

Analysis

Community Roundtables

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June 2026



01 Introduction

The Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes undertook a series of three roundtables in white working class majority areas across England in January and February 2026. There were three locations; Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, Great Yarmouth and Knowsley. Each was selected for its demographic make-up characterised by large majority white British populations (as defined by >89% white British ethnicity), high levels of deprivation (as defined by $\geq 25\%$ of the population deprived along at least two dimensions) and low levels of academic attainment (as defined by >25% with no qualifications).

Participants were identified through desk based research of organisations based within and working with the local community and snowballing of contacts. The roundtables were in person and were hosted by one of the local organisations, within the local area. Each roundtable lasted for two hours, facilitated by a member of the Public First research team and had between eight and seventeen participants. There were four key questions posed for discussion, although each session followed a semi structured format, guided by the expertise and insight provided by participants:

1. What are the key factors driving the educational underachievement of white working class young people in this area?
2. What are organisations in this area doing to improve the educational outcomes of white working class young people?
3. What knowledge, tools, and system conditions are needed to better support this work?
4. What would it take for government to improve the educational outcomes for white working class young people in this area?

02 Key Takeaways

- 1. Across all areas, participants expressed deep attachment to their towns and strong belief in local young people's potential.** However, they also felt their communities were persistently framed negatively, which risked becoming a self-fulfilling and reinforcing reality.
- 2. Intergenerational expectations were shaped in an economy where academic attainment was not essential for stable, respected employment.** The disappearance of those pathways has not always been accompanied by clearly visible or culturally resonant alternatives, weakening the perceived link between school success and adult opportunity.
- 3. Participants felt the current model privileges academic attainment in ways that disengage pupils with practical or vocational interests.** Limited early access to technical pathways and the dominance of performance metrics were seen as constraining schools' ability to reflect local identity and labour market realities.
- 4. Confidence and belonging are as significant as attainment.** A "lost middle" of pupils - neither high-attaining nor visibly struggling - was seen as particularly vulnerable to drifting into underachievement without targeted encouragement.
- 5. Although many initiatives, charities and services operate locally, participants described them as siloed, short-term and difficult to navigate.** A lack of communication between organisations, and between local and national agencies, was seen to reduce effectiveness and create duplication or gaps in support.
- 6. What works is relational, early and locally rooted.** Participants consistently pointed to strong relationships, whether in schools, youth work, or early years settings, as the most effective driver of engagement. Early language support, visible role models, practical pathways such as apprenticeships, and trusted adults embedded in the community were seen as disproportionately impactful.

03 Grimsby

Headlines

1. Participants in this roundtable were unsurprised by the underperformance of white working class young people in the town. While immigration was a relatively new local phenomenon, the group still felt familiar with the contrast between non-white students and their peers.

Grimsby doesn't neatly fit the mould for the national [charity] model, and so this is unique in many ways, which is why I love it. And our centre is staffed almost entirely by people from the area... what I can say is that we have got really good attendance [at the homework clubs], but we have not got really good attendance from white working class students. Sessions are predominantly Nigerian students, black British. We have tried so hard to get the white working class students. **Centre Leader, Education Charity**

I've also got another school in Bradford which is predominantly Muslim... And the difference between those children and the children I see in Grimsby. Our school is in one of the most deprived wards, and we see very different children there - disengaged children who do not want to engage in education at all. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

It's kind of it's not one single thing is it? It's just everything combines - all these sorts of intersectional disadvantages that exist within a specific locality, plus our geographical isolation doesn't help either, because you can't get anywhere quickly if you don't drive. **Centre Leader, Education Charity**

We've got to acknowledge that [underachievement has] been going on for years and years here. So the fishing industry collapsed when I was a kid, back in the 70s and we've now had three, four generations come along with nothing but menial jobs or unemployment, unless you get educational attainment. **Community Director, Sports Foundation**

I do believe we [Oasis] are at the forefront of education, but we are still struggling with white working class British children. And you look at our schools, and you look at our outcomes, and mine, particularly in the North East, are struggling. We're struggling to get the children in school. We don't have that the same issues. I'll be honest with you, if you look at our schools in central London, they're probably more deprived because more people have free school meals, but they look out onto the finance district in London? Aspiration. They're so aspirational. And they have so much more funding than what we have. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

2. At least part of the issue was **a wider social breakdown that they saw in working class communities throughout Grimsby**. They described communities becoming increasingly atomised and disconnected and disenfranchised.

*Now the world's a very different place than what it was in 2019, but I think the biggest difference is that sense of community, that aspiration, and I think that is a real issue. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust***

*When children or adults are going through a transitional space, a change in the personal life or whatever's going on for them, that sense of community holds people up, but white working class families are losing that sense of community. **Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust***

*Those schools in the inner cities get a lot more money. My school in Bradford gets so much money because it's an inner city school compared to what we get here. And actually, our children are a lot more deprived. And it just seems unfair. At the end of the train line, at the end of the road, we're a coastal town. I think they're important points. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust***

*These are families that don't vote, so don't feel that they can change, because they don't feel that the vote matters, but the policy changes that are happening... the people that is happening to, they're not voting to change that. **Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust***

3. They also identified a **fracturing of the social contract between schools and families**, citing attendance and, perhaps more worryingly, the rise in elective home education throughout the town. One participant linked this to compressed school days, leaving young people in a vulnerable vacuum in the afternoons.

*We're not providing for all of these children, and there's a lot of them going 'let's home educate', because they don't want to be in school, or the parents don't want the fines, or, actually, the parents don't want us to keep ringing them up, because they keep running around the building like a maniac. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust***

*We have to create a sense of community and a sense of belonging and a sense of mattering in our schools, and that has to transition between primary and secondary. We know that lots of families, when they go to secondary for whatever reason, are choosing to home educate, and that's happening more and more in primary as well... So I think lots of it boils back down to that sense of belonging and mattering, that sense of community, and why working families are feeling ostracised from that, whether it be in schools or localities. **Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust***

*Some schools close at lunch, reduce timetable, so youngsters are on the streets from lunchtime. So we're having to open from lunch time to work with these young people and keep them safe, because they are so vulnerable to exploitation. **Canon and CEO, Youth Club***

4. Participants identified **a failure in the school system and its curriculum to reflect white working class culture back to its students**. Grimsby was seen as a working class town, but

its schools felt unable to offer its disengaged students routes into working class professions, which they often felt strong cultural ties to, due to academic performance metrics. Relatedly, participants argued compellingly **that the absence of strong vocational options at a younger age was putting many young people off school.**

When I took over that school, I had a construction room, a motor vehicle maintenance room. We had some absolutely fantastic facilities. And one of my old schools in Immingham, and they had the hair and beauty room. But we can't use them because they're not on the curriculum ... we need plasterers and we need joiners, but the current curriculum disengages children. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

If we could have an education system that really did excite them, that they wanted to be part of, but unfortunately, I can't do that. I don't have the funds to do it. I don't have the facilities to do it now. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

There is such a thing as a working class culture, a way of looking at life, a set of values, and that, unfortunately, certainly our secondary schools are an alien culture to young people, and they find themselves adrift. **Canon and CEO, Youth Club**

We're trying to teach maths in a much more vocational way of delivering the skills needed. Because actually, if you are going to go out into health, you know, you're going to need to know measurements. **Principal, College**

5. There was a strong sense of pride in local identity, both in terms of how working-class young people view themselves and the deep dedication community leaders feel toward Grimsby, but leaders also felt misunderstood and looked down on by middle class elites and institutions.

It needs to be everybody working together for the good of our children. They're all our children of our town, and when you come from this town, you feel really passionate about wanting to do your best. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

For boys in particular, there's something about the pull of the trade, which I can completely understand, to be perfectly honest, because my brother's probably earned more than I do, without a degree and without that additional training. But I think there's also something about not wanting to, not wanting to lose touch with where you're from and who you are. **Centre Leader, Education Charity**

There's, a narrative within the media where those with education are condescending to and patronising to those without and I think that really fed into Brexit. I think it's feeding into the kind of narrative on Reform at the minute as well. **Centre Leader, Education Charity**

They perceive that they're not valued, and that's not a false perception. Not everybody feels like that — I know not everyone around here does — but a number of times I hear people being really

dismissive. Depending on the accent, people quickly make assumptions about someone's level of education and all that sort of thing, and immediately demonise these kids. We see that on social media, we see it in the media and in all sorts of ways. It's not true and it's not right, but we mustn't pretend they're suffering from false assumptions. **Community Director, Sports Foundation**

The idea that somebody down in London has put together a curriculum because a tiny, tiny minority of people could go to Oxford, it's an absolute nonsense. The gentrification of education, has just made things 100% worse. We've got these magnificent buildings and these academies, their own businesses, and all the rest of it, and all this business about uniforms, and it's a load of nonsense, but it appeals to the people who have those set of values. **Canon and CEO, Youth Club**

6. The group was unanimous that if sufficient high-quality apprenticeships were available in the town this would offer white working class students a reason to strive educationally.

Simply pointing to university was not cutting it in terms of motivation or aspiration.

Attendees **bemoaned the standard of careers education available to students**, suggesting that it wasn't tailored to the local jobs market and too often misled students as to what was and wasn't possible.

Look at the debt that people come out with now, no matter how academic you are and how highly you achieve at GCSE, at A level. How can you justify that level of debt at the end of it, if a job in your industry or sector or area of expertise doesn't exist where you come from. We're having those kinds of challenging conversations with young people because they can't see the value of a university degree to them personally, even though they might be able to achieve what is required to get in.

Centre Leader, Education Charity

Lots and lots of students talking about apprenticeships, which is really exciting, yep, but there are not enough of them, and they are highly competitive. And the people who are getting those apprenticeships are the high achieving kids who actually don't want fifty grand worth of student loan debt. **Centre Leader, Education Charity**

[A particular employer] come into career fairs, and they're brilliant, but they don't tell the kids that there is probably between 6 and 12 apprenticeship places available, and they get almost 1000 people apply. We're not being realistic about the jobs that are available. **Work Coach,**

Department for Work and Pensions

7. Schools desperately needed to reengage parents as co-authors of their children's education. Too often, however, these parents were themselves totally disengaged from education and learning. Breaking this cycle would be a challenge however there was no alternative if the white working class attainment gap was to be closed.

We have to work together to get your child to where they need to be. But the parents just don't engage like they used to – I mean they used to come in to shout at me and scream at me, that was fine. Now they don't come in, they've given up. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

I do think it goes back to parenting, early education and that sense of belonging. We've set up something that looks like a living room, with a table in it, and that's where we have all of our meetings with parents. They've got a safe space where we can deliver whatever we need to deliver. It's not a meeting room. It's not me sat across from a family with a pile of papers. It's really low threat. School, for the children and for the family, should be the safe space. **Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

That's where it becomes really tricky when you get disengagement. You have to create that sense of belonging and mattering, of families knowing they're important. You've got to harness that engagement early on. Early intervention is so important. But with school budgets reducing – and I know it's the elephant in the room – there just aren't as many people on the ground to enable that to happen. It's really, really difficult to build those community and family links. **Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

The ones that I generally see are the ones that do not have that parental support. They've got nobody to back them up. They've not got nobody to teach them how to be resilient. And they are not resilient. They have no resilience whatsoever. When someone knocks them down, they cannot get back up. **Work Coach, Department for Work and Pensions**

8. Breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage requires shifting resources toward early years programmes to provide foundational parenting support from the very beginning. Without establishing this early relationship, later attempts to help disengaged young people are ultimately too late to overcome entrenched barriers. Early language and literacy failure in particular were seen as a foundational driver of later disengagement and behavioural breakdown.

From somebody who works at the other end of this...if we don't have early intervention, then by the time they're coming through, it's too late. **Principal, College**

Communication and interaction is the biggest barrier and we need early intervention to get early reading right. **Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

We did an analysis of our new year seven cohort [aged 11], the twenty children who are struggling and have got the most negative points. Most of them had a reading age well below their chronological age. Between [a reading age of] six and eight, all 20 of them. They were predominantly white, working class, British boys. They couldn't access the curriculum. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

9. Participants identified the **collapse of informal civic organisations that, in previous generations, had provided structures, alternative trusted adults and simply places for young people to go.** They further identified **decline in resilience and social norms among students,** in large part blaming social media and screen time as the cause. Specifically, the absence of youth clubs were mentioned, with attendees enthusing about attempts to set up similar institutions in the town. Where these institutions do exist, they felt disconnected and fragmented in a way that prevented effective practice.

It's not rocket science. The abilities and skills to reach these kids are all there, and the way you can do it is all there is. It's not some great mystery. It's got to do with the value you put on these young people. **Canon and CEO, Youth Club**

We had a network of youth clubs in this town. But what happened was they brought in this 'accredited outcomes' nonsense. So they went to the youth centre, and they were handed a worksheet on anger management or something and they voted with their feet. So the council looked at the youth centres 'no one's there, we're going to close you.' We survived because we're voluntary, just about managed to survive. You know, we're still there somehow, but it was a tragedy. **Canon and CEO, Youth Club**

I'm so excited about this project [a new youth centre] for our children. It's gonna be absolutely brilliant when it officially launches and opens, because our children have somewhere that can be proud of, that can go on an evening, that doesn't cost a fortune, that's got lots of different things. They can engage in careers, numerical, literacy, but this will be a physical building. **Secondary Regional Lead, Multi Academy Trust**

There's so much passion for the town, and there are so many people doing so many things for the town, but it's all underfunded, and you're never going to solve this without funding. The second thing is, it's not coordinated. There's lots of groups and good things, but we need to attempt to collaborate more widely. [It] is beyond the power of schools to do anything other than say, 'please change'. So how do you get that comprehensive, knitted together strategy? Because without each of those elements, it will fall down. **Community Director, Sports Foundation**

I see young people all day, and I'll say, right, do you have any hobbies? Do you do anything? – Gaming. They don't go out, they don't socialise. **Work Coach, Department for Work and Pensions**

The one thing they crave that they haven't got has nothing to do with activities at all. What they crave is a relationship with a trusted adult, that's the key to everything for them. **Canon and CEO, Youth Club**

04 Great Yarmouth

Headlines

1. This was a group of leaders from across the local community sector, including several from the two local councils, charity and education leaders. They recognised the problems facing Great Yarmouth, but also expressed a deep sense of pride in their home.

I love where I live. I love Great Yarmouth. I don't need to go out of the area, and I wouldn't want my children to go out the area, because I want them to be close to me. **Councillor, Great Yarmouth Borough Council**

2. This group felt strongly that Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility was not a meaningful measure for defining white working class young people. They felt that, at least historically, being working class involved a sense of pride in the fact you were working. Free school meal eligibility was seen to only represent the very poorest of this group.

Working class meant a real pride of avoiding and benefits. **Youth Support Case Worker, Norfolk Council**

I'd say the threshold for working class is considerably above those eligible free school meals **Headteacher, Primary School**

3. Achievement was defined far more broadly than academic outcomes, particularly KS2 and GCSE results. Success was described as “doing your best at whatever it is you want to do”, with personal fulfilment and contribution valued alongside qualifications. **Schools were seen as over-focused on academic performance and league tables**, and participants reflected that the curriculum wasn’t meeting the needs of this group, particularly boys and pupils with SEND.

If you are technically brilliant in a heritage craft that doesn't have a qualification associated with it. That's not under achieving, that's being a skilled trades person. I think that's part of the problem we have with the underachievement piece. It's not being defined correctly **CEO, Sixth Form College**

I don't think aspiration should necessarily be linked to educational level, because you're absolutely right, you could have an aspiration to be, you know, the best bricky there is that doesn't necessarily mean that you're not achieving **Programme Manager, Youth Charity**

The whole education system is not set up to keep the more challenging young people. We should abandon league tables. We should go back to where we started, which was that the primary school

should be able to take any pupil for which they can make some progress. Forget these stupid measures. Forget testing children. It's ridiculous. **CEO, Sixth Form College**

Maybe the league table should be. How well do you look after your young people and distance travelled [in terms of progress]? **CEO, Youth Charity**

The change in qualifications that they do at secondary school has so drastically changed how much is practical compared to how much is theoretical... The whole way that qualifications are made up doesn't support our children to be successful. There is a limited amount of practical assessments included in GCSE's compared to the previous assessment models. **Headteacher, Primary School**

4. University was not seen as an obvious or compelling route for many local young people, particularly due to the perceived debt of student loans.

Those little routes that were there that made working class kids able to achieve have now those doors have been systematically shut over a period of time for a number of different reasons, not just about tuition fees, but that is a big thing. **Team Manager, Youth Support Service**

They don't feel like they've got any access to that world at all, that they don't aspire to go to university, because actually, you've got to pay huge amounts of money, and you've got to take on a lot of debt for it. **Team Manager, Youth Support Service**

5. Poverty was viewed as a central driver of underachievement. Children arriving hungry and lacking basic resources were seen as facing structural barriers facing schools from the outset.

Since 2010 we've lived in absolute austerity. Now, if you grow up in that and you see your mum and dad struggle, but you still know that you've got no access to these things that other friends might have, and they might be using food banks... You know, why would you bother then to kind of knuckle down and go to school? **Team Manager, Youth Support Service**

6. SEND support was seen as increasingly difficult to access for white working class families. Process around diagnosis and EHCP were described as complex, inconsistently applied and easier to navigate for middle-class families.

When we opened our centre in Gorleston, one of the things that we felt is there was a clear disparity with young people who should have educational healthcare plans in Great Yarmouth, whereas in Norwich that there was loads that hadn't that had them that didn't need them. **CEO, Youth Charity**

Middle class parents are very good at arguing in tribunals that their child needs an EHCP **CEO, Sixth Form College**

*Some specialist providers are oversubscribed by the tribunal system which result in children attending who are not suitable. This means that in school we have several children who according to professionals are unsuitable mainstream, who are not able to access specialist provision due to a lack of spaces. As a result we see extreme behaviours which lead to suspensions in order to keep everyone safe. **Headteacher, Primary School***

7. Limited transport, restricted mobility and lack of exposure beyond the local area were seen to constrain aspiration. Multiple leaders spoke about how children would not regularly leave their local area, even to neighbouring towns due to poor transport. This was evidenced by the extent of intergenerational living within the town, which meant that young people were not leaving their family home even when they reached adulthood.

There is a mobility issue, both social and physical, but that's been the case for a long time. It's that mindset that you don't travel further than you know – Norwich is an exciting place to visit.

Headteacher, Primary School

*We take all of our kids out on all the trips, we fully subsidise the children, because if we do not then they don't go. So, we took one year to London museum last week, it's amazing. They get to see something that's different which has inspired them. **Headteacher, Primary School***

*We're trying to raise aspirations and make sure that students go on to bigger and better things. The downside of that is they do and then they don't come back. **CEO, Sixth Form College***

8. Apprenticeships were strongly supported, and some organisations were directly involved in offering them. However, there was concern about instability in the levy system and whether current reforms risked weakening a key vocational pathway, in direct opposition to what was seen as needed.

*One of the worries I've got now is the new contribution of 25% per employee. That is going to be really bad for areas like ours. **CEO, Sixth Form College***

9. Role models were viewed as critical. Visible employment, particularly among working-age adults, was described as an important influence on young people's expectations. Younger, relatable role models were seen as especially effective in supporting and influencing young people. Parents were often their children's role-models, although this made breaking intergenerational cycles of deprivation more challenging.

*Where parents are working, but they're just on a terrible income, you still have the role models within the family who set the idea that we would work. **Headteacher, Primary School***

We had an 11-year-old who'd been excluded from school. Would come every week after school. I couldn't get word out of him, like, I've tried, you name it. But when I set him up with a mentor,

someone closer in age, currently studying University, I was amazed. **Programme Lead, Education Charity**

In the project we're setting up, we're trying to find young people nearer their age..., just to say, well, actually, there is these opportunities. This is what I've done. **East Norfolk & Waveney lead, Men and Boys Charity**

The parents aren't parents anymore. They're a mate. And that is a massive problem. **CEO, Sixth Form College**

10. Confidence was identified as a key barrier, with leaders discussing how young people were sometimes labelled as failures at a young age and not given enough small opportunities for success. Leaders highlighted a “lost middle” of young people who neither excel nor fail but drift unnoticed into underachievement. Confidence was also given as the key barrier to young people applying for opportunities and jobs outside of their comfort zone. This was linked to mental health challenges in young people and the low availability of both counselling services, and soft skill development.

When we're talking about outcomes and you're talking about aspirations, we've got to talk about confidence. **Team Manger, Youth Support Service**

That work experience has got to be achievable. We can't set them up to fail. We've got to think about all these tiny things that we set up in the lead to it, so that they've got small ways that they can achieve that tiny little bit to build that self esteem and confidence, because we can't just put them into it. It doesn't work as simply for this group of young people and children, we're dealing with years and years that they've not had that social, emotional kind of containment. So those opportunities, they'll self sabotage really easily. **Team Manager, Youth Support Service**

I think there's a group of children that seem to be missed... We've got a group in the middle. You're going to have the ones who get free school meals... then you've got the overachievers, but you've always got this little group of children who suffer. They don't cause enough problems. Yeah, they suffer. They go sort of unnoticed. **Councillor, Great Yarmouth Council**

You put all of those bits of paper in front of someone without any of that that background and that support from a trusted adult. It's the confidence. **Youth Support Case Worker, Norfolk Council**

Mental health services need to improve, and they're horrific, especially here. And I think that's a knock on effect with the parents aren't getting the support they might need. **East Norfolk & Waveney lead, Men and Boys Charity**

11. Life skills and employability skills were seen as underdeveloped, although there was a lack of consensus as to what these key skills were. Financial literacy, communication skills and basic social confidence were viewed as essential gaps that are not consistently addressed.

Academic success should be transformed, perhaps into just being able to do things that you should be able to do when you grow up. I always think financial education is something that's massively missing in schools. **East Norfolk & Waveney lead, Men and Boys Charity**

For the young people we work with, one of the biggest things we're talking about is interview skills... Can you talk about what you want to do, why you want to do it, and how you're going to develop this person? And they go, 'no, I don't know how to do that.' **Centre Leader, Education Charity**

It all boils down to is confidence and assertiveness, and that's the two things that are lacking in pretty much all society. **East Norfolk & Waveney lead, Men and Boys Charity**

12. Early intervention and community-based support were seen as crucial. In particular, speech and language interventions were seen as key to wider success. Leaders emphasised the value of low-cost, relationship-based initiatives, and “stealth support” delivered through trusted community settings. Many organisations spoke of the difficulty of services, initiatives and third sector organisations which come and go and the difficulty keeping track of what was available.

That [speech and language delay] continues all the way through. By the time they get to GCSEs, they haven't actually got the words to be able to do well. **CEO, Sixth Form College**

My experience of being in Yarmouth is if they're below the national average [in terms of speech and language], they're going to finish below the national average, and the ones who are just above the national average are going to finish below the national average as well. So, we've employed [classroom assistants] solely to do work on speech and language, to try and avoid that becoming an issue as to why they then don't achieve. **Headteacher, Primary School**

For us, education wise, the issue is there's a 30-million-word gap between children in low-income families and professional families by age three... effectively, what we're having to say is they're not going to learn it anywhere else. They have to learn it in the school. **Headteacher, Primary School**

We would have more inclusion if we had more speech therapists, if we had proper funding. **CEO, Sixth Form College**

[The loss of] Multiply and Sure Start is so devastating, because so many of our families were using that, and we were hearing about it in the community, and we never hear about all the different provision in Great Yarmouth because everyone is trying to access different services. **Centre Lead, Education Charity**

*[About a youth outreach programme] Now it's a trestle table and a flask of hot chocolate. As high tech as it gets, but it is consistency... what they think they're getting is a free hot chocolate, but what they're actually getting is conversation with the same people. Some fantastic professional relationships that form there. They're getting signposting, so young people that are possibly the furthest from services are now finding out about youth groups, finding out about employment projects and things. Physically, they get some safeguarding. **Programme Manager, Youth Charity***

13. When asked what the government could do to address the challenges they describe, leaders felt that poor communication between departments, particularly the DWP and DfE, was the biggest barrier. This was coupled with the need for sustained investment and funding in towns like Great Yarmouth.

*Even with the adult skills funding budget, they've put the minimum wage up so high now that people that could access adult skills funding... can't do it now because they have to pay because the threshold the people who's raising the minimum wage are not talking to the Department of Education.. **CEO, Youth Charity***

*The health budgets gone down so they put speech and language onto education, but your budget hasn't gone up to replace it. The inter departments in government, they don't talk to each other. **Manager, Community Centre***

*I think this is about investment in in communities. We need long term, sustainable investment in in youth work, in community development work... You know, these parents have had really poor experience of education themselves. they are the ones that are living in poverty. **Team Manager, Youth Support Service***

*We keep coming up with good things, like sure start or multiply, and they just get going, and then something stops. I don't think it's about coming up with new ideas, I actually think it's about listening to the professionals that have been in the jobs for a long time... let's prioritise some of those and fund them consistently. **Programme Manager, Youth Charity***

05 Knowsley

Headlines

1. This was a group of community leaders from across the education, youth work, health and sports sectors. Several participants were from Knowsley themselves and expressed pride in being from the community.

2. Participants questioned whether “white working class” is a useful or helpful definition, with some viewing it as a proud identity and others as a politicised or stigmatising label newly introduced into education. Free School Meals was widely rejected as an adequate proxy, missing a large cohort of families who are “just above the threshold” or reluctant to claim. There was a strong sense that if a group is to be targeted, it must be clearly and consistently defined — but also framed positively rather than as a deficit category.

I grew up in a white working class area, and for us, it was a term of pride. **CEO, Multi Academy Trust**

When I saw the term working class, my heart sank a little two reasons, because I felt that's quite a sort of emotive term, and that can be used as a negative connotation. Also, certainly in health, it's not how we define cohorts. **Local GP**

I do have a problem with the phrase white working class, and I think it's where it actually came from, originally in the political sphere. **Head of the School of Education, Liverpool John Moors University**

I don't think that [FSM] reflects the sort of broad scale of white working class students that we actually work with... there's a whole cohort of students that you also work with, that are not eligible for free school meals. **Director, Education Charity**

When we just talk about free school meals, we miss so many people out. **CEO, Multi Academy Trust**

Having a clear definition of that across the board, though, would be the starting point, because we all went round this room, and we have divergent ideas on what that actually is. **Director of School Improvement, Multi Academy Trust**

If you don't define a cohort or a group, let alone do it successfully, then you can't target support properly to that cohort... there's never anything that caters specifically for working class, let alone white working class. **Director, Education Charity**



I could go to [cricket club] and say, right, I want funding for girls and [ethnic] minority [young people] anything like that. If I went and asked, listen, I need funding for white working class boys or girls, there's nothing there, because I think it's forgotten about. **Head Coach and Vice-Chairman, Sports Club**

3. Knowsley's entrenched position at the "wrong end of the league tables" was described as both a structural reality and a psychological burden. Participants argued that repeated public framing of the borough as deprived or underperforming becomes self-fulfilling, reinforcing apathy among young people. At the same time, there was deep pride in the community and frustration that successes are rarely celebrated.

Knowsley is often presented as being at the wrong end of national league tables, and that narrative has persisted for many years. But on the ground, it's far more complex, with strong schools, committed professionals and a community that is fiercely proud of where it comes from.

Headteacher, Primary School

[Young people] are constantly surrounded by and reminded of all of the deficit in Knowsley – 'you are the second most deprived area in the borough', 'you've got the worst GCSE results', 'you're the most obese.' So with that constant label, I find young people often ask, 'what is the point in me even trying?' Because I'm from a borough that is at the very bottom. **Youth Work Manager, Merseyside Youth Association**

I think we need to get better collectively at sharing that sense of pride and the really good news stories from everybody from all different walks of life everywhere, because we don't want to always be hearing that we're the bottom of the league table somewhere. Actually, if you're trying to show people that you can be successful in lots of different ways... those real success stories, the projects that people are taking part in, need to be really celebrated. **Education Improvement Officer, Knowsley Schools Forum**

You only have to be in Kirby for a few years and you understand the strength of that community and the loyalty of the people, and they are fiercely proud of who they are. **Local GP**

4. Geography and post-16 provision were seen as structural barriers to aspiration. As a long, thin borough bordered by other authorities, Knowsley has historically lost what were described as 'aspirational families' to schools in neighbouring boroughs, and many young people must travel significant distances for A-level provision. For some, that physical distance becomes a psychological one, narrowing horizons at 16 rather than expanding them.

When I came here, I was utterly astonished that you can have all areas of the [Liverpool city region] without any Sixth Form provision, and people have to go elsewhere, outside their communities.

Head of the School of Education, Liverpool John Moors University

[When talking to young people] things like A level provision always comes up, having to travel outside the borough, having to get funding to travel outside the borough to access the education they want.

Youth Work Manager, Merseyside Youth Association,

The secondary schools that don't have sixth form provision or colleges, they find it hard to get universities in to actually speak to their students. **Director, Education Charity**

5. The loss of local industry and the erosion of a clear “dignity of work” pathway were repeatedly cited as long-term drivers of disengagement. Where previous generations could leave school and enter stable, respected employment, that route has disappeared without being replaced by an equally visible alternative. For some families, education no longer clearly links to meaningful local opportunity.

We look back historically in this area and the wider area, there was a heavy industry, and there was a dignity with work, and communities were really solid in that. And what has happened over a number of generations now is that dignity of work has been eroded, really. And I think if you've not got that dignity of work, that end point where education feeds. If that end point isn't there, what is the point? And a lot of the time that's what we are faced with in schools. Well, why? What for?

Director of School Improvement, Multi Academy Trust

Why is it in this community, we don't have that same value towards education? Why is going to school not seen as a privilege, a right, a gift, something to be grateful? Why don't we have that sense of belonging in school? [In the past] there were different jobs, well paid jobs, well respected jobs, that gave people pride and dignity in the local community - and that stopped. That was eroded. **Director of School Improvement, Multi Academy Trust**

6. Secondary school was identified as the point where enjoyment, belonging and engagement decline sharply. Primary schools were widely praised as community hubs, but transition to secondary was described as a tipping point, particularly in Years 7–9. Working-class pupils were seen as having lower tolerance for a system that feels less relational and more rigid. This was felt to lead to lower attendance rates as children ‘opt out’ of education, which in turn strained parent-school relationships.

All the primary schools I've been in Knowsley, the staff really get their communities. They completely understand the context they're working in, and they're working as real community hubs, you know, offering all sorts of things to the parents and the children, which really does create that sense of belonging. **Education Improvement Officer Knowsley Schools Forum**

Parents at primary school will walk, generally, walk the children to the gate, to the door. When they get to secondary school, it's kind of like, well, you kind of move now off. You kind of go get the bus on your own. We don't see you until parents evening. **Executive Headteacher, Secondary School**

I think as an 11 year old, when you come and you've kind of used to maybe one teacher, one classroom, the consistency of a primary school, that kind of curriculum, and then you come to secondary school and go, guess what? You've got 14 different subjects. Now, with 14 different teachers. **Executive Headteacher, Secondary School**

When we track children's enjoyment of school, regardless of the group, it will deteriorate when they enter secondary... my primaries are doing really, really great jobs at making children feel wanted. They come into secondary, everybody's enjoyment declines at that point. This is a national problem. The white working class children do so more sharply. I think what we see with that is the lack of tolerance that they have because they don't have the supporting structures and they don't have middle class parents in the background dragging them through their secondary education. **CEO, Multi Academy Trust**

From my experience teaching in secondary schools, Year 9 often felt like a tipping point where some pupils disengaged. It reinforced for me that the education system sometimes offers an academic pathway that does not suit every young person. **Headteacher, Primary School**

The attendance policies, and the way in which those have been implemented have put us in a war situation with families... Somebody made a policy decision to do it in that way, to actually set us up against them, so that erodes then all of that positive relationship that you want to build with them, and that relationship that you can have with families, because they then don't have that trust in us. They don't want to come to us with those issues. **CEO, Multi Academy Trust**

7. Participants argued that the curriculum and accountability system narrow definitions of success and disengage pupils whose interests are practical or vocational. A highly academic GCSE model was seen as the default marker of ambition, leaving those pursuing technical routes feeling less valued. Frequent reform and inspection pressures were described as reducing flexibility and local responsiveness.

But the kind of dogma is for the curriculum to be ambitious, it's got to be academic. And to be ambitious, you need to go to university. And the definition of success and ambition is academia, university, white collar, not working class professions... And if you're not somebody who thrives on that and wants that, and actually has got more practical skill, wants to go and be a plumber, you've still got to get through 10 GCSEs that are all academic and measuring the same thing in different ways... and if you struggle, the label is you're not valuable to society. **Director of School Improvement, Multi Academy Trust**

Historically there were clearer vocational routes available. Now many pupils remain in an academic GCSE pathway even when a more technical route might better suit their talents. If GCSEs become the sole benchmark of success, we risk overlooking other valuable pathways. **Headteacher, Primary school**

So you haven't got any freedom and ability to go for what is the right curriculum, what is truly the right curriculum and right set of qualifications for the children in front of you, because you are constrained by what is on that quals spreadsheet, because if it's not on there, it doesn't count on progress eight, and your school's in the crap because your progress eight is rubbish. **Director of School Improvement, Multi Academy Trust**

[The Ofsted framework] is not going to allow schools who are operating really, really effectively with disadvantaged children who are getting great outcomes to shine, because you're pitching everything against national data. **CEO, Multi Academy Trust**

8. Intergenerational attitudes toward education remain a powerful influence, particularly at transition points. Participants stressed that parents generally want the best for their children, but confidence and familiarity with post-16 and university pathways vary significantly. Parents who had grown up during industrial decline did not see education translate into opportunity, shaping scepticism today.

If you look at families whose schooling took place during the late 1970s and early 1980s, many experienced a period where education did not clearly lead to employment because traditional industries were disappearing. They are now parents, and their experiences shape the way they view the value of education today. **Headteacher, Primary School**

I do Baby Clinic each week, and now part of my Baby Clinic is, do you read to them? Can you read? And if they can't - wouldn't it be great to learn to read with your child, and then linking with social prescribing and with the charity The Reader. So there's bits of work going ahead that I think are all part of the picture. It's about having that coordinated approach and the single message. **Local GP**

*An 18 year old girl came to see me and said she got three A*s, and had got an offer from Robinson College in Cambridge, but she didn't go because her mum didn't want her to go. So part of this is about changing the paradigm of expectation.* **Local GP**

We take groups of Year 6 students to university, and we bring their parents and guardians there too. And it's really important that it's able to be seen as a space that - whether or not they decide to do that in the future - it is a space where they can belong. And we work really closely with the University of Liverpool, who ensure that the students that shown us around the university, are people from a widening participation background as well, so that it is reflective of the young people - like they might be local, they sound like them. It's a place where they can be, but also that parents and guardians are able to sort of to see this as well and actually be like, I could belong there too. **Centre Lead, Education Charity**

9. Trusted adults and youth work were seen as critical in rebuilding confidence and aspiration outside formal classroom structures. Youth workers described their ability to build long-term relational trust, reframe young people's identities and feed strengths back into schools. Personalised support, small bursaries and locally rooted mentoring were described as disproportionately impactful.

Parents are 100% necessary or a key part to this, but trusted adults are too, so those relationships that you build independently with young people and families. **Youth Work Manager, Merseyside Youth Association**

What I really think needs to happen is youth work and schools need to work better together. I think we would have much better outcomes for young people. **Senior Lecturer Youth Work, Liverpool John Moors University**

[Part of the role and value of youth workers is] taking young people who maybe don't go to school or feel like they're the lower achievers, and they have low aspirations... and being able to expose them to new opportunities and really wave the flag for them, and feed into something new that they've tried, that they're actually quite good at... pushing them towards new goals and new things to achieve, and then feeding that back to the schools. And say, 'you know that student that never comes in and can be disruptive when they're in class? Well, this is what they've done. They've hosted an event, they're running a campaign' **Youth Work Manager, Merseyside Youth Association**

When we speak about role models, I don't think it has to be, say a sports star or a film. It could be someone who's shown a bit of interest in them. We see it with our coaching, we have one lad who's twenty or twenty one, but the kids gravitate to him because he's from here. And maybe he's not a role model, but he's someone they can connect to. **Head Coach and Vice-Chairman, Sports Club**

10. There was strong agreement that lasting change must be locally led rather than repeatedly imposed through central reform. Participants called for stability, long-term investment and empowerment of local leaders across education, health, youth work and business. Knowsley was described as having the pride, expertise and will to improve — but requiring trust and sustained support to do so.

The last thing schools need is to become a political football where policy changes constantly tell professionals how they should work. **Headteacher, Primary School**

I'm a big believer in saying, just do one thing really well. Just do something really, really well. And own that. **Headteacher, Primary School**

We have got an education system that flips around depending on what government we get. And how can that be a stable thing? So we'll go from one curriculum to another curriculum depending on the government of the day. **CEO, Multi Academy Trust**

I genuinely think it comes down to money, and it comes down to things being locally owned, because there's a pride in Knowsley, if you tell people in Knowsley 'you can do it', and you empower people... Local people think not just about the quick win but about the legacy in ten or twenty years.

Headteacher, Primary School

There was a Knowsley Ambassadors event that I went to, which is the first one they've had since I've been here. It was essentially people from local business, some people from schools, etc, all kind of working together to try to raise - when I say the aspiration, I don't mean about moving out of Knowsley. This is about staying in Knowsley, developing Knowsley, developing Knowsley into a centre of excellence for business, for education, etc. And it was, it was a really nice environment and atmosphere, and that probably more so than any other area that I've got, made me come out with a smile on going, yeah, I'm really glad I'm in here. **CEO, Multi Academy Trust**

It's about connections and relationships. And those connections and relationships are not just within education. They are about the whole of our society. **Local GP**