'Left behind' neighbourhoods as precarious places: a viewpoint from Liverpool City Region

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Key takeaways

1. The current 'levelling up' agenda is based on a specific understanding of the challenge facing so-called 'left behind' places, resulting in a policy approach that focuses on top-down redistributive interventions to address spatial inequality in the United Kingdom.
2. This policy briefing shows how 'left behind' places are made precarious: experiencing a distinct form of vulnerability that involves a combination of jeopardy, uncertainty, and dependence.
3. A case study exploration of Seacombe in Wirral (a constituent borough of Liverpool City Region), highlights the extent to which shared prosperity, community stability, and local autonomy have become fragile and insecure in an area recently identified by Local Trust as a 'left behind' community. The fate of the community hangs precariously in the balance.
4. By focusing on precarity we can illuminate and critique the power dynamics that are at play in 'left behind' places. Such communities are 'held back' by a systemic lack of power. Local people have lost effective control over their lives, livelihoods, and the future development of their area, and are instead reliant on the discretionary power of various, often distant, decision makers.
5. Paternalistic approaches to addressing spatial inequality risk perpetuating the kinds of power dynamics that are driving intense precarity in 'left behind' places. A renewed emphasis on building greater local ownership of the economy, and instituting novel mechanisms for local democratic control over decision making, is required.

1. Introduction

The concept of 'left behind' places has become increasingly salient in political discourse over recent years as spatial inequalities have widened, and appeared more evident, across many advanced economies (Martin et al., 2020). In the UK, this concept has been central to the Government's 'levelling up' agenda, which has been explicitly addressed to "areas that have for too long felt left behind" (HM Government, 2022: viii). At a local level, too, solving the challenges faced by left behind places is increasingly recognised as fundamental to successful economic development, regeneration, and resilience building.

But how should the concept of left behind places properly be understood? What makes a place 'left behind', why is this politically significant, and how can communities respond effectively to this policy challenge?

This policy briefing shows how 'left behind' places ought to be conceptualised as distinctly precarious places, where communities face jeopardy, uncertainty, and dependence and have insufficient control over the future development and prosperity of their local area.

It explores the idea that the challenge facing 'left behind' places goes beyond particular deficits in employment, investment, or social infrastructure, and instead points to a more fundamental lack of power in the hands of local citizens. Solving this challenge requires an alternative approach to 'levelling up', focused on building greater democratic control and ownership over the development of a local area and its economy.

These ideas are explored with reference to the illustrative case study of Seacombe, a ward in Wirral, Liverpool City Region (LCR), identified as one of the UK's most 'left behind' in research conducted by Local Trust (2019). This case study combines findings from a mixed methodology of conceptual analysis, interpretation of available data, as well as knowledge exchange with local policy makers and practitioners. The exploration of Seacombe as a typical 'left behind' place is not intended to patronise or stigmatise this particular area, or those that live and work there. Instead it is intended to provide a foundation for wider theory building about the precariousness of 'left behind' places, and reveal how this can be addressed in Wirral, Liverpool City Region, and beyond.
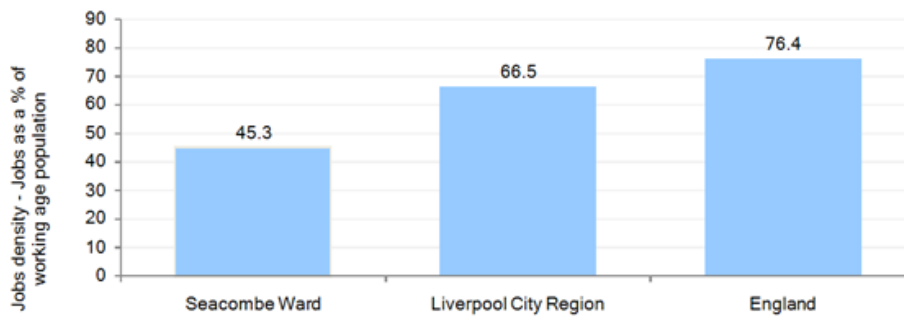
Figure 1: Jobs densities compared in Seacombe Ward, Liverpool City Region and England (OCSI, 2022)

2. Exploring Seacombe

Home to an estimated 15,609 residents, Seacombe has previously been defined as 'left behind' due to a combination of high deprivation, insufficient access to civic assets, poor connectivity to services and job opportunities, and low levels of engagement in civic life, which it shares with other similar communities (Local Trust, 2019).

In particular, the challenges facing this 'left behind' place can be categorised along three intersecting economic, social, and political dimensions:

Economic
Historically, Seacombe's development was driven by its proximity to the Birkenhead and Wallasey docks. As these have declined over the last century, Seacombe has lost its central source of local wealth creation and employment, and many local industries that this once sustained – such as transmission belt manufacturing, flour-milling, and food processing – have disappeared (Roberts, 2002). As a result, the quantity and quality of local employment has declined. Job density and average incomes are low (see Figures 1 and 2), and poverty is entrenched within parts of the community.

Approximately 90% of Seacombe residents are in the most deprived decile for both income and employment according to the 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (OCSI, 2022).

Social
Seacombe is a place of great civic pride and resilience, but one where sense of community and quality of place have become more fragile over recent decades (OCSI, 2022). The community has lost critical social infrastructure, and has become increasingly isolated as local public transport has become more fragmented, unreliable, and unaffordable (Mott MacDonald, 2020). The area is further challenged by its housing market, which displays a higher prevalence of lower value, private rental properties (see Figures 3 and 4). Disconnection, a paucity of social infrastructure, and a housing mix that promotes high rates of resident turnover in certain areas undermines both community stability and the cultivation of meaningful social relationships. Responses to the annual Community Life Survey suggest that Seacombe scores lower than average for strength of local social relationships and strength of belonging to the local area (OCSI, 2022).
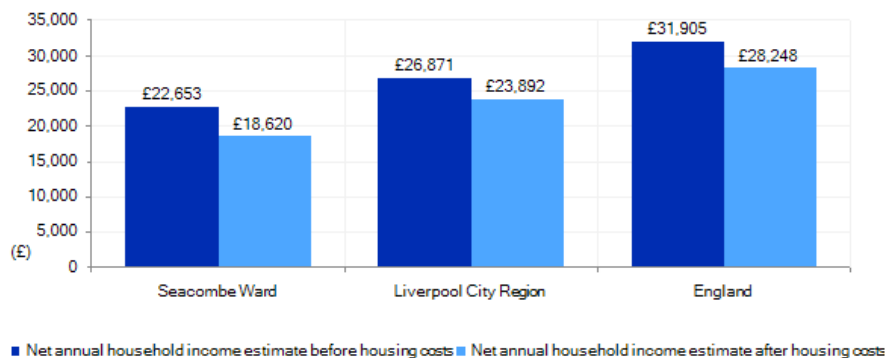

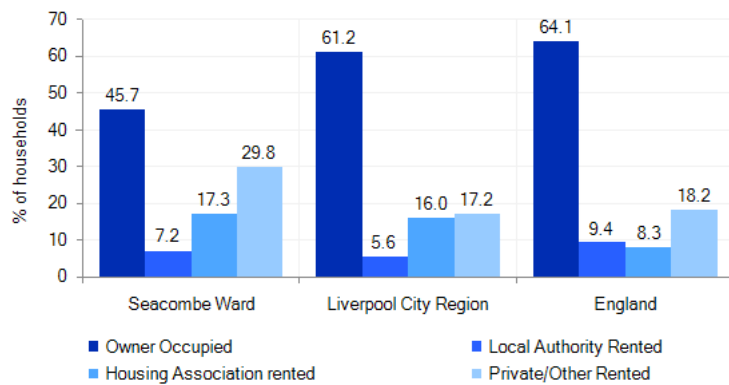*Figure 2: Annual household earnings (£) (OCSI, 2022)*

Figure 3: Housing tenure breakdowns (OCSI, 2022)

Political

In Seacombe, many residents appear disengaged from the policymaking system, as reflected by a history of low voter turnout over recent local elections (see Figure 5). Lack of connection to the institutions and processes of democratic policymaking is likely to have been exacerbated by long-term national policy neglect, not least as the result of a decade of austerity that has hit Seacombe, Wirral and Liverpool City Region disproportionately hard (LCRCA, 2020). Alternative sources of funding and investment have done little to fill the gaps left by cuts to local government funding, with Seacombe residents receiving the equivalent of just £5 per head in 2019 from major grant funders, compared to an England average of £34 per head (OCSI, 2022).

3. Analysis

Typically, left behind places are primarily understood to be the products of distributive inequality: there is a deficit of certain assets or opportunities relative to other places that requires rebalancing (Martin, et al. 2020). As the case study evidence shows, Seacombe is certainly an area that faces significant challenges of inequality.

However, it also helps to reveal the extent to which such 'left behind' communities face intense, multidimensional precarity, with shared prosperity, community stability, and local autonomy appearing fragile and insecure.

The concept of precarity describes a specific kind of vulnerability or insecurity, one that involves a combination of jeopardy, uncertainty, and dependence. There is a risk of some harm, cost, or injury arising unpredictably, at any time or not at all, in a way that is beyond the control of those who are at risk. Often deployed as a way to describe the distinct vulnerability of working people employed on extraordinarily insecure terms and conditions (for example those working on zero-hours contracts or in the gig economy), the concept of precarity alerts us in particular to the insecurity, unpredictability and instability that can arise as a result of asymmetrical power relationships (e.g. where employers have a capacity over their staff to demand, deny, or discontinue work at will and with impunity).
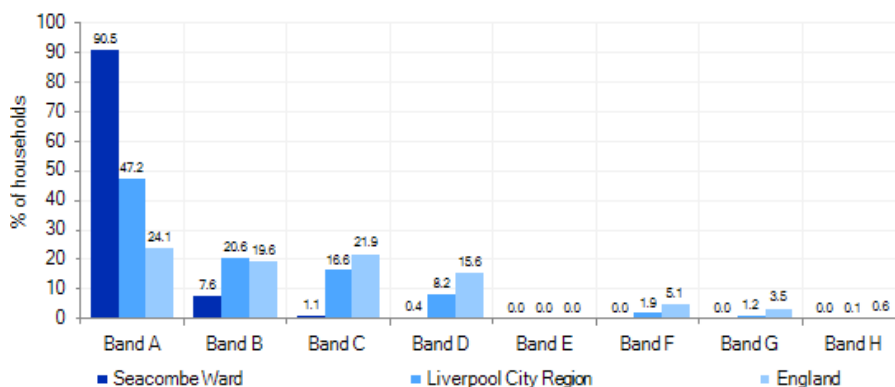

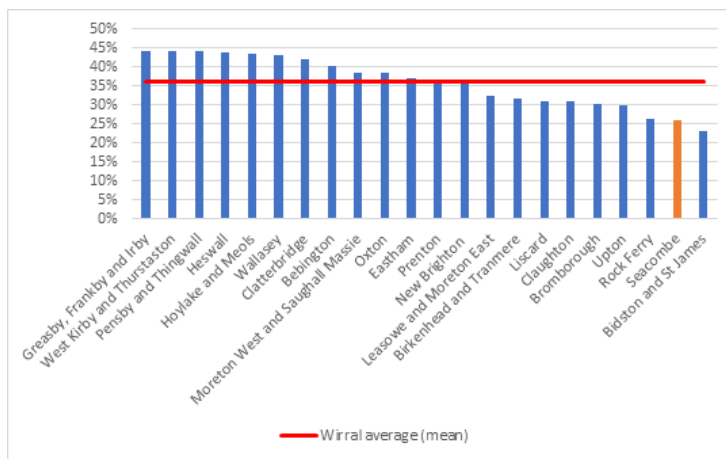*Figure 4: Dwelling stock by council tax band (OCSI, 2022)*

Figure 5: Average (mean) voter turnout (%) in Wirral by ward for local elections 2016-2022 (Source: Wirral Council, n.d.)

The idea that places, and the communities that call them home, can experience analogous forms of vulnerability is not necessarily new (e.g. Wilkinson, 1939), and there is now an emerging literature focused on studying various 'geographies' or 'landscapes' of precarity (Waite, 2009; Harris and Nowicki, 2018; Lesutis 2022; etc.). However, 'left behind' communities appear to offer prime, though underexplored, examples of the way that intense precarity can manifest within particular places.

In the case of Seacombe, we can see this precarity exist as a combination of:

- Jeopardy: the community faces the threat of deepening deprivation, eroded quality of place, and further policy neglect.
- Uncertainty: with limited scope for ownership and control over decision making at the local level, the extent to which the area develops or declines in future, is difficult for residents to predict or meaningfully influence.
- Dependence: the fate of the community is instead disproportionately reliant upon, and determined by, those decision makers (employers, investors, landlords, etc.) – often distant from the community itself – that have a discretionary capacity to intervene, disengage, or disregard a place entirely.

With fewer local businesses creating high-quality local jobs, and in the absence of public sector employment of the type that helped to revive places under New Labour, the prosperity of residents is now likely to be largely dependent on cultivating the good will of external employers and investors to revive the community and its economy.

The quality of place in Seacombe could, likewise, be increasingly determined by service providers, landlords, and developers, with insufficient capacity for local people themselves to wield greater influence over local property, land, and infrastructure. Meanwhile, this relative lack of power at the local level leaves the community more exposed to the arbitrary impacts of policy neglect at the national level.

This precarity risks undermining community resilience, disproportionately exposing places like Seacombe to external shocks (e.g. market volatility, the withdrawal of investment, policy churn) and internal domino effects (e.g. further erosion of the local business base, spiralling unemployment, increasing poverty). Moreover, there are reasons to think that living under conditions of intense precarity of this kind could also have a significant impact on public wellbeing. Indeed, evidence suggests insecure income, insecure employment, and insecure housing are all associated with a range of psychological and physical health impacts (e.g. Marmot, 2010; Shelter, 2017; Adams and Prassl, 2018; etc.).

By incorporating an analytical focus on precarity, as well as distributive inequality, we can more accurately illuminate and critique the power dynamics that are at play in 'left behind' places. Such communities are 'held back' by a systemic lack of power, with insufficient influence over the future development of their local area and economy. Solving this challenge requires more than simply rebalancing spatial inequalities through top-down intervention. Indeed, any paternalistic approach risks perpetuating the very kinds of discretionary power dynamics that underpin the intense precarity of certain communities.

Levelling up left behind places therefore also requires an increased emphasis on building greater local ownership and control within communities such as Seacombe, so that citizens can escape existing precarity traps and democratically determine their own future.

With Wirral now the focus of significant public, private, and third sector regeneration activity (Wirral Council, 2021; Clarke, 2021) there is an opportunity to develop an approach to 'social' regeneration that both recognises the precarity facing certain communities, and meaningfully addresses it.

4. Recommendations

This analysis suggests that action is required to ensure 'left behind' places are sufficiently insured and protected against precarity, with communities instead able to wield greater local control and ownership over their area. This will require:

- an emphasis on developing stable, community-based power for the long-term;
- moving beyond top-down provision of piecemeal projects and drip-fed investment;
- building stronger and more stable anchor institutions within communities; and;
- establishing democratic mechanisms for citizens to inform and contest local decisions.

These high-level principles, in turn, support a number of specific policy recommendations for Seacombe, Wirral, and the wider Liverpool City Region:

Seacombe (Community Level)
1. Learning from the success of community organisations across the wider Wirral area – including Make CIC, North Birkenhead Development Trust, and New Ferry Community Land Trust – citizens and stakeholders in Seacombe should seek to strengthen the ecosystem of small-scale anchor institutions within the ward. Although often still reliant on discretionary grant funding and investment, such organisations can nonetheless provide some 'sticky' capital in the area: investing in community assets, developing economic resilience, and acting as a focal point for local control over the future trajectory of the neighbourhood.

2. Utilise existing local resources – such as the Involve North West Community Connectors team – to design and facilitate new opportunities for citizens to democratically influence local decision making. Existing plans to trial new ways of working in Seacombe as part of a neighbourhood pilot scheme, as well as the imminent development of Seacombe's local masterplan, represent early opportunities to embed mechanisms for democratic contestation at the heart of local policy development.

Wirral (Local Authority level)
1. Work with citizens to develop bespoke Community Resilience strategies, starting with 'left behind' wards, to identify local sources of precarity and local opportunities to build greater stability as part of an overarching 'social' approach to regeneration and economic development.

2. Continue to emphasise the development of local ownership and economic democracy, particularly in precarious 'left behind' areas of the borough, as outlined in Wirral's Community Wealth Building Strategy 2020-2025.

3. Build on existing best practice to maximise democratic participation in local decision-making processes, exploring options such as citizens assemblies, participatory budgeting, mutual ownership models, and forms of e-democracy such as the 'Madame Mayor, I have an idea' scheme established by Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, in 2014 (Nesta, 2022).

Liverpool City Region (Combined Authority level)

1. Develop, with citizens and stakeholders, a City Region-wide focus on addressing precarity in 'left behind' areas. This should be integral to the delivery of plans and strategies including the Plan for Prosperity, Spatial Development Strategy, Social Value Framework, and emerging Community Wealth Building strategy.

2. Establish bespoke, targeted, and long-term funding streams for 'left behind' areas of Liverpool City Region, with reliable mechanisms to ensure resources are controlled by communities and directed towards locally-identified priorities.

Regardless of these local interventions, it is likely that many communities will continue to face varying levels of vulnerability and uncertainty as a result of a UK political system that centralises decision making, has high rates of policy churn, and promotes an overly competitive environment for public funding and investment. Likewise, an economic system that greatly empowers globally-mobile capital will mean the basis for employment and prosperity within many local economies will remain highly insecure. Nevertheless, regional- and local-level interventions to entrench greater levels of ownership and control within communities can help to both rebalance and fundamentally challenge these power dynamics, loosening the precarity traps currently faced in 'left behind' places such as Seacombe.

5. Conclusion

This policy brief argues for a more nuanced, multidimensional understanding of spatial inequality, and the subsequent task facing those who seek to meaningfully 'level up' the UK. So-called 'left behind' places not only face intense inequalities in assets, employment, and investment; they also face intense precarity. Without sufficient local influence or control over the development of future prosperity, quality of place, or the outcomes of key decision-making processes, 'left behind' places cannot be truly levelled up. It is this critical imbalance of power within communities that must now be addressed.

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