

# Briefing: post-Brexit priorities for low-income voters in deprived areas

This briefing sets out what low-income voters, in parts of the country that have been locked out of opportunity, want to see after Brexit: their hopes, fears and aspirations for their families and local economies. Working with UK in a Changing Europe and ComRes we sought to identify where people could find common ground. JRF is committed to amplifying the views of people on low incomes so they gain more of a role in public and political debate.

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### What you need to know:

1. The people we spoke to feel disillusioned and distrust politicians. Three years after the Brexit vote, they are frustrated at the lack of progress on the domestic issues that matter to them.
2. People on low incomes are demanding change from political leaders after Brexit, regardless of their political preferences. They expect more spending on domestic priorities, want to see their areas receive their 'fair share' of investment from government and business, so they have the opportunity to thrive.
3. An ambitious policy offer could deliver electoral dividends. People's economic priorities were for more vibrant local economies and high streets; better paid and more secure work that boosts their living standards; and opportunities to improve their skills and find good apprenticeships.

## Introduction

As we leave the EU, we need to reshape our economy. Making sure the interests and concerns of the most deprived members of society are at the centre of any Brexit settlement is a crucial part of building the just and compassionate society we all want ([UK in a Changing Europe, 2017](#)). Not only is this the right thing to do, it is also a strategy that can deliver electoral advantage.

Low-income voters occupy an increasingly important position among the electorate. Not only are they turning out to vote in greater numbers, they are also the group most likely to switch party (Goodwin and Heath, 2019). While Brexit is an important issue for low-income voters, for most of them, taking action on living standards is the most significant issue driving their voting choices (Goodwin and Heath, 2019).

The last general election saw the Conservatives' share of the vote increase more in areas that faced relative economic decline in the last decade, with Labour's vote share increasing more in areas that have performed better ([Jennings, 2017](#)). Both the main parties need to focus on winning over low-income voters in disadvantaged areas if they are going to form the next government.

Listening to low-income voters living in places held back by poverty – as we sought to in this project – reveals the issues that can bridge the Brexit divide. Good jobs that deliver higher living standards, training that leads to better prospects for the future and ensuring towns and cities have the opportunity to thrive and be prosperous are issues that unite people.

However, these domestic issues are being crowded out by the Brexit debate. What is more, people say the way Brexit is being handled has only increased their feelings of being 'let down, ignored and patronised' by a distant political establishment (ComRes, in press). Any politicians seeking to lead our country must urgently prioritise those domestic issues that drove many voters to choose to leave the EU in the first place ([Goodwin and Heath, 2016](#)).

## What we heard from people

JRF and UKICE commissioned a series of deliberative workshops with low-income voters in parts of the country held back by a lack of economic opportunity. In each place people discussed their priorities for their area, and their aspirations for their local economy as the UK leaves the EU. We visited large 'core' cities (such as Glasgow and Leeds), 'overshadowed' towns located in close proximity to large cities (such as Bolton and Dudley) and 'freestanding' towns and smaller cities that are not in the shadow of a larger place (such as Middlesbrough and Newport). Further details of the methodology can be found in the appendix.

The workshops revealed a country divided. Frustration with the dominance of London and the surrounding area in our economic and political life, differences in view between participants from core cities and those from overshadowed towns and over

Brexit and its likely impact on the local economy all came to the fore. (None of the groups were held in London, so we cannot provide a counterpoint from low-income voters living in London.)

What was seen as the overly London-centric nature of the country and a general sense of separation between London and the rest of the country was a particularly strong theme. Participants felt other areas were forgotten about, and stripped of investment, talent, funding and attention as a result of decisions being made with a 'London mind-set'. Interestingly, while this view was particularly prominent among participants in the north and Midlands, it wasn't exclusive to them – it came up in every place, including Hastings and Southampton.

“Westminster and the government are London-centric, and the further west, east, north you go, you know, the poorer things are.”

Male, Newport, freestanding city

“You've got big franchise companies. A lot of them are based in the UK, for example, in London. It means you'll be taking the profits, say, from Birmingham, Manchester, Southampton, whatever. You'll be taking those profits, and they all just go back to London.”

Male, Southampton, freestanding city

“There's always the north-south divide. Public transport in the north is a lot worse than it is down south.”

Male, Leeds, core city

Within towns overshadowed by larger cities there is a sense of losing out twice – first to London then again to their larger neighbour. In places such as Bolton, Dudley and Worksop, people highlighted examples of what they saw as their neighbouring areas getting investment while they did not. Similar views were expressed in Newport, where there was concern about a lack of investment in the Welsh Valleys.

“So I think what we would call traditional working class areas, they're ... declined to the benefit of richer areas where people want to invest money rather than actually investing it in areas where it would make a difference to local life.”

Female, Bolton, overshadowed town

“It goes back to the way we want to encourage companies coming to Wales. You just don't want to encourage them to go to Swansea, Cardiff, Newport. You want them to go into the valley.”

Male, Newport, freestanding city

In overshadowed and northern towns, there was also a much greater degree of pessimism about the challenges facing individuals and communities. This was in contrast to core cities, such as Leeds, where a more optimistic view was expressed by some participants.

“Just hanging on, like, with your money and everything. You know, when you just survive.”

Female, Worksop, overshadowed town

Despite these divides, there was a striking level of consensus about the problems facing communities and the types of solutions that government, businesses and others should pursue to improve the prospects of the local area and improve living standards. Harnessing these ideas is a route to bridging the Brexit divide.

While the focus of this project was on people’s economic aspirations, it is worth noting a number of other issues that were consistently raised in all the places where workshops were held. These included:

- A perception of rising crime levels and a lack of community safety.
- A sense that local places were looking worn-down and unclean, with high levels of litter and a lack of green spaces.
- A lack of things for young people to do, both in terms of work and leisure.
- Isolation and loneliness among older people.
- A lack of community and public spaces.

Alongside the economic issues we highlight below, these are also clear priorities for people on low incomes.

## What kind of economy do people want after Brexit?

Workshop participants were united in their desire for an economy that delivers opportunities to get a better job and improve their prospects and living standards. They saw this as requiring investment in improving the quality of jobs, vibrancy of their local economy and the high street. They also wanted to see improved training options for adults and apprenticeships for younger people to enable access to better job opportunities.

### Good jobs and the vibrancy of the economy

The low-income voters we spoke to expressed frustration at the state of the local labour market, with low pay and a lack of security coming to the fore. An obvious and simple solution to many participants was to ensure that the minimum wage covers the ever-increasing cost of living.

“But you can’t live on minimum wage. Once you’ve paid all your rent, all your bills, everything that comes out, your petrol, once you’ve lived, what have you got left?”

Female, Dudley, overshadowed town (phase one)

Insecurity of work was also raised regularly, with zero hours contracts seen as the worst example of insecurity by several groups. They were perceived almost entirely negatively, and many participants advocated banning them completely.

A lack of affordable public transport and childcare, and a lack of well-paid part-time jobs, were also seen as limiting factors that prevented people from earning a decent living. Participants wanted to see a stronger local public transport system and more generous childcare, especially for people with younger children.

“So, maybe a better public transport network, trains, buses, cycling or even a tram or something crazy like that, putting tram lines down all over.”

Male, Middlesbrough, freestanding town (phase one)

“We thought more free spaces [at a] younger age, and there’d be more job opportunities for parents, and obviously more people able to work because they could afford to send their child to nursery or childcare.”

Female, Dudley, overshadowed town (phase one)

But the biggest barrier to economic security was the need for better job opportunities. Participants discussed two ways of delivering them: greater investment to attract businesses to the area and more support for local businesses. People in overshadowed and freestanding towns and cities raised the need to provide incentives to firms offering good jobs to locate in their area. Offering such incentives was seen as a way of decision-makers demonstrating a belief in the area currently thought to be lacking.

“Yes, they did that in London, didn’t they, with the Olympic Village and everything like that, so there was money invested there in Canary Wharf and everything but all the money seems to have gone there, we’ve been, sort of, left in this area.”

Female, Middlesbrough

“It’s all low paid jobs, so to be able to bring up the area in general, we need people with higher paid jobs. So they need more companies to be brought in that aren’t just distribution centres so we need incentives, like I talked about an engineering plant, to bring big businesses in that are willing to have their headquarters here, for example.”

Female, Worksop, overshadowed town

Participants also wanted to see more support for local start-ups, whether through the provision of low-cost space, favourable tax regimes, grants or mentoring. There was also a strong desire to level the playing field to give local independent businesses a chance. Large corporations – especially those that operate mostly online – were seen as not paying enough tax, with participants calling for greater enforcement.

“All businesses should be held to account. They [large businesses from outside the area] can’t just come in here [...], take and not give anything back.”

Male, Southampton, freestanding city

## State of the local high street

Participants saw the state of local high streets as a key indicator of the economic health of the area, and for many the signs were negative. This was particularly the case in overshadowed and freestanding towns and cities. However, even in the core cities of Leeds and Glasgow the state of the local high streets, rather than city centres, was an issue. There was significant concern about the number of empty shops and a strong desire to put them to good use as community spaces, housing or spaces for start-up businesses, if not as shops. Participants felt frustrated that their communities were not given the opportunity to influence or lead these changes.

“That’s been vandalised. That’s just such an eyesore and nothing’s being done about it. It just looks horrific.”

Female, Dudley, overshadowed town (phase one)

For some, the priority was making improvements to the environment and improving the look and feel of the place to attract businesses. Others thought attracting businesses first would be a better idea, with a reduction in business rates being regarded as a necessary step to do so.

“If you create this really nice environment to be in, you’re more tempted to go there. Rather than, ‘Oh, I’m just going to go online.’ Because that’s the big problem these days, isn’t it?”

Male, Southampton, freestanding city

They need to look at business rates, as well, because Brierley Hill High Street, most of it’s closed down, because they can’t afford the rent on the shops. Even Merry Hill’s going that way.”

Male, Dudley, overshadowed town

## Improved adult education and training

Participants also stressed the need for more opportunities for adults to retrain and learn new skills. A lack of skills among the population was seen as a barrier to

attracting businesses to some areas, whereas in others not having the right skills for the jobs on offer was seen as the problem. Either way, participants particularly highlighted the challenges for those who are time-poor and cash-strapped when it came to training.

The cost of training was a key issue, although participants took different views on whether course fees should be met by government or employers, or possibly through university-style loans. Removing any up-front cost to the individual was seen as essential.

“More opportunities for adults to go and learn and develop their skills for free, rather than having to pay stupid university fees, because when you get to an adult, you want to go back and learn sometimes.

Female, Dudley, overshadowed town (phase one)

A lack of flexible provision for people with work and childcare commitments was also highlighted as a barrier, along with the problems involved in selecting a useful course that improve employment prospects.

“Training at times that suit adults with children or other commitments, like night courses, day courses, whatever... actually speak to and find out, because everyone’s got different hours.”

Male, Worksop, overshadowed town

Many participants also talked about the need to offer more digital and IT training for adults, to help people respond to a changing labour market and allow them to compete with young people who were seen as having a natural advantage as digital natives.

“Young people have more technology available, so they can create opportunities for themselves. There are an awful lot of people who are not used to the technology, who don’t have access to the technology, so then they can’t create things.”

Female, Leeds, core city

## **Apprenticeships and non-university routes for young people**

The need for alternatives to university for young people was a theme running across the workshops. To many participants, going to university was seen as saddling young people with debt and stripping the area – and local economy – of skilled workers, as those leaving for university rarely returned. They wanted to see alternatives that would provide young people with the skills that could lead to a good job in the local area.

“The thing is, they go away to university. They don't come back.”

Male, Newport, freestanding city

“Better training overall, you know, in all different types of professions. I think there's far too much emphasis put on universities.”

Male, Hastings, overshadowed town

Apprenticeships were commonly seen as the way to fill this gap. Participants had mixed views on the current apprenticeship offer, with some thinking there were a lot available and others thinking there was a shortage. The perceived poor quality of some apprenticeships was raised, along with concern about the amount apprentices are paid, with several participants noting how low the apprenticeship minimum wage is. They felt people were being exploited and were unable to survive on the wages offered.

“You can get an apprenticeship in retail, where it pays, like, £7,500 a year, which is below the minimum wage. People use the apprenticeship wage as an excuse to underpay people.”

Male, Glasgow, core city

“Teach them a skill that can see them through their lives, because as the kids learn, their wages will increase. They've got the skills, and then they can go on to train other people, but there's none of that anymore, because they start them on below minimum wage. £2 and £3 for an apprenticeship. Kids don't want to go and do it, because they can't. They can't even go and buy a McDonald's.

Female, Dudley, overshadowed town

Creating apprenticeships in sectors where there is a local shortage of workers was highlighted as a way that they could be made more appealing, along with ensuring a guaranteed job at the end of an apprenticeship. Low-income voters thought this would be a win-win situation for both employer and employee – getting a positive, motivated and well-trained employee who is paid properly for what they do.

“In a sense ... you need to show, then, what's the end goal?... Stability, I think, is the best way to put it. I think if they don't have that then an apprenticeship won't be worthwhile.”

Male, Leeds, core city

## What does this mean for policy? JRF recommendations

Anyone who wants to lead this country must hear people's repeated calls to focus on longstanding domestic problems that are holding people back and constraining them from building a better life.

“We haven't got the attention before Brexit; I don't know if we'll get it after.”

Female, Middlesbrough, freestanding town

A common vision emerged of unlocking growth and prosperity across the country to rebalance the economy, making sure work pays, and ensuring people have the skills to make the most of opportunities in their area. With all the political parties talking about loosening the purse strings, and a spending review on the horizon, giving people and places the tools to thrive must be a priority. Based on what we've heard, JRF makes the following recommendations.

### Unlocking growth and prosperity across the country

A far more ambitious response is needed to attract and grow businesses, improve transport connections and invest in skills in places where people have been locked out of opportunity. As a first step, the government must get on and deliver its promised UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UK SPF) to reduce inequalities between communities. This should target parts of the country where pay and employment are the lowest and **at least** match the £2.4 billion a year that currently flows through the EU Structural Funds it will replace.

But action cannot stop there. Rebalancing the economy and spreading opportunity outside of London and the surrounding area will require significant investment. The ([UK 2070 Commission, 2019](#)) recently called for £10 billion a year above and beyond existing spending commitments for the next 25 years to help rebalance the economy – this is the scale of ambition that is needed. This is not about choosing between investing in towns or cities – their fortunes are interconnected. What matters is giving places the tools and investment to enable them to thrive.

### Work that pays

A good job that provides security is a priority for people. It is therefore welcome that both the Conservative and Labour parties are currently talking about further increases to the minimum wage. But rather than wait for government, JRF recommends businesses get ahead and move to pay the real Living Wage. Employers such as Ikea and Lush are already demonstrating it is possible to do this in highly competitive sectors of the economy, and more firms should follow their lead. The creation of a Living Hours standard ([Living Wage Foundation, 2019](#)), to give people confidence and certainty in the shifts they work, is also a welcome development in this respect.

### Having the skills to make the most of opportunities

Among those we listened to, high-quality apprenticeships and supporting adults to retain jobs were recurrent themes. JRF is concerned about the fall in the number of

apprenticeship starts since the funding system was reformed in 2017, particularly the sharp decline in lower skilled people starting apprenticeships ([Powell, 2019](#)). Apprenticeships must be a route through which people can get a better job and build a better life.

Looking ahead, as technology and automation reshape jobs and change the labour market, support for adults to update their skills and change jobs is essential. But significant cuts to the adult skills budget in recent years pull in the wrong direction ([Evans and Egglestone, 2019](#)). As the recent Augar Review highlighted, the system can be improved with more funding, simpler access, more financial support for those on low incomes and driving up the quality of non-degree qualifications ([Augar et al, 2019](#)).

An often overlooked starting point is making sure people have the basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills needed for work and life. JRF recommends this is made a priority. An estimated nine million adults are held back by a lack of basic literacy and/or numeracy, and 9.5 million lack basic digital skills. The Learning and Work Institute estimates that meeting basic skills needs and supporting more people with low qualifications to gain medium level qualifications would cost an additional £1.9 billion a year ([Evans and Egglestone, 2019](#)).

(These recommendations are drawn from JRF's evidence base and analysis, in response to what we heard. They are the views of JRF and are not necessarily shared by UK in a Changing Europe or ComRes.)

## Conclusion

At a time when the country is so profoundly divided over Brexit, this is the perfect moment to find common ground and push forward an agenda that can unite the country. People on low incomes told us what this looks like: improving living standards and restoring pride to towns and cities which have been overlooked for too long.

Brexit has monopolised political and policy debate, leaving little room for domestic issues. Too much emphasis has been placed on how to appeal to Leave or Remain voters as separate groups, and far too little on how to bridge that divide. The focus should be on rebalancing the economy, making sure work pays, supporting local economies and high streets so they can be vibrant and ensuring people have the skills to make the most of opportunities in their area.

People are impatient for change. They have made clear their hopes, fears and aspirations – and have provided politicians with a clear way forward. Now the onus is on them to listen and to act.

## Appendix

### More about what we did

JRF and UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE) commissioned ComRes to conduct 18 deliberative workshops in April and May 2019 with low-income voters living in nine locations across the country. The workshops aimed to understand low-income voters' national and local social and economic priorities as the UK leaves the European Union. We drew on [Pike et al's \(2016\)](#) typology of places, which identifies different roles and connections towns and cities have in a labour market, to test where there were different issues raised in different types of place.

Locations selected were:

Type of place	Location
<b>Core city</b> (the principal cities of their city regions, hosting high-level services and anchor institutions that attract investment and people)	Glasgow Leeds
<b>Freestanding city</b> (not overshadowed but smaller than core cities and some distance from them)	Newport Southampton
<b>Freestanding town</b> (as above)	Middlesbrough
<b>Overshadowed town</b> (have larger neighbouring cities that host the higher-level functions, main employment sites attracting commuters and provide the principal growth opportunities)	Bolton Worksop* Hastings* Dudley*

\*Note: These places were not categorised by Pike et al in the Uneven Growth report, but were selected and categorised here based on JRF's understanding of that report's findings.

The workshops were split into two parts. The first phase, consisting of 12 workshops, focused on asking participants about the issues facing their area, and asked them what they thought could be done to improve the wealth of their area. This was freeform and open, with a wide range of ideas being developed.

The second phase of the research asked participants to deliberate on some of the more common ideas that were identified by the first phase of workshops. JRF, UKICE and ComRes looked across the ideas that had been supported most by participants. These were: more options for young people who don't go to university; help for adults to retrain; support for local businesses; and improving the look of your local high street.

Full details about the methodology and approach to the work are available in the full report, publishing imminently in 2019 by ComRes.

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## About the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent social change organisation working to solve UK poverty. Through research, policy, collaboration and practical solutions, we aim to inspire action and change that will create a prosperous UK without poverty.

We are working with private, public and voluntary sectors, and people with lived experience of poverty, to build on the recommendations in our comprehensive strategy - [We can solve poverty in the UK](#) - and loosen poverty's grip on people who are struggling to get by. It contains analysis and recommendations aimed at the four UK governments.

All research published by JRF, including publications in the references, is available to download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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