

What Ails Hartlepool?

A spirited electoral race has emerged between three candidates vying to represent Hartlepool in Parliament, a community long among those 'left behind'.

I write this letter as a member of the 99% Organisation, a group committed to reducing the pervasive inequality in Britain.

Why is Hartlepool 'left behind' and what can help it catch up? A close look at official government data suggests that ambitious plans for 'infrastructure' in the form of roads, bridges and creation of a 'Freeport' are unlikely to be the fix that Hartlepool needs.

Let's look at just one measure of what it means to be 'left behind'; the percentage of children eligible for free school meals. Children from the lowest income households are eligible for free meals during their school day. The numbers speak for themselves; in 2019/20, the percentage of primary school children eligible to a free meal across England was 17.7 per cent. In Hartlepool, the comparable percentage was 26.4 per cent. For children at state-funded secondary schools, the relative percentages were 15.9 and 31.0 respectively. On average, twice as many secondary school students in Hartlepool are from households on incomes so meagre that they qualify for free school meals.

The explanation does not appear to lie in unusually low wages in Hartlepool. Indeed, average male full-time wages, at £572.80 per week, are higher as of December 2020 according to official data than the £547.80 average of the rest of the North East region that surrounds Hartlepool. On average, women working full time in Hartlepool also have somewhat higher gross weekly pay than women in surrounding areas.

If the woes do not stem from low workers' wages, something else may be going on. Unemployment may be part of the answer; adults in Hartlepool are much less likely to be at work than their counterparts in the rest of the North East.

But better insights come from drilling down into the percentage of the population aged 16 to 64 that have effectively dropped out of the workforce. These are the economically inactive. That is,

they are not at work and nor are they looking for work. In Hartlepool, more than a quarter of those aged 16 to 64 – 27.1 per cent – were in this category as at last December. That is higher than the 23.6 in the North East and 21.0 per cent across Britain.

What's going on? Some 'inactivity' is clearly temporary. For example, about a quarter are parents raising young children who are likely to re-join the workforce one day. Some are inactive because they are full-time students who will one day go on to earn higher-than-average wages. But the percentage classed as students is lower in Hartlepool than in near-by areas.

But the single largest group of 'economic inactives' are those who have dropped out of the workforce because they are physically unable to work. These account for more than a third of those who are neither at work nor looking for work. In fact, the sheer number of people in this category 5,300 as at the end of 2020 is larger than the 3,300 who are unemployed. A higher percentage of economically inactive in Hartlepool are in this category than can be found in the North East generally and is much higher than the average across Britain generally. It is not at all clear that bringing new employment to Hartlepool will cure its ills.

There are hints that workless adults in Hartlepool are very likely to also be parents of children under the age of 16. For the year to December 2019, that was nearly a third of all children – 32.2 per cent – nearly twice the 17.7 per cent in the North East region and more than three times the 9.6 per cent nationwide.

What has kept people out of work and led to debilitating health? Maybe they were unable to find suitable employment at much younger ages. Levels of educational attainment among Hartlepool residents offer some clues. While 40.3 per cent of Britons generally have the equivalent of a university degree, that percentage is only 27.4 in Hartlepool. In the North East, it is 31.9 per cent. At the other end of the skills scale – those with no qualifications at all – the percentage is 11.0 in Hartlepool compared with 9.4 in the region and 7.7 across Britain. Indeed, data stretching back to 2004 show that Hartlepool has long lagged the region and the nation in producing university graduates and has outpaced them when it comes to producing those with no skills at all.

To summarise, a freeport and new infrastructure might be nice to have in Hartlepool. But without investment in people – education, health care, housing – those ambitions will do little to 'level up' the area.

