaining their land.
- Invest more in our social infrastructure such as parks and sports facilities, for example, that foster a stronger sense of community and offer opportunity for children to get active and develop key social skills.
- Do more to promote the region’s rich local history and beautiful surroundings, that are something we can all be proud of.

Introduction

Back in 2019, in the face of rapidly rising child poverty levels in the North East, I teamed up with the National Education Union (NEU) to produce a child poverty report. The aim of the report was to highlight the key causes and effects of child poverty in the North East with a specific focus on my constituency of Wansbeck.

Since then, we have seen unprecedented and unforeseen changes to our social and political fabric as our communities were hit with a global pandemic turning our lives upside down. Other than the very few most wealthy in this country and across the world, everyone has felt the effects of the past year.

But some have felt them harder than others. As with most things, those already struggling the most have been hit the hardest. Mass unemployment and the biggest recession the country has seen in generations will have long lasting and devastating effects in our communities unless the appropriate steps are taken to protect them.

This all comes on the back of a decade of brutal austerity and cuts. Vital community assets have been slashed, schools and police are starved of funding and resources and wages have stagnated while the cost of living and house prices have soared. All the while the richest in the UK and around the world continue to amass extravagant wealth, a process only accelerated during the pandemic.

The effects on the life of someone growing up in poverty cannot be overstated. The numbers suggest those growing up in poverty are at a disadvantage in practically every metric measurable, from health, educational outcome, career prospects, crime, drug abuse and more.

Despite all the government's talk of levelling up, recent data that has come to light has shown that even before the pandemic child poverty levels in the North East continued to rise rapidly as the effects of a decade of austerity and cuts began to have a deep impact with no signs of slowing down.

We live in a beautiful place with a rich history full of wonderful people. Our children are brimming with talent and potential, but are being let down by the current political, social, and economic landscape they find themselves growing up in.

Wansbeck is a proud community and many people who fall into the accepted definition of poverty would resent the description and reject the categorisation. Most people simply want a job providing fair work and an honest wage, to be able to afford a home and to build a family while having a community around them that provides the structures for a meaningful and fulfilling life. Sadly, despite the modesty of these goals, for many in Wansbeck and millions of others across the UK today, they have become unrealistic.

As a result, I have decided to produce an updated report on child poverty in Wansbeck, looking deeper at its causes and effects, as well as attempting to identify what measures can be taken both in the short and long term to fight back against it.

While the report is focused on the problems facing Wansbeck, there are no doubt other constituencies in the North East and other parts of the country who will find themselves facing similar circumstances and challenges, and the findings of the report will come as no surprise to those living and working in these places around the country.

Child poverty is at crisis point in the North East and is the biggest challenge we face. That this is true in a region of a country with one of the largest economies in the world in the 21st century is astounding. This must be addressed immediately and comprehensively before the worst outcomes of such a political situation manifest themselves.

My heartfelt thanks go out to all those who helped produce this report that I sincerely hope will provide a basis for Wansbeck to rebuild following the pandemic in a way that puts those in need first.

Child Poverty in Wansbeck

A child is considered to be in poverty if they live in a household with an income of less than 60% of the median UK household income after housing costs.

To get an idea of what this may look like in practise, Peter Townsend, a founding member of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) defined poverty thus:

*'Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong.'*¹

Since 2014/15 child poverty has been steadily increasing in almost all areas of the UK. 4.3 million children (31%) across the UK now live in poverty. This is an increase of 200,000 between 2018/19-19/20 and 500,000 over five years.

This rise has been felt more sharply in the North East. The region has seen by far the steepest increase in child poverty of anywhere in the UK between 2014/15 and 2019/20, from 25% to 37%. In the same time period, child poverty levels in the South East and Northern Ireland actually decreased (Figure.1).

¹ CPAG. 2021. *What is poverty?*. [online] Available at: <<https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/what-poverty>>

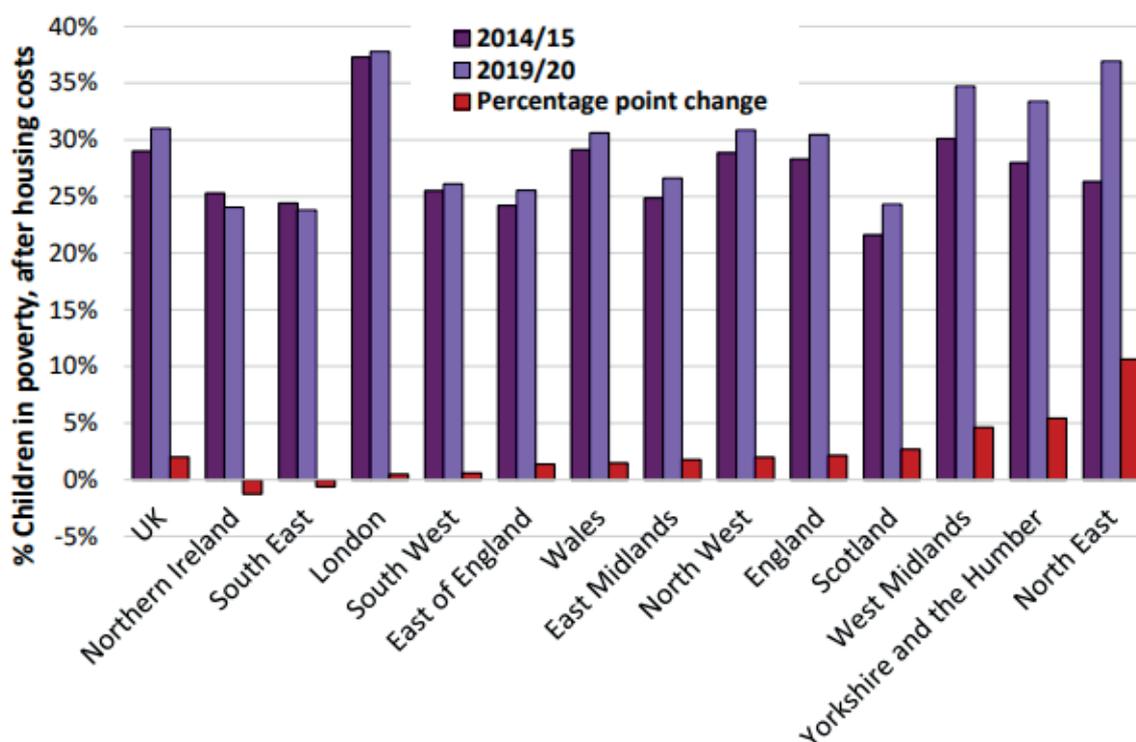


FIGURE 1 - CHANGE IN CHILD POVERTY RATE ACROSS DIFFERENT REGIONS OF THE UK FROM 2014/15-2019/20. IMAGE FROM THE END CHILD POVERTY COALITION MAY 2021 REPORT.

During this period, we have gone from levels of child poverty just below the UK average to having the second highest levels in the country just behind London.

Data from the End Child Poverty Coalition reveal that all 12 North East local authority areas have seen the highest increases of child poverty of anywhere in the country – a truly eye-opening statistic².

My constituency of Wansbeck is no different. Over the past five years it has seen an increase in child poverty from 25.7% up to 35.2% meaning there are now 5,079 children growing up in poverty in my constituency – over a third of all children.

This figure undoubtedly hides the worst of child poverty in some areas of the constituency. Wansbeck is made up of more prosperous towns and rural areas alongside more populated and deprived clusters who suffer poverty worse.

² Nechildpoverty.org.uk. 2021. *Facts & figures - North East Child Poverty Commission | Every child deserves an equal chance in life.* [online] Available at: <<https://nechildpoverty.org.uk/facts>>

Relative child poverty 2019/20

Aged 0-15, before housing costs

Area code	Area name	Poverty level	Poverty rate
E05009096	Ashington Central	354	35.0%
E05009098	Bedlington Central	170	20.7%
E05009099	Bedlington East	288	32.4%
E05009100	Bedlington West	193	24.7%
E05009105	Bothal	146	21.5%
E05009107	Choppington	256	29.1%
E05009108	College	299	35.8%
E05009121	Haydon	145	22.1%
E05009126	Hirst	414	34.8%
E05009134	Morpeth Kirkehill	110	11.2%
E05009135	Morpeth North	79	12.0%
E05009136	Morpeth Stobhill	134	17.7%
E05009137	Newbiggin Central and East	241	33.7%
E05009149	Seaton with Newbiggin West	284	24.0%
E05009152	Sleekburn	268	32.6%
E05009155	Stakeford	126	21.6%
E14001014	Wansbeck constituency	3,693	25.6%
E1200000	North East	127,829	26.8%
K02000001	UK	2,428,284	19.1%

[Source: HMRC and DWP, Children in low income families: local area statistics, 2020](#)

FIGURE 2 - RELATIVE CHILD POVERTY RATES IN WANSBECK BEFORE HOUSING COSTS

Figure 2 shows the relative child poverty rates across the different wards in Wansbeck before housing costs (unfortunately data after housing costs is not collected at this level hiding the true levels of child poverty in the area). It shows huge disparities in child poverty across different areas of the constituency, some areas three times higher than others, and the constituency as a whole far higher than the national average.³

This makes for incredibly concerning reading. This report will attempt to outline potential causes and effects of this rise in poverty including an increase in precarious and low paid work as well as a rise in unemployment, a swelling cost of living, cuts to benefits and more. I believe

³ It should be noted that the increase after housing costs would also not be applied uniformly. It is likely that the gap would widen even further between the highest and lowest levels of child poverty if housing costs were accounted for.

what is revealed is a generationally perpetuating cycle of poverty that will require bold strokes and the necessary funding, resources, and political will to break.

The report will end with both recommendations for the government to implement in the short and long term, as well as suggestions on how Wansbeck as a community can take the initiative in the fight against child poverty.

Contributing Factors

Child poverty is a political choice. A decade of brutal austerity and cuts have taken their toll on a region already struggling with unemployment and poverty following its industrial decline beginning in the late 70's. A wide range of decisions and inaction from the government particularly over the past 11 years has directly resulted in an explosion of child poverty up and down the country, most noticeably here in the North East - including Wansbeck.

In Work Poverty

One of the most concerning trends driving the rise in child poverty is the rapid increase of in-work poverty. It is now no longer the case for many in Wansbeck that getting a job is a guaranteed way to lift yourself and your children out of poverty.

Children in in-work poverty, 2019/20		
Percentage of children in poverty in working families		
		% of children in poverty in working families
E05009126	Hirst	44.4%
E05009108	College	58.9%
E05009137	Newbiggin Central and East	59.1%
E05009107	Choppington	63.2%
E05009099	Bedlington East	63.4%
E05009096	Ashington Central	64.2%
E05009152	Sleekburn	68.1%
E05009100	Bedlington West	68.6%
E05009105	Bothal	69.5%
E05009098	Bedlington Central	69.6%
E05009155	Stakeford	70.0%
E05009121	Haydon	70.6%
E05009136	Morpeth Stobhill	72.1%
E05009134	Morpeth Kirkhill	74.4%
E05009149	Seaton with Newbiggin West	75.0%
E05009135	Morpeth North	84.8%
E14001014	Wansbeck	65.6%
E1200000	North East	68.2%

Source: HMRC and DWP, Children in low income families: local area statistics, via Stat-Explore

FIGURE 3 - PERCENT OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY IN WORKING FAMILIES IN WANSBECK

The TUC reported in 2019 that 108,775 children living in poverty in the North East came from households with at least one parent in work, up 52% since 2010⁴. Almost two thirds of children living in poverty in Wansbeck come from a working household.

The government often boast about data showing high employment rates, but recent findings from the Institute for Public Policy research (IPPR) finds that 1 in 6 working households now find themselves in poverty including 42% of families with 3 or more children⁵. They rightly point out that this dramatically undermines a welfare system built on the idea that work is a route out of poverty. A Levelling Up plan based on creating jobs is not enough, low wages and precarious work must be addressed immediately.

Underemployment & Unemployment

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) have done extensive work on the rise of in-work poverty and its causes. They find that wage growth and our social security system has not kept up with the cost of living and rising housing and rent prices.

Households are struggling with both unemployment and underemployment - workers not being able to work as many hours as they would like to. There is a chronic issue with finding enough hours of work and lack of opportunity to progress out of low paying work.

The JRF identifies a number of key factors feeding into both unemployment and underemployment, namely a lack of opportunity to find jobs with stable and sufficient hours, a lack of affordable and flexible childcare, and transport links⁶.

This is more common in the hospitality and retail sectors which commonly have incidents of lower pay and fewer available hours. These industries were also hit disproportionately hard by the pandemic with many workers finding themselves furloughed on 80% of a wage that was already pushing them into in-work poverty.

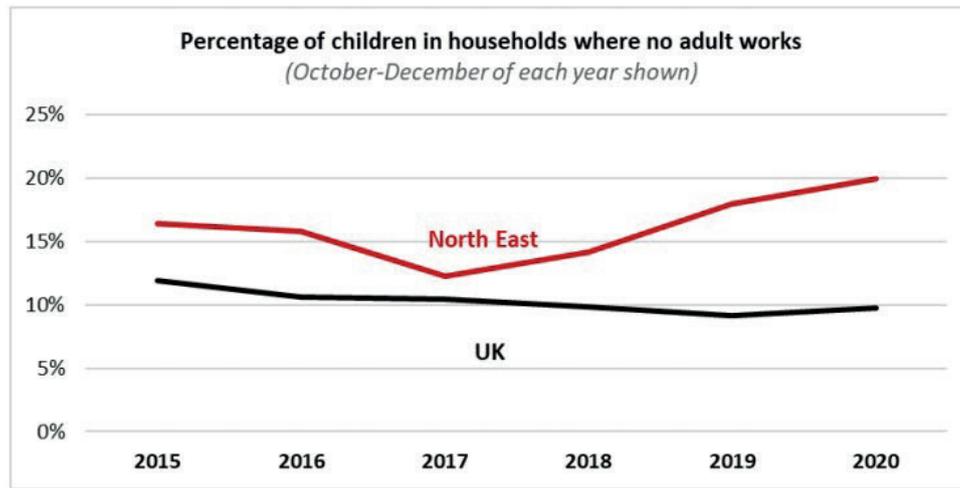
On the other hand, unemployment remains a problem in the North East. According to the JRF the North East had the highest levels of working-age adults not in paid work at 31%⁷. Data presented on behalf of End Child Poverty and the North East Child Poverty Commission reveals the percentage of children in households in the North East where no adult works has sharply increased since 2017 compared to the rest of the UK.

⁴ TUC. 2021. *Child poverty in working households up by 800,000 since 2010, says TUC*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/child-poverty-working-households-800000-2010-says-tuc>>

⁵ IPPR. 2021. *Revealed: Working family poverty hits record high, fuelled by rising housing costs and childcare challenges*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.ippr.org/news-and-media/press-releases/revealed-working-family-poverty-hits-record-high-fuelled-by-rising-housing-costs-and-childcare-challenges>>

⁶ JRF (2020a) UK Poverty 2020/21. [Online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2020-21>

⁷ JRF (2020b) UK poverty 2019/20. [Online] Available at: www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2019-20



Source: UK Labour Force Survey

FIGURE 4 - CHANGE IN CHILDREN IN NON-WORKING HOUSEHOLDS IN THE NORTH EAST AND UK FROM 2015-20.

As shown in Figure 4, the percentage of children in households in which no adult works has increased from around 12-13% in 2017 to 20% in 2020. This rise may go some way to explaining why the North East has seen a sharper increase in child poverty rates compared to the rest of the country - the North East's unemployment is now the highest in the country outside of London.

Childcare

Lone parents in particular struggle with in-work poverty. Paying for childcare can be extremely expensive, and many lone parents find themselves restricted to low paid jobs and fewer hours due to their commitments to their children, key indicators for in-work poverty.

Many are faced with the prospect of working longer hours but paying for childcare that is more expensive than they are being paid, or working less hours to take care of their children stunting their career and limiting their income levels - or even simply remaining unemployed.

Childcare costs often exceed the support offered by Universal Credit (UC), and the total amount parents can claim back on UC has been frozen since 2016.⁸

There is also the issue of upfront childcare costs. Under UC any help with childcare is paid retrospectively, and as childcare often has to be paid a month or term in advance and three quarters of families in poverty have no savings, many are left unable to pay for childcare⁹.

⁸ JRF (2020a) UK Poverty 2020/21. [Online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2020-21>

⁹ CPAG. 2021. *Upfront for families? Childcare costs in universal credit*. [online] Available at: <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/upfront-families-childcare-costs-universal-credit>. The CPAG have done extensive work on the fundamental flaws on UC including with regard to childcare payments.

Undoubtably these problems have worsened through the pandemic. My office was inundated with correspondence regarding childcare especially when it was announced that close relatives would not be allowed to help with caring commitments, leaving many parents unable to work normal hours, inevitably pushing them further into poverty. Shockingly more than 70% of women who asked to be furloughed for childcare reasons while schools were shut during the pandemic were refused the request.¹⁰

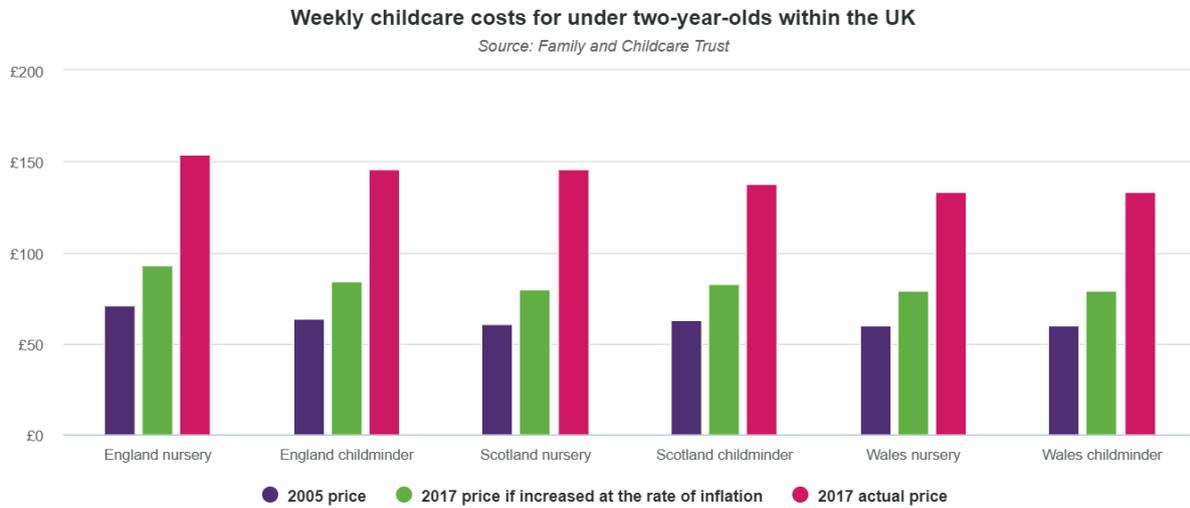


FIGURE 5 - WEEKLY CHILDCARE COSTS FOR UNDER TWO-YEAR-OLDS IN THE UK FROM 2005 - 2017. SOURCE: FAMILY AND CHILDCARE TRUST

More needs to be done to support families raising children, especially in single parent homes. There must be more recognition in the workplace for those with childcare commitments as well as more funding to support parents facing the difficult balancing act of working and raising a family.

¹⁰ Topping, A., 2021. Furlough refused to 71% of UK working mothers while schools shut - survey. *The Guardian*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jan/13/furlough-refused-to-71-of-uk-working-mothers-while-schools-shut-survey>>

Single-parent households in Wansbeck, 2011			
Area name	Single parent households	All households	% single parent households
Wards in Wansbeck			
Ashington Central	239	2,321	10.3%
Bedlington Central	152	2,304	6.6%
Bedlington East	192	2,157	8.9%
Bedlington West	105	1,841	5.7%
Bothal	115	2,016	5.7%
Choppington	193	2,122	9.1%
College	180	2,437	7.4%
Haydon	110	1,962	5.6%
Hirst	323	2,452	13.2%
Longhorsley	70	1,663	4.2%
Morpeth Kirkhill	117	2,173	5.4%
Morpeth North	79	2,044	3.9%
Morpeth Stobhill	134	2,143	6.3%
Newbiggin Central and East	199	2,191	9.1%
Pegswood	112	2,134	5.2%
Seaton with Newbiggin West	151	1,884	8.0%
Sleekburn	172	1,963	8.8%
Stakeford	123	2,135	5.8%
Wansbeck			7.4%
North East			8.0%
UK			7.2%

Source: 2011 Census, Table KS105UK and KS107UK, via [ONS Nomis](#)

FIGURE 6 - SINGLE PARENT HOUSEHOLDS IN WANSBECK

As we can see from comparing Figure 6 above with Figure 2, single parent households are more prevalent in areas with higher child poverty levels. Far more must be done to support these parents in particular who feel the most strain of living off one income and having sole childcare responsibilities.

Transport

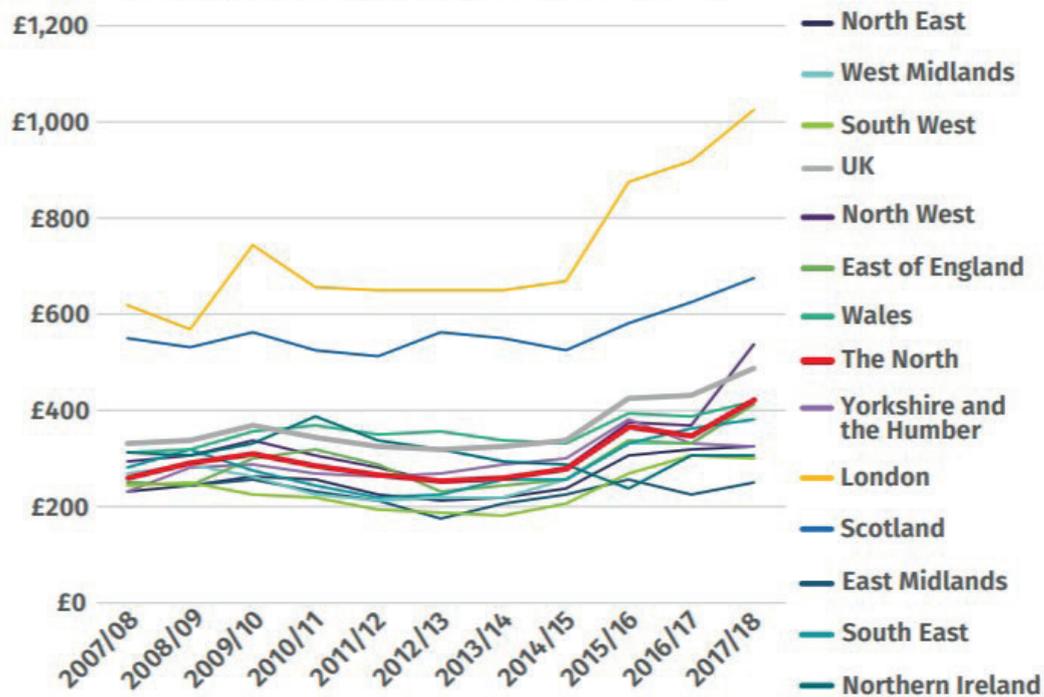
It is clear to anyone who lives here in Wansbeck and the surrounding areas in South East Northumberland that we suffer from a major lack of opportunity for quality secure jobs, support for those with childcare commitments, as well as a lack of investment into industry and infrastructure - especially transport.

There are huge discrepancies in transport spending across different regions in the country (Figure 7). Despite this, the latest data available¹¹ from the House of Commons library states that in total, the average commute of constituents in Wansbeck was 18.3km, this was around 11% more than the average commute length for people in the North East overall and 23% greater than the average commute length for people across England (Figure 8).

¹¹ Some data including this is only available from the 2011 census so is unfortunately slightly out of date. This will be updated when the next census data is revealed.

FIGURE 2.1: TRANSPORT SPENDING PER CAPITA HAS BEEN MORE THAN TWICE AS HIGH ON LONDON AS ON THE NORTH OVER THE LAST DECADE

Total public spending on transport per capita – including revenue and capital, and from central and local government (private spending not included)



Source: IPPR North analysis of ONS 2019

FIGURE 7 – TOTAL PUBLIC SPENDING ON TRANSPORT PER CAPITA BY REGION IN THE UK.

Commutes from Wansbeck						
The number of constituents* travelling by distance to work, total and average distance for Wansbeck with regional and national comparisons at the time of the 2011 Census						
	Wansbeck		North East		England	
Number of people						
Less than 2km	6,752	19%	202,172	18%	4,170,138	17%
2km to less than 5km	5,106	14%	235,849	20%	4,627,289	18%
5km to less than 10km	6,029	17%	220,617	19%	4,364,988	17%
10km to less than 20km	6,815	19%	192,451	17%	3,848,064	15%
20km to less than 30km	4,295	12%	55,976	5%	1,439,855	6%
30km to less than 40km	682	2%	20,205	2%	642,205	3%
40km to less than 60km	291	1%	15,795	1%	586,489	2%
60km and over	1,091	3%	33,880	3%	773,984	3%
Work mainly at or from home	2,936	8%	92,336	8%	2,581,832	10%
Other	2,342	6%	83,689	7%	2,127,877	8%
Total distance (km)	568,286		16,073,763		304,789,308	
Average distance (km)	18.3		16.5		14.9	

* All usual residents aged 16 to 74 in employment the week before the census
 Source: NOMIS, Census 2011: Q5702EW - Distance travelled to work

FIGURE 8 - TRAVELLING DISTANCE TO WORK IN WANSBECK COMPARED TO THE NORTH EAST AND ENGLAND

Without sufficient and affordable transport links, people are unable to take certain jobs that require them to commute. South East Northumberland is an area built up of clusters of small and medium towns, and the poor transport infrastructure adds to the sense of isolation and makes finding work even more difficult. A decade of austerity has slashed bus services across the country, in particular in the North as council budgets are stretched to breaking point¹².

Back in 2019 I did a bus tour around Wansbeck to highlight the inaccessibility of the transport links in Wansbeck. At the time, people complained not only about the total lack of reliable links between the towns across South East Northumberland, but about the cost as well. A single bus journey in London is capped at £1.55 no matter how far you want to go and capped at £4.65 in total for the day. At the time of the bus tour, I was receiving complaints about tickets in the North East being 4-5x higher than this, and real-life examples of people losing out on job opportunities because of bus prices and availability. An adult day ticket between Morpeth and Ashington alone is £6.40¹³.

These problems feed into a cycle of further decline which is most evident on our hollowed out high streets all across Wansbeck and South East Northumberland, accelerating the breakdown of our communities and subsequently social bonds that all feed into making life harder for families affected by poverty.

The lack of opportunity for available quality work in the region, made worse through expensive childcare and a lack of reliable transport, inevitably leads to a lack of aspiration and direction, a view, it was found in my discussions for this report, that is widely held by those working closely with children in our communities. Compared to a few decades ago when the North East had a strong industrial structure providing those leaving school without the qualifications to go to university with quality work, today children often find there is no obvious route into a stable long-term career.

Once in a low paying job or precarious work it is harder to build a career and get promotions, often due to limitations like transport and childcare commitments, or through no clear promotion system to work through. Therefore, those who end up in these jobs often find they are unable to work their way out of them, once again depressing aspiration and a feeding into the view that work is pointless because it no longer gets you out of poverty. How can we expect people to be enthusiastic and committed to their jobs and education if they, in many cases justifiably, believe they are at a dead end that work and education won't help them get out of anyway?

Those that do succeed in Wansbeck academically and go off to university follow a general trend in the UK and are unlikely to return, migrating to large cities and metropolitan areas thanks to a lack of quality jobs and opportunity to fulfil their aspirations back home, resulting in a continuous brain drain from our communities. Back in 2016 it was reported that the North had lost 310,000 graduates to the south over 10 years in a mass brain drain due to lack of

¹² BBC News. 2021. *Buses in 'crisis' as 3,000 routes reduced or scrapped*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-44681974>

¹³ <https://www.arrivabus.co.uk/buy-tickets/region/north-east/zone/ane031>

opportunity in the region¹⁴. It should not be the case that for someone to succeed in a professional job they must uproot and leave their families and the communities they were raised in.

It is clear that far more needs to be done to support the unemployed and those in in-work poverty who often find themselves with simply no opportunity to improve their own situation through no fault of their own, alongside creating strong stable and aspirational jobs closer to home for school leavers both with and without higher education qualifications.

Cost of Living, Housing & Rent

Compared to other parts of the country the North East has relatively low house prices, yet we still suffer from very high levels of poverty due to very low wages and relatively high unemployment figures.

Despite this, house prices and the cost of living are still rising all over the country faster than wages are rising, especially here in the North East where wages are so low. A lack of genuinely affordable and social housing in the country, with little progress being made to alleviate this problem, has resulted in fewer young people being able to get on the housing market.

As social housing was sold off in the 80's continuing through the 90's and 00's, no new housing was being built. The 2010's had the lowest levels of peacetime house building since the 1920's. This coincided with rising house prices and rapid growths in the price of rent¹⁵.

A lack of affordable and social housing results in a rise in those living in rented accommodation. Many find themselves paying rent at a higher rate than they would pay for a mortgage while also having no property portfolio and residing in unstable living conditions often on the brink of homelessness, a problem that has become worse in recent years in Northumberland according to the homeless charity Shelter.

¹⁴ Boffey, D. and Inman, P., 2016. North of England loses 310,000 graduates in 10-year brain drain. *The Guardian*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/nov/19/brain-drain-southward-310000-graduates-left-north-ten-years>>

¹⁵ McNeil C and Parkes H (2021) 'No longer managing' The rise of working poverty and fixing Britain's broken social settlement, IPPR. [Online] Available at < <http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/no-longer-managing>>

Housing tenure in Wansbeck, 2011

	Owned	Private rented	Social rented
Wards in Wansbeck			
Ashington Central	56%	21%	22%
Bedlington Central	68%	11%	19%
Bedlington East	57%	16%	27%
Bedlington West	77%	8%	13%
Bothal	70%	11%	18%
Choppington	57%	12%	30%
College	55%	14%	30%
Haydon	78%	7%	14%
Hirst	45%	28%	26%
Longhorsley	71%	19%	7%
Morpeth Kirkhill	77%	6%	16%
Morpeth North	75%	12%	11%
Morpeth Stobhill	74%	9%	15%
Newbiggin Central and East	59%	16%	23%
Pegswood	66%	12%	19%
Seaton with Newbiggin West	63%	8%	27%
Sleekburn	56%	13%	30%
Stakeford	80%	8%	11%
Wansbeck constituency	67%	11%	20%
North East	67%	14%	17%
UK	64%	16%	18%

Source: 2011 Census, Table KS402UK, via [ONS Nomis](#)

FIGURE 9 - HOUSING TENURES ACROSS WANSBECK¹⁶

This is an issue likely to become even more acute in the coming months and years following the pandemic. Renters have racked up huge rent arrears during lockdown while out of work, and now the eviction ban is lifted these people all face having nowhere to live. Alongside this, between June 2020-21 house prices in the UK grew at their fastest rate since 2004¹⁷, while millions were placed on furlough or lost their jobs.

The House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee suggested this problem will be felt particularly harshly in the North East due to low incomes and relatively

¹⁷ BBC News. (2021, June 29). *House prices rise at fastest pace in 17 years*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-57648935>

high rates of Housing Benefit claimants. Private renters in the North East are the most likely group in the country to need help with housing costs, with over half claiming some sort of housing benefit.¹⁸

More needs to be done to provide quality affordable and social housing to those who need it, as well as to ensure protection from those falling behind on their rent and facing eviction.

There also exists a significant problem with out-of-town landlords who buy up property and then fail to look after them properly so long as they are receiving rent. Police officers I have spoken to consider this a major contributing factor in the rise of anti-social behaviour that ties in with the 'Broken Window Theory' and a lack of respect for the communities and place we live.

All this needs to be addressed if we are to hope for a community where people own the houses they live in and respect their surroundings, providing financial security and an enhanced feeling of belonging.

Cuts to benefits and social services

Wansbeck has a significant number of people claiming benefits both in employment and unemployment as shown in the graphs below.

People claiming unemployment benefits				People on Universal Credit by employment status						
April 2021, not seasonally adjusted				April 2021						
Area code	Area name	Count (Aged 16+)	Rate (Aged 16-64)	People on UC: total		Of which: employment indicator (a)				
				number	As % of pop. aged 16-65	In employment		Not in employment		
				number	As % of pop. aged 16-65	number	As % of pop. aged 16-65	number	As % of pop. aged 16-65	
E05009134	Morpeth Kirkehill	110	3.7%	Wards in Wansbeck (b)						
E05009100	Bedlington West	115	4.1%	Ashington Central	707	21.8%	227	7.1%	477	14.8%
E05009135	Morpeth North	110	4.1%	Bedlington Central	337	10.6%	133	4.1%	204	6.4%
E05009121	Haydon	115	4.2%	Bedlington East	617	20.4%	204	6.8%	410	13.7%
E05009136	Morpeth Stobhill	130	4.6%	Bedlington West	295	10.1%	124	4.2%	170	5.8%
E05009098	Bedlington Central	155	5.1%	Bothal	366	12.6%	166	5.7%	202	6.9%
E05009155	Stakeford	135	5.3%	Choppington	570	19.3%	193	6.6%	377	12.7%
E05009149	Seaton with Newbiggin West	175	5.5%	College	763	23.8%	249	7.7%	517	16.1%
E05009105	Bothal	160	5.6%	Haydon	284	10.1%	125	4.5%	157	5.6%
E05009107	Choppington	230	8.0%	Hirst	1,017	29.0%	299	8.5%	714	20.3%
E05009099	Bedlington East	260	8.9%	Morpeth Kirkehill	269	8.9%	120	4.0%	150	4.8%
E05009152	Sleekburn	235	9.0%	Morpeth North	193	6.8%	68	2.5%	120	4.4%
E05009096	Ashington Central	305	9.6%	Morpeth Stobhill	285	10.0%	104	3.6%	179	6.3%
E05009137	Newbiggin Central and East	265	10.1%	Newbiggin Central and East	575	21.4%	184	6.8%	396	14.5%
E05009108	College	360	11.6%	Seaton with Newbiggin West	550	16.8%	238	7.3%	308	9.6%
E05009126	Hirst	515	14.9%	Sleekburn	581	21.7%	206	7.7%	377	14.0%
E14001014	Wansbeck constituency	3,550	7.1%	Stakeford	281	10.6%	97	3.7%	185	7.1%
E1200000	North East	117,600	7.1%	Total: wards in Wansbeck (b)	7,681	16.1%	2,737	5.7%	4,950	10.3%
K02000001	UK	2,647,555	4.6%	Wansbeck constituency	8,107	15.8%	2,913	5.7%	5,192	10.1%
				North East	282,212	16.6%	97,666	5.8%	184,543	10.8%
				Great Britain	5,948,534	14.4%	2,200,094	5.3%	3,748,444	9.0%

FIGURE 10 - PEOPLE CLAIMING UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS AND UNIVERSAL CREDIT IN WANSBECK INCLUDING BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS. HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY

¹⁸ JRF (2020a) UK Poverty 2020/21. [Online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2020-21>

Households on Universal Credit				
February 2021				
Area code	Area name	Households on UC: total	Of which:	
			With dependent children	No dependent children
Wards in Wansbeck (a)				
E05009096	Ashington Central	629	217	414
E05009098	Bedlington Central	291	98	192
E05009099	Bedlington East	512	198	319
E05009100	Bedlington West	247	112	137
E05009105	Bothal	316	116	205
E05009107	Choppington	459	193	270
E05009108	College	668	223	443
E05009121	Haydon	256	90	161
E05009126	Hirst	864	324	542
E05009134	Morpeth Kirkehill	221	80	144
E05009135	Morpeth North	178	48	133
E05009136	Morpeth Stobhill	240	80	162
E05009137	Newbiggin Central and East	502	180	320
E05009149	Seaton with Newbiggin Wes	449	207	241
E05009152	Sleekburn	499	183	321
E05009155	Stakeford	236	73	164
Total: wards in Wansbeck (a)		6,559	2,412	4,152
E14001014	Wansbeck constituency	6,939	2,553	4,381
E12000001	North East	244,070	90,015	154,061
K03000001	Great Britain	5,031,336	1,914,486	3,116,848

Notes
 Statistical disclosure control was applied to this table at source to avoid the release of confidential data.
 Components may not sum to totals due to the disclosure control applied.

FIGURE 11 - HOUSEHOLDS ON UNIVERSAL CREDIT IN WANSBECK. HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY

The IPPR report that increasing living costs have coincided with changes to social security while wages have not kept up making it only more difficult for families to break out of the poverty cycle.

They estimate that ‘a single parent with two children would have to work 23 hours per week at minimum wage to be above the poverty line, compared to just 16 hours had there been no post-2010 changes to the welfare system, representing a 44 per cent increase.’¹⁹

Years of freezes and cuts to the value of benefits (with CPAG estimating that Child Benefit alone has lost 23% of its value since 2010), alongside the introduction of policies such as the two-child limit²⁰ and benefit cap, mean that our social security system simply no longer provides the effective safety net we need to prevent people falling into poverty and destitution..

This has been made worse as a result of Northumberland County Council’s decision to withdraw council tax support affecting as many as 5,170 people in Wansbeck, the most being

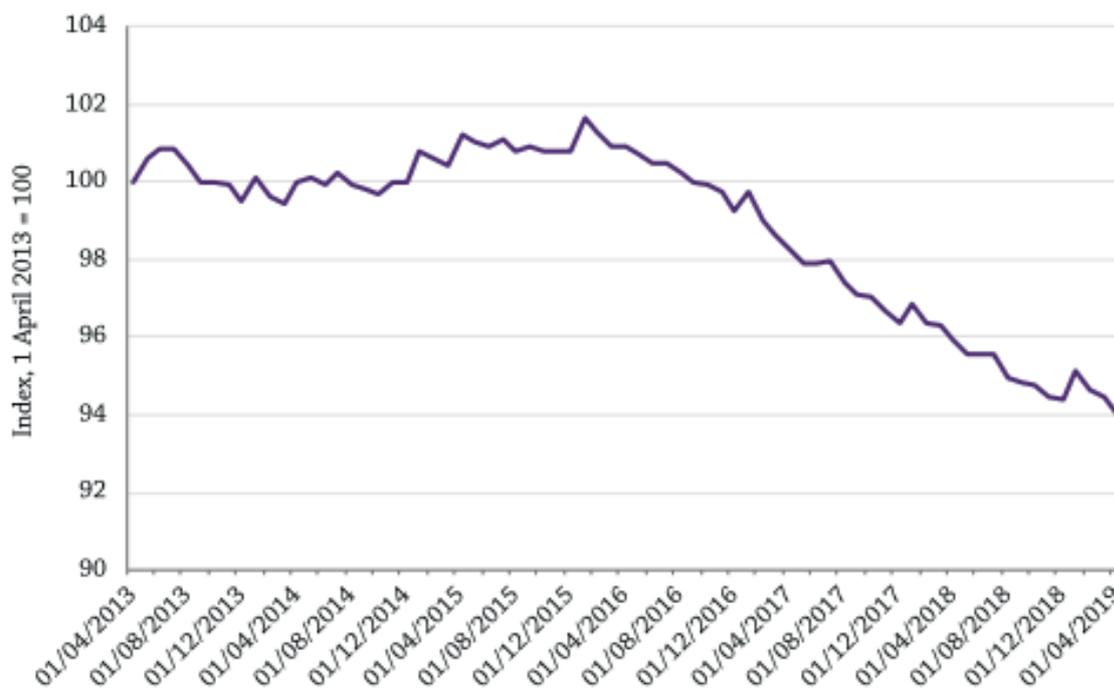
¹⁹ McNeil C and Parkes H (2021) ‘No longer managing’ The rise of working poverty and fixing Britain's broken social settlement, IPPR. [Online] Available at < <http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/no-longer-managing>

²⁰ Research from the North East Child Poverty Commission reveals the two-child limit affects at least 3,300 children in Northumberland alone. Bailey, A., 2021. 14,000 NORTH EAST FAMILIES HIT BY ‘TOTALLY UNFAIR’ TWO-CHILD LIMIT. [online] North East Child Poverty Action Commission. Available at: <<https://nechildpoverty.org.uk/news/14-000-north-east-families-hit-by-totally-unfair-two-child-limit>>

from Hirst, including 2,177 people with children, again the largest number being from the Hirst ward.

The six weeks wait for universal credit payments also leaves many growing hungry and falling behind on rent while they sit tight waiting on support. Sometimes the help comes simply too late to stop families building debt and falling below the poverty line.

The benefit freeze has seen the value of many benefits fall. The same benefit received in 2019 and 2013 is worth around 6% less



Source: Office for Budget Responsibility

FIGURE 12 - THE FALL IN THE VALUE OF BENEFITS BETWEEN 2013 AND 2019. SOURCE: JRF UK POVERTY REPORT 2019-20

Several reports²¹ produced in recent years outline the inadequacies of universal credit and the benefits system in protecting people from falling into poverty both in and out of work. The JRF 2020/21 UK Poverty report suggests:

‘At a minimum, we need the temporary £20 a week increase to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit to be made permanent. We also need to extend this same lifeline to people on legacy benefits such as Jobseeker’s Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance, and then to consider further improvements to the current system, to ensure it gives adequate support.’

²¹ JRF (2020) UK Poverty 2020/21. [Online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2020-21>. See extensive list of references for reports on UC and benefit reform.

A recent End Child Poverty report suggest this may go some way to explaining why the North East has seen such an explosion in the rise of child poverty. They suggest the presence of a relatively large amount of low paid workers who were just above the poverty line have been pushed below it by the freeze on their in-work benefits²². A failure to maintain the £20 uplift would also amount to around £7.2 million being taken out of the local economy, with those on the lowest wages most likely to spend closer to home.

Nobody wants to be reliant on benefits to keep them out of poverty. Ideally, we would achieve full living wage employment for all, with fair hours that allow for flexible work and help with childcare arrangements. But until this happens people need support to keep them above the poverty line - support that they currently are not receiving.

Education

The effects of child poverty are profound from a very young age. By almost every metric a child growing up in poverty is at a disadvantage from the beginning compared with a child who is not in poverty. Be it in education, health, career prospects and much more - it is an uphill climb from the beginning for those materially disadvantaged.

Poor educational attainment is both a result of and a cause of poverty. Disadvantaged pupils are falling behind their peers in performance in schools and as a result are more likely to struggle to find secure good paying work. This cycle then reasserts itself as their children grow up in hardship, facing all the same problems their parents did.

Our current education system is not fit to support children who are living in poverty. Teachers talk to me about being stretched to breaking point as funding has been slashed and as a result, they often find themselves simply picking up the pieces of the fallout of child poverty rather than providing the children with the robust education they need. A significant number of schools in Wansbeck now operate their own food bank system to help support struggling parents – this is done above and beyond the call of duty and piles even more pressure and time constraints on teachers.

This has become exponentially worse during the pandemic. Teachers tell me that schools were caught woefully unprepared as all the shortcomings in funding and resources as a result of a decade of austerity were brutally exposed. The learning time lost has been unprecedented as teachers had to adapt as never before to teach remotely without anything near the proper support, all the while overseeing children of key workers in schools, and a whole new system of examination with practically no real detail as to what they were supposed to be doing.

School funding across the country has been dramatically cut in the last decade. The Stop School Cuts campaign estimates that 129 of the 154 schools in Northumberland are suffering from a

²² Hirsch, D. and Stone, J., Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2018/19. Summary of estimates of child poverty after housing costs in local authorities and parliamentary constituencies, 2014/15–2018/19.

funding crisis. Northumberland schools together currently have an £8.3m shortfall as of 2020 with an average of £216 lost for each pupil²³.

More cuts by stealth are on their way. Changes to the way pupil premium is to be distributed will result in schools in the North East alone losing up to £7.26million in funding, hitting the most deprived schools the hardest²⁴. Despite their best efforts, schools are struggling more than ever to give children in poverty the support they need.

Children growing up in poverty perform academically worse than their peers. The NEU estimate that children accessing free school meals are 28% less likely to leave school with 5 A*-C GCSE grades than their wealthier counterparts²⁵. Some schools in Wansbeck have huge

Pupils known to be eligible for free school meals in Wansbeck		
January 2021		
	Number	Proportion
Choppington Primary School	67	57%
Central Primary School	358	48%
NCEA Castle School	46	46%
Cambois Primary School	40	46%
Collingwood School & Media Arts College	89	44%
Cleaswell Hill School	75	40%
NCEA Duke's Secondary School	345	36%
NCEA Bishop's Primary School	561	35%
Stakeford Primary School	57	33%
Stead Lane Primary School	74	32%
Bedlington Whitley Memorial Church of England Primary Scho	83	31%
Mowbray Primary School	79	30%
Pegswood Primary School	45	29%
Ashington Academy	274	28%
Bedlington Academy	202	26%
Bedlington Station Primary School	62	26%
Bedlington West End Primary School	52	23%
Meadowdale Academy	68	22%
Ringway Primary School	38	20%
St Benet Biscop Catholic Academy	216	18%
Bothal Primary School	124	18%
Morpeth Stobhillgate First School	26	17%
St Bede's Catholic Primary School	35	15%
St Aidan's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School	36	14%
Morpeth Chantry Middle School	69	13%
St Robert's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided First School	13	9%
The King Edward VI Academy	115	8%
Morpeth Newminster Middle School	41	8%
Abbeyfields First School	27	8%
Morpeth All Saints Church of England Aided First School	18	7%
Morpeth First School	18	5%
Wansbeck	3,353	24%
England	1,737,598	21%

Note: Schools ranked in order of proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals.
Source: Department for Education, [Schools pupils and their characteristics 2020/21](#), June 2021

FIGURE 13 - PUPILS KNOWN TO BE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS IN WANSBECK. HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY

²³ School Cuts. 2021. *Find out how Government cuts will affect your child's school #SchoolCuts:: School Cuts.* [online] Available at: <<https://schoolcuts.org.uk/>>

²⁴ Walker, J., 2021. North East schools are set to lose up to £7 million in a Government 'stealth' funding cut. *Newcastle Chronicle*, [online] Available at: <https://www.chroniclive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/north-east-schools-set-lose-20443943>

²⁵ NEU. 2021. *Child poverty - the facts.* [online] Available at: <<https://neu.org.uk/child-poverty-facts>>

numbers of these children, with around half of all pupils receiving free school meals in some schools (Figure.13) ²⁶

Attainment

Educational attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers is getting wider. The Education Policy Institute reported last year that disadvantaged pupils are 18.1 months of learning behind other students by the time they finish their GCSE's²⁷.

There are a wide range of reasons for this. The National Education Union (NEU) has done extensive work into the reasons disadvantaged children do worse in terms of educational attainment.

A significant reason for this is fatigue and poor concentration as a result of food insecurity and poor diets. A report produced by Kellogg's found that children arriving to school hungry once a week would lose around 8.4 weeks of learning time over their primary school life²⁸.

It is therefore extremely concerning that the North East Child Poverty Commission, CPAG and Children North East recently found that 1 in 4 children living in poverty in the North East are not eligible for free school meals under the current threshold – this despite our region consistently having the highest proportion of pupils eligible for FSMs of anywhere in England²⁹.

There are also disparities in the ability of children in poverty to learn away from school. Parents in poverty are more likely to be fatigued themselves and can often lack the time, facilities, and skills that other families have to support their child's learning away from the classroom.

This was particularly evident during the pandemic where parents found themselves having to support their child's learning from home. Many simply were not to set up to do so, without the appropriate equipment or access to the internet. This undoubtedly will have made the attainment gap, particularly among early years children, grow ever wider especially in the North East³⁰.

Teachers I have spoken to, as well as those in the community who work alongside disadvantaged children, are often keen to reiterate this point. Parents, especially single

²⁶ The figures here are only children 'known' to be on free school meals. Anecdotally from conversations I have had with headteachers at some schools these figures are even higher in reality.

²⁷ Hutchinson, J., Reader, M. and Akhal, A., 2020. Education in England: annual report 2020. Available at: <<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/>>

²⁸ Kelloggs. 2013. A Lost Education The reality of hunger in the classroom. Available at: <https://www.kelloggs.co.uk/content/dam/europe/kelloggs_gb/pdf/R2_Kellogg_A_Lost_Education.pdf>

²⁹ CPAG. 2021. *One in four North East pupils living in poverty miss out on Free School Meals*. [online] Available at: <<https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/one-four-north-east-pupils-living-poverty-miss-out-free-school-meals>>

³⁰ Walker, P., 2021. Covid has eroded progress by disadvantaged pupils in England, finds study. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jun/04/covid-has-eradicated-disadvantaged-pupils-progress-finds-study>

parents, living in poverty need extra support in nurturing their child as they grow up to ensure they do not fall further behind children whose parents can afford to spend more time with their children and have the resources and know-how to effectively support them with their education

School leavers destination

Wansbeck has been lagging behind the rest of the country in the number of 18-year-olds going to university (Figure 14). But this again will have huge disparities across the constituency and within schools.

	Wansbeck	England
2015	30.3%	31.3%
2016	31.2%	32.5%
2017	32.7%	33.3%
2018	26.9%	33.7%
2019	30.6%	35.0%
2020	31.2%	37.9%

FIGURE 14 - ESTIMATED 18-YEAR-OLD ENTRY RATE TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN WANSBECK COMPARED TO ENGLAND. HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY

According to the data, a high performing school in Wansbeck currently has a 60% rate of children achieving a grade 5 or above in Maths & English GCSE in 2019. For the same year this number is 19% at another school in Wansbeck with a catchment containing far more children in poverty, with the national average falling at 40%. When only including disadvantaged children, this drops to 26% and 11%.

While children attend university now more than ever before, it seems reasonable to assume that some schools in more disadvantaged areas are likely to send a significantly lower number of pupils to university than the national average.

Going back to the attainment gap - it seems highly unlikely that children born into one part of Wansbeck are simply uniformly smarter and better at passing exams than in another area. Instead, it is far more likely that it is the case that some schools have much higher proportions of children growing up in poverty and having to deal with all the challenges that come with that, and as a result perform worse in their exams.

Undoubtedly, if some children born in these areas were born up the road in a more prosperous area then they would be achieving better grades and potentially be heading off to university and opening more doors of opportunity. Tackling child poverty would help bring out the full potential of these children and result in a fairer and more meritocratic society.

While it is important that more is done so that all students can reach their full ability no matter their background and economic circumstances, it almost must be appreciated that university

is not for everyone. Often it is simply the case that some people do not want to go to university and uproot from their communities and families.

By focusing too much on university entry we risk forgetting the students who do not want to follow that route and would be more suited to vocational and technical training when they leave school. As a larger number of these children are likely to come from more disadvantaged areas it is these areas that would benefit most from this change in thinking, and the areas that have been most disillusioned by the recent trend in encouraging university attendance over the last few decades.

Instead of attempting to cram as many children as possible into university, we should also be focusing on ensuring that those not choosing higher education are still offered alternative avenues to good, well paid jobs through things such as apprenticeships and vocational and technical training programs that suit their needs and get them ready for life after education.

This may include forging strong links between colleges and high schools and local businesses in order to offer clear routes into employment in the local area that does not depend on higher education. There are already promising signs this is beginning to happen more in some places, such as Akzo Nobel and in the near future hopefully with Britishvolt in Cambois among other places.

These jobs must also be paid fairly so that those in them do not simply fall into the ever-growing pile of those in in-work poverty. While the work done by highly educated professionals such as doctors and scientists throughout the pandemic has been invaluable, the work done by more manual workers such as delivery drivers, cleaners, child carers and supermarket workers have kept us on our feet and we simply could not have done without them.

This newfound appreciation of these key workers³¹ over the pandemic must be harnessed to deliver a new deal for all workers to guarantee a living (or family) wage and a meaningful voice in the workplace that give these jobs the dignity and respect they deserve.

Adult Learning

Those achieving a worse educational outcome, often because of poverty, will be more likely to find themselves in low paying and unreliable work. Additionally, as outlined earlier, these jobs are difficult to work out of, and many who find themselves in low paying work find there is no opportunity for progression.

³¹ Despite this newfound appreciation, it has been revealed by the TUC that 3 in 10 children of key workers grow up in poverty in the North East. TUC. 2021. *3 out of 10 children in key worker households in the North-East live in poverty*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/3-out-10-children-key-worker-households-north-east-live-poverty>>

This is even more so the case in the last decade as Adult Learning has been cut by 45% as reported by the Social Mobility Commission's 'Monitoring Social Mobility' report last year³², including the decision to scrap the Union Learning Fund.

The cycle is therefore perpetuating itself generation on generation. If a child grows up in poverty, they are likely to perform worse at school and therefore are more likely to find themselves in low paid unreliable work. As a result, their children are more likely to grow up in poverty and so on. As work becomes more precarious and unreliable the less chance there is for those in poverty to work themselves out of this trap. Programs such as the Union Learning Fund offered an opportunity for adults to learn new skills and as a result broaden their horizons to find new lines of work that may lead to a lifeline out of precarious and low paid work.

Far more needs to be done to get people out of this cycle. Children in poverty must be given more support and schools given the funding to provide this support. This also goes back to the need to provide quality secure jobs for those not performing well in school academically as a result of their material conditions when growing up, so they have the opportunity to work themselves out of poverty.

Physical Health

Growing up in poverty is the worst thing you can do for your health. The Marmot report initially released in 2010 and followed up in 2020 paints a picture of the brutal effects on health while growing up in poverty. In 2020 they found that over the last 10 years health inequalities had grown, people can expect to live more of their lives in ill health, and astonishingly living in a deprived area of the North East is worse for your health than a deprived area of London by around 5 years life expectancy. The North East has the worst life expectancy of anywhere in the country.³³

A report from the National Child Mortality database found that over a fifth of child deaths may be avoided if children living in the most deprived areas had the same mortality risk as those living in the least deprived, and there was a 10% increase in the risk of death between each decile of deprivation³⁴. In 2019 research at Newcastle University found that around one third of an unprecedented increase in infant mortality in England between 2014-17 may be attributed to rising child poverty – equivalent to an additional 172 infant deaths over that time period³⁵.

Even in a single constituency the life expectancy gap is staggering. Based on estimates, a female living in Morpeth Kirkhill can expect to live around 15.8 years longer than a male growing up in Ashington Central or Hirst.

³² GOV.UK. 2021. *Monitoring social mobility 2013 to 2020*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/monitoring-social-mobility-2013-to-2020>>

³³ Marmot, M., 2020. Health equity in England: The Marmot review 10 years on. *Bmj*, 368.

³⁴ NCMD Programme. 2021. *Child Mortality and Social Deprivation | National Child Mortality Database*. [online] Ncmd.info. Available at: <<https://www.ncmd.info/2021/05/13/dep-report-2021/>>

³⁵ Taylor-Robinson D, Lai ETC, Wickham S, *et al* Assessing the impact of rising child poverty on the unprecedented rise in infant mortality in England, 2000–2017: time trend analysis *BMJ Open* 2019

Life expectancy (in years) for wards of Wansbeck 2015-19						
	Males			Females		
	Central estimate	Lower CI	Upper CI	Central estimate	Lower CI	Upper CI
Ashington Central	72.5	70.0	75.1	78.7	76.3	81.0
Bedlington Central	77.7	75.7	79.6	77.6	74.4	80.8
Bedlington East	75.2	72.6	77.9	79.2	77.1	81.3
Bedlington West	79.9	77.6	82.3	84.9	82.5	87.4
Bothal	79.6	78.0	81.2	81.6	79.9	83.3
Choppington	79.2	74.7	83.6	80.6	78.1	83.0
College	75.7	73.3	78.2	80.8	77.7	84.0
Haydon	80.7	77.9	83.6	84.0	81.6	86.4
Hirst	72.5	70.3	74.6	77.0	75.1	79.0
Morpeth Kirkhill	79.5	76.5	82.5	83.6	82.1	85.0
Morpeth North	80.3	78.7	81.9	85.0	83.5	86.4
Morpeth Stobhill	83.3	80.0	86.5	88.3	85.5	91.0
Newbiggin Central and East	76.7	74.2	79.3	81.2	79.5	82.8
Seaton with Newbiggin West	79.7	77.6	81.9	82.9	79.6	86.3
Sleekburn	76.4	73.9	78.9	81.0	78.6	83.5
Stakeford	79.6	77.1	82.2	83.1	81.5	84.8
Northumberland	79.4	79.1	79.7	82.8	82.5	83.0
England (2017-19)	79.8	79.7	79.8	83.4	83.3	83.4

FIGURE 15 - LIFE EXPECTANCY (IN YEARS) IN WARDS ACROSS WANSBECK

The pandemic has laid bare these health inequalities. A report produced by Sir Michael Marmot for Manchester³⁶ has found that deprivation has a direct link to higher mortality rates of Covid-19 and confirmed that this will be the case elsewhere in the country.

A healthy diet is expensive and on a tight budget can be unattainable: The Health Foundation estimate it is 3 times more expensive to get energy from healthy foods than unhealthy foods³⁷.

The huge rise in food banks across the country as well as here in Northumberland is clear evidence that people can no longer afford to feed themselves and their families properly and reliably. The Wansbeck Valley Food Bank (WVFB) in 2019 revealed a huge 50% increase in demands on the previous year, and in 2020 this rose another 30%³⁸, and the number of children on free school meals shown in Figure 13 shows just how many families in some areas are struggling to put food on the table. The Right to Food campaign is leading the way in trying

³⁶ Marmot, M, Allen, J, Boyce, T, Goldblatt, P, Morrison, J. (2021) Building Back Fairer in Greater Manchester: Health Equity and Dignified Lives. London: Institute of Health Equity

³⁷ The Health Foundation. 2021. *Our food and our health | The Health Foundation*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.health.org.uk/infographic/our-food-and-our-health>>

³⁸ Wansbeck Valley Food Bank. 2021. *Wansbeck Valley Food Bank – Helping anyone in the Wansbeck....* [online] Available at: <<https://wansbeckvalleyfoodbank.org/>>

to get action taken on this, but the government are currently yet to commit to their suggestions³⁹.

Local charities such as Full Circle Food and the YMCA's Y-Cook project both based in Ashington provide helpful classes on healthy cooking to deliver to both parents and children, to teach them how to practically achieve a healthier diet on a low budget. But this should not be the job of local volunteers, and more must be done to deliver projects like this from the government.

The effects of a poor diet later in life are devastating, with an increased likelihood of developing a wide range of cancers, type 2 diabetes, heart conditions and more.

It is not only diet that can cause poor health from poverty. Living in cramped accommodation and cold and damp housing have profound health effects, and in severe cases children do not have adequate clothing to protect them from harsh weather conditions.

Parents also often find money so tight they cannot afford to take their children to extracurricular sports clubs such as swimming lessons or football clubs meaning they do not get the exercise they need. It is far cheaper and less stressful after a long shift on low pay to sit children in front of a TV than pay and take them to a sports club. This is a particular tragedy for an area renowned for producing world class sports stars.

Data from the ONS reveals that between 2017 and 2019 the North East had the lowest life expectancy for both males and females in the UK⁴⁰. This is without doubt strongly linked to the rapidly increasing poverty levels in the region.

Mental Health

This is not to mention the mental health implications poverty can have. In 2016 the JRF produced a report on poverty and mental health that used data from the ONS showing that mental health prevalence was more far more common in children living in families:

- With neither parent in work (20% compared to 8% in families in which both parents work)
- Whose parents have no educational qualifications (17% compared to 4% in parents with a degree)
- Whose weekly income was less than £100- (16% compared to 5% for those earning over £600 a week)

³⁹ Ian Byrne MP. 2021. *Right to Food Campaign*. Ian Byrne MP for Liverpool West Derby. [online] Available at: <<https://www.ianbyrne.org/righttofood-campaign>>

⁴⁰ Office of National Statistics (ONS). 2021. *Life expectancy for local areas of the UK - Office for National Statistics*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/bulletins/lifeexpectancyforlocalareasoftheuk/between2001to2003and2017to2019>>

- That receive disability benefits (24% compared to 8% who receive no benefits)⁴¹

These are sobering findings that show a clear link between poverty and mental health issues.

School teachers I have spoken to point out a noticeable difference in the mental health of their pupils after the pandemic including a worrying rise anecdotally in the number of children self-harming.

Why a person's mental health may deteriorate is a complex issue with each particular case being unique. But research done into the concept of 'Deaths of Despair' may shed light on why mental health problems are more prevalent for people living in poverty. Not only will a poor diet and living conditions surely take its toll on your mental health, a feeling of hopelessness and directionless in life will undoubtedly play a part too.

Young people do not only struggle with all the problems that come with poverty. As more people find themselves in poverty despite working, they begin to see no realistic way out in the traditional route through hard work.

The de-industrialisation of South East Northumberland has resulted in a lack of quality and secure jobs for young people leaving school and no clear vision for their future or aspiration to reach to.

But it has also eroded the once strong bonds of collectivism and community that provided a sense of solidarity. In the more individualised atomised society of today, it is my belief there is an unquantifiable sense of alienation and isolation that is contributing to the decline of our communities.

The Northumberland NHS 'Our Community Promise' is a positive step in the right direction to tackling these issues. This project seeks to focus on tackling the troubling health inequalities caused by deprivation in our region with an added focus on local sustainability and environmental concern.

This is a promising start. But following the pandemic and inevitable rise in mental health problems that will come as a result, far more must be done to develop a comprehensive way of dealing with mental health among young people that focuses on addressing the root causes that are so often linked with poverty.

Crime

In large parts of my constituency of Wansbeck, and more widely in South East Northumberland, there is an ever-growing issue with anti-social behaviour and crime, predominantly related to drug use.

Those active in the community helping children falling into crime, as well as police officers, paint a disturbing picture that is closely related to poverty. Vulnerable children are easily

⁴¹ Elliott, I. (June 2016) Poverty and Mental Health: A review to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Anti-Poverty Strategy. London: Mental Health Foundation. (pp.23-24)

manipulated by drug dealers offering them huge sums of money to become involved in county lines drugs.

With so few quality job opportunities, especially for those performing poorly in schools, it is easy to imagine how a child who sees no conventional route out of poverty through hard work may become involved in drugs. Once involved it is incredibly difficult to break out, and the chronic underfunding of prisons has made them fertile ground for those looking to recruit more vulnerable young people for their organised crimes.

As it stands, police are left fighting the symptoms of a more systematic problem that needs to be addressed at the roots. But with the right funding and engagement with those in the communities this can change. Better trained and experienced police on the streets would help the police gain control of the situation, and a comprehensive plan to develop outreach services in the community and schools to identify those vulnerable to falling into crime, and give them the support they need, could go a long way to breaking the cycle of children in deprived areas falling into crime.

For example, it has long been established⁴² that children who have had multiple adverse child experiences (ACE) were more likely to fall into crime later in life⁴³. One study done by Bangor University and Public Health Wales found that over 80% of prisoners had experienced at least 1 ACE and nearly half had over 4⁴⁴. If better outreach services were in place with strong links to schools, especially in early years, children experiencing an ACE could be identified and given extra support to help protect them from falling into criminal activities.

These problems are exacerbated by poor housing and crumbling high streets that are not properly sustained, hearkening back to the broken windows theory mentioned earlier. My office is flooded with emails from areas such as Ashington and Bedlington bemoaning the state of the high street and housing areas in which they live, and the negative effects are reinforced by the accounts of police officers. Although certainly not the only contributing factor, the physical degeneration of our surroundings inevitably fosters a lack of respect and belonging that plays into rises in crime and anti-social behaviour as well as a feeling of decline and lack of aspiration and inspiration.

Those currently working in the community with these children have a deep understanding of these problems but are left frustrated at a lack of resources. We need to put more trust and resources behind those best placed to deal with the problems our community face.

⁴² Early Intervention Foundation. 2021. *Adverse childhood experiences: What we know, what we don't know, and what should happen next*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.eif.org.uk/report/adverse-childhood-experiences-what-we-know-what-we-dont-know-and-what-should-happen-next>>

⁴³ An ACE is a traumatic or stressful experience occurring before the age of 18, such as but not limited to physical, emotional, of sexual abuse.

⁴⁴ Ford K. 2021. *More than eight in ten men in prison suffered childhood adversity – new report | News and Events | Bangor University*. [online] Bangor.ac.uk. Available at: <<https://www.bangor.ac.uk/news/archive/more-than-eight-in-ten-men-in-prison-suffered-childhood-adversity-new-report-40595>>

Stigma

On top of all of this is the stigma that can surround being in poverty. I hear from parents and teachers about children who cannot afford even the basics, and as a result often have to cut costs, for example by not paying for school trips or being left out of participating in expensive extracurricular activities like sports clubs, ultimately leading to a sense of social ostracization.

Despite this, it is also often reiterated that people do not like being defined as living in poverty or as being disadvantaged. Myself and politicians alike all across the country are admittedly guilty of this, and even this report has used phrases like this throughout in order to get its points across.

All parents want is to be able to provide for their families. They simply desire fairness, the opportunity to create a life for themselves and for their children to thrive, and understandably resent any turn of phrase that speaks down to them or suggests they are lacking in some way

People want the opportunity to get a good job to work themselves out of the poverty cycle. Yet currently the government are not doing enough to provide the infrastructure and support that can create the conditions for this to be possible.

Teachers especially lament a system overly focused on examination and hitting targets that constantly tells children they are 'failing' or are 'behind', naturally made worse by the loss of learning caused by the pandemic.

This is the last thing children who are already suffering from a lack of confidence and enthusiasm need. Instead, we need to inspire children and mould our education system around their strengths and interests that prepare them for the challenges of life ahead. We then need to provide them with an honest living wage, the ability to buy a house of their own and support to raise a family and live in a place they respect in an active and thriving community.

Summary

It is my humble belief that many simply want the opportunity to gain steady employment, be paid fairly for the work they do, have the opportunity to enjoy their time off to pursue their passions and raise a family in a home they own.

More and more children growing up in Wansbeck look to their future and the opportunities available to them and consider this simple vision unachievable.

It should not be, and it does not have to be, this way – child poverty is a political choice. There are actions the government could take tomorrow to lift a huge proportion of children out of poverty if the political will was there – but unfortunately it is clear it is not. On the other hand, new ideas are being trialled across the country as people take the initiative to lift their own communities out of poverty.

Going forward

The circumstances leading to such high levels of child poverty and the ones that follow as a result are profound for Wansbeck and for hundreds of other constituencies around the country alike.

Addressing them will be no easy or quick fix, but I believe there must be fundamental changes in the way we must approach these issues if we wish to be successful.

The pandemic offers us a window of opportunity to do this. Our lives have been radically shifted in the last year and a half as we have been forced to isolate and learn a whole new way of living.

But our recognition of key workers has become more acute. We have spent more time locally in our communities and with family. Consequently, many of us have gained a new-found perspective about what truly matters.

Investments rather than costs

It is clear that whatever strategies are taken to tackle child poverty, schools, hospitals, police, and groups working in our communities all need more funding and resources. A decade of austerity has hollowed out these institutions leaving them one step behind the problems they face and always picking up the pieces rather than getting to the heart of the problems and rooting them out once and for all.

Few would disagree with this. But when it comes to supplying the funding, we are simply told there is no 'magic money tree' and that someone will have to pay.

Yet over the past year and a half we have seen that in times of emergency or crisis there is more than enough money. £35 billion was spent on a Test & Trace system deemed necessary to fight the virus and get the economy back on its feet, yet it has been practically non-existent and has caused more problems than it solved.

We must start considering child poverty as the crisis that it is, especially here in the North East, and to view the spending necessary to tackle it in all sectors not as a cost but as an investment.

For example, Sir Kevan Collins in his role as the Education Recovery Commissioner recommended the government invested £15 billion to help schools catch up following the major disruption caused by the pandemic. The government instead committed to spending £1.4 billion of this, less than 10% of the recommended amount, calling it a 'substantial sum of money'.

But if they considered this £15 Billion as an investment rather than a cost, their perspective may rightly change. Upon his resignation following the Government's decision not to implement his recommendations, Sir Kevan Collins pointed out that *"One conservative estimate puts the long-term economic cost of lost learning in England due to the pandemic at*

£100 billion, with the average pupil having missed 115 days in school.”⁴⁵ If the government consider £1.4 billion as a substantial sum of money, then they must surely be concerned about this.

This is only one example. Back in 2018 the JRF estimated that poverty costs the UK around £78 billion a year. This included £29bn spent on treating poverty-related health conditions, £10bn on schools providing support like free school meals and £9bn spent on policing and criminal justice problems related to poverty in deprived areas.⁴⁶

By giving the proper funding to schools, the police, social services, infrastructure, the NHS, and others to root out poverty at the source, we prevent further mass costs down the line and create a healthier, more productive society that is ultimately economically more efficient.

There is some low hanging fruit that can be immediately achieved here, such as maintaining the £20⁴⁷ universal credit uplift as well as ensuring all children living in poverty qualify for free school meals. These again should be considered investments to stop children from slipping into poverty to avoid the wide-ranging and expensive complications this causes that are outlined throughout this report.

Supporting parents

Throughout the pandemic, while school children were taking a prolonged period of working at home, the attainment gap rapidly increased. When speaking to teachers about this the answer is clear – some families are simply better equipped to support their children’s learning and development than others.

This may be as a result of the parents simply not having the knowledge to help their children, especially in subjects such as maths and sciences, not having the time due to antisocial and physical working hours taking their toll and leaving them exhausted, not having the money to send them to after school clubs to further develop their skills especially physically or socially in things like sports clubs, having mental or physical health problems of their own, or simply not having the fundamental parenting skills that no one has taken the time to teach them - among a range of other things.

This is particularly acute for single parents who have the huge disadvantage of not having another partner to share incomes and childcare duties with.

Much was rightly made of the digital divide throughout the pandemic. Students without the resources to learn at home would inevitably fall behind and the need for appliances and universal internet was urgent. But the idea that all children will start doing their work at home

⁴⁵ William, H., 2021. Economic cost of lost learning to run into billions, Sir Kevan Collins warns. *Evening Standard*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/institute-for-fiscal-studies-england-west-midlands-birmingham-education-policy-institute-b938487.html>>

⁴⁶ JRF. 2016. *Counting the cost of UK poverty*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/counting-cost-uk-poverty>>

⁴⁷ It’s also worth pointing out that this £20 is not likely to be squirreled away and saved. It will almost certainly always be used to buy essentials, pumping millions into the local economy that is lost if it is taken away.

because they are given a laptop and access to the internet is short-sighted and does not appreciate the need to create a comfortable home atmosphere suitable for learning that many children, especially children growing up in poverty, do not have.

Parents need more support. Free programs that can help educate parents who lack the know-how to help nurture their children could make a huge difference if delivered properly, including things such as budgeting, learning to cook healthy meals on a budget, advice, and guidance on nurturing their children's education and more. Parents, especially single parents, who do not have the time outside work to support their children as robustly as they would like, should be offered more support especially when it comes to childcare. The answers to this may not be easy, but if schools were given more funding and resources to help these children hone their cognitive and social skills at an earlier age then the attainment gap that begins at these early years may begin to close.

To help support their family, workers must be guaranteed a sufficient wage to raise their children with at least the basics to lead a flourishing childhood. This should include at least a guarantee of a living wage (or even a family wage), a robust system in place to help parents with childcare that does not throw them back into poverty, support for schools to help aid children's learning from an earlier age if necessary and a generous system of maternity and paternity leave to help support children's development in those crucial early weeks, months and years of life.

Place and pride

A running theme throughout conversations I have with various people in the communities is the degeneration of towns in Wansbeck and the lack of pride and respect for our area this results in, especially among young people.

Northumberland is one of the most naturally beautiful places in the country – if not the world. Yet in towns such as Ashington, Bedlington and Newbiggin the high streets have been hollowed out and are falling apart, landlords do not take proper care of their property and there are few chances for young people to take part in extracurricular activities leaving them bored and vulnerable.

Only recently I spoke with a local gymnastics and trampolining club catering to almost 400 local children who were facing an existential crisis over finding space to practise and train their gymnasts. These are exactly the things we should be throwing money at to keep children off the streets while encouraging physical activity and a place to meet friends and learn social skills. This is particularly difficult to accept when we see and hear of the vast wealth that corporations and individuals have amassed over the course of the pandemic.

A recent study⁴⁸ found the poorest areas of the country also have the worst social infrastructure, lacking things such as parks, libraries, and sports facilities, and were also the least likely to receive government funding.

Again, this should be seen as an investment rather than a cost. By creating a better sense of community, we can help reduce crime and give children the structures around them that are necessary to succeed. It will also likely attract more investment and encourage talented school children to stay rather than flee to larger towns and cities down south.

This must also address the area's housing problems. Genuinely affordable and attractive housing needs to be built and support given to young people particularly to get onto the housing market, and more support and protection is required for those renting. Measures should be in place to ensure those owning homes, especially out of town landlords, take responsibility for the plight of their properties, and more must be done to maintain and keep clean communal areas and high streets to foster a greater respect and belonging for the areas we live.

Engaging with the communities

Unfortunately, when the funding and resources are provided, they are delivered in a top-down manner. Decisions about where funding and resources go should be made as close to delivery as possible. Those I spoke to who work closely with the children suffering in poverty were incredibly passionate about their duties to the children and have a much deeper understanding of the problems they face, many of which are unique to each community and can only be understood by those close to them, rather than those in offices in London.

It is often pointed out that the UK is currently one of the most unequal countries in the world, as well as one of the most centralised. We need a real meaningful devolution of powers, resources and funding transferred to regions for them to be implemented most effectively by those with the best understanding of the task ahead.

Community Coordination & Wealth Building

Despite all this, there is little reason to think anything will change any time soon. We are well into the 11th year of Conservative rule that has overseen this regime of austerity and rapid rise in child poverty – whatever your political inclinations, this is simply a fact.

We cannot sit and wait around forever waiting for support from central government that seems unlikely to come. It is now worth experimenting with new innovative ideas that have the potential to invigorate our communities and bring us closer to tackle the problem head on ourselves.

⁴⁸ APPG for Left Behind Neighbourhoods. 2021. *'Left behind' areas receive less than half the charitable grants of other deprived places, new research shows - APPG for Left Behind Neighbourhoods*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk/news/left-behind-areas-receive-less-than-half-the-charitable-grants-of-other-deprived-places-new-research-shows/>>

There have been several attempts in the past year by different individuals and organisations based in Wansbeck to come together and coordinate their efforts in tackling problems in the community. Unfortunately, so far nothing significant from these attempts has come to fruition although progress is being made. Nevertheless, I remain committed to engaging in a partnership like this on a Wansbeck wide level and reaffirm my commitment to such as a project.

Community Wealth Building (CWB) has been another technique that has proven effective in other regions in the country, most notably in Preston, in tackling inequalities and poverty.

CWB aims to keep wealth in the region by encouraging large 'anchor' institutions to engage in local procurement alongside encouraging local employers to commit to paying a living wage and encouraging the social use of land and property.

This may also include encouraging anchor institutions as well as local businesses of a range of sizes to offer training programs at an early age to school children to get them ready for employment and offer a route into work that does not go through higher education.

While this idea is only a seedling it has been proven to work elsewhere, and places power back into the hands of the community by promoting locally minded and social enterprises that are closely attached to and respect the place and people involved.

Conclusion

A decade of cuts and austerity have hollowed out communities, decimated vital services, stagnated wages and left many millions in poverty across the country. Nowhere has been hit harder than the North East, and no one feels the damage harder than our children.

When the pandemic hit our lives were turned upside down. Few knew what to expect and we were forced to rapidly adapt to a new way of living.

In what has been such a difficult time for everyone, I have seen rays of hope everywhere I look. Communities immediately rallied together, groups formed on social media offering support for the vulnerable to help with their shopping or simply if they needed someone to talk to. As the October half term came around and school kids faced losing their free school meals for a week a mammoth mobilisation of individuals and businesses of their own accord ensured no child went hungry.

We have found a new respect for the key workers who have kept us from total collapse, but who do not get the pay or dignity through their work that the importance of it deserves.

As a society we have gone through a mass change of perspective in what is important to us. A strong community network, a recognition of our obligations to one another, the importance of the nature and environment around us and the yearning for meaningful and fairly paid work.

We now have an opportunity to build on this. Child poverty levels are reaching unacceptable heights that are simply not sustainable. Let us build a new future for them based on creating meaningful jobs, a chance in life to build a family, own a home and contribute to the community around us to create lives that are truly worth living.

Notes

1. The Pegswood and Longhorsely wards were left off the data provided by the House of Commons Library because they are only partly in Wansbeck, crossing over into neighbouring constituencies as well.
2. To highlight how all these facts contribute together, it is worth noting that the Hirst ward has at once the highest percentage of single parent households, lowest levels of home ownership & highest levels of privately rented accommodation, highest percentage of people claiming unemployment benefits, the highest percentage of people receiving universal credit both in and out of work and the joint lowest life expectancy.
3. Cover photo: "Woodhorn Museum" by Graeme Darbyshire is licensed under CC BY 2.0

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