UNIVERSITY *of York*

This is a repository copy of *Challenges to Levelling Up:Post-COVID precarity in "left-behind" Stoke-on-Trent*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/193146/

Version: Published Version

Article:

White Rose
university consortium
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield & York

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/

Check for updates

Challenges to Levelling Up: Post-COVID precarity in "left behind" Stoke-on-Trent

David Etherington[1], Martin Jones[2]* and Luke Telford[3]

[1]School of Justice, Security and Sustainability, Staffordshire University, Stoke-on-Trent, United Kingdom, [2]Executive Office, Staffordshire University, Stoke-on-Trent, United Kingdom, [3]School for Business and Society, University of York, York, United Kingdom

The COVID-19 pandemic both revealed and intensified the United Kingdom's (UK) regional inequalities. The UK is widely recognised as one of the most regionally unbalanced nations in the developed world, with many "left behind" places across the North and Midlands like Stoke-on-Trent falling way behind parts of London and the Southeast of England in terms of living standards in the neoliberal era. Since 2019 the UK Government have promised to "Level Up" the UK, culminating in the publication of the Levelling Up White Paper in 2022. This pinpointed the need to raise living standards, opportunity, and prosperity across the UK, with Stoke identified as a priority area. Primarily utilising qualitative case study data ($N = 15$) provided by Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke-on-Trent (CASNS), this article explicates how there are myriad challenges to the Levelling Up strategy in Stoke. Suffering from a historical legacy of the loss of its ceramics and manufacturing industries, the paper outlines how the city-region contains a structural cocktail of disadvantage including low paid jobs, welfare erosion, indebtedness, destitution, and food insecurity. The article closes by discussing the implications of these structural problems for the Government's Levelling Up agenda, suggesting that only a transformative shift in both allocated resources and neoliberal spatial development will regional imbalances be adequately addressed in places like Stoke-on-Trent.

KEYWORDS

Levelling Up, COVID-19, neoliberalism, spatial inequalities, Stoke-on-Trent

Coronavirus has impacted our economy, particularly sectors such as hospitality, as well as many supply sectors such as tableware manufacturers in Stoke-on-Trent. We must look to the future and hope in confidence that we can defeat this virus and return to a path of economic growth, greater opportunity and increased prosperity. *Stoke-on-Trent is on the up and we must keep it on the up, redoubling the efforts that were long overdue even before covid struck* … [W]e live with hope that the post-COVID era is just months away (Jack Brereton, MP for Stoke-on-Trent South, in *North Staffordshire Potteries Towns: Levelling Up Debate*, House of Commons, 2020: 80WH, emphasis added).

Introduction

Whilst successive Governments in the UK worked to keep regional inequalities "at socially tolerable limits" (Hudson, 2022, p. 11) under capitalism's post-war phase (1945–1979), the shift to neoliberal political economy in the late 1970's shifted the spatial inequalities pendulum. Neoliberalism's spatial development entailed the deindustrialisation of the UK economy which meant the North and parts of the Midlands—including Stoke-on-Trent which had historically depended upon ceramics and manufacturing work—had their economic DNA ripped from them rather quickly (MacLeod and Jones, 2018; Martin et al., 2021; Telford, 2022a,b). At the same time, much of London and the Southeast pulled ahead of the rest of the nation—particularly in light of the Big Bang deregulation of the economy and the emergence of London as the globe's core financial hub, resulting in a "North South divide" which has continually deepened (Jones, 2019; Martin et al., 2021). However, a "20-minute drive from almost any point on the map, or a cursory glance at ONS census data, reveals that the U.K cannot be so neatly divided geographically into economic haves and have nots" (Boswell et al., 2022, p. 2).

Such spatial inequalities have been aggravated by two "once-in-a-century events" (Martin, 2021, p. 144) including the 2008 financial crisis and the imposition of austerity (Farnsworth and Irving, 2018; Gray and Barford, 2018), as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. This intensified inequalities in employment, welfare, health, housing, education and impacted detrimentally upon peoples' general life chances particularly in "left behind" areas (Briggs et al., 2021a,b; Martin et al., 2021; Etherington et al., 2022; Liddle et al., 2022). By "left behind" locales, we refer to places that are characterised by social and economic decline, high prevalence of poorly paid employment opportunities, crime, poor mental and physical health, political dissatisfaction, as well as lower than national average rates of educational and skills attainment (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Sandbu, 2020; Tomaney and Pike, 2020; Martin et al., 2021; Tomaney et al., 2021; Boswell et al., 2022; Liddle et al., 2022; MacKinnon et al., 2022). Whilst there are international variations in the evolution of "left behind" places, there are some striking similarities between places like post-industrial Stoke and other deindustrialised locales such as within what is known as "peripheral France," Germany's "suspended regions," Holland's "shrinking areas" as well as the "Rust Belt" in the United States of America (see: Martin et al., 2021).

As Blundell et al. (2020, p. 3) highlighted, the specific nature of the pandemic's economic shock interacted with many "old and deep inequalities" such that many low-income households could not manage for a month if they were to lose their main source of income. Adjusted COVID-19 death rates in the UK's most deprived tenth of areas were "more than double" those in the least deprived tenth localities (Blundell et al., 2020, p. 3), exposing how the pandemic has not been felt evenly and is

shaped by social class, age, gender, race, and ethnicity (Marmot et al., 2020; Bambra et al., 2021; Sparke and Williams, 2022). The Marmot et al. (2020) Build Back Fairer report noted that some post-industrial places experienced damaging longer-term economic, social and health effects. Impacts include widening inequalities during children's early years and in educational attainment, increasing poverty and income inequality, rising unemployment particularly for young people, and deteriorating mental health for all age groups. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed how the UK possesses some of the worst regional inequalities in the developed world (Jones, 2019; Connolly et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2021; Hudson, 2022), making it rather difficult for politicians to ignore and culminating in political promises to "Level Up" (Martin, 2021).

The publication of the Levelling Up White Paper in February 2022 outlined ambitious plans to Level Up, suggesting it means "giving everyone the opportunity to flourish" and means "people everywhere living longer and more fulfilling lives, and benefiting from sustained rises in living standards and wellbeing" (HM Government, 2022a, p. xii). It particularly outlines the importance of boosting high-paid jobs, restoring pride in place and empowering local communities (HM Government, 2022a). It also emphasises the devolution of power, particularly in localities that have been "left behind" under neoliberalism and require sustained state intervention and private sector investment to enhance the chances of Levelling Up being a success (King and Ives, 2019; HM Government, 2022a). Levelling Up forms part of a wider devolution continuum, attempting to move responsibilities to cities through metro mayors and a raft of deal making public policy interventions—city deals, devolution deals, and growth deals. However, the challenges for Levelling Up in places like Stoke are long running, deep rooted and will not be solved overnight. As Martin et al. (2021, p. 24) intimate:

> "Levelling up is not a one-off policy challenge, but an ongoing process that will take many years, even decades, to achieve. Just as the current problem of left behind places has been long in the making, so it will be long in its resolution."

In the context of post-COVID political economies and roads to recovery, this paper explicates the *interlocking challenges* of Levelling Up in "left behind" Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire, North Midlands, UK. Despite being championed above by Jack Brereton MP and others as "on the up", the city has been scarred by deindustrialisation and the shift to service-based employment under neoliberalism, which has not been an adequate replacement for its ceramics and manufacturing industries (MacLeod and Jones, 2018; Mahoney and Kearon, 2018; Mattison, 2020). As we will encounter, the locale possesses one of the highest national rates of workers on low pay and skills, as well as high levels of people on welfare (Hardship Commission, 2015; MacLeod and Jones, 2018; Mattison, 2020). Although these problems have been congealing in "left behind"

places for some time (Etherington, 2020a; Briggs et al., 2021b; Hudson, 2022; Telford, 2022a), "research has yet to fully engage with the development problems of such 'left behind' places" (MacKinnon et al., 2022, p. 40) and explore them in relation to the Levelling Up strategy.

Drawing upon qualitative case study data provided by CASNS on enquiries and advice and support ($N = 15$) and data from a Stoke-on-Trent foodbank, this article's aim is to explore how people experienced a *structural cocktail* of disadvantage particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that this embodies deep-rooted problems for Levelling Up the area. The paper is organised as follows. After exploring the case of Stoke-on-Trent, we outline the Levelling Up strategy and how it has proposed to remedy place-based inequalities in "left behind" places like Stoke. The next section—methodology—briefly documents the methods and data that underpin the article. We then explore the structural cocktail of disadvantage encompassing the perils of low paid jobs and the associated economic uncertainty and social insecurity. The final key section—welfare and food insecurity—explores how austerity left the city-region in a precarious situation as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, with many residents enduring poverty, high levels of personal indebtedness and foodbank usage. The article closes by offering some reflections on what might be required to enhance the chances of Levelling Up being a success, agreeing with Martin et al. (2021) that only a transformational allocation of resources and progressive shift away from neoliberal political economy will the Government's Levelling Up plans be achieved in places like Stoke.

A place called Stoke-on-Trent: Crises in the making

Stoke-on-Trent was constituted as a County Borough Federation of six towns in 1910 and received "Royal Letters Patent" in 1925. Its name is derived from Stoke-upon-Trent— the centre of governance and road and rail transport— with the other polycentric city-regional towns being Hanley, Burslem, Tunstall, Longton and Fenton. Located in the North Midlands, Stoke-on-Trent lies around 150 miles Northwest of England's capital, London. Stoke's local economy has historically dependent upon ceramics and manufacturing work, with the North Staffordshire coalfield and pottery industries dating back to the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, respectively. By 1850, the city-region manufactured around 90% of British pottery (MacLeod and Jones, 2018). The advance of manufacturing work including mining, steel, engineering, and particularly ceramics as the area's raison d'être continued into the twentieth century, with the region acquiring the nicknames *Ceramicopolis* and *The Potteries* (Jayne, 2004). Whilst the immediate decades after the culmination of the 1929 Great

Depression and two World Wars are generally thought of as the *trente glorieuses* due to rising living standards, mass unionisation and Government control of the commanding heights of the economy (Streeck, 2016; Jessop, 2018; Telford, 2022b), "Stoke's dependence upon long-established industries was to have catastrophic consequences" (MacLeod and Jones, 2018, p. 122) and is the point of departure for its development as the "heartland of the left behind" (Morris, 2017).

Across the mid-1950's and mid-1970's, 13,000 jobs were lost in North Staffordshire's coalfield as the industry responded to competition from abroad and enacted redundancies (MacLeod and Jones, 2018). The area lost 10,059 pottery employment opportunities between 1978 and 1981 (Imrie, 1989). Whilst Shelton steelworks employed 3,400 people in 1967, it also ceased operating in 1980 leading to the loss of several thousand jobs (MacLeod and Jones, 2018). Such industrial retrenchment formed part of the broader epochal shift to neoliberalism, involving a historic reversal of the global flows of trade and capital with branch plants often shifting to the Global South to enable capital to further exploit labour forces and maximise profitability under a more loosely regulated and competitive global marketplace (Imrie, 1989; Streeck, 2016; Jessop, 2018; Telford, 2022a).

Stoke-on-Trent now regularly features in the bottom 10 UK cities for business start-up rates; number of businesses; residents with high qualifications; low property values and housing affordability (House of Commons, 2020). Job creation generally remains concentrated in low skill sectors, involving lower than average proportions of residents qualified to high levels and sizable skills gaps identified by local employers. As we will see, the local economy comprises relatively high proportions of zero-hour contracts, underemployment and temporary contract working (Hardship Commission, 2015). The local business sector is also weak. Whilst larger firms tend to be owned by investors and interests outside the region, medium-sized firms—the so-called "aspirational middle"—are in limited supply (Etherington, 2020b).

Austerity also cuts deep into Stoke's socio-economic decline. It is in the top six local authorities for spending cuts, impacting detrimentally upon public sector contributions to local economic growth (Mahoney and Kearon, 2018). Leadership and collaboration are often dependent on the external imposition of formal requirements of partnership working by central Government and—in the past—the European Union (EU). Where external frameworks are absent, a parochial localism due in part to the polycentric nature of the urban morphology tends to prevail which hampers partnership working (Imrie, 1989). To fully understand the Levelling Up challenges facing the city-region, the focus must also capture its regional interrelationships. This includes Liverpool, which lies around 50 miles Northwest of Stoke; Manchester, around 44 miles North of Stoke; and Birmingham which is 45 miles South of Stoke. These combined mayoral authorities particularly the latter two often

suck in money like an "agglomerative super vortex" (Griggs et al., 2020, p. 16).

Deindustrialisation, the growth of poorly paid and non-unionised employment and austerity have contributed to the collapse of the area's Labour vote. Cast as "the most working-class city in England" (Jayne, 2004, p. 199), it historically returned Labour MPs as its electoral representatives for its three constituencies of Stoke-on-Trent Central, North, and South (Mattison, 2020). However, over the past decade political allegiances have gradually shifted towards more nationalistic causes (Jayne, 2011), acquiring the nickname "Brexit capital" in 2016 as 69% of residents voted to Leave the EU (Morris, 2017; MacLeod and Jones, 2018; Mahoney and Kearon, 2018; Mattison, 2020). The area was also central to the collapse of the Red Wall in December 2019, that is, the stretch of constituencies from Northeast Wales up to Northeast England which had historically returned Labour MPs but voted Conservative often for the first time in their electoral history (Mattison, 2020). This meant Stoke returned three Conservative MPs as its electoral representatives for the first time in its history.

Vividly, before the COVID-19 crisis hit Stoke-on-Trent was in a fragile and precarious position (Hardship Commission, 2015; Mattison, 2020). Etherington et al. (2021) reveal that across Stoke-on-Trent, over 50,000 people of working age were in receipt of one or more Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefits (plus Housing Benefit), with the locality ranking as the 12th highest local authority in terms of the proportion of children under 16 in relatively low-income families. The above means the area has been cast by the City's council leader—Abi Brown—as the "national litmus test" for the Levelling Up strategy. The next section thus outlines the Levelling Up agenda, laying the groundwork for both a brief analysis of the methodology and an explication of our data that documents low pay, precarity and destitution in Stoke.

The levelling up strategy

It is important to note that there is a long-running policy history of successive Governments seeking to share wealth and opportunity more evenly across the UK (Jones, 2019; Martin et al., 2021; MacKinnon et al., 2022). A rescaling policy agenda in local and regional economic development has been in place for the past 25 years (see: Sturzaker and Nurse, 2020), commencing with the creation of devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, alongside nine Regional Development Agencies (RDA) across England in 1998 *via* New Labour (1997–2010). At the same time, Stoke has been subject to various regeneration measures which have done little to tackle the area's problems (Jayne, 2011). Moreover, the 2010–2015 Coalition Government scrapped RDAs and replaced them with 39 Local Enterprise Partnerships in 2011 at the subregional level.

These are partnerships between businesses, local authorities and civic leaders to try and boost economic growth and generate employment opportunities in their respective area.

Announced by the Coalition Government in 2014, the Northern Powerhouse was regarded as a flagship policy for aiding job creation and economic growth across Northern England particularly through improved transport connexions to other parts of the UK. This was accompanied by the establishment of the Midlands Engine by David Cameron's (2015–2016) Conservative Government in 2015, bringing together regional stakeholders to try and drive economic growth and prosperity. Subsequently, Theresa May's Government (2016–2019) rolled-out a "place agenda" to drive regional prosperity, making links with sectoral and local UK Industrial Strategy. Whilst these policy initiatives were severely undermined by austerity (Jones, 2019), the importance of place took on increased impetus with the announcement of a £4.8 billion "Levelling Up" fund in the November 2020 Spending Review by Boris Johnson's Conservative Government. Allocation of these funds involves a competitive market-oriented approach where local councils must submit bids for pots of money (Newman, 2021), with most funds so far being allocated to locales where the Conservatives won at the 2019 general election. However, it is worth highlighting that the Levelling Up fund does not come close to offsetting the money lost through austerity. For instance, austerity in the North amounted to around a cut of £413 per person; yet the investment provided by the Levelling Up fund in the North in 2021 amounted to a mere £32 per person (Marmot, 2022).

Indeed, there are emerging debates over what Levelling Up means, not least as it is conceptually nebulous. Leyshon (2021) suggested it is politically expedient for the strategy to be poorly defined, since it enables the Government to cast small victories as evidence of Levelling Up. Others highlight how Levelling Up is brought by electoral calculation rather than an authentic desire to tackle place-based inequalities, aiding the retention of support in "left behind" places across the North as the Government can claim they are at least doing something to tackle uneven spatial development (Tomaney and Pike, 2020; Hudson, 2022). As mentioned, "left behind" places like Stoke are the key battlegrounds for the Levelling Up strategy, putting a "question of place" (Tomaney and Pike, 2020, p. 45) at the core of the current Government's agenda. As mentioned, such locales are not confined to the UK and are often defined by relative economic decline, low paid jobs, lower than national average levels of productivity and educational qualifications, coupled with higher than national average rates of impoverishment, social exclusion, ill physical and mental health, depopulation particularly of younger residents, political discontent, and poorer public services (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Sandbu, 2020; Tomaney and Pike, 2020; Martin et al., 2021; Tomaney et al., 2021; Boswell et al., 2022; Liddle et al., 2022; MacKinnon et al., 2022).

Hudson (2022) outlines the UK Government's proposals to Level Up, encompassing new trade deals including with India as part of its post-Brexit economic arrangements and new green industries in light of the shift to net-zero including battery giga factories, wind farms and hydrogen plants. However, many of the Levelling Up policy interventions are not necessarily new, including the introduction of 10 free ports which were initially introduced under the Thatcher Government and served to heighten place-based inequalities, as well as the relocation of Government jobs to the North since some state jobs already resided there including a Passport Office in Durham. Whilst spatial policy throughout neoliberalism emphasised the benefits of "letting London rip" (Leyshon, 2021, p. 1683), which was based on the idea that wealth will trickle out to the rest of the nation, Levelling Up purports to tackle the North South divide including *via* the devolution of power involving the creation of local Mayors to award councils more autonomy in addressing place-based problems.

The release of the Levelling Up White Paper shed further light on what Levelling Up means, highlighting "12 medium-term missions" to be achieved by 2030 (HM Government, 2022a). This includes raising living standards, improving the standards of transport and digital infrastructure, education, and skills, as well as reducing crime and restoring pride in place (HM Government, 2022a). Critiques have pointed to how the White Paper is bold on ambition but does not offer a coherent economic plan and the finances required to Level Up (Marmot, 2022), while it also emphasises the importance of market innovation and dynamism and thus puts "faith in the same market forces" that "were the initial superficial cause of the North's economic problems" (Hudson, 2022, p. 7). Such ideological ambiguity (Newman, 2021) leads Bridge (2022) to suggest that the Levelling Up agenda identifies symptoms rather than causes of socio-spatial inequalities, failing to identify the importance of taming the market. Meanwhile, Liddle et al. (2022, p. 5) intimate that it suffers from "a lack of focus and delivery," replacing achievable goals with far too ambitious ideas without the resources required to implement them (also see: Martin et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding these debates, Stoke-on-Trent was successful in the first round of the Levelling Up fund. In October 2021, the city-region was allocated three pots of monies for regeneration projects, receiving the most Levelling Up investment for any UK city (Stoke-on-Trent City Council, 2022). Key components of this include £20m for heritage projects across the city-region including the regeneration of Tunstall Library and Swimming Pool, as well as £20m for Estruscan Square in the city-centre resulting in the creation of a 3,600-capacity arena, residential units and a 138-bedroom hotel. The remaining project is £60m for the Good Yards redevelopment. Behind Stoke's train station, the site is "the gateway to the City" (Stoke-on-Trent City Council, 2022, p. 16) and involves the creation of a vibrant urban quarter.

This encompasses 174 apartments, restoration of the Vaults Warehouse, a water taxi *via* the canal, a new "Pavilion" building for work and leisure spaces as well as a 150-bedroom hotel, encouraging more people to work and live in the city-region. The aim is to encourage inward investment to create higher paid jobs, stimulate economic growth post COVID-19 and steer the city-region into a new age of enhanced opportunity and relative prosperity. However, there are a range of obstacles to the Levelling Up strategy in "left behind" Stoke particularly low-paid and precarious work, welfare retrenchment and food insecurity. The article now turns to the methodology, before empirically exposing some of these structural challenges.

Methodology

Data deployed in this paper is primarily provided by CASNS. These form rich qualitative case studies of individuals ($N = 15$), exposing their *multiple disadvantages* encompassing low-paid work, poverty, indebtedness, and food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were collected and organised into case studies for this research through CASNS's advice and support service, which primarily consists of face-to-face and telephone interviews. Consent forms were used for face-to-face clients, which asks for permission to form the case studies. For phone enquiries, consent was asked to store and use their data under legitimate interest. Regarding CASNS's volume of enquiries, the main categories are issues around Universal Credit (UC), debt, other benefits and tax credits, employment and housing. The case studies enable us to ascertain peoples' experiences of poverty and how wider issues are impacting upon their lives. They were selected because they are representative of the enquiries they received during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus illuminating the multitude of problems that many people endure in Stoke-on-Trent. As the data was captured throughout the COVID-19 pandemic–specifically from April 2020 to January 2022–we responded to Briggs et al. (2021b) assertion that it was important to study the pandemic in "real time" to reveal how people were enduring this turbulent period.

We also draw on data provided to us for our research from a Stoke-on-Trent foodbank, who record why and how many people use their service. Such data outlines the number of families receiving food aid in 2018–2019, compared to during the pandemic specifically across January 2021–2022. This enables us to observe trends across time regarding the demand for food aid and further illuminate the multiple forms of disadvantage. All data is anonymised, with the respondents that form the case studies pseudonymized. This data is synthesised with existing data sources on disadvantage in Stoke and beyond, enhancing its robustness and strengthening the contextualisation.

The methodology possesses some limitations. Whilst it is a small sample size, it is important to highlight that there

is no consensus on what constitutes the correct sample size in social scientific research (Baker and Edwards, 2012), not least as qualitative data's value lies in its richness, depth, and complexity rather than universal representativeness (Telford, 2022a). Qualitative studies have offered revealing and nuanced insights across a range of small sample sizes, including one interview/case (see: Kotze et al., 2020), four (see: Hall and Antonopoulos, 2017) and eight (see: Treadwell et al., 2020). As Baker and Edwards (2012, p. 8) highlight:

> "A small number of cases, or subjects, may be extremely valuable and represent adequate numbers for a research project. This is especially true for studying hidden or hard to access populations."

People enduring poverty is an archetypical example of a "hard to reach" population (MacDonald et al., 2020; Rowley et al., 2021), with such difficulties aggravated *during* the COVID-19 pandemic when opportunities for data collection were somewhat curtailed (Briggs et al., 2021a,b). Martin et al. (2021) and MacKinnon et al. (2022) indicate that there is also a lack of qualitative data derived from "left behind" localities, meaning this small-scale study offers important and complex insights and contributes to debates on the challenges for Levelling Up. Moreover, despite its limitations it can offer analytical generalizability whereby the findings are corroborated or problematised through other research under similar conditions (Telford, 2022a). Other work on "left behind" communities also found low-paid jobs, welfare retrenchment and economic precariousness (MacLeod and Jones, 2018; Mattison, 2020; MacLeavy and Jones, 2021; Martin et al., 2021; Boswell et al., 2022; MacKinnon et al., 2022; Telford, 2022a,b). As Leyshon (2021, p. 1686) noted, "research is needed to move towards a clearer understanding of the causes and consequences of uneven development and help to build a better understanding of what levelling up might mean." Therefore, the next two sections shed empirical light on the *structural cocktail* of disadvantage in Stoke-on-Trent, discussing its implications for Levelling Up and framed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Laddering down: The perils of low paid jobs

In "left behind" Stoke-on-Trent, large segments of the labour market are characterised by poorly paid and non-unionised employment. There has particularly been a recent upsurge in temporary jobs, zero-hour contracts and part-time work which fails to offer the economic foundations required to forge a stable and secure livelihood (Morris, 2017; Etherington, 2020a). While the average weekly earnings of an employee in Southeast localities like London and Reading stands at £751 and £671 respectively, in Stoke it is £465 making it

far below the UK average of £555 and one of the lowest across the nation (Etherington et al., 2022). Crises throughout neoliberalism have often resulted in state interventions that are anathema to neoliberal theory, providing the temporary fuel to mitigate the crisis, pacify public discontent, and enable it to embark upon a new spirit (Streeck, 2016; Peck and Theodore, 2019). Elucidating this during the COVID-19 pandemic was the Government's furlough scheme (March 2020-September 2021). Such "corona statism" (Gerbaudo, 2021, p. 6) functioned to prevent total economic collapse and mass unemployment (Briggs et al., 2021b), but the decline in monthly incomes impacted detrimentally upon those on low wages in Stoke since they were already struggling to get by. Etherington et al. (2021) reveal that 12,200 individuals were furloughed on the Job Retention Scheme (JRS)[1], with 6,600 of these being on the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS)[2]. CASNS data revealed that many enquiries during the pandemic were due to problems at work, including employees worried about the longevity of their job, employment rights under furlough and their palpable risk of redundancy. Illuminating this is the case study below:

> Gemma is a single female who initially contacted CASNS in June as she had been furloughed and was to remain furloughed until at least the end of September. Gemma works in a hotel and due to the impact of COVID-19 she has been told verbally that she had been selected for redundancy with 3 months' notice which will end on the 2nd of November 2020. Despite being given verbal notice her current employer has said that furloughed workers can be asked to come back with 24 hours' notice if they are required, previously her employer told her that she could take another job whilst on furlough. She was given conflicting advice on her rights to work whilst being furloughed. A few weeks later she informed us that she had the offer of a job to start after she had been made redundant, but it was at a slightly lower rate of pay and for fewer hours.

The UK's hotel industry contains the largest proportion of low wage employees of any industry, with the job often being physically demanding and degrading (Lloyd et al., 2013). Regulation is poor with many hotels relying upon agency employees (Lloyd et al., 2013), somewhat curtailing the optimism surrounding the ongoing construction of several new hotels in Stoke as part of the council's successful Levelling Up bids. Such a deregulatory climate is revealed by the data above, demonstrating how Gemma's previous employer was able to

---

1 This provided grants to employers to pay 80% of employees' wages, enabling them to retain and pay their staff.

2 The SEISS scheme offered five grants that self-employed individuals could submit applications to receive. The first grant, for instance, was for up to 80% of their profits up to £2,500 a month for 3 months.

dispense of her rather easily. It also shows how exploitative employers do not view workforces as people with human needs but as "packets of time"; they are "simply either available or unavailable" (Fisher, 2018, p. 465), which was aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated uncertainty with the restrictions. This magnified economic insecurity in "left behind" Stoke, since there is a higher proportion of low-paid jobs where staff can be more easily dismissed (Gratton et al., 2019; Etherington, 2020b). Whilst Gemma was offered alternative work, the absence of both adequate remuneration and stability ensnared her in a cycle of poorly skilled and low paid employment. This is a reality facing many residents in Stoke, with the COVID crisis utilised by some employers to circumvent employment laws and accuse workers of wrongdoing:

> Adam has been employed with the same company for over 20 years but believes that due to COVID-19 the company is struggling financially. In November whilst Adam was at work, Adam's wife phoned him to say that due to a cough she had been told to get a COVID-19 test. Adam immediately told his employers and went home to self-isolate. On returning to work Adam was called in for a meeting and accused of gross misconduct on the basis of not informing his employer that he was at risk of COVID-19 and deliberately attending work for 3 days when he was possibly infected, all of which Adam denies. Adam's employer stated that they would dismiss him for gross misconduct unless he signs a non-disclosure agreement promising not to start tribunal proceedings, in which case they will offer him 12 weeks wages in lieu of notice.

The above demonstrates how Adam's employers attempted to dismiss him during the crisis, displaying little regard for both his years of service and livelihood. Such dehumanised disregard represents the neoliberal capitalist ethos, emphasising capital accumulation, profit maximisation and preserving one's position in the marketplace at the expense of workers' rights and wellbeing (Harvey, 2011; Streeck, 2016; Jessop, 2018). This has led Hudson (2022) to suggest that the Levelling Up agenda and eliminating inequalities is incompatible with a capitalist regime, since socio-spatial imbalances are an inherent part of its structural orientation. The strategy thus fails to understand capitalist economies, particularly as capital moves across space to maximise returns on its investments producing uneven spatial development in the process (Harvey, 2011; Jones, 2019). As mentioned, this was clear in many 'left behind' places like Stoke-on-Trent with the gradual loss of its ceramics and manufacturing industries from the 1960s onwards, which continues to cast a *long shadow* (Beatty and Fothergill, 2017) over the city-region.

Nevertheless, the data also highlights how COVID-19 equipped Adam's employer with the ideological cover required to try to downsize the workforce. Our research revealed that low-paid workers were at an increased risk of continuing to work whilst carrying the infection, since they often relied on the minimum statutory sick pay. At £95.85 a week, it is one of the lowest rates of sick pay in Europe, resulting in enhanced psychological distress and worry about paying the bills. Meanwhile, other workers in Stoke continued to struggle by on low pay:

> Martyn lives alone in a one bed apartment, and his rent and council tax payments are currently up to date. Martyn works 20 hours a week and is currently claiming Universal Credit[3] to top up his low wages. He has asked for more hours at work, but currently there are none available. Martyn contacted Citizens Advice, as he wanted to see if he was eligible for any additional benefits. Martyn is claiming the single person discount on his Council Tax liability but is not eligible for any Council Tax Support. Unfortunately, the benefit check showed no additional benefit entitlements.

Rubery et al. (2018) highlighted the normalisation of precarious work whereby security and opportunities for career progression are absent; workers must adjust to the perpetual degradation of economic insecurity and uncertainty. This is clear above, whereby Martyn is also enduring what Fisher (2018) termed a deflation of expectations under neoliberalism; many employees in "left behind" places like Stoke are compelled to accept precarity as a *timeless* part of life. Evidently, poorly paid jobs and the associated structural atmosphere of economic precariousness represent challenges to Levelling Up. For all the emphasis on improving opportunity, livelihoods and prosperity, the reality on the ground is that many people are struggling to get by and afford basic utilities (Hardship Commission, 2015; Mahoney and Kearon, 2018; Gratton et al., 2019; BBC, 2022). Many endure employers who focus largely on maximising profitability at the expense of workers' health and wellbeing, while others like Martyn struggle on part-time hours despite wanting to work longer to meet basic living standards. The reality of day-to-day life for many in Stoke is one of hardship and worry about both the present and the future (MacLeod and Jones, 2018; Mahoney and Kearon, 2018; Gratton et al., 2019; Etherington et al., 2021, 2022; BBC, 2022). As Martyn highlights, this is also tethered to the inadequateness of the welfare state, which we now present as another key challenge to Levelling Up in Stoke.

---

3   Introduced by the Coalition Government in 2013, UC can be claimed by both unemployed and low-income citizens. The Coalition cast UC as simplifying the benefits system as it merged six different benefits into one monthly rather than weekly payment (O'Hara, 2015; Garthwaite, 2016). However, O'Hara (2015) suggests the shift to monthly payments means many claimants struggle to manage their finances, pay their bills and thus turn to payday lenders, while its receipt is attached to various stipulations involving punitive sanctions for non-compliance.

Welfare and food insecurity

As part of the Government's financial support during the COVID-19 pandemic, they increased UC claimants' payment by £20 which was branded as the UC "uplift" (March 2020-September 2021). The UC claimant rate for young people in Stoke-on-Trent rose from 5.9% in March to 10.2% in December 2020 (Etherington et al., 2021). However, the precise unemployment figure is likely to be much higher than statistics indicate, partially as large amounts of potential claimants particularly unemployed young people refuse to claim benefits (Beatty et al., 2022). Whilst this is related to neoliberalism's hostile ideological climate towards the poor, imbuing them with a sense that they must take individual responsibility for their plight (Fisher, 2018), the swelling surplus of unemployed people in Stoke serves an ideological function. Forming a reserve army of labour, it enables employers to discipline workers more easily since they can be rather straightforwardly replaced (Etherington, 2020a; Telford, 2022a,b). Undermining the ability of employees to organise, it intensifies competition for jobs and undermines collective wage increases. This has been a key part of neoliberalism, with a degree of unemployment normalised in places like Stoke as demand for jobs outstrips supply. This sense of atomisation and struggle is worsened by the ongoing erosion of the welfare state, which left many people in Stoke in a precarious position as the pandemic hit:

> Robert is a single 44-year-old male. He has a 10-year-old son who stays with him from Friday to Sunday every week. He is currently unemployed and looking for work. Robert is a homeowner. He pays £395 monthly for his mortgage and is up-to-date with this. He did take a repayment break during the first COVID lockdown but has contacted his mortgage lender who has agreed to spread the missed payments over the remainder of the mortgage term. There are no current arrears, however, Robert is concerned about future affordability due to the reduction of income following the loss of his job. Robert currently receives Jobseeker's allowance[4] of £149 a fortnight. Robert has also made an application for Universal credit and is still awaiting a response.

It is important to highlight that the impact of the cuts was not felt evenly since welfare demand tends to be concentrated amongst low-income groups (Beatty and Fothergill, 2017; Gray and Barford, 2018; Bambra et al., 2021), meaning "left behind" places like Stoke inevitably suffered some of the worst cuts. Between 2010/11 and 2017/18, Stoke-on-Trent city council lost £193 m from its budget due to austerity.

The council was given some autonomy over how to enact austerity, transforming neoliberalism's financial crisis into a form of fiscal discipline for local councils (Gray and Barford, 2018). This left the council significantly weakened in addressing place-based inequalities particularly with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Punitive cuts were enacted particularly to UC, jobseekers' allowance, and employment support allowance (ESA)[5] (Beatty and Fothergill, 2017; Etherington, 2020a; Etherington et al., 2021). Despite the temporary £20 UC uplift (March 2020-September 2021), these cuts left many people destitute throughout the pandemic, intensifying levels of personal indebtedness as benefit levels were simply not high enough to meet basic living standards. CASNS data indicated that debt was the 2nd most enquired about issue between September 2021–January 2022, with Stoke acquiring the nickname the "debt capital" (Partington, 2018) several years ago since it possesses the highest insolvency rates in England and Wales. The case study below illuminates this problem:

> Helene is a single person, living in a one-bed private-rented property, she is 23, and usually works as a chef so hasn't had much work since the initial COVID-19 lockdown. Helene is an EEA national who, while being able to speak fluent English, struggles to read the written language. Currently, all Helene receives is Universal Credit of £342.72 per month. From this it appears that Helene is not receiving the housing element of Universal Credit and isn't sure why as she's not had any communication on her online journal that she can read properly. After paying her rent Helene only has £85 a month for all her other expenses, she tells us that she has pawned her TV for some money over Christmas and now only has a radio. Helene has council tax arrears as she has to make up the 30% difference not covered by her council tax reduction award and also has a fuel debt.

Other evidence also reveals that debt is a significant problem in the city-region that blights peoples' lives, since many rely on pay day loans, borrowing money from family and the use of credit cards to get by (Partington, 2018; Gratton et al., 2019; Boden, 2022). Harvey (2011, p. 115) described credit as the "central nervous system" of neoliberal capitalism since debt increases peoples' worry and thus their chances of dispiritingly complying with employers' exploitative demands and acquiescing to welfare cuts. Acting as a form of financial discipline, it forecloses the future and escalates people like Helene's sense of distress in "left behind" Stoke. Despite this, the Levelling Up strategy has little to say about the corrosive nature of private indebtedness and its links to low-paid jobs and

---

[4] This is a welfare payment to unemployed people who are trying to ascertain work, though its receipt is attached to various conditions involving punitive sanctions for non-compliance (Etherington, 2020a).

[5] ESA provides financial assistance to people who have ill health including a disability. However, during the austerity age bureaucracy increased within the welfare state, meaning claimants often must fill out around a 30-page form to receive ESA which often impacts detrimentally upon their mental health (O'Hara, 2015).

welfare retrenchment (see: HM Government, 2022a), potentially highlighting that if the agenda is going to make a difference to Stoke's most disadvantaged residents it must seek to tackle these issues.

Welfare retrenchment and debt is also linked to the *tectonic rise* in food aid in the city-region, with a local food bank revealing that the number of families receiving food aid in 2018–2019 stood at 756. Whilst this reached 1,116 in 2020, it catapulted across January 2021–2022 to 1,727. Reasons cited for using the food bank during the pandemic particularly included low-paid work, benefit delays, being self-employed and receiving no income and inadequate welfare provision, which chimes with other evidence in Stoke (Hardship Commission, 2015; Gratton et al., 2019; Boden, 2022). A manager of another food bank in Stoke also recently reported that 14,000 people used their service from March 2021–2022 (Boden, 2022). Such multiple disadvantages are elucidated below:

> Adele is unable to work and is claiming Universal Credit. Adele has made a recent claim for Personal Independence Payment[6] (PIP) and is awaiting the outcome. Adele had to finish work in June due to her ill health. Adele suffers from COPD, Emphysema and Diabetes and struggles to walk. Adele tops up her gas and electricity meters each week putting £15 on each during the winter months, although she has cut back recently due to a lack of affordability. Adele tells us she just switches her heating off when her meter runs low. Adele has been sending fit notes to the DWP since July, but has not yet submitted UC50 forms, so she is only receiving the standard allowance of UC of £277 per month with £292 in Housing costs being paid directly to the council as her landlord. Adele pays £120 to the Local Authority for the bedroom tax[7] and council tax contribution. Adding basic living costs (gas, electricity, phone, car tax and insurance, broadband, water etc) of £286 leaves her with a deficit of £130 before buying food. She has had her maximum foodbank referrals and cannot afford to eat.

---

6   PIP was introduced in 2013 with the intention of gradually replacing Disability Living Allowance (DLA). PIP is aimed at people aged 16 or over with disabilities to financially help with their additional needs. However, research indicates recipients face far more punitive tests to receive PIP in comparison to DLA and have to fill in around a 50-page online form to receive payment, increasing mental distress (O'Hara, 2015; Garthwaite, 2016).

7   The bedroom tax was introduced in 2013, resulting in housing benefit being based upon both accommodation size and the number of residents. This meant tenants with 1 'extra room' lost 14% of their housing benefit and 25% for "two additional rooms" (O'Hara, 2015). The Coalition claimed it would free up space for claimants to move to smaller sized accommodation. However, critics suggested it did nothing to address a lack of housing and particularly penalised people unable to work because

Food insecurity has a detrimental impact upon peoples' lives, intensifying psychological distress, ill health and fomenting feelings of shame and humiliation (Hardship Commission, 2015). With food insecurity in the UK standing at 8.8% (4.7 m adults) in February 2022, The Food Foundation (2022) reported that food insecurity represents a myriad challenge to Levelling Up the UK. The White Paper does not mention reducing food insecurity levels yet tackling it ought to be a key component of the agenda, since it is central to reducing poverty, increasing peoples' health and wellbeing, and allowing them to meet their most basic needs for survival (Food Foundation, 2022). Welfare cuts, food insecurity and destitution combine to produce a *cocktail of structural disadvantage* in Stoke:

> Bethany lives alone in a 2-bedroom private rented property, her rent is £425 per month. Bethany is in receipt of Universal Credit. As Bethany is 23, she is only entitled to the Shared Accommodation rate of Universal Credit, leaving her with a significant shortfall in her housing costs. After Bethany has paid her rent she only has £235 left for the rest of the month to meet all of her utility bills, her council tax shortfall of £3.99 a week and to buy food and clothing. Bethany has mental health issues, which means that she cannot work and her financial situation is causing her lots of stress which in turn is increasing her mental health issues. Bethany contacted us as she has no money to buy food or top her pre-payment meter up, she also disclosed debts of £230 to Severn Trent [water company] and £460 to her electric company.

As the data documents, the ongoing erosion of the welfare safety net means it is profoundly inadequate for people to meet their basic needs. Given this context, it is unsurprising that mental ill health is a key problem particularly in "left behind" places like Stoke (Hardship Commission, 2015; Gratton et al., 2019), since many people endure the "Depressing Realism" (Fisher, 2018, p. 462) of low-paid and precarious work, welfare cuts, indebtedness, and food insecurity. This has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, with waiting lists for treatment currently at record levels across the UK (Iacobucci, 2022). However, the Levelling Up White Paper says little about ameliorating the ongoing mental health crisis. Although improving "wellbeing" is one of the White Paper's "12 missions" (HM Government, 2022a), the term mental health is fleetingly mentioned seven times with no strategic outline on how to improve it. This represents yet another challenge to Levelling Up in Stoke; concerted efforts are required to tackle mental ill health and enable people to live healthier and more satisfying lives.

---

of illness/disability, forcing many people to move out of the area they had grown up in as they could no longer afford to live there (O'Hara, 2015; Etherington, 2020a).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and aggravated the UK's position as one of the most regionally imbalanced economies in the developed world (Lloyd and Blakemore, 2021; Martin, 2021; Martin et al., 2021). Political promises to reduce socio-spatial inequalities are at the core of the UK Government's Levelling Up agenda, with the White Paper offering bold rhetoric and ambitions. This includes "12 missions" centred upon increasing prosperity, opportunity, living standards, the prevalence of high-paid jobs and the devolution of power by 2030 (HM Government, 2022a). The evolution of Stoke-on-Trent since the 1960's, particularly under neoliberalism, has meant the city-region has emerged as a textbook "left behind" locality and a priority area for Levelling Up (HM Government, 2022a). However, there are a multitude of *interlocking disadvantages* in the city-region, presenting myriad challenges to the Levelling Up strategy. This paper revealed how this particularly includes low-paid work, indebtedness, inadequate welfare provision, food insecurity and mental ill health (Hardship Commission, 2015; MacLeod and Jones, 2018; Mahoney and Kearon, 2018; Gratton et al., 2019; Etherington et al., 2021, 2022).

"Left-behind" places like Stoke often possess interlinking problems, meaning experimentation with policy initiatives is important (Martin et al., 2021; MacKinnon et al., 2022). Whilst the locality's success in the first round of the Levelling Up fund is a welcome boost to the area, many of the problems documented throughout this article pre-date, and have been deeply exacerbated by, the COVID-19 pandemic; they are structurally and strategically embedded and will take many years to undo. The area is still suffering from the loss of its manufacturing and ceramics industries and austerity, with the Levelling Up funds allocated so far not equalling the £193 m Stoke-on-Trent City council lost through the cuts across 2010–2018. Indeed, Levelling Up must be about more than investment in physical infrastructure. This should include the promotion of the real living wage across all sectors, coupled with more stable and secure forms of employment which would dwindle peoples' economic uncertainty and financial distress. As mentioned, the Levelling Up White Paper and associated policies also say little about indebtedness, mental ill health, food insecurity and their links to the erosion of the welfare state. In this spirit we agree with Connolly et al. (2021) that Levelling Up cannot be divorced from the ongoing erosion of the welfare state, and without a concerted reinvestment in Britain's broken welfare safety net it is thus unlikely to provide much material improvement to the most disadvantaged peoples' lives in 'left behind' Stoke.

Levelling Up policies should also consider Job Rotation schemes, which are a key part of labour market policy in less socio-spatially imbalanced nations like Denmark. Essentially, this is a short-term job guarantee, preparing people for employment *via* offering placements to unemployed people and awarding employment and skills training for the company's workers, successfully reducing both inequalities and skills shortages (see Etherington and Jones, 2004; Jones, 2019). Such a policy would help to challenge neoliberalism's unequal spatial development. As the article documented, many of the area's problems cannot be divorced from neoliberal political economy including deindustrialisation, the reserve army of labour, welfare retrenchment and how neoliberalism's growth model creates myriad spatial imbalances, filtering into debates on how capitalist formations present inherent challenges to Levelling Up (Hudson, 2022). All these problems take on increased importance with the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, engendering reports in June 2022 that people were queuing down the street for food in Stoke (BBC, 2022). Research by CASNS sketches the pending cost of living crisis, precipitated by energy bills, rent, and the cost of food and other essentials. A "local humanitarian catastrophe" is predicted for 2023 and with "a crisis as serious and, potentially, as deadly as COVID, that threatens the health and welfare of many people across North Staffordshire and beyond" (Citizens Advice Staffordshire, North and Stoke-on-Trent [CASNS], 2022, p. 20).

Indeed, the Conservatives ousting of Boris Johnson and eventual appointment of Liz Truss as the Conservative Party Leader and thus Prime Minister on 6th September 2022 possesses implications for Levelling Up "left behind" places like Stoke. On 23rd September 2022, her Government announced a "New Growth Plan" based primarily upon economic growth which takes priority over Levelling Up (see: HM Government, 2022b). Policies enacted or in the pipeline include removing the cap on bankers' bonuses and cancelling the planned increase in Corporation Tax to 25% (HM Government, 2022b), keeping it instead at 19% which is the lowest in the G7. This has been accompanied by a rather quick U-turn on their plans to scrap the top 45p rate of income tax for those who earn £150,000 or more, since it was met with political and public outrage. Simon Clarke, the Levelling Up Minister, also recently espoused the language of austerity by pointing to the need to "trim the fat" from national budgets (Swinford and Wright, 2022). Enacted under the ideological banner of neoliberalism's trickle-down economics, evidence suggests this agenda is likely to further aggravate both the UK's deep-rooted spatial imbalances and societal inequalities (Streeck, 2016; Jessop, 2018; Jones, 2019; Martin et al., 2021; Telford, 2022a). It will do little for "left behind" places like Stoke, serving to further intensify a deregulatory economic climate that will lead to further job insecurity, welfare erosion and social distress while those at the top of the social hierarchy accumulate yet more wealth and power. Levelling up is effectively over before it began, but the deep issues of "combined and uneven development" remain (Peck et al., 2022).

Whilst we remain attuned to neoliberalism's potential for perpetual mutation (Jones, 2019; Peck and Theodore, 2019; Sparke and Williams, 2022) particularly in light of Liz Truss's New Growth Plan, considering the 2008 financial crash,

COVID-19 pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis we agree with scholars that space has emerged in the UK for a potential rethink of neoliberal political economy (Gerbaudo, 2021; Martin, 2021; Telford, 2022a). Such a shift is important given "the scale and nature of the UK's contemporary 'left behind places' problem are such that only a transformative shift in policy model and resource commitment of historic proportions" (Martin et al., 2021, p. 109) are likely to achieve the significant Levelling Up of the UK economy. Our small scale, qualitative account contributed to debates on how—until this happens—it is likely that many people in "left behind" Stoke-on-Trent will continue to endure economic precarity and struggle to afford the basics of day-to-day life.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Staffordshire University Ethics Committee. As outlined in the methodology of this study, all ethical principles were adhered to in this research. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

Publisher's note

References

Baker, S., and Edwards, R. (2012). *How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough?* Southampton: National Centre for Research Methods.

Bambra, C., Lynch, J., and Smith, K. (2021). *The Unequal Pandemic*. Bristol: Policy Press Rapid Response Series.

BBC (2022). *Queues Down the Street in Stoke-on-Trent for Free Supermarket Food*. BBC. Available online at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-stoke-staffordshire-61893386 (accessed June 23, 2022).

Beatty, C., and Fothergill, S. (2017). The impact on welfare and public finances of job loss in industrial Britain. *Reg. Stud. Reg. Sci.* 4, 161–180. doi: 10.1080/21681376.2017.1346481

Beatty, C., Fothergill, S., Gore, T., and Leather, D. (2022). *The Real Level of Unemployment 2022*. Sheffield Hallam University: Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research. Sheffield: Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research.

Blundell, R., Costa Dias, M., Joyce, R., and Xu, X. (2020). *Covid-19 and Inequalities: The IFS Deaton Review*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Boden, C. (2022). *Rishi Sunak has Broken his Promise to Help with the Cost of Living*. The Guardian. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/23/rishi-sunak-broken-promise-cost-of-living-food-bank (accessed June 23, 2022).

Boswell, J., Denham, J., Furlong, J., Killick, A., Ndugga, P., Rek, B., et al. (2022). Place-based politics and nested deprivation in the UK: Beyond cities-towns, Two Englands and the Left Behind. *J. Rep. Democr.* 58, 169–190. doi: 10.1080/00344893.2020.1751258

Bridge, S. (2022). Levelling up – Is it the right cure? *Local Econ.* 37, 21–33. doi: 10.1177/02690942221098617

Briggs, D., Ellis, A., Lloyd, A., and Telford, L. (2021a). Researching the COVID-19 pandemic: a critical blueprint for the social sciences. *Bristol Policy Press Rapid Res. Series.* doi: 10.2307/j.ctv1s7cc2g

Briggs, D., Telford, L., Lloyd, A., Ellis, A., and Kotze, J. (2021b). *Lockdown: Social Harm in the COVID-19 Era*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Citizens Advice Staffordshire, North and Stoke-on-Trent [CASNS] (2022). *Turning Down the Heat: How the Cost of Living is Affecting North Staffordshire*. CASNS. Hanley: Stoke-on-Trent.

Connolly, J., Pyper, R., and Zwet, A. (2021). Governing levelling-up in the UK: challenges and prospects. *Contemp. Soc. Sci.* 16, 523–537. doi: 10.1080/21582041.2021.1957495

Etherington, D. (2020a). *Austerity, Welfare and Work: Exploring Politics, Geographies and Inequalities*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Etherington, D. (2020b). *A Disappearing Safety Net: Post COVID-19 Crisis and its Impact on Poverty and Disadvantage in Stoke-on-Trent*. Stoke-on-Trent: Staffordshire University.

Etherington, D., and Jones, M. (2004). Beyond contradictions of the workfare state? Denmark, welfare-through-work, and the promise of job rotation. *Environ. Plan C. Govt. Politics* 22, 129–148. doi: 10.1068/c28m

Etherington, D., Jones, M., Harris, S., and Hubbard, S. (2021). *Post COVID-19 Crisis and its Impact on Poverty and Destitution in Stoke-on-Trent*. Stoke-on-Trent: Staffordshire University.

Etherington, D., Telford, L., and Jones, M. (2022). *The Pending Poverty Catastrophe in Stoke-on-Trent: How Benefit Cuts and the Cost-of-Living Crisis Impacts on the Poor*. Stoke-on-Trent: Staffordshire University.

Farnsworth, K., and Irving, Z. (2018). Austerity: neoliberal dreams come true? *Crit. Soc. Policy* 38, 461–481. doi: 10.1177/0261018318762451

Fisher, M. (2018). *K-Punk*. London: Repeater Books.

Food Foundation (2022). *New Data Shows Food Insecurity Major Challenge to Levelling Up Agenda*. Available online at: https://foodfoundation.org.uk/press-release/new-data-shows-food-insecurity-major-challenge-levelling-agenda (accessed June 22, 2022).

Garthwaite, K. (2016). *Hunger Pains: Life Inside Foodbank Britain*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Gerbaudo, P. (2021). *The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic*. London: Verso.

Gratton, N., Vincent, P., Signha, L., Beddows, R., and Ball, A. (2019). *Get Talking Hardship*. Stoke-on-Trent: Hardship Commission.

Gray, M., and Barford, A. (2018). The depths of the cuts: the uneven geography of local government austerity. *Cambridge J. Reg. Econ. Soc.* 11, 541–563. doi: 10.1093/cjres/rsy019

Griggs, S., Hall, S., and Jones, M. (2020). *Levelling Up or Pushing Down?* Municipal Journal. Available online at: https://www.themj.co.uk/Levelling-up-or-pushing-down/218943 (accessed June 21, 2022).

Hall, A., and Antonopoulos, G. (2017). Coke on tick: exploring the cocaine market in the UK through the lens of financial management. *J. Financ. Crime.* 24, 181–199. doi: 10.1108/JFC-07-2015-0037

Hardship Commission (2015). *Stoke-on-Trent Initial Report*. Stoke: Hardship Commission.

Harvey, D. (2011). *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. London: Profile Books Ltd.

HM Government (2022a). *Levelling Up: Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. White Paper. London: HM treasury.

HM Government (2022b). *The Growth Plan 2022*. London: HM treasury.

House of Commons (2020). North Staffordshire Potteries Towns: Levelling Up. Vol. 685. Available online at: https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-12-01/debates/20120137000001/NorthStaffordshirePotteriesTownsLevellingUp (accessed May 2, 2022).

Hudson, R. (2022). Levelling up in post-Brexit United Kingdom: economic realism or political opportunism? *Local Econ.* 37, 50–65. doi: 10.1177/02690942221099480

Iacobucci, G. (2022). England saw record 4.3 million referrals to mental health services in 2021. *Br. Med. J.* 376, 1.

Imrie, R. (1989). Industrial restructuring, labour and locality: the case of the British pottery industry. *Environ. Plan A.* 21, 3–26. doi: 10.1068/a210003

Jayne, M. (2004). Culture that works? Creative industries development in a working-class city. *Cap. Cl.* 84, 199–210. doi: 10.1177/030981680408400119

Jayne, M. (2011). Mayors and urban governance: discursive power, identity and local politics. *Soc. Cult. Geogr.* 13, 29–47. doi: 10.1080/14649365.2011.635800

Jessop, B. (2018). Neoliberalization, uneven development, and Brexit: further reflections on the organic crisis of the British state and society. *Eur. Plan. Stud.* 26, 1728–1746. doi: 10.1080/09654313.2018.1501469

Jones, M. (2019). *Cities and Regions in Crisis: The Political Economy of Sub-National Economic Development*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

King, N., and Ives, E. (2019). *A Rising Tide: Levelling Up Left-Behind Britain*. London: Centre for Policy Studies.

Kotze, J., Richardson, A., and Antonopoulos, G. (2020). Looking acceptably feminine: a single case study of a female bodybuilder's use of steroids. *Perform. Enhanc. Health.* 8, 1–7. doi: 10.1016/j.peh.2020.100174

Leyshon, A. (2021). Economic geography I: uneven development, 'left behind places' and 'levelling up' in a time of crisis. *Prog. Hum. Geogr.* 45, 1678–1691. doi: 10.1177/03091325211011684

Liddle, J., Shutt, J., and Addidle, G. (2022). Editorial: levelling up the United Kingdom? A useful mantra but too little substance or delivery? *Local Econ.* 37, 3–12. doi: 10.1177/02690942221099835

Lloyd, C., Warhurst, C., and Dutton, E. (2013). The weakest link? Product market strategies, skill and pay in the hotel industry. *Work Employ. Soc.* 27, 254–271. doi: 10.1177/0950017012460310

Lloyd, P. E., and Blakemore, M. J. (2021). *The Covid-19 Experience in England: Eight Essays on the Pandemic and its Management Peter Lloyd Associates*. Available online at: https://www.peter-lloyd.co.uk/papers-and-blogs/ (accessed June 16, 2022).

MacDonald, R., Shildrick, T., and Furlong, A. (2020). Cycles of disadvantage revisited: young people, families and poverty across generations. *J. Youth Stud.* 23, 12–27. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2019.1704405

MacKinnon, D., Kempton, L., O'Brien, P., Ormerod, E., Pike, A., and Tomaney, J. (2022). Reframing urban and regional development for left behind places. *Cambridge J. Reg. Econ. Soc.* 15, 39–56. doi: 10.1093/cjres/rsab034

MacLeavy, J., and Jones, M. (2021). Brexit as Britain in decline and its crises (revisited). *Polit. Q.* 92, 444–452. doi: 10.1111/1467-923X.13039

MacLeod, G., and Jones, M. (2018). Explaining "Brexit Capital": uneven development and the austerity state. *Space Polity.* 22, 111–136. doi: 10.1080/13562576.2018.1535272

Mahoney, I., and Kearon, T. (2018). Social quality and brexit in stoke-on-trent, England. *Int. J. Soc. Qual.* 8, 1–20. doi: 10.3167/IJSQ.2018.080102

Marmot, M. (2022). The government's levelling up plan: a missed opportunity. *Br. Med. J.* doi: 10.1136/bmj.o356

Marmot, M., Allen, J., Boyce, T., Goldblatt, P., and Morrison, J. (2020). *Build Back Fairer in Greater Manchester: Health Equity and Dignified Lives*. London: Institute of Health Equity.

Martin, R. (2021). Rebuilding the economy from the COVID crisis: time to rethink regional studies? *Reg. Stud. Reg. Sci.* 8, 143–161. doi: 10.1080/21681376.2021.1919191

Martin, R., Gardiner, B., Pike, A., Sunley, P., and Tyler, P. (2021). *Levelling Up Left Behind Places: The Scale and Nature of the Economic and Policy Challenge*. London: Routledge.

Mattison, D. (2020). *Beyond the Red Wall: Why Labour Lost, How the Conservatives Won and What Will Happen Next?* London: Biteback Publishing.

Morris, I. (2017). *Left Behind Brexit Capital. Stratfor*. Available online at: https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/left-behind-brexit-capital (accessed June 16, 2022).

Newman, J. (2021). The ambiguous ideology of levelling up. *Political. Q.* 92, 312–320. doi: 10.1111/1467-923X.13010

O'Hara, M. (2015). *Austerity Bites*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Partington, R. (2018). *Stoke is Debt Capital of England and Wales – followed by Plymouth*. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/money/2018/jul/13/stoke-is-debt-capital-of-england-and-wales-followed-by-plymouth (accessed June 22, 2022).

Peck, J., and Theodore, N. (2019). Still neoliberalism? *South Atl. Q.* 118, 245–265. doi: 10.1215/00382876-7381122

Peck, J., Werner, M., and Jones, M. (2022). A dialogue on uneven development: a distinctly regional problem. *Reg. Stud.* doi: 10.1080/00343404.2022.2116417 [Epub ahead of print].

Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2018). The revenge of the places that don't matter. *Cambridge J. Reg. Econ. Soc.* 11, 189–209. doi: 10.1093/cjres/rsx024

Rowley, J., Richards, N., Carduff, E., and Gott, M. (2021). The impact of poverty and deprivation at the end of life: a critical review. *Palliat. Care Soc. Pract.* 15, 1–19. doi: 10.1177/26323524211033873

Rubery, J., Grimshaw, D., Keizer, A., and Johnson, M. (2018). Challenges and contradictions in the normalising of precarious work. *Work Employ. Soc.* 32, 509–527. doi: 10.1177/0950017017751790

Sandbu, M. (2020). *The Economics of Belonging*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sparke, M., and Williams, O. (2022). Neoliberal disease: COVID-19, co-pathogenesis and global health insecurities. *EPA Econ. Space.* 54, 15–32. doi: 10.1177/0308518X211048905

Stoke-on-Trent City Council (2022). *Stoke-on-Trent Levelling Up Prospectus*. Stoke: Stoke-on-Trent City Council.

Streeck, W. G. (2016). *How Will Capitalism End?* London: Verso.

Sturzaker, J., and Nurse, A. (2020). Rescaling urban governance: planning, localism and institutional change. *Bristol Policy Press.* doi: 10.1332/policypress/9781447350774.001.0001

Swinford, S., and Wright, O. (2022). *Truss Ally Simon Clarke Prepares UK for New Age of Austerity. The Times*. Available online at: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/truss-ally-simon-clarke-prepares-uk-for-new-age-of-austerity-cbjkw5b8n (accessed October 1, 2022).

Telford, L. (2022a). *English Nationalism and its Ghost Towns*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Telford, L. (2022b). There is nothing there: deindustrialisation and loss in a coastal town. *Compet. Change* 26, 197–214. doi: 10.1177/10245294211011300

Tomaney, J., Natarajan, L., and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, F. (2021). *Sacriston: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Place*. London: University College London.

Tomaney, J., and Pike, A. (2020). Levelling up? *Polit. Q.* 91, 43–48. doi: 10.1111/1467-923X.12834

Treadwell, J., Ancrum, C., and Kelly, C. (2020). Taxing times: inter-criminal victimization and drug robbery amongst the english professional criminal milieu. *Deviant. Behav.* 41, 57–69. doi: 10.1080/01639625.2018.15 19136