

# **Forgotten Towns**

## **Weymouth, Portland**

### **and the coastal economy**

*a report from the South Dorset Research Group compiled by  
Philip Marfleet and Jenny Lennon-Wood<sup>1</sup> – July 2022*

The boats, the sands, the esplanade,  
The laughing crowd;  
Light-hearted, loud  
Greetings from some not ill-endowed;

The evening sunlit cliffs, the talk,  
Hailings and halts,  
The keen sea-salts,  
The band, the Morgenblatter Waltz.

From *At a seaside town in 1869*  
THOMAS HARDY

The chill waves whiten in the sharp North-east;  
Cold, cold the night-blast comes, with sullen sound;  
And black and gloomy, like my cheerless breast,  
Frowns the dark pier and lonely sea-view round.  
Yet a few months — and on the peopled strand  
Pleasure shall all her varied forms display;  
Nymphs lightly tread the bright reflecting sand,  
And proud sails whiten all the summer bay:  
Then, for these winds that whistle keen and bleak,  
Music's delightful melodies shall float  
O'er the blue waters; but 'tis mine to seek  
Rather, some unfrequented shade, remote  
From sights and sounds of gaiety[.] — I mourn  
All that gave me delight — Ah! never to return!

*Written at Weymouth in Winter*  
CHARLOTTE SMITH

Come with me to this Island in the sea  
Tears of stone shed by ancient mountains' bones  
The curving shore for all good men to see

From storming seas and flooding rip tides free  
This Island of white stone only Neptune owns  
Come with me to this Island in the sea

Stand alone on these stark broken cliffs, that be  
From pounding of the sea, the broken stones  
The curving shore for all good men to see

Portland's sheltered stony bay, that's in the lee  
The Island and her Pulpit Rock that groans  
Come with me to this Island in the sea

From *Come With Me To This Island In The Sea*  
ANDREW SHISTON

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*Cover photos*

Stone Pier, Weymouth; buildings at The Verne, Portland (Siobhan Lennon-Patience).



## **Summary**

*In this report we present evidence to support our concerns that Weymouth & Portland have become forgotten towns in which a fragile economy, shrinking job opportunities and rising costs place increasing pressure on local communities, and present few options for young people. The year 2022 marks three decades since decisions that profoundly changed the economy of South Dorset, removing local industries and producing a collapse in skilled employment and an abrupt decline in prosperity. We argue that local authorities and agencies have since been ineffective in addressing these problems: one result is that Weymouth & Portland stands at or near the base for key regional and national indices measuring income, educational achievement and social mobility. The report considers why for 30 years policy makers have not successfully addressed the area's economic decline and increasing deprivation. It identifies problems of exclusion of local people from decision-making – and the implications for communities that feel left behind or even abandoned. It concludes with proposals for further research and for policies that can begin to reverse the pattern of decline.*

*The report recognises continuous efforts to bring change among people who live and work in Weymouth & Portland. The authors anticipate a future in which young people have new opportunities in South Dorset and an active interest in remaining part of local communities.*

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## Abbreviations

AEU – Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union

AUEW - Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment

ASHE – Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings

BCP – Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole

DCC – Dorset County Council

DRA - Defence Research Agency

GMB – (formerly the General, Municipal, Boilermakers' and Allied Trade Union, GMBATU)

GVA - Gross Valued Added

Hesa - Higher Education Statistics Agency

ICA – Island Community Action

IPACA - Isle of Portland Aldridge Community Academy

IPMS - Institution of Professionals, Managers and Specialists

Konver - Community Initiative Concerning Defence Conversion

LEP – Local Enterprise Partnership

LSOA – Lower-layer Super Output Area

MSOA – Middle-layer Super Output Area

ONS - Office for National Statistics

SDRG – South Dorset Research Group

SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

TGWU – Transport and General Workers Union

TTWA – Travel to Work Area

TUC - Trades Union Congress

Unesco – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

WeyPAW – Weymouth and Portland Action on Wages



## Introduction – the ‘cul-de-sac’

When development agencies assessed circumstances across the South-West of England in 2017 they highlighted a “cul-de-sac effect”, in which low-wage jobs perpetuate inequality and deprivation, prompting the young to leave.<sup>2</sup> This “vicious circle”<sup>3</sup> of poor job prospects and low earnings is strikingly clear in the case of Weymouth & Portland, the main population centre in South/West Dorset.<sup>4</sup> Here, the economy has contracted at a startling rate, multiple deprivation has increased sharply, and in 2018 the area was ranked lowest for social mobility in England.<sup>5</sup> Weymouth & Portland has become a “coldspot” for social mobility: according to government researchers it is “an all-round poor performer ... where residents experience low levels of quality jobs, low average wage [sic] and relatively costly housing”.<sup>6</sup> Despite calls for urgent action by local authorities and other bodies, years have passed without evidence of intervention or even of sustained interest in the area’s difficulties. In this report we explore what accounts for these problems – and consider how they can be remedied.

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated a process of decline under way in Weymouth & Portland for almost three decades. Recent research suggests that the Dorset Council area is among the most “at risk” in England as the Covid pandemic takes its effect on economic activity.<sup>7</sup> Disadvantaged even by regional standards, it seems likely that Weymouth & Portland will be further depressed, limiting the life chances of its young people. In 2022 it became clear that, despite compelling evidence of the need for local regeneration, it would be excluded from the Government’s “levelling up” initiatives. None of the £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund announced in 2021 to provide “infrastructure that improves everyday life” was to be directed to the area, despite the Fund’s focus on “ex-industrial areas, deprived towns and coastal communities”.<sup>8</sup>

This report explores 30 years of decline in economic activity and the implications for local communities. It also considers problems faced by people of the area in articulating their concerns, for long-term decline has been accompanied by a crisis of political representation in which decision-makers are seen as increasingly distant from those who experience these problems. The paper proposes that local authorities and development agencies bear heavy responsibility for economic and social decline in the area: most important, that focused research combined with meaningful interventions and investments could have avoided the record of decline.

The report has been produced by members of the South Dorset Research Group (SDRG) – a collaboration of local researchers who focus on economic, social and cultural issues, highlighting the circumstances and experiences of those marginalised in mainstream discourses and official discussions. Local authorities, development agencies and academic institutions have rarely focused on the area, although most of its 80,000 people live in an urban location that, demographically, dominates a largely rural county.<sup>9</sup> Since 2017 members of SDRG have been participants in a series of initiatives addressing wage poverty, health cuts, educational provision, environmental and community action. These have provided insights into a process of change in which Weymouth, Portland and neighbouring areas have experienced almost continuous decline.

Absence of meaningful research on Weymouth & Portland inhibits understanding of the area's problems. Data mobilised for this report has been obtained mainly from secondary sources – information available from local authorities, development agencies, academic institutions, libraries, archives and local media. Some has also been gathered at the community level – the experiences of those involved in “third sector” organisations, community groups, trade unions, charities, churches and volunteer networks including school/parent groups. This suggests a high level of resilience among people in South Dorset, who have responded to increasingly challenging circumstances by mobilising local social resources. Largely “hidden” and unresearched, these initiatives have become more evident during the Covid pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Among conclusions reached is the urgent need for sustained primary research that examines in depth the origins of the crisis in Weymouth & Portland, the circumstances and experiences of those affected, and continuing efforts of local people to mitigate its effects. The report highlights at key points the need for such research.

The authors note areas of policy making in which there are signs of improvement. We welcome new information relevant to issues under discussion, recognising that some data – especially that relating to social circumstances, health, well-being, and education – are specific to geographical areas and to limited time periods. We are concerned, however, with long-term trends, especially the trajectory of the local economy and implications for local networks and communities. Critical observation of the work of local authorities does not imply criticism of their employees who, in the majority, are also residents of Dorset and of the area in focus – and who experience many of the problems addressed below.



## SECTION 1

**Closure and retreat:** *what prompted rapid contraction of a relatively stable local economy in Weymouth & Portland? What were the implications?*

Over the course of a generation the economy in Weymouth & Portland changed dramatically. In the early 1990s a high proportion of local jobs were in the defence sector. Research undertaken by Portsmouth Polytechnic on behalf of local authorities in South and West Dorset, published in 1992, demonstrated that combined defence employment (direct and indirect) accounted for 41 percent of jobs in Weymouth & Portland.<sup>11</sup> In the Travel To Work Area (TTWA - primarily Weymouth, Portland and Dorchester) 6,465 employees relied directly or indirectly on the Ministry of Defence and its contractors.<sup>12</sup> A complex of defence sites across the area provided numerous jobs in skilled occupations: most (apparently) permanent, pensionable, and (by later standards) relatively well paid. There was a high level of trade union organisation in workplaces, with the result that rates of pay and conditions of employment were comparable to those in establishments across the UK. By the end of the decade all but a handful of defence-related jobs had gone - a change that exceeded in scale and speed the closure of many major industrial complexes in the UK such as coalfields, steelworks and manufacturing plants. The change was abrupt and had profound consequences.

When closures were first discussed in secret in the late 1950s, the Admiralty noted that Portland's Royal Dockyard had a workforce of some 1,600.<sup>13</sup> The Dockyard was closed in 1959 but Portland Naval Base remained open to maintain vessels and support military personnel, employing thousands of onshore workers and civilian seamen/ women. Alongside the naval establishment a large airbase at the Mere (HMS Osprey) operated helicopters, and on two sites - at Southwell and Castletown - the Defence Research Agency (DRA, earlier the Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment, AUWE) undertook research on submarine weaponry, with a workforce of some 2,000.<sup>14</sup> Defence establishments provided many highly skilled occupations: marine engineering, electronics, electrical engineering, avionics, communications and logistics, and a wide range of maritime specialisms.<sup>15</sup> Large numbers of local residents were also employed in clerical/ administrative support. In addition, military/ defence networks engaged many private businesses in supply of machinery and parts, maintenance, construction, transport, catering and related services. Of particular importance were engineering companies based at the Granby Industrial Estate in Weymouth, constructed in the 1950s when activities in Portland were expanding rapidly, and providing

multiple jobs in skilled occupations, notably engineering and electronics. Among scores of local businesses which responded to a survey in 1991, three-quarters reported that the bulk of their turnover was dependent on defence.<sup>16</sup>

In 1995 the naval base on Portland and both DRA sites were closed, followed two years later by closure of the airbase. Some naval jobs were transferred to Devonport; most disappeared as part of £250 million of cuts to the national defence budget, viewed as a “peace dividend” accruing from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Over £60 million was obtained in long-term savings from closures at Portland.<sup>17</sup> There was even greater loss to the local economy: the Portsmouth report noted that in 1991 there had been 693 “alongside” days logged by warships visiting the naval base, together with 572 such days logged by Royal Fleet Auxiliaries, and visiting naval personnel spent an average of £15 per visit within the local economy.<sup>18</sup> The report noted the importance of an “extended seasonal character” of these inputs – “significantly important to some businesses and may well make the difference between economic viability and possible closure”.<sup>19</sup> The combined loss of direct and indirect revenues to the local economy - including through the “ripple effect” of closures - would be far-reaching, the report suggested, as Ministry of Defence establishments provided “a large percentage of local household income”.<sup>20</sup> It estimated costs of total closure of defence sites to the local economy (in terms of gross outputs) at £73.2mn annually – over 15 percent of output in the TTWA.<sup>21</sup>

News of sweeping closures brought opposition locally, especially from trades unions (notably the TGWU, AEEU, GMB and IPMS), from the local MP, the local authority and from community organisations. As Geoffrey Carter notes in a detailed history of the naval base, when such opposition proved ineffective, “there inevitably remained some bitterness and deep regret”.<sup>22</sup>

### **Market ‘solution’**

It is difficult to calculate sums received locally for regeneration and to determine the purposes to which grants and aid were put: there is no evidence of a formal public record. An accumulated total of £40mn is indicated in some sources: this sum, however, appears to combine grants made in the 1990s as part of the closure programme with private investment in tourism and grants committed to projects for the Olympics 2012.<sup>23</sup> (Initial costs of supporting Olympic sailing events were estimated at £17mn).<sup>24</sup>

When defence closures were confirmed, Weymouth & Portland Borough Council applied to the UK Government for Single Regeneration Budget funding, receiving £6 million over a five-year period to undertake economic, social and environmental development.<sup>25</sup> The authority also applied to the EU's Community Initiative Concerning Defence Conversion (Konver), producing modest sums directed to countryside and tourism projects, and to the EU's Pesca fund, targeted at communities and areas dependent on the fishing industry. Trade union officers engaged in the Konver bids observe that the Government was unwilling to contribute significant matching funding to the programme, with the result that Weymouth & Portland received only a fraction of the sums directed to regeneration at defence sites elsewhere in Europe, where state authorities undertook to stimulate regeneration.<sup>26</sup> When Shadow Defence Minister David Clark asked in Parliament if the Government would intervene with further state support for Weymouth & Portland he was told there were "no plans to provide additional funding".<sup>27</sup> Combined awards directed to local projects, including regeneration initiatives, were dwarfed by the total lost to closures.

There was soon evidence of economic decline and of the wider impacts in South Dorset: it appears, however, that for almost three decades following the closures, no statutory body or development agency addressed these issues as matters of intrinsic importance. Such disinterest amounted to a posture of denial – an approach consistent with the economic agendas shaping national and local policy during this period. Neoliberal principles adopted in the 1980s under the Thatcher government dictated that the state should disengage from economic affairs in favour of private capital. On this view, "the market" would seed growth as individuals and companies pursued profit and generalised prosperity. Writing in 2002, Jonas and Ward observe that ministers "invoked the language of entrepreneurialism and partnership to mask their systematic restructuring of the British state ... part of a dual strategy to centralise regulatory and fiscal control and displace local responsibility to quasi-public institutions".<sup>28</sup> In South Dorset neither statutory bodies nor "quasi-public institutions" accepted responsibility for economic policy, leaving local communities to their fate at the hands of the market.

Years passed without sustained attempts at regeneration – and apparently without systematic enquiry about the impacts of change. Writing in 1998, Joe Doak noted that although national defence closures had brought numerous assessments in the context of land use, wider economic and social impacts received little attention.<sup>29</sup> In Doak's comprehensive review of policy for redundancy of the national defence estate there is no evidence of *any* formal review of outcomes for Weymouth & Portland conducted by national or local government or by development agencies,<sup>30</sup> notwithstanding plentiful evidence of an

abrupt contraction in local economic activity. When in 2018 researchers at Portsmouth University reflected on developments in the 1990s they found that wages in Weymouth & Portland had quickly fallen significantly below the UK average.<sup>31</sup> Unemployment had risen sharply, later returning to the national average: at the same time, the structure of employment had changed markedly, with more jobs likely to be part-time. By 1998 the number of part-time vacancies in the TTWA had increased by two-thirds: nationally over the same period the increase was in the order of 13 percent.<sup>32</sup> As apprenticeships in a range of skilled occupations were abandoned, qualification levels in the local workforce fell: the proportion of the workforce qualified to at least NVQ3 or above, which had been significantly above the national average in 1997-98, fell to well below the national average by 2000-01.<sup>33</sup> The trend continued and was particularly marked in Portland: by 2011, only 19 percent of Portland residents had a qualification at Level 4 or above, compared to the national average of 29 percent.<sup>34</sup> Long-term unemployment had risen to 16 percent.<sup>35</sup> There were also indications of what researchers called a “mini brain-drain”: an economic and labour market profile from Dorset County Council in 2013 reported an outflow of younger people and an influx of those in the pre-retirement age bracket.<sup>36</sup>

Portsmouth University also noted a significant change in the geography of employment. A feature of the TTWA until the mid-1990s was the magnetic effect of the Portland bases, to which thousands of people commuted daily. Following site closures, “out-commuting” increased rapidly, “suggesting that a significant number of local residents have to travel outside the local area to obtain employment commensurate with their personal skill set”.<sup>37</sup> Consistent with predictions in the Portsmouth report of 1992, business survival rates declined. Although such rates (survival after three years of operation) across Dorset were generally better than the national average, in Weymouth & Portland they fell and in 2013 were below the national level.<sup>38</sup>

### **Multiplier Effect**

These problems were not unique – other areas also experienced major defence cuts, and there was a long record across the UK of closures, especially of state-owned enterprises. But several issues made changes in South Dorset particularly damaging. Barrow-in-Furness in Cumbria had also been reliant on the defence sector for employment. In the early 1990s, some 15,000 people worked in its main defence-related enterprises,<sup>39</sup> and when cuts were announced the Competition Commission observed that the impact might be severe. It was particularly concerned about the “Multiplier Effect” – the impact on jobs in the local economy through reductions in spending power and the effect on suppliers. In the case of Barrow, it

noted a “25 percent Indirect Multiplier Effect”, adding: “The fact of the isolation of the Barrow community suggests that indirect employment losses are likely to be greater and the level of reabsorption [into other forms of employment] lower in this area than elsewhere in the UK.”<sup>40</sup> Barrow and Weymouth/Portland had much in common – a population of similar size and problems of geographical isolation. The two areas enjoyed very different fortunes however. In 2020 there were 9,500 workers employed at the Barrow shipyard and maintenance of a skilled industrial base had prompted innovation in offshore wind-generation and related energy technologies. Between 1997 and 2015 Barrow was the fastest-growing coastal economy in the UK, measured by Gross Value Added (GVA) per capita.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, in Portland no large industrial sites survived and in Weymouth several engineering companies earlier networked with the defence sector soon failed.<sup>42</sup> In the absence of initiatives to address these losses the local skills base collapsed.

These outcomes were not only foreseeable but had been predicted by the Portsmouth Report of 1992, which had also addressed the Multiplier Effect. In Weymouth & Portland, researchers calculated, the Multiplier would be 1:078 - for every 100 direct jobs lost to closure, 78 would also be lost indirectly.<sup>43</sup> The Portsmouth team had identified key enterprises that would be affected, notably a host of small and medium engineering and electrical firms, and suppliers of goods and services. It seems that their conclusions were ignored or deemed irrelevant: there was no attempt to address the prospect of collapse of local industry, the imminent loss of skills and the long-term impact on local communities.

Between 2007 and 2017 the economy in Weymouth & Portland contracted by 13 percent (measured by GVA) – an extraordinarily rapid rate of decline.<sup>44</sup> When the Social Market Foundation compared 32 coastal areas across the UK it found only one, Inverclyde near Glasgow, that had experienced a more significant reduction during this period.<sup>45</sup> Key sites on the former defence estate were sold to private businesses, which largely failed to achieve their aims. In 1997 the former naval base at Portland was sold to Langham Industries. The company’s plans were ambitious: to create a commercial port and “a centre of regional economic activity”, with a roll-on/roll-off Continental ferry service, a fishing harbour and fish-handling centre, a marina and yacht repair facility.<sup>46</sup> The port survived - but with a fraction of the activities planned and with modest employment. At Southwell the former DRA site was also sold and opened in 1997 as Southwell Business Park. In 2010 the park went into administration and major initiatives including a hotel complex also failed. In 2014 the Isle of Portland Aldridge Community Academy (IPACA – now Atlantic Academy Portland) took over a large part of the site for use as an “all through” school. It is unclear whether any payment

received by the Government from private purchasers was directed to economic or social purposes in Weymouth & Portland.

Until the mid-1990s the local economy had been relatively stable: between 1971 and 2001 the workforce in Weymouth & Portland increased by 28 percent, about average for a seaside area in England.<sup>47</sup> A decline in number and in quality of jobs soon took its effect, however: by 2002, Weymouth and Portland had the lowest mean annual income in Dorset, a full £1,000 below West Dorset, and over £4,000 below the level in East Dorset.<sup>48</sup> Six of the 10 wards in Dorset with the highest percentage of families on means-tested benefits were in Weymouth & Portland.<sup>49</sup> Between 2009 and 2017, employment declined by almost 17 percent; in 2019, with a jobs density of 53.9, Weymouth & Portland had the lowest level of access to local employment among all urban areas in the county.<sup>50</sup> By 2019 the proportion of jobs with low-level skills in the workforce, at 60 percent, was the highest in Dorset (including Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole - BCP).<sup>51</sup> Among 379 areas in the UK, Weymouth & Portland ranked 372 for competitiveness: the nearest urban centre, Poole, ranked 135.<sup>52</sup>

By 2019 leisure and the retail sector dominated employment. Accommodation and food provided almost 20 percent of jobs, with a further 17 percent in retail and wholesale.<sup>53</sup> There is an interesting contrast with Poole, some 35 miles away and with a comparable industrial/maritime history and a significant tourism sector. Here in 2019, only 6.19 percent of jobs were in accommodation and food, and 13.62 percent in retail and wholesale.<sup>54</sup> Over 12 percent of the workforce in Poole was employed in manufacturing:<sup>55</sup> in Weymouth & Portland the figure was 3.89 percent.<sup>56</sup> Today a high proportion of jobs in Weymouth & Portland are in hotels, holiday camps and parks, caravan camps, shops, restaurants, cafes and fast-food outlets, pubs, clubs and entertainments. It is in these sectors that employment is least secure. Wages are often low and “employer delinquency” most common, with a higher proportion of owners failing to comply with laws on contracts, regular and full payment of earnings, and in-work benefits. Government research demonstrates that in accommodation, food services, retail and wholesale, workers are most likely to be paid below the National Minimum Wage and to experience violation of the law in relation to terms and conditions of employment.<sup>57</sup> Unpaid Britain, a research group at Middlesex University, has similarly found that violations are clustered in these sectors, concluding that jobs in entertainment, food and beverage services, and “other personal services” (hairdressers etc) are most likely to be associated with abuse of employee rights.<sup>58</sup> In Weymouth & Portland many jobs are in addition seasonal and a high proportion are part-time. Under these conditions wages across the area have been continuously depressed. In 2016, employees of First Bus in Weymouth and Bridport were denied pay parity with the company’s employees

in Yeovil, 30 miles away, on the basis that payments on offer were consistent with levels in the South/West Dorset labour market.<sup>59</sup> In 2016 average gross weekly earnings of £300.10 in Weymouth & Portland were the second lowest in the UK, below the Dorset average of £378.70 and far below the England average of £441.90.<sup>60</sup> A year later the figure for Weymouth & Portland had fallen to £283.40 - the lowest among all local authorities in the UK.<sup>61</sup>

These changes were associated with the increasingly disadvantaged status of women in the workforce. Many jobs in the defence sector, notably “administrative” posts in both public and private enterprises, had long been filled by women who – like male counterparts – enjoyed relatively stable, sometimes pensionable employment. This disappeared abruptly in the mid-1990s, to be followed by a long period of deregularisation and “marketisation” and an increase in part-time, insecure and poorly paid employment. There is ample evidence to demonstrate the impact of neoliberalism on women in the workforce, where Louise Dalingwater notes a trend to “lower hourly earnings, fewer training and promotion opportunities, fewer job opportunities, less job security, less access to unemployment insurance and reduced pension entitlements”.<sup>62</sup> She observes: “This high incidence of part-time work among women has been found to incur a significant pay and opportunities gap in Britain.”<sup>63</sup> Research by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills confirms this trend. In 2015 the Commission noted:

Two thirds of those earning low pay in the UK are women. One reason is that women are concentrated in low paying occupations and sectors. Females also make up 77.5 percent of part time employees, and there are big differences in pay for full time and part time workers ...

Women in the adult social care, cleaning and commercial catering industries are amongst the worst affected, where part time work, insecure and unsociable hours and low pay is typical, with many staff earning well below £10 per hour.<sup>64</sup>

In the case of Weymouth & Portland these trends were exaggerated by reconfiguration of the labour market as part of a “coastal”/ “seaside” economy. Part-time, seasonal employment in hospitality/catering, retail, “personal services” and related areas soon dominated the structure of employment – a trend re-emphasised when the care sector became one of the few areas of growth. The Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) notes that healthcare demand has grown “exponentially” in Dorset - in part an expression of the needs of an aging population (see below).<sup>65</sup> In 2020, three-quarters of “frontline” care workers in the UK were paid at rates below the Real Living Wage.<sup>66</sup>

This pattern of disadvantage has profound implications for the life chances of women, and for household stability and community cohesion. Of particular importance is teenage pregnancy – closely associated with inter-generational cycles of family poverty. Government research demonstrates that, “Teenage pregnancy is both a contributory factor and an outcome of child poverty”:

The majority of teenage parents and their children live in deprived areas and often experience multiple risk factors for poverty, experiencing poor health, social and economic outcomes and inter-generational patterns of deprivation.<sup>67</sup>

By 2007 the level of teenage pregnancies in Weymouth & Portland was double the rate across Dorset and significantly higher than the national average: in 2009, local media could identify the area as “a borough of teenage mums”.<sup>68</sup> Ten years later, the rate of teenage pregnancies had declined (in line with national trends) but Weymouth & Portland still had the highest level in Dorset, including BCP.<sup>69</sup> *Research is needed urgently into the feminisation of work in the local economy and the implications for women’s incomes, life chances and well-being.*



## SECTION 2

**Social impacts:** *how has change impacted local communities? What are the implications for health and wellbeing?*

Less than 20 years after final defence closures in Portland the local economy was in deep crisis. Neither local government nor development agencies had addressed regeneration: when significant investment was finally allocated to the area it was focused on the 2012 Olympics and upon hopes for a surge in tourism and employment in leisure activities. This one-dimensional approach was not successful (see below).

The cumulative effect of years of decline can be seen in comparative measures for the Dorset economy. In recent years no area in the county has reached the UK average for GVA per head: in 2017 Poole was closest at 96 percent of the UK average, with Bournemouth at 82 percent. Weymouth and Portland registered a paltry 41 percent of the national average – barely half of the average for the county as a whole (table 1). Among 98 coastal communities in England, Scotland and Wales, Weymouth & Portland had the third-lowest GVA per head of population.<sup>70</sup>

By 2013 unemployment in Weymouth & Portland was double the rate across Dorset, amounting to some 30 percent of the county's total, although the area contained less than 10 percent of its population (then including BCP).<sup>71</sup> At 3 percent it had not risen to predicted levels, however. It seems likely that out-migration reduced demand for local jobs in some sectors. Between 2009 and 2017 the population of Weymouth & Portland increased marginally, by 1.6 percent (in Poole there was a 3.9 percent increase and in Bournemouth a 14.9 percent increase).<sup>72</sup> In 2019 Weymouth and Portland Borough Council observed: "Younger people are moving out of the area because of the affordability gap between house prices and wages with over 57% of young working households unable to afford a property at the lower end of the market."<sup>73</sup> *Further focused research is needed to measure this trend and its implications for the local economy and community.*

Among those who remain in the area are many without advanced skills, for whom opportunities are increasingly limited to jobs in hospitality, leisure and retail – dominant sectors in the "coastal" economy. For those who leave there is little economic incentive to return, particularly as the reduced skills base has made the area even less attractive to employers who might offer better-quality jobs. The consequences of decline are reflected in

indices of deprivation published by the ONS. These measure relative deprivation in Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) and are summarised in the Index of Multiple Deprivation which combines information from several domains: Income, Employment, Education, Skills and Training, Health and Disability, Crime, Barriers to Housing Services, and Living Environment. The LSOAs are designed to be of a similar population size, with an average of approximately 1,500 residents or 650 households.

Table 1 - Dorset – GVA per head by local area, 2017. Source: ONS<sup>74</sup>

	GVA (£mn)	GVA/head (£)	% of UK average
Bournemouth	4400	22593	82
Poole	4003	26463	96
East Dorset	1770	19802	72
North Dorset	1183	16639	60
Purbeck	960	20532	75
West Dorset	2294	22476	82
Weymth & Portld	735	11179	41
BCP	9592	24244	88
DCC	6942	18509	67
Dorset	16534	21454	78

The rapid slide from relative economic stability in the 1990s to today's unemployment and poor-quality jobs has emphasised income and employment deprivation to the extent that significant numbers of households in Weymouth & Portland struggle to cover the cost of necessities like housing, food, heating and clothing. In 2019, nine of the 219 LSOAs covered by Dorset Council were within the top 20 percent most income deprived nationally (up from seven in 2015). Seven of them were in Weymouth & Portland. The Social Mobility Commission's *State of the Nation* report of 2017 identifies a likely cause: "In ... Weymouth and Portland, more than four in ten people earn less than the voluntary living wage, the highest levels in the country and much higher than the national average of one in four."<sup>75</sup> The ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) for 2017 estimates that 44.2 percent of employees in Weymouth & Portland were earning below the Real Living Wage; by 2018 this had risen to 47.8 percent.<sup>76</sup> In 2022 the *Dorset Skills Report*, produced by Dorset LEP, confirmed that almost 50 percent of all jobs in Weymouth and Portland paid less than the Living Wage, compared to 25 percent for Dorset as a whole and a national average of 20 percent.<sup>77</sup> The Real Living Wage is calculated annually by the Resolution Foundation and overseen by the Living Wage Commission. Unlike the government's national minimum wage, which is based on a target to reach 66 percent of median earnings by 2024, the Real Living Wage is based on the best available evidence about living standards in the UK and reflects what employees and their families actually need to live.<sup>78</sup>

In March 2020, during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government introduced a £20 weekly increase in payments for those claiming Universal Credit; this was later removed. Nationally, the cut affects the six million claimants of Universal Credit, 40 percent of whom are in low-paid work. According to analysis by the TUC, the highest proportion of low-income workers affected are in the South West of England where more than four in 10 Universal Credit claimants have a low-paid job that qualifies them for benefits, a larger percentage than any other region.<sup>79</sup> The impact of the pandemic suggests that, consistent with this trend, income poverty in Weymouth & Portland has worsened: *further research is required.*

## **Housing**

Deprivation associated with low wages is compounded by Dorset's high cost of living, with house prices the most significant factor. The county has one of the greatest disparities between income and house prices in UK. As Dorset Council stated in its evidence to the House of Lords report, *The Future of Seaside Towns*, "generally people who retire in Dorset have more money to spend on housing and this leads to increased house prices".<sup>80</sup> In 2013 the average price of a house in Weymouth & Portland was 9.5 times average annual

earnings.<sup>81</sup> By 2020 the ratio had increased to 10.8 against a figure of 7.8 for England as a whole.<sup>82</sup> It seems likely that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on this ratio, possibly due to an exodus from major conurbations in an attempt to escape the virus and constraints imposed to combat it. In December 2020, the South West region recorded one of the highest annual house price increases in the UK at 10.2 percent.<sup>83</sup> In the year to November 2021, house prices in Dorset increased by 12.9 percent, as against a national figure of 10 percent.<sup>84</sup> *As with many indices, these and similar figures for Weymouth & Portland are collected increasingly rarely – an outcome of the creation of a unitary authority for Dorset, now often the sole local authority that features in key datasets. This in effect conceals much information on Weymouth & Portland, making more urgent sustained primary research on the area.*

High house prices alongside a large, low-quality private rental sector are common features of UK coastal towns, particularly seaside resorts. Weymouth & Portland is no exception. In 2019 the housing charity Shelter showed that an average two-bed family house in Weymouth & Portland cost £8,100 per year to rent privately.<sup>85</sup> The combined income (all earners, after tax and National Insurance) of a family on low wages in the area was £23,920.<sup>86</sup> “Locally,” said Shelter, “this means 33.9 percent of a low-earning family’s yearly income has been spent before other living costs are factored in”.<sup>87</sup> The cost of social housing consumes less family income but, says Shelter, a steep decline in social housing “has left growing numbers of families caught in a debilitating ‘rent-trap’.”<sup>88</sup> Dorset’s relatively high council tax is an additional burden on low-income households. In 2019/20, the tax on a Band D property on Portland was £2,034.49: in Weymouth it was £2,130.89; England’s average was £1,750.<sup>89</sup>

In 2018, Shelter’s research paper *Homelessness in Great Britain – The Numbers Behind The Story* ranked Weymouth and Portland at third highest in the South West for the number of homeless people per head of population - just below Bristol and Gloucester and higher than Bournemouth or Poole.<sup>90</sup> In 2021, the *Dorset Echo* reported on analysis of Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government statistics by the campaign group Action on Empty Homes. In October 2020, 7,570 homes in Dorset were not being used, up from 7,246 the year before; of these, 1,820 were empty long-term, having been unoccupied for at least six months, and 5,750 were second homes. One in every 24 homes in Dorset was standing empty - above the average of one in 47 across England - while 273 households were without their own homes.<sup>91</sup>

As part of the government's response to Covid-19, in March 2020 local authorities were given 48 hours' notice to get all homeless people into accommodation. Having made no provision for in-house hostels, Dorset Council relied on private B+B's and hotels to house homeless residents. Only three hotels agreed, all in Weymouth. As a result, the majority of homeless people from across Dorset were temporarily moved into Weymouth, re-emphasising problems of accommodation in the area.<sup>92</sup> Dorset Council's response to a Freedom of Information request in March 2021 stated that, of 186 people helped by the Covid-19 provisions, 45 percent were subsequently in settled or supported accommodation.<sup>93</sup>

### **Family poverty, health**

Low wages, job insecurity and high costs leave many families uncertain about funding day-to-day living. Faced with choices between food, heating or unforeseen expenditure such as medicines, many rely on food banks. The Help and Kindness Project website,<sup>94</sup> which helps people find local support, lists 10 food bank services for Weymouth & Portland. Weymouth Food Bank,<sup>95</sup> which operates four of the listed services, provided help to 3,378 adults and 1,639 children in 2020, an increase of 33 percent over 2019.<sup>96</sup> In 2021 it distributed almost 50,000 meals' worth of food parcels. Treasurer Helen Miller notes that family needs have become more pressing: "Demand is still increasing ... food, fuel and energy prices are increasing and wages are not going to keep up with that. I think it's going to be a difficult time".<sup>97</sup>

Family poverty has specific consequences for children. In 2019 a report by End Child Poverty showed that 30 percent of under-16s in Weymouth & Portland were living in poverty, rising to some 40 percent in Melcombe Regis, Weymouth East and Underhill, compared to an average of 26 percent for the South West region.<sup>98</sup> Of 5,266 children in South Dorset said to be affected 4,050 were from Weymouth & Portland.<sup>99</sup> Growing up in poverty blights children's lives; it means being cold, going hungry, not being able to join in activities with friends. According to Anna Feuchtwang, chair of End Child Poverty: "Work does not guarantee a route out of poverty, with two-thirds of child poverty occurring in working families".<sup>100</sup>

Low-income families face food insecurity and problems providing healthy diets: one outcome identified by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health is a close correlation between deprivation and excess weight/obesity.<sup>101</sup> Part of the explanation is that, in general, more nutrient-rich foods cost more per calorie than less nutrient-rich foods. In 2018 the Food

Foundation reported that the poorest households in the UK would have to spend 42 percent of their disposable income to meet dietary recommendations outlined in the government's *Eatwell Guide*.<sup>102</sup> When families cannot provide a healthy diet the likelihood of unhealthy weight gain among children rises rapidly, leaving such children at risk from cardiovascular disease, Type 2 Diabetes, joint problems and breathing difficulties such as asthma and sleep apnea. They often also experience anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, which can be exacerbated by social problems such as bullying and stigma.

Childhood obesity is likely to continue into adulthood and is associated with a higher chance of premature death and disability. Between 2006/07 and 2019/20 the gap between obesity prevalence for children attending schools in the most and least deprived areas of England increased by 1.8 percentage points due to obesity prevalence increasing in the most deprived areas and reducing in the least deprived.<sup>103</sup> In 2018, NHS data showed that children in Weymouth & Portland had the highest levels of obesity in Dorset, with 9.1 percent of Reception-age pupils and 17 percent of Year 6 pupils recorded as obese. For Year 6, the numbers classed as overweight or obese rose to 33 percent (for comparison, only 6.7 percent of Reception-age pupils in Poole and 10.1 percent in East Dorset were obese.)<sup>104</sup> Caroline Morgan, chief executive of Local Food Links, said that childhood obesity was a "hidden problem ... [it] will get worse before it gets better". She added:

The price of food is increasing but wages are not. It's much more of a problem in Dorset than people think, there are very few areas that are not affected. We have affluent areas next to deprived areas and it's masking the problem.<sup>105</sup>

The *Dorset Echo* commented in 2018 that statistics on childhood obesity for Weymouth & Portland added to "a series of grim revelations for the 'left behind' borough", adding to unwelcome news on low incomes and the county's worst rates for life expectancy.<sup>106</sup>

Weymouth & Portland has some of the worst health outcomes in England, with low life expectancy and high rates of major diseases. In his report on health in coastal communities, England's Chief Medical Officer Professor Christopher Whitty has identified some common causes: "The pleasant environment attracts older, retired citizens to settle, who inevitably have more and increasing health problems. An oversupply of guest housing has led to Houses of Multiple Occupation which lead to concentrations of deprivation and ill health." He commented on the striking lack of available data on health and wellbeing in coastal communities and recommended a national strategy to address problems of preventable illness.<sup>107</sup>

Adult health and wellbeing is seriously affected by economic deprivation. People without an adequate income find it difficult to adopt and maintain healthy behaviours, to avoid stress, to feel in control and to access positive experiences and material resources. Without secure, adequately paid work they can become trapped in a cycle of poverty and poor health. The health and disability domain of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation used by Dorset Council measures the risk of premature death and impairment of quality of life through poor physical or mental health. On this measure, six of the most health-deprived LSOAs in Dorset in 2019 were in Weymouth & Portland, with nine LSOAs in the top 10 percent most health deprived nationally.<sup>108</sup> In 2018 six Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) in Weymouth & Portland registered “bad or very bad” general health at a level worse than the average for all such areas in England.<sup>109</sup> ONS statistics showed that both boys and girls in Weymouth & Portland had a lower life expectancy at birth than all other areas of the county. Boys were expected to live for 78.5 years, lower than UK average of 79.2 years, and girls were expected to live for 83.2 years. Life expectancy for men in Weymouth was significantly lower than the English average - the lowest in Dorset and 8.7 years lower than neighbourhoods in the county that registered the highest life expectancy.<sup>110</sup> Commenting on the figures, Weymouth GP Dr Jon Orrell said:

The life expectancy figures show that wealth brings health, and the opposite – being poor makes you poorly. The biggest changes in health have less to do with health services than social changes – wages, good food, warm homes, clean air, debt. Weymouth and Portland has been hard hit since the loss of well-paid navy jobs. Lack of income and home conditions hits those who are marginalised the hardest. The stress of a harder life in a relatively impoverished area leads to earlier deaths as the figures show.<sup>111</sup>

Financial insecurity, together with inadequate support services, often leads to deteriorating mental health. Public Health Dorset’s 2019 locality profile compared records for Weymouth & Portland with the England average and found that all local general practices had more cases of depression, with levels of severe mental illness average or higher than the national figures.<sup>112</sup> The Public Health England health profile for Weymouth & Portland published in 2017 showed that the suicide rate locally was very significantly higher than the average for England.<sup>113</sup> In 2018 the *Dorset Echo* reported that, at 361 people in every 100,000, Weymouth & Portland had a strikingly high rate of hospital admissions for self-harm, well above 185.3 per 100,000 for the South West as a whole.<sup>114</sup>

## **Inequality**

One striking feature of the increase in multiple deprivation is the pattern of inequality across Weymouth & Portland. Data collected by Department for Communities and Local Government and published in the *Index of Multiple Deprivation for England* show that a number of the most deprived areas (within the 10 per cent most deprived in England) are adjacent to the least deprived (within the 10 per cent least deprived in England).<sup>115</sup> In 2018 the *Dorset Echo* identified “vast disparities” in economic and social measures for adjacent wards in Weymouth, noting in particular a yawning gap in life expectancy:

The vast disparities across the town show men living in Wey Valley, on the northern edges of the town, have a life expectancy of 84.3 [years] but men in Melcombe Regis [in the town centre] have a life expectancy of around 73.1 years – below the national average ... Meanwhile, women living in Preston [a northern suburb] can expect to live until they are almost 90 compared to women in Melcombe Regis who are only expected to live until 81.<sup>116</sup>

This pattern is not unique to Weymouth & Portland; rather, it is a particular, very pronounced expression of national trends over recent decades. In an analysis of inequality and local geography conducted in 2001, Gregory, Dorling and Southall observed that “inequality - *relative poverty* - has grown and has been particularly marked over the last 30 years”.<sup>117</sup> More recent developments - most importantly the repeated imposition of “austerity” policies across the UK - have exaggerated local differences in income and wellbeing.<sup>118</sup> Even in this scenario, however, Weymouth & Portland stands out as an area of striking local inequalities. Addressing a conference in Weymouth in 2018, Professor Danny Dorling - a leading authority on the geography of inequality – observed: “You should have a sign up at the train station that says, ‘*Welcome to Weymouth, the most socially divided small urban settlement on the south coast*’ ”.

## **Education**

Dorset Insight’s report for 2018 shows the county as a whole hovering around the national average for pupil achievement. Data on schools is difficult to evaluate, especially since introduction of academies and absence of meaningful information on comparative performance.<sup>119</sup> In its submission to the House of Lords *Future of Seaside Towns* report in 2019, Dorset Council acknowledged Weymouth & Portland’s very low rate for social mobility and linked this to progress scores for all secondary schools in the borough, which fell below the government’s floor standard.<sup>120</sup>



Table 2

<i>Local Authority</i>	<i>% of children eligible for FSM achieving a 'good level of development' at the end of Early Years Foundation Stage</i>	<i>% of children eligible for FSM attending a primary school rated 'outstanding' or 'good' by Ofsted</i>	<i>% of children eligible for FSM attending a secondary school rated 'outstanding' or 'good' by Ofsted</i>	<i>% of children eligible for FSM achieving at least the expected level in reading, writing and maths at the end of Key Stage 2</i>
<i>Bournemouth</i>	51.29%	92.80%	85.36%	34.51%
<i>Christchurch</i>	50.97%	83.16%	100.00%	27.85%
<i>East Dorset</i>	50.66%	98.73%	86.39%	15.71%
<i>North Dorset</i>	51.30%	64.43%	100.00%	31.25%
<i>Poole</i>	51.52%	86.79%	58.10%	29.08%
<i>Purbeck</i>	49.05%	83.45%	100.00%	30.77%
<i>West Dorset</i>	44.40%	83.09%	100.00%	22.50%
<b><i>Weymouth &amp; Portland</i></b>	<b>46.23%</b>	<b>62.01%</b>	<b>54.64%</b>	<b>20.95%</b>

Source: Social Mobility Commission<sup>121</sup>

The *Social Mobility Index* offers markers of progression among disadvantaged pupils – those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). In 2017, such children in Weymouth & Portland were overall more disadvantaged educationally than almost others in Dorset (table 2).

In 2018, South Dorset was ranked at 533 among 533 parliamentary constituencies in England for social mobility – a striking marker of the area's status on an index that measures

the life chances of its children. Some 70 percent of the population of the constituency lives in Weymouth & Portland.<sup>122</sup>

Persistent absence from school has a damaging impact on attainment and is notably high in some of the most socio-economically deprived areas of Weymouth & Portland. In 2017/18 the persistent absence average for Dorset stood at 10.4 percent, slightly lower than the national average of 11.5 percent. However, in Fortuneswell North (Portland) the figure was 28 percent, with Rodwell & Chapelhay and Melcombe Regis (central Weymouth) both recording 26 percent.<sup>123</sup> Family poverty is associated closely with declining educational achievement. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that school spending per pupil in England fell by 9 percent in real terms between 2009/10 and 2019/20 and that the deprivation funding premium shrank from 35 percent to 25 percent in 2018/19. Also, under a new National Funding Formula, the increase to schools in poorer areas is expected to be three to four percentage points lower than those in more affluent areas up to 2021.<sup>124</sup> Budget cuts imposed nationally have also reduced funding available to local authorities to sustain and develop child and family services. As a result, schools serving deprived communities like Weymouth & Portland are dealing with extra challenges, including deteriorating mental and physical health, the impact of unemployment, and higher crime rates.

Across Dorset county the proportion of students entering Higher Education, at 52 percent, falls below the UK average (in 2015-16, the national average was 58 percent).<sup>125</sup> In South Dorset there is strong preliminary evidence that the proportion of students progressing into the tertiary sector is significantly lower. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (Hesa) identifies “Low Participation Neighbourhoods” in which educational advance is associated with multiple deprivation: the concentration of such neighbourhoods in Weymouth & Portland suggests that its schools are progressing even fewer students to university.<sup>126</sup> This substantial deficit has implications for the local skills base and for employment options. Decades passed during which local authorities in Dorset declined to address the problem, despite initiatives elsewhere in the UK to provide opportunities at the tertiary level by establishing university centres and/or campuses. Among examples in areas that share economic and demographic challenges with Dorset are successful projects undertaken in Cornwall, Lincolnshire and Suffolk. A local initiative finally emerged in Dorset in 2020 (see below).

## Resources for youth

A recent assessment of the experiences of communities in coastal towns observes that young people face increasingly complex challenges. Aniela Wenham comments: “Addressing the reproduction of localised inequalities requires policy makers and politicians to re-examine the causal processes that contribute towards profoundly unequal life chances.”<sup>127</sup> Policy makers in Dorset have responded to such challenges by removing all youth services. In 2015 Dorset County Council (DCC) approved plans to remove funding for 22 council-run youth centres, aiming to save £1 million. Despite a large protest by young people at County Hall, Dorchester, the cuts went ahead as the Council announced that buildings it owned or leased for youth work could be taken on by the local community or sold.<sup>128</sup> This concluded a long series of reductions in services, including removal in 2011 of funding for the Waves advice and information centre in Weymouth. Waves, run by the charitable Children’s Society, had offered family mediation, drop-in advice sessions and confidential sexual health services for young people: in 2010, the mediation scheme had assisted 130 families; the drop-in centre had been used by more than 500 people. Manager Roy Koerner said of the programme’s closure:

What we have found is that there’s an increased demand for the mediation service and we are not coping with all the families we should. Demand has gone up for all sorts of reasons but increased financial hardship increases conflict in the family - in some cases children might feel they want to run away. We are now having to deal with the high-risk cases, so preventative work has been stopped, which will have a knock-on effect.<sup>129</sup>

Conflict in the family invariably has a disproportionate impact upon women and girls – and these warnings should have prompted concern about domestic abuse and violence, the high level of teenage pregnancies, and the importance of supportive local services. But Waves finally closed in 2019, re-opening some months later as Nu Waves with a small team and much-reduced funding from Weymouth and Dorchester Town Councils. In 2016, there had been three full-time youth centres and five part-time youth clubs in Weymouth & Portland, plus Waves. By 2021, there was one full-time youth centre and one part-time youth club (excluding church-based youth groups and uniformed organisations); there were no dedicated youth facilities on Portland (table 3).

**Table 3 - Youth Provision (Clubs/Centres and Youth Work) in Weymouth & Portland**

*Clubs and centres delivering youth work up to August 2016 (most run by Dorset County Council) and their status in February 2021 (in normal times, ignoring temporary Coronavirus effects).*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type of Centre up to August 2016</b>	<b>Current position as at February 2021 (not including Covid-related issues/temporary closures)</b>
<b>Full-time centres</b>	<b>Run by Dorset County Council (DCC)</b>	
STEPS Club for Young People	Full-Time Youth Centre	Full-time Youth & Community Centre – run by STEPS the Charity
Littlemoor Top Club	Full-time Youth Centre	Part-time Youth Club
Portland Youth Centre	Full-time Youth Centre	Closed
<b>Part-time centres</b>	<b>Run by DCC</b>	
Southill Youth Club	Part-time Youth Club	Now SPARK Wellbeing Centre - No longer a youth club
Chickerell Youth Club	Part-time Youth Club	Closed
The Courts Drop-In	Part-time Youth Club	Closed
<b>Part-time centres</b>	<b>Run by Vol Sector - Not DCC</b>	
Islanders Club	Part-time Youth Club run by Voluntary Sector	Younger age range
Easton Sq. Drop-In	Part-time Drop-in run by Methodist Church	Closed
<b>Advice &amp; Information Centre</b>	<b>Run by The Children's Society</b>	
Waves	Full-time centre	Closed

*Source: Tom Lane, Principal youth worker, STEPS Club for Young People, Weymouth.*

In 2019 Dorset Police and Crime Commissioner Martyn Underhill warned about the impact of cuts, including a correlation with increases in youth offending:

The local authorities have removed most youth services except those that are statutory. This retreat from outreach services, youth services and early intervention over several years, has led to a generation of youth growing up in Dorset without amenities or support in many cases.<sup>130</sup>

In 2021 an Executive Advisory Panel of Dorset Council recognised the glaring deficiency: “a gap ... in youth club provision, particularly in the Portland area of the county”.<sup>131</sup> Having been reduced to an appeal for crowdfunding of youth centres, in 2021 the Council returned to a grants-based programme, albeit with paltry funding.

Increased awareness of problems for children and young people is evident in Dorset Council’s *Children, Young People and Families Plan 2020-2023*. This notes: “stark differences between where children grow up and the chances they have of doing well in adult life, with Weymouth and Portland ranking one of the lowest areas for social mobility in the whole country”.<sup>132</sup> Its proposal for integrated activity with multi-professional teams based in local communities is an encouraging development. Especially notable is the establishment of Local Alliance Groups that bring together professionals and parents, local charities and community organisations to focus on Early Care and in particular on children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). There is a huge deficit to be addressed, however. *Focused research is required to assess the impact of continuous reductions in funding in deprived areas, notably Weymouth & Portland.*

### SECTION 3

#### **At the end of the line: Measures implemented to mitigate economic decline and social deprivation – and the outcomes**

In the 1990s academic researchers began to address the decline of seaside and coastal areas around the UK. Many were identified as places “at the end of the line” – located where roads and railways terminated and often dependent on tourism and seasonal economic activity. In 2006 Sheela Agarwal and Paul Brunt considered key issues confronting English resorts, in particular the mounting evidence for multiple deprivation. Social exclusion had most often been associated with inner-city and rural environments, they noted, but had now been identified as a feature of the coastal economy, “notoriously fragile because it is dominated by tourism businesses and other service sector businesses”.<sup>133</sup> In a detailed analysis of factors contributing to increased poverty, inequality and social deprivation on the coast, they concluded that diversification of the local economy was the most important means of halting decline. Restructuring of the tourism sector to achieve greater market competitiveness had been attempted widely, largely without success:

[I]t has done little to arrest the socio-economic pressures that many resorts have been experiencing ... it is therefore imperative that a more holistic and integrated approach must be adopted which attaches greater priority to addressing non-tourism issues.<sup>134</sup>

In South Dorset policy makers pursued a different approach. The decimation of local industry that had taken place in the 1990s was followed by an orientation on tourism that made the area more dependent on seasonal employment in insecure, ill-paid jobs, prompting a further spiral of decline. With the exception of hopes for Portland Port and nearby Osprey Quay (at the Mere, the former airbase), development strategy in the area relied upon seaside activities sustained by seasonal interest. In 2000 a Weymouth and Portland National Sailing Academy was established with some £7mn of combined grants from local and national authorities including the National Lottery.<sup>135</sup> In other sectors, energies required to prompt economic growth were to come from business networks, with an assumption that entrepreneurial initiatives focused upon tourism would play the key role. This was consistent with neoliberal nostrums and with the establishment in 2010 of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), initially mandated to be voluntary liaisons of business people that would stimulate local economic activity and later provided with central government funding and charged to lead development strategy in areas under their

authority. The Dorset LEP embraced the whole county, including the Bournemouth/ Christchurch/ Poole conurbation (which took on a separate identity as a unitary authority in 2019). This presented a further problem: although usually seen as a seaside area, BCP had its own industrial base including advanced defence systems, marine engineering and boat-building, finance and IT. It was also home to a major regional airport and to two universities – a stimulus to research and investment as well as an income generator for the area. South Dorset had no such institutions. Since 2010, LEP activities have been focused continuously on BCP as Dorset’s key economic hub: other areas of the county, notably Weymouth & Portland, have received a fraction of investment handled by the organisation. Of some £247mn distributed through the LEP by 2020, £4.7mn – less than 2 percent – had been directed to projects in the area.<sup>136</sup> Awards from sources such as the Coastal Communities Fund (for which Weymouth received £3.79mn in 2018 for regeneration of the quayside area)<sup>137</sup> are rare exceptions to practices that have starved Weymouth & Portland of development funding. This pattern appears to confirm criticism of Dorset LEP made in relation to Bridport, West Dorset, and noted in the 2019 House of Lords report on seaside towns:

The experience of the Bridport area is that it has been almost impossible to engage properly with the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership. The LEP focuses on strategic projects in larger urban areas or larger development sites and does not appear willing to invest in the needs of smaller coastal communities. As LEPs are now the main source of public regeneration funding, this is immensely frustrating.<sup>138</sup>

The LEP, the key local development agency, has not systematically addressed economic activity in South Dorset – a problem compounded by the passivity of local authorities, especially in relation to transport infrastructure. Over the course of 30 years from the early 1990s only two significant modifications have been made to the road network in South Dorset – the Puddletown by-pass on the A35 (the main east-west route across the county), and the Weymouth relief road on the A354 (see below). Much of the A35, the A31 (a second east-west route) and the A37 (the main road north through Dorset towards Bristol) remain as winding single-carriageway routes notorious for hold-ups. In 2016 the *Portland Plan* observed: “To secure future economic growth, it is critical that cost effective improvements are investigated and made to the local highways network and to the existing public transport provision (including availability and frequency of service).”<sup>139</sup> The issue of major road improvements is contentious, with environmental issues an important concern; it is also the case, however, that key economic activities require effective transport and communication - and Dorset is one of only two counties across the south and south-west of England without

motorways (Cornwall nonetheless being connected to the national motorway network by the M5 through Devon and Somerset). Road links to and across South Dorset are relics of an earlier age when the area's maritime connections played a key role in economic activity - and sea routes too have been challenged by lack of strategic investment. In 2012 the ferry berth at Weymouth Harbour began to collapse, threatening cross-Channel services. A £4.25mn investment by the local council aimed to save the service but the berth proved too small to accommodate a new vessel operated by Condor Ferries. In 2015 Condor transferred its service to Poole, reputedly at an annual cost of the £750,000 to Weymouth Harbour authorities.<sup>140</sup> In 2017 plans for a new service from Weymouth to Cherbourg failed to materialise and in 2021 the Weymouth ferry terminal ("Building B") was finally demolished.

The local LEP observes that Dorset "suffers from a weak road network, poor connectivity and an overall lack of integration within the transport network placing major constraints on economic development, growth and suppresses productivity [sic]".<sup>141</sup> In 2019 it became clear that all proposals to improve the road network in the county, including east-west and north-south routes linking Weymouth & Portland to regional networks, had failed to obtain central government support.<sup>142</sup> Connections to the nearest urban centres are so inadequate that commuting to work in Poole/Bournemouth, some 35 miles away, is insignificant, engaging just 2.5 percent of the workforce in Weymouth & Portland.<sup>143</sup> The record on rail has been equally ineffective. The Dorset LEP *Strategic Plan* comments tersely that: "Rail passenger growth – including on the important Weymouth-London Waterloo line - has been constrained by limited service frequencies and a lack of infrastructure."<sup>144</sup> The main line to London runs for several miles on one track outside Dorchester and access to Weymouth station is limited by a blockage described by planners as the "Weymouth throat". The line to Bristol in the north remains single track on much of the route. In 2016 plans to electrify the local network were deferred indefinitely.<sup>145</sup>

The bus network has been in a state of continuous decay. Since privatisation in the 1980s, bus routes have been radically reduced and services cut to meet profitability criteria of local operators. In 2017 Dorset County Council reduced the number of subsidised routes from 35 to seven. The National Director of Bus Users UK, David Redgewell, commented:

It's horrendous. From what I can see, no other council in the south west has cut back on bus services to this level. There is very little left ... To suggest the council has not got enough money to fund a public bus service is shocking in 2017. Lots of people use these buses and their lives are going to be absolutely appalling now.... It seems the council does not care about economic development and tourism.<sup>146</sup>



Among the handful of routes subsidised by the local authority after 2017, none connected Weymouth & Portland to other areas of the county. Private operators in the area meanwhile continued to reduce services. In May 2022, Michael Kelly, president of Weymouth and Portland Access Group, observed that routes and frequency were still being cut: “Rail and bus fares are high yet the services continue to fall short of what is needed.... Weymouth and Portland Access Group has campaigned on this issue for years but regrettably the situation continues to decline.”<sup>147</sup> In 2021 the Government launched a National Bus Strategy for England with a Bus Back Better fund worth £1.4 billion. In May 2022 it became clear that, although neighbouring authorities had been successful in obtaining support, Dorset’s bid had been rejected.<sup>148</sup>

### **Anchor institutions**

Inadequate infrastructure, notably a deficient system of public transport, has for decades been a huge disincentive for both private and public investment in South Dorset. The problem was starkly clear in 2005, when one of the few large enterprises to have emerged in Weymouth, the retail chain New Look, relocated its distribution centre at a cost of 580 jobs to the area. Local media reported: “New Look stunned Weymouth and Portland when it announced it was moving its distribution centre to Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire to be closer to motorways and be more centrally-based.”<sup>149</sup> A further 70 jobs were soon transferred and in 2009 New Look moved 250 head office jobs to London, cutting the remaining workforce in Weymouth by half. The decision had been taken, said a company spokesman, because of problems of travel and of access to relevant employee skills in the area.<sup>150</sup>

For over two decades Weymouth & Portland has hemorrhaged full-time skilled jobs and few large workplaces remain. Outside the leisure and retail sector two industrial employers stand out: print technology company ASM (formerly DEK Printing Machines) and Sunseeker luxury yachts, a Poole-based enterprise established at Osprey Quay in Portland. Few small manufacturers have survived: the growth sector in private business appears to be in elderly care, where wages and employment conditions are notoriously poor. Public-sector employment overall is strikingly low. The TUC has collated data on public-sector employment by parliamentary constituency. South Dorset has a population of some 110,000: in 2021 there were 4,550 public-sector employees in the area, which is dominated demographically by Weymouth & Portland. In contrast, in neighbouring West Dorset, with 99,000 people spread across a predominantly rural area, there were 12,081 public-sector employees.<sup>151</sup> Significant “anchor institutions” (well-established bases of permanent

employment networked into the local economy and community) are few - a key reason why jobs density in Weymouth & Portland is the lowest among all urban areas in Dorset. The Land Registry on the Granby Estate, Portland's two prisons (the latter with a combined workforce of some 400 employees), and Weymouth's college of further education are islands of stable public-sector employment.<sup>152</sup> In 2019 Dorset Healthcare NHS Trust closed wards at Portland Community Hospital, reducing the institution to marginal service status, notwithstanding the parlous state of local primary care provision and the importance of the institution to the Portland community - spelled out by residents in a series of meetings with Dorset Healthcare NHS Trust.<sup>153</sup> Key institutions of local government and the health service, providing thousands of jobs "anchored" in the local economy and community, are located in Dorchester. Here they are within reach of some commuters from Weymouth & Portland but have the long-term effect of draining skilled employment away from the latter.

### **2012 Olympics**

When plans for development finalised in 2016 were presented to town and parish councils in South and West Dorset, they prioritised tourism attractions and facilities; tourist accommodation including caravan and camping sites; rural diversification; new agricultural buildings; and equestrian development.<sup>154</sup> This suggests that local planners see Weymouth & Portland primarily as a site for tourist initiatives, with the implication that it is likely to remain an area of low-paid, insecure jobs. Sustained initiatives for development involving skilled, full-time, permanent jobs supported by appropriate investment in infrastructure have not been forthcoming.

The continued crisis of family poverty and collapsing social mobility in Weymouth & Portland is described by a former senior executive of Dorset County Council as "Dorset's shame".<sup>155</sup> Problems have also been highlighted by a leading elected member of the local authority. In February 2019, Gary Suttle - Cabinet member of Dorset Council responsible for addressing issues of social deprivation - told a public session of the Council that for decades the authority and its predecessor, historically under the control of his majority party, had failed to provide effective leadership in economic and social policy, and that inadequate infrastructure held back development.<sup>156</sup> His frank assessment contrasts with the posture of denial adopted over many years by those in authority in local bodies, including elected officials and officers charged to oversee economic affairs and community development, for whom the natural assets of South Dorset set in the context of tourism – the Jurassic coast, golden beaches and thatched villages – have been projected as key resources for growth, to be realised by entrepreneurial vigour.

Passivity among local officials was evident even when Portland was chosen to host sailing events during the 2012 London Olympic Games. Investment for the Games from central government included a Weymouth relief road (the A354 at £87mn), new bus services, a centre for sailing events at Osprey Quay, an athletes' village, and further sums for publicity, community engagement, security and environmental improvements.<sup>157</sup> According to Simon Williams, head of Portland and Weymouth 2012 Operations,

The overarching priority was to capitalise upon the catalytic affect [sic] of the Games and their potential to boost the local economy, reprofile Weymouth and Portland as a tourist destination, and potentially attract business interest...<sup>158</sup>

Williams anticipated a transformation of the former defence sites and broad economic, cultural, community and legacy benefits.<sup>159</sup> Entrepreneurs would be invited to consider new opportunities and Weymouth & Portland would "rise from the ashes of its naval past".<sup>160</sup> The focal point was tourism: as a marker of official expectations, a £3.5 million viewing tower, the Jurassic Skyline, was constructed on the seafront at Weymouth. In 2017 its platform became stuck, marooning 13 people who were eventually removed by helicopter. In 2019 the tower was closed and dismantled – an unhappy metaphor for local experiences of the Olympics. The Weymouth relief road had also been presented as a major contribution to local development. But much was single-carriageway, constructed without wider strategic planning and inputs, so that the "Ridgeway Road" soon became synonymous with lengthy holdups.

During the Olympics planning phase Deborah Sadd reviewed expectations of 2012 as a mega-event. Weymouth's "once in a lifetime opportunity" had already brought extravagant hopes for regeneration, she noted, mainly based on the National Sailing Academy established in 2001 and on improved infrastructure for tourism, upgraded hotels and a general move "upmarket" in the leisure sector.<sup>161</sup> Sadd noted the importance of experiences worldwide in relation to the Olympics and similar high-profile events, warning that "sports tourism developments can have negative impacts on local communities" and that without careful strategic planning, the outcome could be a decline in the fortunes of the local community.<sup>162</sup>

Following the Games, Maninkant Sharma and Helen Symons undertook analysis of the local planning process.<sup>163</sup> They noted that the official planning group, Weymouth and Portland 2012 Operations, had specific expectations: "Hosting the 2012 Games creates long-lasting legacy benefits for Weymouth & Portland and Dorset", the group suggested, proposing that

the Games “acts as a catalyst for re-profiling the area and boosting economic regeneration, tourism and inward investment”.<sup>164</sup> But local and national authorities had neither invested in social resources in the area nor initiated a legacy agenda that could bring significant benefits.<sup>165</sup> The Games came and went as anticipated improvements failed to materialise. Quoting the mixed reactions of local people, including a planning officer, Sharma and Symons note that tourism decreased both during and after the Games. New buses introduced for the events were soon withdrawn and, significantly, accommodation at the athletes’ village was sold at prices that local people could not afford:

Once the games were over life came back to normal - as it was before the hosting of the games ... There were promises, hopes and enthusiasm but no perception of a clear Olympic legacy today.<sup>166</sup>

Sharma and Symons conclude that a significant share of responsibility was associated with local authorities which “did not uphold promises that were made”.<sup>167</sup> Immediately following the 2012 Games there were calls for a task force “to give struggling Weymouth a much-needed boost”.<sup>168</sup> Local campaigners said that income from tourism had declined. Dave Price, chair of Weymouth Hoteliers, Guesthouses and Leaseholders’ Association said: “Weymouth is heavily reliant on the tourism trade and should have seen developments following the great Olympic coverage last year. Instead we’re seeing possible cutbacks...”<sup>169</sup>

The spiral of decline continued: by 2019 Weymouth & Portland was among areas with the highest levels of bankruptcy in the UK. The borough was ranked 12<sup>th</sup> in the country for insolvency, “with debt-stricken residents struggling to make repayments”.<sup>170</sup> A national report revealed 39.6 personal insolvencies per 10,000 adults in Weymouth & Portland against a national average of 25 insolvencies.<sup>171</sup> Similar problems were evident in other coastal towns, in which “dying industries” had not been replaced; critically, South Dorset suffered from a shortage of advanced skills, inhibiting investment by both private and public sector enterprises:

[T]he worst hit seaside towns do not have a university, making them less desirable as destinations for businesses looking for skilled employees. A knock-on effect is that young professionals move away to attend higher education and build their careers - leaving an ageing population in their wake.<sup>172</sup>

The issue of access to higher education – and the provision of advanced skills within local communities - remains a persistent problem. Data from the Department for Education show that disadvantaged students in Dorset (those receiving free school meals at the age of 15)

are increasingly unlikely to enter higher education.<sup>173</sup> In 2019-20, 16.4 percent were at university, down from 19.5 percent the year before. Among young people not receiving free school meals, 39.8 percent were studying in higher education at the age of 19, also down from 40.1 percent in 2018-19. The progression rate gap between poorer pupils and non-disadvantaged students rose to 23.4 percent in 2019-20, up from 20.6 percent in 2018-19 (across England, 26.6 percent of pupils who received free school meals at age 15 were participating in higher education in 2019-20, compared to 45.7 percent of those who did not receive meals.)<sup>174</sup> *It is almost certain that data for Weymouth & Portland will reveal a larger gap – research is required urgently.*

### **‘Demographic timebomb’**

There is strong anecdotal evidence that young people have been moving away from Weymouth & Portland, exacerbating the local skills shortage and deepening a crisis of expectations in relation to educational experiences and career advancement. When Weymouth & Portland Action on Wages (WeyPAW) and Unison provided classes on employment rights at Weymouth College in 2019, many students expressed scepticism about their futures in South Dorset.<sup>175</sup> In 2021, Dorset Councillor Andrew Kerby declared that one of the biggest issues for the county was the effect of younger people moving away to find jobs and homes elsewhere. “We do have an issue with prospects and opportunities,” he told a council committee. “If they don’t exist in Dorset the economically active will go elsewhere and it’s just not sustainable...”<sup>176</sup> As above, it is likely that data from Weymouth & Portland will reveal a serious crisis of expectations and a pattern of out-migration that has long-term consequences as the “cul-de-sac” effect takes its impact. *Research is now needed urgently on expectations and career trajectories of young people from the area.*

These issues are not solely matters associated with youth. Problems of multiple deprivation and of the “cul-de-sac” have implications for the whole community. A report published in 2008 concluded that Dorset was sitting on a “demographic timebomb”, as increasing numbers of older people needing services and care could not be supported by a workforce that was also aging.<sup>177</sup> Ten years later Dorset Council had the highest proportion of over-65s in England: some 29 percent of the Dorset population was over 65 compared to a national average of 18 percent, and projections for the next 25 years suggested that the number of over-65s would grow by 50 percent.<sup>178</sup> In 2009 the median age of the Dorset Council area was 46.9 years: this increased to 52.0 in 2019 and was projected to rise to 54.4 by 2029.<sup>179</sup>

The figures are striking, even at the regional level: in 2020 the median age for the South West region was 44.1.<sup>180</sup> For all areas of England it was 40.4.<sup>181</sup>

Dorset has the lowest proportion of under-50s of any authority in the UK<sup>182</sup> and its dependency ratio is now the highest,<sup>183</sup> meaning that the “timebomb” is ticking at a faster pace. If this situation is to change it will be necessary to retain young people in the local labour force, equipped with appropriate skills. Weymouth & Portland is the area’s main population centre – can its young people expect a future in South Dorset? Can this “cold spot” for job prospects and social mobility see changes of benefit to the community as a whole? Very urgent action is required.

### **‘Boosterism’**

A feature of the posture of denial adopted by policy makers and some business groups is the characterisation of Weymouth & Portland as a place of sun, sea and glorious countryside which provides a setting for growth and prosperity. The local business lobby has a distinct vision:

Weymouth and Portland is a thriving [sic] coastal area and an exciting place to live and work. The area blends the outstanding natural beauty of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site with easy access [sic] to the major conurbation of Poole and Bournemouth, along with a mainline railway service to London.<sup>184</sup>

Such public relations discourse, if understandable in the case of a business group, does not reflect local realities. When repeated continuously it adds to false images and can inhibit meaningful assessment of continuing problems. Strategic thinking which celebrates the area’s natural assets without addressing these issues is similarly unhelpful. The *Dorset Plan* approved by Dorset Council in 2020 also emphasises natural assets, recognising coyly: “The Dorset rural idyll can conceal hidden deprivation,” and that “there are pockets of deprivation, mostly in urban areas (mainly Weymouth and Portland)”.<sup>185</sup> The idea of isolated sites of disadvantage - “pockets of deprivation” - is repeatedly used in official documentation and in discussion at formal sessions of local authorities. Localised deprivation is evident in towns and in villages across Dorset: in the case of Weymouth & Portland, however, this term conceals the reality of systemic crisis in significant areas of Dorset Council’s largest urban centre, home to over a fifth of the population in the unitary authority. In a decision in September 2021 which marks the authority’s posture of denial vis-à-vis social deprivation, its People and Health Overview Committee voted to exclude mention of specific areas of deprivation from key public documents.<sup>186</sup>

Dorset LEP has recorded much fragmentary evidence of continuous decline but sees problems in Weymouth & Portland as a matter of “lag” in economic activity.<sup>187</sup> The *Western Dorset Economic Growth Strategy*, a plan published in 2016 by the LEP together with local authorities, might have provided an opportunity to confront realities. Unwilling to address the crisis in South Dorset, however, its authors once more highlighted the value of the landscape: “extensive Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty ... the only natural UNESCO designated World Heritage site in England – the Jurassic Coast. These features help to attract people to live, inspire creativity, and drive tourism”.<sup>188</sup> By continuously talking up natural assets these tropes conceal embedded problems. They amount to boosterism – a practice well-established in North America, whereby enthusiastic promotion of a town or city by local business and real-estate companies disseminates misleading images. This form of social marketing was much in evidence in Dorset before the 2012 Olympics, greatly inflating expectations of long-term economic progress. It has since become a staple of local development discourse, whereby the aspiration for change and the headlining of themes and priorities – growth, skills, innovation, educational opportunity – create an illusion that change is imminent.

The idea that living in “Beautiful Dorset” should be sufficient to satisfy local residents is described by a former planning officer at the County Council as “a mantra” among senior elected officials, whose life experiences may be different from those living in “an overpriced, low-wage economy”.<sup>189</sup> In 2019, a special panel on economic development established by Dorset Council resolved not to establish an emergency group or planning committee for South Dorset: it also declined to initiate a Poverty Review for Weymouth & Portland (notwithstanding completion of a detailed review of poverty issues by the local authority in nearby East Devon). Local members of parliament have similarly been notable for their inaction. Unlike some constituency MPs who campaign energetically for attention to economic problems, inadequate infrastructure, poor public transport, and resources for education and youth, local MPs have been largely passive, especially during the recent period of accelerating local decline. Oliver Letwin was member for West Dorset from 1997 to 2019, representing parts of outer Weymouth and neighbouring settlements to the west and north. Richard Drax has been member for South Dorset, including all of inner Weymouth, Portland and settlements to the east, since 2010. Both have been conspicuous by their absence from local debates on the area’s fortunes – a position consistent with their status as advocates of neoliberal policy in which the state at national and local levels abstains from intervention in economic affairs. When invited in 2018 and 2019 by community organisations

in South Dorset to attend conferences on the crisis in Weymouth & Portland both MPs declined.<sup>190</sup>

In 2018 a constituent in Weymouth wrote to Richard Drax to draw attention to her own experiences of problems in the town. Highlighting a decline in wages, serious difficulties in local schools, inadequate public transport and the dilapidated state of the local railway station, she received a reply made public through local media. “Your letter,” wrote Drax, “only underlines how inaccurate reports and negativity can have such a depressing effect on people and I am truly sorry you feel the way you do,” insisting: “the situation is not nearly as grim as you state.” He continued:

I hope that this letter warms the cockles of your heart [sic] and reassures you, somewhat, that life in Weymouth and Portland is not as bad as some would have you believe. Importantly, many people and organisations are working their socks off to improve and enhance this beautiful part of the country.<sup>191</sup>

Drax makes much of the Dorset Innovation Park at Winfrith which he launched at a ceremony in 2018. As a dedicated Enterprise Zone it offers tax breaks for investors and has attracted a group of high-technology manufacturing, service and IT companies, together with the offices of Dorset Police and HM Coastguard. Numerous statements from Dorset LEP and local planners laud the Park as a marker of successful development strategy, notably as a “cluster of excellence for the South-West”.<sup>192</sup> The Park has been established on the site of a decommissioned nuclear reactor strategically located in the 1950s in an area of rural isolation on the Dorset heathland. Without public transport links it is inaccessible to most potential employees in Weymouth & Portland, 20-25 miles away. Richard Drax has chosen this site, far from population centres, for his constituency offices.<sup>193</sup>

In 2017 the government’s Social Mobility Commission published a comprehensive report on life chances of young people across England. It concluded that in areas such as Weymouth & Portland – national “coldspots” – it is essential for key local bodies to collaborate in developing remedial policies. Emphasising the importance of coordination among decision-makers, it proposed:

Local authorities and other stakeholders in rural or isolated areas need to take more consistent action to improve access to opportunities. This can involve better transport links; better systems for ensuring rural schools receive outreach from service providers; and better connections between schools, charities, universities and businesses. Local Enterprise Partnerships, metro mayors, or universities are all well positioned to lead such efforts.<sup>194</sup>



In Dorset relevant bodies have been extraordinarily slow to move. Much decision-making appears to take place in isolation. The award of funding in 2020 for a University of Dorset Centre at Kingston Maurward College, Dorchester – an outcome of discussions between the College, Dorset Council and the Dorset LEP - may be a sign of belated awareness that urgent action is required.<sup>195</sup> Such liaison should be routine among decision-making bodies.

## SECTION 4

### **What next?** *Community assets and the democratic deficit*

It would be wrong to depict Weymouth and Portland as unattractive places to live. On the contrary: Weymouth is an attractive resort with a sandy beach, a warm shallow bay, a picturesque harbour and two nature reserves. Like Portland it offers opportunities for sailing, sea swimming, water sports, walking and cycling. The “blue space” of water is considered increasingly to enhance wellbeing. Sometimes identified as “hydrophilia”, this focus on rivers, lakes, coastlines and access to the sea has become an influence on urban planning and on the promotion of leisure pursuits by health professionals and others.<sup>196</sup> The open countryside and proximity of the sea in South Dorset is particularly inviting but coastal pursuits are not always available to local residents.<sup>197</sup> Tourism and incoming retirees drive up the cost of leisure activities. Weymouth and Portland harbours are often filled with expensive leisure craft, leading to the local quip that the area caters for “The yachts and yacht-nots.” Yachting, powerboating, zapcat inflatables, water-skiing, windsurfing, sailboarding and kayaking – all promoted as desirable coastal pursuits – are often expensive and out of reach. In recent research in similar coastal locations Aniela Wenham notes the impact upon young people, for whom such “symbolic representations of prosperity” that permeate everyday lives, stimulate feelings of being “forgotten and/or ‘left out’”.<sup>198</sup>

Set against such sentiments is a strong sense of community, evidenced in the many organisations in Weymouth & Portland committed to support to residents. Local schools offer vital support to children and families, backed up by organisations like *Home-Start* for families with young children, and school-based clubs for older children. Parents run an informal support and campaigning group for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities – *Dorset Parents’ Campaign Group for SEND Children*. Several local churches offer food banks, all run by volunteers, which provide a lifeline for many families. *The Nest* is not-for-profit community shop in Weymouth and the *Lantern Trust* assists vulnerable and marginalised people with a notable Sleep Safe project for the homeless; the *Bus Shelter* also supports rough sleepers. *The Repair Café*, which holds large public events, assists people to fix a host of items. *WeyForward* promotes social entrepreneurship, with a focus on young people. On Portland, *Island Community Action (ICA)* is a remarkable local charity with outreach activities across the area which reach over a thousand older people through its Silver Island project.<sup>199</sup> Organisations such as ICA mobilise the altruistic values, energies and potentials of local people: they cannot, however, substitute for statutory bodies

equipped with funding from local and national sources, and with historic responsibility for the wellbeing of Dorset's communities.

Campaigning groups in South Dorset target deprivation and the erosion of community facilities. In 2019, Keep Portland Hospital organised a petition for retention of facilities at the community hospital site: the signatories, more than 8,000 people, represented over half the adult population of the island. Hundreds of Portlanders attended public meetings and a "Hands Around the Hospital" event which attracted wide media coverage.<sup>200</sup> Weymouth and Portland Action on Wages (WeyPAW) has provided Rights at Work training sessions to give local students confidence to claim entitlements.<sup>201</sup> In 2018 and 2019 it organised well-attended conferences in Weymouth to address problems of economic decline, poverty wages, inequality and low social mobility. In 2020 WeyPAW joined with Dorset Trades Union Council to launch a Low Pay - No Way! campaign.<sup>202</sup> This aimed to persuade Dorset Council to set an example to other local employers by paying its staff the Real Living Wage, making Dorset a Living Wage County. The campaign observed that both Cornwall Council and Bristol City Council had undertaken to pay the Real Living Wage and that there was compelling evidence of the impact on a wide range of local employers. It also proposed that third parties contracted by the Council should pay the Real Living Wage, helping to place a floor under wages in the county, with particular benefits for those employed in ill-paid jobs. The campaign called in addition for establishment of local workshops on employment issues, especially those affecting young people.

These proposals were discussed with councillors and presented to Full Council meetings and to senior officers of the Council. In February 2021 the Council voted to reject proposals to initiate a move towards implementation of the Real Living Wage for those on its lowest pay grade, including catering assistants, delivery and collection drivers, general assistants and school crossing-patrol staff. Local media reported that the Council's lowest pay level was £17,800 a year, "roughly nine times less than the annual salary of chief executive Matt Prosser".<sup>203</sup> Local MP Richard Drax provides similarly negative leadership – in 2021 he was named and shamed by national authorities when his company Morden Estates failed to pay 43 employees the legally required National Minimum Wage.<sup>204</sup>

In 2016 researchers Fernanda Balata and Olivier Vardakoulias spoke to hundreds of people across the UK to assess the needs of coastal communities.<sup>205</sup> They concluded that central and local government need urgently to build local capabilities, ensuring that adequate infrastructure is in place to allow economic recovery and social advance. They added: "Local

people need to be in control, leading a new approach to regeneration.”<sup>206</sup> Community organisations are making valiant efforts to improve working lives and the environment for people living in Weymouth & Portland but they cannot make significant progress without cooperation and support from those in authority in key local bodies. There is little evidence of progress by Dorset Council on incomes and employment, or on wider issues of social deprivation. Significantly, these pressing concerns did not feature in the *Economic Growth Strategy 2020-2024* approved by the Council in July 2020.<sup>207</sup> It seems that Dorset Council is unable to address problems that cause hardship to so many residents - part of a pattern of conduct that goes back over two decades.

South Dorset Research Group is aware of a growing democratic deficit in the county, especially marked in Weymouth & Portland. The establishment of a unitary Dorset Council area in 2019, replacing district and borough councils, removed much political authority and significant resources at the local level.<sup>208</sup> Elected representatives of Dorset Council are perceived as more remote from constituents and less likely to be attentive to local issues. The Council is viewed increasingly as ineffectual and many of its members as disinterested in pressing issues that confront residents/ constituents - issues raised repeatedly by members of the public in Council meetings and through local media. In April 2022 it became clear that senior managers at Dorset Council were among the highest paid among their peers across the UK. While the national average of employees per council earning over £100,000 annually was 7.7, in Dorset the number was 26 – a striking statistic in the context of economic and social disadvantage among so many Dorset residents.<sup>209</sup> Criticisms of remoteness and disinterest are also levelled at South Dorset MP Richard Drax, who has declined to engage with efforts to address systematically the economic and social decline in his constituency and who, in February 2021, refused to meet constituents to share their experiences as key workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>210</sup>

Many people in South Dorset believe they go unheard by those who hold elected office and by key decision-makers within statutory bodies. Like other coastal communities in which remedial action is needed after years of neglect, they wish to be heard and to see implementation of policies that reflect their needs and preferences. Local authorities should be listening to and engaging with communities in a participatory mode. People wish to define what economic success looks like for their areas – and community-led plans should be taken far more seriously within the wider decision-making system. Economic progress should be defined by locally felt economic benefits, rather than simply by contribution to GVA or short-term financial returns. When a top-heavy consultation was held in central Weymouth in 2017

to address problems in the deprived Melcombe area, a meeting dominated by local authority officials, police and health managers failed to engage the community: local residents complained of being “disenfranchised”.<sup>211</sup> A Melcombe Regis Board, established by local bodies in 2016 to address issues of housing, health and community wellbeing in one of the most deprived areas in Weymouth, was subsequently disbanded without having made meaningful progress.<sup>212</sup> Firm commitment to engage with communities that embeds the approach used by Local Alliance Groups now addressing the needs of children, young people and families is an initiative that should be mobilised far more widely.

Community organisations make continuous efforts to improve both working lives and the environment for people living in Weymouth & Portland but they cannot do so effectively without cooperation, support and appropriate action from those who hold the power and the purse strings. *Focused research is needed to investigate the implications of a loss of confidence in institutions and processes, and means to redress a widening democratic deficit.*

## Initiatives to address the crisis in South Dorset

This report recommends:

### 1. *Focused research and analysis*

- Dorset Council to undertake a poverty review for Weymouth & Portland to report within six months on headline issues of employment, wages and family incomes; child poverty; and social mobility. The Council to establish an emergency Working Group to consider implications of the review.
- Dorset Council to commission a wider review of the economic and social crisis in Weymouth & Portland to be undertaken by academic experts or an independent research body. The review to collect detailed data on economic and social circumstances in Weymouth & Portland and to report on: employment, wages and the labour market; women's employment; family incomes and child poverty; health and well-being; education and career prospects; affordable housing; transport and communications; out-migration of young people; local democracy and community participation.
- A liaison group to be created in response to recommendations of the Social Mobility Commission, bringing together Dorset Council, town councils in Weymouth and Portland, Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), and local health trusts to undertake engagement with community organisations in "bottom up" mode, establishing means to hear and respond to perceived needs.

### 2. *Policy interventions*

- Dorset LEP to recognise the priority needs of Weymouth & Portland and to work actively to promote meaningful investment in local infrastructure, notably road, rail and public transport. Dorset Council to introduce without delay a revised policy on public transport, focused on a cheap, reliable, green bus network.
- Dorset Council to introduce the Real Living Wage (RLW) for all employees, to require all contractors and third-party employers to implement the Real Living Wage, and to work proactively to encourage employers across the county to implement the Real Living Wage, making Dorset a Living Wage County.
- Dorset Council to establish a programme of workshops at schools and colleges in South Dorset on employment rights and legal remedies, and to organise open sessions on employment rights in Weymouth and Portland.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Jenny Lennon-Wood is Secretary of Dorset Trades Union Council; Philip Marfleet is Emeritus Professor of Social Science at the University of East London: both live in South Dorset. Thanks for comments on drafts of the report to: Dr Mel Hughes (Bournemouth University), Prof Tony Walter (Bath University), Dr Siobhan Lennon-Patience, David Rhodes, Sarah Jane Pattison, Councillor Paul Kimber, Councillor Giovanna Lewis, and Lynne Hubbard. Thanks also to the archivists at Dorset History Centre.

<sup>2</sup> SW Rural Productivity Commission (2017) *Key Findings and Recommendations 2017*, p25. In 2018 Exeter University established a Social Mobility Research Unit to address this persistent problem - young people in the South West are the most disadvantaged among regions of the UK. See:

<https://www.exeter.ac.uk/socialmobility/news/articles/socialmobilityinthesouthw.htm>

<sup>3</sup> SW Rural Productivity Commission, p25.

<sup>4</sup> Weymouth and Portland are distinct areas separated by a causeway and bridge across The Fleet, an area of inland water. From 1974 to 2019 the two were linked administratively in Weymouth and Portland Borough Council. From 2019, overall administrative responsibility fell to Dorset Council (see Note 9), with lesser authority under Weymouth and Portland town councils. In this report, the authors refer to Weymouth & Portland as a single area linked by strong historic, economic, social and administrative ties.

<sup>5</sup> The House of Commons Library measures social mobility for all parliamentary constituencies in England. In 2018 South Dorset ranked bottom among 533 constituencies. Demographically Weymouth & Portland dominates the constituency (see n7 below). See also Allen, G. and Audickas, L. (2018) *Social Mobility Index by Constituency, England*, House of Commons Library (2018), p9; online at:

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8400/>

<sup>6</sup> Social Mobility Commission (2017) *State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain*, p118; online at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/662744/State\\_of\\_the\\_Nation\\_2017\\_-\\_Social\\_Mobility\\_in\\_Great\\_Britain.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Davenport, A., Farquharson, C., Rasul, I., Sibieta, L. and G Stoye (2020) *The Geography of the COVID-19 crisis in England*, Institute of Fiscal Studies, June 15, p3: online at: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14888>

<sup>8</sup> HM Treasury (2021) *Levelling Up Fund – Prospectus*, p1; online at:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/966138/Levelling\\_Up\\_prospectus.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/966138/Levelling_Up_prospectus.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> In 2017 Weymouth & Portland, together with Chickereil (a contiguous area) had an estimated population of some 72,000. A cluster of local settlements brings the population to the area to approximately 80,000. See Dorset Council Area Profiles; online at: <https://apps.geowessex.com/insights/AreaProfiles/Search> The parliamentary constituency of South Dorset includes a coastal strip that extends east to Swanage: most of the population is resident in Weymouth & Portland. The county of Dorset is now divided into two unitary authorities – Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) and Dorset Council. Weymouth & Portland is the largest urban area in the latter.

<sup>10</sup> As evidenced by NHS managers and administrators who acknowledge the key role of non-statutory organisations and volunteers at a time of crisis. Authors' discussions with NHS managers and administrators in South Dorset, 2020-21.

<sup>11</sup> University of Portsmouth (1992), *Defence Related Employment in Portsmouth and Weymouth – Final Report*, [Portsmouth Polytechnic Local Economy Research Group: report commissioned by Dorset County Council, West Dorset District Council, Weymouth & Portland Borough Council, Dorset Training and Enterprise Council], p2.

<sup>12</sup> See University of Portsmouth (1992), p47. See also Williams, S. (2012) "From Defence Closures to Olympic Legacy" in *Economic Regeneration in South Dorset*, Dorset County Council planning document; Williams, T., (1997) "The Location and Restructuring of the UK Defence Industry: The Case of the South West (University of Plymouth, Research Thesis); and Bennett, W. (1995) "Portland's naval history ends as last warship sails", *The Independent*, 22 July; online at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/portlands-naval-history-ends-as-last-w-arship-sails-1592621.html>

<sup>13</sup> First Lord of the Admiralty (1958) "Naval Reorganisation", Secret Document for the Cabinet, 11 February; online at: <http://www.godfreydykes.info/NAVAL%20CUTS.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Newth, J. (2008) "A Portland Success Story", *Dorset Life*, October.

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- <sup>15</sup> Bennet, 1995. Trade union representatives at Portland Naval Base suggest that total numbers were higher, with the directly employed workforce across numerous sites approaching 6,000 (personal communication from former trade union representatives at the naval base, November 2020).
- <sup>16</sup> University of Portsmouth, 1992, p36.
- <sup>17</sup> Carter, G. (1998) *The Rise and Fall of Portland Naval Base*, PhD thesis, University of Exeter, p228.
- <sup>18</sup> University of Portsmouth, 1992, 26.
- <sup>19</sup> University of Portsmouth, 1992, 26.
- <sup>20</sup> University of Portsmouth, 1992, 39.
- <sup>21</sup> University of Portsmouth, 1992, 47.
- <sup>22</sup> Carter, 1998, 228.
- <sup>23</sup> Sadd, D. (2004) *The Impacts of Mega-Events held at Satellite Venues - Case study of Weymouth & Portland* (MA Thesis, Bournemouth University); online at: [http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/14445/5/final\\_draft2.pdf](http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/14445/5/final_draft2.pdf); much of this sum was directed to harbour repairs and construction of a marina.
- <sup>24</sup> Sadd, D. and Jackson, C., 2006. "Planning for Resort Regeneration: The role of the Olympic 2012 bid for Weymouth and Portland, Dorset", 7, Bournemouth University Archive; online at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/74741.pdf>
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- <sup>26</sup> Personal communication from former trade union representatives at the naval base, November 2020.
- <sup>27</sup> Robin Squire, Under Secretary of State for the Environment, in House of Commons proceedings (extracts from Hansard), UK Parliament, 19 November 1992; online at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199293/cmhansrd/1992-11-19/Writtens-2.html>
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- <sup>32</sup> Portsmouth University, 2018, 35.
- <sup>33</sup> Portsmouth University, 2018, 35.
- <sup>34</sup> Portland Community Partnership (2016) *Future Portland - Transforming our Island economy to deliver growth and jobs*, p15.
- <sup>35</sup> Portland Community Partnership, 2016, 16.
- <sup>36</sup> Portsmouth University 2018, 23, 35.
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