



Institute for Public Policy Research



THE KIDS AREN'T ALRIGHT

STATE OF THE NORTH 2025

**Ryan Swift, Daniel Galloway,
India Gerritsen and
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SUMMARY

This year's *State of the North* report highlights the growing challenges that today's young people face, and details how regional inequality exacerbates them for many young northerners.

This is a pivotal moment for young people. The current generation of young people (Gen Z) has grown up in extremely challenging circumstances. Many are seeing their opportunities and chance of intergenerational social mobility shrinking.

We are also seeing growing concerns about young people's satisfaction with democracy and its ability to deliver for them (Foa et al 2020). This is a threat to the long-term health of our democracy and society.

While these challenges impact young people across the country, this is especially true in many areas of the north of England, where young people are often further disadvantaged by our country's deep and persistent regional inequalities (Johns et al 2024).

Regional divides in their starting baseline, their opportunity for a good life, and their chance to be heard in politics are a barrier to many being able to reach their full potential. This is damaging for young northerners' chances and democratic content, as well as our region's future success.

Despite years of rhetoric on closing our regional divides, deep inequalities remain. There is an urgent need now to address this for the next generations of northerners to break out of the doom-loop of regional inequality which acts as a barrier to life chances and opportunity.

The report draws on insights from the literature and data analysis, as well as findings from focus groups carried out with young people in Wigan and Newcastle and a focus group on opportunity with young people from across the North. In doing so, it gives voice to the concerns and priorities of young people in the region. The report also draws on new polling which looks at young people's attitudes to opportunity, political representation and policy responsiveness.

Bringing all of this together, we set out the ways the government, mayors and other local leaders can take the opportunity to fix the inequalities faced by young northerners and deliver for them before divides entrench even further.

They should do so by acting in key three areas:

1. A better baseline for young people in the North

- Taking action to close gaps in opportunity and social mobility through a regional approach to the Government's forthcoming child poverty strategy.
- Ensuring fair funding for schools between regions and targeting further funding at places most in need.
- Combined authorities working with local businesses through their good employment charters and educational institutions to facilitate young people in the area up to the age of 18 being able to take on good quality work experience opportunities.
- Targeting greater investment in mental health support in areas most in need, targeting resource so young people across the country can expect the same wait times.

2. Access to a good life for our young people

- Spread cultural investment more fairly across the country to redress historic underfunding and the challenges of cultural exclusion in regions like the North and devolve responsibilities and funding for culture to combined authorities where the appetite and capacity for this exists.
- A targeted funding programme for local councils to improve and develop new urban green spaces in places most in need.
- Further devolution of powers of local transport to combined authorities and the promotion of local public control of buses to enable place-based innovation in services and fares.

3. A strong voice and agency for young people in our democracy at the local, regional and national levels, and responsiveness to their views and priorities

- The government must deliver on its commitment to lower the voting age to 16.
- The introduction of votes at 16 should take place alongside an extension of the provision of citizenship and politics education in schools.
- Youth democracy should be strengthened with a campaign to increase awareness of the youth parliament by ensuring all local and combined authorities have full and well-resourced youth councils, and with the creation of a Youth Council of the North.
- Local leaders and mayors should commit to holding regular listening sessions with young people.

It is essential that political leaders act now to improve the prospects and democratic content of young northerners. Today's young people are the future of the North. By 2043, over 9 million northerners will be Gen Z or younger, making up 60 per cent of the working population and 43 per cent of the voting population (ONS 2020a).

The government has put young people at the heart of its Opportunity Mission, with the aim of 'breaking the link between young people's backgrounds and their future success'. Putting this into action now in the north of England is crucial.

It must do so both to tackle the unfairness of intergenerational and regional inequality that holds too many people back, and to restore young northerners' trust in politics by showing that progressives can deliver on their promises for change or else risk losing a new generation of potential voters to the populists and the radical right.



1.

THE YEAR THAT WAS

The north of England stands at a crossroads, facing both challenge and opportunity. The election of a new government in Westminster and the continued expansion and deepening of devolution provide opportunity to make good on regional rebalancing and revitalise the North. But the growing threat of the populist and radical right, and a difficult domestic and international economic outlook, pose challenges to this agenda at the same time as making a real change more urgent. Socially, the North's rich heritage and current cultural potential provide the opportunity for the region to thrive. But growing fault lines within communities, between the haves and have nots and between generations, must be overcome so the region can move forward and all can succeed together.

WESTMINSTER

A progressive victory but the threat of the radical right looms

The past year has seen significant political change in Westminster with the election of the first Labour government in 14 years. Labour won a landslide victory, taking back many seats in the north of England that the party had lost in 2019. Voters, tired of scandal and crisis under the Conservatives, put their faith in Labour's promise of change and expect the government to deliver on its missions to grow the economy, work towards net zero, improve safety in our communities, break down barriers to opportunity, and make the NHS fit for the future (Labour 2024).

Despite this progressive victory at home, political instability has reigned globally. The election of Donald Trump for a second term as US president typifies this, while across Europe the threat of populism and the radical right continues (Cokelaere 2024, Mitteregger 2025). The UK is not immune to this trend. At the time of writing, Reform is topping the opinion polls (Politico 2025). But recent centre-left victories in Canada and Australia provide optimism that progressives can push back against the radical right and win.

DEVOLUTION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Wider and deeper devolution but local government finances remain tight

The new government has continued to widen and deepen devolution in England. In December 2024 it published its English Devolution White Paper (MHCLG 2024) which set out a roadmap for furthering devolution, including the introduction of a new devolution framework as called for by IPPR North (Giovannini and Johns 2021). It has embraced England's local leaders, with metro mayors invited to Downing Street just days after the general election, and with the establishment of the Council of Nations and Regions, the Mayoral Council for England, and the Local Government Leaders' Council to facilitate closer working between different layers of government.

In the North, local leaders have continued to deliver for their places. Greater Manchester became the first place to bring buses fully back into local public control – a key milestone in the progress of devolution delivering outcomes (Johns and Gerritsen 2025). Meanwhile, new mayors elected for the first time in 2024 in the North East and North Yorkshire have hit the ground running (Gerritsen 2025).

Northern mayors have also continued to collaborate through the Convention of the North, held in Preston this year, and with the establishment of the Great North initiative which seeks to evolve pan-northern collaboration on green industrial renewal, manufacturing, transport and creative industries (Tickell 2025).

In May 2025, elections were held for new mayors in Hull and East Yorkshire, and in Greater Lincolnshire. Over 90 per cent of the North's population is now covered by a mayoral combined authority (MHCLG 2024). Victories for Reform in both new mayoralities as well as strong showings in some council elections across the North highlight the growing political challenge they pose to progressives. Attention will now shift to whether new Reform mayors and councils can shift from campaigning mode, to put their places' interests above party and deliver for their areas (Swift 2025).

In local government, however, significant financial constraints remain following the decimation of local funding under previous Conservative administrations (Johns et al 2024). While the government has increased core funding for local councils and has set out plans to make local government funding fairer by better recognising factors like demographics and deprivation (MHCLG 2025), finances remain tight, impacting local services and outcomes. What's more, mayors and local government remain beholden to national tax revenues, with so far limited moves towards greater fiscal devolution.

ECONOMY

Opportunities for growth and regional rebalancing but challenging domestic and international headwinds blow

Economically, the situation at home and internationally remains challenging. Years of sluggish growth and underinvestment have held many places in the North and across the country back (Johns and Hutt 2023). Despite commitments to deliver a Northern Powerhouse and to level up, the Conservatives' final budget in office in March 2024 barely mentioned the need for economic rebalancing, typifying 14 wasted years (HMT 2024).

The new government has pledged to increase investment across the UK (HMT 2025), but the difficult economic climate coupled with the government's self-imposed fiscal rules make this endeavour challenging. This task, however, remains urgent. The government has committed to delivering a new industrial strategy, which is one means to unlock investment across the country (DBT 2024). It is vital those places across the North that have suffered from previous waves of deindustrialisation are backed (Swift and Johns 2025).

SOCIETY

Northern culture flourishes but cracks in communities show

In wider society, the last year has once again seen the North at the centre of exciting cultural developments in the UK. Bradford is the UK's 2025 city of culture, while northern mayors have continued to champion the cultural offers and industries in their areas.

The gaze of commentators has also landed frequently on young people, with concerns expressed about young people's attitudes to democracy (Ahmed 2025, Hyde 2025, Duffy and Morini 2025). Concern about youth social attitudes and safety saw the creators of the hit TV show *Adolescence* invited into Downing Street to meet the prime minister (Prime Minister's Office 2025).

Concerningly, last summer saw the outbreak of race riots across the country, with many northern towns and cities blighted by ugly scenes. The riots were perhaps symptomatic of increasingly hateful views being held by some in society (Deo 2024), and the far right's mobilisation of them (Patel and Morris 2024).

2. REGIONAL REBALANCING FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

It is in this context of challenge and opportunity that this year's *State of the North* report focusses on young people in the North. This is a pivotal moment for them. The current generation of young people (Gen Z) has grown up in extremely challenging circumstances. Living through or born into the financial crisis of the late 2000s, they have faced the era of austerity and declining public services (Johns et al 2024). They have seen their horizons shrink as a result of the 2016 Brexit referendum. They made great sacrifices for the benefit of all during the pandemic at the cost of significant educational and social disruption to themselves (Sonuga-Barke et al 2022).

Coming through the other side of all this, they have faced the cost-of-living crisis and are living through an era of relative stagnation where opportunity is limited; it is becoming increasingly unlikely that many of today's young people will be better off than their parents (Williams 2023). Intergenerational wealth inequality is stark (Johns et al 2024) and inherited wealth is becoming an increasingly important determinant of young people's future financial stability, widening inequalities (Hood and Joyce 2017). YouGov polling of 18-to-27-year-olds finds that just 30 per cent feel they will be better off than their parents when it comes to career opportunities, 24 per cent feel they will be better off in terms of happiness, and only 15 per cent think they will be more financially secure than their parents (Difford 2025).

It is unsurprising that we are seeing growing concerns about young people's satisfaction with democracy and its ability to deliver for them (Foa et al 2020). One likely key driver of young people's democratic discontent is the gap between what they desire and what the state has provided. All too often their voice goes unheard or is inadequately represented in our democracy and electoral politics.

Addressing this is crucial for the long-term health of our democracy and society. There are increasing concerns about the attitudes of some young people, including the potential rise in appeal of the radical right to youth, and the seemingly diverging political and social attitudes between some boys and young men, and some girls and young women (Burn-Murdoch 2024). This includes growing concern about misogynistic attitudes and behaviours, recently brought to the fore in the popular TV drama *Adolescence*.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This report is not overly prescriptive in its definition of young people, though it focusses its analysis predominantly on what has been termed Gen Z, which we define here as those born between 1997 and 2012. Cohort effects and self-recognition between those within a generation mean that they can serve as useful foci of analysis (Curtice et al 2023, Ipsos 2023). Generational boundaries, however, are never perfectly neat. Moreover, what happens in early childhood and later stages of youth development also has

an important bearing on attitudes and outcomes. For this reason, analysis of Gen A (the generation born post 2012) also shapes this report.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE NORTH

While these challenges impact young people across the country, this is especially true in many areas of the north of England, where young people are often further disadvantaged by our country's deep and persistent regional inequalities (Johns et al 2024). As this report sets out, these inequalities faced by young people in the North are evident and felt by young northerners across a range of factors, with regional divides in their starting baseline, the opportunity for a good life, and the chance to be heard in politics being barriers to full potential for many, damaging their chances and democratic satisfaction. Despite years of rhetoric on closing our regional divides, from the Northern Powerhouse to levelling up, deep regional inequalities remain. There is an urgent need to address this now if the next generation of northerners are to break out of the doom-loop of regional inequality which acts as a barrier to life chances and opportunity.

Today's young people are the future of the North. Across the region, a little over 5 million of its 15.7 million population are Gen Z or younger. At present they make up 18 per cent of the workforce, and 14 per cent of voters (ONS 2024). By 2043, over 9 million northerners will be Gen Z or younger, making up 60 per cent of the working population and 43 per cent of the voting population (ONS 2020a). Understanding their experiences, challenges, hopes and potential, and delivering for this generation are therefore crucial to their success and prosperity and that of the region looking ahead.

This report seeks to do that, drawing not only on insights from the literature and data analysis, but on findings from focus groups carried out with young people in Wigan and Newcastle and a focus group on opportunity with young people from across the North. It gives voice to their concerns and priorities. The report also draws on new polling which looks at young people's attitudes to opportunity and political representation, and policy responsiveness. In consolidating this research, it sets out the ways in which the government, mayors and other local leaders can take the opportunity to fix these inequalities and deliver for young northerners before divides entrench even further between regions, between young and old, and between young men and women.

They should do so by acting in key three areas. First, through providing a **better baseline** for young people in the North, closing gaps in opportunity and social mobility, educational outcomes, employment prospects, and mental health provision. Second, by ensuring that young people in all parts of the country have access to a **good life**, improving access to culture, to green space, and the provision and reliability of public transport. And third, by ensuring that all young people have a **strong voice** and agency in our democracy at the local, regional and national levels, and that their views and priorities are listened to and acted upon.

3.

A BETTER BASELINE

At present, too many young people's life chances remain determined by where they were born and the circumstances in which they grew up, and too many are prevented from fulfilling their potential. While interregional mobility has seemingly declined in the UK in recent decades (Clarke 2017), it shouldn't be the case that young people need to move in order to get on in life. Young northerners deserve the same starting point and future opportunities as young people in other parts of the country.

Many of the young people we spoke to like their hometowns and are proud to be from the North. Participants spoke of the importance of the 'culture up north', and pointed to characteristics like friendliness, being caring and a sense of togetherness that some saw as hallmarks of northernness. Others pointed to the countryside and history as rooting them in their place. Yet despite this affection for the North, few participants across our focus groups envisaged staying in the North as they got older. People felt they needed to move away to succeed: "A lot of people gravitate to London because that's where the opportunities tend to be." There was a clear sense that opportunity was lacking. One said:

"Northern powerhouses have been left behind... there's no opportunities whatsoever."

Another noted that "many northern towns have been abandoned".

To address this, there is a clear and urgent need to ensure that all young people can start from a better baseline from which to thrive. Here, our analysis of existing data and discussions with young people suggest that opportunity and social mobility, education, employment, and mental health should be key priority areas for improvement. This should include tackling regional inequalities in childhood poverty, addressing inequalities in education funding, ensuring that good employment prospects are available to young people in all regions, and taking steps to fix regional inequalities in mental health challenges and waiting times for treatment.

OPPORTUNITY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

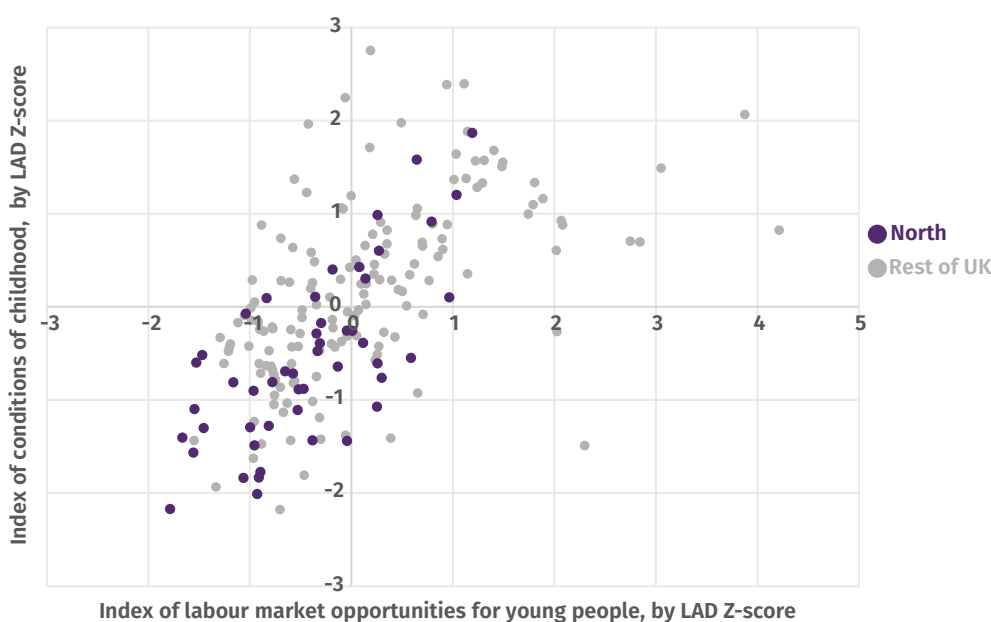
Ensuring that opportunity is equally accessible everywhere is vital to providing young people in the North with a better baseline from which to thrive. The government has recognised this. 'Breaking down the barriers to opportunity' is one of its key missions. Currently, too many young people are held back by a lack of opportunity. A key factor in this is the challenge of improving social mobility, which requires both increasing opportunity and reducing inequality overall (Norman et al 2025). This is not just vital to the life chances of young people across the region, it is also crucial to achieving northern and national prosperity. Evidence suggests that increases in social mobility improve economic productivity and nationwide economic outcomes (Jenkins et al 2017).

As we will see, education and employment are crucial to providing opportunity for young people in the North. But the opportunities can also be shaped much earlier in life. The Social Mobility Commission (2024a and 2024b) has highlighted the importance of childhood conditions and labour market opportunities for young

people, determined by factors such as child poverty, parental occupation, parental education, and access to professional jobs for young people. In addition, they consider favourability of economic growth. Levels of advantage across all three of these indices, two of which are explored below, are below the national average in the North.

FIGURE 3.1: YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE NORTH TEND TO HAVE LOWER ADVANTAGE IN LIFE THAN MANY OF THEIR PEERS ACROSS BOTH CHILDHOOD CONDITIONS AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Indices of labour market opportunities and conditions of childhood for UK local authority districts by Z-score. The Z-score shows how likely it is that a place is different to the UK average, where a negative value is worse and a positive value is better



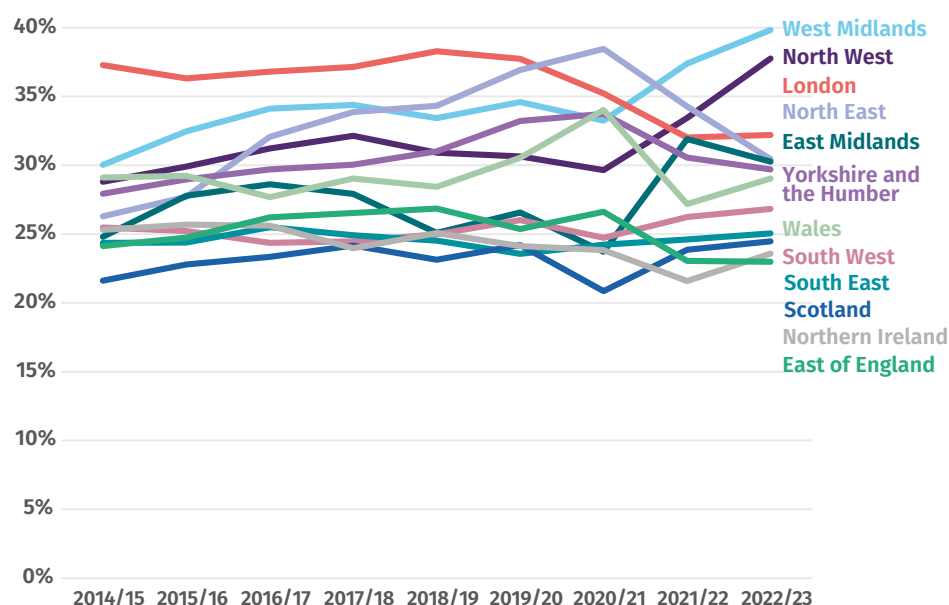
Source: Social Mobility Commission 2024a and Social Mobility Commission 2024b

Similarly, levels of child poverty and disadvantage are above average across the North, and again particularly poor in the North East, and Yorkshire and the Humber (ibid). The percentage of children living in low-income families has risen across the UK in recent years but remains higher than the national average across the North (DWP 2025). Over 1 million children are now living in poverty in the north of England (Wadman et al 2024). The issue of poverty and its impacts on young people was raised by a number of our focus group participants. As one put it: “[Poverty] affects people at school, [they’re] thinking when am I going to eat when I get home, what can I eat when I’m at school.”

The current government has recognised the scourge of child poverty and the impact it can have on limiting opportunity, noting that “driving down child poverty will transform lives and communities” (Cabinet Office 2024). It has therefore put addressing this challenge at the heart of its Opportunity Mission, with the aim of “breaking the link between young people’s backgrounds and their future success” (ibid). It is expected to set out its child poverty strategy later this year.

FIGURE 3.2: CHILD POVERTY HAS RISEN IN ALL THE NORTH'S REGIONS SINCE 2014/15 AND THE WEST MIDLANDS AND NORTH WEST HAVE OVERTAKEN LONDON IN LEVELS OF CHILD POVERTY, THOUGH WITH SOME RECENT IMPROVEMENTS IN THE NORTH EAST

Proportion of children living in poverty, measured as relative poverty after housing costs (AHC)



Source: Social Mobility Commission 2023

The government has rightly recognised that tackling child poverty and improving young people's opportunity cannot be done from the centre alone. It has highlighted that it can learn from initiatives already in place across the country, saying its strategy "will be UK-wide, drawing on devolved and reserved levers and working closely with devolved governments, recognising the progress that has been made on their poverty strategies & policies, and with mayors and other leaders of local government" (Cabinet Office 2024).

In the North, the work of Kim McGuinness in the North East has been a notable example of a regional mayor putting the issue of child poverty at the heart of their agenda. She has established a Child Poverty Reduction Unit and is working with stakeholders in the region to develop a North East child poverty action plan (NECA 2024). Local authorities in the North are also taking action to try to improve children's start in life, such as Rotherham Council's (2025) baby pack scheme.

As the government in Westminster pushes ahead with its child poverty strategy, it is essential that **the national child poverty strategy recognises and reflects different regional challenges and needs and draws on the work of local leaders, and further empowers them to tailor local child poverty and opportunity strategies in their places.** This approach could be facilitated through the Council of Nations and Regions, the Mayoral Council for England, and the Local Government Leaders' Council.

EDUCATION

In order to spread opportunity across the country and improve social mobility to provide a better baseline for young people, other inequalities must also be tackled – not least when it comes to educational outcomes. Education is vital to young people's life chances, and we all benefit from well-educated young people. Higher

levels of qualification lead to improved employment opportunities, in terms of access to employment and graduate earnings (Farquharson et al 2022).

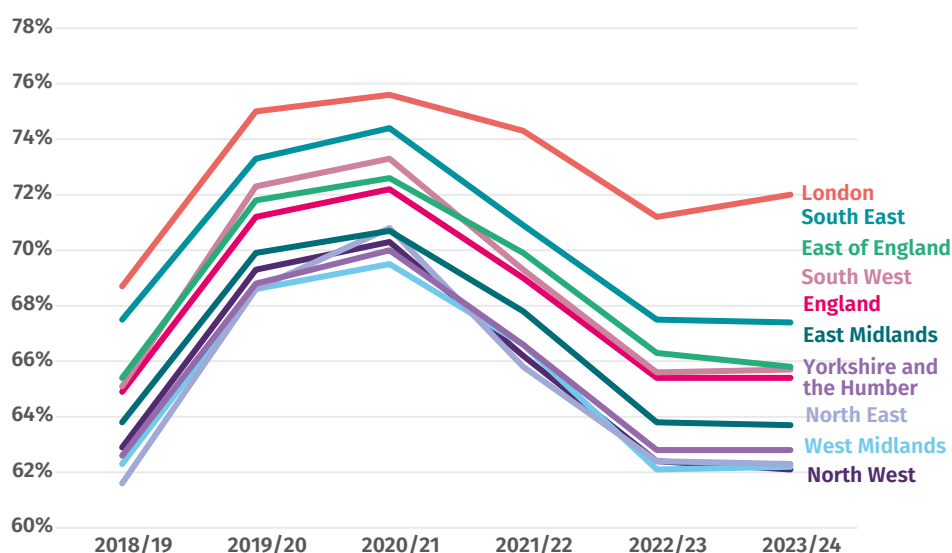
There is evidence that improved educational outcomes also result in improved health outcomes (Davies et al 2018). Education levels also have an increasingly important bearing on rates of civic and democratic participation: those with higher levels of education are more likely to participate (Patel 2023). Moreover, improving educational attainment is vital to boosting the UK economy. It is suggested that improving educational attainment between regions in England could raise £14.4 billion (Hochlaf and Mudie 2022).

High levels of disadvantage result in worse educational outcomes and reduced opportunity. This is true from very early childhood and throughout a young person's school journey (Education Policy Institute 2024). Even when it comes to high attaining students, there is a lag between high attainers from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more advantaged backgrounds. This lag is worst in the North West and North East than elsewhere (Holt-White and Cullinane 2023).

Higher levels of deprivation in many parts of the North are reflected in poorer school outcomes. Over recent years, the proportion of individuals passing English and Maths at level 4 is well below the national average in all the regions of the North (DfE 2024a). This is not a problem of poorer educational institutions. Even where schools are rated highly, the challenge of persistent disadvantage still results in inequalities in educational outcomes (McGlade and Kelly 2025).

FIGURE 3.3: THE PROPORTION OF INDIVIDUALS PASSING ENGLISH AND MATHS AT GRADE 4 OR ABOVE IS LOWER IN ALL THREE NORTHERN REGIONS THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE

Percentage of pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and Maths GCSEs by region, 2018/19 and 2023/24



Source: ONS analysis of DfEa 2024.

Note: axis starts at 60 per cent, not 0 per cent.

Nevertheless, several participants in our focus groups commented on standards of education and challenges in their schools, such as lack of resourcing and high teacher turnover rates. One participant noted that “all the best teachers in my area have moved down south within a year because they go down for better paying

jobs". The view that many young people in the North are disadvantaged when it comes to education was typified by one remark:

"The North, especially in terms of education, is lacking, more than the South."

A further driver of inequalities in educational outcomes may be funding disparities between schools in the North and other regions such as London. Schools in the North have remained historically underfunded despite the mismatch in outcomes. This issue has worsened in recent years. While in 2010, deprived schools received up to 38 per cent more funding than non-deprived area schools, this progressive funding has now almost disappeared (Farquharson et al 2022). On average, pupils in London receive 9.7 per cent more funding than those in the North (Mon-Williams et al 2023). This may be a key factor in explaining why London has better outcomes than many places in the North, despite high levels of child poverty also being a notable feature in many areas of the capital (Holt-White et al 2025).

To address this, **the government should explore amending the school funding formula to ensure fair funding between regions and targeted further funding at places most in need.** This should ensure that education funding is "commensurate to the level of need to reduce longstanding inequalities in attainment outcomes", and could be achieved by

allocating additional funding to education providers to support young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (Mon-Williams et al 2023). This would benefit many areas in the North, improving the prospects of young people across our region.

EMPLOYMENT

Access to employment opportunities and fulfilling, well-paid work is another key barometer for youth satisfaction and outcomes. This was recognised by many participants in our focus groups, with the importance of good and well-paid employment opportunities being highlighted. Wider polling also bears this out: over half of young people believe that better job opportunities are the best way to improve lives (Latham 2024). Ensuring that young people in the North have access to good quality job opportunities is also beneficial for the UK economy more broadly, taking the pressure off the overheated London and the South East and spreading prosperity around the country (Raikes 2019).

Currently, many places across the North have some of the lowest access to higher professional jobs, and a larger portion of the youth workforce in lower working-class jobs (Social Mobility Commission 2024). This issue was highlighted by many participants in our focus groups. As one person put it:

"There's still a big gap between the South and the North... down south there's a lot more opportunities, much better jobs... but the jobs you can really get up north is work in factories, manual labour or retail shops... down south has more influential jobs."

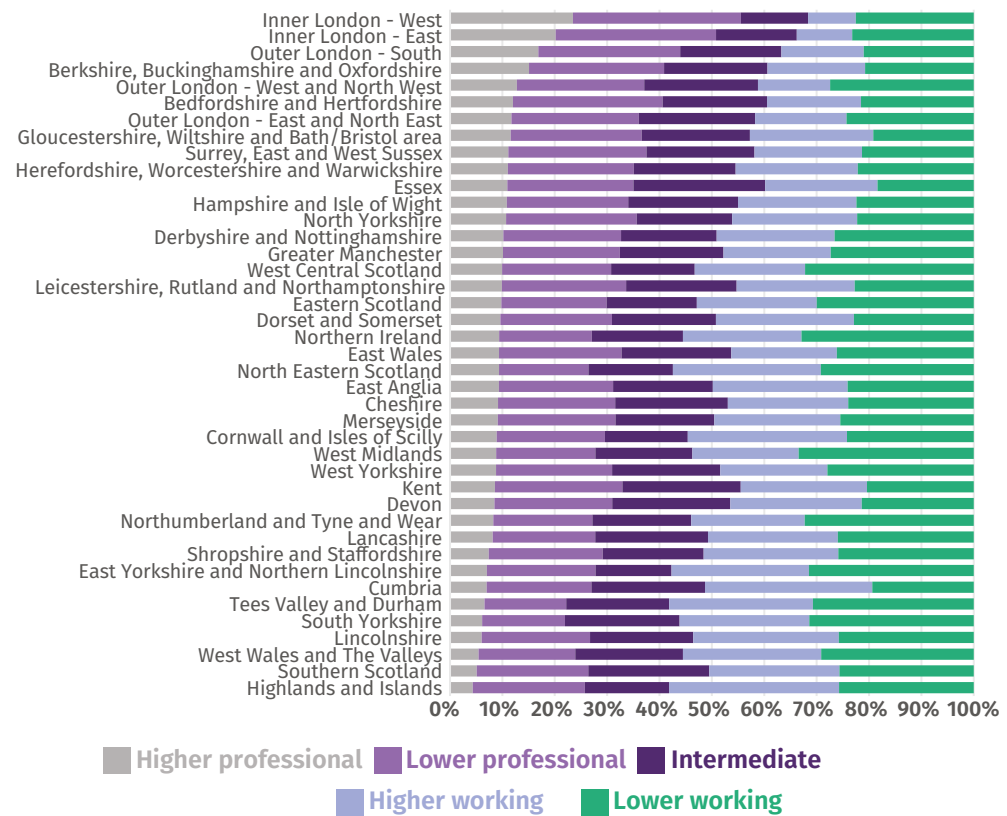
Employment prospects were the key reason that many young people we spoke to felt they might have to leave the North to have a successful career: "All the big opportunities are London, and if you want those opportunities you have to move down there."

A key means to address this issue is for government, local political and educational leaders, and businesses to work more closely together to ensure that regions outside of London and the South East attract business investment and new employment opportunities. The government's forthcoming industrial

strategy is one route by which it can work to target good jobs and employment opportunities in the north of England, particularly to those areas that have suffered from previous waves of deindustrialisation (Swift and Johns 2025). The government has also pledged to invest in cultural industries to create more employment opportunities across the country (DCMS 2025).

FIGURE 3.4: FEWER YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE NORTH WORK IN HIGHER PROFESSIONAL OCCUPATIONS

Percentage of 22-to-29-year-olds by each professional occupational level by ITL2 region



Source: Social Mobility Commission 2024c

This noted, today’s young people want opportunity now, including meaningful work experience to help them succeed in their chosen career paths without having to leave the North. Many young people in our focus groups spoke of the difficulty of gaining work experience. This was typified by the remark: “You need experience to get a job, but you have no experience to get a job.” Yet it was seen as difficult to gain such experiences in their local areas. One participant noted that lots of high-quality work experience like summer internships seem to be largely based in London and the South East, which, in their view, “leaves people in the North a bit alienated”.

Existing opportunities for work experience, particularly those offered in schools, were seen to be largely inadequate by many young people in our discussions. Generally, this was seen to result in low-quality placements that were too short-term and take place when young people feel too young for them to be useful – generally in year 10. As one person put it: “At 15 you can’t do much, I was working behind a desk and cleaning pool tables.” There was therefore a strong desire for

better, longer-term opportunities at an older age, and for a system where good quality employers are incentivised to take on young people and provide them with meaningful experience.

To deliver on this, combined authorities could work with local businesses through their good employment charters and educational institutions to **facilitate young people in the area up to the age of 18 being able to take on good-quality work experience opportunities with businesses and organisations in the area**. Not only would it provide young people in the area with better work experience opportunities, but it would also benefit local businesses and the regional economy.

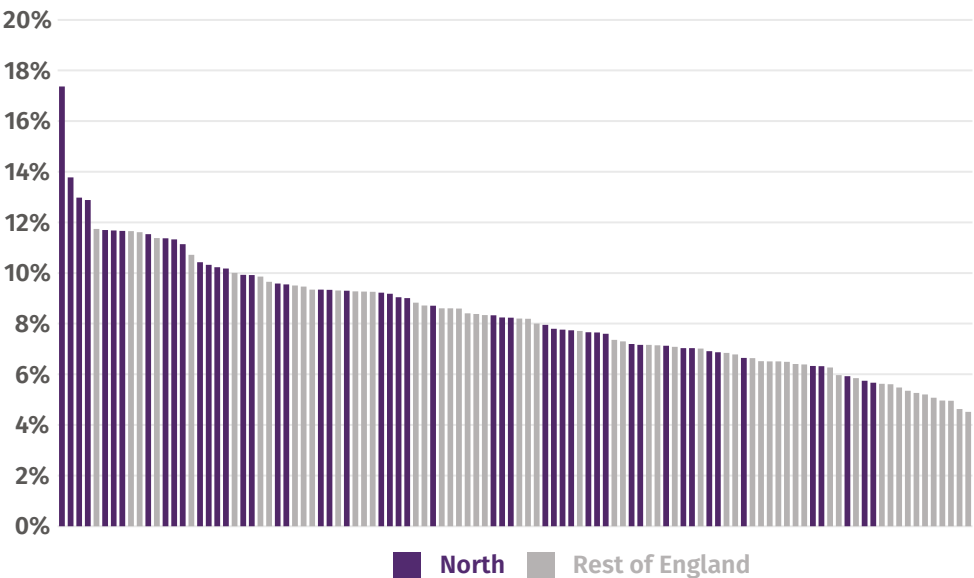
MENTAL HEALTH

The rising challenge of poor mental health among young people (Baker and Kirk-Wade 2024) must also be addressed. This has a significant personal impact for those who suffer, and negatively affects their wellbeing and opportunities. Several participants in our focus groups raised the issue of mental health and highlighted it as a growing concern for many young people. As one participant put it, mental health is now “the biggest issue for young people”.

Failing to address challenges around young people’s mental health now will result in further social and economic challenges. Young people suffering from suspected mental health problems are more likely to miss more days of school (Treloar 2023). Moreover, poor youth mental health has a significant impact on youth unemployment (DfE 2025), the economy and productivity (Cardoso and McHayle 2024).

FIGURE 3.5: RATES OF CONTACT WITH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AMONG CHILDREN IS HIGHER IN MANY AREAS OF THE NORTH OF ENGLAND

Percentage of children in contact with mental health services by sub-ICB area



Source: Baker and Kirk-Wade 2024

Levels of poor mental wellbeing among young people have worsened in recent years. This is true for young people from primary education up to university level,

and for boys and young men and girls and young women (Baker and Kirk-Wade 2024, Lewis and Stiebahl 2025, Treloar 2023).

While this is a problem in many parts of the country, challenges around young people’s poor mental health are experienced more keenly in some places than others. Of the top 10 areas affected by poor youth mental health according to analysis by Baker and Kirk-Wade (2024), five are in the North, with the remainder spread across the Midlands and the South West. Increased levels of deprivation, higher rates of disability and worse general health in the North mean young people are at increased risk of poor mental health. As one focus group participant noted: “Mental health is an issue worldwide... but the North does struggle with some things more than the South.”

This places a higher demand on mental health services in the region. Seven of the top 10 areas with the highest percentage of children in contact with mental health services are in the North (figure 3.5). This strain is perhaps illustrated by the fact that waiting times between the first referral to mental health services, such as talking therapies for anxiety and depression, and the second treatment are also higher in the North than elsewhere (table 3.1). In fact, the average days waited for first treatment are 10 times longer in the North West than in London. A participant in one of our focus groups spoke frankly of their own experience with mental health support waiting times, rightly noting that for many “the waiting time is taking the mick”. They also noted that “when [people] do get support it’s in blocks of sessions, and even if you’re not fully feeling better, it’s just ‘that’s you done’”.

TABLE 3.1: WAITING TIMES BETWEEN REFERRAL AND SECOND TREATMENT FOR TALKING THERAPY FOR ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION ARE LONGEST IN THE NORTH

Average days waited between referral to talking therapies for anxiety and depression and second treatment by region

	Average days waited for first treatment	Average days waited between first and second treatment	Average days waited between referral and second treatment
North West	27.9	69	96.9
North East	14.4	62	76.4
Yorkshire and the Humber	12.2	39.9	52.1
East of England	9.5	33.6	43.1
West Midlands	10.7	29.9	40.6
East Midlands	10.3	27.1	37.4
South West	6.5	19.8	26.3
South East	4.7	13.6	18.3
London	2.5	9.7	12.2

Source: Baker and Kirk-Wade 2024

There is a clear need to address the underlying causes of young people’s mental health challenges, from the fallout of the pandemic to the rising challenges of social media, concerns about opportunity, and life course pessimism. This noted, as these figures indicate, urgent improvements in services and treatment for young people struggling with mental health challenges are required. This should be done through **targeting greater investment in mental health support in areas**

most in need, and targeting resource so young people across the country can expect the same wait times. Currently, services for children and young people comprise just 8 per cent of total spending on mental health services (Gilburt and Mallorie 2024). Given the growing issue of young people's mental health, this will likely need to increase.

4. A GOOD LIFE

As well as having a better baseline from which to thrive, young people need to be offered optimism and fulfilment, and have access to opportunities, spaces and connections that enable them to lead a good life. Over recent years, government cuts, particularly those to local council funding, have seriously damaged the social fabric of many communities in the North and youth provisions. Between 2010–11 and 2023–24 there was a 73 per cent decrease in funding for youth services across England, representing a real-terms cut of £1.2 billion (Kumah 2025). In some places, youth opportunities for leisure and enjoyment are severely lacking, even private provision. As one young person put it:

“Cineworld’s been closed down, I cried over that, I’ve literally got nowt else to do.”

Our analysis and conversations with young people highlighted three priority areas where improvements in provisions would be important for unlocking a good life: cultural opportunities, access to good quality and safe green spaces, and improved, more reliable and safe public transport. Giving local leaders more of a say and spending power to tailor local cultural opportunities and investment, providing targeted funding for local councils to improve and develop new urban green spaces, and devolving more powers to mayors over transport are steps that could be taken in these areas.

ACCESS TO CULTURE

Access to culture, including the arts, music and sports, is not only a source of creativity and fun for young people but can also aid cognitive and social development and wellbeing (Fancourt et al 2020). Interaction through arts and culture is important for the social fabric of places and can have positive effects on community cohesion (Northern Culture APPG 2022). A strong culture industry in the region is also vital to the northern economy and can provide a greater range of employment opportunities (ibid).

The North has a rich cultural heritage and a dynamic range of cultural and creative industries today. Bradford is the UK’s 2025 City of Culture. Meanwhile, regional mayors like Tracy Brabin (2024) in West Yorkshire have made championing culture a key tenet of their agendas. But at present, too few young people have the cultural access that they need to thrive or access to careers in creative sectors. Several developments in recent years have exacerbated this issue.

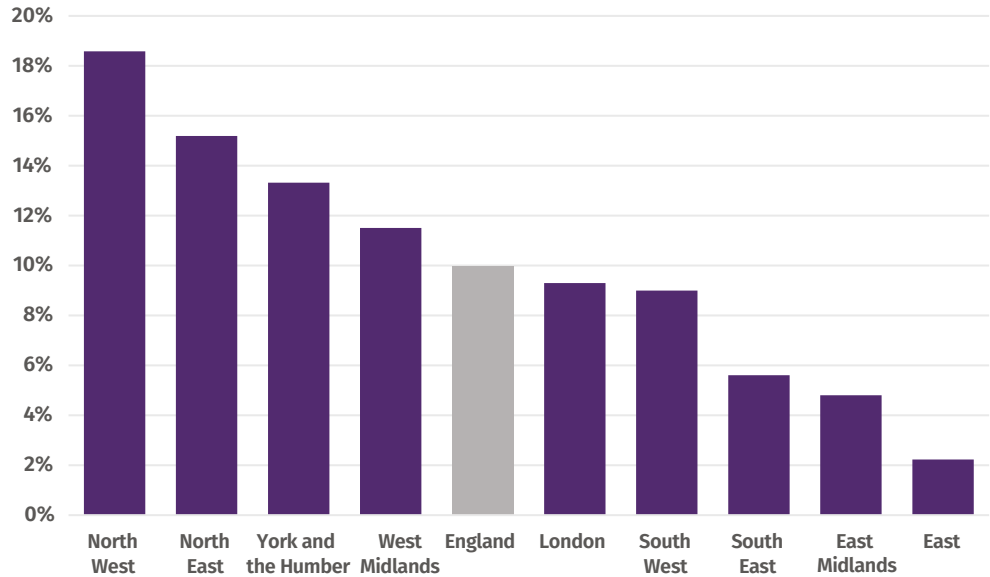
There has been a significant drop in cultural education provision in schools. Between the 2011/2012 school year and the 2023/2024 school year there was an 11 per cent drop in the hours of art, drama or music taught (DfE 2024). This is particularly damaging for young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds, many of whom are often priced out of engaging with cultural events (ACE 2020). This issue was raised by several focus group participants. When it came to sport, one noted: “Wigan’s opportunities are good, but it’s the price tag on them [that is the problem]... my rugby team is £20 a month, plus registration fee, plus away days, but if you can’t afford it, it’s game over.” Costs – sometimes at short notice – also appeared as a significant issue when it came to activities offered by schools, trips

in particular: “Schools do lots of trips but they’re not accessible to most people... there’s a skiing trip to Italy and it costs almost £2,000 and only maybe 20 people in the school can go, it’s not accessible to most families.”

Additionally, library closures over the past 14 years have particularly affected the North (figure 4.1). Libraries are crucial for accessing literature and learning, and are often cultural centres for communities. Their importance as study spaces was also noted by several of the young people we spoke to. There is also a notable disparity in library provision in schools. While just 6 per cent of primary schools in the South East do not have a library, 18 per cent in the North East lack one, the highest rate in England (National Literacy Trust 2022).

FIGURE 4.1: NORTHERN REGIONS HAVE THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF LIBRARY CLOSURES IN ENGLAND SINCE 2010

Percentage of libraries (including static and mobile libraries and excluding prison and archive libraries) that were open in 2010 but had closed by 2024 by region



Source: ACE 2024

This decline in cultural provision is made worse by the fact that the UK has one of the lowest rates of cultural investment in Europe (Ashton et al 2024). This is despite the strength of the cultural sector and the desire for the population to engage with cultural activity (ibid). Moreover, despite attempts to diversify cultural investment across the country, inequalities in funding across regions remain.

To give overall scale to this inequality in arts and culture funding across regions, Table 3.2 below shows the total and per capita levels of spending by region for key Arts Council England (ACE) funding. It shows National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) which is regular funding from ACE for organisations over the period and Transform funding which is funding given to organisations when their regular NPO funding ceases. It also includes National Lottery Project Grants, which are Lottery-funded grants allocated by ACE on a rolling application basis, funding crucial arts and culture projects ranging from small community events to major projects across several disciplines. In 2022, the then government directed ACE to invest more outside of London, recognising inequalities in spending. While £24 million was ultimately redistributed in the NPO budget, significant regional inequality remains.

For the 2022–26 period the whole North is receiving £383.5 million through core ACE funding streams (namely NPO and Transform funding) compared to London’s £458.6 million. Meanwhile, for National Lottery Project Grants at the time of writing (Q1 2025), the North has been allocated £66 million – £4.17 per capita – versus London’s £60.6 million (£6.63 per capita).

TABLE 4.1: LONDON RECEIVES A MUCH HIGHER ALLOCATION OF ACE FUNDING THAN OTHER REGIONS

Combined ACE funding through the National Portfolio Organisation and Transform programmes 2023–26 and National Lottery Project Grants 2023 to date (Q1 2025) by region

	Total (£m)	Per capita (£)
London	519.2	56.79
Yorkshire and the Humber	184.1	32.84
North East	88.1	32.58
West Midlands	192.5	31.42
North	449.5	28.38
England	1,568.8	27.11
Midlands	276.5	24.8
North West	177.3	23.55
South West	109.5	18.72
South East	109.5	18.72
East Midlands	83.9	16.72
South East	132.9	14.07
East	80.9	12.57

Source: ACE 2025a, 2025b, ONS 2020a

These per capita spending inequalities add up to sizeable missing investment in arts and culture for the North, estimated below. This is reflected in our findings of limited access to arts and culture for young northerners.

- Had the North received the same core funding per capita as London, it would have received £411.1 million more, rising from £383.5 million to £794.6 million.
- Had the North received the same allocation in National Lottery Project Grants (2023/24 – Q1 2025/26) per capita as London, it would have received £39.1 million more, rising from £66 million to £105.1 million.
- Combining these, estimating for ACE investment over the period 2023/24 to Q1 2025, had the North seen the same allocation per capita as London, it would have seen £450.2 million more, rising from £449.5 million to £899.7 million.

While the gap in culture funding between London and the North has narrowed compared to ACE’s last investment programme – from a £691 million gap in NPO funding between London and the North based on IPPR North’s analysis in 2017 (Marsh 2017; 2017 prices) to a £411 million gap in NPO funding based on our latest analysis above[1] – the chasm in cultural funding between regions remains stark. There is a clear need to go further on spreading cultural investment more fairly across the country to redress historic underfunding and the challenges of cultural exclusion in regions like the North. This should be reflected in the funding allocations in ACE’s next investment programme post-2026.

Additionally, to improve access to culture in the North, the government should commit to devolving ACE funding and responsibilities for culture to what will become Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities (EMSAs), where there is the

appetite and capacity to facilitate this, so that they can begin to invest in their local cultural priorities and areas of growth. In areas without an EMSA, local leaders and ACE should work together closely on co-creating plans for investment and spreading access to culture.

This would be a positive step in the evolution of devolution in England. As Shaw (2024) has noted: “Devolution has created the need for a more relationship-based approach to culture delivery at a local level, one that is less top down and more co-created closer to communities.” Cultural devolution would enable local leaders to develop cultural investment plans to suit their areas’ needs, whether that it is providing more cultural activities inside or outside of schools for young people, investing in libraries, museums and other cultural hubs, or building on local cultural strengths and industries to provide greater opportunities for young people. This was recognised by young people we spoke to, with one noting that:

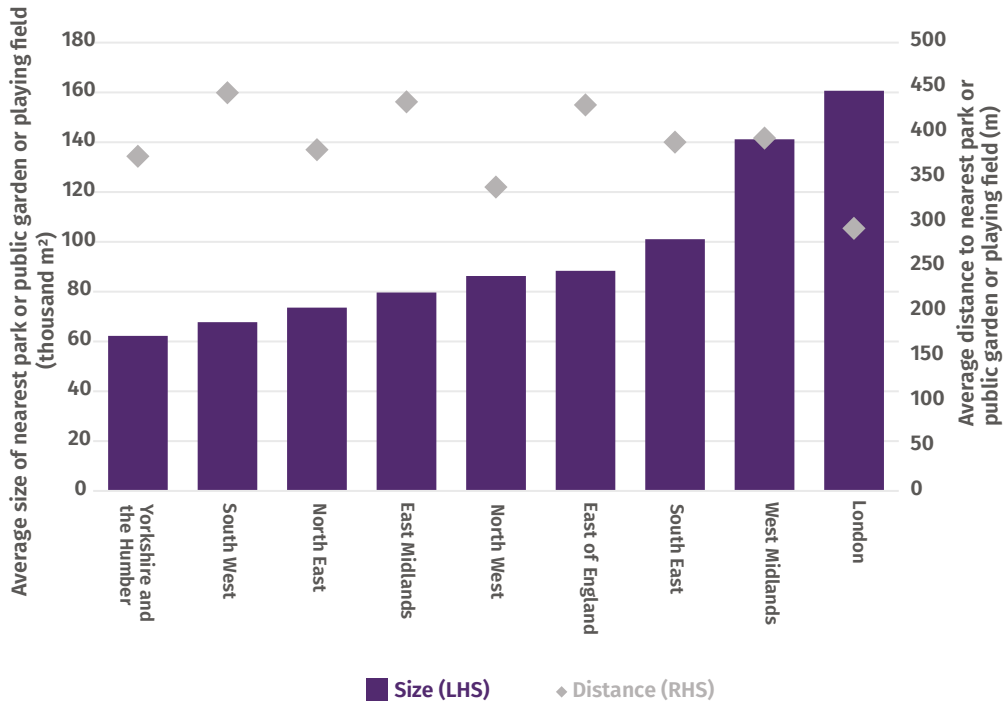
“Our needs are not the same as others... local leaders will have more idea of what we need.”

ACCESS TO GREEN SPACE

Access to leisure and green space is also important for a good life and can bring many benefits, not least for young people’s health and mental wellbeing. Good quality urban green spaces can also bring wider social benefits, such as facilitating social interaction and strengthening community cohesion (Jennings and Bamkole 2019) and improvements in climate resilience, as well as economic benefits (Dickie et al 2023).

FIGURE 4.2: YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER AND THE NORTH EAST HAVE SOME OF THE SMALLEST PARKS, PUBLIC GARDENS AND PLAYING FIELDS IN ENGLAND

Average size and distance of the nearest park, public garden or playing field by region



Source: ONS 2020b

When it comes to access to green space, quality and quantity matter. While the people in many areas of the North have good availability of green spaces, the size and quality of public and private green spaces tends to be worse than many other regions (Figure 4.2). The ability for young people to enjoy green space also matters. As one focus group participant said: “The grass where we grew up, they took the goal nets away – it’s small things like that... what are we going to do now there’s no football nets?” They added: “People always talk about anti-social behaviour in the North, but it’s taking stuff like that away that leads to anti-social behaviour.”

Robinson et al’s (2022) work on urban green centre metrics demonstrates a significant north-south divide in the quality of urban green spaces. Measuring for green spaces, greenness and tree cover, the top five locations for green cover are in the South, while the five worst performing regions are all within the North. This study also demonstrates some relationship between deprivation and greenness – more deprived areas see fewer quality green spaces. Similarly, research on the state of parks finds that three regions of the North have seen the largest decline in park quality, and the highest rates of ‘poor’ or ‘fair’ quality parks (APSE 2021). Perhaps relatedly, it finds that budget cuts to public parks have been most drastic in the North West and the North East (ibid). Addressing these issues is crucial to ensuring that young northerners have the access to high-quality green spaces and the associated benefits that this can bring.

To this end, we recommend that the government provides **targeted funding for local councils to improve and develop new urban green spaces in places most in need**. There is currently a welcome £15 million initiative backed by a new partnership between the National Trust, The National Lottery Heritage Fund and Natural England which aims to provide funding for local councils to improve urban green space (National Lottery Heritage Fund and Natural England 2024). However, given the scale of cuts to park budget since 2010 are estimated to have been £350 million (Grant and Duncan 2023), a much scaled-up, long-term investment scheme is necessary to ensure that vital resources get to areas most in need, rather than a one-off programme that requires local authorities to bid for funding.

Investment in urban green space must also be used to improve safety and accessibility. This was seen as a vital issue by several of our focus group participants. Concerns about lack of adequate street lighting and lighting in public spaces and parks were emphasised, as were concerns about vandalism of parks.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Young people must have the ability to get around their areas for both opportunity and leisure. Good public transport is foundational for good lives. It connects people with education, with employment opportunities and with friends and family, and is a key means of improving social inclusion (Johns and Gerritsen 2025). In an age when social isolation among younger people is on the rise (Burns-Murdoch 2025), access to good quality, reliable and affordable public transport is crucial for connections (Transport for the North 2022). Yet despite fewer young people being able to drive than in previous generations (Davies 2021), public transport ridership among young people has declined (Sustrans 2023). The availability and costs of public transport are seen as the key factors in this trend (ibid).

Some young people in our discussions spoke about the importance of trains, with the previous government’s decision to cut the Northern leg of HS2 being a particular grievance. One person said:

“It drives me insane [that the Northern leg of HS2 was cancelled by the previous government]... we’re second-class citizens, why are we stuck with second class trains?”

Buses were seen as the key means of public transport by most of the young people we spoke to, but their frequency and reliability were key issues. In particular, service levels in smaller towns were highlighted as a problem: “Buses are the best thing ever... but there’s not a single bus to major towns in Manchester. If I try to get a bus to Wigan, I have to get a bus to Leigh and then a bus to Wigan.” These problems are unsurprising. In recent decades, bus service provision has been significantly reduced in many places, but some have been worse affected than others: cuts have been 10 times higher in the most deprived areas of England than in the least deprived areas (Johns and Gerritsen 2025).

To improve buses in the North, **devolution of powers of local transport to combined authorities and the promotion of local public control of buses are essential**. It is local policymakers who are best placed to design local public transport services that work for their areas (Johns and Singer Hobbs 2025). This would also enhance local leaders’ ability to provide targeted public transport incentives and capped fares to help young people. Existing incentives like the free bus pass for 16-to-18-year-olds in Greater Manchester championed by Andy Burnham and the £1 young person’s fare in the North East championed by Kim McGuinness were extremely popular and viewed as very helpful by many young people we spoke to in Wigan and Newcastle.

5. A STRONG VOICE

The voice of young people goes unheard in our politics at present. This fuels both youth discontent with democracy (Foa et al 2020) and low rates of political participation among young people (Ipsos 2024), resulting in the doom-loop of low turnout and a lack of policy responsiveness to youth concerns. This poses a long-term threat to the health of our democracy. There is also a danger that youth democratic discontent can be seized upon by the populists and the radical right.

To address this and to better deliver in the interests of young people, the government and local leaders must take steps to ensure that their voices are heard, listened to and acted upon. They could do so by ensuring that the commitment to enfranchise 16- and 17-year-olds for all UK elections is met, while at the same time strengthening citizenship education and democratic practices in schools. Youth democracy at the national, combined authority and local levels must also be strengthened. And local leaders and metro mayors should develop new initiatives to listen to and respond to the concerns of young people in their areas.

DEMOCRATIC DISCONTENT

There has been increasing concern in recent years about young people's seemingly growing dissatisfaction with democracy and its ability to deliver for them (Foa et al 2020). Gen Z and millennials are now the two groups least satisfied with democracy in the UK (Electoral Commission 2023). Political dissatisfaction among young people can result in several undesirable outcomes.

It can drive the 'silent protest' of a lack of turnout (Patel and Quilter-Pinner 2022). Currently, younger people are much less likely to vote than older people. Ipsos (2024) estimates that just 37 per cent of 18-to-24-year-olds turned out to vote in the 2024 general election. Inequalities in turnout rates generate political inequality, skewing the responsiveness of governments and parties (Patel 2023). This was recognised by young people we spoke to. One participant noted: "At the moment politicians don't have to appeal to young people." Another said: "Parties do things that appeal more to the elderly." In turn, this was seen as likely to further depress young people's interest in politics and desire to vote.

This problem is recognised by the public more broadly. Polling by Savanta of over-16-year-olds from across the UK commissioned for IPPR and IPPR North found that 49 per cent of respondents either 'somewhat' or 'strongly' disagreed with the statement 'MPs do a good job representing the interests and wishes of young people'. In contrast, just 20 per cent either 'somewhat' or 'strongly' agreed with the statement. The figure was slightly better when the same statement question was applied to local leaders and mayors, although there was still a widespread perception that the interests and wishes of young people are not adequately represented. Here, 40 per cent either 'somewhat' or 'strongly' disagreed that young people's interests and wishes are represented by local leaders and mayors, compared with 23 per cent who 'somewhat' or 'strongly' agreed that they are.

Youth dissatisfaction with politics may also result in 'noisy protest' whereby young people's discontent with the status quo drives them away from support for

traditional parties into the arms of populists and more radical alternatives (Patel and Quilter-Pinner 2022). Elsewhere in Europe, support for the radical right among young people is on the rise (Cokelaere 2024). While this is true among both young men and women in some places, elsewhere gender divides in political attitudes are becoming starker (Mitteregger 2025).

Although these trends have not yet spread to the UK to the same extent, we must not be complacent. Indeed, there are warnings of the potential growing pull of the radical right to the young and to young men in particular. While Reform fared worst among young people at the general election last year when compared to other age groups, among under-30s the party was more popular than the Conservatives (Yougov 2024). There was a notable gender gap: 12 per cent of 18-to-24-year-old men backed Reform compared to just 5 per cent of 18-to-24-year-old women who, in contrast, disproportionately backed the Green Party (YouGov 2024).

Away from the ballot box, there is concerning evidence that the views of some young men in particular are becoming more extreme and hateful (Deo 2024). The race riots that blighted many towns and cities last summer were perhaps symptomatic of this. Moreover, the growing concern about misogynistic attitudes among some young boys was raised by several girls in one of our focus groups.

This matters for several reasons: it threatens progressive political parties and policy interests at the ballot box, but its effects are much more wide-ranging and dangerous, threatening the stability of our communities and our democracy itself. Recently, alarm has been raised by a number of polls that suggest significant support for more authoritarian forms of government among young people (Ahmed 2025, Hyde 2025). While there is evidence that some of this concern may be overstated, it is symptomatic of the fact that many young people now seem to lack confidence “in the delivery of democratic institutions and systems” (Duffy and Morini 2025).

This links back to representation and policy responsiveness. A likely key driver of young people’s democratic discontent is the rift between what they desire and what the state has provided. The economic, social and political context in which today’s young people have grown up has been turbulent, from the financial crisis and its aftermath to austerity, Brexit and the political fallout, the effects of the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and rising global insecurity. These factors have coalesced to increase pessimism about their life chances (Difford 2025). At the same time, young people have seen governments rein back their opportunities – for example, the scrapping of the Educational Maintenance Allowance and the trebling of university tuition fees.

In the North, this pessimism about the ability of politics to deliver is exacerbated by the issue of regional inequality. As one participant put it, there is a sense that people feel let down by undelivered promises, from the Northern Powerhouse to levelling up and HS2. They asked:

“Why can’t we just be equal? We’re not asking to be better, we’re just asking to be equal... they let us down because we don’t matter to them... I think that’s why young people don’t engage in politics.”

DEMOCRATIC OPPORTUNITIES

Progressives must not shy away from these issues and allow a negative doom-loop of low youth turnout and political and policy unresponsiveness to continue, or they risk ceding ground to the populist right when it comes to young people. They must tackle the drivers of youth dissatisfaction head on – taking action to provide young people with a better baseline and access to a good life. They must also take action to bolster youth voice and agency in our democracy so that young people and

their interests are truly listened to and acted upon in our politics. We set out four key actions that the government and local and regional leaders could take to give young people a stronger voice.

Votes at 16 in all UK elections

The government has committed to extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds for all UK elections. It is essential that they deliver on this commitment with votes at 16 included in the upcoming elections bill. Doing so would enfranchise an additional 1.5 million young voters and give young people the chance to begin participating in our democracy sooner (Patel and Swift 2025). Based on evidence from Scotland and elsewhere, this is likely to help build a positive norm of democratic participation over the longer term (Eichhorn and Huebner 2023, Aichholzer and Kritzing 2020).

Lowering the voting age to 16 may also have a positive effect on raising the salience of the preferences and needs of young people and bringing them up the political agenda. For this to happen it is incumbent on political parties and politicians to better speak to the concerns and interests of young people. Lowering the voting age to 16 had widespread support among the young people in our focus groups. As one participant noted:

“16-to-17-year-olds, they are literally the future of the country... They should have a choice to decide in their own future.”

Some opponents of lowering the voting age argue that 16- and 17-year-olds lack the maturity, comprehension and political knowledge necessary to cast an informed vote. Several participants in our focus groups pushed back against this. As one put it: “People say they’re not as educated when they’re 16 but there’s loads of adults that aren’t.” Another noted: “I think young people are more politically aware than people think, [and] not every 20-year-old, not every 30-year-old will engage with politics.” Evidence from Austria finds that the quality of 16- and 17-year-olds’ voter choices is similar to that of older voters, in that they cast votes in ways that enable their interests to be represented equally with those of other cohorts (Wagner et al 2012).

Improved political and civic education in schools

The introduction of votes at 16 should take place alongside an extension of the provision of citizenship and well-resourced and unbiased politics education in schools to ensure that all young people feel knowledgeable and confident enough to take part in our democracy. This was emphasised by many of our participants. As one said: “I don’t think there’s enough education at all on politics, we’re never taught about it in school.”

Polling commissioned for IPPR and IPPR North found that many 16-to-25-year-olds do not feel that schools, colleges and sixth form adequately prepare young people for civic participation, with 39 per cent of young respondents either ‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ disagreeing that they do. Similarly, polling by the Electoral Commission (2025) found that many young people would like to see more political and democratic education in schools. Moreover, recent polling by Teacher Tapp found that “84 per cent of state school teachers surveyed did not believe the national curriculum provides enough political education to prepare students for voting in elections” (Martin 2025).

There is evidence to suggest that citizenship education can lead to improved rates of political participation and help build a norm of longer-term participation among young people (Dassonneville et al 2012, Tonge et al 2012, Weinberg 2022). Beyond this, bringing the practices of a healthy democracy into educational settings by offering young people spaces to form political opinions through organised debates,

mock elections and in-school debates with politicians can bring benefits, mitigating inequalities in political knowledge and improving engagement and participation (Huebner et al 2021, Eichhorn and Huebner 2023).

More empowered and regional youth democracy

In addition to participating in elections, young people also need more opportunities to take part in politics themselves and to have their voices and ideas heard, and – importantly – responded to. One means of doing so is the existing Youth Parliament network and through local and regional youth councils. Established in 1999 the UK Youth Parliament is made up of more than 300 elected young people aged between 11 and 18 years old. Additionally, many councils and some combined authorities have youth councils or cabinets.

Many of our focus group participants were involved in their local youth councils and some had been involved with the UK Youth Parliament. While they were positive about their experiences, it was also recognised that there are some issues with the current model that should be addressed. First, it was noted that there is a lack of awareness among young people about the scheme which may prevent them being involved. Many found out about the scheme via their school, and it was thought that some schools put more emphasis on promoting the scheme than others. This issue of inconsistencies in awareness and access has been noted by the Youth Parliament itself (DCMS 2023).

Second, it was highlighted that there is a lack of uniformity of standards of local youth councils across local authorities. Some are very well supported by their local councils while others are not. Similarly, that some of the North's combined authorities do not have full youth councils or cabinets was also seen as an issue. Third, concerns were raised about how much influence young people can have on bringing about practical change through involvement with these organisations. Many involved in their local youth council felt local leaders listened to the voices of young people but questioned whether this made a difference in terms of policy. As one participant put it:

“I think that they’ll listen but then not act on it, they’ll say ‘oh we hear you’ but then when it actually comes to acting on it, they don’t do that.”

Fourth, the southern-centric nature of the UK Youth Parliament was highlighted as a concern. One participant who was a national representative said: “Coventry is the furthest North I’ve been for Youth Parliament.”

Reform is required to address these concerns and to improve youth representation at both the local and national level. There should be a **campaign to increase awareness of the Youth Parliament** and local initiatives and encouragement for a diverse range of young people to become involved. Additionally, **all local authorities and combined authorities should have full and well-resourced youth councils or cabinets**, who can expect to meet local politicians regularly and be able to hold them to account on policy-making.

Building on these local bodies, **a Youth Council of the North should be created** to allow young people from across the North to come together and discuss their shared ambitions, challenges, and ideas for change for the region. There was support for this idea among the young people we spoke to. It was recognised that “it would be good to connect with others [across the North]”, and that given many shared interests, “communication between different councils would give others ideas”.

Local youth listening sessions

Beyond improving youth representation and voice in youth parliaments, combined authorities and local youth councils, there is also a need to widen and diversify youth voice in local democracy more broadly to encourage participation among all young people, including those currently less engaged in politics. One means of doing so would be for **local leaders and mayors to commit to holding regular listening sessions with young people** to hear their concerns and priorities, and report back on the work they are doing to improve outcomes for young people in their areas. Already, mayors are innovating in this space. For example, Oliver Coppard has held Young People's Question Time style events in South Yorkshire (SYMCA 2022).

These initiatives could alternatively be facilitated via educational institutions. Recent polling for the Electoral Commission (2025) found that 42 per cent of young people would like to see visits from people who work in politics. Youth participants for each listening session could be selected by lot to ensure a diverse and different sample of young people at each session. This approach would bring in the voices of young people who may not otherwise seek to get involved with local democracy. As one focus group participant said: "If you've never experienced it how do you know, but if you try it you can know." Additionally, facilitating these sessions through schools and colleges and holding them during school time was seen as a positive means of encouraging wider participation.

Coupled with the strengthening of youth democracy detailed above, this approach would further boost the voice of young people in local and regional politics, doing so in a more informal setting with a more diverse range of young people having opportunities to take part and be heard.



6. CONCLUSION

While young people across the country face challenges, this is especially true in many areas of the north of England, where they are often further disadvantaged by our country's deep and persistent regional inequalities. As this report has shown, regional divides in their starting baseline, their opportunity for a good life, and their chance to be heard in politics are a barrier to many being able to reach their full potential. This is damaging for young northerners' chances and democratic content, as well as the future success of the region.

The Labour government elected on a landslide last year has put young people at the heart of its Opportunity Mission, with the aim of "breaking the link between young people's backgrounds and their future success". Putting this into action now in the north of England is crucial. It must do so both to tackle the unfairness of intergenerational and regional inequality that holds too many people back, and to restore young northerners' trust in politics by showing that progressives can deliver on their promises for change, or else risk losing a new generation of potential voters to the populists and the radical right.

The government, working with the regions' metro mayors and local leaders, can take action now. It must do so by providing **a better baseline** for young people in the North, by ensuring that all young northerners have access to **a good life**, and by making sure that all young people have **a strong voice** and agency in our democracy at the local, regional and national levels, and that their views and priorities are listened to and acted upon. The doom-loop of regional inequity which acts as a barrier to life chances and opportunity must be broken for the next generations of northerners.

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