BEYOND 'LEFT BEHIND PLACES'

POLICIES 'FOR' AND 'WITH' 'LEFT BEHIND PLACES'

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Introduction

For over a decade, concern has mounted about places in Europe and North America that have been 'left behind' by the growth and prosperity experienced in more economically dynamic regions. This briefing paper summarises the findings from the **'Beyond Left Behind Places' project**. Filling a gap in the policy debate, this study included qualitative research with residents of economically 'left behind' regions in France, Germany and the UK to gather their experiences and perceptions.

The qualitative research was focused on six case studies areas, two in each country. It aimed to give agency and voice to people living in 'left behind' areas and draw on their experiences and priorities to inform the development of locally tailored policy responses. The case studies were designed to explore residents' employment activities and access to services, alongside their perceptions of their areas and of recent place-based policies.

Based on our findings, we outline a set of directions and recommendations on policies 'for' *and* 'with' 'left behind places.

These are based on an inclusive, largely bottom-up approach tailored to local circumstances and needs, while recognising the importance of broader forces and trends.[1] Accordingly, this approach seeks to not only benefit 'left behind places' (LBPs), but also work in conjunction with local residents, businesses and communities to improve opportunities and life chances in these areas.

What are 'left behind places'?

The term 'left behind places' has in recent years emerged as a way to describe places negatively affected by austerity, globalisation, and technological change. We use it as a shorthand for places experiencing decline or stagnation on economic, demographic and social dimensions, relative to more dynamic and prosperous places. 'Left behindness' can therefore be understood as a multidimensional condition that affects a variety of places, ranging from former industrial districts to outlying towns and some rural regions.

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[1] MacKinnon, D., Kempton, L., O'Brien, P., Ormerod, E., Pike, A., Tomaney, J. (2022) Reframing urban and regional 'development' for 'left behind places'. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 15(1), 39–56. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsab034

Executive Summary

Key Findings

- There are different kinds of 'left behind' regions. An analysis of regional development trajectories in the EU-15 between 1982 and 2017 highlighted three main types based on: 'persistent economic and demographic lag'; 'persistent economic and demographic decline'; and, 'deindustrialisation-driven decline'.

- Despite a longer-term experience of population shrinkage (see above), many economically lagging regions, have seen net gains in population through internal migration in more recent years.[2] In all three countries – France, Germany, and the UK – the average internal out-migration rate for 'left behind' regions was lower than for more economically dynamic regions in 2017-18.

- The underlying condition of 'left behindness' is present in the six case study areas (La Grand Combe and Roanne, France; Kusel and Herne, Germany; Bishop Auckland and Walsall, the UK), although it took different forms in different places. While the language of 'left behind places' is more prevalent in the UK, the condition was described more in terms of being

'overlooked' or 'forgotten' in France and Germany. But some residents do not feel left behind, benefitting from lower local housing costs, and travelling to access employment, services and leisure opportunities over a wider geography.

- Three principal manifestations of 'left behindness' emerged across the cases: a lack of higher-skilled employment opportunities; the decline of town centres and high streets; and reduced levels of service provision and the closure of facilities.

- Political disinterest and a lack of belief in a better future were prevalent among residents across the cases. There was a general lack of engagement with national and local politics which was seen as having little local impact and as divorced from everyday needs.

- Recent place-based policies for LBPs adopt a property-led model of regeneration. As such, they may work in terms of improving the built environment, appearance and image of LBPs, but are unlikely to reach the most 'left behind' people in these areas

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[2] Velthuis, S. et al. (2024) Regional migration in economically lagging territories: a comparative analysis. *Beyond 'Left Behind Places' Project Working Paper* 01/24. https://research.ncl.ac.uk/beyondleftbehindplaces/publicationsanddownloads/

Policies for *and* with 'left behind places'

Our arguments outline broad principles and directions for LBPs. They consider policy issues at three levels: 1) rethinking and redefining the problem of LBPs; 2) reformulating policy goals and principles; 3) suggesting policy initiatives and institutional arrangements for LBPs.

Overarching policy principles

- The most fundamental principle concerns the need for policy-makers to reaffirm the value of the people and places which have been 'left behind' or overlooked. Policies should adopt an inclusive, bottom-up approach that aims to increase each person's set of opportunities or capabilities.
- While 'left behind places' (LPBs) are unlikely to become centres of high-tech industry, they do have assets that can support future economic and social activities and attract people and businesses.
- An integrated set of policies is required to address the multi-dimensional condition of 'left behindness'. Future policies should aim to make 'left behind' areas better places to live by enhancing the opportunities available to residents.

- Policy-makers should adopt a multi-level approach, requiring local, regional and national government to work together to address the lack of resources and powers available to support local communities. At the local level, this will involve cooperation across administrative boundaries, at the scale of functional economic areas, and organisational responsibilities.
- Addressing feelings of disaffection and powerlessness requires community engagement and participation to identify future priorities and goals. This is a key change in formulating policy 'with' as well as 'for' LBPs. The local knowledge and attachments of residents are important assets for future policies.

Policies for *and* with 'left behind places'

Policy recommendations

- **Open-up and democratise interpretations and visions of 'development' in LBPs** – for example through local consultation and 'listening' exercises, community development planning and strategy development.

- **Adopt a place-based approach tailored to local contexts** and underpinned by meaningful decentralisation of powers and resources to give local and regional government more capacity to develop local strategies.

- **Increase residual incomes and access to employment.** This requires job creation to be aligned with local skills, with targeted support to help people access employment opportunities. Local authorities, anchor institutions and employers should work together to lower the barriers restricting such access.

- **Fix the foundations of local infrastructures and services** by enhancing accessible and affordable health provision and public transport, renewing social infrastructure, and diversifying and sustaining high street retail and the leisure economy.

- **Encourage local policy experimentation and innovation within and between countries,** supporting the establishment of international, national and regional networks of local groups to develop and diffuse ideas (basic infrastructure guarantees; spaces for alternative forms of provision and social innovations; community wealth building initiatives; basic income pilots

Background

Social and spatial inequalities between and within core and peripheral regions have re-emerged as an acute political concern in recent years. This issue has generated growing interest in places characterised as 'left behind' by globalisation and economic and technological change, particularly former industrial areas and rural regions, which have been identified as hotspots of political discontent and populist support.[3]

Over the past couple of decades, urban and regional policy has identified major city-regions as the main engines of productivity and growth. A key element of this dominant narrative of urban agglomeration has been the encouragement of people in lagging areas to move to more prosperous regions to access employment and economic opportunities.[4] However, the current wave of political discontent and geographical polarisation indicates that this approach has over-estimated the capacity and willingness of individuals to move between disadvantaged and prosperous regions.

The dominant narrative also assumed that agglomeration would benefit people living in the wider regions around major cities, enabling them to access employment, services and amenities in city centres. In practice, however, this 'city centrism' seems to have accentuated spatial polarisation and political discontent.[5]

Much recent research on LBPs has focused on aggregate economic and demographic trends, investment and employment outcomes and policy debates.[6] The question of how people experience economic, social and political change in 'left behind' regions has received less attention. Little is known of residents' employment and income-generating activities, access to services and their views on national and local politics and regeneration initiatives.

Conventional policies for economically lagging regions have adopted a twofold approach: i) growth and innovation-oriented interventions aiming to increase their competitiveness and attractiveness;

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[3] Hendrickson, C., Muro. M. and Galston, W.A. (2018) *Countering the Geography of Discontent: Strategies for Left Behind Places*. Brookings Institution, Washington DC.

[4] Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2018) "The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it)" *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11(1), 189-209.

[5] Pike, A. (2018) The limits of city centrism. City Evolutions, https://www.cityevolutions.org.uk/the-limits-of-city-centrism/; McKay, L., Jennings, W., & Stoker, G. (2024). Understanding the geography of discontent: Perceptions of government's biases against left-behind places. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31(6), 1719-1748.

[6] Connor, D. S., Berg, A. K., Kemeny,T., & Kedron, P. J. (2024). Who gets left behind by left behind places? *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 17(1), 37–58. https://doi.org/10.1093/CJRES/RSAD031; Fiorentino, S., Glasmeier, A.K, Lobao, L., Martin, R. and Tyler, P. (2024) 'Left behind places': what are they and why do they matter? *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 17(1), 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsad044

and, ii) redistributive transfer payments based on welfare and public service support. Some recent research on 'left behind' regions and shrinking cities recognises the limitations of these approaches. This work highlights alternative approaches to development such as community wealth building, wellbeing economies and the foundational economy, espousing 'beyond GDP' goals such as local ownership, ecological and social justice and foundational liveability.[7]

Methodology

Based on an international comparison, the research used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods which combined aggregate data analysis with case studies in specific places in France, Germany and the UK. The quantitative analysis used official datasets to investigate long-term regional trajectories in Western Europe and to assess migration trends in the three countries.

The qualitative case study research was designed to explore people's everyday social and economic practices and experiences, addressing the neglected question of how residents experience living and working in 'left behind places'.[8]

The six local case studies were selected on the basis of relative economic decline, slower-than-average population growth, and below national average incomes. One rural and one urban case study was selected in each country: La Grand Combe and Roanne in France; the district of Kusel and Herne in Germany; Bishop Auckland and Walsall in the UK (Table 1).

The research covered both the material and immaterial dimensions of 'left behindness', i.e. not only what people do, but also how they feel about the places they live and their prospects. Analysis extended outwards from the micro-level practices of households and connected to larger macro-level trends (e.g. labour market polarisation, austerity, political disempowerment).

Over 300 semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with residents and stakeholders across the six case studies. Approximately two-thirds of these were with local residents, and the remainder with key 'stakeholders' (representatives of local and regional governments, Non-Government Organisations, community groups and business associations). Data analysis was based on a common coding scheme across the different countries and cases.

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[7] Calafati, L., Froud, J., Haslam, C., Johal, S. and Williams, K. (2023) *When Nothing Works: From Cost of Living to Foundational Liveability.* Manchester University Press: Manchester;
Crisp, R., Waite, D., Green, A., Hughes, C., Lupton, R., MacKinnon, D., and Pike, A. (2023) 'Beyond GDP' in cities: assessing alternative approaches to urban economic development", *Urban Studies*, 61(7), 1209-1229; McInroy N (2018) Wealth for all: Building new local economies. *Local Economy* 33(6): 678–687.
[8] Tomaney, J., Blackman, M., Natarajan, L. and Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, D., Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, F. and Taylor, M. (2024) *Social Infrastructure and Left Behind Places*, Routledge: London.

Table 1. Case study areas

Case study	Urban / rural	Country	Population (municipality / district)	Location	Trajectory
Roanne	Urban	France	34,000	Rhône-Alpes Auvergne	'Persistent economic and demographic decline'
Herne	Urban	Germany	157,896	Northern Ruhr	'Deindustrialisation-driven decline'
Walsall	Urban	UK	73,719	West Midlands	Deindustrialisation-driven decline'
La Grand Combe	Rural	France	9211	Cevannes, Occitanie region	Persistent economic and demographic lag'
Kusel	Rural	Germany	71,140	Rhineland-Palatinate	'Persistent economic and demographic decline'
Bishop Auckland	Rural	UK	43,005	North East England	Persistent economic and demographic decline'

Key findings

## *Different kinds of 'left behind' regions*

There are different kinds of 'left behind' regions. An analysis of regional development trajectories in the EU-15 at the NUTS scale between 1982 and 2017 highlighted three main types of 'left behind' regions (Figure 1).[9]

- First, the group characterised by 'persistent economic and demographic lag' can be regarded as 'long-term left behind' with low average GDP and often population loss.[10]
- Second, the 'persistent demographic and economic relative decline' group can be seen as 'more recently left behind', having started with high initial level of relative GDP per capita in 1982.
- Third, 'deindustrialisation-driven decline' regions fell behind as industrial employment shrank and GDP per capita fell relative to national levels.

By contrast, regions in the 'favourable configuration' group were able to rebound successfully from structural change, experiencing economic and/or demographic growth after an initial phase of restructuring and decline. The 'unfavourable post-crisis transition' and 'halted catch-up' groups have both

experienced recent slow down after earlier growth, with the former in more danger of becoming 'left behind'. Lastly, the 'persistent demographic and employment dynamism' group experienced sustained economic and population growth over the period.

Figure 1: Trajectories of regions across the EU-15
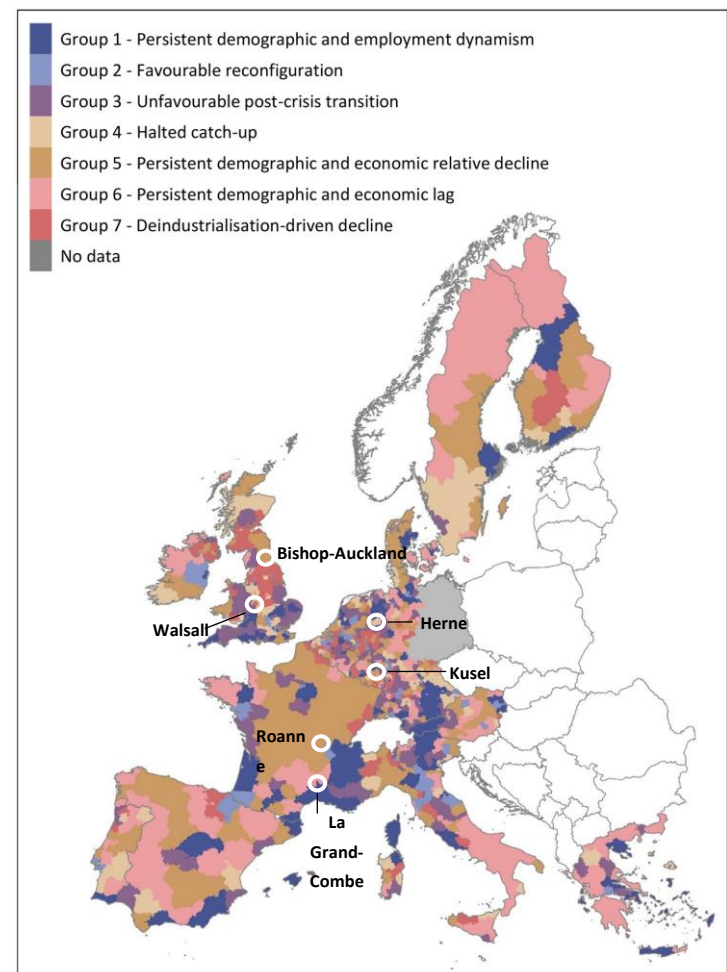
Source: Le Petit-Guerin et al. 2023

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[9] Le Petit-Guerin, M. et al. (2023) Lost in transition? Trajectories of regional 'left behindness' in the EU15 from 1982 to 2017. *Beyond Left Behind Places Project Working Paper* 04/23. Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS), Newcastle University, UK. https://research.ncl.ac.uk/beyondleftbehindplaces/publicationsanddownloads/Trajectories%20analysis_working%20paper%200423.pdf

[10] Connor, D. S., Berg, A. K., Kemeny, T., & Kedron, P. J. (2024). Who gets left behind by left behind places? *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 17(1), 37–58. https://doi.org/10.1093/CJRES/RSAD031

Staying, not moving

Although many regions across Western Europe experienced population decline over the 1982-2017 period, as outlined above, our analysis of migration patterns for the immediate pre-pandemic period (2017-18) indicates that economically 'lagging behind'[11] regions in France, Germany, and the UK did not in general experience population loss through regional migration. On average, these regions saw net gains in population from internal migration (Figure 2).[12]

This was largely because the internal out-migration rate was lower for 'lagging behind' regions than for 'forging ahead'

regions, indicating that fewer people are leaving lagging regions. In 2017-18, 68% of lagging regions had a positive internal migration balance. This increased to 81% of these regions when considering total migration (i.e. internal plus international).

This finding is consistent with recent research arguing that economic analyses have over-estimated the willingness and capacity of people to move from 'left behind' to economically dynamic regions.[13] It reinforces the need to improve employment and living conditions in lagging regions so that residents can attain a good standard of living and access the services they need.

Figure 2: Economically "left behind" regions on average see net gains in population through internal migration

Average rates of net internal migration (per 1,000 residents), by economic category and country, 2017-18
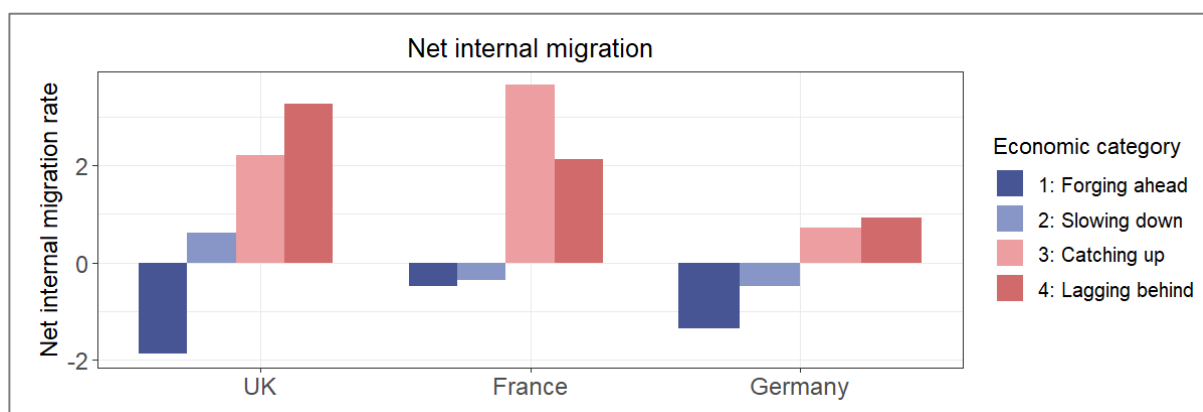
Source: Velthuis et al. 2024: 18

The qualitative research indicated that many residents had lived in the case study areas for most of their lives, although they were substantial minorities who had

moved to these places. The reasons for 'staying' and 'moving' were broadly similar across the cases. First, affordable housing and the availability of social

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[11] For this analysis, economically 'lagging behind' regions are defined as having lower-than-national-average per capita GDP in 1991 and slower-than-national-average per capita GDP growth between 1991 and 2018.
[12] Velthuis, S. et al. (2024).
[13] Rodríguez-Pose (2018).

housing was critical for some. For example:

> "I'm just like, it's where I live, I've just got to suck it up and take it. I like the fact rent is much cheaper, house prices are much cheaper compared to London, I'd never be able to afford a place in London, I'd have to move in with my parents, whereas here, on a single wage, I can afford the rent."
> (Female resident, Walsall, November 2022)

Second, family and social networks provided mutual support and social connection as well as a justification for decisions to stay. These networks were often associated with strong place attachments and feelings of belonging. In-migration to the case study areas was often for family-related reasons, such as to be nearer to parents or a partner's family.

Third, quality of life and environmental amenities such as tranquillity, open space and attractive scenery, were emphasised, particularly in the rural areas, where proximity to nature and the scope for outdoor recreation were valued.

At the same time, some people had left or intended to leave the case study areas. Many respondents had family members who had left the area, often for employment, but sometimes for other reasons such as being closer to a partner's family or for lifestyle reasons. Some young people expressed an intention to leave in the future, often but not always for employment reasons. Nearby larger cities were seen by some young people as appealing destinations (for example, Newcastle from Bishop Auckland). In the case of Herne, high-quality transport connections enabled people to combine low-cost living in Herne with access to the employment, education, services, and leisure opportunities of the wider Ruhr region, meaning there were fewer reasons to leave. Some respondents expressed resentment of other people moving to their areas, particularly if these arrivals were culturally or racially different, and were perceived to be economically inactive and increasing pressure on local services.

Herne tram service (authors' own image, June 2022)

Not everyone is 'left behind'

The case study research showed that the underlying condition of 'left behindness' is very much present in the six case study areas, although this took different forms in different areas and for distinct groups of residents (see below). While the language of 'left behind places' is more prevalent in the UK, the condition was expressed in terms of being 'overlooked' or 'forgotten' in France and Germany.

In the UK cases, several residents used the term 'left behind' to describe their areas, recounting this in terms of economic and town centre decline, limited employment

options and the closure of services and facilities (see below).

While neither the term, not its nearest German equivalent, '*Abgehängte Regionen*', was used, respondents in the German cases were acutely aware of the relative disadvantage of their areas, although this was perceived to be far less severe than Eastern Germany.

The sense of economic and social decline was particularly acute in the rural French case, La Grand Combe, reflecting a lack of employment and services following the closure of the mine. By contrast, the proximity of Roanne to Lyon brought some hope of benefiting from overspill developments.

Remaining mine housing in La Grand Combe (authors' own image, October 2022)

At the same time, a substantial minority of residents did not feel 'left behind' and valued the lower-cost housing and environmental amenities of LBPs. These residents are often better-off and have the means to travel to access employment, services and leisure

opportunities over a wider geographical area.

This pattern was evident in both the urban and rural cases where the wider region provided greater opportunities for employment, entertainment and consumption. For instance, 'living regionally' was evident in Herne, where good transport connections and its location 'in the middle' of the Ruhr agglomeration allowed respondents to commute to other Ruhr cities for employment and services (see below). In the rural cases, however, mobility was often experienced as a material constraint, requiring the use of a car to access services and work, increasing people's cost of living.[14]

Local meanings and perceptions of 'left behindness'

While the term was not used in all countries, the multi-faceted condition of 'left behindness' was generally evident across the different cases. Residents and stakeholders cited a range of aspects, including economic decline, depopulation and ageing, lack of employment opportunities, negative external images and a lack of funds for services and strategic investments. More specifically, three principal manifestations of 'left behindness' stood out across the cases.

First, 'left behind places' tend to provide only basic employment opportunities in

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[14] Karbon Homes (2023) *Fair foundations: a new movement for 'left behind places'*. https://www.karbonhomes.co.uk/media/2kxh5j0z/m0123197-fair-foundations-report-plain-text.pdf

sectors such as manufacturing, retail, health and social care. Respondents highlighted a lack of higher paid employment and career opportunities beyond entry level posts.

In response, some residents commute to work in other parts of the wider region or other regions on a temporary or longer-term basis. This was particularly prevalent in Germany. In the case of Herne, this reflects good transport connections, alongside the low cost of housing:

> So I think you have to say, of course, that people have always been used to commuting in the Ruhr area, or somehow, they're learning to do it now with time and it's difficult to get to Düsseldorf in the morning, it's no fun. But otherwise, commuting from Bochum or the like, I think those are the biggest commuter links that Herne has, Bochum I think, Dortmund. It's completely normal for people to drive there. I also know a few people who say we live in Herne now because the real estate prices were cheaper and we could afford to buy our own home here (Business representative, Herne, November 2022).

Despite longer travel times, Kusel has a long history of out-commuting to work in larger employment centres (for example, Kaiserslautern, Saarland, Mannheim).

Second, the decline of town centres and high streets was viewed as a key expression of 'left behindness', manifested in empty and unused properties. The loss of the range of shops, markets, cafés, bars and restaurants present in previous decades was keenly felt by many respondents, along with the dense social interactions and 'buzz' which they associated with these facilities. For

some residents, a sense of nostalgia for a previous age of vibrant town centres and sociability was apparent. Such nostalgia was not only evoked by older residents, but also some younger respondents, based on stories they had heard from older relatives. This underlines its prevalence as a localised narrative of long-term decline.
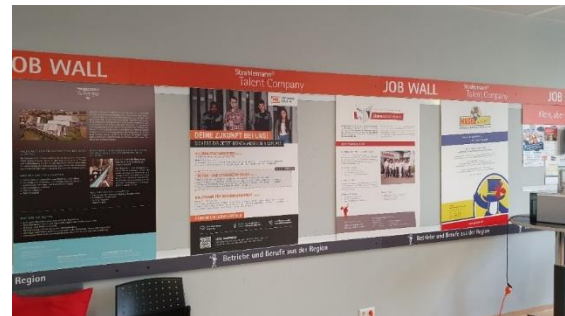
Poster informing pupils about vocational training opportunities, Kusel (authors' own image, March 2023)

Newgate Street, Bishop Auckland (authors' own image, February 2023)

Third, reduced levels of service provision and the closure of facilities were also associated with 'left behindness', compounding the effects of long-term decline. This was more acute in the UK cases and the rural French one. For some UK respondents, the loss of services and

facilities was a defining feature of life in a LBP:

> I just think, throughout my life … just things seem to be slowly closing down and closing down. When I was in primary school, I wanted to go to the Grange secondary school, because it was literally across the road from my house, then it closed down. Then I went to … Park secondary school and it had a sixth form, and the sixth form closed down, and the Clay Café in the town's closed down. There was a Greggs and all these other things in the town, now most of the buildings are just empty. It's just, the only thing in Spennymoor town is probably Wetherspoons. (Female resident, Bishop Auckland, March 2023).

A lack of access to services was a theme of the French cases, particularly La Grand Combe, where provision was compared unfavourably with the previous mining era. In Roanne and Kusel, access to medical facilities was seen as problematic, reflecting the retirement of general practitioners. By contrast, service provision was perceived to be relatively good in Herne.

Political disinterest and a lack of belief in a better future

Political disinterest and a lack of belief in a better future were prevalent themes across the cases. This sense of political disempowerment was more prevalent than the resentment and 'the revenge of the places that don't matter' which underpins the dominant academic and policy narrative on 'left behind places'.[15]

Local residents expressed little trust in politicians and public institutions. They were largely disengaged with national and local politics which was seen as irrelevant and divorced from people's everyday needs. Residents tended to be particularly critical of national politicians for being remote and out of touch, contributing to a feeling of being 'forgotten' or 'neglected'.

In some case study areas, this sense of political disempowerment is being harnessed by right-wing nationalist and populist parties:

> "A large majority of the working class doesn't have socialist convictions, but voted PC [Communist Party] for years because the PC defended working-class values. And today, what's happening? Well, Marine Le Pen … is capturing all those votes. And I think here, in a village like Champclauson, nobody votes for Le Pen because there's violence, because blah blah, because… racism either … Even if like everywhere, there are some forms of racism, we can't escape it, it's complicated. But it's not that which motivates the FN [Front National, now Rassemblement National], votes, it's really… There's that, so the recovery of people who are in misery, it was very demagogic, she knew how to do it well. And then, there are also all those, I think, who are completely fed up with politics in general and with elected officials, and who say: 'well, anyway, let's vote, it can't be worse.' Finally, that's how I interpret it here. Then, it's frustrating for me to know that out of 130 voters, 73 who I shook hands with last time at the polling station voted for Le Pen [laughing] but well". (Local stakeholder, La Grand Combe, June 2022).

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[15] Hilhorst, S. (2024) *A Tale of Two Towns: Economic Disadvantage and Political Disempowerment in ex-Industrial England*; Rodriguez-Pose (2008)

More engagement with local than national politicians was evident across the cases. Some residents highlighted examples of local political representatives who were highly visible and engaged with residents on a daily basis. At the same time, they were often critical of local authorities as organisations for a perceived lack of local engagement and investment. In some cases, this was despite recent efforts to engage with residents by local authorities, highlighting the challenge of achieving meaningful local engagement.

Limitations of recent place-based policies

In recent years, place-based policies have been introduced to address territorial polarisation and political discontent.[16] In France and the UK, these policies have taken the form of new initiatives to improve the competitiveness and attractiveness of smaller cities, towns and rural areas. In Germany, existing policies to promote territorial equalisation have been maintained and extended.[17] Residents of the French and UK case study areas selected for these new place-based policies were often sceptical, based on past experiences, of whether they would make any real difference to their areas, although some welcomed the investment.

In all three countries, recent place-based policies have followed a property-based approach which seeks to improve the built environment and attract investment and people.[18] They typically focus on infrastructure provision, town centre improvement, housing redevelopment and skills enhancement. Such measures try to address decline by increasing the attractiveness of the areas in question and promoting growth, alongside additional aspects such as quality of life and 'pride in place'. While improvements to the built environment, appearance and image of LBPs are needed, these initiatives do not

[16] Mackinnon D, Kinossian N, Pike A, Beal V, Lang T, Rousseau M, Tomaney J. (2024) Spatial policy since the global financial crisis. *European Urban & Regional Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1177/09697764241287376

[17] Grabski-Kieron, U. and Boutet, A. (2022) Small and medium-sized towns – situation, development and prospects in different types of areas. In Gustedt, E., Grabski-Kieron, U., Demazière,C. and Paris, D. (Eds.) *Cities and Metropolises in France and Germany*. Forschungsberichte der ARL 20: Hanover, pp. 801-101.

[18] Adams, D., Disberry, A., & Hutchison, N. (2017). Still vacant after all these years – Evaluating the efficiency of property-led urban regeneration. *Local Economy*, 32(6), 505-524. https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094217729129

go far enough in ensuring that 'left behind' people in these areas benefit from such investment, requiring extensive outreach and investment in skills and training.[19]

Property-led regeneration in Bishop Auckland (authors' own image, June 2024)

In general, the top-down national place-based policies introduced in the UK and France lack the sustained local engagement required to address the local needs of people in LBPs. In the UK, the [20]

very tight timescales established for local authorities competitively to bid for funds often precluded extensive local consultation at this formative stage when the priority projects and their desired outcomes were selected. Mayors play a leading role in local programme coordination and delivery in France, but often experienced difficulties in involving institutional partners and other groups.

By contrast, more local engagement and partnership has been apparent in the more decentralised German governance system. In recent years, however, states have required indebted municipalities, including the city of Herne and Kusel district, to implement austerity policies. As a result, they lack funds for investments and strategic projects, meaning that they have fallen further behind wealthier municipalities.

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[19] Glover, B. and Phillip, A. (2021) *All Ears: Putting the Public at the Heart of Levelling Up*. Demos: London; Green, A., Hughes, C., Sissons, P., & Taylor, A. (2022). Localising employment policy: opportunities and challenges. In A. Jolly, R. Cefalo, & M. Pomati (Eds.), *Social Policy Review 34: Analysis and Debate in Social Policy*. Policy Press, pp. 24-47. https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/social-policy-review-34

[20] Dudek, S (2021). Auf dem Weg zum austeritätspolitischen Föderalismus in Bayern? Eine historisch-materialistische Politikanalyse sparpolitischer Restrukturierungsprozesse in der Raumordnung. *Zeitschrift für Wirtschaftsgeographie*, 65(2), 45-57. https://doi.org/10.1515/zfw-2020-0015

Policies 'for' *and* 'with' 'left behind places'

Rather than offering detailed advice on the composition of investment programmes or the delivery of projects, we outline broad principles and directions to inform the development of policies for LBPs. This approach reflects the aims of the research we undertook, the diversity of our case studies, and the need to avid overly prescriptive, one-size-fits all solutions. Our arguments seek to influence policy discussions at three levels: 1) rethinking and redefining the problem of LBPs; 2) reformulating policy goals and principles; 3) and, suggesting policy initiatives and institutional arrangements for LBPs.

Informed by the findings set out above, the policy messages below are designed to address key aspects of the 'left behind' condition across the three countries. This condition is not geographically contained within LBPs which have a range of connections to other places and regions, and which are home to many people who are not themselves 'left behind'. Rather, the condition should be seen as an expression of broader structural forces (globalisation, deindustrialisation, public sector austerity) and widening regional inequalities over recent decades.[21] This means that LBPs should not be seen as the authors of their own misfortunes, implying that remedies need to come from without as well as within. Regional and national government have crucial roles to play in this respect. LBPs require long-term commitment and support; they are not amenable to short-term fixes.

As outlined above, the 'left behind' condition is multi-dimensional and multi-level. It reflects wider processes of economic and social restructuring linked to the decline of traditional industries. These industries have been replaced by routine and low-paid jobs.[22] Previous place-based policies have failed to establish new economic roles for LBPs beyond this low wage economy, despite promises of good jobs and regeneration.[23]

Overarching policy principles

First, the most fundamental principle concerns the **need for policy-makers to reaffirm the value of the people and places which have been 'left behind' or overlooked**. Their marginalisation by conventional urban and regional policy means that their economic potential has been under-utilised. LBPs have traditionally been defined in negative terms as deficient (i.e. lacking skills, enterprise, financial capital, etc.). While this is often part of the 'left behind'

[21] Hilhorst, S. (2024); Martin, R., Gardiner, B., Pike, A., Sunley, P. and Tyler, P. (2021) *Levelling up left behind places: the scale and nature of the policy challenge.* Regional Studies Association, Falmer, East Sussex.
[22] Preece, J. (2017) "Immobility and insecure labour markets: An active response to precarious employment", *Urban Studies* 55, 1783-1799.
[23] Hilhorst, S. (2024)

condition, it represents a partial and misleading diagnosis of the problem to be addressed, ignoring the contribution of broader structural factors.

Our approach is informed by the capabilities framework in international development which emphasises individual flourishing, arguing that regional policies should aim to improve "each person's set of valuable opportunities (or capabilities…)".[24] This requires a focus on the ultimate goals of regional policy, such as the ability to have a fulfilling job or to engage in various forms of social interaction, before working backwards to identify policies to achieve these goals. It requires a process of deliberative participation involving local residents to identify the things they value in their lives, which policy should target.[25] Capabilities thinking resonates with the inclusive, bottom-up approach we emphasised earlier, making "people's visions, values and potentials" the basis for development.[26]

Second, while LPBs are unlikely to become centres of high-tech industry, **they do have significant assets (such as relatively lower cost housing, available land, green space, close social networks, proximity to resources) that can support future economic and social activities and attract people and businesses**. In the past, these places made important contributions to

national prosperity, with some acting as centres of innovation and technological development. Today, they can still play a significant role in the growth of emerging industries such as renewable energy.

More generally, the identification of future economic roles and opportunities is an important priority, based on available assets that reflect local conditions and potential development pathways. Such assets should not just be seen in economic terms; there is scope to also think about the social assets and potential of LBPs to attract certain demographic groups and activities, for example older people or people adopting alternative lifestyles, although this would need to be supported by investment in local services.[27] Our research suggests that articulating a new economic and social role for LBPs could help to foster renewed attachments and 'pride in place' which many residents saw as tied to the economic and industrial history of the area. There is a need to recreate this pride in a post-industrial economy, recognising that new economic and social roles are likely to be different from those of the past.

Third, **an integrated set of policies is required to address the multi-dimensional condition of 'left behindness'**. Future policies should adopt a broader approach that goes beyond narrow definitions of 'the economic' to

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[24] Abreu, M., Comim, F., & Jones, C. (2023). A capability-approach perspective on regional development. *Regional Studies*, 58(11), 2208–2220. https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2276332

[25] Abreu et al. (2023)

[26] MacKinnon et al. (2022)

[27] Marjanović, M., Sagot Better, M., Lero, N., & Nedović-Budić, Z. (2024). Can acceptance of urban shrinkage shift planning strategies of shrinking cities from growth to de-growth? *Urban Planning, 9*, 6904. https://doi.org/10.17645/up.6904

address issues of social provision and political disempowerment. There is a need to break the vicious cycles of industrial loss, socio-economic decline and service reduction that has characterised many LBPs.[28]

Policies should aim to make 'left behind' areas better places to live by enhancing the opportunities available to residents. This entails a focus on the everyday economy or foundational economy, addressing the issues that matter most to people and seeking to make their lives easier and better. Increasing people's capabilities and well-being can provide a better foundation for economic development by improving health and wellbeing, reducing inactivity rates, and enhancing labour market participation.[29]

Fourth, future **policies should adopt a multi-level and multi-organisational approach, requiring local, regional and national government to work together constructively**. This would entail meaningful decentralisation of power and resources, reflecting local leaders' greater knowledge of place-specific conditions and potentials, while recognising that local outcomes are also shaped by broader structural forces. At the local level, addressing the multi-dimensional condition of 'left behindness' requires closer cooperation across organisational boundaries and responsibilities.

Devolution can help to address political disempowerment and mistrust; with residents tending to identify more strongly with local politicians than national ones. Giving local leaders and organisations the tools and resources to address local needs and implement strategies agreed with residents is important to show that meaningful change can be achieved.

At the same time, there is a vital role for national and regional government to play in providing adequate levels of long-term, integrated and co-ordinated funding for disadvantaged places, sustained political commitment and policy coordination to underpin and support local action.[30]

Fifth, the process by which policies are developed and decisions taken is important for people living in LBPs. **Addressing feelings of political disempowerment requires enhanced community engagement and participation to identify local priorities and develop agreed solutions**.[31] The local knowledge and attachments of residents who often have an acute sense of local needs and potential are key assets that require to be unlocked to inform future policies. Underpinned by meaningful devolution, local authorities have a key role to play in engaging with residents and building community capacity.

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[28] Tomaney et al. (2024).

[29] Barnsley Council and South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (2024) *Pathways to Work Commission Report*.

[30] Martin et al. (2021); Taylor, A., Sampson, S. and Romaniuk, A. (2021) *What does it take to 'level up' places: evidence from international experience*. Industrial Strategy Council.

[31] Abreu et al. (2023).

Policy recommendations

Based on our research findings and the broad principles outlined above, we make five key policy recommendations.

Open-up and democratise interpretations and visions of 'development' in 'left behind places' to popular participation and decision-making. Building on the principles of reaffirming the value of 'left behind' people and places and community engagement, this shift would address political disempowerment and foster the development of policies 'for' *and* 'with' 'left behind' people and places by working with residents, communities and business for the long-term betterment of these areas.

This approach requires supporting civic and political leadership and creating opportunities for participation. It would involve local engagement and 'listening' exercises focused on residents' ideas for future development, building on examples like 'The Cornwall We Want', the 'Walsall 2040' initiative, UK Local Poverty Truth Commissions, and the LAND L(i)EBEN project in Kusel district. Given existing levels of disempowerment, this engagement will require sustained commitment and investment by local leaders, working with community and voluntary sector organisations to reach and represent residents and ensure their views and priorities are appropriately recognised and used to inform policy. The

agreed outcomes of such engagement exercises can be implemented through locally-focused campaigns to convene public, private, civic and community actors in place-focused action (for example, the LAND L(i)EBEN smart city project in the district of Kusel which aims to develop new projects through dialogue with local residents, and the "*centre de santé municipal*" in Riorges (Roanne) which develops a public-driven model of healthcare).

Adopt a place-based approach tailored to local circumstances to best address the multi-dimensional condition of 'left behindness'. As part of a multi-level and multi-organisational approach (see above), this should be underpinned by the meaningful decentralisation of powers and resources. In the UK, which remains more centralised, devolution should be extended to more areas and policy responsibilities such as education and training, health and social care, and social protection and welfare, supported by more consolidated budgets.[32] This would give Mayoral Combined Authorities powers more comparable to municipal and regional governments in France and Germany, enabling them to develop more tailored and integrated policies to better address local needs.[33] More broadly, such decentralisation would support: the alignment of spatial planning and development, for instance: 'good' job creation locally and/or within affordable

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[32] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024) *English Devolution White Paper*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper
[33] Green, A., et a.(2022

commuting distance (see below); the balancing of employment and housing land uses; and the coordination of place promotion and investment attraction strategies.

Economic development and planning policies need to be joined up at the regional scale, approximating to functional economic areas, rather than having separate and fragmented top-down national initiatives for distinct types of places (e.g. cities, towns, villages) as we have seen in France and the UK. This approach should be based on an understanding of the economic relationships between places within a larger region.

Increase residual incomes and access to employment. The adoption of a foundational economy approach focuses attention on households' residual income – defined as available income after a) taxes & benefits and b) expenditure on housing, utilities and transport.[34] The goal should be to increase residual incomes in LPBs by improving access to employment and supporting the foundational economy, utilising available assets.[35]

Conventional employment creation policies have often failed to benefit low-income households, ignoring the barriers that prevent them from accessing new job opportunities, particularly if there is a mismatch between these jobs and the skills of residents.[36] This underlines the need for job creation to be aligned with local skills and for targeted support to help people access employment opportunities. A key focus should be 'middle skills' jobs in sectors like manufacturing, construction, health and social care and hospitality which provide scope for in-work progression.[37] These jobs are likely to be distributed across different employment sites in local travel to work areas, rather than being directly adjacent to disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Our research indicates that lower-income residents in the case study areas faced a number of barriers to accessing such 'good employment', principally transport, childcare and national tax and welfare policies. In response, there is a need for local authorities, anchor institutions like housing providers, further education colleges and employment agencies, and employers to work together to lower these barriers. The kinds of initiatives that could be introduced locally include: 'grow your own employment' schemes involving, for example, targeted apprenticeships and job pathways for less skilled applicants, focused on disadvantaged neighbourhoods; the

[34] Foundational Economy Research Ltd (FERL) (2022) *Jobs and Liveability*. Report for Karbon Homes. https://foundationaleconomyresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/FERL-Report-Jobs-Liveability-for-Karbon-Homes-Sept-2022.pdf

[35] Karbon Homes (2023).

[36] Crisp, R. Gore, T., Pearson, S. and Tyler, P. (2014) *Regeneration and Poverty: Evidence and Policy Review*. Centre for Economic & Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University. https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research/publications/regeneration-and-poverty-evidence-and-policy-review

[37] Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2019) Briefing**:** how local industrial strategies can deliver inclusive growth. https://www.jrf.org.uk/work/how-local-industrial-strategies-can-deliver-inclusive-growth

provision of further education courses aligned with the local labour demand; employability support to keep people in work; subsidised transport provision to assist people to travel to key employment sites; and support for childcare outside school hours, allowing parents in low-income households to work longer hours.[38]

Fix the foundations of local infrastructures and services to address the problem of the closure of facilities and amenities and reduced access to services. Reflecting the need for an integrated approach, such policies would encompass: accessible and affordable health provision and public transport (especially buses); renewing social infrastructure deemed valuable locally – for example, associations, community centres, libraries, leisure facilities, parks, and sports clubs; and, diversifying and sustaining high street retail and the leisure economy. Local authorities, anchor institutions and community organisations can support high streets by locating their offices and service centres on them.[39]

A central challenge is to find new ways of providing, adapting and sharing social facilities in LBPs. Given resource and staffing constraints, the sharing of services between areas could have an important contribution to make. For example, in

Germany regional governments support the shared provision of

social services between municipalities. According to the *Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt und Raumforschung* (Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, BBSR) (2017), the use of central locations with shared functions can ensure adequate regional provision, especially in sparsely populated areas where municipalities may offer limited services.[40] In France, this approach is evident in the Maisons France service created in 2020 by the *Agence Nationale de la Cohésion des Territoires* (ANCT) in 2020, although this service has been criticised for emphasising cost reduction and digitalisation.

Encourage policy experimentation and innovation. This approach would aim to foster policy integration by connecting 'conventional' growth-based and 'alternative' social and environmental approaches to economic development. It could be supported by the establishment of international, national and regional networks of local groups of officials and community representatives to develop and diffuse ideas, adopting a multi-level approach. We identify four areas of policy experimentation and innovation for these groups to pursue. First, supporting infrastructure provision through a basic infrastructure guarantee to provide a minimum level of services and amenities to which residents are entitled, requiring

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[38] FERL (2022)
[39] FERL (2022)
[40] BBSR (2017) *Raumordnungsbericht 2017*. Daseinsvorsorge sichern Sonderveröffentlichung, Oktober 2017. https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/veroeffentlichungen/sonderveroeffentlichungen/2017/rob-2017-final-dl.html

investment in LBPs and close cooperation between national and local government.[41]

Second, the provision of spaces and places for alternative forms of provision and social innovations – for example, community fora, infrastructure, and activities to enable local public voice and participation, alongside the funding of community action initiatives to support locally-determined priorities. Third,

assessing the scope to introduce community wealth building initiatives to increase the circulation of value within local economies through local procurement, employment and ownership.[42] Finally, establishing basic income pilots as trials at the regional and national levels to raise household income, expenditure and well-being.[43]

[41] Coyle, D. Erker, S. and Westwood, A. (2023) *Townscapes: A Universal Basic Infrastructure for the UK*. The Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Cambridge. https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/townscapes-a-universal-basic-infrastructure-for-the-uk/

[42] McInroy N (2018).

[43] Doussard, M. (2023). "Building distributive populism: basic income and political alternatives to ethno-nationalism", *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, rsad040. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsad040