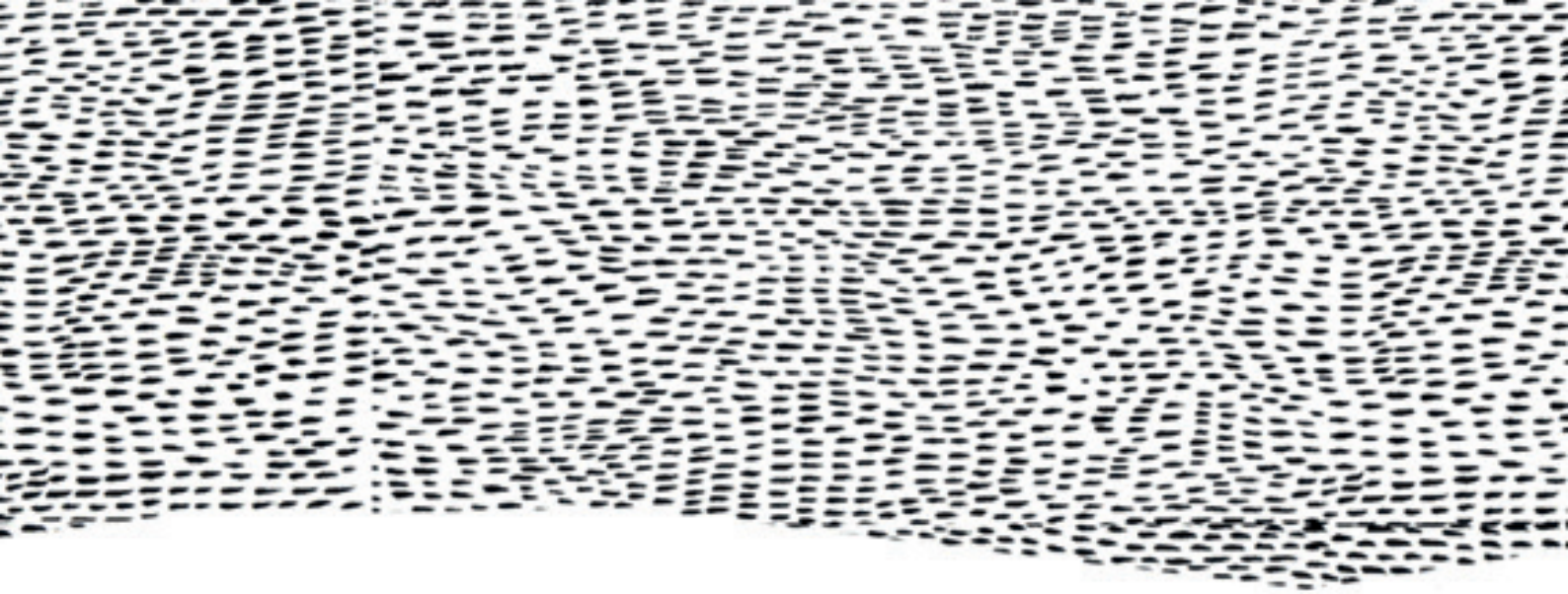


Growing up in Sunderland:

Young People,
Politics and Place

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Executive Summary

A total of 64 people participated in this study, including 52 young people (aged 14-25 years), 6 young adults (aged 26-30 years) and 6 local stakeholders involved in youth support, service provision and local politics. We primarily adopted a qualitative approach and conducted 21 individual interviews, 11 focus groups and two walking interviews.

Place Attachment and Local Belonging

- For many of the young people, Sunderland is a place of community to which there are strong family and friendship ties. This is important to their sense of belonging and place attachment.
- Culture and cultural developments, such as the local music scene and the City of Culture 2021 bid, were considered positive aspects of the city by some young people.
- Youth centres, leisure services and recreational spaces are features of Sunderland that many young people were positive about and considered important to their quality of life and place attachment.

Youth Concerns and Socio-Economic Challenges

- Young people were concerned about the employment opportunities in the local labour market and finding positive transitions into adulthood. Precarious work conditions and difficulties in finding a career path were common concerns.
- For many young people, the Nissan car factory was regarded as one of the best employment prospects in the local labour market. While working in Nissan was an aspiration for many youths, they often found it hard to realise their ambition due to a lack of training and opportunity.
- Young people felt that in Sunderland there had been a lack of investment and public funding, and that this had resulted in neglected areas and run-down recreational spaces.
- Concern about negative media portrayals of Sunderland was expressed by several young people. Positive aspects of the city were considered to be frequently overlooked and ignored.

Racism and Islamophobia

- Racism and Islamophobia were regularly featured in the everyday lives of many of the young people in the study.
- Despite Sunderland being a largely White city, everyday 'race talk' was a feature of the majority of young lives; that is, most young people discussed issues of race and racism with little prompting. Many young people had either witnessed or experienced racism and Islamophobia by way of graffiti, name-calling, far-right activity, the internet or violence. Although a minority of young people expressed racist views, most saw racism as a negative and worrying issue in Sunderland.
- The presence of the far-right in the city has been a significant contributing factor in young people's encounters with racist attitudes and has played an active role in creating the hostile environment in which racism can flourish.
- For young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, racism and the presence of far-right groups were particularly concerning, restricted their mobility and, in some cases, their broader rights to the city.

Young People's Views on Brexit and Immigration

- Those young people who expressed an opinion, primarily wished to remain in the European Union (EU). Brexit was considered to have a range of negative attributes; such as affirming racism, generating misleading propaganda and having negative economic consequences for Sunderland.
- Several young people expressed uncertainty about what Brexit is and, as a result, were unsure about the implications of the vote to leave.
- The majority of those who expressed opinions about immigration had a tolerant attitude to migrants and multiculturalism, believing that migrants were often made scapegoats for Britain's socio-economic problems. While most participants recognised that Sunderland lacks diversity, they were favourably disposed to the city becoming more culturally diverse.
- The scarcity of public welfare resources could lead to concerns regarding immigration. These concerns encompassed issues of assimilation, including the need for migrants to learn English and to adapt to the local culture.

1: Introduction

In the context of supposed 'left-behind' places and the unfolding of Brexit, we examine a range of important issues in the everyday lives of young people in post-industrial cities. This report explores the views and experiences of young people and young adults (14-30 years old) growing up in Sunderland in the North East of England. In particular, we examine these young people's challenges and concerns, and how they impact on their sense of belonging and outlook. We examine factors that they see as positive about their everyday lives. In addition, we examine their opinions on important topics related to the current socio-political climate, such as Brexit and immigration.

In post-industrial cities and towns such as Sunderland, younger people live in places that are frequently labelled as 'left behind', considered to have both socio-economic problems and impassioned support for Brexit (Burrell et al., 2019). However, very little is known about young people's opinions and experiences in such places or the impact on them from post-industrialisation, social class and impending Brexit (Finlay et al., 2019). Of further concern, those under the age of 18 had not been allowed to vote in the 2016 EU Referendum, which means that this younger generation had been denied a voice in one of the most important decisions in the United Kingdom's recent history.

Therefore, very little is known about how these young people feel about growing up in post-industrial cities, what challenges and opportunities they encounter or their views concerning Brexit, migration and politics.

To respond, we carried out research with young people in Sunderland between 2017 and 2019. In this report, we address the following aims and present some of the key findings that we outlined above.

1.1: Aims

The project had four interrelated aims:

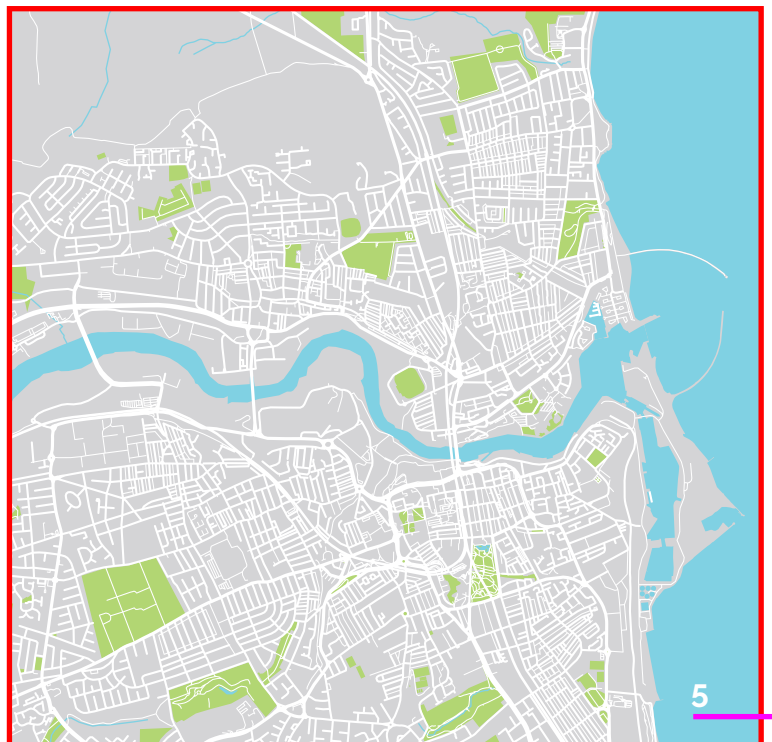
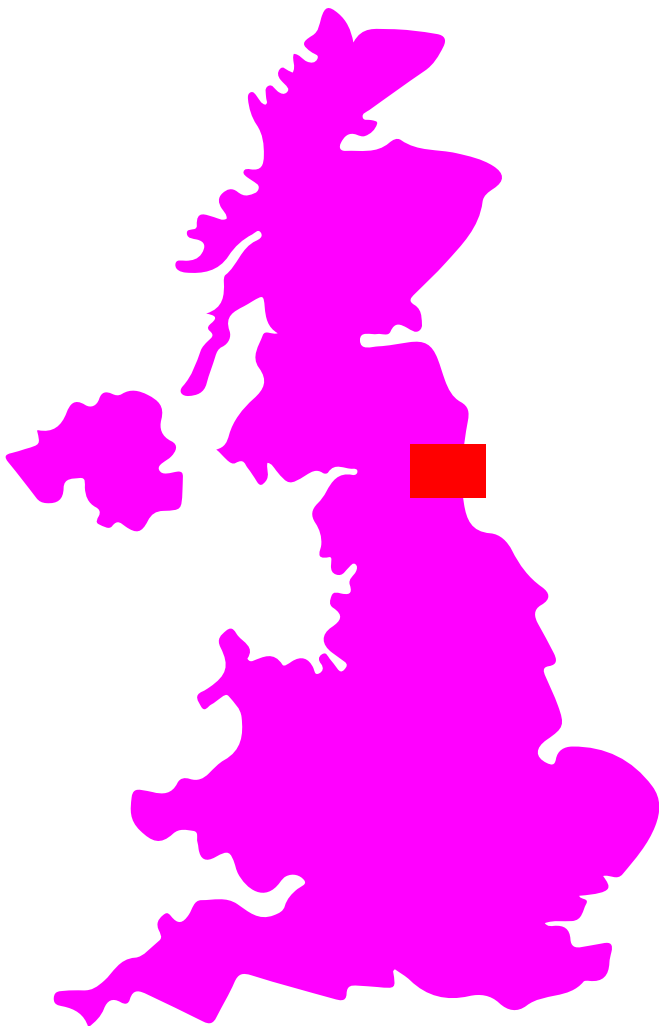
- To examine the challenges and concerns facing young people who are growing up in Sunderland.
- To analyse young people's relationship and sense of belonging to the city and the neighbourhood that they live in.
- To examine young people's employment aspirations and economic challenges.
- To explore young people's opinions about socio-political issues, such as Brexit, race and immigration.



2: The City of Sunderland

The city of Sunderland is situated in the county of Tyne and Wear in North East England. Sitting on the banks of the River Wear, Sunderland has a significant industrial heritage of shipbuilding, coalmining, salt and glassmaking. In the late-twentieth century the city went into industrial decline, and its main labour market is now automotive, technology, public-sector and service-sector work. While a regeneration strategy to deal with post-industrialisation has been implemented, several areas of the city such as Southwick and Hendon have gone into decline and are considered to have high levels of multiple deprivation and poverty (Wilson, 2019). The unemployment level of the working-age population in the metropolitan borough of Sunderland was 7% in 2018/19, which is higher than the national average of 4.1% (Official Labour Market Statistics, 2019).

The population of the city was 174,286 in 2011, and with the metropolitan borough of Sunderland, which incorporates areas such as Washington and Houghton-le-Spring, it was 275,300 (Census, 2011). In terms of demographics, Sunderland is a predominately White city, with 93.4% identifying as White British and 6.6% as an ethnic minority (non-White British) in the 2011 Census. This largely reflects the regional picture, with the North East recording the highest proportion of people classified as White British (93.6%) of all regions in England and Wales (Census, 2011). South Asian populations, such as Bangladeshi and Pakistani, are the largest ethnic minority groups in Sunderland, but they account for only 2.2% of the total population (Census, 2011). Some wards have a higher ethnic minority populace, such as the working-class districts of Hendon (15% non-White British population) and Millfield (26% non-White British population), suggesting a degree of minority ethnic concentration in particular neighbourhood wards.



3: Research Methods

The focus of our study was on the opinions and experiences of young people in Sunderland. This warranted an approach that allowed these young people to engage in open discussions, express their views and describe their experiences of growing up in the area. In this project, therefore, we used various types of interviews and focus groups. Moreover, we actively spent time on a series of walks around the city and its various neighbourhoods to make visual records.

The fieldwork was undertaken intermittently from mid-2017 to early-2019 and, overall, a total of 64 people participated. Of this sample, 52 were young people (14–25 years), six were young adults under 30 years and a further six were over 30 years. The study included 21 individual interviews, 11 focus groups and two walking interviews. In addition to this work with young people, we interviewed local councillors, youth workers and religious leaders. Our intention in these stakeholder interviews was to investigate the opportunities and challenges for young people in growing up in Sunderland.

In terms of the participant demographics, we did not aim for a representative sample of the population of Sunderland; rather, we sought to recruit a diverse and often 'hard to reach' sample of young people. We feel that this diverse sample is significant, in the light of changing national demographics and emerging transformations at a local level in many urban areas as a consequence of global population movements. Accordingly, around two-thirds of the sample (n=41) identified as White British and a further third (n=23) were from multiple ethnic backgrounds, including Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Black-British, Iranian, Eritrean and Polish.

Of the 23 minority ethnic participants, 12 were born in Sunderland and five were currently asylum seekers. In terms of gender, 32 were female and 32 male. Most of the young people were from working-class occupational backgrounds, yet with diverse experiences. Our sample included some who had left school at 15 years, sixth-form students, others who had transitioned into further education at technical colleges and Sunderland University, and those who had found work in the local labour market. The residential locations of participants were all within the Sunderland Central parliamentary constituency and included young people from the council wards of Southwick, Hendon, Barnes, Millfield, St Michaels and St Peters.

To recruit participants to the study, we contacted organisations and groups to identify young people who might be interested. This included university groups, youth centres, charities, volunteer groups, local schools and colleges. We used social media to assist with recruitment. All of those who participated in the research openly consented to doing so. We used an interview or focus group schedule when collecting data, yet we employed it flexibly to fit the personal opinions and experiences of each participant. The key topics were: perceptions about local neighbourhoods and Sunderland; belonging and place attachment; education and employment aspirations; views and experiences of multicultural diversity and racism; and opinions about politics, including Brexit, the far-right and migration. All the data that we collected were fully transcribed and coded using a computer software data package before being systematically analysed by the research team for themes and subthemes. The next section presents the main issues emerging from this analysis.



4: Place Attachment and Local Belonging

What do young people like about growing up in Sunderland? What are seen as the positive features of Sunderland for young people? What factors are important to young people's sense of belonging? In this section, we examine some of the factors that young people see as positive about their lives in Sunderland and that are important to their sense of belonging to the city. We examine three issues that we identified from the research: (i) community, family and friends; (ii) culture; and (iii) youth centres, leisure services and recreational spaces.

4.1: Community, family and friends

When young people discussed what they liked about their lives in Sunderland, community, family and friends were frequently referred to and talked about. For many of the young participants, the neighbourhood that they lived in provided a strong sense of community that was important to their sense of belonging and attachment. This was illustrated in a youth focus group:

It is, like, a nice close community... you feel, like, if you have got an issue, you can turn to your neighbour, and that neighbour will help you.

(Male, White, 17 years old)

The community is, like, what you have pride for in your area

(Male, White, 18 years old)

Many of the young people had close family and friends in the area, and this was often seen as a positive feature of growing up in Sunderland. The importance of family and friends was expressed by young people of all ethnic backgrounds and areas of the city:

I think [I like it] that is because I lived away, I just love, like.... Aye, it makes you appreciate home a lot more, especially all your mates and your family and

all that. So now moving back home, I am buzzing. You know what I mean? Especially after moving down south and that, it was quite hard.

(Male, White, 22 years old)

So what is it you like about Sunderland, then?

Well I just love it.... I don't know, I just really enjoy living here.

(Male, White, 22 years old)

It is probably just because it is where I grew up and where I know.

(Female, White, 22 years old)

It is, like, where all me mates and that and all. So, like, I enjoy myself here, so... that's probably the reason why.

(Male, White, 22 years old)

Yeah, like, as they're, like, old people, all of them are, like, friends for us, and they, like, take our bins out and stuff like that. Like, all of them are friendly.

(Female, British-Asian, 17 years old)

Despite Sunderland's reputation for being a 'left-behind' post-industrial place, the responses of the young people indicate a high level of place attachment. The minority ethnic young people often considered those neighbourhood wards with a relatively high ethnic minority population to be important to their sense of belonging and personal security, for example in the following comment:

I feel better in Hendon, because there is more Bengali people there, more people my colour, so if anything does happen, I have got everyone around me.

(Female, British-Asian, 17 years old)

Others recognised that micro-hubs, such as the university, were important sites for diversity:

Oh yeah, it is a lot better [in Sunderland] ... I feel as if the university has brought in quite a lot of people from... I think Canadians come through, and they have got an Egyptian background.... And they are seeing more Black people, they are seeing more and more Chinese people, and just, like, ethnic minorities really.

(Male, Black, 27 years old)

For many young people in the research, Sunderland is richly associated with a sense of community to which there are strong family and friendship ties. In large part, this offered them a supportive network of abundant social capital and resource. However, in some cases we found that such intense localism could engender territorial forms of belonging and attachment to specific streets and housing estates, risking conflict with those beyond the neighbourhood.

4.2: Culture in Sunderland

Cultural outputs and events in Sunderland, such as music and theatre, were considered as a positive aspect of the city by some young people. In particular, they regarded the Sunderland City of Culture bid 2021, for which Sunderland was shortlisted, and the associated cultural regeneration such as the new Music, Arts and Cultural Quarter (MACQ) as some encouraging developments. This was especially the case for the young people whom we spoke to who were studying at Sunderland University:

I am part of the art team for the City of Culture 2021 bid. It does feel to a lot of younger people like we are actually part of something that is happening for the city, for the good of the city.... I think it is going to be really nice when it is all done up. And anything that makes the city look a bit more attractive from the outside, we are enthusiastic about that. And hopefully it will be a nicer place for students as well, so students can feel like they can stick around a bit more as there will be more cultural things, rather than just hopping on the metro.

(Male, White, 22 years old)

As the quote illustrates, cultural developments in the city centre were seen to be making the city more attractive and, for those young people who were involved in activities related to the City of Culture bid, it made them feel part of something important.

We also found that the local live music scene created a sense of community for young people and was important to their sense of belonging. The success of certain bands from Sunderland was considered a source of local pride:

The music scene... sort of like with the Futureheads and Frankie and the Heart Strings, obviously... bands like that... that's something I really like about here.

(Male, White, 21 years old)

It is important to point out that not all the young people in the research were positive about the cultural development of the city, and some expressed a disconnection with the Sunderland City of Culture bid 2021 and the associated cultural regeneration. Therefore, cultural initiatives in Sunderland are experienced and perceived by young people in various ways, often depending on where they live in the city and their ability to access culture.

4.3: Youth centres, leisure services and recreational spaces

Youth centres such as Young Asian Voices (YAV), located in the East End, and the Southwick Neighbourhood Youth Project (SNYP) provide a range of services and spaces for young people to use. For many participants, youth centres are an important part of their everyday lives. For example, consider the following quotes:

It is, like, a place to go, it keeps, like, you out of trouble. Like, you have got somewhere to actually hang around with your friends and not feel like you are going to be targeted by the police for loitering around the streets and things like that.

(Female, White, 18 years old)

And then like... and then there is Paul, who helps with, like, work employment, so he is really good. So, like, when we left school, like, he helped us with our CV, help us to try to find a job.

(Female, White, 17 years old)

As the quotes highlight, youth centres in Sunderland have several important functions and benefits for many of the young people in the study. They provide a space where they can safely spend time with their friends and meet new people. Furthermore, we found that the youth centres were frequently spaces of support, where young people could develop certain skills and have opportunities to visit places in the local area and further afield. Therefore, youth centres and youth services had positive impacts related to the transition into adulthood. We found that youth centres were particularly important to those young people who faced certain disadvantages in their everyday lives, such as those from economically marginalised areas and ethnic minorities. This is because the youth centres provide support, opportunity and peer relationships, which disadvantaged youths may not find easily in other aspects of their everyday lives. It is important to note that the youth centres in Sunderland are often vulnerable to closure, continuously struggling to attain funding for their future survival. What our research shows is the critical importance of youth centres to the wellbeing of many young people in Sunderland and the need for youth services to continue and to expand, especially in the more disadvantaged areas of the city.

In addition to formal youth and leisure services, recreational spaces such as parks, the coast and beaches were features of Sunderland that many young people were positive about and considered important to their quality of life and sense of belonging:

I don't know, like, for our age it [Sunderland] has got everything we need, like. Youth clubs, football pitches, all sorts really.

(Male, White, 16 years old)

Mowbray Park is quite a nice place that I like going to. And if we were to have a version of Regents Park, that would probably be it... now that it is getting warmer I come here. And with Sunderland being so bunched together it is easier to nip over.

(Male, White, 22 years old)

We found that many of the young people were creative in their use of their surrounding post-industrial landscape. Many spoke of riding mini-motorbikes and BMX bikes at a landscaped former colliery site, others enjoyed spending time with friends in the lime kilns near the river and some enjoyed using the former shipbuilding areas as sites for leisure and 'hanging out'.

Summary

- For many of the young people, Sunderland provides a place of community to which there are strong family and friendship ties. This is important to their sense of belonging and place attachment.
- Culture and cultural developments, such as the local music scene and the City of Culture 2021 bid, were considered positive aspects of the city by some young people.
- Youth centres, leisure services and recreational spaces are features of Sunderland that many young people were positive about and considered important to their quality of life and place attachment.



5: Youth Concerns and Socio-Economic Challenges

What challenges and difficulties do young people in Sunderland face? What are the issues that concern young people? How do these challenges and concerns affect their sense of belonging and outlook? In this section, we examine some of the key challenges and concerns of Sunderland's young people. These include limited opportunities in the local job market; a lack of urban and regional development, leading to urban decay; and negative representations of the city.

5.1: Local job market and lack of opportunity

A significant concern in the lives of many of the young people was the lack of employment opportunities in the local job market. This can make it difficult to secure a smooth transition into the labour market, and adulthood more generally. Consider the following youth focus group extract:

Do you see Sunderland as providing quite good opportunities for jobs in the future and stuff?

Personally, no.

(Female, White, 22 years old)

I don't. There is just not enough.

(Female, White, 22 years old)

It is just the call centres.

(Male, White, 22 years old)

Aye, it is just the call centres or Nissan. Like, the car.

(Female, White, 22 years old)

There is not much choice for certain people.... Like, those who have no qualifications....

(Male, White, 22 years old)

I have been trying to get a job for, like, a year, just anything at the minute will do, and, like, everywhere just needs flexibility, flexible hours. And sometimes you just can't do that, when you are a single parent.

(Female, White, 22 years old)

As this example illustrates, young people often consider the employment opportunities and career paths in Sunderland to be limited. Many consider the opportunities in the local labour market to be restricted to certain organisations and types of employment, such as the Nissan car factory and the call centres. The employment conditions of flexible hours and zero-hour contracts are seen as challenging, particularly for those with caring responsibilities, such as young mothers. To find employment opportunities and a career path, some young people consider it likely that they will have to move out of the area, or at least go to work in another city. This was particularly the case for graduates and those in higher education:

There is not much to do here, to be honest. Like, if you want to be someone or do something, you can't, like, get a career. Because, for example, if you want to go, like, I had to, I am doing a work placement now, but like all, I do graphics, so all the work placements will be in Newcastle instead of Sunderland. Like, it is really rare, it is really rare to, like, find like jobs and stuff here, like, to what you want to do in the future, like, career wise. So, you have to, like, move away to do something there.

(Female, British-Asian, 19 years old)

Therefore, as in other cities and regions in the North of England, there are signs that Sunderland is suffering from a 'brain drain' and losing qualified young people to regional competitors, other parts of the United Kingdom and abroad (Homes for the North, 2016).

For many of the young people, Nissan was regarded as one of the best employment prospects in the city, nonetheless it was considered difficult to get a job there, as disclosed in this youth focus group:

Aye, Nissan is a good job, like.

(Male, White, 17 years old)

Aye, you get canny money working for them.

(Male, White, 17 years old)

My cousin works in Calsonic.

(Male, White, 17 years old)

Nissan is probably the only good thing round here.

(Male, White, 17 years old)

I would, like, I would work in Nissan if I could get a job in Nissan, but it's just too hard to get a job in Nissan.

(Male, White, 17 years old).

Nissan Automotive is the largest employer in Sunderland. A further challenge facing the young people is that, as a result of Britain's departure from the EU, the company is now uncertain whether its next model will be produced on Wearside. Thus there is an issue of economic path dependency, as Nissan remains the exemplar for employment in this predominantly post-industrial city.

In this challenging local labour market, we found that the transitions into adulthood and work were varied and complex. For example, in areas that are considered to have high levels of social deprivation, such as Hendon and Southwick, some young people were successful in finding job opportunities, albeit frequently in precarious positions, yet there was also evidence of others becoming socially marginalised, with serious difficulties in transitioning into adulthood and the labour market. Those who had the most difficulty had frequently left education early with few qualifications, had experienced exclusion from school and, in some cases, showed signs of exposure to drug use. Therefore, young people from the same area could have dissimilar experiences, often depending on how they engaged with systems of education and training, with exposure to drug use and addiction and, possibly, with difficult events in childhood.

5.2: Lack of government investment and urban decay

In addition to concerns and challenges around employment and transitions into adulthood, some of the young people felt that there was a general lack of investment and public funding in Sunderland, resulting in neglected and run-down spaces and a sense of the city being 'rough':

That is what I mean, in Sunderland, there is nothing to do. Like, we have got a park, there is no swings, no, there is one slide, one slide, and there is one tyre swing, which only one person can sit on. It is just, honestly, it is so boring, there is nothing else to see.

(Female, British-Asian, 17 years old)

But recreationally, there is nowt.... Like, we have got one park, the park is terrible.

(Male, White, 17 years old)

There is no opportunities; there is no activities or nowt for the young ones.

(Male, White, 17 years old)

It is frequently the public spaces of the city, such as its parks and streets that the young people feel are neglected and not being looked after or invested in. This can result in youth disengagement with public spaces and the expression of their sense of boredom with the city and their everyday lives. Moreover, police dispersal orders in certain areas of the city meant that, for some of the young people, their use of public space was restricted to certain times. Therefore, although some were positive about the recreational offerings in the city, as highlighted in previous sections, others were far more ambivalent. They felt that good-quality recreational spaces were limited, and that their right to use public spaces was restricted by dispersal orders that could stop them from hanging out with groups of friends.

5.3: Negative representations

Although most young people acknowledged that Sunderland had several socio-economic difficulties, some believed that it was often portrayed unfairly in the media:

It's barely portrayed at all, to be honest! No one really talks about Sunderland... I think, I think the North East in general has that problem. When the North and North East gets talked about, it is always Newcastle or Manchester, which we don't even really consider to be the North. So, Sunderland, I can't remember the last time Sunderland was even mentioned in a news story, which is a shame. As I say, we have so much going on in terms of development things, but with the City of Culture award, that might help sort of... get the name out there a little bit. I think Sunderland has got a bit of an image problem....

(Male, White, 22 years old)

This quote illustrates how representations of Sunderland are understood by young people in the research. We found that most participants felt that the city was frequently portrayed in negative ways and, for some, this resulted in developments that they considered to be positive, such as the cultural quarter, not being properly reported and thus overlooked.

Many young people acknowledged that Sunderland is overshadowed by its North East neighbour, Newcastle, in terms of culture and financial investment:

So, anything good that comes to the region would basically bypass us and go straight to Newcastle. So it is kind of, we are in this sort of city that... it is kind of, like, it has got small-minded, it is kind of, like, got, like, a... because it doesn't have the big infrastructure, it doesn't have the big culture, whatever, it is kind of, like, a bit... a bit... I don't know – lacking, maybe, in kind of a sense.

(Male, White, 25 years old)

Within the context of a broader North/South divide are regional disparities. Young people were often aware of the uneven geography of investment in the North East and how this can have negative consequences for Sunderland.

Summary

- Young people were concerned about employment opportunities in the local labour market and about finding positive transitions into adulthood. Precarious work conditions and difficulties in finding a career path were common concerns.
- For many young people, the Nissan car factory was considered one of the best employment prospects in the local labour market. While working in Nissan was the aspiration of many youths, they often found it hard to realise their ambition due to lack of training and opportunity.
- Young people felt that in Sunderland there had been a lack of investment and public funding, and that this had resulted in neglected areas and run-down recreational spaces.
- A concern about negative media portrayals of Sunderland was expressed by several young people. Positive aspects of the city were regarded as frequently overlooked and ignored.



6: Racism and Islamophobia

What are young people's experiences of racism and Islamophobia in Sunderland? How does Racism and Islamophobia impact on the lives of young people? What are young people's opinions about racism, the far-right and asylum? In this section, we examine the impact of racism and Islamophobia on young people's lives in Sunderland.

6.1: The Far-Right & Racism

Racism and Islamophobia were found to be a significant concern and issue in the everyday lives of many of the young people. Most participants were able to recount racist incidents that they had seen or experienced in Sunderland, and the majority saw this as a negative and worrying aspect of life in the city. What became apparent was that 'race talk' was a regular feature of their lives; that is, most young people discussed issues of race and racism with little prompting. Throughout the project, young people would frequently discuss issues of race related to racism, Islamophobia, migration and asylum, as well as the far-right. Indeed, much of the racism discussed was Islamophobic in nature and involved hostility to Muslims, or those mistaken for Muslims.

It was not difficult to discover why 'race talk' was a feature of this overwhelmingly White city. In recent years, Sunderland has experienced an increase in far-right activity, and over 13 far-right marches and demonstrations were reported in a 13-month period from late 2016 (Halliday, 2019). This significantly increased the volatility of racism in the city, creating a turbulent and toxic environment in some neighbourhoods. Groups targeting the city have included the English Defence League (EDL), Britain First and the Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA). However, in response, the city has seen a growing resistance to far-right groups and racism, and collectives such as Sunderland Unites have organised counter-demonstrations. The presence of far-right groups in Sunderland was frequently discussed with respect to racism and Islamophobia, and it was of particular concern to many young people:

I do worry a lot for not just [about] the asylum seekers, but for people of different backgrounds especially, because Britain First and EDL have been spending a lot of time in the city recently. Yeah, I don't know if they are still doing it, but they were planning to do a march through the city every two weeks... but the EDL come over here and it is very intimidating for people as well, from all backgrounds. Like, I don't like being around them, and they have no, they didn't mind me, a White guy, but it is intimidating being around people like that.

(Male, White, 22 years old)

Other young people were aware of the far-right's impact on social media and the local area. In a youth focus group, they went on to discuss Tommy Robinson, previously known as Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, co-founder and former leader of the EDL, who attended demonstrations in Sunderland in 2017/18:

And Tommy Robinson.

(Female, White, 17 years old)

Oh, I hate him.

(Female, White, 17 years old)

I absolutely hate him! I think he is getting it, like, he is brainwashing people, like, literally.

(Female, White, 18 years old)

I was sick of going in that town and, like, you know the EDL and that?

I was sick of seeing them protest.

(Female, White, 17 years old)

You don't even feel safe literally, they are just so....

(Female, White, 18 years old)

The young people's comments above not only illustrate the prevalence of everyday 'race talk' but indicate how the presence of far-right groups in Sunderland can make people from all backgrounds feel unsafe. The majority did not see the far-right as something that they wanted in their city, nor did they consider it as representative of Sunderland. For ethnic minority young people, who were primarily Sunderland born and of South Asian heritage, the presence of far-right groups was particularly concerning and challenging, as the following extract testifies:

The EDL came down and the police were promoting it [their speech and march], because I got the text, like, 'Be safe! blah blah', you know, 'Don't go outside'. Why do I have to...? Why do I feel like that in my city? I have been born and bred in Sunderland, why do I need to be, like, yeah I can't go to town because they are there. But you shouldn't bring these EDL people down if they are unsafe to the public. Like, if the Muslim community feel like unsafe, the police needs to go think, like, 'Oh my God, we can't bring the EDL because it is not safe for the Muslim community'. Because if they are promoting the way, like, 'Oh don't go outside! Tell your friends and family'.... They are allowing it.

(Female, British-Asian, 19 years old)

Unsurprisingly, certain areas of the city where the far-right activists held demonstrations were frequently avoided by minority ethnic youth. In addition, according to participants, the police would advise the South Asian communities to take precautions and stay inside their homes. For many of the minority ethnic young people whom we spoke to, this was seen as unjust, inhibiting their mobility and civic sense of belonging. As the extract indicates, some youth felt that this was an incursion into their rights and was akin to institutional racism. As such, many minority ethnic young people felt 'out of place' and excluded from public places. In addition, many of the ethnic minority young people had experienced racism and Islamophobia in public and educational spaces in Sunderland such as schools, colleges and on the street (also see Bowler & Razak, 2017).

6.2: Politics of Asylum and Race

A comparatively small number of asylum seekers have been placed in Sunderland through the government's dispersal programme, which was introduced in 2000. In 2018, a temporary ban on housing more asylum seekers was implemented in the city at the request of the local council, due to concerns around 'social cohesion issues' and local 'tensions' (Taylor, 2018). The belief was that the council could not guarantee the safety of asylum seekers in the toxic environment that had been created by the regular far-right protests and similar activities.

We spoke with five young asylum seekers and refugees who had been placed in the city. Although they had challenges in their everyday lives, including concerns with racism, they were generally positive about their experience of living in Sunderland:

before coming to Sunderland there are some stereotypes towards people in the Northeast, like.... So before coming here people say, 'Oh it is very tough and you are going to meet people with a very... strange accents and people with really unfamiliar to this migrant'. So, when I came here, I came with all this things in my mind, actually. So, after arriving here I wasn't that much feeling really safe and relaxed, because of what I heard before coming here. So... because of this, I really restrict my movements. Yeah, quite often I don't really go out in the night-time to be more safe than.... But realistically, when we look at the truth, what really life looks like for me after I have been here, I really found that most people in Sunderland are really nice to us, and really very good. But again, there are a few people who are not really, like, who don't really accept the presence of other... migrants. And there are some people who are really not tolerant towards the others.

(Male, Ethiopian, 27 years old)

The asylum seekers and refugees we spoke with generally felt that Sunderland was a welcoming place where they had received support and care. Moreover, a number stated that the reality was much better than its reputation for being unwelcoming to migrants and refugees. Nonetheless, they could recount experiences of hostility and racism, and some explained how they actively avoided particular places to mitigate this risk.

Finally, a minority of young people we spoke with openly held racist and xenophobic views. These views were most clearly identified in a focus group interview with several young White men who were both out of work and had no or few qualifications. What was evident from the focus group discussion was their sense of 'White victimhood'. Rather than recognising Whiteness as a marker of privilege, the young men frequently narrated accounts in which they were the victims of societal change. The narratives of these particular unemployed young men were peppered with racism, territoriality and a belief that Muslim and South Asian communities, in particular, were the perpetrators of conflict.

Summary

- Racism and Islamophobia were regularly featured in the everyday lives of many of the young people in the study.
- Despite Sunderland being a largely White city, everyday 'race talk' featured in the majority of young lives; that is, most young people discussed issues of race and racism with little prompting. Many young people had either witnessed or experienced racism and Islamophobia by way of graffiti, name-calling, far-right activity, the internet or violence. Although a minority of young people expressed racist views, the majority saw racism as a negative and worrying issue for Sunderland.
- The presence of the far-right in the city has been a significant contributing factor in young people's encounters with racist attitudes, and it has played an active role in creating the hostile environment in which racism can flourish.
- For young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, racism and the presence of far-right groups were particularly concerning, restricting their mobility and, in some cases, their broader rights to the city.



7: Young People's Views on Brexit and Immigration

How do young people feel about the current socio-political climate? What are their opinions on topical political issues? In this section, we examine young people's views on Brexit and immigration.

7.1: Brexit

In the EU Referendum of 2016, Sunderland emerged as a 'leave' city, with 61% voting for Brexit. Following this, in the General Election of December 2019, the Labour party held Sunderland Central, but its majority was reduced by almost 7,000 votes, with the Conservatives and the Brexit Party making significant gains. Therefore, as do other post-industrial cities in the North of England, Sunderland has shifting and changing voting patterns.

Survey evidence and polls suggest that younger generations are more likely than older generations to be against Britain leaving the EU (Finlay et al., 2019), and this study resonates with national data on youth voting patterns. Although not all the young people had clear views on Brexit, those who did expressed a preference to remain in the EU. Consider the following quotes:

I would say that I don't agree with it [Brexit], mainly because I feel like a lot of the people who have voted, have voted because of racism. Like, if you read on social media, the amount of people that have said, 'Oh it is because such and such, get rid of the immigrants, this and that'. It is immigration that has basically won this.

(Female, British-Asian, 19 years old)

Because I don't see what was the problem, like? Why change it? And then I think it was just, it was proper propaganda. Because, like, they were, like, 'Oh we will give the NHS all this money, we will do this, we will do that'. But then... we have voted 'leave' and none of this happened.

(Female, White, 17 years old)

Well, I was quite frustrated actually, because I know that the North East gets a lot of funding from the EU, and I worry that that will change. In Sunderland, as well, as I say, there is not much funding coming from central government, so it was coming from different places such as the EU. And I don't think that a lot of people in the city understood that.

(Male, White, 22 years old)

These quotes highlight some of the issues surrounding Brexit that concerned the young people. First, there was an association of Brexit with racist and anti-immigration views. Second, some considered Brexit to be a form of propaganda that utilised misinformation and misled people on fiscal policy and public spending. Third, there was concern that Brexit could have negative economic consequences for Sunderland, with a possible reduction in investment in the local area.

For some of the young people, the fact that Sunderland was a majority 'leave' city produced feelings of disappointment. There was frustration with the common association of Sunderland with Brexit, as this ignored the many people in Sunderland who voted 'remain'. For example, consider the following quotes:

Well, I was horrified with the Brexit vote, and when Sunderland was 'leave', I could not believe it! I think, to be honest, a lot of the younger generation don't use the vote when they should.

(Female, White, 28 years old)

They don't show the good things about it, it is portrayed like this Brexit city... It is unfair, because there are plenty of people there that are not ['leave' voters], that didn't support Brexit.

(Male, Black, 27 years old)

In addition to those who were explicitly against the vote to leave, there were young people who had differing and less clearly articulated opinions. Only a small number of participants expressed real support for Brexit and thought that it was a positive step for the region and the country. More common was uncertainty about what Brexit is, and as a result, uncertain opinions on the Referendum and Brexit. This uncertainty was especially pronounced in younger participants (14–16 years old), illustrating how young people can become disenfranchised from mainstream politics and voting. The following opinion was frequently relayed:

I don't even know what it [Brexit] is, me. I don't even know what it means. I don't....

(Male, White, 16 years old)

In contrast to the Scottish Independence Referendum, where people 16 years and above could vote, the EU Referendum was marred by the lack of information and reticence to engage with young people.

7.2: Immigration

When discussing the theme of immigration, a range of opinions were raised. In particular, several participants were critical of the treatment and framing of migrants by popular media and national debates. Some young people felt that Sunderland had become more diverse in recent years through the arrival of new migrants and international students, and that this was a positive change for the city. Most of the young people recognised that, compared to other British urban areas, Sunderland was not a diverse city. Consider the following quotes:

It is not the fact that immigrants are stealing the jobs, it is the fact that immigrants are doing the jobs that people don't want to do.

(Male, White, 18 years old)

I think if I was in a similar situation as, say, like, a... Syrian family I know I would be a refugee, like, just this morning I was talking to someone about this and they said, like, 'while there is this stereotype of say, like, immigrants coming from... like, Syria just to go on the dole, but, like, you wouldn't do that...'. Like... if, say, England was a warzone and we were escaping to Syria, we wouldn't just, like, we wouldn't travel all that way and risk our lives just to, like, to sit in front of, like, Jeremy Kyle [a popular daytime television show] or something like that. I don't see any problem with it, I have never really had an issue with immigration.

(Male, White, 21 years old)

I mean Sunderland in general, I think it is... a city that at the moment, they say it is going through development, which I think is well overdue. But I have noticed that, especially now, especially with spending time away, I have noticed it is a lot more multicultural. I remember when I was at school, I remember when I was very young, there wasn't as much diversity. So, it is nice to see now that there is a lot more diversity.

(Female, White, 28 years old)

To this extent, many of the young people we spoke with had a tolerant and often favourable opinion of immigration and multiculturalism in Sunderland. What is further evident in their accounts is the diversity of migration itself; including economic migrants, international students, EU workers, refugees and asylum seekers.

While most young people were not against immigration, some did express concerns related to community cohesion and its demands on social welfare and state benefits. Consider the following quotes:

There is two basic things you need to know about the area you are in. The country's culture and the language. It is the two things you need.

(Male, White, 17 years old)

It [immigration] doesn't matter as long as they get a job, like. I wouldn't say I was that bothered as long as they're not just [on the] dole....

(Male, White, 17 years old)

Some young people felt that it was important for migrants to try to integrate into the 'majority' way of life, especially through learning the English language and gaining an understanding of the local culture. The importance of migrants being economically active and not claiming benefits was expressed by some. Therefore, for some young people, there were certain 'red lines' about how migrants should participate and be involved in British society. Notably, there was a lack of clarity around asylum seekers, who are legally bound not to work until their claim has been processed. Finally, the small minority of the young people who held openly racist views, as discussed in the previous section, frequently expressed anti-migrant and xenophobic opinions in the focus groups.

Summary

- Those young people who expressed an opinion on the EU primarily wished to 'remain'. Brexit was considered to have a range of negative attributes, such as affirming racism, generating misleading propaganda and having negative economic consequences for Sunderland.
- Several young people expressed uncertainty about what Brexit is and, as a result, were unsure about the implications of the vote to leave.
- The majority of those who expressed an opinion on immigration had a tolerant attitude towards migrants and multiculturalism, believing that migrants were often made scapegoats for Britain's socio-economic problems. While most participants recognised that Sunderland is lacking in diversity, they were favourably disposed to the city becoming more culturally diverse.
- The scarcity of public welfare resources could lead to concerns regarding immigration. These concerns encompassed issues of assimilation, including the need for migrants to learn English and adapt to the local culture.





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