Reframing the 'Left Behind'

Race and Class in Post-Brexit Oldham

THIS LEFT BEHIND IDEA, BEING AN IMMIGRANT, YOU WERE ALWAYS LEFT BEHIND - AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PILE. YOU KNEW YOU WOULD HAVE TO WORK THAT MUCH HARDER TO JUST SURVIVE. SO THE IDEA OF BEING LEFT BEHIND WASN'T NEW TO US.

SOMEONE DECIDES YOU'RE EITHER BLACK OR WORKING CLASS. LOTS OF US ARE BOTH! THIS IS ONE OF THE THINGS THAT HAS ALWAYS FRUSTRATED THE CRAP OUT OF ME, THERE IS TALK OF THE WORKING CLASS BEING LEFT BEHIND. THE WHITE WORKING CLASS WERE LEFT BEHIND, BUT THE WORKING CLASS IN GENERAL HAVE BEEN LEFT BEHIND.

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For more information about this project and access to other forthcoming publications and artwork produced based on our conversations with local residents, please visit: https://www.ethnicity.ac.uk.

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Introduction

Over the past decade political discussion has increasingly focused on a constituency called the 'left behind'. It was initially employed to make sense of rising anti-immigrant and nationalist sentiment and the emergence of far right and right-wing populist groups such as the British National Party (BNP) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). It was however the aftermath of the 2016 EU referendum that fully confirmed the term's ubiquity, as politicians and commentators of all persuasions have called for the concerns of this group to be both heard and acted upon. The ubiquity of the term was best confirmed, perhaps, by the recent 2019 production of a much-publicised BBC Three drama titled, *The Left Behind*.

The 'left behind' refers to a marginalised, predominantly English 'White working class', purportedly cast adrift by an assortment of deleterious developments. Firstly, it is argued that the economic and social bases of society have been radically transformed through globalisation and deindustrialisation. This is said to have impacted disproportionately on a White working class suffering from rising levels of deprivation and less equipped to deal with the demands of the post-industrial economy.

Second, it is stated that demographic, political and cultural changes – characterised by immigration, the alleged advances of multiculturalism, the liberal social values purportedly subscribed to by university-educated metropolitans, and the wider orientation of mainstream parliamentary politics towards the middle-classes – have worked to alienate large swathes of the 'White working class' (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Kaufmann, 2018; McKenzie, 2017b; Winlow et al., 2017).

Within political commentary, the 'left behind' are often identified as the electoral engine of an exclusionary 'new nationalist' (Valluvan, 2019) politics that, it is frequently asserted, represent legitimate anxieties about inequality, globalisation, immigration, multiculturalism and Islam.

> The White working class, the argument goes, has been forgotten – their histories silenced and their claims for a redress of the injustices they face ignored. This has led, in turn, to calls for racial self-interest by the dominant groups to be seen as legitimate and not to be labelled racist (Bhambra, 2017: 217).

There are accordingly a series of problems with the 'left behind' thesis, beyond the obvious issue of often legitimating a particularly dangerous form of nationalism undergirded by appeals to whiteness. For instance, the 'left behind' assertion grossly simplifies the complexity of views held by White working class people. A conception of working class politics is frequently reduced to anti-immigrant sentiment and racial resentment. It also denies the appeal of such views across different social classes, absolving more powerful and privileged actors from their own role as consumers and producers of exclusionary forms of nationalism (Bhambra, 2017; Mondon and Winter, 2018). Relatedly, it overstates the numerical significance of the so-called 'left behind' to recent electoral events. Danny Dorling (2016) offers an important corrective here, pointing out that just 24% of Leave voters could be located in the lowest two social classes (see also Evans and Mellon, 2017). And as others have argued, an equally pressing issue electorally is not who votes for what, but why so many, including a significant share amongst the poorest in our society, abstain from voting altogether (see Mondon, 2015).

More significantly however, ethnic minorities are altogether absent in these 'left behind' accounts. The negative impacts of social, political and economic change as experienced by ethnic minorities, alongside the broader histories of racism they encounter, are summarily silenced. Indeed, the formation of the 'left behind' works to re-centre the imputed interests of the 'native' population (itself defined in very specific and narrow terms). Here, the 'White working class' are cast as being uniquely disadvantaged and the primary, if not sole, victims of processes of decline.

This elides how deindustrialisation, austerity, and the housing crisis interact forcefully with structures of racialised exclusion to produce stark inequalities. It also denies the multiethnic and multiracial composition of the working class. Such erasures, and the broader racism and xenophobia the notion of the 'left behind' seemingly sponsors, make it in turn an important area for critique. As Khan and Shaheen note,

> The focus on (and only on) the White working class obviously relegates race as a category of analysis. Or, worse, race is invoked only as a category in opposition to class – that racism is over, that ethnic minorities are part of a 'cosmopolitan elite', that policymakers and political parties respond or pander to ethnic minorities – sometimes, it's claimed, at the expense of the White working class (2017: 4).

Similarly, in the midst of lamenting the rise of the far right, recent contributions to the 'left behind' and cognate discussions have also remembered post-war welfare capitalism in an increasingly nostalgic manner – as being an era characterised by relatively stable, well-paid employment (e.g. Berman 2017; Gest, 2017; McKenzie, 2017a; Strangleman, 2017). While of course true in some significant ways, others such as Satnam Virdee have asked for a more inclusive and therein more critically sober tact. That is to say, if we are to use the three decades succeeding the Second World War as a basis for imagining progressive alternatives to contemporary political-economic orthodoxy, then a 'race-conscious' approach too is required precisely because such an approach 'would identify something more complex going on'. Namely, we must remain more attentive to the fact that such undoubted gains for one section of the working class were accompanied by systematic racism and discrimination against another section of the working class (Virdee, 2014: 98).

This project accordingly interrogates the notion of the 'left behind' through a critical exploration of class, race and place in the context of Oldham. In doing so, it has deliberately sought out counter-narratives to this discourse. It engages the views of Black and minority ethnic residents, as well as White residents who reject many of the political sentiments attributed to the 'left behind'. While we do not make claims about whether such critical perspectives are representative of the wider majority position (which is unlikely of course), it is vital that such experiences and views are allowed a wider traction, helping to act as a grounded reference through which political stakeholders and other members of the public can also begin to formulate alternative political narratives.

Put differently, our aim is not to deny that the social and political views assigned to this constituency represents a powerful force in contemporary politics. Clearly, sections of the White working class have been drawn into a politics of resentment that has found expression through populist-nationalist forms. As was made strikingly evident in a much-publicised Hope Not Hate report, areas exhibiting stronger tendencies to more right-wing, populist-nationalist politics 'are disproportionately located in Labour's traditional heartlands, working class communities built on traditional industry' (Carter, 2018: 9). However, along with the report, we do also reject the idea that these sentiments are the exclusive preserve of any one particular demographic. A range of

studies and public opinion polls point to the continued salience of immigration, nationalism, Islamophobia, and opposition to multiculturalism as key political concerns for significant swathes of the population. The response to the Brexit vote, including the rise in hate crime, also highlights the widespread hostilities that remain, as targeted against both newer migrants but also established Black and minority communities (Burnett, 2017).

Seeking out a broader set of perspectives facilitates accordingly a reframing of the 'left behind', which we would argue is necessary for a number of reasons. First, failing to critique the idea of the 'left behind', as it stands, works to both endorse and further cultivate the forms of nationalist politics that currently operate as powerful framing devices for understanding decline and disaffection. In other words, the 'left behind' conceit gives the nationalisms currently ascendant in Britain and Europe a further alibi and platform to work through. As more people come to understand their experiences through this divisive framework, the more political purchase notions of the 'left behind' and 'White working class victimhood' is likely to acquire. Second, the identification of a uniquely disadvantaged 'White working class' reinforces 'racialised codes of belonging' at both local and national levels (Virdee and McGeever, 2018: 11). Privileging the 'left behind' as *the* key contemporary political actor effaces the voices and experiences of Black and minority ethnic groups, as not only is their disproportionate presence as members of the working class denied but their own political concerns regarding racism and intersecting inequalities become sidelined (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017). These multiple erasures work in turn to limit the potential for more robustly multiethnic political alliances to take more effective shape.

This report seeks therefore to revise the prevailing conception of the 'left behind', drawing on interviews and census data that more sensitively profiles the acute class inequalities that minority groups in contemporary England continue to experience. This report also engages with White English residents who frame the problems facing their communities in ways that eschew anti-immigrant sentiment and racialised hostilities. The presence of such 'White working class' voices is grossly neglected in the prevailing political conversation, a neglect that greatly benefits the further entrenchment of nationalist politics. As such, not only does this shift in perspective serve to challenge the racial exclusivity of notions of the 'left behind' and the 'working class', but it can also help to open up political discussion towards alternative future possibilities and priorities. After all, the dominance of the 'left behind' trope and its association with right-wing populism does chronically stifle debate around other key areas of contemporary policy concern: drawing attention away from other pressing concerns such as austerity, housing, regeneration, jobs, and, of course, racism more generally.

Oldham and the 'Left Behind'

Within framings of the 'left behind', place is central. The 'left behind' narrative fixates on both the 'White working class' but also its archetypal spaces, wherein political commentary invariably locates this constituency within post-industrial towns such as Oldham, Rotherham, Stoke-on-Trent, Burnley, Wigan, Boston and Sunderland. Smaller, formerly industrial towns certainly do present particular challenges. Many of them experience high levels of deprivation and inequality, poor quality housing, a lack of investment, and weaker levels of economic growth (Pike et al., 2016). And yet, as a recent policy briefing on *Class, Race and Inequality in Northern Towns (*Barbulescu et al., 2019: 1) notes, 'much of the post-industrial North of England' has long been omitted from national policy debates about economic growth or deprivation. It is in turn this much discussed political void that the 'left behind' trope, in part, attempts to exploit.

Such geographically framed accounts of a 'left behind' thesis has of course gained further purchase as a result of Brexit, with significant proportions of Leave voters located outside of the larger metropolitan cities. The Leave EU vote was particularly high in the former textile towns of Lancashire, and, in Oldham itself, 60.9% (65,369 votes) of the local population voted for Brexit.

Over recent decades, such locations have also been sites of racial unrest and antagonism, with increased support for UKIP and the far right (Carter, 2018), and often exhibiting markedly fragmented geographies and inequalities along lines of race, ethnicity and class (Phillips, 2008). As noted in one such context, Webster (2003: 102) observed that within the former mill towns of the Pennines there exist 'perceptions of ethnic difference that are less amorphous, more visible, striking and contrasting than are found in larger more multicultural cities'. And yet, as the authors of the above *Class, Race and Inequality in Northern Towns* repeat, 'the national framing of diversity [still] tends to focus on higher minority concentration areas in the country' (Barbulescu et al., 2019: 1), resulting in often one-dimensional policy framings of racism, immigration, and inequality more broadly.

With its combination of high support for Brexit and marked racial and class inequalities, Oldham is therefore a particularly resonant site for this study. Located in the North West of England, just to the north of Manchester, Oldham has existed historically as a mill town, known for its cotton production which peaked in the 1890s, as well as once being the parliamentary constituency of Winston Churchill. As premised on its privileged British industrial location amid the broader network of exploitative colonial era cotton production, Oldham gradually became a destination for different groups of immigrants seeking work: first, the Irish, and then later from other European regions, including Polish migrants (Kalra, 2000). In the post-war period, South Asian immigrants, notably from Pakistan, arrived during the 1960s, with smaller migrant populations arriving from India, Bangladesh, and the Caribbean. They entered an industrial sector that was already in significant decline by the 1930s, and which had largely collapsed by the end of the 1980s (ibid.). The last working cotton mill closing in 1998. In the town itself, racially exclusionary policies in employment and housing shaped distinct racialised geographies, and class divisions remain also particularly pronounced between different parts of the town. Since the decline of industry, the promise of post-industrial 'regeneration' has proven largely elusive, though Oldham is currently in the midst of significant town centre development, and some investment is being targeted towards housing and schools.

Oldham's reputation as a declining industrial area has been accompanied, in recent years, by its image as 'riot' town (Jones, 2013). Along with Burnley and Bradford, Oldham was the site of much-commented upon riots in 2001, largely understood as comprising local South Asian residents, the police, and far right supporters. These riots took place in a context in which the BNP was securing increased support during the 2000s, with local and national media accounts focusing on the alleged prevalence of segregation and racial 'no-go' areas. Furthermore, local Labour MP during this time, Phil Woolas, was an early exponent of the 'left behind' trope, popularising notions of White working class victimhood. [i] Oldham's reputation for racial segregation and antagonism has as a result proven hard to shake, evident in the fact that Oldham featured prominently in the polarising 2016 Casey Review into integration.

The town occupies therefore a certain iconic position within contemporary political and media discourses of race, class, politics and nation (Alexander, 2004; Jones, 2013). A reputation that has been further re-entrenched through recent stories that identified the town as the most deprived place in England: possessing the highest proportion of deprived areas in the UK and the second lowest house prices behind Burnley.[ii]

To reiterate however, it is vitally important to note that these inequalities map unevenly onto the town's population. A 2015 report by Finney and Lymperopoulou found that Oldham also hosts some of the most pronounced disparities in inequalities when comparing 'White' and 'non-White' populations across a range of indicators, ranking the town the 4th 'worst' in the country based on 2011 census figures. This sense of internal variation is important. In seeking to elicit a range of voices that do not register as frequently within media and political discourses, the report hopes in turn to offer some alternative stories of the town.

The project

Between January and May 2018, 15 interviews were conducted with residents of Oldham, most over the age of 35 and all having lived there for multiple decades. The participants were drawn from a range of areas in the town alongside different racial and ethnic backgrounds, including White English, British Bangladeshi, British Pakistani, and Black British. Residents were recruited through existing networks, and a number of them worked for community and voluntary organisations in the town. The interviews focused on their experiences of life in Oldham both in the past and the present. Discussions centred on what residents identified as the most important issues and challenges facing the town.

The report also includes secondary analysis of census data between 1991 and 2011, to provide a sense of the changes in the social, economic and demographic features of the town. Archival research was also conducted in local and national news publications, identifying key moments in the town's recent history. In analysing the data we present, we have also engaged with other research that has taken Oldham as its object of study, as well as literature focusing on northern post-industrial towns more generally. Given the limited size of our own sample, this engagement represents an attempt to locate our research within a wider body of academic and policy research.

Organisation of the report

The discussion that follows attempts herein to both critique and reframe conceptions of the 'left behind'. It does this through an exploration of a range of themes, organised into the following sections:

The first section entitled, '**Poverty, deprivation and inequality**', outlines the scale and nature of inequality in Oldham. It illustrates the deepening forms of social and spatial deprivation that have resulted from processes such as deindustrialisation, globalisation, and austerity. We argue that rather than being the unique preserve of a marginalised 'White working class', inequalities cut across racial and ethnic communities, highlighting the multiracial and multiethnic composition of the working classes. At the same time, however, deprivation and poverty in Oldham are experienced disproportionately by Black and minority ethnic residents, as both structural changes in the economy and policy reforms adversely impact minority communities, leaving them more likely to encounter poverty and economic hardship. The section concludes with an examination of the impacts of austerity policies on the town. For many of our respondents, it was the pernicious effects of the state's programme of austerity rather than immigration and Brexit that emerged as the most pressing political concern.

Section 2, '**Racism, segregation and multiculture**', explores longer local histories of racism and racial exclusion. It is argued that the invocation of a 'White working class', as being uniquely disadvantaged by dynamics of social and economic change,
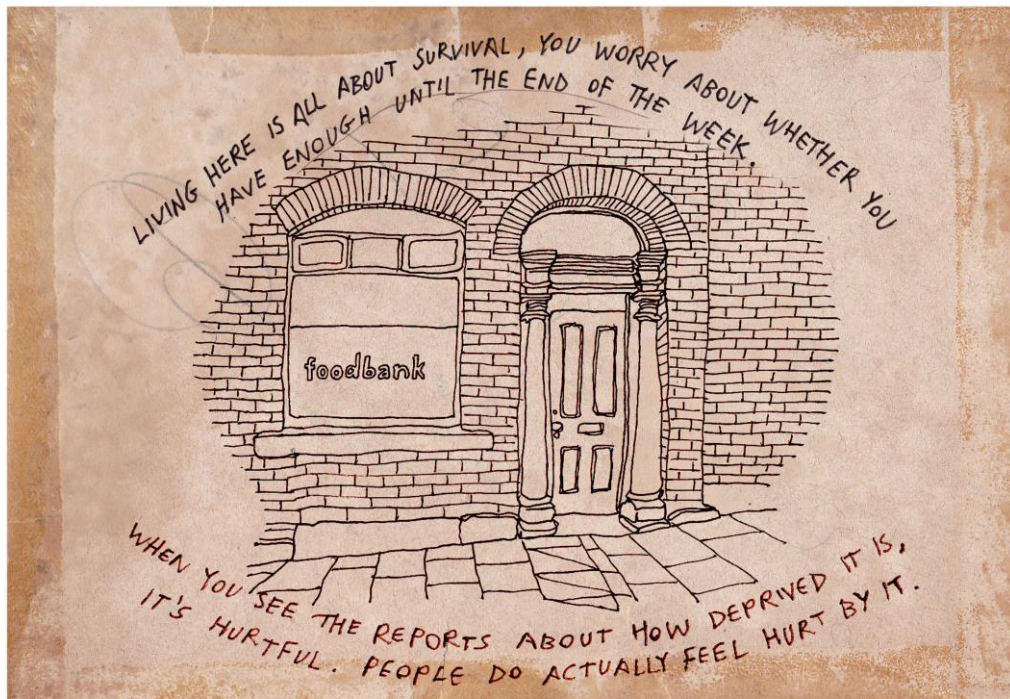
excludes the contribution of Black and minority ethnic communities. Dominant narratives of the 'left behind' rest upon a particular form of racialised nostalgia that ignores the stake and claims that Black and minority ethnic communities also have in relation to the town, the nation and the changes that have taken place. Similarly, these discourses elide historical and contemporary realities of racism and discrimination. The section also considers Oldham's reputation as a 'segregated' space. While such a reputation does reflect entrenched forms of inequality and division, it will be argued that simplistic notions of 'self-segregation' and culturally oriented explanations deny much more pressing social and economic factors. This section also highlights the fragile forms of conviviality that some residents identify as constituting an underappreciated alternative local energy important to counteracting the racisms and general anti-immigration sentiment as already existing but also further accentuated in the wake of the Brexit vote.

Section 3 examines the theme of '**Economy and Regeneration**'. The notion of the 'left behind' often implies a lack of progress, devolving responsibility for this apparent 'lag' to localities and their residents. This view ignores the role of wider economic restructuring and the uneven dynamics of the decline associated with the ascendant neoliberal economy. This section explores Oldham's position in relation to both the national and regional economy. It also examines contemporary forms or urban regeneration and its attendant anxieties, as respondents from a range of backgrounds worried about both the potential limits and inequalities that inhere within redevelopment projects.

The final section explores questions of '**Politics and civil society**'. It examines residents' experiences of the 2016 EU Referendum campaign and its outcomes. There is also a consideration of how local political articulations of a 'left behind' White working class emerged, situating this in relation to the wider national debates within which towns such as Oldham have played an iconic role. Similarly, residents argued that the consolidation of a populist-nationalism via the 'left behind' conceit fundamentally denies the comparable political frustrations of Black and ethnic minority communities. Residents also noted that these developments do not, contrary to wider media analysis, constitute an anti-establishment political voice, but simply represent an intensification of mainstream political discourses that were already taking shape across previous decades. Many noted that this is a consolidated anti-immigration discourse that further distracts from the urgent economic reforms and renewal that places like Oldham has most to gain from. The resurgence of a left-led Labour Party was seen by some residents as signalling this much-needed alternative political platform, though reservations about the party's efficacy, coherence, and electoral potential remained pronounced.

The report ends with a brief summary reiterating key findings.

1. Poverty, Deprivation and Inequality

LIVING HERE IS ALL ABOUT SURVIVAL, YOU WORRY ABOUT WHETHER YOU HAVE ENOUGH UNTIL THE END OF THE WEEK.

foodbank

WHEN YOU SEE THE REPORTS ABOUT HOW DEPRIVED IT IS, IT'S HURTFUL. PEOPLE DO ACTUALLY FEEL HURT BY IT.

Introduction

As observed in the Introduction, economic anxiety has been routinely identified as a key feature explaining why many 'White working class' people in towns like Oldham voted to leave the European Union and/or have been drawn towards right-wing populist parties such as UKIP. It is commonly argued within these discussions that such political trends represent a response to decades of economic dispossession; the loss of relatively secure, well-paid employment; the replacement of post-war welfare capitalism with neoliberalism; and, more recently, austerity.

Undoubtedly, people who are White and working class, along with other communities, are experiencing stark and often hardening levels of deprivation and disadvantage. However, the privileging of the experiences of the 'White working class' within these discourses – as evident for instance in the Casey Review (see Hirsch, 2017) – limits our understanding of contemporary deprivation and inequality. Indeed, these discourses are often simultaneously silencing and loaded with particular forms of inference. First, it is often implied that the 'left behind' is either 'uniquely' or 'disproportionately' disadvantaged. Relatedly, in a number of formulations, there is often a suggestion that the plight of the 'White working class' is somehow related to immigration – both contemporary and historic – and the alleged relative advantages of Black and minority ethnic communities (Khan and Shaheen, 2017).

Not only do such narratives deny that the working class in this country has always been multiracial and multiethnic since its industrial and imperial formation, they also gloss over the fact that neoliberalism – as globalisation, deindustrialisation and austerity – has had a profound impact on the lives of all working class people (Shilliam, 2018; Virdee, 2014). What becomes clear in Oldham is that experiences of poverty, deprivation and inequality are widely shared, experienced by a range of different groups across various axes, whether that be income levels, health, housing, food and fuel poverty. However, it is also the case that Black and ethnic minority residents still

face disproportionate levels of poverty and inequality. More often than not, recent economic trends, and the policy programmes that facilitate them, have had a disproportionate impact on working class people from an ethnic minority background. Drawing on a range of sources, this section of the report will outline the nature and scale of this poverty, deprivation and racialised inequality in Oldham, while also considering the distinct impacts of recent austerity programmes.

Poverty and deprivation

Given the entrenched nature of poverty, deprivation and inequality, it is unsurprising that residents' accounts would focus so heavily upon it. Respondents frequently made reference to Oldham being a 'poor town', in which many residents struggled economically. One female British Pakistani living in a deprived area stated, in what was an emblematic remark,

> I think living here is all about survival; you worry about whether you have enough until the end of the week.

Here residents referred to historic losses of industry, the prevalence of low-wage work, as well as visible signs of deprivation such as abandoned and degraded spaces, poor quality housing, litter, and empty shops.

As mentioned in the introduction, an ONS report in 2016 found Oldham to be the most deprived area in the country, containing the highest proportion of deprived areas as based on indicators including employment, income, health, education, disability, access to housing, and the condition of the wider built environment. The report also revealed that almost two-thirds (65.2%) of its Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) ranked amongst the most deprived 20% in the country (amounting to 43 of its LSOAs), with just 4.5% of LSOAs in Oldham ranking in the 20% least deprived (ONS, 2016: 18-19). The impact of such poverty and deprivation, alongside the wider perception of the area that it conveys nationally, has had a painful and stigmatising impact on many residents' sense of pride and dignity. As one resident – a White woman in her 30s – reminded us, 'when you do see the reports about how deprived it is, it's hurtful and I think a lot of people do actually feel hurt by it.'

Across many indicators, Oldham is clearly 'left behind' relative to both other parts of Greater Manchester (GM) and nationally. The town has an average life expectancy more than two years lower than the national average for both men and women (Oldham Council, 2018: 26). Average resident incomes and house prices are also significantly lower than regional and national rates. The average sold house price in Oldham was £135,650 compared to a GM average of £168,580, and a national average of £271,964. This varied significantly within the town, with the highest house price average being £237,660 in Saddleworth South, compared to £62,751 in St Mary's (ibid: 42).

Unsurprisingly, Oldham also has lower rates of employment. In 2016 (for those aged 16-64) the proportion in employment was 68.4% in Oldham, in comparison to 70.1% in GM and 74.1% in England (ibid.: 19). These disparities are also evident in unemployment rates. July 2018 figures show that 4.4% of people in Oldham (aged 16-64) were unemployed, compared to the GM rate of 3%, and the national average of 2.1%. Youth unemployment rates in Oldham were 7.1% compared to 3.9% across GM and 2.8% in England.[iii] So too, with regards to income, the average annual income for residents in Oldham in 2016 was £23,917 compared to £25,741 in GM and £28,503 for England as a whole. Here Oldham registered the second lowest average annual income in the GM region (Oldham Council, 2018: 23).

Oldham also registers very high rates of child poverty. A report produced by the End Child Poverty coalition in 2018 found that in Greater Manchester more than 40% of children lived in poverty. The study ranked the parliamentary constituency of Oldham West and Royton 10th out of 650 constituencies, registering a child poverty rate of 46% in September 2017, which was an increase of 10% between 2015 and 2017.[iv]

In the area of education, Oldham also lags behind, with the proportion of students attaining both the expected and higher standard in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 in 2015-16 ranking in the bottom 10% nationally. Attainment at GCSE level also ranked in the bottom 15% of Local Authorities in England (ibid: 49-50). Similarly, across a range of child development related health indicators, Oldham registers higher than national rates of tooth decay and poor mental-health among 5-16 year-olds alongside higher than national rates of self-harm among those aged 10-24 years (ibid.: 28-9).

Sadly, such indications of deprivation in Oldham are not unexpected. Importantly however, when reflecting upon the widespread geographies of such inequality in Oldham, many of the participants recognised that experiences of deprivation were not restricted to any one racial or ethnic group. There was also a sense that inequality had significantly worsened in recent years. This was a belief shaped by personal experiences and also some of the voluntary and work activities our participants engaged in. One participant, a British Bangladeshi man in his forties who worked at a local school, commented on the increasing visibility of poverty amongst both the 'White British' and 'Asian' children.

> It's not just the Asian families, it's the White families too, and a lot of British White families are suffering. Sometimes I work in a school and I see the way some of the White kids are dressed, it's not just affecting the Asian families, it's also affecting the White British families.

For some participants, such as the White female resident quoted below, it was important that a wider sense of class was to be retained when reflecting on assumed local inequalities.

> I think a lot of people realised that the problem was class not colour and that White working class people were being disadvantaged in the same way as Asian working class people, you know. The problem wasn't – oh one group is taking resources from the other – the problem is the resources being available at all.

Overall, the statements from many participants demonstrated an acute awareness of disadvantages suffered by both White and Black and minority ethnic communities, with references being made to what were seen as poor 'Asian' areas such as Glodwick and Coppice, and so called 'White' areas like Fitton Hill and Holts. However, while not downplaying the inequalities experienced by White groups, the danger is that the drawing of equivalences between them ignores the complexities of disadvantage, particularly in terms of the impact of structural and institutional racism on everyday working class life. For example, in 2011, Oldham was ranked 4th in terms of districts with the highest levels of minority ethnic inequality in England and Wales relative to the White British population – as based on education, employment, health and housing measures (Finney and Lymperopoulou, 2015). The next section will outline some of these disparities in more detail.

Racialised inequalities

While disadvantage was widespread in Oldham, as in towns and cities throughout the country, it maps unevenly onto racial and ethnic communities. As the 2017 Government Race Disparity Audit revealed, racial and ethnic inequalities are observable and persistent across key domains of employment, income, health and housing. Other research suggests that at the local level, racial and ethnic inequalities in employment and housing in particular have in fact increased since 2001 (Finney and Lymperopoulou, 2015).

Oldham confirmed these wider trends. As observed, while many of the wards across the town register high levels of inequality, those places ranking as the *most* deprived – Coldhurst, St Mary's, Alexandra and Werneth – all feature disproportionately high 'non-White' populations (see figure 1 below). In Coldhurst for instance, which registered the highest rates of child poverty in the country (62.1%), over 60% of residents are of Bangladeshi heritage.[v]

Figure 1: Disproportionate levels of deprivation by local electoral ward[vi]

Ward	Unemployment (%)	No Qualifications (%)	Households Overcrowded (%)	LLTI (16-64) (%)	White British (%)	Non-White (%)
Alexandra	8.6	40.4	12.4	22	59.5	36.6
Coldhurst	9.4	42.7	21.6	20.4	25.4	72.9
St Mary's	7.8	41.2	15.7	19.8	32	65.9
Werneth	7.2	36.8	16.5	20.1	21.4	76.7
Oldham	5.4	29.6	7.5	16.3	75.6	22.5

These inequalities were also manifest across a range of other indicators. Ethnic disparities were particularly marked in the area of employment, with Oldham ranking as the 3rd most unequal local authority district. Here, according to the 2011 Census, 12.2% of the local Black and minority ethnic population over the age of 25 years were unemployed compared to 5.5% of White British residents (Finney and Lymperopoulou, 2015: 28). Employment rates for the White population over 16 years of age was close to 60% compared to just over 40% for Pakistani origin residents and less than 40% for Bangladeshi residents. These disparities are also evident amongst employment rates for those aged between 25 and 49 (see Figure 2 below). Over 70% of White British men are employed full-time compared to around 22% of Bangladeshis and around one-third of Pakistanis. Unemployment also adversely impacts upon Black and minority ethnic communities. While just over 7% of White British men were unemployed according to 2011 Census figures, the rate was over 12% for Bangladeshis, 24% for Africans, 30% for Mixed White and African, and over 37% for the 'Other Black' category. Similarly, while the unemployment rate for White British women is just over 5%, this compares with over 17% of Pakistani women, 21% of Bangladeshi women, and 30% for African women.

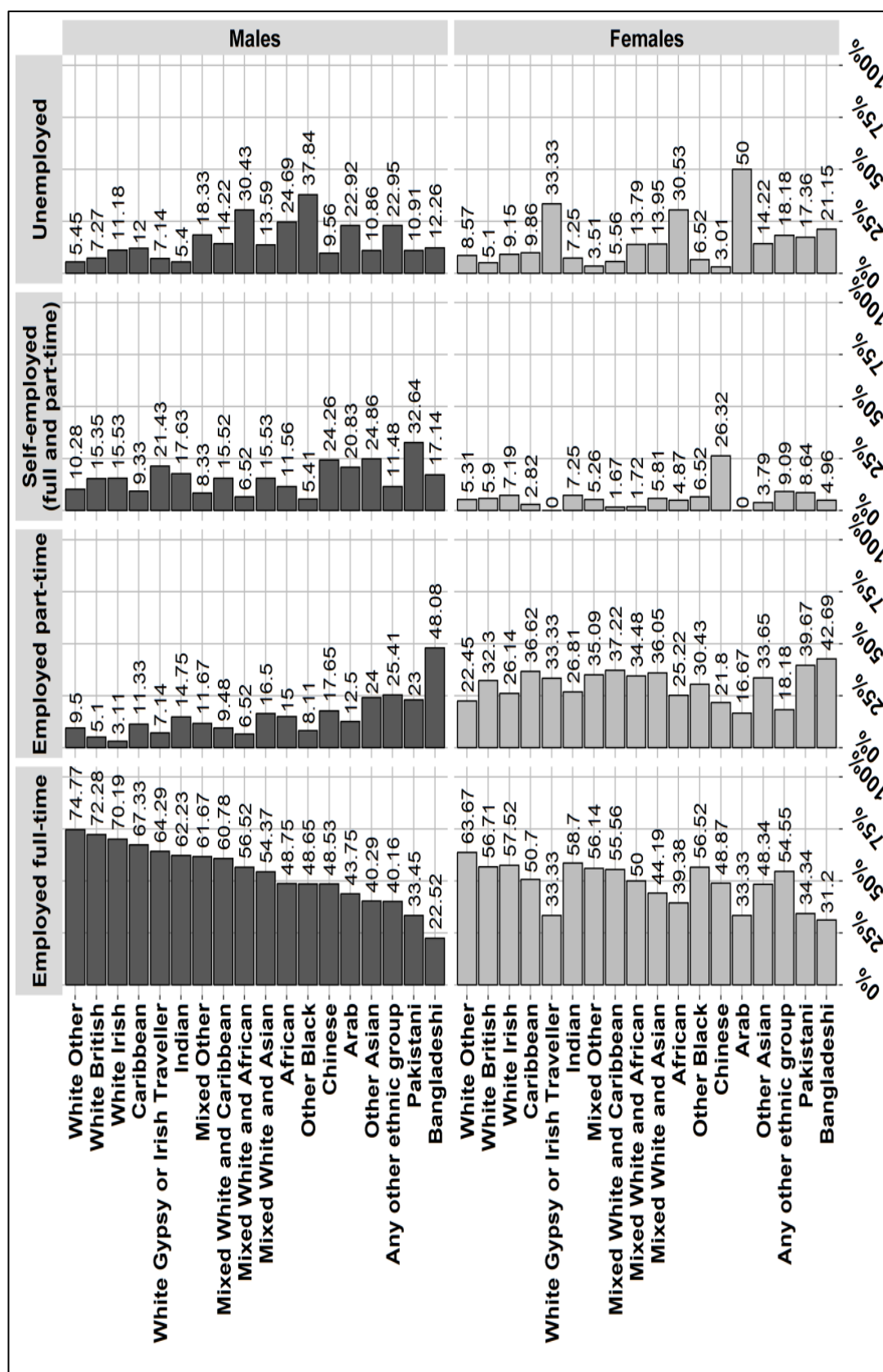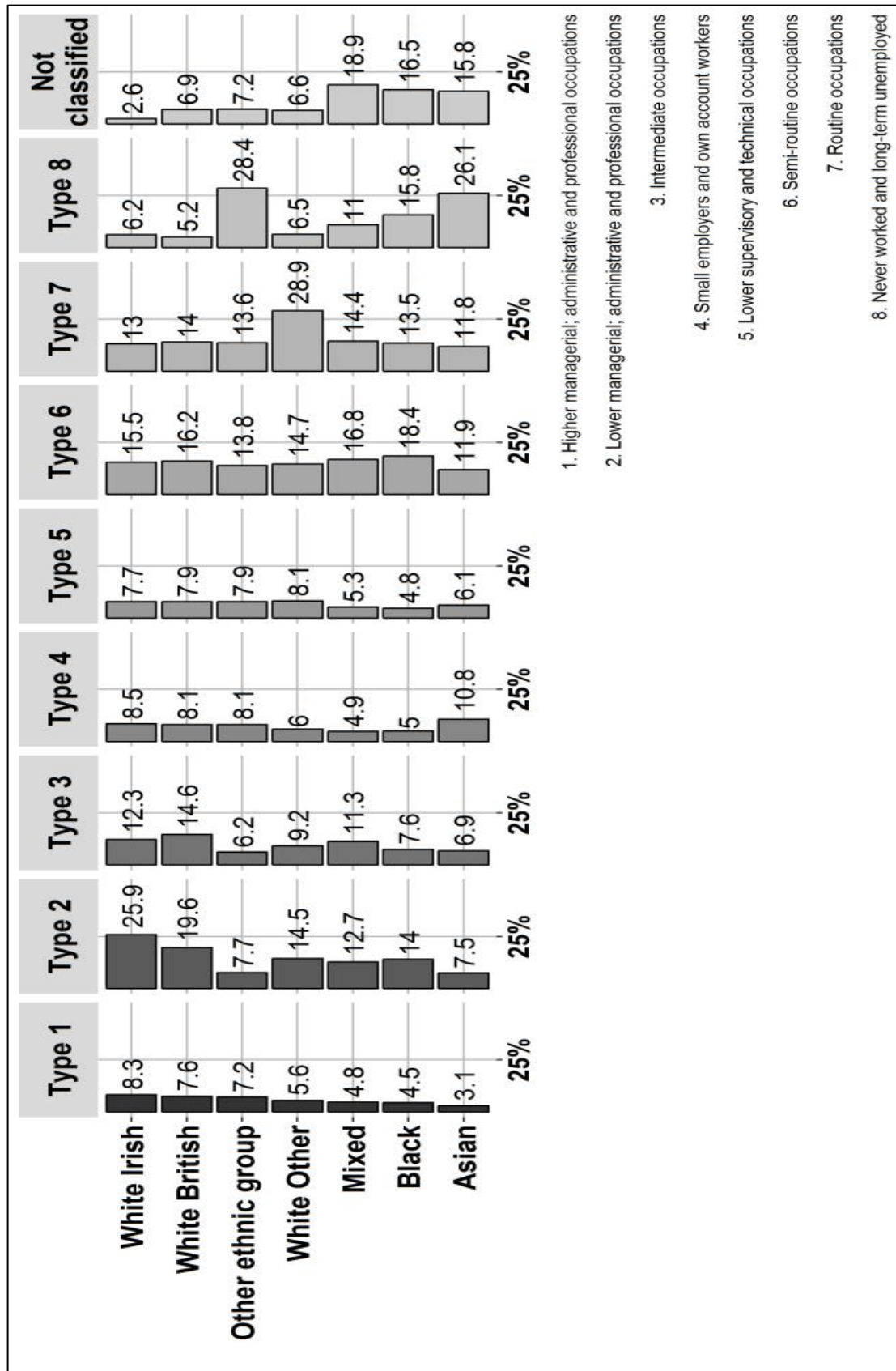**Figure 2: Types of employment and unemployment, men and women aged 25 to 49 years by ethnic group, Oldham 2011.**[vii]

Figure 3:Type of employment by ethnic group[viii]

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5	Type 6	Type 7	Type 8	Not classified
White Irish	8.3	25.9	12.3	8.5	7.7	15.5	13	6.2	2.6
White British	7.6	19.6	14.6	8.1	7.9	16.2	14	5.2	6.9
Other ethnic group	7.2	7.7	6.2	8.1	7.9	13.8	13.6	28.4	7.2
White Other	5.6	14.5	9.2	6	8.1	14.7	28.9	6.5	6.6
Mixed	4.8	12.7	11.3	4.9	5.3	16.8	14.4	11	18.9
Black	4.5	14	7.6	5	4.8	18.4	13.5	15.8	16.5
Asian	3.1	7.5	6.9	10.8	6.1	11.9	11.8	26.1	15.8

1. Higher managerial; administrative and professional occupations

2. Lower managerial; administrative and professional occupations

3. Intermediate occupations

4. Small employers and own account workers

5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations

6. Semi-routine occupations

7. Routine occupations

8. Never worked and long-term unemployed

These inequalities also manifest across a range of other indicators. Ethnic disparities were particularly marked in the area of employment, with Oldham ranking as the 3rd most unequal local authority district. Here, according to the 2011 Census, 12.2% of the local Black and minority ethnic population over the age of 25 years were unemployed compared to 5.5% of White British residents (Finney and Lymperopoulou, 2015: 28). Employment rates for the White population over 16 years of age was close to 60% compared to just over 40% for Pakistani origin residents and less than 40% for Bangladeshi residents. These disparities are also evident amongst employment rates for those aged between 25 and 49 (see Figure 2 above). Over 70% of White British men are employed full-time compared to around 22% of Bangladeshis and around one-third of Pakistanis. Unemployment also adversely impacts upon Black and minority ethnic communities. While just over 7% of White British men were unemployed according to 2011 Census figures, the rate was over 12% for Bangladeshis, 24% for Africans, 30% for Mixed White and African, and over 37% for the 'Other Black' category. Similarly, while the unemployment rate for White British women is just over 5%, this compares with over 17% of Pakistani women, 21% of Bangladeshi women, and 30% for African women.

Within employment, Black and minority groups were also disproportionately found in routine and semi-routine occupations, whereas White British people were more heavily represented in managerial, administrative and professional occupations. As Figure 3 illustrates below, in 2011, 27% of local White British were in either higher or lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations, while just 1 in ten local Asian and 18% of Black workers were employed in these professional categories. By contrast, less than one in five White workers worked in semi-routine or routine occupations compared to over one third of Asian and almost 30% of Black workers.

Beyond employment, Oldham also ranked poorly (3rd in 2011) in terms of ethnic disparities in health. 25.7% of the local Black and minority ethnic population compared to 20.4% of White British residents have a limiting long-term illness (ibid.: 34). And in terms of housing, in 2011, 20% of Black and minority households lived in overcrowded accommodation compared to 5% of the local White British population. Education is however one area where racial and ethnic inequalities have been significantly reduced, reflecting a national trend. In Oldham in 2001, 29% of BME people had no qualifications, compared to 14% in 2011. This latter figure compares to 13% for White British residents (Oldham Council, 2016: 16).

Austerity

The racialised aspects of deprivation and inequality figured prominently in our participants' narratives, much of which will be profiled in later chapters of this report. It is however the participants' more general concerns over inequality, which were particularly pronounced and politically charged, that is most pertinent to this present juncture. For instance, many of the local people we spoke to in Oldham testified to the acute pain and hurt brought by austerity. All respondents mentioned how austerity and welfare reform policy was having a detrimental impact on the town and its residents. This was linked to a widespread perception that inequality had been exacerbated over recent years. This was a belief shaped by participants' personal experiences, as well as some of their voluntary and work activities. In what was an indicative statement, one Bangladeshi male resident stated, in relation to the town,

> It has changed for the worst because of the cuts. That is one of the reasons but the main one is jobs and every year the Government are making cuts and cuts and cuts…People cannot enjoy their lives as much as they did 10 or 15 years ago.

Another resident, a White British woman in her 30s, drew more specifically on her experience of volunteering at a local food bank.

> I wasn't expecting it to be that busy and sometimes the shelves were empty, there wasn't enough food to give out…So you used to have to try and make up food with what there was on the shelves, whoever came in that day should have been getting – we just made up what we could…I mean I had never even heard of a food bank when I was growing up, you didn't hear about them. Whereas when I started hearing about food banks, I thought it was just like a meal that people were getting. It really upsets me that people go without food.

As was the case for other participants, the levels of inequality were a source of anger directed at a national government perceived as being aloof and indifferent,

> I mean do they even know about people like that? Their actual individual stories?…There is this class of people who cannot actually afford food. Do they know them, their stories – like they are both working and still struggling to get by?

Between April 2017 and March 2018, the Trussell Trust foodbank in Oldham provided 7,435 emergency food supplies to people in crisis.[ix] The Trussell Trust has reported that the three main reasons why people in Britain were being referred to their foodbanks during this period was low income (28.5%), delays to benefit payments (23.7%), and benefit changes (17.7%).[x] Furthermore, the use of foodbanks rose by 52% in areas where universal credit has been rolled out, in comparison to 14% where universal credit was yet to be or had only very recently been implemented.[xi] Many of these issues in the town can certainly be linked to the wider lack of work, but also not to be neglected is the prevalence of low wage employment. After all, figures recently released by the Department of Work and Pensions show that nearly 40% of universal credit claimants in Oldham are in paid work.[xii]

Given the high rates of deprivation and inequality in Oldham, it is unsurprising that austerity and changes in welfare provisioning would exert especially forceful impacts. A report by Beatty and Fothergill confirmed that older industrial towns have been hit particularly hard by welfare reform, given that the highest concentrations of welfare claimants are located in areas formerly reliant on the manufacturing industries. The report concluded that by 2020/21, the average financial loss from post-2010 welfare reforms per working age adult in Oldham will amount to £950 per year, more than double the rates for residents in the South of England (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016: 18). When considering the impact of more recent post-2015 welfare changes, Oldham ranked as the 7th most negatively impacted place in England, with an average loss to a working adult of £490 per annum (ibid.: 19).

It is unsurprising that these changes generated significant concern for residents. But, in contrast to the orthodoxies of much contemporary national news coverage and punditry, for our respondents these issues emerged in the interviews as being far more immediate and prominent than Brexit or immigration related concerns. As one British Bangladeshi man stated with concerned alarm,

> Austerity has scared the living daylights out of people…People are very scared of what is going to happen.

Oldham Council's 'efficiency plan' for 2016/17-2019/20 stated that between 2009/10 and 2016/17, budget cuts of £192 million had been enacted with a further £45 million

in spending reductions expected by 2020.[xiii] One South Asian resident reflected upon the impact of such cuts upon the voluntary sector in which they worked,

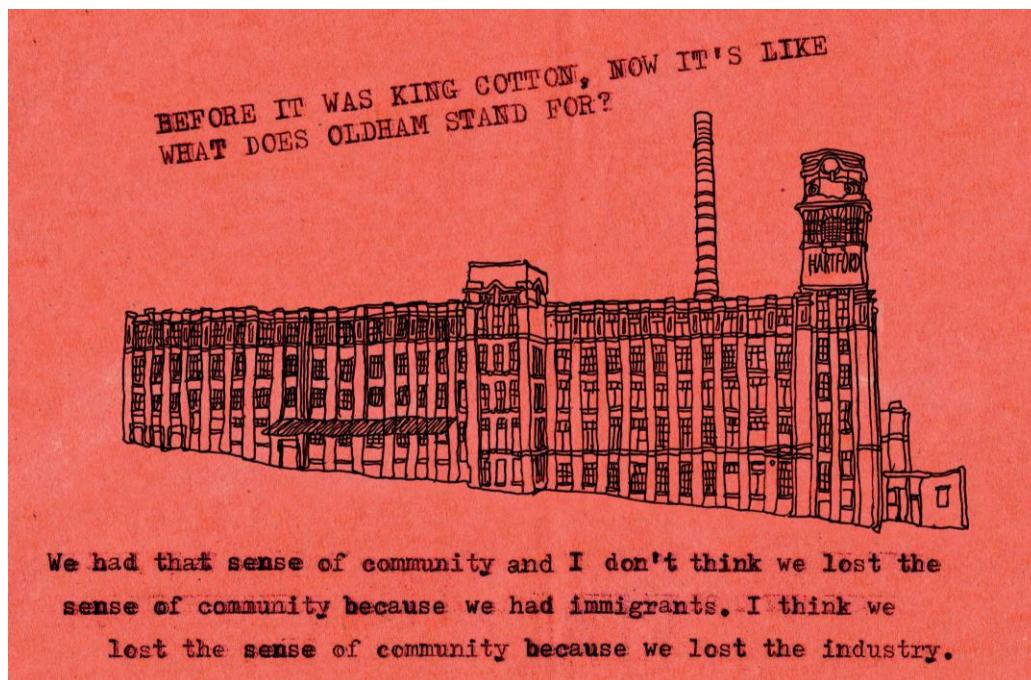> We have seen [voluntary] groups who were doing similar things to us – totally wiped out – totally gone…All the welfare cuts, the local community projects, anything to do with the community are all gone…The voluntary sectors have all just shrunk.

Once again, while all groups in Oldham are suffering from these policy shifts, Black and minority ethnic people will be disproportionately impacted, given their greater levels of poverty and deprivation. For example, important research conducted by the Runnymede Trust attests that universal credit is having a disproportionate impact on women and Black and minority ethnic households. The research also shows that Black women who are in employment are set to see their benefits cut on average by £1,500 per year (Hall et al., 2017; see also Allen, 2018). Similarly, 10.7% of households in Oldham are in fuel poverty (i.e. where fuel costs are either above the national average or where household spending on fuel would leave a household with an income below the poverty line).[xiv] But again, figures released by the government in 2017 shows that in comparison to White households, Black and minority ethnic households are more likely to experience fuel poverty.[xv]

Summary

As this section of the report reveals, deprivation and inequality are widespread in Oldham, encompassing wide geographies of the town and various racial and ethnic groups. Relative to both Greater Manchester and the nation as a whole, Oldham fares poorly across a range of social and economic indicators. It is clear, however, that the dominant discourses of the 'left behind' serve to obscure understandings of contemporary inequality. While it is the case that 'White working class' communities have suffered through changes such as deindustrialisation, austerity and welfare reform, they are not alone. In fact, the detrimental effects of these changes and the inequities they have produced reveal the multiracial composition of poorer communities. Indeed, Black and minority ethnic groups, in comparison with the White British population, often suffer disproportionate disadvantages, particularly in areas such as employment and housing. The section concluded with a discussion of the impacts of austerity, which represented for many of our participants the greatest social and political threat of the time, rather than Brexit or immigration. Once again, while austerity is having devastating impacts on Oldham as a whole, it is minority communities that will unevenly bear the brunt of these policies.

2. Racism, Segregation and Multiculture

BEFORE IT WAS KING COTTON, NOW IT'S LIKE WHAT DOES OLDHAM STAND FOR?

We had that sense of community and I don't think we lost the sense of community because we had immigrants. I think we lost the sense of community because we lost the industry.

Introduction

As we have argued throughout this report, the invocation of a 'White working class' that has been marginalised by processes of social and economic change is central to the 'left behind' narrative. Within this broader national discourse, the White working class emerge as the central protagonist in an account of both local and national decline. And, in the same way that the positioning of the 'left behind' as uniquely disadvantaged ignores the disproportionate levels of deprivation and inequality experienced by Black and minority ethnic people, this construction of the 'left behind' also excludes these same groups in how it imagines and remembers conceptions of place, community, and nation.

This discourse is problematic in a number of key ways. First, it erases the social and economic contributions of Black and minority ethnic communities as well as silencing their experiences of life both locally and nationally. In casting the 'White working class' as key victims of recent processes, it ignores the losses – in income, jobs, industry, and community resources – to which minority groups have also been subjected. Second, it is clear that the public sympathy lent to what is called the 'White working class' rests on racially exclusionary principles: the suggestion here is that the struggles of the 'White working class' are indeed politically unacceptable, but in so doing, it elides the struggles of minorities as well as disregarding considerations of racism and its long histories. In nostalgically recalling a supposed 'golden age' for both local communities and for the nation, it ignores how, for Black and minority ethnic residents, any such 'golden' age was compromised by racial discrimination and exclusion (see Virdee 2014). Indeed, in some important ways, the very securities that the 'White working class' are deemed to have exclusively lost – a robust welfare state and the availability of industrial work and housing options – were predicated on the exclusion of Black and minority ethnic groups deemed less worthy and deserving of these resources (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018; Shilliam, 2018). Thirdly, the present privileging of the 'White working class' as *the* 'left behind' also ignores the persistence of racism in the contemporary period. Here, discourses which seek to explain the marginalisation of

Black and minority ethnic groups through recourse to notions of cultural difference and 'self-segregation' evades how racism continues to shape how the nation and its locales are imagined, while simultaneously reproducing tired racist stereotypes about 'culture'.

This section of the report seeks accordingly to reassert racism's importance to these discussions. First, it considers how the views of our respondents help point to a more complicated past, one that demonstrates that Black and minority ethnic communities also had a stake in the loss of modes of working and living that are lamented within the 'left behind' narrative. It also demonstrates the continuing significance of racism in communities such as Oldham. Furthermore, the following discussion draws broader attention to racialised notions of home, community and nation, all of which are reinforced by 'left behind' narratives and have become particularly forceful themes in guiding contemporary politics. These are themes that, if further consolidated, gravely threaten the possibilities of the more inclusive multiethnic cultures being cultivated in our towns and cities[xvi].

Racism and imagining 'community'
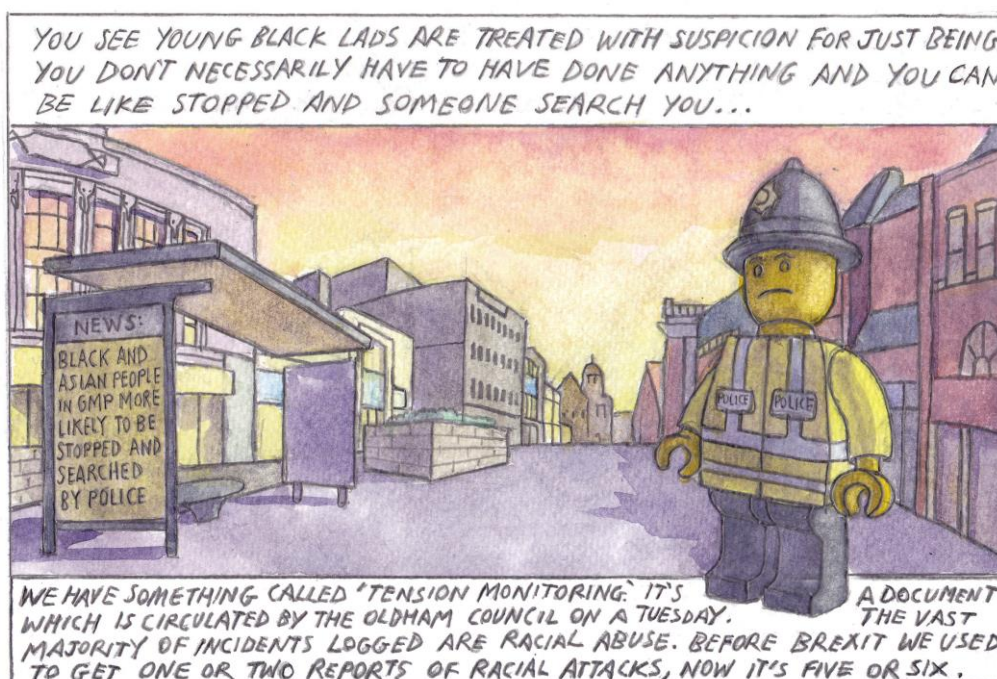
The accounts provided by Black and minority ethnic residents in Oldham offer insight into a more complex reading of the past than conventionally found within 'left behind' narratives. Unsurprisingly, like their White peers, the Black and minority research participants involved in this project lamented deindustrialisation, the passing of a more robust economy, and the dismantling of public service provision. Some of them also bemoaned what they described as a loss of community and togetherness. This is important, as this is a sentiment often identified within accounts of the 'left behind' that is all too often narrated as if it were something only experienced by the 'White working class'.

However, for these participants the past is also remembered not necessarily as a time of greater prosperity, but in terms of stark discrimination and disadvantage. Many of the Black and minority ethnic participants recalled experiences of racism, be it by classmates and school authorities, being abused by neighbours, and/or being targeted by both the police and the far right. As one British Pakistani female bluntly stated, 'I don't think you could have grown up in Oldham and not had some kind of racial abuse

or racial experience.' Respondents also drew attention here to the erasure of both their own stake and role in the history of the town and their ongoing, distinctly contemporary experiences of racism.

Some historical specificity is important here. While the post-war industrial era is often referenced as a more prosperous society that has been 'left behind', for Black and minority ethnic residents it was an era shaped by institutional racism (as well as being premised on the disproportionate concentration of wealth as engendered by the preceding period of formal colonialism). During the 1950s and 1960s, many major employers had adopted 'colour bar' policies that restricted the employment of people racialised as non-White to just 5% of the workforce (see Virdee, 2014 and Shilliam, 2018). These policies were commonplace in Britain's textile mills and iron foundries, where Black and Asian people were often restricted to unskilled jobs which usually paid less than the skilled jobs typically occupied by White workers. Black and Asian workers were also refused the same breaks as their White colleagues, as well as being refused training and being subjected to segregated shift patterns where contact with White workers was limited (Duffield, 1988). Discriminatory 'last in, first out' policies also offered some White workers a relative degree of protection from redundancy. Such arrangements were often the result of agreements between employers and trade unionists (Kalra, 2000; Virdee 2014). In Oldham, South Asian mill workers found themselves restricted to lower-paid semi-skilled and manual work, as well as the night shift. Not only did South Asian mill workers find themselves concentrated in an industry that had already started to decline, they were also concentrated in specific jobs that were increasingly coming under particular threat from redundancy (Kalra, 2000).

Oldham's history tells us that deindustrialisation and the long-term unemployment that followed was a multiracial class experience. As one of our research participants aptly put it, 'the working class in general' were 'left behind' when the last of the cotton mills closed its doors in 1998. However, there was a sense that this was not always reflected in the collective memories of the town. Many of the reports produced by the Council offer timelines of Oldham's history that mark the arrival of immigrant workers – Irish, Polish, Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi – and the fact that the demise of the textile industry impacted heavily on these communities. In the town centre there is a local timeline which visually narrates the town's history - traversing its founding, the industrial boom, anti-Irish riots in 1861, and the election of Churchill as a local MP in 1900. However, one British Pakistani resident in our study claimed that there is little mention of the contribution of the town's South Asian population until the 1990s, and when it is indeed mentioned, it is in relation to the town's *cultural* diversity. She felt that this reflected a general exclusion of Black and minority ethnic residents in the town's material and symbolic economy: 'Like [only] once in every five years do they [i.e. the local authority] realise that the town is diverse'.

It was of course not only in reference to the past that Black and minority ethnic participants articulated a sense of exclusion. This is evident, both in relation to the racialised inequalities outlined in the previous section, but also in the everyday experiences of residents. One participant, a 'mixed race' male in his 30s explained how in comparison to what were deemed as being more cosmopolitan spaces such as Manchester, racial differences seemed to be a more visible source of tension, even in very mundane settings.

> So I am mixed race. My wife is [South Asian]. When I walk around in the centre of Oldham holding her hand, that will get looks. When we are at a restaurant and there is me, my wife, and then my White mum, people again look.

Another important issue that was raised related to policing, with many residents drawing attention to frustrations with their impression of how police stop and search powers are used/overused, targeting people racialised as non-White.[xvii] Despite there being an overall decline in the number of recorded stop and searches at the national level, Stopwatch have recently reported that the disproportionate use of stop and search in Greater Manchester had increased between 2016 and 2017. [xviii] In comparison to White people, Black people were four times and Asian people just over twice as likely to be stopped and searched by the police. At the national level, there were 4 stop and searches for every 1,000 White people, compared with 29 stop and searches for every 1,000 Black people in 2016/17.[xix]

As national statistics reveal, there remain significant disparities in terms of the overrepresentation of Black and minority people in all aspects of the criminal justice system,[xx] with stop and search remaining a particularly iconic issue in this context. As the above individual again explained,

> I am now old enough to remember the stop and search laws…Young Pakistani men and the young Bengali men, and the East Africans, they have been put through something like – they expect you to be a thief or some sort of criminal, [treating] you like some extra threat to the country!

Some local people we spoke to did suggest that policing had improved since the 2001 riots, noting examples of good community policing, but they also stressed that there was still room for improvement. A British Bangladeshi male participant recalled here a telling incident.

> A murder happened in the area where I come from in Glodwick about 8 years ago [and] there were police officers at the scene, people just walking past asking them what had happened. [The police officers said] – 'come on blacks get off, shoo off. This is none of your business'. So that was the response 8 years ago. So when they were pushed back the police became their enemy. This time round we had community officers and the community has gone out to them with cups of tea, we had opened the mosque up to them to use our facilities and the relationship has been like this. Why? Because the police officer was explaining to them in a nice manner what had happened and what information they had and were they able to relate…Recently we had a murder in Oldham in front of my mosque. The police didn't get in touch but we knew what to do because we have done that and been there and we know exactly how to handle the situation.

In wider media and political discourse there has all too often been a tendency to limit the discussion of racism to something that occurs at an individual level predicated on notions of personal hatred, malice and intent, thus obfuscating the nature and impact of structural and institutional racism. However, as both statistical evidence and the locational narratives of our research participants clearly show, institutional racism continues to be keenly felt as being the level at which racisms remain most salient in terms of generating structural outcomes. The enduring legacy of the institutional was also very much present when many of our participants spoke about local housing issues.

Segregated space

Central to the way in which race is narrated and understood in relation to Oldham (both by people in the town but particularly those outside of it) is through reference to the 2001 riots and the issue of racial and ethnic segregation. The riots occurred in a wider context in which the far right BNP had made political inroads in local elections and race had been further politicised through the inflammatory trope that there existed 'no-go' areas for White residents in the town (Ritchie, 2001). There were also disturbances in both Burnley and Bradford that summer, and these events were central to key national policy shifts away from a perceived multiculturalism commitment towards an emphasis on 'integration' (Back et al., 2002). The Cantle Report, which was the official Government report into the riots, gave particular attention to the notion that communities were living 'parallel lives', with an emphasis being placed on the alleged 'self-segregation' and cultural 'otherness' of South Asian Muslim communities (Jones, 2013; Thomas, 2011). Such arguments also featured heavily in the more recent 2016 Casey Review which perpetuated the view that 'White working class' people are victims of economic and cultural marginalisation, while at the same time depicting the struggles of South Asian Muslim communities as being primarily a result of their own cultural orientations and a purported refusal to 'integrate' (see Bassel 2016; Hirsch 2016).

Again, the recurring prominence of such arguments works to effect many erasures. It sidelines the fact that these minority communities have also been subjected to various social class pressures and inequality, while also downplaying historic and contemporary forms of racism by interpreting social and spatial exclusion chiefly as an expression of cultural preferences. Over the course of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, a number of studies have shown that it was in fact racist housing policies, particularly in the public sector, that significantly contributed to residential segregation within towns and cities across the country.[xxi] For instance, in the early 1990s, the Commission for Racial Equality found the local authority in Oldham guilty of operating a segregationist housing policy.[xxii] The 2001 Ritchie report also criticised Oldham Council for a history of institutional racism in education and housing. The report also pointed to the persistent presence of everyday racism, an everyday experience that significantly shapes the housing choices that minority residents make.

Questions of racial and ethnic segregation have remained a key national political concern since the 2001 riots, even though influential academic research has in fact suggested that segregation is generally declining across the country (Finney and Simpson, 2009), including in Oldham (Phillips, 2008). Despite this, it is hard to deny that Oldham remains a segregated space. In Oldham, Bangladeshi and Pakistani populations are disproportionately concentrated in the wards adjacent to the town centre, with the majority of the Pakistani communities residing in the wards of Werneth, St. Mary's and Alexandra, while Coldhurst is home to the majority of the town's Bangladeshi population, with a growing concentration in Shaw. The following maps (figures 4 and 5) illustrate the highly uneven concentration of both Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups in the town. The location quotient maps based on 2011 figures indicate where groups demonstrate disproportionate levels of clustering relative to the distribution of the general population.

While participants noted how some upwardly mobile Asian residents are, unsurprisingly, now 'more able to make decisions about moving out into parts of Chadderton and parts of Royton', racial and ethnic segregation remains a defining feature of Oldham life. For example, a report by Oldham Council observed that while between 2001 and 2011 the rate of segregation was decreasing for Black and to a lesser extent, Indian populations, the decline in segregation for Pakistani and Bangladeshi populations was very small.[xxiii] The Council report concluded that 'index of dissimilarity reveals 'extremely high levels of ethnic segregation, with Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups particularly high and not improving significantly' (Oldham Council, 2016: 17). Exacerbating this is the important fact that the segregation of White British and White Other communities in Oldham actually increased between 2001 and 2011, meaning they are now slightly more likely to live in less racially diverse areas[xxiv] (see figure 6).

Racial and ethnic segregation remains therefore a significant feature of the life of Oldham. Deborah Phillips has noted how histories of settlement and racism in northern Pennine towns have contributed to a context in which there exists 'a clear racialization of space within these towns, which lives in people's imaginations and influences decisions about where to live' (2008: 184). Simpson, Ahmed and Phillips (2008) studied attitudes towards race and housing in Oldham and Rochdale amongst young White, Pakistani and Bangladeshi residents. They found that most young people's popular geography is heavily contoured by ethnic demarcations, routinely naming and characterising areas as 'Asian' areas, White areas, and mixed areas' (ibid.: 3). The authors also identified here a desire among younger Pakistani and Bangladeshi residents to move into more ethnically mixed areas. However, family and community ties, alongside the more significant presence of constrained housing options and pronounced fear of racism, restricted these movements (ibid.: 3-4).

Different conclusions than ordinarily reached in popular punditry are accordingly available here. While racial and ethnic segregation is clearly evident and widely recognised, the emphasis on 'race' as the primary basis of social and spatial divisions, does risk, particularly within media representations of the town, obscuring the deep class divisions also active here. Residents frequently made reference to the stark levels of class-based segregation that exist in Oldham, between deprived inner-wards populated by both poorer White and Black and minority ethnic residents, and more affluent 'White' outer-areas such as Saddleworth. As one of the White British male participants put it,

Oldham itself is quite far-flung, it has – an inner city or inner urban area, which is quite highly populated and very traditional housing – lots of terraced housing and things like that. And then as you go out, it becomes quite an affluent place but very spread out into the hills and it's in the hills and the countryside that it would be nearly all Whites.

Herein, while residents did not dispute the challenges of segregation, they were often frustrated that social class factors were rarely considered when evaluating such processes and they also resented what they viewed as the stigmatisation of Oldham and the overbearing legacy of the riots.

In the wake of the unrest, the town came to be stigmatised as a 'riot' town (Alexander, 2004; Jones, 2013; Thomas, 2011). This has been an image that has proven hard to shake. A South Asian Muslim male working in the voluntary sector explained,

In the national press, as soon as you mentioned Oldham, you had visions and pictures of a burning car outside the Live and Let Live Pub in Glodwick, because that was the image of the riots. So almost everything when you mentioned Oldham in the national press seemed to start with the riots of May 2001 and that image is the image of Oldham to so many people.

Another White male resident, working for a local faith-based organisation, felt that Oldham and its residents were subjected to media portrayals that failed to recognise the improvements that had been made.

When I look at the riots in 2001 and how the people were portrayed who were living in Oldham, it made us the worst people to live on the face of the world… We do have issues in our town, we are not hiding away from that but I do think there is a slight improvement and that it still needs some improvement but the media is the media.

This and similar frustrations are of course well evidenced. As Jones (2013) found through interviews with community cohesion/integration workers across the country, Oldham possessed a national reputation for racial conflict and unrest that had become deeply entrenched. The seemingly indelible character of such national views do in some important ways reflect very real challenges faced by the town, but the preponderance of such impressions also risk normalising the image of Oldham as a place only of conflict, as opposed to one which also sustains circuits of conviviality and fluent cohabitation.

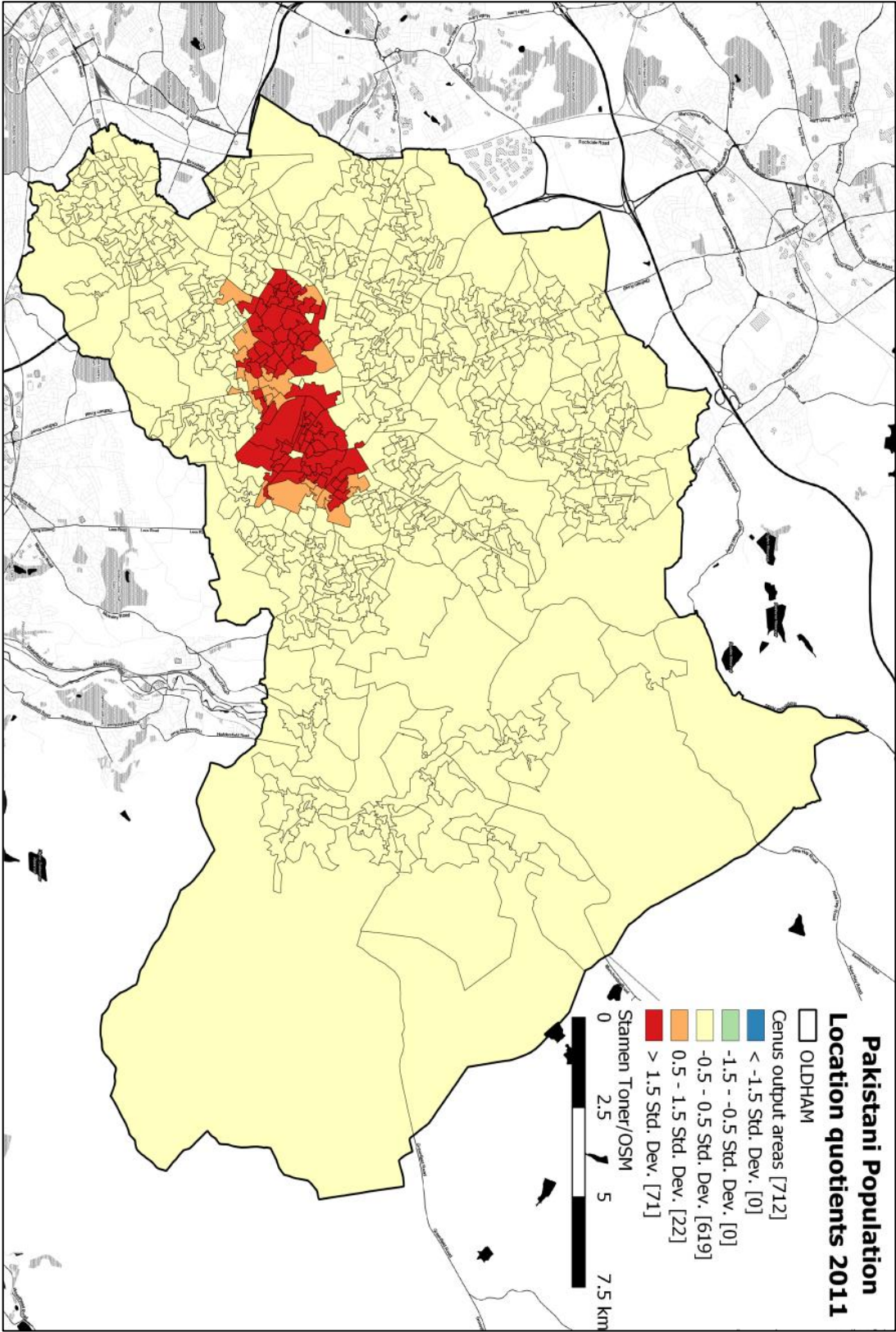**Figure 4: Location Quotients the Pakistani population in Oldham, 2011[xxv]**

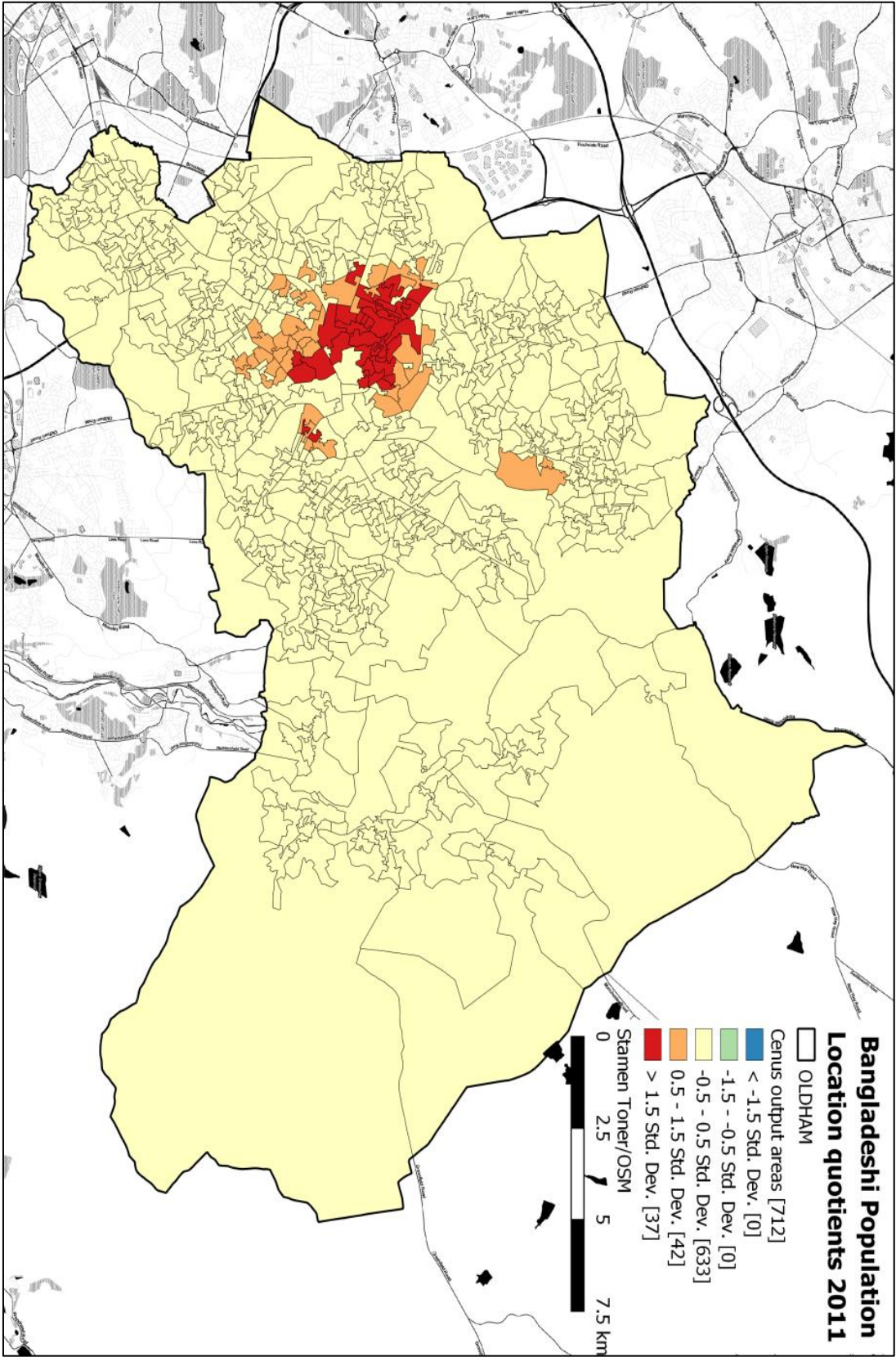**Figure 5: Location Quotients for the Bangladeshi population in Oldham, 2011[xxvi]**
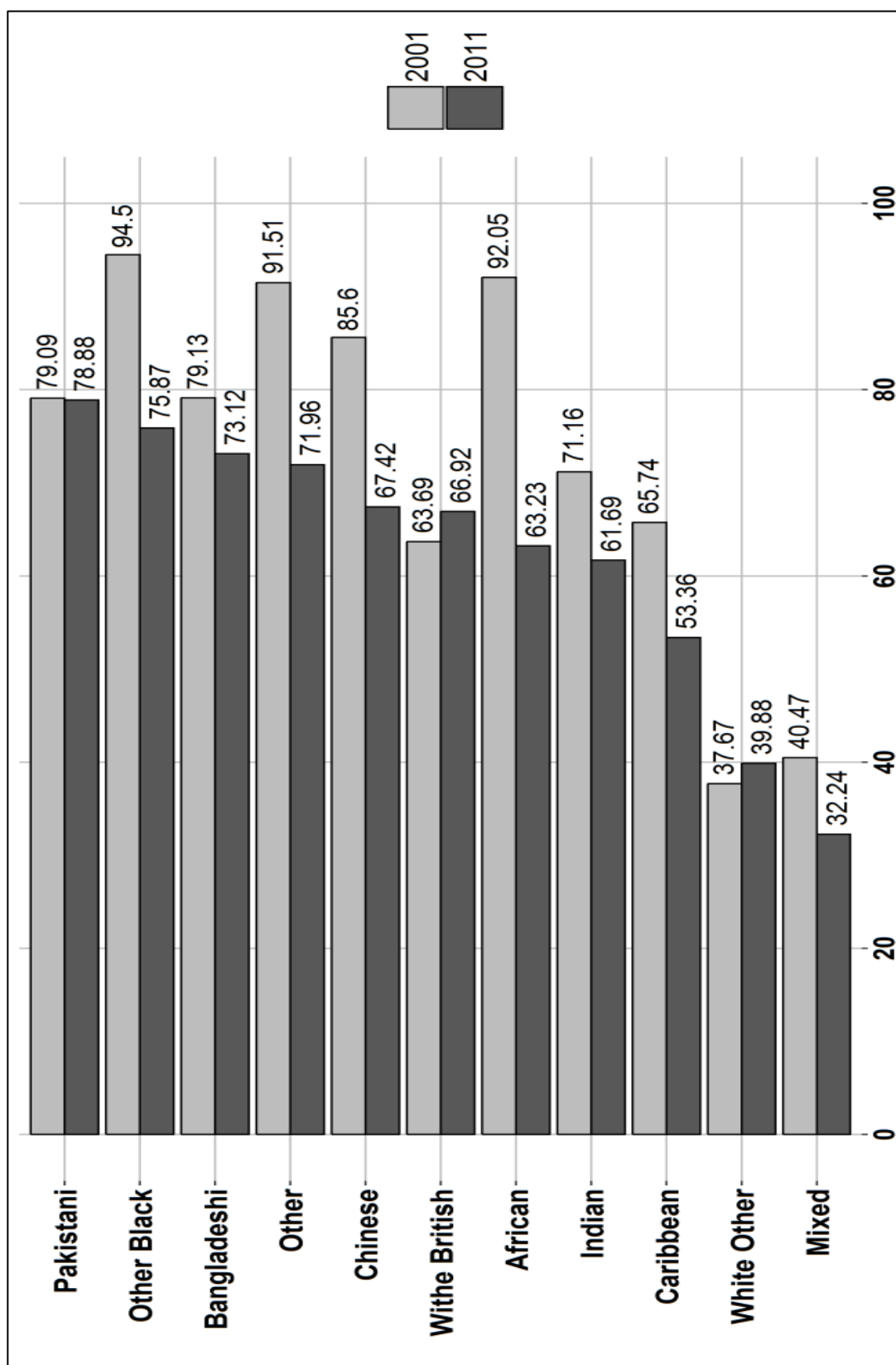
Figure 6: Change in ethnic group segregation in Oldham, 2001-2011[xxvii]

	2001	2011
Pakistani	79.09	78.88
Other Black	94.5	75.87
Bangladeshi	79.13	73.12
Other	91.51	71.96
Chinese	85.6	67.42
Withe British	63.69	66.92
African	92.05	63.23
Indian	71.16	61.69
Caribbean	65.74	53.36
White Other	37.67	39.88
Mixed	40.47	32.24

Multiculture, conviviality and conflict

As mentioned in the introduction to the report, the participants in this study rebuked the political privileging of a 'left behind' 'White working class' and refused, by further implication, to endorse anti-immigrant or racist sentiments. However, that is not to say they did not recognise the impact these issues have exerted in the town, and the challenges they pose for creating a more sustainable, culturally diverse locale. In fact, Oldham was frequently contrasted unfavourably to larger cities such as Manchester, which were perceived as being 'multicultural' and 'cosmopolitan'. More specifically, this comparison was made in ways that generally overlooked the nature of racism and racial inequality in metropolitan areas. One resident, a Muslim man working in the voluntary sector, explained,

> Whereas in Manchester it's a much more cosmopolitan feel to the place – yes there are pockets again in Manchester of where the Asian community are living near [where] the Afro-Caribbean community may also live but there is much more of a general acceptance of the difference than there is here in Oldham. And that tension has come perhaps because there are such segregated areas and because people feel as though […] their own traditions are being eroded and they blame the other for that erosion.

Research participants also generally shared the view that segregation, a culture of blame, and a sense of loss and erosion were barriers to creating more positive interethnic and interracial relations in Oldham. As one White participant who also worked in the voluntary sector stated,

> How do you bring kind of the Bangladeshi, the White working class, you know, the older, the younger populations together and bridge between all those things, how do you do that?

This kind of general lament was gestured at by many of the participants. Pointing in turn to a frustrating sense of a mutually reinforcing bind: namely, if the 'left behind' and similar narratives is both predicated upon but also reinforces a divided and exclusionary sense of community, residents in Oldham recognised that such divisions might prove increasingly hard to address. This kind of polarisation was made ably apparent in a recent report by Hope Not Hate (Carter, 2018) into the hardening of divisions across post-industrial towns like Oldham.

In the wake of the 2001 riots there was a well-documented spike in racist attacks, but the 2001 Ritchie report pointed in fact to a longer history of racial violence in Oldham.[xxviii] Unsurprisingly, racially motivated attacks continue to be a feature of the town[xxix]. In the wake of the riots, significant efforts were made to improve 'community cohesion', a concept that was itself not uncontroversial or uncontested (Jones, 2013). It however remained the case that the divided nature of the town was seen as militating against more inclusive conceptions of local place and community. Indeed, survey research carried out in 2013 by IPSOS Mori on behalf of Oldham Council drew attention to a sustained sense of pessimism in the town regarding community relations. For example, 29% of residents disagreed that 'their neighbourhood is a place where people of different ethnic backgrounds get on well together', compared to 22% in 2006 and 2010. Only 35% also agreed that 'having a different mix of people in their neighbourhood makes it an enjoyable place to live'.[xxx] In 2017, Ted Cantle, the author of the Home Office's report into the aforementioned 'community cohesion' after the riots, was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying that Oldham remains one of Britain's most segregated towns and that attempts to foster integration where some of the rioting took

place had been 'lukewarm at best and probably non-existent at worst'.[xxxi] Just the previous year, Oldham Council stated that,

> There appears to be little White and Asian social mixing, as expressed by dual heritage or mixed ethnicity households. Geographical segregation, particularly between White and Pakistani and White and Bangladeshi, is exceptionally high and showing little sign of improvement (2016: 1).

Paul Thomas' (2011) study of community cohesion initiatives in Oldham and Rochdale also noted important barriers, with the young White people present during sessions particularly reticent to engage in cross-ethnic interaction. Residents in our project also pointed to the ways in which austerity and funding cuts had undermined attempts to promote better relations. A White woman working in the voluntary sector identified a decline in the number of community events that worked towards these ends.

> So over years gone by Oldham had quite diverse festivals and…you know, cultural festivals and sort of community festivals and stuff with all that money to bring people together around that belonging stuff is really not very apparent.

Similarly, a member of the local Interfaith Form told us that,

> Initially we were on something like £84,000 ['from the local authority']…That dropped to £30,000. This was before Brexit, that was from austerity, but we then have gone to other places to top up that money…So we have been able to find other ways of being funded but we went from £84,000 down to £30,000…That was the immediate impact of austerity. And we have seen groups who were doing similar things to us totally wiped out, totally gone.

Not only financial cuts but also the broader contemporary political landscape – chiefly, a context of rising Islamophobia, right-wing populism, and the fallout from the Brexit vote – were seen as producing more fractured relations between local racial and ethnic groups. A British Bangladeshi man expressed concern that his children would be subjected to racism at school and in the town's public spaces. He also noted how the increased state surveillance of Muslims evident in the controversial Prevent strategy, media stereotypes, as well as institutional and everyday racism were making life more difficult for Muslim people.

> It's really, really difficult and hard and I know people who are qualified, you know they have got Degrees and Masters and they cannot even find a job. They end up driving a taxi or they are in the catering industry…It's got worse…I think it's the media, it boils down to the media and politicians are not helping.

Another British Pakistani Muslim woman pointed to a range of negative experiences that she was aware of amongst her peers, narrating incidents of discrimination in workplaces, public services, public spaces and local transport. Indeed, as the Runnymede Trust observed in 2017, anti-Muslim sentiment has become increasingly widespread. In contemporary Britain this has created a context in which, 'Muslims experience disadvantage and discrimination in a wide range of institutions and environments, from schools to the labour market to prisons to violence on the street' (Elahi and Khan, 2017: 2).

The prospects for community relations in the wake of Brexit, 'hostile environment' immigration policies and rhetoric, and the aforementioned consolidation of right-wing populism were also identified as areas of concern. For example, one White respondent noted that the current political climate is both representative of, and contributing to, a

deepening hostility: her 'fear' being that 'we are going to be a place which is less tolerant, we are going to be a place where it's less inclusive as a country.'

These fears do seem well founded. Some of the local people who took part in our research pointed out that racist attacks and abuse had increased since the EU Referendum. For example, one of our White participants pointed out that:

> We have something called 'tension monitoring' and it's a document which is circulated by the Oldham Council and we feed into that any tension that we hear of and if you read about the vast majority of incidents that have been logged into this…it's a vast majority of racial abuse. Before we used to get one or two reports of racists attacks but now [after the EU Referendum] it's five or six.

Home Office statistics have shown that Lancashire Police recorded a 36% increase in the number of 'race-related' crimes in 2016/17.[xxxii] Home Office figures also show that, at the national level, the police have recorded 'unprecedented spikes' in hate crime following both the EU Referendum and recent terror attacks in Manchester and London.[xxxiii] In fact, the 29% increase in the number of hate crimes reported in comparison to the previous year was the biggest annual increase since records began. A report from the Migrants' Rights Network (2017) on the views of migrants towards Brexit and immigration policy also found that their experiences in Britain were worsening. The study, which included Oldham as a case study, revealed widespread experiences of difficulties in finding employment, alongside the pervasiveness of racism, xenophobia and hate crime.

It is important to remember however that more open and convivial relations were not completely absent from Oldham. Many of the participants mentioned the importance of their interethnic and interracial friendships and networks. For example, Black and minority ethnic participants discussed their various friendships and relationships with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds while a British Bangladeshi man pointed warmly to his son's participation in a multiracial and multiethnic football team and his own convivial relations with the other parents. While these bonds as cited were certainly of an eminently mundane nature, many participants did place a pointed emphasis on the future possibilities that such realties rehearse and, in some senses, the not insignificant progress it represents. As a White male resident in his fifties remarked:

> People can see that people are mixing together and standing together across the boundaries of religion or ethnicity...When I first came here people were telling me in the community, in the church community – 'oh we don't speak to them' – them being the Muslims. More recently they have been saying things more like – 'we are speaking to each other much more now aren't we?'…This gives them permission as it were – like the [productive] peer pressure we talked about before with the young people – they think it's happening everywhere so it's ok to do that. And it's not OK to say things like 'oh we don't talk to them anymore'.

And as a White female participant identifying as 'White working class' remarked,

> [Some] Romanians moved in across the road…Really it doesn't even bother me…To me they are my neighbours [and] I could see they didn't have anything with them – the house was pretty bare when I was talking to them outside the house…and I said 'have you got any furniture?' And she said 'no'. So we organised – it wasn't a lot but it was stuff that we didn't need and my family didn't need so I spoke to my husband's parents to see if they had anything that they didn't need and there was quite a few bits that they were going to put on

a car boot anyway. So we gave it all to them and this woman was really grateful, really thankful for it.
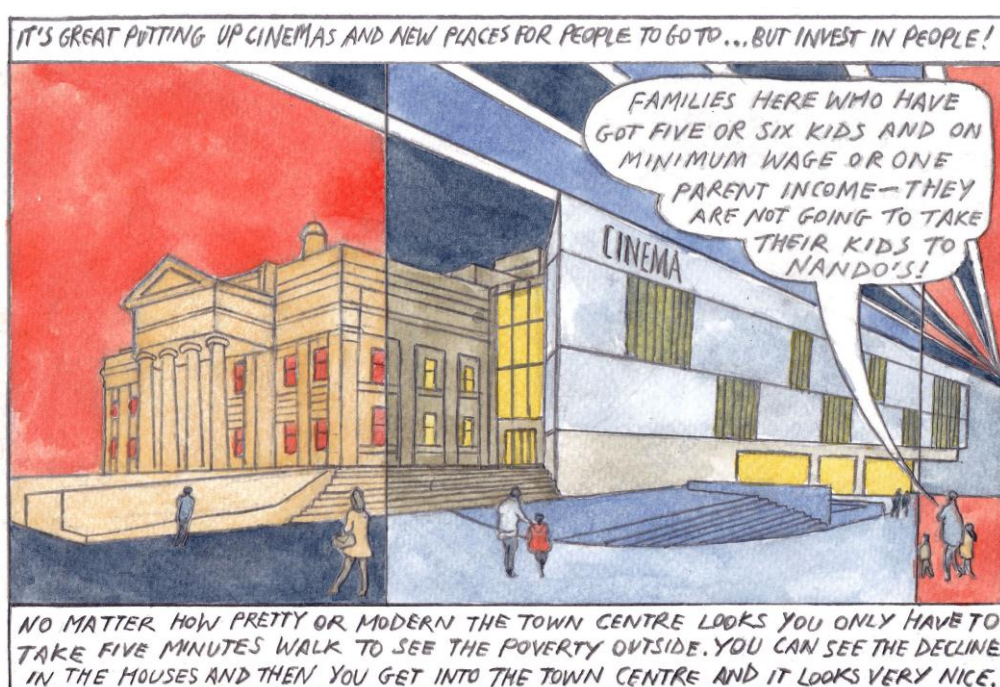
Again, while in many senses only rather mundane reflexes, these reflections do also point towards the forging of everyday senses of community in a manner that is stripped of the often tired and counter-productive emphasis, both policy and media led, on the politics of national identity and integration (Gilroy, 2004). However, as remains the prevailing focus of this chapter, there was at the same time a consistent view that there existed significant barriers to the development of more inclusive visions of community and place. For example, the same woman who had assisted the Romanian family also pointed to the negative responses that the arrival of the family had generated among some of her White neighbours who 'just view them with suspicion'. A number of studies point to the challenges of building more convivial cultures in areas where racialised senses of belonging, poverty and deprivation co-exist (Hickman et al., 2008; Thomas, 2011; Thomas et al., 2017). As is to be expected, widespread senses of economic and social insecurity – particularly when combined with social and spatial separation – does render the cultivation of more inclusive and encompassing ideas of community and place particularly difficult.

It was herein in this particular context that many residents stressed the urgent need for political and cultural authorities to prove more adept at profiling, as discussed previously, the mundane but warm local bonds that people often sustain across ethnic and racial lines – in spite of the wider socioeconomic adversity they are often contending with. These are the everyday resources that, while seemingly banal and inconsequential, do help to counteract the simplistic political recourse to a conflict-oriented fatalism about multiethnic locales as well as better destabilizing the allure of nativist political narratives currently dominant.

Summary

This section of the report has highlighted how racism and racialised exclusion are silenced within the 'left behind' narrative. To varying degrees, this narrative works to further endorse a racialised vision of both national and local community, in which Black and minority ethnic people and their experiences are marginalised. In presenting the 'White working class' as the primary victims of social and economic change, it ignores the impacts of processes such as deindustrialisation on Black and minority ethnic residents, and works to downplay both historic and contemporary manifestations of racism and exclusion. The tendency is to see only the 'White working class' as victims of economic exclusion, as opposed to the local 'Asian' communities who are denied a class status and are deemed to be adrift as a result of certain cultural predilections. Finally, events such as Brexit and the deepening of anti-immigrant and anti-minority sentiment is also working to further hamper the engendering of more convivial relations in a context of enduring inequalities and segregation.

3. Economy and Regeneration

IT'S GREAT PUTTING UP CINEMAS AND NEW PLACES FOR PEOPLE TO GO TO...BUT INVEST IN PEOPLE!

FAMILIES HERE WHO HAVE GOT FIVE OR SIX KIDS AND ON MINIMUM WAGE OR ONE PARENT INCOME—THEY ARE NOT GOING TO TAKE THEIR KIDS TO NANDO'S!

CINEMA

NO MATTER HOW PRETTY OR MODERN THE TOWN CENTRE LOOKS YOU ONLY HAVE TO TAKE FIVE MINUTES WALK TO SEE THE POVERTY OUTSIDE. YOU CAN SEE THE DECLINE IN THE HOUSES AND THEN YOU GET INTO THE TOWN CENTRE AND IT LOOKS VERY NICE.

Introduction

Implicit in the idea of the 'left behind' is a sense of distance when compared against a nationally conceived standard of social and economic progress. Particularly questionable here is the term's intimation that particular groups or areas have failed to adapt to the new realities of globalised capitalism; an implication that neglects how economic and political policies as actively enacted by powerful bodies, both private and public, were in fact central to the economic stagnation suffered by such regions. We have already established that the prevailing conception of the 'left behind' privileges a supposed 'White working class' constituency who are reported to be expressing growing levels of 'economic anxiety'. And while this report does not deny this, what is often omitted within this conception is the active role of the state in shaping contemporary inequalities and engendering these feelings across all sections of the working class. A focus on questions of economy and regeneration – which emerged as a significant area of concern amongst our participants – helps herein to more accurately reframe how to approach the economic disadvantage facing diverse communities. Such a discussion also helps reveal the limits of a political narrative that focuses so narrowly on 'cultural anxiety' – and associated issues of multiculturalism and immigration – as the 'left behind' discourse often does.

This section examines accordingly how our participants talked about the local economy, profiling the issues they identified as significant economic barriers in the town – low-wage work, the town's proximity to Manchester, and its struggle for an economic identity in the wake of deindustrialisation. It also considers how it was the specifically economic struggle facing Oldham that was often linked by participants to a sense of declining community, as residents lamented what they often saw as a economically driven weakening of the wider social fabric. Finally, it considers how participants engaged with the question of the town's regeneration, given that Oldham is in the midst of a number of redevelopment projects. Seen more broadly, there emerged amongst our respondents a shared set of concerns centred on place, economy and community, a set of concerns that was never presented as being the exclusive province of one ethnic group.

'Post-industrial' economy?

The social and cultural ramifications of economic decline have had a profound impact on people's everyday sense of place. Places like the abandoned Hartford Mill, which has been empty for decades, are iconic representations of how both deindustrialisation and the neoliberal era of globalisation have devastated the local economy. They also facilitate an on-going sense of incompleteness in terms of developing an economy that serves the residents of the town. Participants lamented how the loss of industrial jobs and better-paid work led not only to economic issues but also raised questions regarding the identity of the town. One 'mixed race' male resident in his 30s concisely explained that,

> Back in the day you would say Oldham's job was it's a Mill Town. And now it's not anymore and nothing has really replaced that.

Another resident, a South Asian Muslim male in his forties working in the voluntary sector, elaborated upon this sentiment,

> I think that for a town like Oldham…it takes time to find an area of specialism that it now needs to be well known for. Before it was King Cotton, now it's like what does Oldham stand for, if you know what I mean? Is it industry? Is it technology?

A 2016 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) Report is instructive here. The report observed how many smaller formerly industrial towns in the UK – particularly in the North of England – are contending with long-term patterns of decline (Pike et al., 2016). Oldham represents what the report identified as being an 'overshadowed city', places with 'larger neighbouring cities that host the higher-level functions, main employment sites attracting commuters and provide the principal growth opportunities' (ibid.: 2). 'Overshadowed' places, such as Oldham, are consequently identified as growing both economically and demographically at slower rates relative to other cities.

Existing in such close proximity to Manchester was deemed accordingly to be a double-edged sword for Oldham. While many enjoyed the ability to visit and work in Manchester – something the participants said was particularly important for young people, particularly in terms of access to education, employment and cultural opportunities – there was also a sense that Oldham's proximity was detrimental to the town. The extension of the Metrolink system, for instance, was sold as being a necessary part of the town's regeneration, particularly as it would connect Oldham more effectively to the broader regional economy. Some residents however offered interesting reflections about this development. One South Asian Muslim male in his thirties clarified the emergent predicament particularly well,

> You find that so many people just use [Oldham] as a dormitory…There is a big argument about whether the Metrolink actually brings people into Oldham or takes people out of Oldham…I know there is a lot of development in the town centre but no jobs are coming in now – very few…So you will have good Oldhamers working in Manchester because here they have nothing to look forward to and that is a major, I suppose, hazard for people who are going to go looking for a better future.

Highlighting this, figures published in 2017 reveal that Oldham is, as is to be expected, a 'net exporter of labour', as significantly more people commute out of the borough for work every day (36,340 people) as opposed to those who come to the town for work (29,137 people) (Oldham Council, 2017a: 2). Much of this export of labour goes to the

City of Manchester, which accounts for almost one-third of residents (11,712 people) commuting out of Oldham for work (ibid.: 12).

The aforementioned JRF report highlights how 'overshadowed' towns experiencing relative decline are often identifiable by lower proportions of younger educated residents, and a workforce characterised by lower skills and educational levels. Oldham clearly exhibits these trends. As a report by Oldham Council concluded,

> Skill levels are one of the most important determinants of socio-economic outcomes. Skills are not only an important route out of poverty for individuals, but a key driver of economic prosperity. Unfortunately Oldham has traditionally had a weak skills base, which is a legacy of generations of manual employment. This has resulted in residents finding it difficult to enter new growth sectors over recent years (2018: 22).

According to figures published in 2016, 15% of the working-age population in Oldham have no qualifications compared to 10.1% in GM and 8.4% in England. At the other end of the spectrum, only 27.6% of working-age people in Oldham have qualifications at NVQ Level 4 or above, compared to 33.6% in GM, and 36.7% across England (ibid.: 22).

Alongside restructuring, former industrial areas have also been subject to stagnating economic growth and the prevalence of low-wage work. Research by Beatty and Fothergill (2016) demonstrates that the loss of manufacturing has had a devastating impact on both public finances and historically industrial towns. The rise of low-wage work following deindustrialisation, alongside stunting the prospective provisioning of more advanced in-work skills training and portfolios, also diminishes tax revenues and suppresses pay, leading to greater public spending on in-work benefits. In 2016, average weekly wages for workplaces in Oldham were £443 per week, compared to £499 across GM and £544 in England (Oldham Council, 2018: 23). Worryingly, a report by Oldham Council (2018: 23) speculates that, 'average wages – which have been stagnant since the recession – are not expected to rise significantly in Oldham over the next 20 years'. This is a further sobering reflection of the fact that in Oldham many of the jobs available are concentrated in lower-wage sectors that offer little opportunity for career progression.

The prevalence of low-wage work in the town is partly the result of a lack of private sector growth. In the wake of economic restructuring over the last few decades, Oldham has become increasingly reliant on public sector employment. Over 20% of workers employed in the town work for either the Local Authority or the NHS (Oldham Council, 2018: 16). This represents the third highest rate of public sector employment in GM (ibid.: 18). This is reflective of the challenges the town has faced in attracting private sector investment. Between 2009 and 2015, private sector employment in Oldham grew by just 5.6% compared to 8.5% in GM and 11.4% across England (ibid.: 18). This reveals the threat posed by austerity and wages freezes and retrenchment in the public sector, making the town particularly vulnerable to funding cuts. For instance, between 2009 and 2015, public sector employment declined by 4.5% in Oldham (ibid.: 18). Some respondents questioned why the council had not been able to assist effectively in leveraging private investment, pointing to the failure of proposed investments by large retail outlets. As a British Bangladeshi male commented,

> That was the problem, this Ikea was supposed to bring jobs and Marks and Spencer to the community, but they are all going elsewhere – because the Council – I don't know what policy they are working on but they need to make it easier.

Such frustrations about the lack of private sector economic activity are certainly well grounded. According to an Oldham Council report, the UK Competitiveness Index ranked the town as 365th out of 379 local authorities nationwide (2017a: 3). This index measures the economic health of areas across indicators including institutions, infrastructure, macroeconomic framework, health, primary and higher education, and training (ibid.: 3), thus revealing the extent of the economic challenges facing Oldham. Over the next 20 years, the number of jobs in Oldham is expected to grow by only 4.2% compared to 10.6% for GM (ibid.: 8). Clearly, the absence of private sector influx and the growing dependency on an increasingly underfunded public sector poses significant long-term economic concerns.

Community and quality of life

Discussions of the economy amongst participants were invariably related to issues of community and quality of life. Recalling their own working experiences and memories of childhood, participants recalled a more buoyant economy that was inextricably linked to a stronger sense of community. One 'mixed race' male in his 30s recalled, in a remark that ably challenges some wider political orthodoxies,

> We had that sense of community and I don't think we lost the sense of community because we had immigrants. I think we lost the sense of community because we lost the industry.

Residents also recalled there being a broad array of local shops and community facilities, which it was felt had eroded over recent decades. A White female resident who had lived in the town for around 30 years narrated this perceived loss of community:

> I feel it has [declined] – from when I came here, I mean people were friendly towards me – treated me the same as them – but I think things have changed a lot. I mean even now we live in Shaw but I don't know many people in my street. It reminds me of London now, you know, when I went down to London, what a shock that was about people not knowing their neighbours. I know my

neighbours but I don't know. I would say I know about six or seven people in the street…I mean the little shops have deteriorated in Shaw. We had like a little shopping street there but now we have just got a big Asda, so that has had a big impact on the shops.

These views have a broad purchase. A citizens' survey conducted in 2013 revealed that while 53% of the population felt there had been no change in the town in the previous two years, 27% stated it had gotten worse compared to just 11% claiming Oldham was improving.[xxxiv] A sense of resignation that was summed up by a White British resident in his 50s and his frank claim that the place had gone 'downhill'.

> As I said, the centre is quite poor and I don't think there is enough being put into the redevelopment of it.

Residents pointed to aspects of the local landscape when making these assessments, particularly the prevalence of dilapidated and abandoned mills, symbolic of a broader feeling of deterioration across the town. As one British Pakistani female participant clarified this sense of resignation,

> The empty mills and the derelict streets serve as a reminder of the sort of giving up. The town that has sort of given up on itself.

It was also suggested that even much valued local institutions such as Tommyfield Market had also entered a process of decline. One White female resident in her fifties explained,

> Tommyfield Market was renowned – that is the word my mum would use. For miles around – people would come from Rochdale, from Bury, from Ashton – they would come because Tommyfield Market had that reputation…I used to go to the market every single week. Twice a week sometimes…Wednesday was the second hand market, get your bargains and then on Friday or Saturday I would go to the fruit and veg and the meat stalls and that was a regular event.

Such economic decline and the accompanying sense of a community being eroded clearly impacted on a sense of collective identity and self-esteem. Indeed, a number of the participants raised with concern this disconnect in the town, suggesting that this was particularly observable amongst a younger generation, due to what they saw as the stigmatised connotations associated with Oldham and class-based denigrations of the town. One White British woman in her 30s ruefully reflected on how this was affecting her own family.

> My daughters will never say they are from Oldham. They will say I am from Manchester. Same as my son, he won't say he is from Oldham…Because of the way people will view them…that it's just a poor run down place, you know? They say chavvy. They suppose I am a chav from Oldham.

Comments such as this, revealing the violent class stigmas increasingly ascribed to the town, also resonated with the way in which participants were aware that it was likely their children would one day leave Oldham after going to university. As an Oldham Council report explained,

> There is also some evidence to suggest that Oldham's talent is being drained – the lure of the "bright lights" of the main cities in addition to the availability of more graduate level jobs (which Oldham is in relative shortage of) are certainly impacting this. Unless there is a significant increase in the availability of local

graduate level jobs it will be difficult to address this loss of skills through migration (Oldham Council, 2018: 22).

The 2013 *You and Your Community Survey* revealed that while there were strong levels of attachment to specific neighbourhoods, levels of attachment to the town more generally were lower, particularly in the more deprived inner wards. When asked 'how strongly or not you feel you belong to Oldham borough?', 53% responded 'not very strongly or not at all strongly', with just 42% indicating 'strong' feelings of belonging. 42% is not however an insignificant amount and are worth reflecting upon. Such strong feelings of belonging were for instance strongest amongst both older residents and, importantly perhaps, higher amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi residents than White respondents. [xxxv] Many of our own research participants similarly expressed an attachment to Oldham. As the same White British resident in her 30s quoted above explained,

> We have got a school reunion coming up for 20 years and we have got a kind of Facebook messenger thing going and a lot of them are saying 'oh, I've left Oldham, thank God, and I will never move back, it's an awful place, its gone right downhill', blah, blah. Whereas I was like 'Oldham has been a good home to me'. You know, I've got my family there. I've had children there, and I think the children have had quite a good childhood.

Despite an awareness of the economic challenges that it was felt make the town a difficult place to make the lives people would hope to, many of our participants noted the importance of such family and friendship ties that rooted people in place. The same respondent elaborated that,

> I have always said Oldham has been a good home to me so I do want to stay here and I am hoping to get a good job but it just feels like hopeless.

So too, a British Bangladeshi man in his 40s affirmed a profound sense of responsibility to Oldham:

> I wish that my kids would stay in Oldham and not move out because, despite all the negative things, Oldham has still given us so much more and I think you should never forget your roots. Oldham is my roots. Oldham is my foundation. And I wish my kids would make a good life here and give something back to Oldham.

Evidently, Oldham continues to elicit strong and indeed moving attachments from local residents. This should not be overlooked in the midst of more defeatist accounts of the town's contemporary struggles and further confirms the vital importance of an inclusive regeneration where residents and their families feel valued and are able to build a rewarding life, a life that further fosters such deep forms of attachment.

Regenerating community

We have seen how the designation of certain places as 'left behind' can operate as a form of stigma, by which towns and cities are encouraged to 'catch up' with higher-profile and better-resourced locales. This can lead to one-size-fits-all models of regeneration being rolled out to urban areas that often face uniquely complex and nuanced challenges. Importantly, the JRF report into the struggles facing so called 'overshadowed' cities such as Oldham suggests that policymakers would do well to avoid replicating models employed by their higher-profile and better-resourced neighbouring areas (Pike et al., 2016: 3).

In recent years, Oldham has invested significantly in regeneration, particularly in the town centre. The new town hall development includes a cinema, bars, and restaurants, while there has also been investment in the 'Independent Quarter' – an area of the town centre where the local authority has pledged to prioritise local independent and family-run businesses. Improvements have been made to the town's library and a new leisure centre has been constructed. There has also been investment in higher education, with the University Campus Oldham opening in 2012. In general terms, the Oldham Plan 2017-22 aims to create a more inclusive local economy, alongside more effectively coordinated public services, and enhanced community engagement and participation.[xxxvi]

In spring 2018, Oldham Council announced a £350 million investment plan designed to further regenerate the town centre by 2035. Adhering to what is now a very familiar urban redevelopment model, the plan focuses on building town centre apartments, a new hotel, modern retail and office space, and a new multi-storey car park. Alongside this, and the proposed demolition of Queen Elizabeth Hall, investment has been mooted in Tommyfield Market with a new market hall, a new civic centre, police station, court, and an upgrading of the Coliseum Theatre.[xxxvii] These investments, it is hoped, will kick-start the local economy.[xxxviii] This has however been a source of contention. In May 2018, Labour Council Leader, Sean Fielding, stated that the plans 'fall far short of what is required to give a compelling vision for Oldham'. Particular reproach was reserved for plans to create a new civic centre, Fielding arguing that they 'cannot be justified in the context of the cuts being made to the vital services accessed by those which my councillor colleagues and I have been elected to represent.'[xxxix]

In this wider context, some participants questioned whether the type of approach to regeneration currently being undertaken in Oldham was appropriate for the challenges facing the town. While appreciating the investment, participants pointed to the high costs of attending the cinema and some of the new restaurants, particularly given the high rates of deprivation and inequality in the town. Similarly, there was also a sense of discontent that so much of the investment seemed to be focused in the town centre, to the neglect of poorer neighbourhoods. As one British Pakistani female resident asked,

> What are they regenerating? Because you know the regeneration is centred in the town centre, which is great, there are places now for people to go. But at the same time, you know, who thinks these things through because families here, you know, you have got five or six kids and living on minimum wage or on one parent income. They are not going to take their kids, you know, to Nando's and feed them…No matter how pretty or how modern the town centre looks, you only have to take a five minute walk down it to see the poverty outside…You go through Oldham and you can see the decline in the houses and then you get into the town centre and it looks very nice but then you walk down five or ten minutes and you are back into the wasteland.

A related concern was the belief expressed by the same participant that there is a need to target investment more broadly.

> It's great putting up new cinemas and new places for people to go to but invest in people.

Indeed, as the local authority have themselves recently pointed out, Oldham suffers from an aging housing stock, high rates of overcrowding, and significant disparities between housing costs and income, which, despite lower house and rental prices, still

makes access to affordable housing a significant challenge for many (Oldham Council, 2018: 36).

Concerns such as those expressed here are especially pertinent in the context of on-going cuts, widely seen by participants as working to undermine regeneration efforts. Concomitant to the town's investment in regeneration, other community facilities are facing closure and retrenchment as a result of austerity and funding cuts. For instance, the new flats proposed for Trafalgar Square as approved in July 2018 are to be built on the old site of the Robin Hill Bangladeshi Youth Club, which is to be demolished. As one resident quoted in the local newspaper stated,

> Coldhurst is the most deprived area in the whole of the UK and the loss of a youth centre like this is a massive thing for the community. There are no other youth clubs in the proximity.[xl]

Another White resident from our research contrasted the youth centre she remembered growing up in Hathershaw, and the activities this provided, with the current absence of such provisions. Another resident we interviewed – a White male who worked for a local faith-based organisation – reinforced this lament,

> The cut backs in youth services [are a] massive, massive disadvantage to the young people. Nowhere to go, street corners, and we used to have so much in Oldham, so many youth clubs, all of that has been scrapped.

Austerity in particular can be seen as severely undermining any attempts at regeneration, given the impact it has had on public services and community resources. Participants also worried that Brexit might lead to a further reduction in available funds, as they pointed to the importance of EU monies being an important source of investment in Oldham and the North-West region more generally. Furthermore, there were concerns that the devolution of powers to city regions may not deliver the types of investment that it was often presented as doing. As one White British female stated,

> A lot of EU money came into areas like Oldham and we really benefited from that and I really cannot see the Westminster elite putting that sort of money in that is needed. All this talk of the Northern Powerhouse, it's absolutely rubbish. It's just words.

This was particularly disconcerting for residents given what they perceived as the scale of the challenges and the size of the investment required. As another White resident who worked in the voluntary sector concluded with exasperation,

> It's going to affect absolutely millions and costs billions to get us out of this mess.

These are all of course timely frustrations that are beginning to receive wider political coverage. A recent 2018 Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) report into economic justice clarified particularly well the sheer scope of the long-term neglect that needs to be confronted.[xli] The report points to the challenges presented by the many decades across which economic policy has lacked a clear strategy beyond a basic act of faith in 'the market' and during which any gains have been extremely uneven, failing in turn to significantly improve the lives of the people and places most exposed to adverse market conditions. The report also notes the sluggish growth since the recession of 2007-8, with the UK being one of only five 'developed' countries where average earnings are below 2007 levels. The report also calls attention to widening gaps between the rich and poor and the prevalence of low-wage and insecure work. It calls in turn for an economy built on principles of dignity, a commitment to tackling

exclusion, and eradicating poverty. In addition to the arguments put forward by the IPPR, we would also certainly contend that any attempts to regenerate places such as Oldham must also address as an equal priority the enduring nature of racial inequality as discussed in detail in Section 2 of this report. Indeed, it was the need for such reforms and renewal that the participants in this study have expressed so resolutely. It is our view that proponents of the nativist 'left behind' narrative offer an illusory, if not exclusionary, sense of empowerment that diverts attention away from these challenges.

Summary

This section has highlighted the importance our participants placed on the themes of economy, community and regeneration. In listening to their views, a wider conception of the 'left behind' emerges in relation to economic challenges. Through giving their discussion of the economy and economic policy more concerted attention, this section of the report makes apparent the value of a discussion of the 'left behind' that avoids an all too narrowing and incendiary preoccupation with themes of immigration and multiculturalism. A focus on economy and regeneration reveal how multiracial and multiethnic communities are facing significant constraints as a result of long-term economic changes, which, while shaped by globalization, are also a product of state policies and active neglect. While residents were pleased to see the investment which regeneration brings, they raised important questions about the types of development being enacted. Regeneration projects demonstrate particular priorities and forms of commitment. Residents accordingly demanded that investment be shared across Oldham as opposed to being limited to the town centre, while also stressing the need to invest in the core needs of people. A shared emphasis was made apparent regarding the need for a greater availability of secure, well-paid work, adequate housing, and community resources such as youth services that would allow local residents to develop a meaningful sense of place and community. While the 'left behind' narrative, as it stands, compounds a divisive framing of politics and identities, this discussion of the economy and hope reveals the types of issues and local discussion around which alternative alignments and priorities might be given the political attention it deserves.

4. Politics and Civil Society

Introduction

Central to the 'left behind' narrative are notions of political alienation and abandonment. It is argued within such discourses that the 'White working class' – particularly older, less educated men – suffer not only from forms of economic and cultural marginalisation, but also from a sense that the political establishment refuses to adequately engage with or address their concerns.

In their analysis of the then rising support for UKIP, Ford and Goodwin note the way in which changing political values,

> Have left certain groups of voters behind…as an outlook that was once seen as mainstream has become increasingly regarded as parochial and intolerant by the younger, university-educated, more socially liberal and financially secure majority who define the political consensus in early twenty-first-century Britain' (2014: 279).

Generally speaking, proponents of the 'left behind' narrative also argue that the way in which mainstream parties have allegedly converged around the political centre since the 1990s has resulted in these parties failing to effectively engage with the main political concerns of the so called 'left behind': particularly concerns around national identity, immigration and multiculturalism. As put in the alarmist terminology of Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) in their much publicised and polarising *National Populism,*

> Immigration and hyper ethnic change are cultivating strong fears about the possible destruction of the national group's historic identity and established ways of life. These fears are wrapped up in a belief that culturally liberal politicians, transnational organisations and global finance are eroding the nation by encouraging further mass immigration, while 'politically correct' agendas seek to silence any opposition.

At the same time, it is alleged in these arguments that the institutional links between 'White working class' voters and the Labour Party has unravelled. While the indicators of such processes are complicated, such a disconnect is evident in the decline of traditional institutions such as trade unions alongside the general trend of the 2000s where 'left behind' voters abandoned Labour in significant numbers (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 280). These changes are said to have engendered a political landscape where significant numbers of so-called 'White working class' voters – as well as many White middle class voters – have been drawn away from mainstream politics and towards parties such as UKIP (Beider, 2015). And equally, it has resulted in a situation where a UKIP-styled political position has been mainstreamed, absorbed as the default platform of the Conservative Party and also some strands of the Labour Party.

Oldham provides an iconic site through which to trace the development of these sentiments but it is also a location through which some of these sentiments as widely attributed to towns like Oldham can be critically interrogated in closer detail. For instance, an increase in support for the BNP in the early 2000s saw it being marked out as a hotbed for the far right. In 2010, Phil Woolas, the former Labour MP for Oldham East and Saddleworth, was expelled from Parliament for publishing an election leaflet in which he had falsely accused a rival candidate of courting Islamist extremists. It was also revealed that his campaign team had circulated private emails

arguing that 'if we don't get the White folk angry he's [Woolas] gone'.[xlii] The more recent support for UKIP, alongside the high proportion of Leave voters in Oldham in the 2016 EU Referendum, further renders the town a particularly telling site at which to critically situate these wider claims about a 'left behind' White working class in relation to political disillusionment. Just prior to the 2019 European Election's, Oldham would again be targeted by far right politicians with no real organisational roots in the town. First, Brexit Party Leader Nigel Farage delivered a speech in the United States claiming, provocatively and erroneously, that Oldham was a 'divided society' and that he could,

> Take you to a town called Oldham in the north of England where literally on one side of the street everybody is White and on the other side of the street everybody is black. The twain never actually meet, there is no assimilation.[xliii]

Similarly, 'Tommy Robinson', former leader of the English Defence League, also targeted Oldham when he stood as UKIP's candidate for the North West region at the recent European elections, resulting in clashes between his supporters and counter-protesters.[xliv]

Here, the economic decline that Oldham has experienced is of course an important context. For example, analysis by the New Economics Foundation confirmed that the Brexit vote was greater in places which are smaller in size, less 'cosmopolitan', experiencing higher levels of relative decline, and where a significant number of people are employed in low-wage, insecure work. In fact, the report found that,

> On average, the Leave vote share was 20 points higher in those places that have experienced the greatest declines in terms of human and economic capital in recent decades.[xlv]

However, as we have argued throughout this report, this attentiveness to economic distress should not result in the privileging of a purported 'White working class' that is supposedly facing unique forms of disadvantage and marginalisation. This is a privileging that risks silencing the experiences of Black and minority ethnic groups and also ignores the significant Leave vote and/or anti-immigration attitudes as affirmed by various middle-class constituencies across the country (see Dorling 2016; Evans & Mellon 2016). This reading also risks presenting a homogenised picture of the 'White working class' with regard to its political voice. The rush to understand the resentment of people who are White and working class – while a necessary move – tends after all to circumscribe contemporary political debate, which is all too often narrowly focused on anti-immigration sentiments and Brexit. Broadening out the conception of the 'left behind' by engaging the insights of Black and minority ethnic voters, alongside White residents who decline the invitation to endorse views more nativist in nature, presents in turn an important and alternative view of contemporary political concerns. This is important because the perspectives of Black and minority ethnic voters in Britain have long been politically neglected. Similarly, despite the high Brexit vote in Oldham, as a whole there was significant variance within the borough. For instance, in Werneth, the ward with the highest Black and minority ethnic population, 57% of the electorate voted for Remain. This is an important context that often gets elided in more impressionistic public discussions of 'left behind' places.

This section of the report looks therefore at how our respondents made sense of the contemporary political landscape. It reveals accordingly that a sense of political abandonment and alienation is in no way confined to the 'left behind' as conventionally understood. Indeed, many of our participants also felt detached from a political establishment that they viewed as aloof, and, in some instances, as actively derisory

of places like Oldham and its residents. But they articulated this disaffection without being drawn towards more nationalist political positions. The discussion below also focuses on the views expressed by our respondents towards the Labour Party, given that this is the party most of the people in our sample would ordinarily identify with most closely. Before attending however to the aforementioned issues, we will first draw attention to a much-overlooked feature of local politics in prevailing accounts of the 'left behind'.

Local anti-racism and anti-fascism

Reporting on the 'left behind' has demonstrated a tendency to portray local politics in towns in narrow ways that emphasise the susceptibility of such locales to racism and the allure of the far right. In failing to capture the complexities and nuances of local politics in locales such as Oldham, such accounts have also tended to overlook, if not erase, local forms of anti-racist and anti-fascist activism. It is after all important to remember the role that civil society can play at a time when racism is an entrenched feature in both mainstream politics and everyday life (Virdee and McGeever, 2018). This seems particularly important at time when the far right continue to target places such as Oldham and when we are still waiting to see if the forms of local conviviality discussed above, however fragile, will take on a more organized form. Recalling this history is also important precisely because it can provide insights that may also constructively shape emergent forms of alternative national politics as will be discussed later in this section.

Nick Lowles' (2007) account of local responses to the emergence of the far right and the 2001 riots details the nature of anti-racist and anti-fascist work undertaken by local people in Oldham between 2001 and 2006. Much of this work centred on the activities of Oldham United Against Racism (OUAR). Founded in 2001, OUAR worked alongside leading national groups such as the Anti-Nazi League and Searchlight. In response to the activities of various far right groups in the town, OUAR and their allies mobilised over 1,000 people for a rally in opposition to the National Front. According to Lowles, this event turned out to be 'the largest out-door protest in the town for over 50 years' (ibid.: 150). In an effort to thwart the British National Party (BNP) at the ballot box, OUAR and their allies also set-up regular community stalls and addressed local trade union and community group meetings, as well as distributing anti-fascist leaflets and tabloid-style newspapers specifically addressing local issues. Similarly, Side by Side brought together local political parties, voluntary sector organisations and local anti-racists to distribute leaflets across the town (ibid.: 152). OUAR also hosted plays and activities for children in an effort to address the enduring impact and perceptions of segregation in the town, as well as a regular local festival that continued even after local council funding was withdrawn. Alongside local churches and the local Inter-Faith Forum, OUAR was also involved in Oldham Unity Refugee Support which provided legal support and distributed food parcels on a weekly basis to asylum seekers and refugees in the area, as well as hosting monthly social events aimed at building relationships across different groups and sections of the local community (ibid.: 156). In addition to OUAR, Oldham Trade Unions Against Racism and Fascism was also set up by the local trades council and produced an education pack on the history of fascism, the threat the BNP posed to trade unions and how the party's policies failed to provide solutions to the problems faced by working class people in Oldham.

Reflecting the local activities undertaken in Oldham between 2001 and 2006, Lowles notes that the OUAR campaign became a template for grassroots, community campaigning in other areas where the BNP had started to make electoral inroads. Having said that, the activities outlined above were not without their criticisms. For example, Mike Luft, a leading figure in OUAR, has commented that there were times

during anti-fascist election campaigns when 'underlying issues of racism and economic deprivation were not addressed' (cited in Lowles, 2007: 152). In some ways, this is a local reminder of a much wider and historically entrenched problem in British politics: anti-fascism does not always translate into a broader form of anti-racist political practice attentive to the structural and institutional forms of racism as noted above (see Gilroy, 2007).

Lowles also notes that anti-fascist activities were often 'blocked or hindered by the authorities', including the local council, with the police taking 'the view that the anti-fascists were as bad as the fascists' (Lowles, 2007: 152). Lowles' account also notes that 'local politicians appeared to think the worst is over, and are becoming complacent once again' (ibid.: 162). It could be argued that such complacency is reflected in the withdrawal of council funding to local 'community cohesion' and grassroot initiatives, as noted in Section 2. It could also be suggested that this seeming complacency as flagged in 2007 was a primer of a broader obliviousness to the resurgent populist-nationalisms that have now so forcefully hijacked the political conversation, ably capturing the political stage when given active backing by various factions within prominent media and political outlets that allows nationalists to present themselves as the voice of the neglected 'White working class'.

Politics and abandonment

Central to accounts of the 'left behind' is the idea that the 'White working class' has been abandoned by a political mainstream, increasingly unresponsive to the lives of their constituents (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; McKenzie, 2017b; Winlow et al., 2017). This has been identified as a particular issue in towns like Oldham – historically a Labour Party stronghold. In Oldham West and Royton, for instance, Labour has won every General Election campaign since 1950. As such, the historic weakness of the Conservative Party alongside the more recently witnessed decline in the vote for Labour has contributed to the consolidation of a distinct party political vacuum, as well as a profound sense of disaffection with parliamentary politics more broadly.

For instance, over recent decades, there had been a tendency for Labour to pay less attention to safe seats that constituted its traditional 'heartlands'; focusing instead on marginal wards. As a consequence, alongside the decline of trade unionism, Labour has been accused of abandoning its traditional working class constituencies. 'New Labour' famously enacted during the 1990s a shift towards the political centre, embracing neoliberalism and market-oriented policies and rejecting in turn an avowedly class-based politics. This process coincided with the emergence of a new political class within the party that was overwhelmingly university-educated and metropolitan, marking a break with more traditional forms of political representation and internal promotion (Back et al., 2002; Hewitt, 2005; Kundnani, 2000).

One interviewee, a White British Labour Party member in her 70s, recalled here their own encounters with such tendencies of the party under Blair to override local representatives and sentiments by 'parachuting' in candidates more aligned with the New Labour vision.

> I was in the Labour party [and] we had a big active ward with big branch meetings…In 1996 I went as the delegate to the Labour Party Conference in Brighton and that was when New Labour came in. And I was horrified by what happened at the Conference because I had been used to going to NUT Conferences which were very democratic where you had a mandate from the local group where you could influence the way the union went, but that Brighton

conference I felt it was very much stage-managed by New Labour people from London. Our old MP had retired and we had a new one who was catapulted in from London and I was just very unhappy with the Labour Party…Phil Woolas became our MP and my then husband worked for the trade union and Phil Woolas had been the Communications Officer for the GMB and he was very badly thought of within the union…I joined the Labour Party because I felt passionately about social justice and changing things for people and I thought the Labour Party was moving away from that so I left.

The result of the changes noted in this extensive recollection is partly indicative of what has been an increase in political disaffection. Some have already commented on how the two traditional parties tried to respond to this emergent disaffection through a more nationalist politics: taking a stronger rhetorical line against immigration, disavowing the brief 1990s turn towards multiculturalism in favour of a strong recourse to integration and cohesion, and, of course, a War-on-Terror related alarmism and security politics regarding Islam and Muslims (Back et al., 2002; Kundnani, 2000; Valluvan, 2019). But this was a strategy that was then given much fuller and more emphatic expression through the political rise of UKIP.

Many had already the flagged the dangers of this continued trend towards framing various discontents through a nationalist political discourse. A 2014 IPPR report (Griffith and Glennie, 2014) forewarned that the wider disillusionment afflicting many constituencies risks becoming monopolised by a wider nationalist political class. The report cautioned that the inability to offer a political narrative would yield only a White nativist political agenda that not only imperils the opportunities for meaningful socioeconomic restructuring but also systematically silences the shared socioeconomic and political disillusionment nursed by non-White populations, leaving them without a political voice or outlet while further exposing them to the hostile harangues of nativist class politics.

This general sense of political disillusionment was certainly evident in a number of our interviews, irrespective of racialised identity. One 'mixed race' male in his 30s, while identifying as a Labour supporter and a trade union member, remained frustrated by how 'stale' local political activity had become. Similarly, a White female in her fifties claimed that she 'very rarely see[s] candidates knocking on the doors'. A White male in his fifties also argued that, 'We get a disconnect with our politicians…they are completely disconnected from reality'. Another White British resident who identified as 'working class' felt that national politicians in particular had little regard for the people of Oldham stating how, 'I just think to them that they think [Oldham] is on the scrapheap and they are just not pulling it back'. While a South Asian Muslim male located the support for Brexit as resulting precisely from this sense of disaffection:

> The Brexit vote, you know, people are very upset about the establishment and what is going on and how it's doing. They do not believe the establishment.

Some of the above are of course sentiments and impressions consistent with wider claims abounding across the West about the rise of nationalist-populist politics. But interesting and distinctive here is how our research participants were also particularly critical of the mainstream political parties in relation to the EU Referendum campaign, both locally and nationally. The majority of our participants would consider themselves 'Remainers' and there was a sense of disappointment at the absence of debate and campaigning in Oldham around the Referendum. For example, a British Pakistani female participant stated that,

> You know it was oddly very silent here and I got very angry about this Brexit…It seems like staying in the EU didn't really matter…because they [politicians] didn't do the whole canvassing thing of why people should vote. So it was virtually non-existent. On both sides [Leave and Remain] there was just no canvassing whatsoever and people were just not aware of the issues of what was going to happen and what wasn't going to happen.

Another male South Asian resident stated that the Remain campaign had been 'lacklustre', comparing it unfavourably to the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum campaign which he felt had been, 'very high profile, every person of any weight and ability went out and made sure they fought their corner.' One White British woman working in the local voluntary sector extended here a sense of regret that her own organisation had not been more active:

> We stayed kind of apolitical and we would encourage people to vote and encourage people to have access to information but – well, usually when there is a kind of national government vote, then we would have quite a lot of links, a lot of access to good information out there and we would just promote that really. We do try and stay out of the – we didn't do any local stuff…I wish we had now if I'm honest. I wish we had been more political about it because I think from the community cohesion point of view, we could have tried to present a bit more counter balance [to the Leave arguments].

Observations of this sort are important and too often forgotten. There certainly prevails here a widespread sense of political disaffection in Oldham that is discernible amongst a wide range of constituents, rather than being the unique preserve of people who are White and working class. It is also not just a political exclusion as based on the erosion of local institutions traditionally associated with the Labour party, such as local trade union branches or 'working men's clubs'. Instead, it is about a seemingly much more general dissipation of a civil society connection to parliamentary politics altogether: as intimated in the above claims about the relative absence of local campaigning or awareness raising activities regarding the EU Referendum. Here, even those who opposed the Brexit vote located the result within the context of a broad sense of political abandonment and neglect. This corresponds with other research conducted in Oldham. For example, the 2013 *You and Your Community Survey,* which found that just 26% of respondents felt informed about local decision-making, while only 17% agreed that they were able to influence decisions in their local area, with an even more meagre 12% agreeing that they could do so at the borough level.[xlvi]

Race, immigration and politics

Within accounts of the 'left behind', the vote for Brexit is often seen as a disenfranchised 'White working class' exercising and reasserting its political voice. However, for our respondents, including both Black and minority ethnic and White voters, Brexit was instead indicative of an entrenched and *ongoing* political malaise and was therefore a further source of anxiety and frustration. There existed a strong sense that the decision to leave the EU would further weaken Oldham's economic position, particularly given the complementary austerity agenda. To quote from a British South Asian male resident,

> I am quite sceptical post-Brexit. I think the people of Oldham have suffered enough over decades and decades and decades of little investment and I think another ten or fifteen years of post-Brexit austerity, lack of investment, it's not very good at all for the people of Oldham.

Indeed, the prospect of a 'hard Brexit' was a particular source of worry for our participants. A British Bangladeshi male resident expressed here his particular sense of uncertainty, 'I don't see it as a positive for Oldham or for the UK, I just don't. So I don't know what the future holds for Britain once the Brexit is here.' As he elaborated,

> We realise there were false promises made about Brexit and people were talking, you know, it would be great if we came out from Europe. But we are greater with people; on your own we are not great. I was against Brexit, I was for Remain. I wanted to remain in Europe but I think it's [leaving the EU] a bad move for Oldham. I know a lot of people did vote for it. Oldham had a high vote to leave. They really didn't understand what they were voting for. Now a lot of them are sorry that they voted Brexit.

For our participants then, rather than Brexit being a desired outcome and a partial redress to their wider sense of political abandonment, it threatened to further undermine the town's vulnerable economic position. Research conducted by the Centre for Cities and Centre for Economic Performance in 2017 seems to validate such views, stating that any Brexit outcome, 'hard' or 'soft', will have a detrimental impact on the economic output of towns and cities across the country.[xlvii] Similarly, In December 2017 Oldham Council reported that Brexit would likely have a negative impact on economic growth, stating that,

> For areas like Oldham and those places in Greater Manchester that are relatively worse off, households in these areas are likely to experience considerably more difficulty in adjusting to negative economic shocks resulting from Brexit in the longer term.[xlviii]

And given the racialised nature of inequalities observed earlier in this report, it is reasonable to suppose that the negative economic consequences brought about by Brexit will further consolidate racial inequality, having a disproportionate impact upon local Black and minority ethnic communities.

Given these anxieties as expressed by some of our participants in the project, a more contextualised and critical understanding is warranted of what Brexit represents and how both public commentators and politicians have interpreted it in troubling ways. As a number of academics have recently argued, Brexit can be read as part of a wider project of new nationalism, characterised by contemporary concerns such as the 'refugee crisis' and immigration; the War on Terror and related anxieties regarding so called Islamist extremism; the disenchantment with even just a nominal commitment to multiculturalism; alongside the outpouring of nativist concern regarding the plight of a disenfranchised 'White working class' (for example, see Valluvan, 2019). Brexit, and the rising levels of racist abuse and hate crime that transpired following the result, does seem to have revealed a wider political mainstreaming of anti-immigrant and anti-minority sentiment (Burnett, 2017; Khan and Shaheen, 2017). As Virdee and McGeever observe, recent political developments have confirmed the emergence of a situation where,

> Racism has become normalized in both elite political discourse and practice, and everyday life, dramatically diminishing the spaces for Britain's racialised minorities to breathe and live free from hate (2018: 1812).

And in more direct relation to the focus of our own discussion here, as Bhambra (2017) argues, the academic, media and political fixation upon the 'left behind' in the aftermath of Brexit can in fact be seen as part of a broader project in which White racial interests become re-centred within contemporary politics.

As such, rather than viewing Brexit and the nationalistic sentiments it has emboldened as being a sudden and unexpected political break, it can instead be seen as a continuation of longer trends. The 1990s had certainly seen the emergence of an ostensible commitment to multiculturalism and race equality measures that New Labour introduced following the 1999 Macpherson Report. But importantly, it is often forgotten that there had been soon after a reversion – by New Labour (Back et al., 2002), as well as the subsequent Conservative led governments – towards a more assimilationist rhetoric. This was realised through the governmental reconsolidation of 'community cohesion' and 'integration' agendas, both of which oversaw an emphasis on the creation of Shared British Values. Furthermore, in terms of it popular presentation, this recourse to integration placed the moral and practical responsibility squarely on the shoulders of Black and minority ethnic groups, and upon Muslim communities in particular. This general shift to the political right in terms of questions of nation and pluralism was further evidenced in the Conservative Government's formal aim to cut immigration numbers, the associated entrenchment of 'hostile environment' policies, and the subsequent scandal surrounding the deportation of established Black and minority ethnic residents of the 'Windrush generation'.

Tellingly, concerns over a supposedly resentful and marginal 'White working class' had already played a central role in justifying this particular political call for tighter controls on immigration and a greater focus on the integration of minority groups. And as Khalili (2016) has argued, there is in fact a dual political function when anger at the impacts of contemporary austerity is often made to conveniently align with an hostility to immigration: 'Migrants are today blamed for taking up places in housing and schools, burdening the country's publicly-funded universal health system and weakening the working class'. This widely circulated connection effectively deflects attention from the specific ideological decisions that has informed the degrading of public services and public spending. In sum, given this wider political context that has been maturing over a number of decades, Virdee and McGeever have argued that mainstream parties, including their pre-Brexit orientations, have to be seen as complicit in the rise of racism and exclusionary forms of nationalism, arguing that 'Brexit added an accelerant on those conditions [that] allowed racism to flourish, it did not create them' (2018: 1813).

This wider coupling of a putative 'White working class' resentment to a politics of anti-immigrant ethnonationalism has certainly been evident in Oldham in a number of forms. For instance, prior to the disturbances in May 2001, the BNP actively appealed to such sensibilities, securing over 10% of the vote in Oldham East and Saddleworth and Oldham West and Royton constituencies at the General Election. Noting this, the Ritchie report drew attention to how a mix of ethnically sourced political scaremongering at the national level alongside sustained socioeconomic neglect are generating local conditions ripe for far right successes.

> Evidence of BNP success is in one sense to be seen as a symptom of problems in the town, since they would have no more chance of success in Oldham than (say) Guildford unless there was fertile soil for them to sow their seeds (2001: 10).

As the discussion above has already noted, the active appeal to the politics of White resentment was evident throughout the 2000s. Most obviously when in 2008 Phil Woolas, as a Labour MP, ran a leaflet that accused a rival candidate of courting Islamist extremists while members of his campaign team also shared private emails stressing the need to 'get the White folk angry'.

It is within the context that UKIP came to enjoy significant levels of support in the town over the more recent years. The 2015 General Election saw the party register over 19% of the vote in Oldham East and Saddleworth, and over 20% in Oldham West and Royton. Later that year, a local by-election in Oldham West and Royton saw the UKIP candidate come second with 23% of the vote, though Labour's Jim McMahon was elected as the MP. UKIP's local campaign during this by-election was widely criticised for its divisive material that sought to exploit this broader notion of White resentment and nationalist alarmism. McMahon argued here that UKIP was playing a 'dangerous game', wherein, 'rather than giving a positive vision, they are seeking to disunite Oldham'. This included the distribution of material,

> Which at first sight looks like a Labour pamphlet [but then] lists 'uncontrolled, mass immigration', the 'axeing' of the armed forces, the abolition of the monarchy and handing back the Falklands as Labour party policy. [xlix]

There has been, in sum, a substantial recent history of incendiary political campaigning in Oldham. Trends where the circulation of anti-Muslim and anti-migrant demagoguery has become commonplace in the wider political conversation, and particularly pronounced during the EU Referendum and recent parliamentary elections in the area. This was of course a source of much concern for those involved in our research, particularly among the Black and minority ethnic participants. Brexit and its aftermath did not constitute for them some kind of re-centring of their otherwise silenced political voice, but was simply a continuing process of economic and political marginalisation as embedded within longer histories of struggle and exclusion. One British Pakistani female explained this in direct relation to the dominant idea of a 'left behind' White working class;

> I think it's interesting, this being left behind idea. Being an immigrant you were always left behind, so they always knew they would have to work that much harder even to just survive. So the idea of being left behind wasn't new to us.

The sense that Brexit constituted only a further sidelining of Black and minority ethnic experiences and concerns was especially felt by a number of Muslim participants, who made reference to Government policies such as Prevent and the wider political climate in which Islamophobia has thrived. For example, one Bangladeshi male participant explained how the current political landscape was further limiting opportunities for Black and minority ethnic people,

> I don't know how this is going to change but I think it needs to change, do you understand, to give opportunities to these young people…There are a lot of people who are moving out of this country, they are taking their skills to countries that will appreciate them…Even the Indian community is going back to India now because their names are also Asian and they are also struggling. It's not just the Muslims that are struggling, it's all people of colour or of a brown looking name, they are struggling as well.

A number of the White respondents also pointed towards the ossification of an increasingly divisive politics in the town. One White woman in her 30s, who supported the Labour Party, reflected on the resentment her neighbour held towards Romanian immigrants. She concluded that for many in the town Brexit was ultimately a vote against immigration:

> If you did speak to people about Brexit, that was the thing people squirmed about – immigration.

The participants involved here expressed particularly searching and forceful frustration about how such anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiment had become so central to contemporary politics, with one British Bangladeshi Muslim male participant explaining that:

> When you try to divide people and try for hatred, when you are trying to make a community feel unsafe and live constantly under fear, I call those journalists hate preachers…The Muslim community is constantly living under fear…The Muslim community now is looked at through that channel as [a] suspicious community...You have heard of these Asian men grooming White girls in Rochdale, these men are men who just exist in any background...We [Muslim men more generally] are just to be left connected to that rather than – do you understand – we as Oldhamers. I think the Government and the Local Authority needs to be pro-active with the local media and say 'listen we have got quite a strong bond community, we have never voted for the candidates for MP from the BNP' so it tells something positive about our communities, you know. Other towns and cities have voted in candidates in from the BNP, so I think the Local Authority needs to be pro-active and stamp out hate preachers within the media.

This attention given to the local media is an important redress to how media influences are generally appraised. In the wake of the 2001 riots the Ritchie report was particularly critical of the *Oldham Evening Chronicle* (henceforth, *The Chronicle*), noting how,

> We encountered concern that over a long period the media, in particular the *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, had presented events in a biased way, over emphasising attacks on Whites, ignoring cases the other way around. There was also concern that media coverage during the riots had aggravated problems and encouraged rioters…We conclude that in the run up to the riots, in some cases the media could have taken more care to present a more balanced picture of views, particularly within the minority ethnic communities.

The Ritchie report also called for the newspaper to employ more Black and minority ethnic staff and to hold more community events and consultations, identifying race equality organisations as being particularly important. Recommendations such as this remind us that despite dwindling sales, the letters pages and online comments forums on local newspaper websites retain important social and political functions. Such spaces within local media form part of what the sociologist, Roger Hewitt (2005: 66-7), has referred to as a 'communicative community' which consists of 'ideas, opinions, narratives and gossip' that serve as the 'final court of appeal and [also the] legitimator of social opinion and action'. This acknowledgement of local media's influential role is particularly important in terms of how the 'left behind' gets deployed as an idea in media both local and national. As has been argued, the media focus on a 'left behind', exclusively White and working class in its composition, reflects a continued reluctance and inability to imagine a political community in multiethnic and multiracial terms. Local media in those areas which house multiethnic working class communities have a particular responsibility therein, but also an opportunity, to more effectively challenge these misleading conceptions of the working class.

Local Media

Mass media is of course routinely identified as an integral player when it comes to legitimising far right campaigns and mainstreaming racism; but local media too does herein deserve more attention than customarily acknowledged. Even in the context of dwindling readership, the particular role of *The Chronicle* warrants accordingly a slightly fuller commentary here.

For instance, as hinted above, many have described how *The Chronicle*, at least initially, was key in legitimising the BNP as a respectable political actor. As Lowles made apparent in his extended commentary on Oldham, the local press has often, wittingly and/or unwittingly, played a damaging role in terms of normalising frameworks conducive to far right nativism. Indeed, as Lowles (2007: 153) notes, anti-racist activists repeatedly criticised *The Chronicle* for its uncritical coverage of the BNP and for allowing 'its letters pages to be dominated by BNP supporters'.

Such criticism, as echoed in the aforementioned 2001 Ritchie report, did seem to yield productive changes. Within a year, the local newspaper had adopted a more circumspect approach to its coverage of the BNP. Following a BBC Panorama documentary, which exposed the BNP's ideological and organisational origins in neo-Nazism and neo-fascism, *The Chronicle's* coverage of the BNP started to change. For example, *The Chronicle* started to print stories that drew attention to BNP criminality, while in 2002 *The Chronicle* ran a front page pre-election editorial with the headline: 'Vote for Oldham, not divisive BNP', despite initial reluctance from the newspaper's owners (Lowles, 2007: 154-155). That same year, a journalist from *The Chronicle* attended a local community meeting at which BNP activists sought to intimidate attendees. According to Lowles (ibid.: 157), the journalist's coverage of the meeting helped persuade the local council to block the BNP's attempt to hold its annual summer festival on the outskirts of the town.

These initiatives signalled the constructively critical role that local media can play. And it is in this context, one where Lowles and the Ritchie report both emphasise the relevance of local press, that analysis of local newspaper coverage also became an element of our own research methodology. In order to examine how much had changed since the Ritchie report, the research team analysed *The Chronicle* between January 2016 and August 2018. While our thematic analysis revealed that there had been some healthy developments, it is our view, as intimated above by some of our research participants, that *The Chronicle* continued to frequently reproduce anti-immigrant sentiment and racism, especially anti-Muslim racism.

Between 2016 and 2018, *The Chronicle* printed a series of stories highlighting the contribution that the local Muslim population – as individuals, networks but also relevant faith-based institutions – had made to local civic life. *The* Chronicle also ran some important stories repudiating certain attempts to incite racial tensions: such as the story referencing a 'secret' report by Oldham Council for 'anti-terrorism chiefs' debunking otherwise incendiary suggestions that there might be a 'Trojan horse plot' to takeover a local primary.[l] There were also numerous articles with local political and civic leaders promoting multiculturalism and condemning racism, particularly during the run-up to and immediate aftermath of the EU referendum.[li]

However, such interventions that pointedly challenge nationally circulated racist narratives and campaigning were often undermined by the newspaper's daily column, '*Chronicle focus on the latest news around Britain and abroad*'. For instance, this column ran a significant number of stories and headlines that transposed national anti-Asian and anti-Muslim racisms into local media discourse. Alongside an excessive recourse to a populist alarmism as tied to terrorist attacks across various global locations, *The Chronicle* also ran various inflammatory headlines that played all too easily into a notion of rampant domestic 'Islamism'/ 'extremism'. For example, *The Chronicle* printed the following headline as a part of a story counterposing Muslim people with the supposedly uniquely British values of law and order: 'Troubling Muslim theories: British Muslims have a "deeply working" belief in conspiracy theories'.[lii]

In more general terms, our thematic analysis suggests that *The Chronicle* was still all too prone to reproducing sensationalist media themes, themes that traded on a misleadingly disproportionate emphasis on racialised (generally Muslim) fears regarding crime, terrorism, refugees, and related dystopias about 'failed integration' and 'culture clashes'.

Again, while it is not surprising that a popular press platform might turn to the staple appeal of crime, terrorism and immigration related stories (see Hall et al. 2013), it is apparent that in a town such as Oldham, the primary press outlet servicing the area is compelled to exercise greater balance and caution when reproducing such stories. Places like Oldham – both in terms of its demographics but also in terms of its wider place in informing national and even global ethno-nationalist sensationalisms about immigration, multiculturalism, and the supposed incompatibility of Muslims with the West – is particularly sensitive to how such themes get relayed into a local media context. It is not that reporting on issues of crime, political violence and immigration are to be avoided – it is however important that such reporting, editorial interventions, and the balance of the letter columns too should take greater care to ensure that such themes are covered along a more proportionate scale, as well as better interrogating the erroneous and stigmatising racial associations that often colour such stories. As argued in a crucial intervention in relation to recent events in Rochdale and Rotherham, Waqas Tufail (2015) has shown that inflammatory coverage of the sexual exploitation of young women has reinforced various tropes characteristic of colonial racisms: not least, the suggestion that Muslim men are 'perverted sexual deviants'. As Tufail elaborates, such media frames conjure the historically embedded ascription of 'the dark Muslim male, sexually charged, violent, refusing to integrate and serving as an embodiment of a backward religion and dangerous inferior culture' (2015: 29).

While Tufail is addressing one particular context, his analysis contains important warnings that the local press (whether print or digital) as relevant to Greater Manchester/Oldham will need to tackle more aggressively. For instance, it is important to note that *The Chronicle* did not cover acts of White supremacist terrorism to anywhere near the same extent between 2016 and 2017 as it did violence as tied to 'Islamism'. This imbalance becomes particularly telling given that in recent years there have been more acts of terrorism in Europe and the United States committed by White supremacists than by any other ethnic and racial group (see Byman, 2019 and Ravndall, 2019). It is also noteworthy that the paper seemed to routinely allow UKIP MEPS a platform to articulate forms of anti-immigrant sentiment, often undergirded by anti-Muslim racism, without allowing dissenting voices to challenge such perspectives when aired. For example, one scare mongering letter claimed that Turkish membership of the EU (widely repudiated as a disingenuous ruse that was key to the Leave campaign) would give 77 million Turkish citizens the right to move freely across the EU.[liii] *The Chronicle* also ran a series of stories that criminalised asylum seekers and refugees, many of which also fed into overarching narratives which racialised Asian men as sexual predators – reports such as: 'refugee paid girl for sexual favours',[liv] nine Iraqi asylum seekers being arrested on suspicion of raping a German tourist in Vienna,[lv] and a story about two young Asian men who pled guilty to the sexual assault of a child and attempting to pay for the sexual service of a child.[lvi]

The above is of course only a cursory sample of the type of material where *The Chronicle* seemed excessively susceptible to racialised narratives that further stigmatise already demonised minority and outsider communities. This highlights in turn the importance of actively treating the local media as a key front in anti-racist practice – where local media can be more effectively engaged and persuaded into observing the importance of anti-racist literacies and care. The above insights do of course also apply to other related attempts to establish locally relevant online media

content. It is ultimately such interventions in media spaces that will better inform local residents' political horizons, particularly in relation to the economic and social challenges that our participants believed to be more significant to the town, without recourse to pervading racist narratives and inflammatory anti-immigrant sentiment articulated both by the far right and mainstream politicians.

Emergent politics?

Brexit and its aftermaths confirmed then for our participants a deepening and exclusionary form of racialised politics both locally and nationally. But, crucially, it was also abundantly clear amongst our participants that there existed an appetite for a different kind of politics. This was not only evident amongst the Black and minority ethnic people we interviewed, but also White residents, including those who identified as 'White working class'. There perspectives constitute in turn a direct challenge to the 'left behind' narrative that not only ignores the perspectives of minorities but also tends to homogenise the views of White working class people, ignoring the nuances and diversity of views that exist (Beider, 2015; Griffith and Glennie, 2014).

Moreover, the participants involved not only refused to endorse the anti-immigrant, nativist sentiments attributed to the 'left behind', but they also hopefully pointed to recent political developments both nationally and locally. They identified these developments as nascent signs of a different agenda, forged around a return to a more class-oriented politics that remains conscious of racism's deep reach, suggesting in turn different and decidedly multiethnic and multiracial forms of political alignment.

Nationally, the emergence of Jeremy Corbyn and a sense that the Labour Party was returning to the political left and an approach that engaged more directly with concerns around social justice and inequality was welcomed by most of our participants. As one South Asian Muslim male participant commented,

> I think the Labour party had changed…and tried to go to the centre-ground but it has now come back to what it originally started up as for the working class.

For others, even if local Labour leaders were not seen as being as radical as Corbyn, there was a sense that they also represented a leftward move. Commenting on local figures, a 'mixed race' male who identified as a Labour supporter, noted what he saw as a more locally rooted, responsive, and left-leaning political scene emerging in Oldham politics.

> Debbie Abrahams [Labour MP for Oldham East and Saddleworth] is not a Corbynite but at the same time she is well to the left to the likes of Blair and Brown and she is loyal to the party. She is a good MP she will listen to the community. So if you write a letter to Debbie Abrahams she will respond and she will kind of go largely with that…The other MP that covers part of Oldham is Angela Rainier [Labour MP for Ashton-under-Lyme] who covers the Failsworth area…Again Angela is well to the left of the party, probably a bit to the right of Corbyn but is a good local MP who will champion local issues. For that, Debbie Abrahams is a bit of a breath of fresh air because again I feel like I have been bashing Phil Woolas quite a lot but his thinking was always like doing what party HQ [under the Blair leadership] says.

Another South Asian male praised Jim McMahon for being particularly active locally. Alongside local MPs, it is important to note that some of our research participants were generally also quite positive towards their local councillors. The emphasis on local

councillors is again an often-neglected aspect of how political bonds and confidence are forged.

But despite such positive comments, and a relatively strong showing in the 2017 General Election, it is clear that there is still much work to be done if the Labour Party is to reconnect with people and places deemed to have been 'left behind'. Changes in voting patterns evident in the 2017 General Election reveal that the shift to Labour was greatest in the country's cities, where Labour's share of the vote increased by over 10%, which was more than double the swing to Labour in large towns.[lvii] Interestingly, the swing to Labour in Oldham West and Royton was a mere 0.9%, while in Oldham East and Saddleworth it increased by just 2%.

Central to any further advancement will be the ability to offer a political agenda that speaks to the concerns of a broad constituency of residents, particularly when voter absentee rates are considered. Abstention patterns represent a uniquely untapped potential for reconfigured party political aims to target (see Mondon, 2015). And while our participants welcomed a Labour Party that seemed to have recovered an interest in economic equality and seemed prepared to discuss issues such as racism and social inequality, concerns persisted over the ability of both Corbyn as a leader and Labour as a party that could deliver its policy ambitions as well as navigate a more coherent position on Brexit. For instance, whereas one of our interviewees quoted above suggested that New Labour had acquired an undemocratic hold on the party, another interviewee – a South Asian Muslim male who worked in the voluntary sector – raised the question of bullying in relation to the way in which Momentum was perceived to have taken control of the current party. He suggested here that Momentum was jeopardising a more equal and less hierarchical form of politics:

> Although I am Labour, I have a problem with people like Momentum and how they are reacting. Whether Jeremy Corbyn is actually dealing with them in a way that prevents the bullying approach that I would [have to] see. I have a problem with that…It's certainly the bullying approach. I would like to see lots of the Labour policies come into effect…Sometimes the unions can be so in your face that while saying something that is very important, it's an in your face bullying approach that comes out sometimes which speaks of the bullring or something…It's not what I would regard as true Labour policies which are about enabling people – everybody to have their say and enabling everybody to participate. Enabling everybody to be equal in that process rather than a top down hierarchical structural approach.

So too, the recent crisis in relation to allegations of antisemitism in the Labour party and the perception that the party leadership has not acted robustly enough was flagged by one of our White British male participants.

> The antisemitism stuff coming up, that is interesting, I would not like to be in that position at all. I don't think the Labour Party is taking it seriously enough. So there is that problem at the moment with the Labour Party.

Herein, while the general impression among the participants involved was favourable towards the recent shifts in the Labour Party's political direction, the above comments do reveal that some of the wider national challenges faced by the Labour Party, and the accompanying national media coverage and framing, does find local traction as well. This is compounded by the aforementioned observation that the Labour increases across the two Oldham seats in the 2017 General Election was still fairly slight.

Summary

The political abandonment and alienation usually attributed to the 'White working class' within dominant discourses of the 'left behind' attests to fundamental political developments that have emerged over recent decades. There has been a growing disaffection with the political mainstream, a breakdown of the traditional relationship between the Labour Party and working class communities, and a growing unease about a political establishment that is viewed as remote and uncaring. However, as we have suggested, such feelings of abandonment are not restricted to people who are White and working class, but are instead shared by people from a range of different backgrounds.

Similarly, the idea that Brexit represents a reassertion of the political agency of the 'White working class' remains a problematic assumption. Not only does it simplify the complexities of the views of this demographic, it also fails to adequately consider the impacts of Brexit and the wider role of nationalism and racism that Brexit is, in part, an expression of. For our participants in Oldham – both White and Black and minority ethnic – Brexit was a source of immense concern and anxiety, due to the ways in which it would impact negatively on local economic conditions that were already severely compromised. Similarly, the fact that it seemed to constitute a deepening of a pernicious form of racialised politics – in which Islamophobia features particularly prominently – also served to further provoke feelings of marginalisation. At the same time, however, the emergence of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn was also occurring alongside what some of our respondents saw as a reconnection of local Labour politics with its traditional communities. Concerns did however remain both about the ability of the party to pursue its policy agenda, navigate Brexit, its relatively minor electoral gains in the area, and also some of the wider national scandals engulfing the party.

Conclusion

The motivation for this report was to offer a re-framing of the increasingly dominant political narrative of the 'left behind' that had gained ground in light of the initial rise of UKIP (now largely supplanted by the rise of the Nigel Farage-led Brexit Party) but also in the general aftermath of the Brexit result. As extensively discussed in the report, this discourse generally invokes a 'White working class' constituency, which it is intimated has suffered uniquely from processes of deindustrialisation, globalisation, and rising inequality and insecurity more broadly. Within this narrative, the privileging of an imagined 'White working class' works to cast this group as the primary, if not the exclusive, victim of these deleterious processes. While undoubtedly many 'White working class' communities have been marginalised through these developments, we have profiled this research as an attempt to problematise some of the assumptions and silences that the 'left behind' framework rests upon and reinforces. Critical attention becomes particularly necessary given how such wider economic struggles are adversely connected within the 'left behind' narrative to processes of immigration and multiculturalism.

This critique of the 'left behind' narrative has been facilitated through an engagement with Oldham and a small sample of its residents. Oldham, as a place and a set of people, is routinely identified as archetypal in 'left behind' discourses. Engaging therefore with the social, economic and political features of Oldham and the views of some of the residents enables an alternative view of the political challenges facing the town. Beyond the debates about Brexit and a disaffected 'White working class', there are other important voices that risk being silenced when the imputed concerns of the former come to dominate contemporary debate, representing key frames through which towns such as Oldham are made politically intelligible. What these erasures often overlook is the way in which Black and minority ethnic communities have been disproportionately impacted by the loss of work, rising inequalities, and the persistence of racism and exclusionary visions of place, community and nation. At the same time, both Black and minority ethnic residents and White British residents – including those that could be termed 'White working class' – also often invoke a different set of political concerns that is summarily silenced by the 'left behind' narrative. In this alternative conception, it is austerity, urban regeneration, and community relations in its broadest and inclusive sense that are identified as more important than immigration and nationalism.

The findings we have presented here have accordingly revealed a number of important, locally rooted observations that challenge simplistic and racially exclusive political imaginings of the 'left behind'.

First, the 'White working class' are not the sole victims of processes of social, economic and political decline. While they undoubtedly have suffered through the loss of industrial work, the erosion of the welfare state, and a more punitive, more market-oriented approach to governance, they are not alone. This report is a reminder of the obvious but often forgotten fact that the working classes are multiethnic and multiracial in its composition, as well as diverse in its political alignments and views. Furthermore, while many groups are enduring increasing inequality, it is Black and ethnic minority people who generally continue to bear its impacts disproportionately.

Second, the focus on the 'White working class' as the primary victim warranting political attention denies the on-going impacts of racism, especially structural and institutional racism. In invoking an idealised economic and social past, which is itself seen as being the preserve of the 'White working class', the role of Black and minority ethnic

communities in the history of the country and its economy is denied. At the same time, the past that is often romanticised was itself, when starting from the vantage point of minorities, an era of acute racism, discrimination and exclusion. So too, contemporary society remains a place in which racism and xenophobia persists, marginalising people across a range of institutions and various domains of civic life.

Third, the narrative of the 'left behind' tends to only allow for a very narrow politicisation. When globalisation and deindustrialisation are treated as natural processes, oftentimes with anti-immigrant and anti-minority sentiment construed as a legitimate response to this, it serves to downplay the role of the state at both local and national levels in producing contemporary forms of inequality and marginalisation. In Oldham, for instance, there are well-evidenced concerns over the economic present and future of the town, anxieties regarding regeneration and its uneven impacts, alongside anxieties about the potentially devastating impacts of Brexit. Such concerns are particularly acute for towns such as Oldham that are home to high levels of deprivation and poverty, low wage work, and continue to endure the consequences of decades of disinvestment and underinvestment. There is consequently a danger that the potential for political solidarities that target destructive political-economic processes rather than other marginalised groups remain underexplored within 'left behind' discourses'; discourses that invoke only divisive and exclusionary forms of alliance and is often stoked, opportunistically but also by conviction, by media and politicians in both their extreme and mainstream guises alike (Winter and Mondon, 2018).

Finally, the sense of political abandonment is in this report understood to be a more pervasive and encompassing phenomenon than the 'left behind' framing is generally willing to acknowledge. As opposed to it uniquely neglecting a marginal 'White working class', the residents involved in this project drew particular attention to the types of summary political exclusion that has been the enduring reality for many minority people. Many of our respondents also felt a sense of frustration that national – and to a lesser extent local politicians – had given up on towns such as Oldham and people like them. A sense of being 'left behind' is consequently much more widespread and evident than the dominant narrative allows for.

The complex and frustrated voices that we profile in this report demonstrate in turn the pressing need for analyses of class inequalities that are able to engage robustly and concomitantly with questions of racism, public policy and contemporary political economy. These voices evidence the need for an alternative political outlook that can envision political communities in a more inclusive and democratic way, while resisting the easy allure of nativism.

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xxiv Our own analysis of Census data also shows that between 2001 and 2011, most ethnic minority groups were now residing in a greater number of local wards throughout the Borough.

xxv Source: own elaboration using a shapefile of English Output Areas 2011 downloaded from UK Data Service: http://census.edina.ac.uk/easy_download_data.html?data=England_oa_2011. Raster Image: Stamen Toner/Open Street Maps (OMS). Office for National Statistics, 2011 Census: Aggregate data (England and Wales) [computer file]. UK Data Service Census Support. Downloaded from: http://infuse.mimas.ac.uk. This information is licensed under the terms of the Open Government License [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/2].

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http://census.edina.ac.uk/easy_download_data.html?data=England_oa_2011. Raster Image: Stamen Toner/Open Street Maps (OMS). Office for National Statistics, 2011 Census: Aggregate data (England and Wales) [computer file]. UK Data Service Census Support. Downloaded from: http://infuse.mimas.ac.uk. This information is licensed under the terms of the Open Government License [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/2].

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