

Evidence of the lived experiences of poverty in the UK

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Shaping a fairer future We are the UK's home for community research and social innovation

The Young Foundation is the UK's home for community research and social innovation. As a not-for-profit, The Young Foundation brings communities, organisations and policymakers together, driving positive change to shape a fairer future.

Working to understand the issues people care about, The Young Foundation supports collective action to improve lives, involving communities in locally-led research and delivering distinctive initiatives and programmes to build a stronger society. The Young Foundation also powers the Institute for Community Studies.

For more information visit us at: youngfoundation.org

About this paper

This document outlines The Young Foundation's work exploring the nature of poverty and low income within the UK since 2009. It feeds into a thematic review compiled for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by GMCVO.

PART ONE

Introduction

The Young Foundation was founded by sociologist Michael Young in 1953, working deeply in areas of deprivation in East London, where we are still based today, with work across the UK and abroad. The Young Foundation also powers the Institute for Community Studies, a research institute with people at its heart that works to influence change, bridging the gap between communities, evidence, and policymaking. To support with this aim, the Institute hosts a repository of community-related research reports, case studies and publications.

The Young Foundation is committed to involving people and communities who have been historically marginalised, silenced, and under-represented in systems that powerfully affect life chances and wellbeing, and we have a significant back-catalogue of research and approaches related to these themes. We work towards involving those from diverse backgrounds in all aspects of research, mostly by utilising participatory methods whenever suitable. We have a significant focus on peer research, which is reflected in the establishment of the UK's Peer Research Network.

We established the network to strengthen and support community research practice to cultivate deeper and more meaningful engagement with communities. The network brings together a range of partners, including academics, community researchers and community organisations and hosts international conferences, regular events and training opportunities to share learning and drive standards in community research. We have also developed various outputs to support best practice in community research, including through our collaborations with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) on community-led research and innovation.

The Power of Participation: The Young Foundation's vision 2024-28

As a part of our **2024-28 strategy**, we strive to enable everyone in the UK to experience the power of participation.

The strategy builds upon a rich legacy of work looking to understand, involve and innovate alongside communities. We are committed to developing new ways of working together - empowering radical acts of co-creation across communities, state, and business. Beyond demanding change, our drive is toward collaborative, unbounded approaches to creating change across systems.

We know no boundaries, and are ready to respond to need and circumstance, looking to drive participation and innovation across complex challenges. We will do this by focusing upon the following areas:

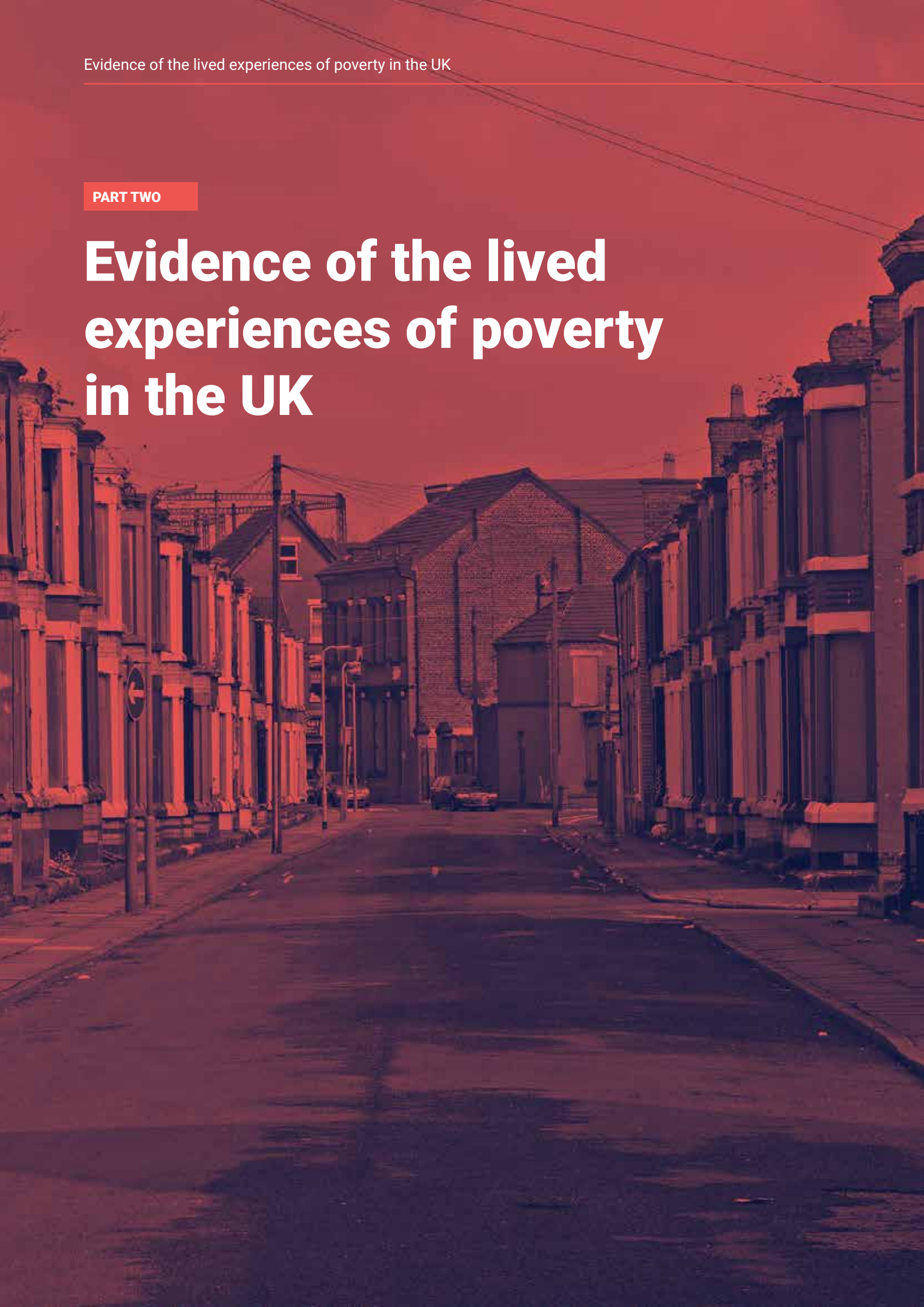
- **Planet** – Aiming to achieve net zero by 2050 requires participation of all UK households, accelerated by policies and support for a socially just transition
- **Place** – Motivation to participate in social, civic and political change is stronger when connected to a 'place', with a sustainable future likely to be a localised one
- **Prospects** – Collective societal change will be greater if we centre capabilities and experiences of 'less heard' voices – supporting younger people to amplify their democratic voice and political participation

The studies outlined in the paper meet one or more of the requirements below:

- Evidence about the problems that people in poverty have told us about and the potential solutions or priorities that they have suggested.
- Evidence that has been co-produced by those affected by poverty.
- Evidence that resulted from a process that gave people affected by poverty the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their experience and identify their priority issues.
- Evidence that was produced to achieve positive change for people affected by poverty.
- Research that has involved people with a lived experience of poverty throughout all stages of the process including the definition of the problem, the analysis of it and solution development.

PART TWO

Evidence of the lived experiences of poverty in the UK



Study 1: The Peer Action Collective: leading research, driving change (2023)

[READ THE FULL STUDY HERE](#)

Summary of the study:

In 2019, the Youth Endowment Fund, the #iWill Fund and the Co-op came together to empower young people to make communities safer and fairer for young people. This report details the first phase of Peer Action Collective (PAC) which looked at the root causes driving youth violence in England and Wales. It was driven by 120 peer researchers aged 16 to 25 who reached more than 4,600 young people aged 10 to 20 through interviews, focus groups, surveys, workshops and events/creative sessions. Peer researchers were supported to take the lead throughout the research process from its design to conduct and analysis. Some 1,600 young people aged 10-20 took these research findings into practice through social action and campaigning through Changemaker roles. The current phase of PAC started in 2023 and is due to continue into 2028, with continued backing from the Youth Endowment Fund, the #iWill Fund, and the Co-op, and will reach more than 11,000 involved or at risk of involvement in violence.

Involvement of those experiencing poverty:

The research from the first phase was led by young people involved in violence or at risk of becoming involved in violence, with many coming from areas of high rates of poverty.

Headline findings:

- Young people ascribed the causes of youth violence as: (1) social deprivation and lack of opportunity, (2) availability of physical safe spaces, (3) relationships with family and friends, (4) engagement with and expectations of different institutions (5) poor mental health support and (6) social media.
- Young people developed eight key recommendations: (1) We want you to deal with the small stuff – not ignoring low level bullying, (2) We need access to and knowledge of the opportunities available to us, (3) More youth friendly spaces would contribute to how safe we feel, (4) Schools need to feel like safe spaces and should help prevent violence, (5) Mental health support should be easy to access, (6) Young people should feel safe online, (7) We need you to consider the inequalities and lived experiences of young people to find solutions to youth violence, and (8) Young people should be partners in developing solutions and change.

Study 2: Rights and risks: Migrant labour exploitation in London (2023)

[READ THE FULL STUDY HERE](#)

Summary of the study:

This research commissioned by the Greater London Authority (GLA) involved us supporting six peer researchers with lived experience of being migrants in London to engage sensitively with other migrants around issues of exploitation in labour markets in London due to their migrant status and support systems in place. Service providers were interviewed by researchers from the Young Foundation and interviews were conducted with migrants by peer researchers.

Involvement of those experiencing poverty:

Peer researchers were recent migrants to the UK and some within the group had experience of handling insecure employment and income due to their visa status. Peer researchers were trained and supported to co-design interview guides, lead in conducting interviews, and contributing to data analysis and dissemination through drawing on their own stories and perspectives.

Headline findings:

- **Core issue:** When migrant workers receive work in the UK, they are often at risk of receiving very low pay for the work they do. This research found that many migrant workers encountered underpayment for their hours, under the table pay which left them unaware of if their tax or National Insurance was paid, and sometimes not receiving their pay for months on end.
- **Recommendations for funders and commissioners:** Investment should be made in long term funding for advice/support services to build capacity for complex case work, the recruitment/training of case workers and community outreach work. Infrastructure should also be funded through centralised mapping of services to provide clear pathways for support when seeking employment; first point of contact options should be invested in; and commissioners should build upon previous work such as the Employment Rights Advice and Support for Underserved London Communities programme. Funders and commissioners should also address the legal aid drought and deserts due to legal aid cuts.
- **Recommendation for advice, support and community organisations:** Organisations should focus on building capacity and expertise, especially in identifying and establishing improved referral pathways and ensuring communication and contact options are accessible and easy to understand for migrants (which includes multiple language options and the ability to directly talk to support workers to discuss these options).

Study 3: Young adults and financial literacy (2022)

[READ THE FULL STUDY HERE](#)

Summary of the study:

The research explored the financial literacy of young people aged between 18 and 25 who were set to reach multiple financial milestones. The peer researchers were involved across the research process, from its design, conduct (interviews), analysis and dissemination (including designing the report). In total, peer researchers interviewed 11 young people about their understanding of money, their financial aspirations, and what shaped these beliefs.

Involvement of those experiencing poverty:

The peer researchers were selected through the Kickstart Scheme. The Kickstart Scheme aimed to support young people aged 16 to 24 who were on Universal Credit and deemed at risk of long-term unemployment. Some of these young people came from very low-income backgrounds. The Young Foundation partnered with [Youth Futures Foundation](#) and [Mohn Westlake Foundation](#) to support 30 young people.

Headline findings:

- **Core issue:** Young people are concerned about managing finances and fear they will not be able to find affordable housing in the future because of the cost of living crisis. It was also found that without support or guidance on how to tackle finances has meant that it has become daunting, especially for those from minority backgrounds who encounter additional barriers to accessing support.
- **Solutions drawn from the research to help boost financial freedom and literacy included:** increasing the minimum wage, removing age differences in pay, and potentially introducing region-specific increases to better reflect the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. Comprehensive financial education that highlights all the government schemes and financial opportunities for young people was also suggested, with particular considerations for those who have recently moved to the UK and are particularly unsure about navigating support and systems in place.

Study 4: Understanding the experiences of first and second generation immigrants in the UK (2023)

[READ THE FULL STUDY HERE](#)

Summary of the study:

The research explored the lived experiences of seven first, and second, generation immigrants in the UK, looking specifically at identity, education, and employment. The peer researchers, who were mostly second-generation immigrants, were involved across the research process, from its design, conduct (interviews), analysis and dissemination (including designing the report).

Involvement of those experiencing poverty:

The peer researchers were selected through the Kickstart Scheme. The Kickstart Scheme aimed to support young people aged 16 to 24 who were on Universal Credit and deemed at risk of long-term unemployment. Some of these young people came from very low-income backgrounds. The Young Foundation partnered with [Youth Futures Foundation](#) and [Mohn Westlake Foundation](#) to support 30 young people.

Headline findings:

- **Core issue:** When families come to the UK to seek better employment, it was reported that they had to start off their careers in lower skilled jobs, which resulted in lower pay, as their qualifications and experiences did not transfer equally to the UK equivalent.
- Some recommendations that emerged were to more effectively signpost existing services available to first- and second-generation immigrants so that they have easier access to this support, for example bursaries for higher education and schemes to help 'level the playing field'.

Study 5: Beyond the ‘foggy and uncertain’: supporting young people’s futures (2022)

[READ THE FULL STUDY HERE](#)

Summary of the study:

The National Lottery Community Fund commissioned, as part of the #iwill Fund, The Young Foundation to lead on a piece of research into the experiences and priorities of young people across England. The Young Foundation trained 59 16- to 20-year-old peer researchers to create the Youth-Led Peer Research Network. They interviewed 209 young people to explore the future beyond Covid-19, whilst helping funders and organisations better understand young people’s priorities. The research sought to identify region specific changes that could be made to make a difference to the lives of young people, both now and in the future.

Involvement of those experiencing poverty:

While there are no exact numbers, some of the peer researchers noted that they had lived experience of homelessness. The peer researchers co-designed and co-conducted interviews.

Headline findings:

- **Core issue:** The research found that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated issues of poverty. They highlighted how support needs to be given to those dealing with poverty and youth homelessness. The research also noted how funding needs to prioritise those who cannot afford to live comfortably. The need to provide additional support around the development of skills like financial literacy and capability was also highlighted.
- A key recommendation was to increase financial literacy and capability among young people, potentially through education or extra-curricular activities.

Study 6: Feeling the Squeeze: An insight into the impact of the cuts on some of the most vulnerable in Camden (2013)

[READ THE FULL STUDY HERE](#)

Summary of the study:

This research, commissioned by Camden Council, formed the second part of a three-year study looking to explore and understand the impact of the national and local changes to benefits on some of the most vulnerable residents in Camden. This report is revisiting a 2012 study, going back to communities and residents, and also new residents, to look at the impact of the cuts and changes, and how things have changed in the past year. Focus groups, one-to-one interviews and ethnographic interviews with residents were used, with additional interviews with voluntary and community sector organisations.

Involvement of those experiencing poverty:

Some respondents were on low income and had lived experience of the impacts of cuts to their benefits.

Headline findings:

- **Core issue:** Due to benefit changes, families (especially low-income) were forced out of privately rented accommodations due to them becoming unaffordable. Overcrowding in housing was also a big issue, especially in families with children and those relying on council housing/benefits.
- Childcare costs meant that many parents could not afford to seek out additional (or any) employment.
- Families also had taken multiple debts to afford to live during the cost-of-living crisis at the time.

Study 7: No Wrong Door: How an integrated employment and skills system can support Londoners (2023)

[READ THE FULL STUDY HERE](#)

Summary of the study:

The Greater London Authority's (GLA) work to support Londoners into good jobs established the No Wrong Door (NWD) initiative to integrate development and training opportunities across London's employment support landscape. Commissioned by the GLA, this research report by The Young Foundation looked to build upon evidence of existing employment and skills support systems, and to understand the diversity of needs for priority groups across London. Methods used include surveys and one-to-one interviews of service providers; one-to-one interviews with service users; co-creation workshops with service providers and local authority staff; and a pan-London workshop with stakeholders from four London subregions.

Involvement of those experiencing poverty:

Some of the service user interviews were done on those who were earning below the London Living Wage.

Headline findings:

- **Core issue:** Those paid below London Living Wage find themselves stuck as they cannot afford to seek employment opportunities due to the cost of childcare, transport and/or price of uniforms
 - Accessing services to help with job seeking (such as the Job Centre) requires you to have the ability to travel and attend regular check-ins/interviews, which is costly.
 - In work support is also lacking, meaning progression paths for those on low-income are usually difficult to navigate, keeping them stuck on low pay.
- Solutions include providers having more effective support, such as onsite childcare for parents seeking employment.

Study 8: Sinking and Swimming: Understanding Britain's unmet needs (2009)

[READ THE FULL STUDY HERE](#)

Summary of the study:

The research, which was supported by multiple organisations, aimed to give an overview of the where the needs in Britain are, and what needs may become more pressing over time. It explored why specific groups of people struggled dealing with shocks, and the implications for policy, philanthropy and public action. A range of approaches were taken, both quantitative and qualitative: ethnographies; focus groups with service providers and frontline workers; public participation and engagement; and secondary analysis of datasets.

Involvement of those experiencing poverty:

The ethnographies were conducted by multiple groups, including night workers, people not in education, employment or training, older people in care, and teenage mothers.

Headline findings:

- **Core issue:**
 - Health, wealth, and income inequalities have widened.
 - Large minority of teenagers (one in eight) are detached from education/labour markets.
 - The very poorest have seen their living standards get disproportionately worse.
 - The potential cuts to public spending will likely affect the poorest most significantly.

