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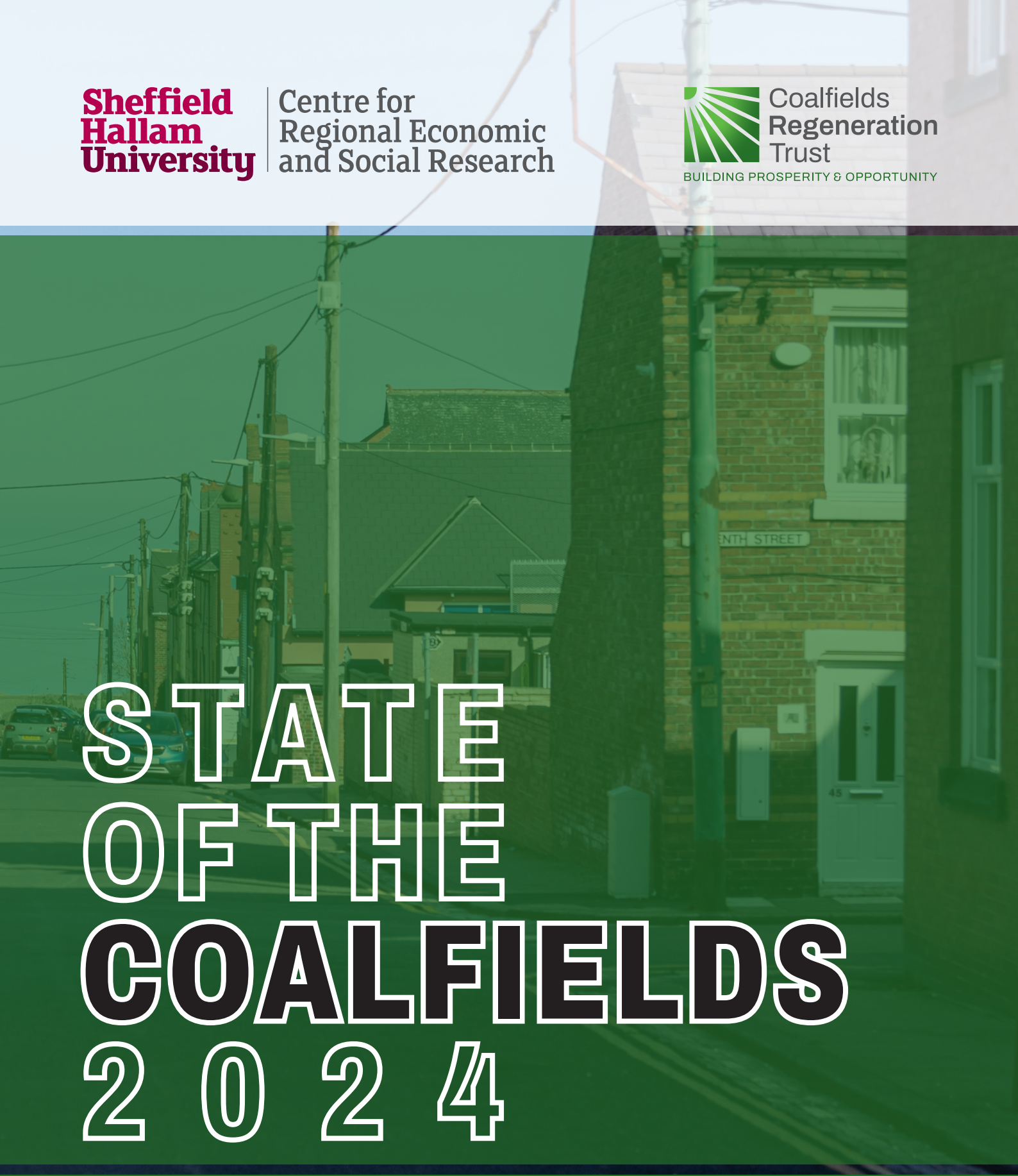

STATE OF THE COALFIELDS 2024

Steve Fothergill, Tony Gore and David Leather

A report commissioned by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust

THE STATE OF THE COALFIELDS 2024

Economic and social conditions in the former coalfields of England, Scotland and Wales

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Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research
Sheffield Hallam University

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Summary

This report updates *State of the Coalfields* reports published in 2014 and 2019. Like its predecessors, it deploys official statistics and a fine-grain map of the former coalfields to consider a range of economic and social indicators and to draw comparisons between the coalfields and the rest of Britain.

An older, slower growing population

The former coalfields of England, Scotland and Wales have a combined population of 5.7 million – roughly the same as a typical English region, a little more than the whole of Scotland and far more than the whole of Wales. The coalfield population is older than average, and in most places growing more slowly than the population of Britain as a whole.

Poor health

Health problems are widespread. 7 per cent of all coalfield residents report 'bad or very bad health' and more than 10 per cent claim disability benefits.

More jobs, in some places

The number of jobs in the coalfields increased by 220,000 between 2012 and 2022. However, in relation to the working age population the rate of growth was only half that in the main regional cities and only a third of the rate in London. The pace of growth also varied between the coalfields.

The rise of warehousing

Warehousing has been a key source of growth. Warehousing now employs more than 175,000 in the former coalfields, which is almost as many as the coal industry itself in the years just prior to the 1984/5 miners strike. The growth in warehousing has been especially strong in Yorkshire and in Lancashire and Nottinghamshire. In several other coalfields the growth has been much smaller.

More workers too

Between 2011 and 2021 an increase in the number of residents born outside the UK added more than 100,000 to the working age population of the former coalfields in England and Wales.

Still not enough jobs and businesses

Despite the recent job growth, the former coalfields still have a 'job density' of only 57 employee jobs per 100 residents of working age, compared to a national average of 73 per 100, and 88 per 100 in the main regional cities.

Commuting: a new norm

One consequence of the low job density in the former coalfields is that there is substantial net out-commuting – an estimated 350,000.

(*continued*….)

A shortage of quality jobs

Just over half of all employed residents in the former coalfields are in manual jobs – significantly more than the national average – and median hourly earnings of residents in full-time work are 6 to 7 per cent below average.

A local brain-drain

Performance at schools appears to be little below the average, and the proportion of young people staying on in education or training is in line with national figures. However, the proportion of working age residents with degree-level qualifications is well below the national average. This is most likely driven by the number and nature of the jobs on offer in the coalfields and by out-migration among the young and better-qualified.

Mixed messages on unemployment

On the government's preferred measure, unemployment in the former coalfields is now in line with the national average. On the other hand, the 'employment rate' in the coalfields – the share of working age adults in work – is three percentage points below the national average and five percentage points below the rate in South East England. To raise the employment rate in the coalfields to the national average would require 90,000 additional residents to be in work. To raise the employment rate to the level in South East England would require 170,000 additional residents in work.

Big numbers on out-of-work benefits

Although recorded unemployment is low, in total one-in-six of all 16-64 year olds in the former coalfields claim out-of-work benefits of one kind or another. That's just short of 600,000 people. A particularly high incapacity benefit claimant rate contributes to these numbers.

Extensive deprivation

In England, 43 per cent of coalfield neighbourhoods are in the most deprived 30 per cent in the country. In Wales, the former South Wales coalfield stands out as particularly deprived, as do the Fife and Ayrshire/Lanarkshire coalfields in Scotland.

The report also looks more closely at figures for four pit villages (Grimethorpe, Easington, Maerdy and Aylesham). The first three of these demonstrate that there are places within the former coalfields that are clearly a very long way from 'fully recovered'. The figures for the fourth give some confidence that it is possible to turn around the fortunes of even quite isolated pit villages.

Britain's coalfields have moved on since the job losses of the 1980s and 90s. There has been substantial progress in new job creation and the former coalfields have emerged with new roles in local and regional economies. But in an era of international migration the full benefits of job growth have not always filtered through to local residents, leaving behind some people and communities.

If the coalfields had been a region in their own right, all clustered together in one corner of the country, the statistics would probably show them to be the most deprived region in the UK.

1. INTRODUCTION

Scope and purpose of the report

The former coalfields are a distinctive part of Britain. Their long history of mining has moulded their economy, culture and landscape. It has also shaped their settlement pattern because coal can only be mined where it is found and many mining towns and villages therefore grew up in places away from the big cities. Coalfield communities often relied on this single industry to an extraordinary extent.

UK coal production peaked just before the First World War. In 1913, 1.1 million miners produced 292 million tons of coal from 3,024 mines[1]. Output and employment fell more or less continuously during the rest of the 20th century though as recently as 1980 the UK coal industry still employed 237,000 workers. But since the year-long miners strike of 1984/5 – fought and lost to try to prevent pit closures – just about the whole of the UK coal industry has disappeared. The last substantial deep mine – Kellingley in Yorkshire – closed in December 2015.

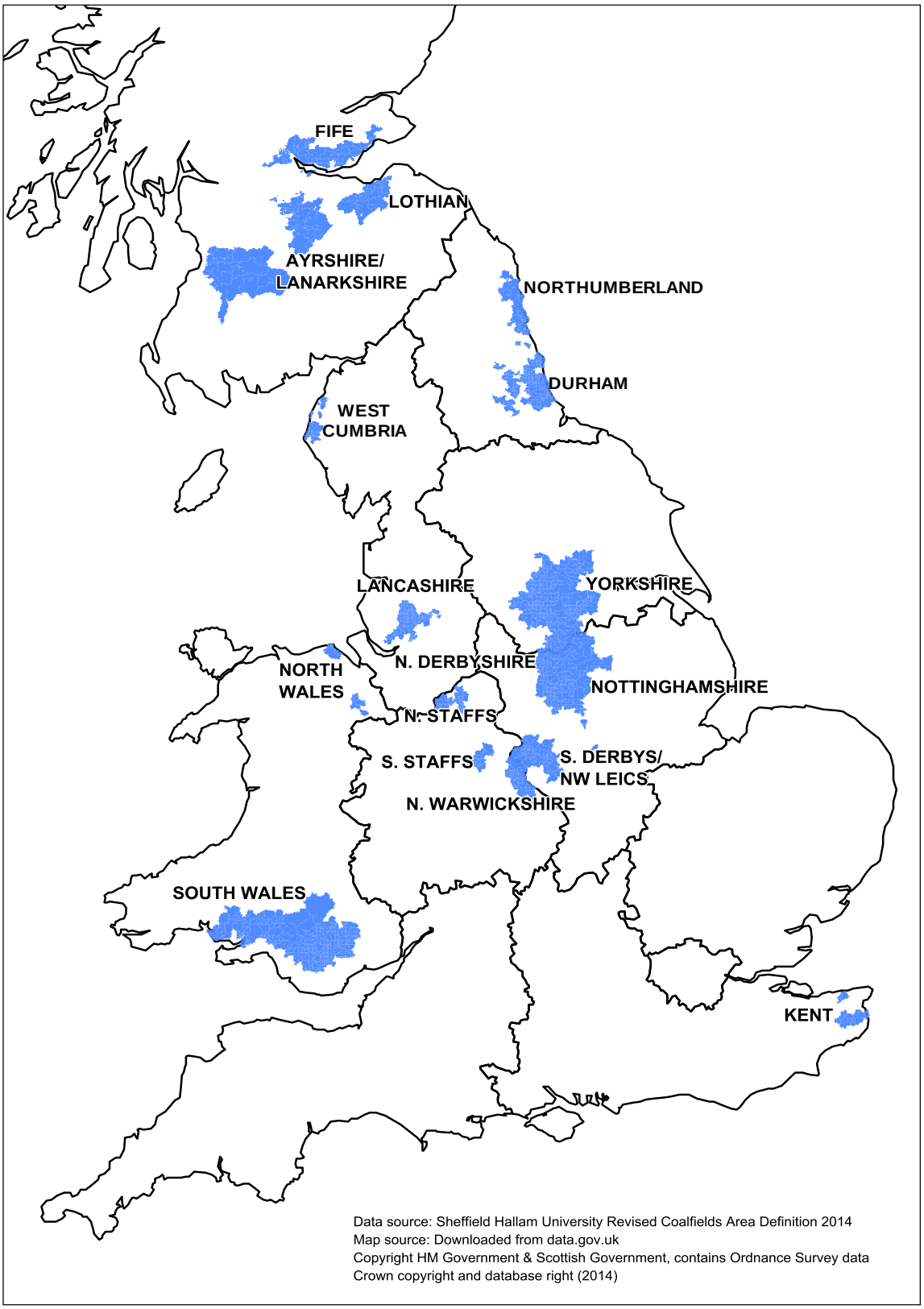
The disappearance of the coal industry raises huge questions about the well-being of the people and communities that once depended upon it, and this has been a significant concern over many decades. Local authorities and successive governments have made major efforts to regenerate former mining areas and, in fairness, most of the physical scars of the industry have now been removed. Colliery sites have been cleared and pit heaps grassed over. But what about the mining communities themselves?

In reports published in 2014[2] and 2019[3] we took stock of economic and social conditions in the former coalmining communities of England, Scotland and Wales. Both reports brought together a wide range of official statistics. The 2014 report concluded that:

> "*The miners strike of 1984/5 may now be receding into history but the job losses that followed in its wake are still part of the everyday economic reality of most mining communities*. *The consequences are still all too visible in statistics on jobs, unemployment, benefits and health.*"

[1] Data from the Department for Business and Trade
[2] M Foden, S Fothergill and T Gore (2014) *The State of the Coalfields*, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University
[3] C Beatty, S Fothergill and T Gore (2019) *The State of the Coalfields 2019,* Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University

Figure 1: Location of the former coalfields



The 2019 report added that:

> *"The number of jobs in the coalfields has grown, the employment rate has increased, unemployment has fallen and the numbers on out-of-work benefits have also fallen…..Whether there has been 'catching up' is less clear."*

There has since been a pandemic, a period of rapid inflation and more recently stagnant national economic growth. In the coalfields just about all the ex-miners have now reached state pension age and many have passed on. There have been other big changes in the labour market including a surge in international migration and, taking a longer view, an increase in labour market participation among women and an expansion of higher education that has taken many young people away from the places in which they grew up.

The present report therefore looks at the up-to-date state of the coalfields, bringing the figures in the 2019 report forward by a further five years. In doing so, it attempts to answer three key questions:

- How do the former coalfields now compare with national averages and with other parts of the country?
- What role do the former coalfields now play in local, regional and national economies?
- And what are the important differences between individual coalfields across the country?

Defining the coalfields

One of the trickier problems is accurately defining the UK coalfields because coalmining took place across a wide range of locations, mainly but not exclusively in the Midlands, North, Scotland and Wales. The regional and sub-regional statistics published by government are not very helpful here. A finer-grained approach is needed.

Our starting point is the ward-based map of the coalfields first developed by Sheffield Hallam University in the 1990s[4]. This defined the coalfields as wards where in 1981 at least 10 per cent of male residents in employment worked in the coal industry. In two areas (Lancashire and North Staffordshire) where mining took place in a more urban context alongside other industries a slightly lower threshold was applied. The Sheffield Hallam map had the merit of defining the coalfields on the basis of labour market data just prior to the major job losses of the 1980s and 90s and it was subsequently deployed by government in the 1998 *Coalfields*

[4] C Beatty and S Fothergill (1996) 'Labour market adjustment in areas of chronic industrial decline: the case of the UK coalfields', *Regional Studies*, vol 30, pp 637-650.

Task Force report[5]. Over the years the map has been revised to include former mining areas in North Wales that did not meet the original statistical criteria and also to cover a small number of additional colliery sites undergoing restoration. The building block has also been revised from wards to Lower Super Output Areas (and datazones in Scotland) which are the finest grain at which most statistics are available. The present report, like the 2019 report, uses this modified version of the Sheffield Hallam map.

These coalfields are shown in Figure 1. The names here are abbreviations – 'Fife' includes neighbouring parts of Clackmannanshire and Stirling for example, 'Ayrshire/Lanarkshire' includes a small area within Dumfries and Galloway, and 'Lancashire' is made up of areas that fall administratively into Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire.

What needs to be kept in mind is that the coalfields cover a wide range of places. This reflects the geography of mining, which took place in and around cities and towns such as Sunderland, South Shields, Wigan, Barnsley and Stoke on Trent as well as in pit villages. Additionally, the definition used here excludes a number of areas (in West Durham, the Forest of Dean and Somerset for example) where significant coalmining ended before the 1980s.

On these boundaries, at the time of the 2021 Census the former coalfields of England, Scotland and Wales had a combined population of 5.75 million. This represents just under 9 per cent – one-in-eleven – of the entire population of Great Britain.

Population by coalfield, 2021

Yorkshire*	1, 276,000
South Wales	758,000
Durham	602,000
Lancashire	591,000
Nottinghamshire	553,000
North Derbyshire	341,000
North Staffordshire	283,000
Fife	272,000
N Warwickshire	196,000
S Derbys/NW Leics	181,000
Lothian	158,000
Northumberland	148,000
South Staffordshire	128,000
Ayrshire/Lanarkshire	124,000
West Cumbria	64,000
Kent	47,000
North Wales	24,000

Sources: Census of Population and ONS mid-year population estimates for Scotland

*N Yorks 75,000, S Yorks 788,000, W Yorks 413,000

[5] Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1998) *Report of the Coalfields Task Force*, DETR, London.

The former coalfields account for 8 per cent of the population in England, 10 per cent in Scotland, and 25 per cent in Wales.

Looking at the figures another way, if the coalfields were a region in their own right they would have a population roughly equivalent to the whole of the West Midlands (5.9 million), South West (5.7 million), Yorkshire & Humber (5.5 million) or Scotland (5.5 million) and far bigger than Wales (3.1 million).

On these boundaries the coalfields vary greatly in size, from Yorkshire with more than 1.25 million people to North Wales with just 24,000.

A note on statistics

As far as possible, all the statistics we present are based on Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in England and Wales and datazones in Scotland – broadly neighbourhoods, each with around 1,500 people. Where data at this geographical scale is available the figures in the report therefore refer specifically to the coalfields, accurately defined, rather than to the wider local authority districts of which they may form only part.

However, some statistics are not available at this highly local scale. In providing some up-to-date figures it is therefore necessary to draw on the government's Annual Population Survey or other data which only provide figures down to local authority level. Where this is the case, the former coalfields have been matched to their principal constituent local authorities[6]. The match is imperfect, so figures based on local authority data flag up this in the headings. It is reasonable to assume that data based on local authorities will understate the problems in the coalfields because some authorities also include more prosperous non-coalfield areas.

A further problem is that in Scotland the Census of Population was conducted in 2022, a year later than in England and Wales, and none of the small area statistics are yet available. Where the gap cannot be plugged by data from other sources we therefore present figures only for England and Wales.

[6] Northumberland (Northumberland County), Durham (Durham County, Sunderland, S Tyneside), Lancashire (St Helens, Wigan), West Cumbria (Allerdale, Copeland), Yorkshire (Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham, Wakefield), Nottinghamshire (Ashfield, Bassetlaw, Gedling, Mansfield, Newark & Sherwood), North Derbyshire (Bolsover, Chesterfield, NE Derbyshire), S Derbys/NW Leics (S Derbyshire, NW Leicestershire), North Staffordshire (Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stoke-on-Trent), South Staffordshire (Cannock Chase), North Warwickshire (Nuneaton & Bedworth, N Warwickshire), Kent (Dover), South Wales (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath Port Talbot, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Torfaen), North Wales (Flintshire, Wrexham), Fife (Fife, Clackmannanshire), Lothian (Midlothian), Ayrshire/Lanarkshire (E Ayrshire, N Lanarkshire, S Lanarkshire).

For most variables, comparisons are made between:

- The average for the **former coalfields**
- The average for **Great Britain** as a whole
- The average for the **main regional cities**. These are Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne, Nottingham and Sheffield (all defined as their local authority).
- The figures for **London**, because the capital is widely understood to be the most dynamic part of the country
- The average for **South East England** (defined at regional level and excluding London) to demonstrate what has proved possible in the most prosperous parts of the country

The absolute numbers we present are generally rounded to the nearest hundred or thousand, and for this reason the figures in some columns do not sum precisely to the total.

2. THE STATISTICAL EVIDENCE

An older, slower growing population

That the population of the former coalfields has increased at a time when the population of the UK has been growing strongly is unsurprising. However, the rate of growth in the coalfields as a whole has been markedly slower than the national average or than in the big cities.

	Population growth 2011-21 (%)
London	7.3
South East England	7.3
Main regional cities	7.1
GB average	5.9
Former coalfields	***3.3***

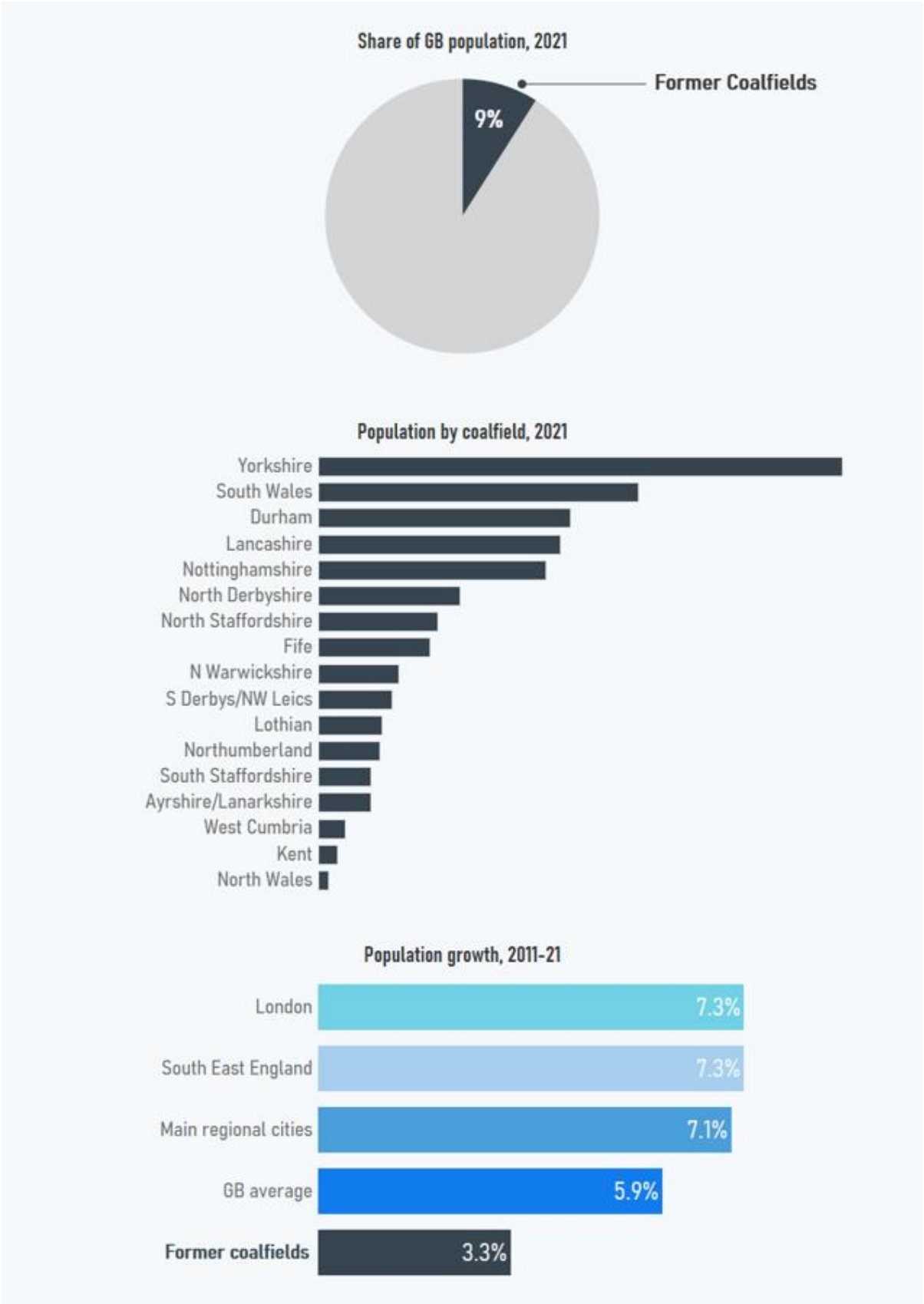
Sources: Census of Population and ONS mid-year population estimates

In recent years the rate of population growth in the coalfields has been less than half the rate in London, the South East and the main regional cities and not much more than half the national average. This slower-than-average growth continues a trend over the preceding decade, identified in the 2014 *State of the Coalfields* report.

Between 2011 and 2021 the population of the coalfields grew by 182,000. All the coalfields except West Cumbria, North Wales and Ayrshire/Lanarkshire shared in this growth. The fastest rate of growth was in Lothian (up 14,000 or 9.7 per cent) and in S Derbyshire / NW Leicestershire (up 15,000 or 9.0 per cent) – both small former coalfields in close proximity to neighbouring cities with plentiful opportunities for commuting.

Among the larger coalfields, Yorkshire's population grew by 57,000 (4.7 per cent) but South Wales by just 1,000 (0.1 per cent).

The age distribution of the coalfield population is subtly different from the national average. In the coalfields there are proportionally more older people (65+) and fewer of working age (16-64) while the proportion of under-16s is close to the national average. Just over one-in-five of the coalfield population is aged 65 or older, compared to one-in-seven in the main regional cities and one-in eight in London. The coalfield population is also getting older – the share aged 65+ rose by nearly three percentage points between 2011 and 2021, and the gap between the coalfields and the national average widened too.


Share of GB population, 2021
Former Coalfields
9%
Population by coalfield, 2021
Yorkshire
South Wales
Durham
Lancashire
Nottinghamshire
North Derbyshire
North Staffordshire
Fife
N Warwickshire
S Derbys/NW Leics
Lothian
Northumberland
South Staffordshire
Ayrshire/Lanarkshire
West Cumbria
Kent
North Wales
Population growth, 2011-21
London
7.3%
South East England
7.3%
Main regional cities
7.1%
GB average
5.9%
Former coalfields
3.3%

	% of population, 2021		
	Under 16	**16-64**	**65+**
Former coalfields	***18.2***	***61.7***	***20.2***
South East England	18.6	62.0	19.4
GB average	18.3	63.0	18.6
Main regional cities	18.6	67.4	14.0
London	19.3	68.9	11.9

Sources: Census of Population and ONS mid-year population estimates

The older population of the coalfields is evident too within the working-age population. The share of young adults (16-34) is lower than the national average and much lower than in the big cities. For every two young adults in the coalfields there are nearly three in the main regional cities.

	% of population aged 16-34, 2021
Main regional cities	31.8
London	29.2
GB average	24.2
South East England	22.5
Former coalfields	***22.2***

Sources: Census of Population and ONS mid-year population estimates

Across Britain as a whole the differences in population growth and in age structure mainly reflect migration and there are two flows that impact strongly on the coalfields.

One is the loss of younger adults to other parts of the country. The younger and better qualified have always tended to move to places where jobs are more readily available, away from more difficult labour markets such as the former coalfields. In the last twenty years or so the flow has been compounded by the expansion of higher education which has diverted large numbers of young adults from the coalfields, where there are few universities, towards the cities.

The other important migration flow is from outside the UK. International migrants too tend to be younger adults of working age and in recent years the UK has experienced a substantial net inflow of migrants from abroad. The share of the population born outside the UK offers a guide to these flows.

Compared to the main regional cities, and in particular to London, the former coalfields have relatively few residents born outside the UK. In relation to the total population, the highest proportion in the former coalfields is in North Staffordshire (9 per cent) whereas the proportion is below 4 per cent in Northumberland, Durham, West Cumbria, South Staffordshire, South Wales. These percentages are all low by contemporary UK standards, though not uniquely so.

Residents born outside the UK, 2021
(England and Wales)

	% of total pop.	% point increase 2011-21
London	41	4.1
Main regional cities	21	4.5
England & Wales average	17	3.4
South East England	16	3.7
Former coalfields	***6***	***2.1***

Source: Census of Population

For many of the former coalfields, significant migration from outside the UK is a relatively new phenomenon. Between 2011 and 2021 the population in the English and Welsh coalfields born outside the UK increased by 119,000 per cent to a new total of 309,000, an increase of over a third.

Poor health

Average life expectancy in the former coalfields is around a year less than the national average, and around three years less than in South East England. This disparity applies to both men and women, and amongst men it cannot be attributed solely to the impact of working in the coal industry because as time has passed relatively few residents are ex-miners, though there is no doubt that working in the coal industry was often damaging to health.

Average years life expectancy, 2020/22 (local authority data)

	men	women
South East England	81	85
London	80	84
GB average	79	83
Former coalfields	***78***	***82***
Main regional cities	77	81

Source: ONS

In the coalfields, life expectancy went up by around a year for both men and women between the late-2000s and the mid-2010s but the gap between the coalfields and the national average has stayed much the same.

For England and Wales, the Census of Population provides a useful measure of self-declared heath. This is the proportion of residents reporting ‘bad or very bad health’. On this indicator the former coalfields emerge as having a high incidence of health problems – the 7.1 per cent of the coalfield population experiencing bad or very bad health represents 370,000 people.

% of residents reporting 'bad or very bad health' 2021 (England and Wales)

Former coalfields	***7.1***
Main regional cities	6.1
England & Wales average	5.2
London	4.3
South East England	4.2

Source: Census of Population

The extent of poor health is underlined by the numbers claiming Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or its replacement Personal Independence Payment (PIP), which is gradually being phased in. DLA and PIP are welfare benefits paid to help offset the costs of care and/or mobility arising from disability. Among the working age population, DLA/PIP is claimed by individuals both in work and out-of-work and it is also paid to substantial numbers above state pension age.

In September 2023, just over 10 per cent of the entire population of the former coalfields – 600,000 people – were DLA or PIP claimants[7]. This proportion is far higher than the GB average and almost twice as high as in South East England. 350,000 of the DLA/PIP claimants in the coalfields were of working age.

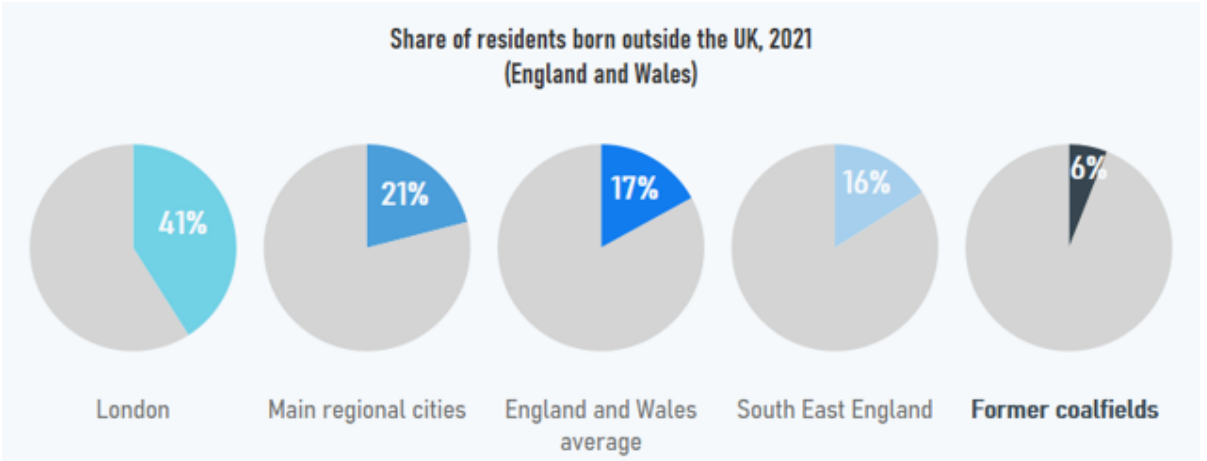
% of residents claiming disability benefits (DLA/PIP), September 2023[8]

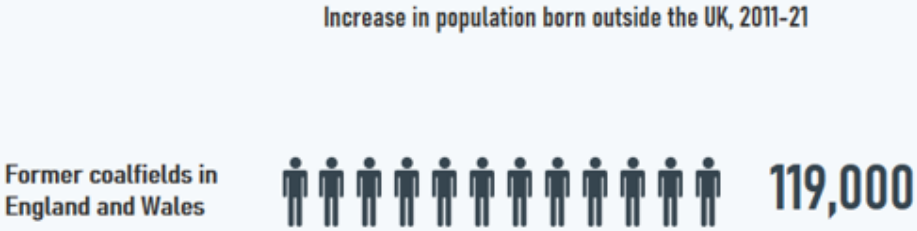
Former coalfields	***10.4***
Main regional cities	8.9
GB average	7.7
London	6.0
South East England	5.8

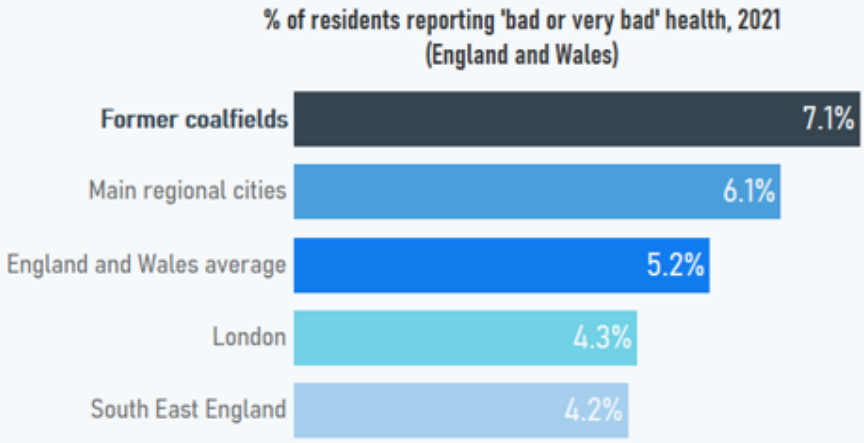
Sources: DWP, Scottish Government

All but one of the former coalfields (the exception is S Derbys/NW Leics) have a DLA/PIP claimant rate above the GB average. In the South Wales coalfield, 13.3 per cent of the total population claim DLA or PIP – that's just over 100,000 people, of whom nearly 60,000 are of working age. The Yorkshire coalfield has over 125,000 DLA or PIP claimants, of whom nearly 75,000 are of working age, though Yorkshire's overall claimant rate is lower at just below 10 per cent.

[7] The numbers here include those in Scotland who have been switched to or are new claimants of Adult Disability Benefit and Child Disability Benefit. For coalfield areas in Scotland the numbers have been estimated from data for local authorities using age-based population weightings.
[8] The Scottish data included here is for June 2023.


Share of residents born outside the UK, 2021
(England and Wales)
41%
21%
17%
16%
6%
London
Main regional cities
England and Wales average
South East England
Former coalfields


Increase in population born outside the UK, 2011-21
Former coalfields in England and Wales
119,000


% of residents reporting 'bad or very bad' health, 2021
(England and Wales)
Former coalfields
7.1%
Main regional cities
6.1%
England and Wales average
5.2%
London
4.3%
South East England
4.2%

More jobs, in some places

The government's Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) provides figures on the number of jobs located in the former coalfields. Because of commuting flows these figures are not the same as the number of coalfield residents in employment, which is considered later. The BRES figures exclude the self-employed.

The most recent BRES data, for 2022, shows that just over two million employee jobs are located in the former coalfields of England, Scotland and Wales. This represents 6.6 per cent of the GB total.

The BRES data shows that between 2012 and 2022 the number of employee jobs in the coalfields increased by 220,000[9]. This represents a 12.1 per cent increase in the number of jobs, but expressed as a percentage of the working age population in the coalfields the increase was much lower, just 6.2 per cent. The difference arises because the former coalfields have relatively few jobs in relation to their working age population and export large numbers of commuters to surrounding areas. Growth in the number of jobs can therefore seem impressive in relation to the initial stock of jobs but not in relation to the size of the local workforce.

	Increase in employee jobs, 2012-2022	
	as % of jobs	**as % of pop. aged 16-64**
London	25.3	18.7
Main regional cities	16.4	12.4
GB average	14.9	9.8
South East England	12.5	8.3
Former coalfields	***12.1***	***6.2***

Source: BRES

Although the growth in the number of jobs in the former coalfields has been only three percentage points below the national average, in comparison to London and the main regional cities it was distinctly slow, especially in relation to the size of the local working age population. On this latter measure, the job growth in the former coalfields was only half the rate in the main regional cities and a third of the rate in London.

All the former coalfields except West Cumbria (where there was a small decline) shared in the growth in employee jobs between 2012 and 2022. The fastest growth was in four smaller coalfields – S Derbys/NW Leics, Lothian, South Staffordshire and Kent. The largest absolute increase was in Yorkshire – up 57,000. But what is also striking is that several of the larger coalfields – South Wales, Durham, Northumberland and North Derbyshire – experienced slow job growth. Employment in the former coalfields has been growing, but not evenly everywhere.

[9] A proportion of the increase (perhaps 40-50,000) is attributable to changes in taxation rules in 2020-21 that reduced the number recorded as self-employed and increased the number of employees.

	Increase in employment, 2012-22	
	No.	**%**
Former coalfields		
Yorkshire*	57,000	13
Nottinghamshire	33,000	19
Lancashire	29,000	14
S Derby/NW Leics	18,000	32
South Wales	14,000	7
Fife	13,000	11
Lothian	12,000	31
South Staffordshire	10,000	26
North Warwickshire	9,000	13
North Staffordshire	9,000	11
Durham	5,000	3
Ayrshire/Lanarkshire	4,000	13
North Derbyshire	3,000	2
Kent	3,000	33
North Wales	1,000	17
Northumberland	1,000	3
West Cumbria	- 2,000	- 9
All former coalfields	***220,000***	***12***

Source: BRES

*N Yorks 2,000, S Yorks 34,000, W Yorks 20,000

The rise of warehousing

A key part of the increase of employment in the former coalfields, especially in Yorkshire, has been the growth of warehousing. Often this has taken place on former colliery sites. The recent expansion is remarkable:

- It accounts for nearly 30 per cent of the overall increase in employment in the coalfields between 2012 and 2022

- It accounts for nearly half the employment growth in Yorkshire, the largest of the coalfields

- The expansion of warehousing in the former coalfields has been accelerating. The number of warehousing jobs increased by 21,000 between 2012 and 2017, and by a further 41,000 between 2017 and 2022.

There is little sign in these numbers of the much-feared impact of automation on employment levels. Even if the growth in warehousing employment were to slow down, it seems unlikely to slip into reverse in the near future.

	Employee jobs in warehousing & wholesale, 2022	
	No.	**Increase 2012-22**
Former coalfields		
Yorkshire	59,250	26,250
Lancashire	20,000	5,500
Nottinghamshire	18,000	8,000
Durham	12,000	5,000
North Derbyshire	11,000	2,000
North Warwickshire	10,500	4,500
North Staffordshire	10,000	1,500
S Derbys / NW Leics	9,000	2,500
South Staffordshire	8,000	4,000
Fife	6,500	2,900
South Wales	6,250	- 500
Lothian	1,575	- 40
Ayrshire / Lanarkshire	1,500	610
Northumberland	1,400	925
West Cumbria	550	120
Kent	425	25
North Wales	275	- 25
All former coalfields	***176,000***	***62,000***

Source: BRES

In several former coalfields, warehousing has become the dominant source of new employment. Indeed, across the former coalfields as a whole warehousing employment is now beginning to match the number of jobs in the coal industry itself in the years prior to the 1984/5 miners strike.

The warehousing jobs are however concentrated in specific places. In particular, there are now almost 60,000 in the former Yorkshire coalfield, where the numbers grew by 26,000 between 2012 and 2022. The adjoining coalfields in Nottinghamshire and North Derbyshire account for nearly a further 30,000, and there are 20,000 more just across the Pennines in the former Lancashire coalfield.

This concentration in central locations within Britain, accessible to the motorway network, is unsurprising and driven by the industry's operational requirements. It's also helped that many former colliery sites have been cleared and made available for new development. By contrast, there are far fewer jobs in warehousing in the South Wales coalfield or indeed in the Scottish coalfields.

More workers too

Alongside the growth in employment in the former coalfields there has been substantial growth in labour supply. There are now more jobs, but also more workers.

A major source of additional labour has been migration from outside the UK. In the former coalfields of England and Wales, the number of 16-64 year old residents born outside the UK increased by more than 100,000 between 2011 and 2021. Given the very high level of migration into the UK since 2021 the numbers in the former coalfields will have increased even further. In line with UK-wide trends, it is likely that much of the pre-2021 migration was from the EU and, following Brexit, the shift will have been to other countries. With few universities within the former coalfields, little of the increase is likely to be attributable to foreign students.

Increase in residents aged 16-64 born outside the UK, 2011-2021
(England and Wales)

Former coalfields	
Yorkshire	34,900
Lancashire	18,300
Nottinghamshire	16,300
North Staffordshire	8,600
North Warwickshire	5,800
North Derbyshire	4,400
South Wales	4,400
Durham	3,900
S Derbys / NW Leics	3,400
South Staffordshire	1,300
Northumberland	900
Kent	700
West Cumbria	200
North Wales	200
England & Wales former coalfields	***104,000***

Source: Census of Population

*N Yorks 1,400, S Yorks 22,100, W Yorks 11,500

In the former coalfields of England and Wales, the ten-year (2011-21) increase in non-UK born residents of working age is equivalent to 54 per cent of the ten-year (2012-22) increase in employment. In the three coalfields with the largest job growth (Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Lancashire), where employment grew by a total of 119,000, the number of working age residents born outside the UK grew by 70,000.

Still not enough jobs and businesses

The former coalfields have a relatively modest stock of businesses. In relation to the population, the number of business in the coalfields is only around two-thirds of the national average.

Private enterprises per 10,000 population, 2023

London	598
South East England	436
GB average	407
Main regional cities	330
Former coalfields	***275***

Source: ONS

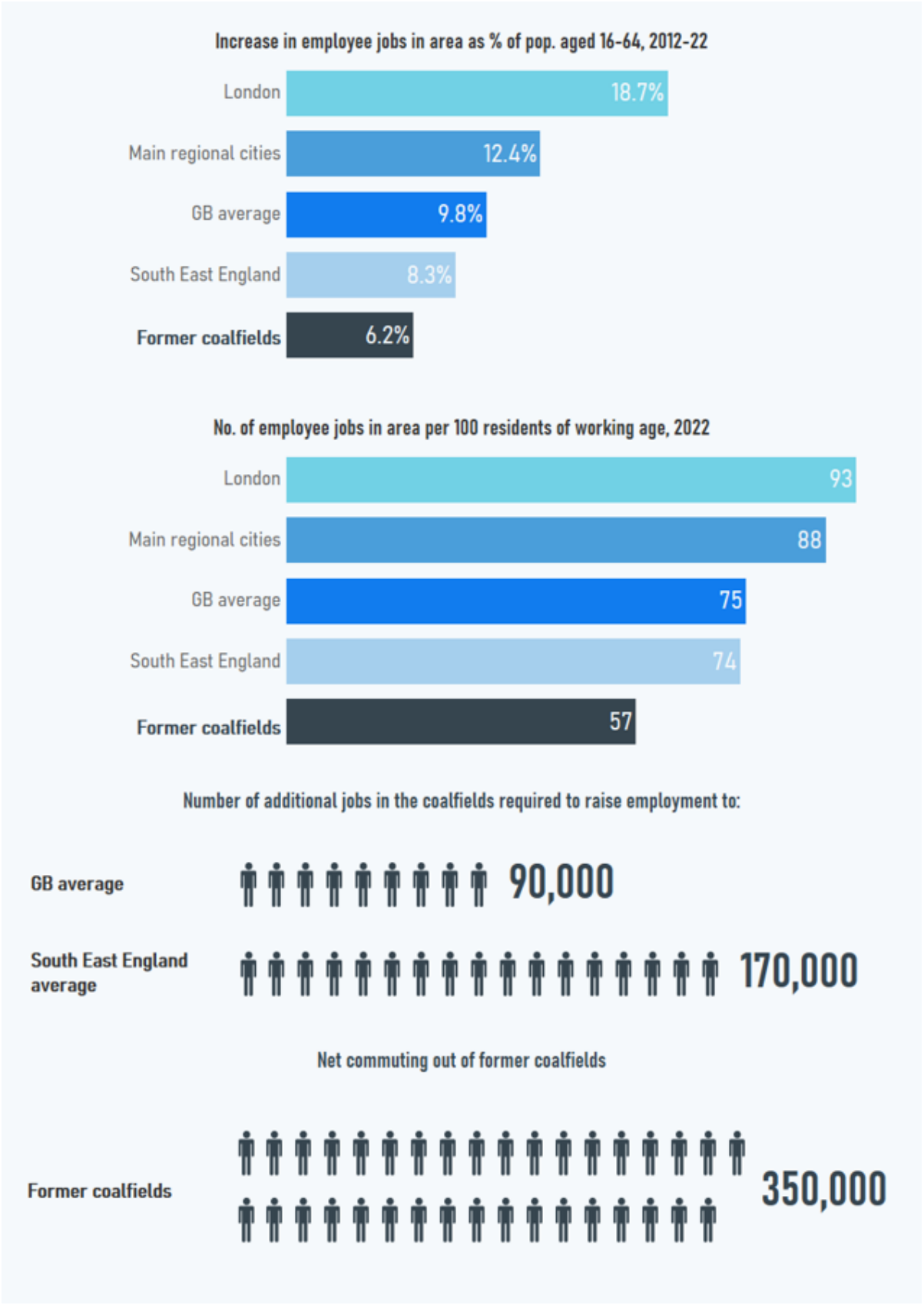
The relative weakness of the coalfield economy is also reflected in the 'job density' – the ratio between the number of employee jobs located in the former coalfields and the local working age population.

No. of employee jobs in area per 100 residents of working age, 2022

London	93
Main regional cities	88
GB average	75
South East England	74
Former coalfields	***57***
Individual coalfields	
S Derbys / NW Leics	65
N Derbyshire	64
Lancashire	64
N Warwickshire	63
S Staffordshire	63
Yorkshire*	63
Nottinghamshire	61
Fife	57
Durham	53
West Cumbria	51
N Staffordshire	51
Lothian	51
North Wales	48
South Wales	46
Northumberland	45
Kent	44
Ayrshire / Lanarkshire	41

Sources: BRES, Census of Population and ONS mid-year population estimates

*N Yorks 62, S Yorks 60, W Yorks 69


Increase in employee jobs in area as % of pop. aged 16-64, 2012-22
London
18.7%
Main regional cities
12.4%
GB average
9.8%
South East England
8.3%
Former coalfields
6.2%
No. of employee jobs in area per 100 residents of working age, 2022
London
93
Main regional cities
88
GB average
75
South East England
74
Former coalfields
57
Number of additional jobs in the coalfields required to raise employment to:
GB average
90,000
South East England average
170,000
Net commuting out of former coalfields
Former coalfields
350,000

Across the former coalfields as a whole, in 2022 there were just 57 employee jobs for every 100 adults of working age. This was up from 50 per 100 in 2012 but still represents a job density far behind the GB average (75 per 100) or the main regional cities (88 per 100). In every individual coalfield the job density in 2022 was well below the national average.

Commuting: a new norm

Of course, the former coalfields do not exist in isolation from surrounding places. The coalfields are part of complex networks of commuting, particularly into neighbouring cities, so there is no requirement for the stock of jobs in the coalfields themselves to match the local labour supply. Commuting helps explain the low job density in Lothian for example (travel into Edinburgh) and in Northumberland (into Tyneside).

But a low job density can also be a symptom of a weak local economy. This is perhaps clearest in the case of the South Wales coalfield where there are just 46 employee jobs for every 100 residents of working age. The South Wales coalfield, in the Valleys, is a major area in its own right and although there are substantial commuting flows to Cardiff, Swansea and Newport on the coast it is hard to escape the conclusion that one of the reasons so many people travel out of the area for work is that there are so few jobs in the Valleys themselves.

It is hard to put a precise figure on the scale of commuting but a reasonable estimate is possible:

- There are 2,030,000 employee jobs in the former coalfields[10]. Adding in the self-employed brings the total number of jobs in the coalfields up to 2,240,000[11].

- The overall employment rate (including students) of 73 per cent[12] in the former coalfields points to 2,590,000 coalfield residents in work.

- The difference between these figures – 350,000 – is attributable to net commuting out of the coalfields

The figure here for 'net commuting' is the balance between flows in each direction and is equivalent to almost one-in-seven of all coalfield residents in work. The outflow from the coalfields will be substantially larger, offset by a smaller inflow from other areas. The total number of out-commuters from the coalfields can't be calculated – the data doesn't allow this – but seems likely to be one-in-four or one-in-five of all residents in employment.

[10] Source: BRES (LSOA data)
[11] Self-employment rate from APS local authority data for 2023
[12] Employment rate from APS local authority data for 2023

A shortage of quality jobs

A widespread view is that too much employment in the UK has become skewed towards part-time and insecure working, including debased forms of self-employment, and that these forms of employment have become particularly prevalent in weaker local economies such as the former coalfields. The hard evidence is mixed.

For example, self-employment in the former coalfields is actually below the national average and well behind the level in London.

Self-employed as % of 16-64 yr. old residents in employment, 2023 (local authority data)

London	16
South East England	13
GB average	12
Main regional cities	10
Former coalfields	***9***

Source: APS

Part-time working is high but only a couple of percentage points above the national average.

Part-time working as % of all employees, 2022

Former coalfields	***33***
South East England	32
GB average	31
Main regional cities	31
London	26

Source: BRES

The nature of the jobs in the former coalfields is nevertheless distinctive. For example, just 8 per cent are in finance and business services, compared to a national average of 14 per cent and 17 per cent in the main regional cities. In the coalfields 12 per cent of jobs are in manufacturing, compared to 8 per cent nationally and 5 per cent in the main regional cities[13].

The former coalfields also remain heavily dependent on manual jobs, which account for over half of all employed residents. Indeed, every one of the individual coalfields of England, Scotland and Wales has an occupational structure that is skewed towards manual occupations.

[13] Source: BRES data for 2023.

% of employed residents in manual jobs, 2021
(England and Wales)

Former coalfields	***53***
Main regional cities	46
England & Wales average	45
South East England	40
London	36

Source: Census of Population

These aspects of the coalfield labour market are reflected in earnings. The government's Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) shows that on average the hourly earnings for men and women living in the coalfields (defined here at local authority level) are six to seven per cent below the GB average.

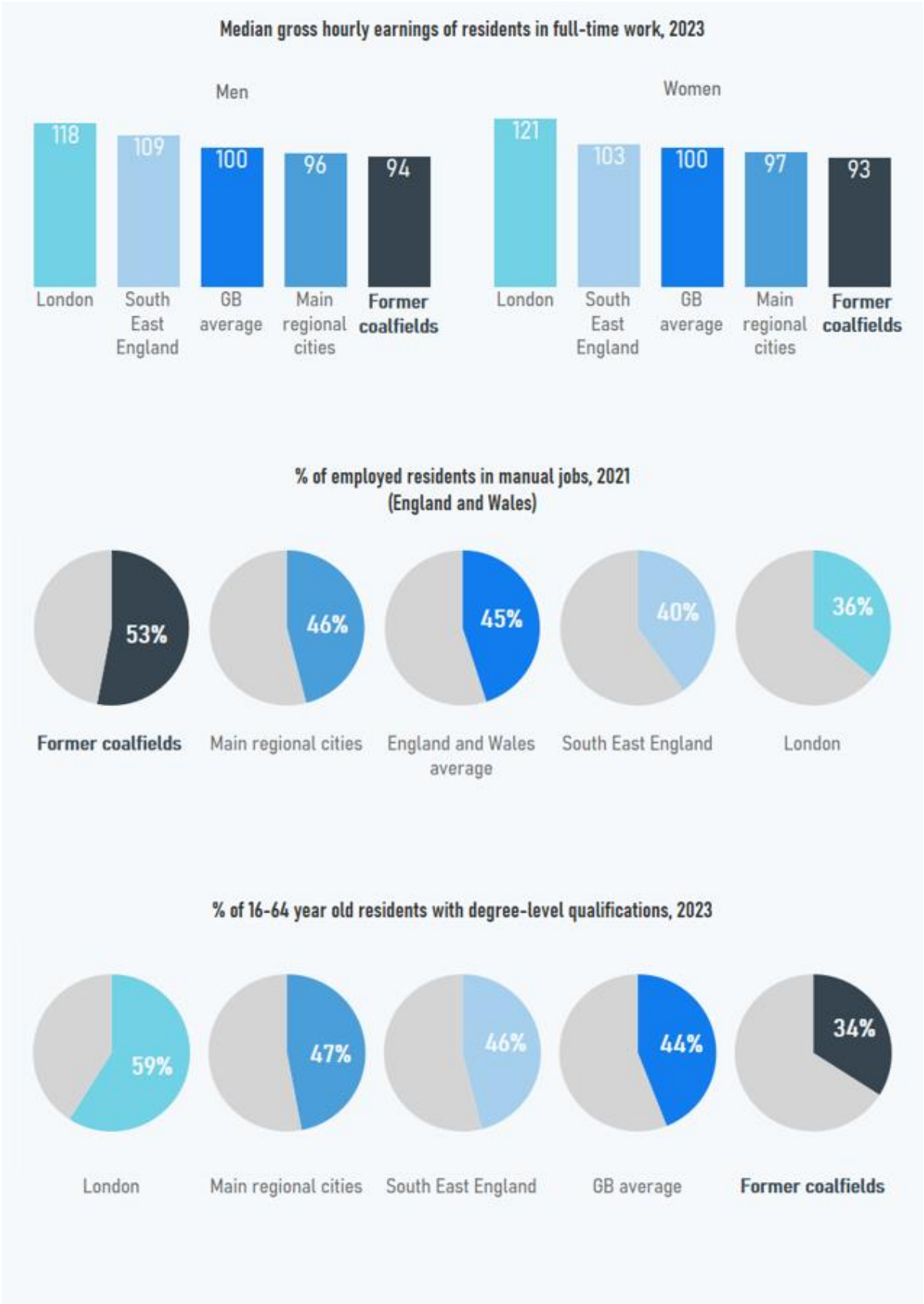
Median gross hourly earnings of residents in full-time work, 2023, GB=100
(local authority data)

	Men	**Women**
London	118	121
South East England	109	103
GB average	100	100
Main regional cities	96	97
Former coalfields	***94***	***93***

Source: ASHE

The gap between earnings in the coalfields and the national average narrowed between 2018 and 2023, by two percentage points for men and three points for women. Quite what underpins this trend is unclear. Rather than a consequence of growing labour demand it could reflect no more than increases in the National Minimum Wage, which over this period were somewhat greater than the increases in average earnings.

The surge in employment in warehousing adds to concerns about job quality. Not all jobs in warehousing are unskilled and poorly paid, but a widely held view is that many of the new jobs are low-wage, physically demanding and can involve difficult and irregular shift patterns. There is also usually little or no trade union representation in the workplace. Unsurprisingly, many coalfield residents appear to shun working in this environment, especially if they are older and not-so-fit. The employers, under competitive pressure to keep down costs, have therefore turned to a ready supply of young, fit migrant workers from abroad. In the former Yorkshire coalfield in particular, the growth in employment fuelled by the rise of warehousing has almost certainly gone hand in hand with a deterioration in the quality of the jobs on offer.


Median gross hourly earnings of residents in full-time work, 2023
Men
118
109
100
96
94
London
South East England
GB average
Main regional cities
Former coalfields
Women
121
103
100
97
93
London
South East England
GB average
Main regional cities
Former coalfields
% of employed residents in manual jobs, 2021 (England and Wales)
53%
46%
45%
40%
36%
Former coalfields
Main regional cities
England and Wales average
South East England
London
% of 16-64 year old residents with degree-level qualifications, 2023
59%
47%
46%
44%
34%
London
Main regional cities
South East England
GB average
Former coalfields

A local brain-drain

The published statistics on performance at school are not organised in a way that allows the former coalfields to be distinguished from surrounding areas and England, Scotland and Wales compile their figures differently. However, figures for a number of predominantly coalfield local education authorities in England offer a guide[14].

The 'A8' measure of attainment at GCSE, which scores a pupil's best eight grades, is these days preferred as a guide to the old 'five A to Cs'. The average score across England in 2022/23 was 46.4. In the former coalfields, Barnsley (43.9), Doncaster (44.5), Durham (45.4), Nottinghamshire (46.2), Wakefield (45.7) and Wigan (43.9) all lagged slightly behind, though not to an extent that would suggest severe under-performance.

Likewise, the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training ('NEETs') seems to be no higher than elsewhere. Against an England average in March 2021 of 5.5 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds, the figures in the coalfields were broadly comparable – Barnsley (5.8 per cent), Doncaster (4.9 per cent), Durham (6.5 per cent), Nottinghamshire (6.0 per cent), Wakefield (4.4 per cent) and Wigan (5.8 per cent).

Where the coalfields do differ a little is in the proportion of 16 and 17 year olds staying on in full-time education and training. In March 2021 the England average was 87 per cent. In some coalfield authorities the figures were lower – Barnsley (83 per cent), Doncaster (80 per cent), Durham (82 per cent) and Wigan (81 per cent) – but Wakefield (87 per cent) matched the England average and Nottinghamshire (88 per cent) exceeded it.

There is little evidence here, therefore, that the quality or numbers of young people coming through the local educational system is markedly worse in the coalfields than anywhere else. Nevertheless, the share of coalfield residents educated to degree level or above remains well below the national average and even further behind London and the big cities.

% of 16-64 yr. old residents with degree-level* qualifications, 2023 (local authority data)

London	59
Main regional cities	47
South East England	46
GB average	44
Former coalfields	***34***

Source: APS

*NVQ Level 4 or above

[14] Source: Department for Education

The driving factor is likely to be the quality and quantity of jobs on offer. Areas with a high proportion of manual jobs, such as the coalfields, are unlikely to retain or attract highly qualified workers, who move to the places where higher-grade jobs are more plentiful. One of the main mechanisms through which this occurs is when young people move away to university and then stay away when they move into employment, stripping the coalfields of successive cohorts of bright, well-qualified youngsters.

Mixed messages on unemployment

Economic commentators have been keen to flag up that over the last few years the UK has experienced lower unemployment than at any time since the mid-1970s. Even the recent slowdown in economic growth has made little difference. On the International Labour Organisation (ILO) measure, now the basis for official unemployment statistics, these observations are certainly correct. The ILO measure, based on survey data, counts the numbers out-of-work who have looked for a job in the last four weeks and are ready to start a job in the next two weeks.

On the ILO measure, in 2023 the unemployment rate in the former coalfields as a whole was just 3.7 per cent, actually 0.1 percentage points below the national average. This low figure is an approximation based on local authority data. Nevertheless, it is perhaps a remarkable achievement considering quite how many jobs were lost from the coal industry.

ILO unemployment rate, 2023, as % of economically active 16-64 yr. olds (local authority data)

London	5.0
Main regional cities	4.4
GB average	3.8
Former coalfields	***3.7***
South East England	3.4

Source: APS

Since 2011 the ILO measure of unemployment has also fallen faster in the former coalfields (by 5.9 percentage points) than across Great Britain as a whole (4.4 percentage points).

The problem is that ILO unemployment is a poor measure of worklessness and the strength of local labour markets, especially in the former coalfields. The ‘employment rate’ – the share of adults of working age in employment – is a key alternative but a complication is that students in higher education distort the figures. Students are heavily concentrated in university towns, where they lower the employment rate, but there are few higher education institutions in the coalfields so a simple comparison of overall employment rates is misleading. The best statistic is the employment rate *excluding students*.

Employment rate (%) of 16-64 yr. olds, excluding students, 2023 (local authority data)

South East England	82.4
London	81.0
GB average	80.2
Main regional cities	78.8
Former coalfields	***77.4***

Source: APS

Excluding economically inactive students, the employment rate in the coalfields is nearly three percentage points behind the national average and five percentage points behind the rate in South East England. The rate in the coalfields is little changed since 2018 (up 0.1 per cent) whereas the GB average increased a little more quickly (up 0.5 per cent).

The differences in employment rates (excluding students) allow two simple but telling calculations:

- To raise the employment rate in the former coalfields to the national average would require 90,000 additional coalfield residents to be in work. This gap has grown by 10,000 since 2018.

- To raise the employment rate in the former coalfields to the average in South East England – a guide to what is achievable under conditions of full employment – would require 170,000 additional coalfield residents to be in work.

Furthermore, these calculations almost certainly understate the extent of the employment shortfall because they are based on data for local authorities rather than for the coalfields accurately defined at LSOA/datazone level.

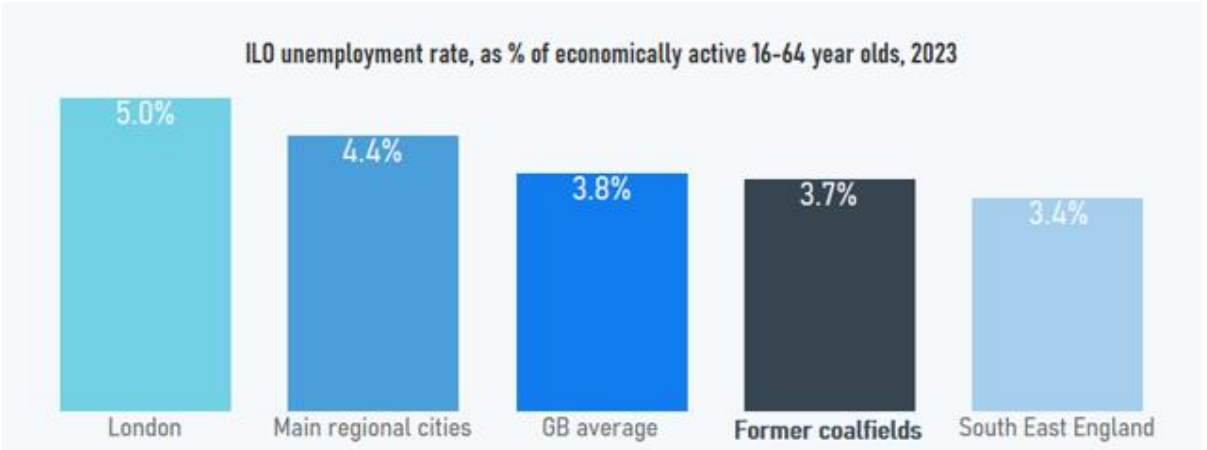
The large former coalfield in South Wales (pop. 750,000) has a particularly low employment rate – just 74 per cent of working age adults (excluding students). This low rate means that in the South Wales coalfield alone it would require:

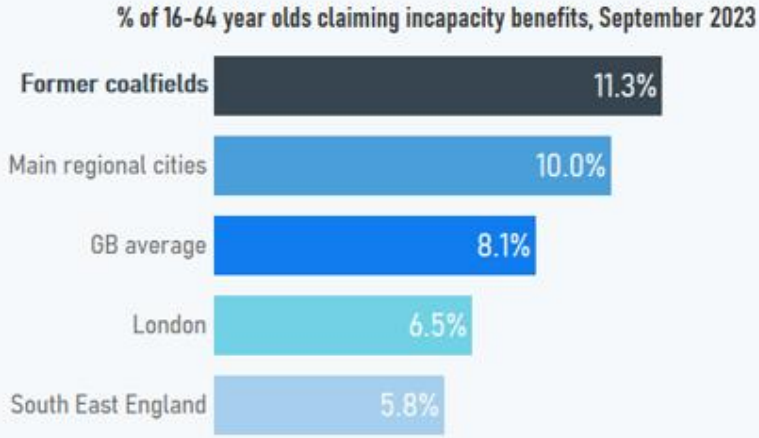
- 15,000 additional residents in work just to match the average employment rate across the former coalfields

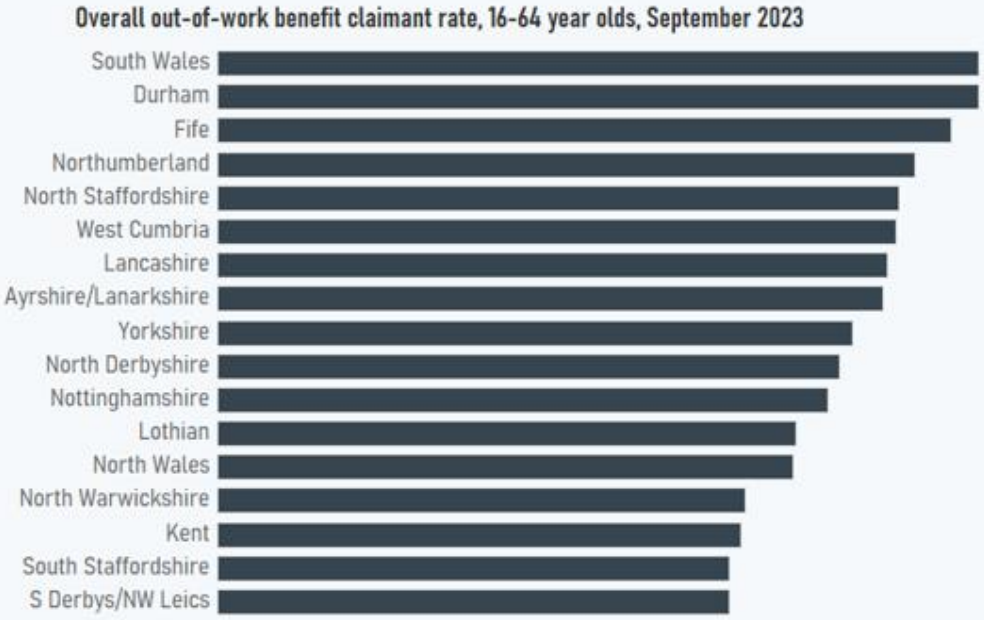
- 27,000 additional residents in work to match the GB average employment rate

- 37,000 additional residents in work to match the employment rate in South East England

The ‘economic inactivity rate’ – the share of 16-64 year olds who are neither in employment nor unemployed – emphasises that the coalfields continue to experience above-average levels of worklessness.


ILO unemployment rate, as % of economically active 16-64 year olds, 2023
5.0%
4.4%
3.8%
3.7%
3.4%
London
Main regional cities
GB average
Former coalfields
South East England


% of 16-64 year olds claiming incapacity benefits, September 2023
Former coalfields
11.3%
Main regional cities
10.0%
GB average
8.1%
London
6.5%
South East England
5.8%


Overall out-of-work benefit claimant rate, 16-64 year olds, September 2023
South Wales
Durham
Fife
Northumberland
North Staffordshire
West Cumbria
Lancashire
Ayrshire/Lanarkshire
Yorkshire
North Derbyshire
Nottinghamshire
Lothian
North Wales
North Warwickshire
Kent
South Staffordshire
S Derbys/NW Leics

Economic inactivity rate (%) of 16-64 yr. olds, excluding students, 2023 (local authority data)

Former coalfields	***18.7***
Main regional cities	16.9
GB average	16.0
London	15.1
South East England	14.1

Source: APS

The above average rate of economic inactivity in the former coalfields is almost wholly attributable to inactivity due to 'long-term sickness'. 'Early retirement' accounts for a small proportion of the difference but the numbers of inactive 'looking after family or home' are very much in line with the national average.

Big numbers on out-of-work benefits

That the former coalfields and the UK more generally are still a long way from full employment is underlined by the overall number of working age adults (16-64) on out-of-work benefits. The figures here combine the unemployed, the long-term sick or disabled and those out of the labour market with caring responsibilities, mainly for small children. In the early autumn of 2023 the headline GB total was a huge 5.46 million. In the former coalfields alone, 590,000 men and women of working age were on out-of-work benefits.

In terms of the overall out-of-work claimant rate, the coalfields were more than three percentage points above the national average and more than seven percentage points above South East England. In South Wales and in Durham, only a little short of one-in-five of all adults of working age were claiming out-of-work benefits at this point in time.

One of the reasons why the out-of-work claimant rate is so high is that the coalfields have substantial numbers on incapacity benefits. This has been known for some while. It became apparent in the wake of the pit closures in the 1980s and 1990s that the main labour market response to coal job losses was not an increase in recorded unemployment but rather a surge in the number of men who withdrew from the labour market into 'economic inactivity', mainly on incapacity benefits. Initially, many of the additional incapacity claimants were ex-miners but through competition for jobs the claims spread more widely as worklessness often came to rest with the less healthy in the workforce. Over time, competition for jobs spread the claims to women as well. The former coalfields were not unique in this respect – other older industrial areas showed the same trend – but they were arguably the prime example.

Overall out-of-work benefit claimant rate[15], September 2023
% of 16-64 yr. olds

Main regional cities	17.2
Former coalfields	***16.6***
GB average	13.3
London	13.2
South East England	9.0
Individual coalfields	
South Wales	19.2
Durham	19.2
Fife	18.5
Northumberland	17.6
North Staffordshire	17.2
West Cumbria	17.1
Lancashire	16.9
Ayrshire/Lanarkshire	16.8
Yorkshire*	16.0
North Derbyshire	15.7
Nottinghamshire	15.4
Lothian	14.6
North Wales	14.5
North Warwickshire	13.3
Kent	13.2
South Staffordshire	12.9
S Derbys/NW Leics	10.4

Source: DWP

*N Yorks 9.1, S Yorks 17.4, W Yorks 14,5

In the autumn of 2023 there were just over 400,000 incapacity claimants in the former coalfields, accounting for 11 per cent, or one-in-nine of all adults of working age. This claimant rate was almost double the rate in South East England.

% of 16-64 yr. olds claiming incapacity benefits[16], September 2023

Former coalfields	***11.3***
Main regional cities	10.0
GB average	8.1
London	6.5
South East England	5.8

Source: DWP

[15] Universal Credit not in employment (Sept 2023), plus Employment and Support Allowance, IB/SDA, JSA and IS claimants of working age (Aug 2023). There is a small overlap between UC and ESA claimants (c.125,000 across GB as a whole) which inflates the total.
[16] Universal Credit health caseload plus ESA and IB/SDA claimants, including NI credits-only claimants.

The significance of the high incapacity claimant rate in the former coalfields is that some of these men and women with health problems and/or disabilities are in effect 'hidden unemployed'. This is evident from comparisons with the low incapacity claimant rate in the parts of Britain at or near full employment, even after adjusting for underlying differences in health and disability. A series of reports from Sheffield Hallam University have adjusted for this distortion to local unemployment figures. The most recent estimates, for 2022[17], suggest that across Britain as a whole 790,000 of those on incapacity benefits might be considered to be 'hidden unemployed' in that they could have been expected to be in work in a genuinely fully employed economy.

Adjusting for this distortion, the 'real level of unemployment' in the former coalfields is considerably higher than the official figures and casts quite a different light on the state of the local labour market. On this wider measure, unemployment in the former coalfields is not only much higher, at an average of 7.3 per cent of all adults of working age, but also unlike the ILO measure of unemployment, a good deal higher than the national average.

Estimated real level of unemployment (% of all 16-64 yr. olds), 2022
(local authority data)

Main regional cities	7.9
Former coalfields	***7.3***
GB average	5.8
London	6.1
South East England	3.8

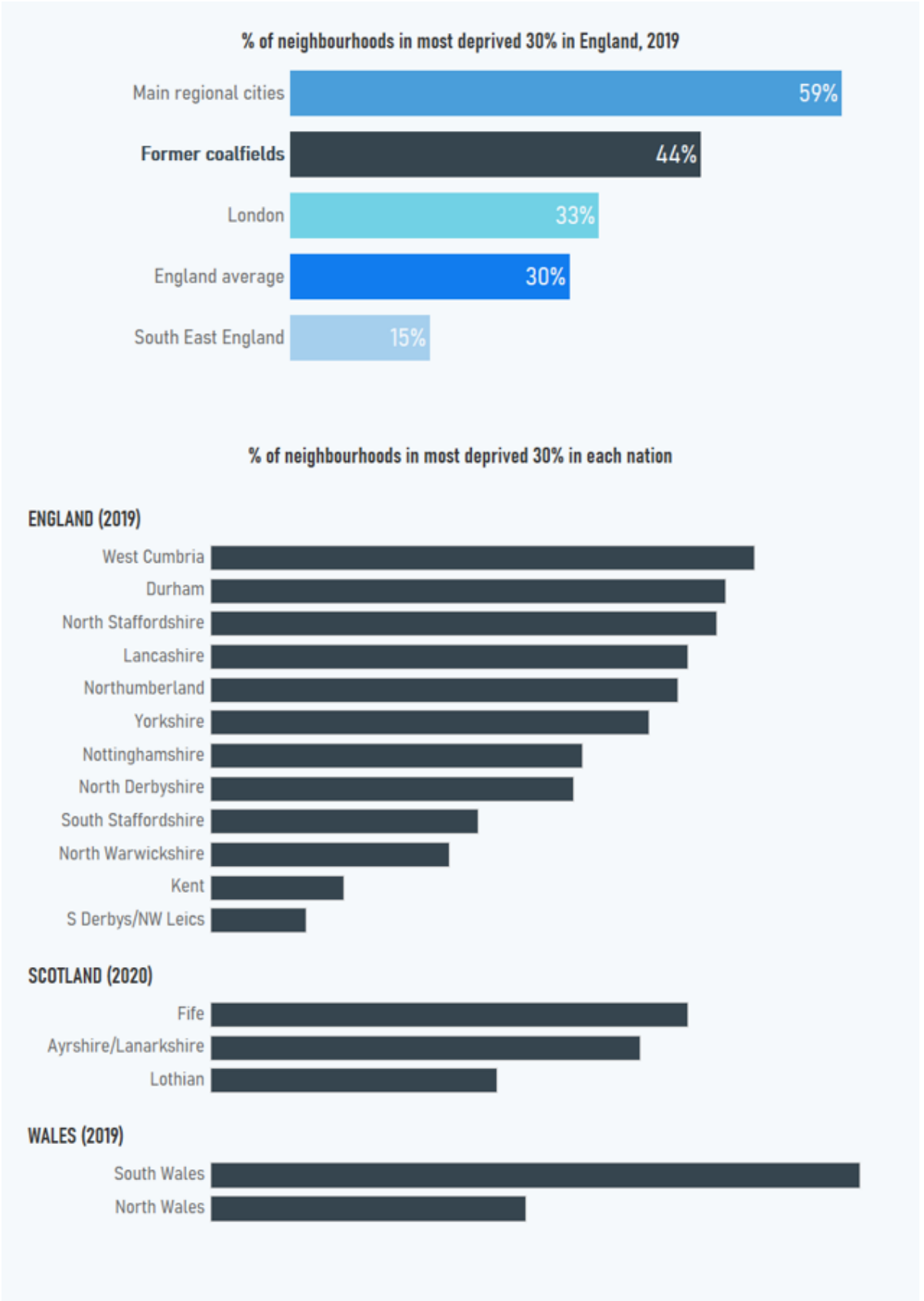
Source: Sheffield Hallam University estimates based on ONS

What should be emphasised is that the 'hidden unemployed' in the coalfields and elsewhere are mostly not active jobseekers – the vast majority are men and women with health problems or disabilities who have given up on the possibility of finding suitable work. But they make up a significant proportion of the overall working age population in the former coalfields.

Extensive deprivation

The UK government and the devolved administrations each produce highly sophisticated indices of deprivation that combine data covering incomes, employment, health, crime, environment and access to services, to provide estimates right down to neighbourhood (LSOA/datazone) level. The statistics are not however comparable between the nations of the UK and have been compiled at different points in time.

[17] C Beatty, S Fothergill and T Gore (2022) *The Real Level of Unemployment 2022*, CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.


% of neighbourhoods in most deprived 30% in England, 2019
Main regional cities
59%
Former coalfields
44%
London
33%
England average
30%
South East England
15%
% of neighbourhoods in most deprived 30% in each nation
ENGLAND (2019)
West Cumbria
Durham
North Staffordshire
Lancashire
Northumberland
Yorkshire
Nottinghamshire
North Derbyshire
South Staffordshire
North Warwickshire
Kent
S Derbys/NW Leics
SCOTLAND (2020)
Fife
Ayrshire/Lanarkshire
Lothian
WALES (2019)
South Wales
North Wales

The former coalfields generally lack the acute segregation between rich and poor areas that at this scale often characterises cities so relatively few coalfield neighbourhoods tend to be among the most deprived 10 per cent. In the coalfields, poverty and deprivation tends to be more evenly spread across larger areas. The best guide to the extent of coalfield deprivation is therefore the share of neighbourhoods in the worst 30 per cent in each country.

In England, 43 per cent of all coalfield neighbourhoods are among the most deprived 30 per cent. This is a proportion almost three times higher than in South East England. In four former coalfields – West Cumbria, Durham, North Staffordshire and Lancashire – the proportion of neighbourhoods in this deprived category is at least 50 per cent.

% of neighbourhoods in most deprived 30% in each nation

ENGLAND (2019)	
Main regional cities	59
Former coalfields	***44***
London	33
South East England	15
West Cumbria	57
Durham	54
N Staffordshire	53
Lancashire	50
Northumberland	49
Yorkshire*	46
Nottinghamshire	39
N Derbyshire	38
S Staffordshire	28
N Warwickshire	25
Kent	14
S Derbys / NW Leics	10
WALES (2019)	
South Wales	68
North Wales	33
SCOTLAND (2020)	
Fife	50
Ayrshire / Lanarkshire	45
Lothian	30

Source: Indices of Deprivation

*N Yorks 10, S Yorks 51, W Yorks 41

In Wales, the former South Wales coalfield stands out as deprived – more than two-thirds of neighbourhoods are among the most deprived 30 per cent in Wales. What is also worth bearing in mind here is that with a population of 750,000 the South Wales coalfield accounts for almost a quarter of the total population of Wales.

In Scotland, it's the former coalfields in Fife and Ayrshire/Lanarkshire that display higher levels of deprivation than in Lothian.

3. A CLOSER LOOK: FOUR PIT VILLAGES

The former coalfields, as defined in the main body of this report, cover a large swathe of Britain. Within them a subset of places deserve a closer look. These are the places usually described as 'pit villages' – smaller settlements, often in a semi-rural setting, that usually owe their whole existence to the coal industry and where there was rarely much other significant business activity. The closure of the mines took away the reason-for-being of these places.

Below, we therefore take a closer look at four places[18]:

Grimethorpe, in South Yorkshire, is famous as the setting for the 1996 film *Brassed Off*, which addressed the trauma of pit closure. (In the film it was known as 'Grimley'). Grimethorpe is also famous for its brass band, which featured in the film. The local colliery closed in 1993. At one time the village, six miles from Barnsley, was on a cul-de-sac on the road network but new roadbuilding has opened up access and there has been the development of new industrial estates, including on the former pit site. Just about all the surrounding towns and villages in this part of Yorkshire were formerly dominated by the coal industry.

Easington, in County Durham, also had a moment of fame in the 2000 film *Billy Elliot*, set against the backdrop of the 1984/5 miners strike. The local colliery, closed in 1991, had extensive workings under the North Sea and was one of the largest in the country, with a workforce of more than 2,000. The village of Easington – which is not to be confused with the local district council of the same name abolished in 2009 – is strung out along a minor road running from the A19 down to the coast. Located around nine miles south of Sunderland, Easington is one of a number of former mining communities in this part of East Durham.

Maerdy, in South Wales, sits at the head of the smaller of the two main Rhondda Valleys in a particularly inaccessible location, 25 miles north of Cardiff and with only a steep road over the mountain top in the opposite direction. The colliery here closed in 1990. The South Wales mining valleys have for some while been known to be slow to recover from the loss of the coal industry. In such a difficult location, Maerdy is one of the most problematic former mining settlements in South Wales and possibly an extreme case within Britain as a whole.

[18] Because small-area statistics are not yet available from the Scottish Census of Population, the pit villages examined here are all in England and Wales.

FOUR FORMER MINING COMMUNITIES – SELECTED LOCAL STATISTICS

	Grimethorpe	**Easington**	**Maerdy**	**Aylesham**	***England & Wales av*.**
Population	6,000	7,650	3.100	5,800	*59.6m*
Deprived households *on at least one official indicator**	65%	61%	73%	54%	*48%*
Residents reporting 'bad or very bad health' *% of all residents*	13%	10%	18%	6%	*5%*
Disability (DLA/PIP) claimant rate *% of all residents*	16%	15%	22%	11%	*7%*
Employment rate *% of all 16-64s*	65%	68%	53%	76%	*71%*
Unemployment rate *% of economically active 16-64s*	5%	6%	9%	5%	*6%*
Economically inactive (excluding students) *% of all 16-64s*	27%	28%	35%	15%	*17%*
Economically inactive long-term sick or disabled *% of all 16-64s*	13%	12%	18%	6%	*5%*
Overall out-of-work benefit claimant rate *% of all 16-64s*	23%	27%	38%	14%	*13%*

Sources: 2021 Census of Population and 2023 DWP benefits data
*Low qualifications, unemployment/economic inactivity, poor health, poor housing.

Aylesham, in East Kent, is every bit as much a pit village as the other three places considered here. Set on its own in the countryside, Aylesham was built in the 1920s to accommodate workers at the then new Snowdown Colliery, which closed in 1987. Snowdown was one of four collieries that worked the small Kent coalfield. The village is almost equidistant between Dover, Deal and Canterbury, about 8-10 miles from each. It sits a couple of miles from the A2 main road but does have a direct train service into London, though a very slow one taking nearly two hours.

The statistics for the first three of these communities – Grimethorpe, Easington and Maerdy – paint a disturbing picture:

- Deprivation is well above the England & Wales average
- The proportion of residents reporting 'bad or very bad health' is at least double the national average
- The disability benefit claimant rate is likewise at least double the national average
- The employment rate among working age adults (16-64) is several percentage points below the national average
- More than a quarter of all 16-64s are economically inactive, a high proportion of them long-term sick or disabled
- The overall out-of-work benefit claimant rate is 9 percentage points higher than the England & Wales average in Grimethorpe, 13 percentage points higher in Easington and 24 per centage points higher in Maerdy

Perhaps the only bright spot in the figures for these three places is that the unemployment rate[19] is modest. Furthermore, these unemployment figures are for April 2021, when the Census was conducted and the unemployment numbers were temporarily boosted by the pandemic. The contemporary numbers are likely to be somewhat lower.

The fourth of the former mining communities – Aylesham in Kent – presents a very different picture. Here there is still evidence of disadvantage. Deprivation is a little above average and the disability benefit claimant rate is well above average. The latter may reflect a population that still includes quite a number of older former miners. But on indicators of employment and economic inactivity, Aylesham is actually better than the national average.

So what might explain these differences? Why is Aylesham apparently well on the road to recovery while the other three remain much further behind? That the explanation lies solely within Aylesham itself seems unlikely. There have been a number of successful community regeneration projects in Aylesham – indeed, some of the best-regarded in the country – and there has been investment in new business units in the village. The colliery site, however, is

[19] Measured here using the ILO definition – out-of-work, available to start work in two weeks and looked for work in the last four weeks. This differs from the numbers claiming unemployment-related benefits.

still one of the very few unrestored sites in the country, principally because of the intransigence of the local landowner. More likely, Aylesham has been able to recover from the loss of its colliery because the scale of the job loss in the small Kent coalfield was so much less than in Yorkshire, Durham or South Wales. There have still been jobs available in neighbouring towns whereas in the larger coalfields, town after town, village after village, went through the same process of closure and job loss.

There are important lessons from this quick look at four pit villages:

- First, within each of the former coalfields there are places that still show signs of acute disadvantage. This tends to be masked by the averages for each of the wider coalfields, which inevitably include more prosperous housing areas and places that were less heavily dependent on the coal industry.

- Second, if a pit village such as Aylesham can be turned around to the extent indicated by the statistics, a similar turnaround should in theory be possible in other pit villages up and down the country. That so many of these other pit villages – such as Grimethorpe, Easington and Maerdy – continue to display so many features of disadvantage suggests that there is still a long way to go.

4. ASSESSMENT

The question that is commonly asked is '*have the former coalfields recovered?*' Sometimes this question refers just to the job losses since the 1984/5 miners strike, but the reality is that the post-strike job losses were only the final phase in a long run-down of employment in the UK coal industry. So have the coalfields recovered?

Jobs

Let's take the issue of job replacement first. In terms of numbers, the job growth in the former coalfields – we identify an increase of 220,000 between 2012 and 2022 alone – more than offsets the job losses from the coal industry since the miners strike. In that very narrow sense there has been 'recovery'.

But this is an imperfect measure because the coalfields started off with very high unemployment, in part because of coal job losses in preceding decades, and there have been big increases in labour supply as well. The population of the coalfields has been growing, partly as a result of migration from outside the UK, and more women have entered paid employment. The health of the local labour market reflects the balance between labour demand and labour supply.

In this respect there is still clear evidence of disadvantage in the former coalfields. Unemployment, as conventionally recorded, is low but the employment rate – the share of men and women of working age in employment – is well below average and the overall numbers on out-of-work benefits remain very high. These are not indicators of a labour market that has fully recovered. Added to this, the quality of the jobs on offer in the former coalfields is below-par. Earnings are below average and manual jobs are the norm to a far greater extent than in the big cities.

Disadvantage

There are social indicators on which the former coalfields also display disadvantage. The population is older and ageing. Ill-health is widespread. So too is deprivation. The share of the workforce with higher-level qualifications is well below average, though this appears to owe more to the loss of the well-qualified to other places than to failings in the local educational system.

Of course, the former coalfields cannot claim a monopoly on these problems. On deprivation, for example, the main regional cities exceed the former coalfields though other statistics, not least on employment growth, cast a more positive light on the cities. What distinguishes the former coalfields is that they lag behind on such a wide range of indicators.

Differences between places

In the 2014 and 2019 reports we identified five smaller coalfields that appeared to be distinctly less disadvantaged than the rest – South Staffordshire, North Warwickshire, S Derbyshire / NW Leicestershire, Kent and Lothian. There is nothing in this new report for 2024 that deflects this assessment. The recovery in these areas probably owes much to the modest scale of job losses from the local coal industry, to their proximity to growth and jobs in neighbouring areas, and to an influx of more affluent newcomers, often triggered by local housebuilding, resulting in the dilution of recorded disadvantage.

Nevertheless, even within each of these former coalfields there will still be communities, households and individuals who still face acute disadvantage and just because their disadvantage is masked by more positive figures for the area as a whole it does not make it any less serious.

In contrast, a number of former coalfields unequivocally continue to display signs of acute disadvantage. The former South Wales coalfield, with a population of three-quarters of a million, is the clearest example. The South Wales coalfield has an exceptionally low job density, high numbers on out-of-work benefits, poor health, extensive deprivation and has largely been by-passed by the growth in warehousing jobs.

New roles

All the former coalfields have in various ways moved on, but not to the same destination. The Yorkshire coalfield, for example, has become the capital of warehousing. This was never explicitly planned but in retrospect it is not difficult to see why it happened there rather than in say Scotland or South Wales. The Lancashire, Nottinghamshire and North Warwickshire coalfields have experienced a similar transition. The Lothian coalfield is becoming a dormitory for neighbouring Edinburgh. The Welsh Valleys too have increasingly become a dormitory for men and women working in Cardiff and along the rest of the M4 corridor, but here the distances are greater and the scale of the population in the Valleys has meant that commuting has never been able to provide a total solution – hence the continuing high levels of disadvantage.

When travel-to-work patterns have become so geographically extensive for many people it is perhaps inevitable that the former coalfields have to different extents taken on a dormitory role for nearby cities. The coalfields do not exist in isolation from the places around them. However, the scale of the imbalance between the resident population and the local stock of jobs suggests that in part the pattern has developed out of necessity, driven by the shortfall in job opportunities in the coalfields themselves.

Pit villages

Within the coalfields there are clearly places that are a long way from ‘fully recovered’. The report’s brief look at four pit villages is a salutary reminder in this respect. In three of the villages (Grimethorpe, Easington and Maerdy) several of the statistics are truly awful. That a quarter or more of all adults of working age are claiming out-of-work benefits of one kind or another is surely unacceptable. That more than ten per cent of all residents should report ‘bad or very bad health’ is deeply concerning. In these places the consequences of the loss of the coal industry are still being felt, even in the generations that are too young to have ever worked in the industry.

Overview

Britain’s coalfields have moved on since the job losses of the 1980s and 90s. There has been substantial progress in new job creation, more so in some places than others, and the former coalfields have emerged with new roles in local and regional economies. But in an era of international migration the full benefits of job growth have not always filtered through to local residents, leaving behind some people and communities. Conventional mass unemployment may have faded into the past, but worklessness and dependency on welfare benefits remains widespread.

The former coalfields of England, Scotland and Wales have a population equivalent to a typical English region, a little more than the whole of Scotland and far more than the whole of Wales. If the coalfields had been a region in their own right, all clustered together in one corner of the country, the statistics would probably show them to be the most deprived region in the UK. That disadvantage in the former coalfields is dispersed across several regions and nations does not in any way lessen its severity.

The Coalfields Regeneration Trust is dedicated to building prosperity and opportunity in former coalfield communities across Britain. The charity is the only organisation with the sole focus of improving the lives of the 5.7 million people who live in former coalfield areas in England, Scotland and Wales.

Our work is funded through a community wealth building model which sees our subsidiary CRT Property build industrial units for SMEs with the rental income re-invested into our charitable work. Our work in Scotland and Wales is also funded through grants from the Scottish and Welsh Governments.

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