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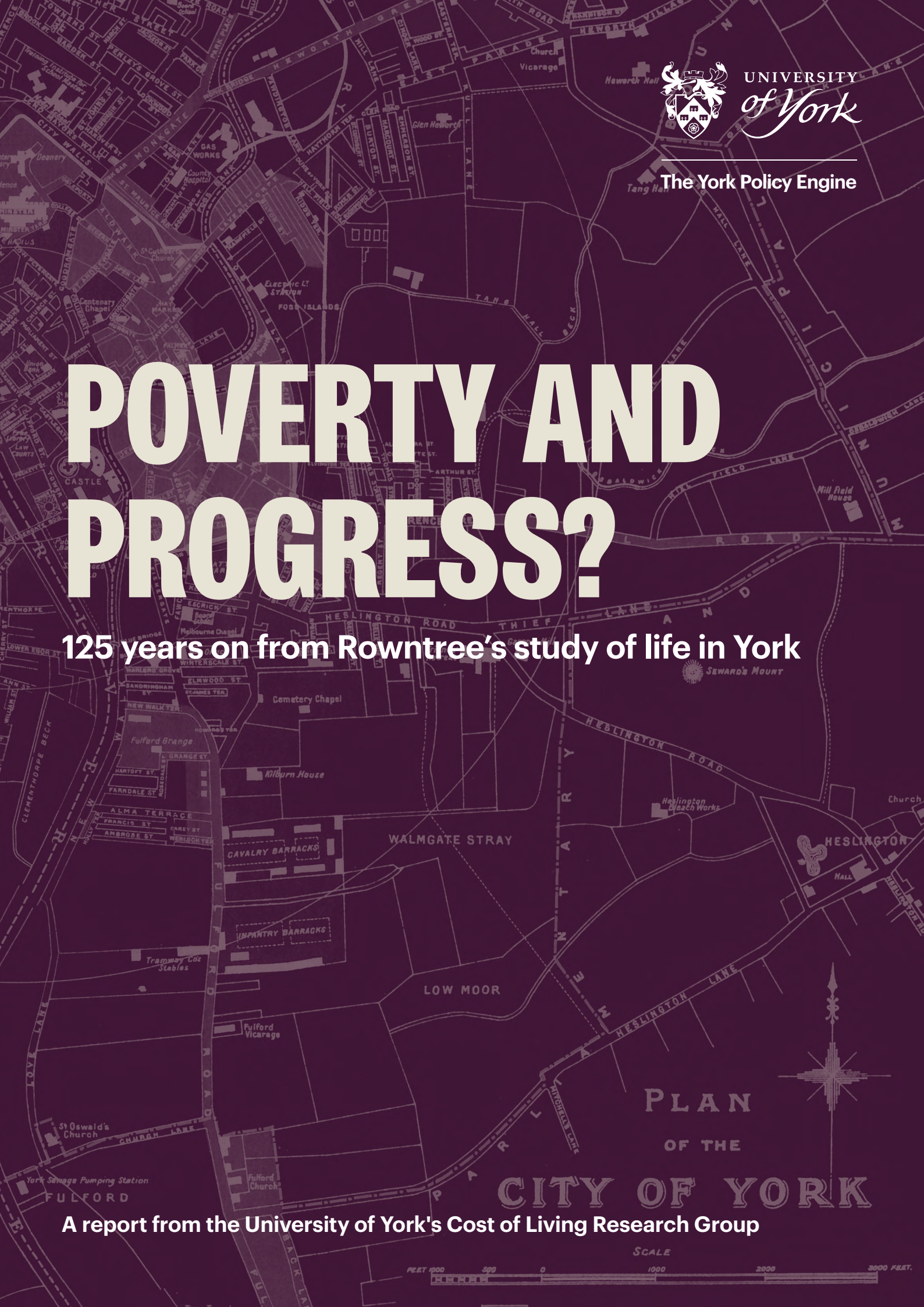
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UNIVERSITY of York
The York Policy Engine
POVERTY AND PROGRESS?
125 years on from Rowntree's study of life in York
A report from the University of York's Cost of Living Research Group
PLAN OF THE CITY OF YORK
WALMGATE STRAY
LOW MOOR
HESLINGTON
FULFORD
CAVALRY BARRACKS
INFANTRY BARRACKS
Cemetery Chapel
Fulford Grange
Kilburn House
Fulford Vicarage
Fulford Church
St Oswald's Church
Tramway Co's Stables
Heslington Bleach Works
Seward's Mount
Mill Field House
Glen Howarth
Howarth Hall
Tang Hall
Church Vicarage
Centenary Chapel
Electric Lt Station
Foss Islands
Cemetery
Gas Works
County Hospital
Law Courts
Melbourne Chapel
Beagle School
Heslington Hall
York Sewage Pumping Station
SCALE
FEET 1000 500 0 1000 2000 3000 FEET.

Acknowledgements

This report is only possible because of the people who gave up their time to be involved in the research, including professionals at local government, schools and third sector organisations and the many residents of York who filled in surveys, participated in qualitative research and spoke to community researchers.

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Lived Insights
Community Driven Change

University of York
The York Policy Engine

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Abbreviations

CDCU	Community development credit unions
CLES	Centre for Local Economies
CWB	Community wealth building
IMD	Indices of Multiple Deprivation
LIFT	Low Income Family Tracker
LILEE	Low Income Low Energy Efficiency
LSOA	Lower Super Output Area
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
NoLo	No and Low alcohol
PIP	Personal Independence Payment
PRS	Private rented sector
PUA	Primary urban area
RAPID	Real-time Analysis of Poverty Indicators Dashboard
SME	Small and medium enterprise
UFSM	Universal Free School Meals
VCFSE	Voluntary, Charity, Faith and Social Enterprise
YNYCA	York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority
YNYCWB	York and North Yorkshire Community Wealth Building

FOREWORDS

The Rowntree Society and Joseph Rowntree Foundation

This year marks a vital milestone: 125 years since Seebohm Rowntree's seminal 1901 analysis of poverty in York. The Rowntree family established a rich local tradition of social investigation, spanning from Joseph Rowntree Senior's door-to-door investigations of educational attendance to his son Joseph's data-driven writing on poverty and society. Seebohm significantly extended this legacy with Poverty: A Study of Town Life, using systematic research to expose the structural forces trapping working people in hardship.

Much has changed between then and now. Seebohm Rowntree went on to inform the creation of British welfare state, tackling the five 'social evils' identified in the 1942 Beveridge Report. Despite York's modern affluence, Poverty and Progress shines a light on areas of deep poverty and inequality that endure today: for example, 18% of children in the city – nearly 1 in 5 – live in relative poverty and low-income households in York are more likely to fall below the poverty line than those in London. The evidence illustrates the important work of statutory, voluntary sector and charitable organisations tackling the contemporary challenges faced by the city, but highlights how much more we must do.

The report's findings resonate deeply with the missions of the Rowntree organisations, where Seebohm Rowntree's commitment to rigorous research and practical solutions to societal, economic, and business challenges remains a guiding force. The Rowntree Society builds and shares knowledge about the Rowntree family, company, and Trusts, connecting their histories to contemporary struggles. Poverty and Progress continues that tradition, bringing York's history of social investigation into conversation with modern evidence. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Housing Trust seek to build a more equitable and just future, free from poverty, while providing decent, affordable homes that prioritise those in greatest need. The sources of economic insecurity highlighted in the report are key priorities, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundations works to tackle energy and rent costs, support housing improvements, and achieve an essentials guarantee for all those who need it.

Underpinned by the family's Quaker belief in equality and the inherent worth of every person, the Rowntree legacy remains a valuable starting point for contemporary anti-poverty work. Poverty and Progress presents a call to action for partners across York and North Yorkshire who share the goal of eliminating poverty and deep inequality. In responding to its findings, we must heed the words of Seebohm's father Joseph, who emphasised 'the need of seeking out the underlying causes of weakness or evil in the community, rather than remedying their more superficial manifestations.'

It is not enough to use a short-term sticking plaster approach. Rather, this evidence must inform a coordinated effort, working alongside people with lived experience and the communities in most need to address the systemic causes of poverty and inequality in our modern society. 125 years after Seebohm's' landmark report, the data and insights in this report present an opportunity to frame and direct that action together.



Nick Smith
Executive Director
The Rowntree Society



Julian Hartley
Group Chief Executive
Joseph Rowntree Foundation &
Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN YORK

Lived Insights Community Researchers

"The themes of the report are linked to our mission to tackle poverty and hopefully, make changes that help bring people out of poverty. It will be a long fight, but that's our mission!" (Kate J. Community Researcher)

We hope this report makes the realities of poverty and inequality in York harder to ignore.

We want lived experience to drive how that evidence is understood, valued and acted on.

We need what people know from living these realities to shape what happens next.

As Lived Insights Community Researchers, we have direct experience of poverty, inequality and navigating support. Much of this report is painfully familiar, reflecting the same pressures we see in our own research: unaffordable housing, insecure work, inadequate incomes and food and fuel poverty.

Part of our role is to make visible what headlines often miss, the shame, stigma and isolation, the survival strategies born of desperation and the way poverty strips away confidence, dignity and agency.

"It feels like only the people with money have value"

We know systems can reinforce poverty rather than free people from it. Complicated processes can add anxiety and make engaging in support systems harder. This can be mistaken for unwillingness, sanctions can follow, making poverty even harder to escape.

"I'm often judged before I even open my mouth so why bother"

Asking for help often means having to account for ourselves: what we spend, how we parent, whether we are ill or disabled enough, whether our hardship is deserving enough. Public narratives can blame people for being poor, rather than the low incomes, high costs and systems that keep poverty in place.

"In York, poverty can be hidden and we can feel like we must hide too."

We refuse to accept that as inevitable.

We want to see a shift in power, with accountability working both ways. People experiencing poverty are scrutinised enough. We want systems and services to be transparent with us, work alongside us and stay accountable throughout.

"We've worn the T-shirt, so trust the way we've gathered our findings and the outcomes."

Rowntree's research helped change attitudes and contributed to social reform. We do not claim our contribution alone can do the same, but we do expect this evidence to be taken seriously. We believe our methods stand up to scrutiny and so should the response to what we have found. We expect action, accountability and an answer to the question:

What changed because you listened?

Our work screams that human connection is central to the solution. Money, housing and services matter enormously but so do love, care, belonging and being valued. Without these, we cannot restore dignity, rebuild agency or create the conditions for people to live with choice and possibilities.

We believe the evidence is compelling and that it's time to turn what we know into change that people can actually feel in their lives.

So how do we do this together?

Listen to us. Work with us. Share power with us. Be accountable together.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Published to mark the 125th anniversary of Seebohm Rowntree's landmark 1901 study, Poverty: A Study of Town Life, this report was assembled by the University of York's Cost of Living Research Group, working alongside community researchers from Lived Insights and the Rowntree Society.

The report takes its inspiration from Rowntree's 1901 study, which Bradshaw (2000, xlvi) argues was the 'first quasi-scientific empirical study' of poverty. It echoes many of the same themes in its analysis, but summarises findings from contemporary research and utilises research methods unavailable to Rowntree 125 years ago. Its thematic coverage reflects over a century of social scientific debate about how poverty might best be measured or conceptualised and the radically different policy context of 2026 compared with 1901.

- While Rowntree's 1901 study focused on poverty, if he were undertaking the study today he would likely be equally concerned with the impact of inequality across the city:
- The Centre for Cities recently described York as the United Kingdom's 'most affluent city' because more of its neighbourhoods fall into the UK's 20% least deprived neighbourhoods than in any other major city in the country
- At the same time, there is significant poverty amidst York's affluence. 18.2% of children within the City of York local authority area lived in relative poverty after housing costs in 2025 and low-income households in York were more likely to fall below the poverty line than equivalent households in London during 2024/25.
- The cost of living in York is relatively high but its average wage is not. York's average house prices are comparatively high (17/63 major cities), housing affordability is low (16th least affordable of 63 major cities) and it has the least affordable housing of any major city in the north of England, with an average house price of £311,000 and a median house price-to-earnings ratio of 8.5 in 2026.

Both long- and shorter-term trends have contributed to the high cost of living for households in York, for instance:

- York's shortage of affordable social housing reflects the fact that many former council homes sold under Right to Buy since the 1980s are now in the private rented sector, which is often more expensive, and councils have been unable to replace them: between 1980 and 2025, York's social housing stock dropped by 51%, from 14,952 to 7,470 homes
- Fuel poverty in York has surged since the 2021 energy crisis, with fuel poverty now also affecting those higher up the income ladder, including those in full time work, with high energy bills and poor housing conditions affecting many people's daily lives.

Between 1980 and 2025 York's social housing stock dropped by

51%

Housing affordability is low in York

16th

least affordable of 63 major cities

18.2%

of children within the City of York local authority area lived in relative poverty in 2025

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN YORK

York is

'safe' 'historic' 'beautiful' 'comfortable'

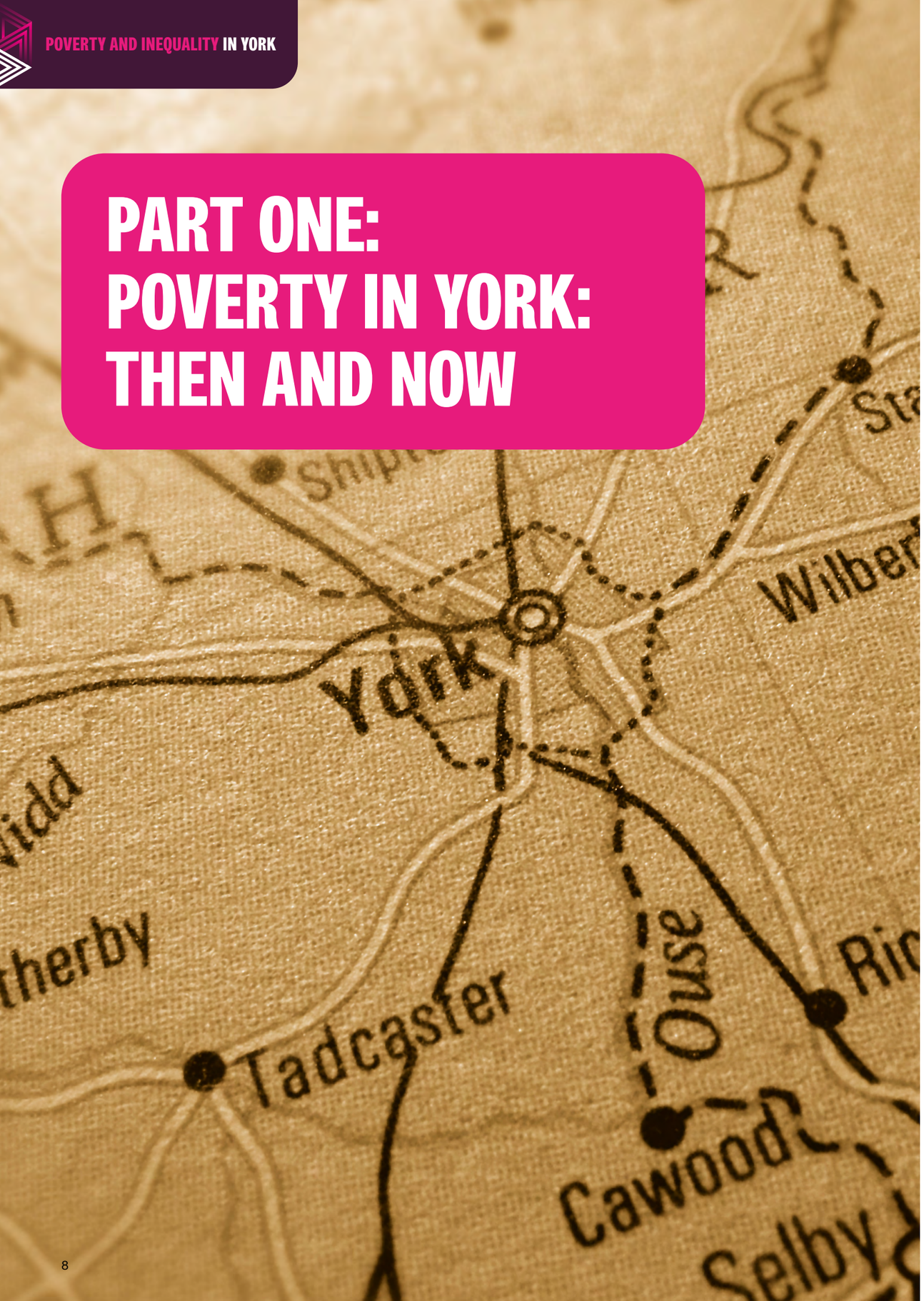
As shown in the following chapters, these characteristics shape life in contemporary York:

- A paradox of affluence was identified in the perspectives of young people who frequently characterised York as 'safe', 'historic', 'beautiful' and 'comfortable' coexisting with socio-economic pressures that shaped their everyday lives and future aspirations. Many young people described experiencing inequalities and hardships associated with the high cost of living, employment insecurity and a lack of affordable housing, contributing to growing uncertainty around transitions to adulthood.
- Despite a deep emotional attachment to the city, young people reported a lack of affordable, youth-oriented spaces and felt that York increasingly caters to tourists rather than local residents. Marginalised groups, including LGBTQ+ youth and young people of colour, often felt excluded due to a lack of visible diversity and representative community anchors.
- Community researchers described feeling 'trapped' by vicious cycles of interconnected challenges stemming from poverty, with social and institutional hostility leading people to internalise shame, deterring them from seeking help and contributing to profound loneliness. They highlighted insufficient income, precarious employment and an inadequate benefits system perpetuating a sense of competition for scarce resources in the city, while some people described reliance on activities within the 'informal economy' such as sex work, drug dealing and the black market, in order to survive.

A common theme across the report's chapters is that fragmented and somewhat siloed policy systems are often less effective than they could be if they were more joined up, a situation typically compounded by stretched funding after years of austerity. However, the report also identifies examples of strong leadership and innovative policy in the city as policymakers and other stakeholders look to address poverty and inequality. For example:

- City of York Council has developed a wide ranging local anti-poverty strategy and used data-driven targeting to increase benefit uptake in low-income households: in 2025, over 50% of pensioner households contacted through this work went on to access Pension Credit, helping reduce poverty amongst this group.
- York-based and FixOurFood programme initiatives like auto-enrolment for Free School Meals and Universal Free School Meals have successfully increased funding for free school meals, reduced stigma associated with them and improved school readiness and attendance in York.
- Community Wealth Building could be a transformative strategy to address 'hidden' poverty and inequality in York, redirecting power and wealth while promoting democratic and inclusive ownership. York has pioneering examples of community wealth building – such as SPARK and YorSpace – and local and regional political leaders who are keen to innovate further with such approaches.
- Community connection and acts of solidarity are powerful counter-forces to stigma and isolation. Shared spaces and community hubs in York help foster dignity and safety.

Nonetheless, all chapters in the report highlight areas where policy reforms could help address poverty and inequality more effectively.



PART ONE: POVERTY IN YORK: THEN AND NOW

1. INTRODUCTION

Kit Colliver

Marking the 125th anniversary of Seebohm Rowntree's Poverty: A study of town life, published in 1901, this collaborative report led by the University of York's Cost of Living Research Group, and featuring guest contributions from a team of community researchers based in York, offers a snapshot of contemporary features of poverty and inequality in the city.

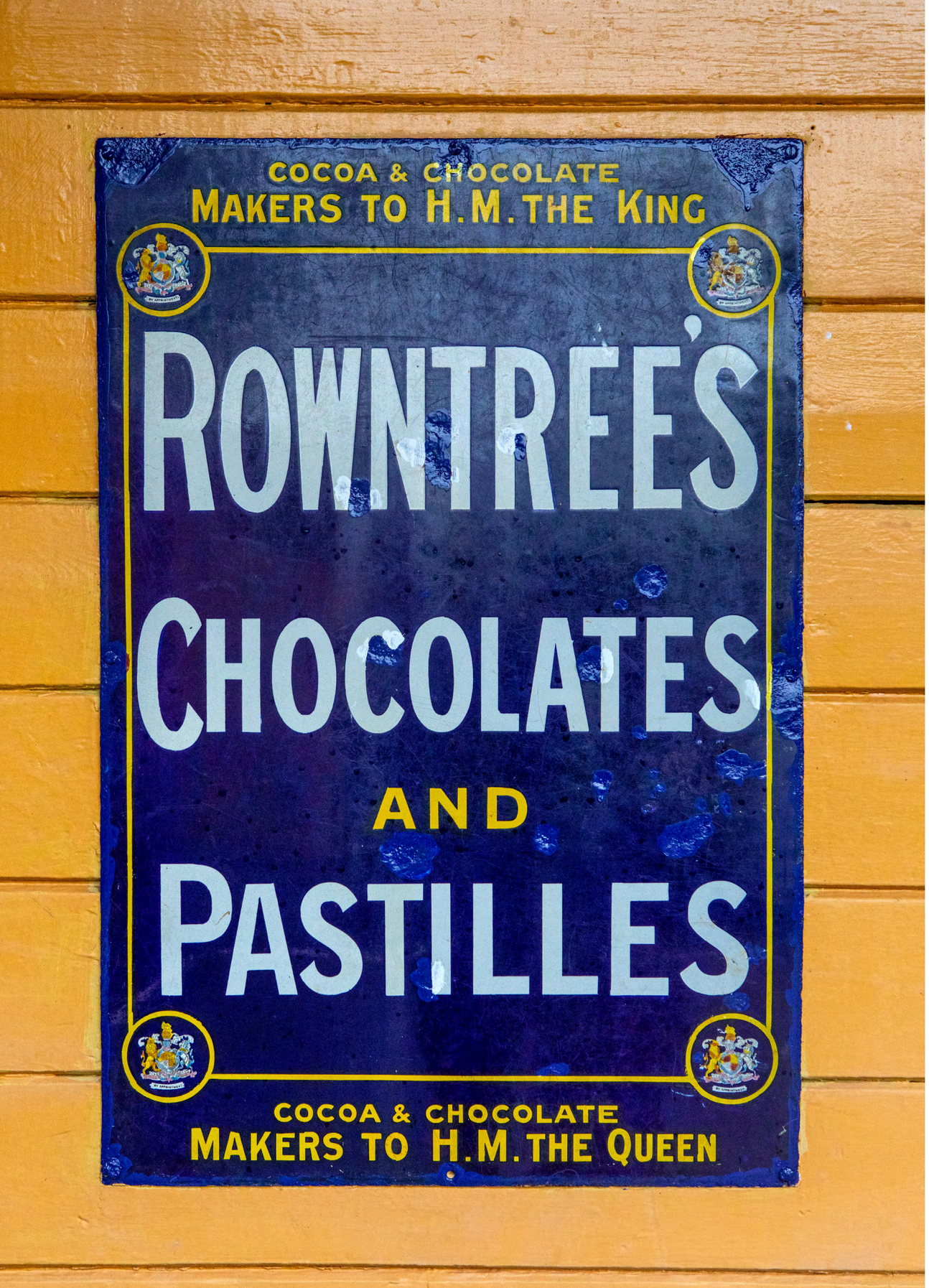
The city of York has changed significantly over the 125 years since Seebohm Rowntree's landmark study. Once 'typical' of Northern towns in the industrial age, York now stands apart in both financial success and its high cost of living. The tension between affluence and deprivation is a central theme within the report, with the city's outward wealth masking deep pockets of deprivation and exacerbating the experience of inequality for those struggling to get by.

Rowntree's work established the foundation for modern poverty research by introducing the first official poverty line and challenging stigmatising, individualised views of poverty by providing statistical evidence of its structural determinants. The research showcased in the report illustrates a number of such features including crises in housing and energy (Chapters 5 and 6) and support systems that are fragmented and under strain (Chapters 3 and 4). Indeed, themes across the report highlight historical continuity alongside (or despite) change: whilst living standards in the city of York have objectively improved since 1901, too many low-income households continue to struggle against systems that exclude them. This is not merely about access to material resources. For example, Chapter 10, which reflects the supplementary section in Rowntree's original report, documents cultural changes to York's pubs as the city's population has grown in affluence. As the young people's voices in Chapter 8 explain, the lack of affordable community spaces in the city is a barrier to relational networks and undermines their sense of belonging.

During the development of this report, members of the Cost of Living Research Group worked closely with Lived Insights, a York-based group of community researchers with personal experience of poverty, inequality and navigating the city's support structures. The community research group used a series of participatory qualitative methods – neighbourhood mapping, local storytelling, and emotional mapping of spaces – to capture their own lived experiences and those of others using food banks and community hubs. They present themes from this work in Chapter 9.

The community research team also made a valuable contribution in reflecting on – and sometimes challenging – the process and outputs of the academic research presented here. This is reflected visually throughout the report, as commentary from the community researchers is captured in boxes embedded throughout the other chapters. This commentary draws attention to the real lives behind all research data, as well as aspects of lived experience that may be missed in academic reporting. The community research team offers a challenge to mainstream research and policy communities, to ensure that findings of this report, and others like it, do not merely record people's challenges but lead to meaningful change.

Seebohm Rowntree wrote that the persistence of poverty in a land of 'abounding wealth' demands 'a greater concentration of thought by the nation on the wellbeing of its own people'. The chapters of this report offer recommendations to inform such thinking. Many, such as the Community Wealth Building proposals in Chapter 7, represent concrete, actionable changes that could quickly improve the lives of people experiencing poverty in the city. Others require wide-scale structural shifts: long-term reforms to rebuild the UK's social security system and place people experiencing poverty at the heart of its design.



2. THEN AND NOW: THE ROWNTREE LEGACY

Kit Colliver and John Hudson

Chapter Findings

SCIENCE: Seebohm Rowntree's 1901 study, *Poverty: A study of town life* used statistical exactness to demonstrate that poverty is a product of social structures rather than individual failings.

- **IMPACT ON BRITAIN'S WELFARE STATE**: Rowntree's work had a major impact on public policy, serving as the evidence for a series of Liberal reforms. He went on to inform the 1942 Beveridge Report that laid the groundwork for Britain's welfare state.

- **LONG-TERM LEGACY**: Rowntree's approach evolved through three major surveys of York (1901, 1936, and 1951), moving from 'bare subsistence' to a more expansive standard of 'human needs'. This legacy continues through the Minimum Income Standard used in contemporary anti-poverty campaigning.

- **MODERN METHODOLOGIES**: Rowntree's 1901 study prioritised statistical analysis of poverty in York, leaving little room for the voices of the people he studied. A modern view offers more sophisticated estimates of poverty and a 'turn to lived experience' recognises the value of knowledge held by people being researched.

Seebohm Rowntree and the 'Poverty' study

Published in 1901, Rowntree introduces his *Poverty: A study of town life* by sketching a portrait of York at the turn of the twentieth century. Characterising is as a 'fairly representative' provincial town,[1] he notes that:

> *The city of York covers an area of 3692 acres. On April 1, 1899, it contained about 15,000 houses, with an estimated population of 75,812, and for municipal purposes is divided into six wards.*[2]

Further details of the city offer some clues to the social concerns of Rowntree's late Victorian era – the industrialising impact of the railway introduced in the mid-1800s, the Ouse river carrying traffic to Hull, a town prone to flooding and to rowdiness in the slums on a Saturday night. Although Rowntree notes that York has no predominant industry, he identifies between two and three thousand people employed in cocoa and confectionary works at the time.

Born in 1871, the son of proprietor Joseph Rowntree, Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree was raised in the expectation of joining the family business. The Rowntree family had purchased the Cocoa Works in 1862 and had grown it to around 900 employees by the mid-1890s.[3] Whilst Seebohm travelled to Manchester to study Chemistry after leaving school, he returned home to York without a degree and started in the Cocoa Works at the age of 18, going on to join the Board of Directors in 1897.[4]

The *Poverty* study originated in response to the industrial challenges of the day, with influences traced to both Seebohm Rowntree's ideological surroundings and his scientific training in response to industrial challenges. A prominent Quaker family, the Rowntrees tended to view social questions as moral questions and were proponents of equity and social justice. These attitudes coincided with liberal thought, including the necessity of social reform for societal wellbeing, and Joseph Rowntree instituted a 48-hour working week in the Cocoa Works in 1896.[5] Voluntarily moving from a chemist's role to a labour management position within the company, Seebohm Rowntree's interest in industrial welfarism was linked both to concerns for worker wellbeing and considerations around the (in)efficiency of an under-nourished workforce. Indeed, his later writing pointed towards welfarism as a mechanism for quelling unrest and reducing the risk of uprisings in the aftermath of the Russian revolution.[6]

...and collected data from a total of 11,560 families – a population of

46,754

– across 388 streets

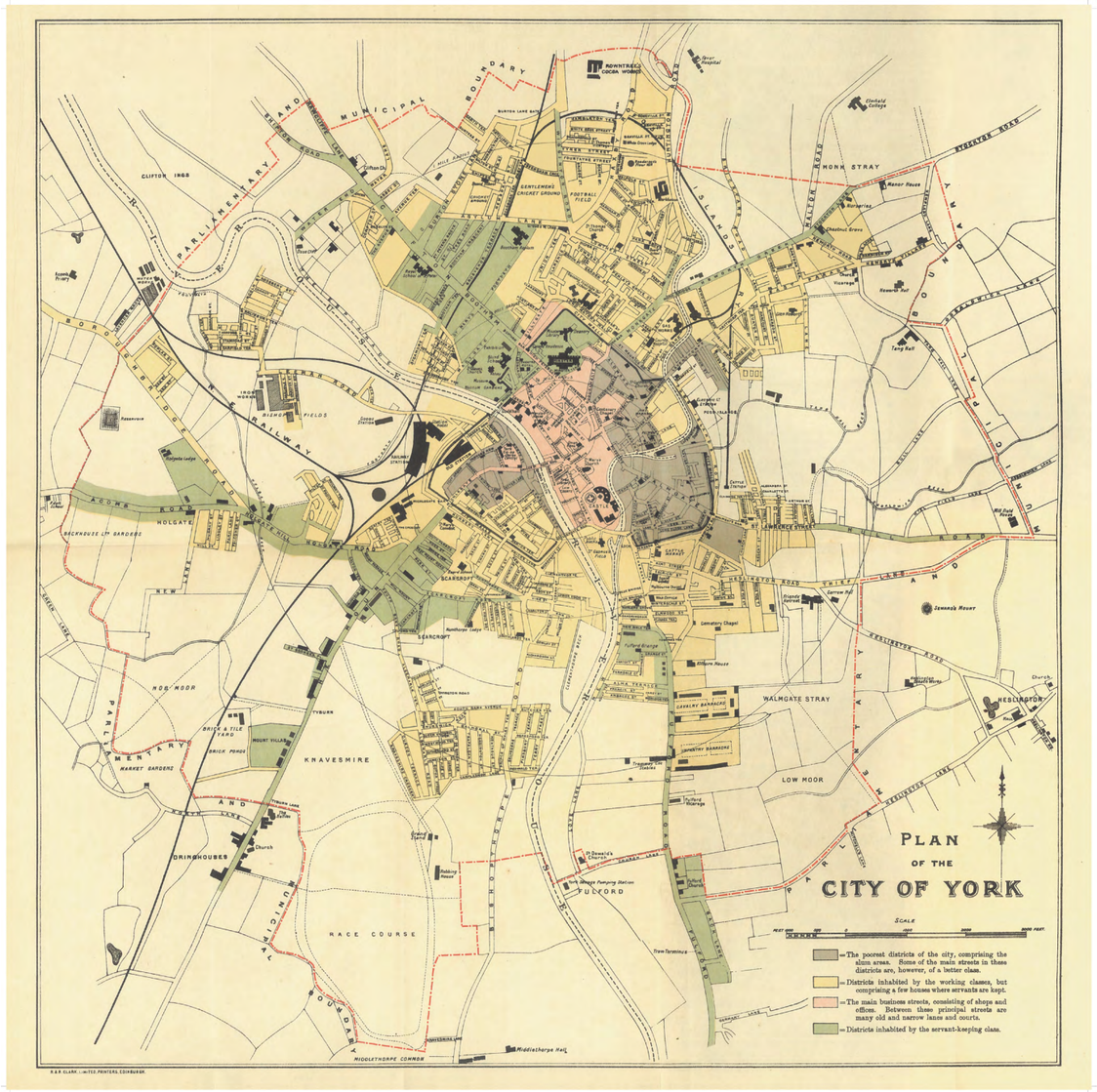
Seebohm Rowntree's research

Informed by Charles Booth's 1889 research in London, Seebohm Rowntree sought to 'undertake a detailed investigation into the social and economic conditions of the wage-earning classes' in the city of York.[7] He commenced his research in York in 1899, approaching these social questions scientifically and with an interest in statistical exactness.[8] Supported by a small team of research assistants, Rowntree conducted house to house surveys of around two thirds of Yorks's population, excluding those wealthy enough to employ servants, and collected data from a total of 11,560 families – a population of 46,754 – across 388 streets.[9]

1 Rowntree, *Poverty* (Macmillan, 1901), p. 12.
2 Rowntree, *Poverty* (Macmillan, 1901), p. 1.
3 Asa Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree, 1871-1954* (Longmans, 1961).
4 Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action;* Jonathan Bradshaw, 'Preface for the Centennial Edition of Poverty: A Study of Town Life', in *Poverty : A Study of Town Life* (Policy Press, 2000).
5 Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action*.
6 B. Seebohm Rowntree, *The Human Factor in Business* (Longmans, Green, and co., 1921).
7 Rowntree, *Poverty* (Macmillan, 1901).
8 Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action*.
9 Rowntree, *Poverty* (Macmillan, 1901).

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Figure 2.1 Poverty in York, 1901



Source: Rowntree, B.S. (1901) Poverty: A study of town life. London: Macmillan. *https://wellcomecollection.org/works/cv2ekdg7*

Rowntree's meticulous survey work represented an important advance in social science methodology. Equally important to the impact of his work were the criteria he devised for measuring the socio-economic conditions he was researching. With reference to leading nutritional science and the cost of goods in York,[10] Seebohm Rowntree devised the first Poverty Line. This was a measure of absolute poverty calculated according to the weekly sum of money a family required to afford minimal rent, food and dietary necessities. Families whose earnings were insufficient to meet these minimal thresholds, even under conditions of perfectly efficient expenditure, were deemed to be in 'primary' poverty. Those whose earnings ought to have afforded these minimum necessities, but where a portion was diverted to some other expenditure, whether 'useful' or 'wasted', were considered to be in 'secondary' poverty.[11]

Impact and legacy

The survey findings were striking. They showed that one in ten (9.9%) of York's households were in primary poverty, meaning they did not earn enough for basic necessities, despite more than half of this group also having regular work. Adding those in secondary poverty (17.9%) brought the total to just short of 30% of York's population. Critiques of Rowntree's methodology suggest these figures may have been an under-estimate. As Briggs[12] observed in his celebrated study of Rowntree's work, the minimalism of the primary poverty was so stringent as to be – intentionally – unrealistic. Equally, as the single point sample of the survey did not account for the volatility of York's low-income working classes, it will have failed to capture those households that cycled in or out of poverty during the period of the study.[13]

Rowntree's figures were comparable to those obtained by Charles Booth's London study,

The survey findings were striking:

9.9%

of York's household were in primary poverty

offering some external validation for the research of each. Moreover, the stringency of the 'primary poverty' definition provided compelling evidence against the prevailing view that poverty was a product of individual or household failings, instead pointing towards an understanding that poverty is a social issue stemming from structural conditions and hence amenable to relief through structural change.[14]

Jonathan Bradshaw makes the following claims of Rowntree's legacy through the *Poverty* study:

- it had a remarkable impact on public understanding of poverty as well as on attitudes to the poor;
- it immediately had an impact on policy, influencing the spate of social reform enacted by the Liberal Government after 1906;
- Rowntree, in Poverty, established the British tradition of empirical social science research; he also established the tradition of social research designed to inform policy — to achieve what today is being called 'evidence-based policy'.[15]

Locally, Rowntree applied his findings to the workforce in York's Cocoa Works, introducing pioneering welfare benefits including dental care, retirement pensions and widow's benefits.[16] Nationally, the study provided an evidence base for a string of Liberal reforms including the 1906 Education (provision of Meals) Act, the 1907 Workmen's Compensation Act, the 1908 Labour Exchanges Act, the 1908 Old Age Pension Act and the 1911 National Insurance Act.[17]

The influence of this work extended throughout Seebohm Rowntree's life and into the modern day. *Poverty* was the first of three studies Rowntree conducted on poverty, with further work published in 1936 and 1951. Having caught the attention of leading politicians, he occupied an advisory role to government in the interwar years and development of the modern welfare state, with his data directly informing the 1942 Beveridge Report and contributing to the subsistence income scales for National Insurance and National Assistance.[18] The research also had a long-term methodological impact. Rowntree's research was inspiration for similar studies in other English localities, building the social policy evidence base of the time, and the legacy of his method for calculating a minimum income standard from basic needs continues to play an important role in contemporary social policy and anti-poverty campaigning through the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's minimum income standard.[19]

Studying poverty then and now

In his preface to the centennial edition of *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, Jonathan Bradshaw concluded:

> *Rowntree's book can claim to be the first quasi-scientific empirical study of the subject – scientific in the sense that it was based on the careful and systematic collection of facts, with a clearly specified poverty standard, which at the time had some scientific basis, and against which household income could be compared.*[20]

In the 125 years since its publication much has changed in terms of how poverty is conceptualised and measured, while modern information and communication technology opens up possibilities for data collection and analysis that were not afforded to Rowntree, meaning 'To a modern student of social science, *Poverty* may appear to be a rather curious volume'.[21] In two follow up studies of poverty in York,[22] Rowntree significantly revised his methods and approach to reflect changes in thinking.[23] Consequently, though we do not know precisely how, we can be confident that if a 'time travelling' Seebohm Rowntree was conducting his study today he would take a very different approach than in 1901. If we were to speculate on how, what major themes might we draw to the fore?

Firstly, we can be confident that Rowntree would adopt a more expansive poverty line. His 1901 study's 'clearly specified poverty standard' is out of kilter with contemporary approaches, Rowntree using a poverty line based on the absolute bare minimum required for physical survival. He utilised a deliberately meagre benchmark because earlier studies had met with scepticism that poverty could exist in one of the richest countries in the world, so he chose an absolute poverty line that even harsh critics would find difficult to dismiss. He made significant revisions to his poverty line in later studies, developing a more expansive 'human needs' approach in the 1918 The Human Needs of Labour and updating it further in the 1941 Poverty and Progress and 1951 Poverty and the Welfare State.[24]

Secondly, it is very likely Rowntree would have wanted to understand in great detail how far social security benefits affect household income. In his 1901 study Rowntree did not ask

10 Bradshaw, 'Preface for the Centennial Edition'.

11 Rowntree, *Poverty* (Macmillan, 1901), p. viii.

12 Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action*.

13 Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action*.

14 Bradshaw, 'Preface for the Centennial Edition'.

15 Bradshaw, 'Preface for the Centennial Edition', p. xx.

16 Rowntree Society, 'Seebohm Rowntree and Industrial Welfare', *The Rowntree Society*, 2016 <*https://www.rowntreesociety.org.uk/pastprojects/seebohm-rowntree-industrial-welfare/*> [accessed 24 March 2026].

17 Bradshaw, 'Preface for the Centennial Edition'.

18 Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action*; Bradshaw, 'Preface for the Centennial Edition'.

19 Elaine Robinson, Juliet Stone, and Matt Padley, *Households Living below a Minimum Income Standard: 2008–2024* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025).

20 Bradshaw, 'Preface for the Centennial Edition', p. xlvi.

21 Bradshaw, 'Preface for the Centennial Edition', p. xxv.

22 B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress; a Second Social Survey of York* (Longmans, Green and co, 1941) <*http://archive.org/details/povertyprogresss0000rown*> [accessed 4 June 2026]; B. Seebohm Rowntree and G. R. Lavers, *Poverty and the Welfare State: A Third Social Survey of York Dealing Only with Economic Questions* (Longmans, Green and Co; Longmans, Green and co, 1951) <*https://wellcomecollection.org/works/tmuatmbt*> [accessed 4 June 2026].

23 Timothy J. Hatton and Roy Bailey, 'Seebohm Rowntree and the Postwar Poverty Puzzle', *The Economic History Review*, 53.3 (2000), pp. 517–43, doi:10.1111/1468-0289.00169.; Kathleen Jones, *The Making of Social Policy in Britain: From the Poor Law to New Labour*, 3rd edn (Athlone, 2000) <*http://archive.org/details/makingofsocialpo0000jone_m9j4*> [accessed 4 June 2026].

24 Hatton and Bailey, 'Seebohm Rowntree and the Postwar Poverty Puzzle'; Jones, *The Making of Social Policy in Britain*.

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households any questions about their income, in part because he could use his business connections to gather information on wage rates from the city's major employers, but also because there was no need to understand how social security benefits affected household income because there was no social security system.[25] By contrast, Rowntree's third and final poverty study in 1951 focused explicitly on this question, indeed it was titled *Poverty and the Welfare State* for this reason.[26]

Thirdly, it seems certain that he would want to make use of cutting-edge information technology to support the analysis and presentation of data and to allow for more timely presentation of findings. The 1901 study featured painstaking analysis of thousands of questionnaires and the book was replete with diagrams, infographics and maps, all completed manually and requiring several years labour from Rowntree and a large number of assistants. Rowntree accelerated the collection and analysis of data in his 1951 study,[27] but still struggled to produce analysis that could keep pace with changes in social security policy.[28]

Contemporary studies of poverty differ markedly in each of these areas from Rowntree's approach. His subsistence poverty line contrasts starkly with contemporary definitions that view poverty in relative terms.[29] Moreover, modern studies typically utilise very detailed surveys of income and expenditure that allow detailed understanding of the impact of the tax benefit system, with some of the most sophisticated approaches allowing for modelling of recent reforms using micro-simulation techniques[30] or the 'nowcasting' of current levels of poverty by combining survey data with administrative data from public service providers.[31]

In addition to the above, we can question whether Rowntree would focus his study on York if conducting it today. He justified this approach on the basis York was broadly representative of living conditions across the country, but much has changed since. As Bradshaw and Bloor[32] note, the 2025 English indices of deprivation show that 'comparatively York is now a remarkably affluent city' with only a small proportion of York's Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) falling amongst the most deprived areas in England and about half falling into the 20% least deprived LSOAs nationally. The 2026 Centre for Cities profile of York[33] echoes this picture with York: ranking 1st (out of 55) primary urban areas (PUAs) in attainment of GCSE maths and English grades 9-4; recording the second lowest (of 63 PUAs) on unemployment; and, ranking 58th (out 62 PUAs) on the number of neighbourhoods in the most deprived quintile.[34]

25 Bradshaw, 'Preface for the Centennial Edition'.

26 *However, even in his final study the absence of a detailed household income questionnaire meant Rowntree missed some payments, the study noting, for example, that its poverty estimates were weakened by the absence of information on discretionary crisis payments such as Exceptional Needs Grants ((Rowntree and Lavers 1951, 35). Moreover, though unclear in the 1951 study, it seems likely that Rowntree's method of imputing benefit income overlooked the fact that not all households take up the means tested benefits they are entitled to, not least because non-take up of means tested benefits was a weakly understood until later studies in the 1950s and early 1960s uncovered the scale of the issue (Townsend, 1979:824)*

27 *In part by randomly sampling 1 in 9 working class households in York rather than visiting them all.*

28 Rowntree and Lavers, *Poverty and the Welfare State*, p. 36.

29 See Brigid Francis-Devine, *Poverty in the UK: Statistics*, Research Briefing Number 7096 (House of Commons Library, 2026) <*https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07096/SN07096.pdf*> [accessed 4 June 2026]; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *UK Poverty 2026: The Essential Guide to Understanding Poverty in the UK* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2026) <*https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2026-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk*> [accessed 3 February 2026]. For example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (2026:181) current definition states 'Being in poverty is when your resources are well below what is enough to meet your minimum needs, including taking part in society' and, while a range of poverty indicators exist, the most commonly used is the proportion of people living in households with less than 60% of the median income after adjusting for household size (Francis-Devine, 2026:6).

30 M. Richiardi, D. Collado, and Popova, 'UKMOD – a New Tax-Benefit Model for the Four Nations of the UK'', *International Journal of Microsimulation*, 14.1 (2021), pp. 92–101, doi:10.34196/IJM.00231.

31 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *What's so Rapid about R.A.P.I.D.?*, 2024 <*https://www.rapid-insights.uk/blog?qb-b=blog--1--what%E2%80%99s-so-rapid-about-r-a-p-i-d--*> [accessed 4 June 2026].

32 Jonathan Bradshaw and Karen Bloor, 'Is York Typical? What Does the Data Tell Us in 2025?', *University of York*, 12 November 2025 <*https://www.york.ac.uk/policy-engine/cost-of-living/news-and-blogs/2025/is-york-typical/*> [accessed 4 June 2026].

33 Centre for Cities, *City Factsheet: York* (Centre for Cities, 2026) <*https://www.centreforcities.org/city/york/*> [accessed 15 May 2026]; Centre for Cities, *Cities Outlook 2026* (Centre for Cities, 2026), pp. 1–42 <*https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Cities-Outlook-2026.pdf*> [accessed 15 May 2026].

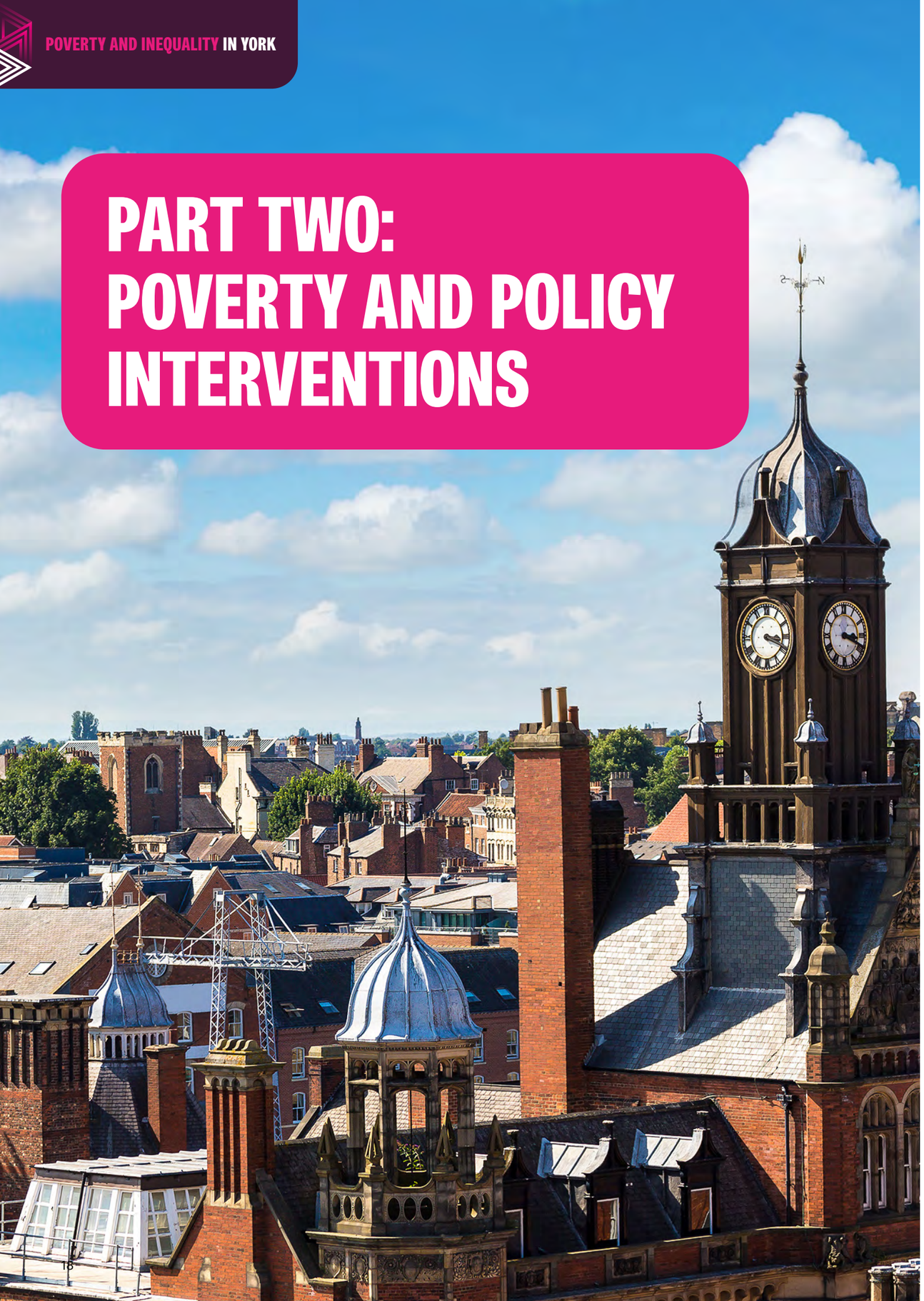
34 Indeed, it is possible Rowntree may have chosen to focus on inequality, rather than poverty alone, had he been undertaking a study of living conditions in York today. The Centre for Cities (2026) profile underlines some of the pressures arising here, for while York's average workplace earnings are typical of the average national picture (ranking 30 / 63 PUAs), its average house prices are comparatively high (17 / 63 PUAs) and housing affordability low (16th least affordable / 63 PUAs).

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN YORK

Fran Bennett notes there has been a 'turn to lived experience' in academic and third sector policy research on poverty.[35] By contrast, while Rowntree's 1901 study features very occasional short quotations from those in households visited by the investigators and there was some involvement of trade unions in facilitating access to data, the study was mainly an exercise in statistical analysis that left little room for the voices of York's working-class households themselves. It is harder to be sure whether Rowntree would look to adopt a more participatory approach to the design and delivery of his study if he were completing it today, though a sympathetic view might be that it would not be wholly incompatible with the spirit of what his 1901 study aimed to achieve.

35 Fran Bennett, 'The Merging of Knowledge? Lived Experience of Poverty and Its Place in Public Debate', Journal of Poverty and Social Justice, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 32.3 (2024), pp. 480–86, doi:10.1332/17598273Y2024D000000019.

PART TWO: POVERTY AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS



3. POVERTY IN CONTEMPORARY YORK

Kit Colliver, John Hudson, Jed Meers and Neil Lunt

Chapter Findings

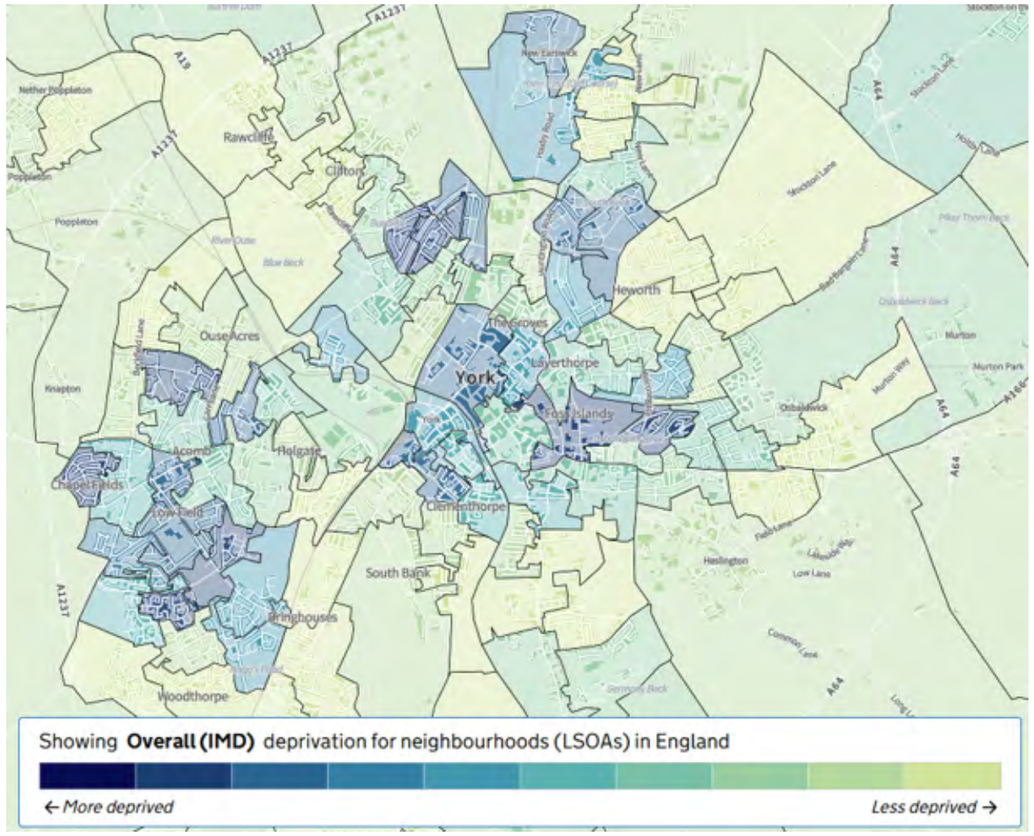
- **AFFLUENCE IN THE CITY OF YORK**: The 2025 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) suggest that York has more top-quintile neighbourhoods (20% least deprived) than any other major city in England. The Centre for Cities describe York as the United Kingdom's 'most affluent city' on this basis. York also has a comparatively low share of neighbourhoods falling into the bottom quintile (UK's 20% most deprived neighbourhoods, 6.6% compared to an average of 26.6% across all major cities).

- **THE AFFORDABILITY GAP**: The cost of living in York is comparatively high but its average wage is not. York's average workplace earnings are typical of the picture nationally (ranking 30 out of 63 major cities), but its average house prices are comparatively high (17/63). Housing affordability is low (16th least affordable of 63 major cities) and it has the least affordable housing of any major city in the north of England.

- **RELATIVE POVERTY RATES**: There is significant poverty amidst York's affluence. 18.2% of children within the city of York local authority area lived in relative poverty after housing costs in 2025. The Real-time Analysis of Poverty Indicators Dashboard (RAPID) data shows low-income households in York were more likely to fall below the poverty line than equivalent households in London during 2024/25.

- **DATA-DRIVEN ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGIES**: Aware of the challenges low-income households in York face, City of York Council has developed a wide ranging local anti-poverty strategy and use data-driven targeting to increase benefit uptake in low-income households: in 2025, over 50% of pensioner households contacted through this work went on to access Pension Credit, helping reduce poverty amongst this group.

Figure 3.1 York LSOAs IMD: Overall



Source: MHCLG English indices of deprivation 2025, *https://deprivation.communities.gov.uk/maps*

Poverty amidst rising affluence

Rowntree's 1901 *Poverty: A study of town life* focused on living conditions in York on the basis it was a 'fairly representative' provincial town. Such a claim cannot be made about contemporary York. With a thriving knowledge-based economy, the modern City of York is characterised by a high-level of outward affluence.

Indeed, the Centre for Cities[1] recently described York as the United Kingdom's 'most affluent city' on the basis no other primary urban area (PUA) has a greater share of its neighbourhoods in the 20% least deprived neighbourhoods as measured by the most recent Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) data. In 2025, 51% of York's neighbourhoods fell into the least deprived 20% of neighbourhoods nationally (which Centre for Centres simply label as 'affluent' neighbourhoods, a convention we follow below), compared with 19.6% of neighbourhoods across all major cities in the United Kingdom. Their analysis shows affluence in York has grown over the last decade or so as a consequence of changes to York's urban core (areas within 2km of the centre), which has become increasingly affluent since 2010.[2] At the same time a comparatively low share of York's neighbourhoods place in the 20% most deprived neighbourhood nationally, 6.6% compared to an average of 26.6% across all cities, with only a handful of cities having fewer neighbourhoods in this category than York.[3]

While IMD data show that 'comparatively York is now a remarkably affluent city'[4] it would be wrong to assume that poverty is of minor concern in contemporary York. Aggregating IMD neighbourhood-level data across cities provides useful information about how cities and neighbourhoods compare, it tells us little about the number of households experiencing poverty, and the UK's comparatively high levels of income inequality mean even the most affluent cities can have high levels of poverty. Official statistics show that 18.2% of children within the city of York local authority area lived in relative poverty after housing costs in 2025.[5] Although this is some way below the UK average of 26%, the fact that around 1 in 5 children in York live in poverty underlines that there remains significant poverty amidst the city's affluence. We should note that cities with comparatively high levels of affluence are typically relatively expensive places to live too, meaning low-income households may see their budgets stretched by higher than average costs for housing and for many of the goods and services they consume daily. The Centre for Cities profile[6] underlines some of the pressures arising here, for while York's average workplace earnings are typical of the average picture nationally (ranking 30 / 63 PUAs), its average house prices are comparatively high (17 / 63 PUAs) and housing affordability (based on a house prices to average earnings ratio) is low (16th least affordable / 63 PUAs), with the least affordable housing of any major city in the north of England. In this context, low-income York residents are not only at risk from the day-to-day challenges of poverty but also the burdens of invisibility and exclusion arising from acute social inequalities.

Cognisant of these issues, City of York Council recently developed and adopted a local anti-poverty strategy, Tackling Poverty Today and Turning the Tide to Create Lasting Change.[7] Analysis undertaken for the strategy showed that some poverty is present in every ward within the city, but that ward-level Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) data from the 2025 IMD (see Figure 3.1) highlights distinct clustering of deprivation and affluence in some neighbourhoods, including disparities in child poverty rates (ranging across wards from 2.2% – 19.8%),[8] healthy life expectancy (an 11-year difference)[9] and a £180 weekly wage gap between the median and 25th percentile that is larger than the regional and the national average gap.[10]

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

I often ask what these strategies actually achieve.

Poverty in contemporary York

City of York Council notes, 'York is a small, very unequal City; so, people experiencing poverty see affluence on their doorstep, and others assume that poverty does not exist in the city'.[11] As this implies, misconceptions and a limited local evidence base have hampered attempts to develop local anti-poverty policies. In something of an echo of Rowntree's pioneering 1901 work, York is playing an important role in developing new approaches to poverty measurement that can help address these gaps. Most notably, Policy in Practice and the York-based Joseph Rowtree Foundation have recently collaborated

1 Centre for Cities, *Uneven Cities: The Geography of Deprivation in Urban Britain* (Centre for Cities, 2026), p. 20 <*https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/uneven-cities-the-geography-of-deprivation-in-urban-britain/*> [accessed 18 August 2026].

2 Centre for Cities, *Uneven Cities*.

3 Centre for Cities, *Uneven Cities*.

4 Bradshaw and Bloor, 'Is York Typical?'

5 DWP, *Children in Low Income Families: Local Area Statistics, Financial Year Ending 2025* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2026) <*https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-in-low-income-families-local-area-statistics-2022-to-2025/children-in-low-income-families-local-area-statistics-financial-year-ending-2025*>.

6 Centre for Cities, *Cities Outlook 2026*.

7 City of York Council, *Tackling Poverty Today and Turning the Tide to Create Lasting Change*, Strategic Action Plan (City of York Council, 2025) <*https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s186058/Item%2016%20-%20Tackling%20Poverty%20Today%20and%20Turning%20the%20Tide%20to%20Create%20Lasting%20Change%20-%20Annex%20A.pdf*> [accessed 15 May 2026].

8 City of York Council, *Report of the Director of Public Health to the Health and Wellbeing Board*, Committee Report (Health and Wellbeing Board, City of York Council, 2025) <*https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s182817/Goal%201%20report%20May%202025.pdf*> [accessed 29 May 2026].

9 City of York Council, *Report of the Director of Public Health to the Health and Wellbeing Board*.

10 City of York Council, *Tackling Poverty Today*.

11 City of York Council, *Tackling Poverty Today*.

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on the development of the Real-time Analysis of Poverty Indicators Dashboard (RAPID) that combines multiple data sources, including administrative data from participating local authorities, and building on Policy in Practice's Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) tool, to provide fine-grained insights on the spatial and demographic patterning of poverty in near real-time.[12] This is a significant methodological advance compared to nationally published poverty datasets such as the Department for Work and Pensions' Family Resources Survey, which come with a 12-18 month reporting lag.[13]

BOX 3.1 POVERTY METRICS TRACKED BY RAPID[14]

Absolute income poverty: This metric identifies households whose net income after housing costs is less than 60% of the median income in 2010/11, uprated for inflation. It reflects an absolute standard of poverty, enabling consistent comparisons over time regardless of changes in national living standards.

Relative income poverty: Households are considered in relative income poverty if their net income after housing costs is less than 60% of the current national median income. This captures income inequality and reflects how far households fall behind the average standard of living.

Relative resources gap: Households who have access to less than a minimum acceptable level of resources, factoring in: income, household savings, and inescapable costs, such as disability-related expenses.

Minimum income standard: Benchmark developed by Joseph Rowntree Foundation based on what members of the public agree is needed for a minimum acceptable standard of living.

RAPID's poverty measures are calculated using household income and outgoings reported in two key administrative data sets – Single Housing Benefit Extract and Council Tax Reduction Extract – supplemented by benefit receipts and estimated eligibility for support such as Free School Meals. Four poverty metrics – absolute income poverty, relative income poverty, relative resources gap and the minimum income standard (see Box 3.1) – are calculated monthly and broken down by demographic and economic categories at the ward level, all on a before housing costs basis. Reflecting the underlying data on which it builds, RAPID data only relate to low-income households captured in the key administrative data sets noted above, i.e. RAPID provides an estimate of living standards of low-income families rather than the whole population, a key fact to take into account when interpreting the figures from RAPID presented below. City of York Council are one of the early participants in the RAPID project and they, together with Policy in Practice team and our team at the University of York, have utilised it to provide the most detailed published snapshot of poverty in contemporary York to date for this report, analysing RAPID data across the 12 months spanning April 2024 – March 2025.

Reflecting the city's affluence, standard poverty measurements show that, overall, households in York are less likely to be in poverty than those in London. However, RAPID shows that, during 2024/25, low-income households in receipt of benefits in York were more likely to be in poverty than equivalent households across the 19 London boroughs covered by the RAPID data: on average 31.5% fell below the relative income poverty rate in York compared to 28.3% in London and 61.7% in York fell below the minimum income standard compared to 57.7% in London, underlining the challenges many low-income households in York face.

RAPID data highlight the demographic and spatial patterning of poverty in York, as detailed in Figure 3.2, which reports the percentage of households falling below the relative poverty line by key demographic groups recorded in RAPID. During 2024/25, the likelihood of falling below the relative poverty line in York was greater for: those of working age than those of pension age; households with children than those without and, for those with children, of greater likelihood where children were young and/or if there were more than two children in the household; people with a disability than those without a disability, but only where the individual was not receiving Disability Living Allowance.

Figure 3.3 shows the spatial pattern of relative poverty in York, based on a snapshot of RAPID data for March 2025. While some low-income households fall below the poverty line in every ward of the city, a greater proportion do in some wards than others. For example, low-income households living in Huntington & New Earswick (20.7%), Bishopthorpe (20.2%), Haxby & Wigginton (24.0%), Fishergate (24.1%), Fulford & Heslington (24.1%), Wheldrake (21.4%), Strensall (22.2%) and Dringhouses & Woodthorpe (26.3%) were less likely to fall below the poverty line than those in Clifton 32.8%, Westfield (34.5%), Holgate (35.8%), Heworth (37.8%) or Hull Road (37.0%).

In each of the above, the likelihood of a group falling below the relative poverty line should not be confused with the prevalence of poverty. For instance, RAPID data for March 2025 show there were almost three times as many households living below the relative poverty line in Westfield (408) than Hull Road (142) even though the relative poverty rate amongst low-income households was higher in the latter. Similarly, while across the city single households are much less likely to fall below the poverty line than those with children it is also true that the majority of households in relative poverty are single households.

York's evidence-based anti-poverty strategy

City of York Council's anti-poverty strategy identifies the high cost of living, low wages and precarious employment, and public service funding gaps amongst the critical challenges facing contemporary York.[15] Noting the hidden inequalities and geographical disparities across the nominally affluent city, it observes that children, single parent families and disabled people are amongst the groups who are most affected, whilst systemic barriers including high-cost housing and transport systems create additional pressures on these residents. In mitigation, the council advances a plan comprising immediate relief including cash-first payments, advice and income maximisation schemes; poverty prevention activities aimed at reducing living costs and supporting access to work, and; system change to meet local need in the longer-term.

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

We want to hear about policies that address our needs specifically.

RAPID has informed the strategy by giving the council up-to-date insights on the spatial and demographic patterning of poverty, enabling them to identify areas and households at greatest risk of falling into poverty and to monitor the impact of local interventions.[16] In providing ward-level breakdowns, demographic filters (e.g. lone parent households, disabled households) and housing tenure information, RAPID supports strategic decision-making about the direction of the council's anti-poverty agenda. LIFT has been utilised alongside RAPID and City of York Council's own administrative data to monitor changes in poverty and target strategic interventions to specific households, particularly in relation to benefit advice and income maximisation activity. For example, City of York Council used LIFT to increase the uptake of Pension Credit by identifying eligible pensioners and encouraging them to claim the support they were entitled to. The LIFT dashboard has enabled the council to monitor outcomes and project long-term impacts for residents of such activity too. In the first year of use, over 50% of those contacted (246 of 430) went on to claim Pension Credit. The LIFT tracker showed a rise in pensioner incomes and decline in pensioners in food poverty over that period.[17]

This demonstrates the potential of data-driven

12 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *What's so Rapid about R.A.P.I.D.?*

13 Policy in Practice, 'R.A.P.I.D. – Real-Time Analysis of Poverty Indicators Dashboard', Rapid Insights, Policy in Practice & Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024 <*https://www.rapid-insights.uk/*> [accessed 23 June 2026].

14 Policy in Practice, 'R.A.P.I.D. – Real-Time Analysis of Poverty Indicators Dashboard'.

15 City of York Council, *Tackling Poverty Today*.

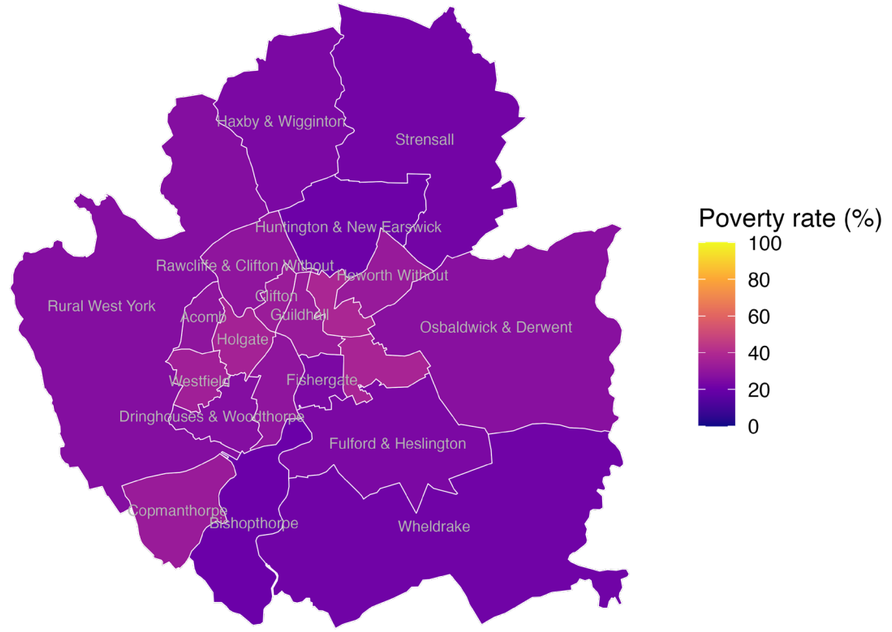
16 City of York Council, *Tackling Poverty Today*.

17 Policy in Practice, '"I Turned on the Heating for the First Time" How City of York Council Transformed Lives in 2025', *Policy in Practice*, December 2025 <*https://policyinpractice.co.uk/case-study/city-of-york/*> [accessed 23 June 2026].

Figure 3.2: Demographic Patterning of Poverty in York 2024/5, % of low-income households below relative poverty line, by demographic groups reported in RAPID



Figure 3.3 Spatial patterning of poverty in York 2024/5: Poverty rate by ward (March 2025), using the relative poverty line (60% of median income, before housing costs)



Source: Policy in Practice and Office for National Statistics (licensed under the Open Government License v3.0)

analyses for directing support to households in the greatest need. Such approaches are likely to become even more valuable in the coming years. On the one hand, multiple measures of disadvantage point towards worsening inequalities in York. For example, the gap in healthy life expectancy – a major indicator of wider social inequalities – has been growing in the city, together with an overall decline in life expectancy in some areas.[18] On the other hand, the city's comparative affluence may undermine the council's capacity to act, as central government's recent Fair Funding Review used relative needs formulae based on a number of socio-economic indicators (including IMD data) to calculate local authorities' multi-year settlement[19] and 'Following the Fair Funding Review, City of York Council is projected to be THE lowest funded unitary authority in the country'.[20]

In light of this adverse funding climate, engaging in methodological innovation to enable the most effective targeting of scarce local resources will be crucial. So too will be creative problem solving, not least working in close partnership with the city's Voluntary, Charity, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector (Box 3.2). This includes the council working closely with partners in the city's VCFSE sector to deliver local welfare assistance, and administering support through the national government's Crisis and Resilience Fund.

18 City of York Council, *Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy Action Plan*, Report of the Director of Public Health to the Health and Wellbeing Board (Health and Wellbeing Board, City of York Council, 2025) <*https://democracy.york.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=70090*> [accessed 29 May 2026]; City of York Council, *Report of the Director of Public Health to the Health and Wellbeing Board 07 May 2025*, Committee Report (Health and Wellbeing Board, City of York Council, 2025) <*https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s182817/Goal%201%20report%20May%202025.pdf*> [accessed 29 May 2026]; City of York Council, *Report of the Director of Public Health to the Health and Wellbeing Board 13 May 2026*, Committee Report (Health and Wellbeing Board, City of York Council, 2026) <*https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s189138/Future%20Direction%20of%20York%20HWB%20-Final.pdf*> [accessed 29 May 2026].

19 Mark Sandford and Philip Brien, *Explaining the Fair Funding Review 2.0* (House of Commons Library, 2025) <*https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10303/*.>.

20 City of York Council, *Financial Strategy 2026/27 to 2030/31* (City of York Council, 2026), para. 49 <*https://democracy.york.gov.uk/%28S%28aw2b23jofoyuejfc1asnl055%29%29/documents/s186992/Item%2010%20-%20Financial%20Strategy%202026-27%20to%202030-31.pdf*> [accessed 18 August 2026].

BOX 3.2 VCFSEs IN YORK: ANTI-POVERTY DELIVERY AND ACCOUNTABILITY[21]

In a recent survey 28% VCFSEs within Humber and North Yorkshire identified their dominant purpose as tackling poverty. In York, VCFSEs provide frontline crisis support and essentials, from food parcels and household goods to provision of warm spaces during colder months. Whilst signposting is one of the most common forms of support offered in the region, many also play a holistic role in empowering people with experiences of poverty and inequality including providing access to opportunities to improve their standard of living. Equally, VCFSEs can provide other local welfare actors with valuable insights about poverty and inequality in the city. For example, the York Human Rights City Network, a partnership between York CVS and the University of York, produces an annual report that tracks indicators like child poverty and the attainment gap.

The close work between VCFSEs and people with lived experience of poverty and inequality means they can play a critical role in advocacy and holding institutions to account. York's Poverty Truth Commission was launched in 2023, linking Community Commissioners with experience of poverty with local decision-makers (Civic Commissioners), aiming to give people struggling against poverty a voice in service design and the city's anti-poverty efforts. Prioritising culture change in services, their *Charter for Organisational Standards* established four commitments for signatory organisations: We listen; We are understanding; We are respectful and friendly; and, We are responsive, honest and care about getting you the right support.

City of York Council adopted the Charter in March 2025, indicating that York Poverty Truth Commission's work would feed into their anti-poverty strategy and noting the Charter's relevance to activities in York Neighbourhood Model, Health's Integrated Neighbourhood Teams, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. Whilst the council committed to integrating the standards across its services and tracking progress through six-monthly update report, the decision was not accompanied by any additional funding – they indicated that any changes would have to be absorbed by existing budgets and that, without resources, there was a risk of incomplete implementation with little change or even worsening of experiences for residents in poverty. This tension highlights the risk that, even where local authorities commit to progressive goals, local government finances are such that they may lack the means to deliver, making council's anti-poverty policies performative rather than transformative in impact.

York in a national social policy context

Our deep dive into the incomes of households in the city of York challenges policymakers to look beyond a single set of poverty figures to explore how spatial context informs experiences of poverty and inequality in place. Whilst York has lower levels of acute deprivation than the UK's other urban centres, the sharp wealth inequalities in the city inform residents' opportunities and ability to participate in society. This is the challenge to policymakers: as all households at risk of and experiencing poverty suffer from negative impacts including financial uncertainty, insecurity and poorer life chances,[22] so anti-poverty work must aim to improve baseline living standards as well as directing emergency support to those in crisis.

One view of the modern City of York presents a cautionary tale, holding a mirror up to the national government and social security system. As the most affluent city in the North, York could be expected to marshal ample resources to protect its residents from poverty and inequality. But high rates of poverty often reflect the impact of a central government run social security system that is failing to reach the most vulnerable and beyond the control of local political actors. This was underlined by the RAPID data we analysed covering York between April 2024 – March 2025; the most marked reductions in poverty occurred between April and May 2024 when a series of national policy changes were implemented: an increase in the National Living Wage (from £10.42/hour to £11.44/hour, up by 9.8%); the annual inflation-linked uprating of means-tested benefits and pensions; Ofgem lowering the price cap for domestic energy, reducing typical fuel bills; and, restoration of Local Housing Allowance to the 30th percentile of local market rents, a marked improvement in support for private tenants in receipt of housing benefit. By contrast, in York itself, the council's financial power to support local welfare interventions to mitigate the impact of gaps in the national safety net is very modest and has been curtailed by changes to funding formulae that reflect the affluence elsewhere in the city. In such a context, the council's anti-poverty strategy is welcome, but faces substantial challenges to delivery.

Within this challenging landscape, sources of hope and opportunity for anti-poverty work in the city of York are twofold. First, the council's commitment to tackling poverty through development and monitoring of a formal local strategy is clear and it joins a growing number of local authorities adopting such an approach (Resolve Poverty 2026). Secondly, the related adoption of a data-driven approach underlines the power of evidence-led policymaking. Novel methodologies enabling local government to target support promise a rapid and efficient means of delivering and evaluating policy interventions to ensure that they bring about meaningful improvements at household and community level.

National government leadership promises to mitigate some of the most acute pressures facing local council welfare efforts. The new UK-wide Child Poverty Strategy promises an integrated approach that works across layers and government and across different sectors. The abolition of the two-child benefit limit promises to reduce demand on local welfare initiatives by lifting thousands of children out of poverty. The new Crisis and Resilience Fund, replacing a series of short-term iterations of the cost of living crisis's Household Support Fund, offers local authorities greater predictability and stability of funding, enabling strategic planning around future welfare efforts.

At the time of writing a new Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, has just taken office promising a 'cost of living government' and the biggest-ever 'rebalancing of power' away from Whitehall. It may be that the scope for local and regional authorities to pursue ambitious anti-poverty agendas is about to widen further.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Long-term targeted support**: Local government should continue its data-driven approach to developing and monitoring York's local anti-poverty strategy, making use of RAPID and LIFT together with other data sources to target support and evaluate the efficacy of anti-poverty initiatives over the longer term.
2. **Collaboration and co-design**: Local government should work closely with the city's Voluntary, Charity, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector and those with lived experience of poverty in the development and roll-out of anti-poverty initiatives, including activity arising from the new Crisis and Resilience Fund.
3. **Coordinating to tackle child poverty**: Local and regional government should explore new ways of working with each other and national government as part of the UK-wide Child Poverty Strategy.

21 See Elizabeth Cookingham Bailey, Chunhua Chen, and Anne-Marie Greene, *Workforce Mapping Project 2025* (2025); YHRCN, *York Human Rights City Indicator Report* (York Human Rights City Network, 2025) <*https://yorkhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/YHRCN-Indicator-Report-2025-final.pdf*> [accessed 15 May 2026]; Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership, *VCSE Collaborative: Project Overview 2022-2026* (Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership, 2026) <*https://yorkcvs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/VCSE-Collaborative-Final-Report-9.pdf*> [accessed 17 June 2026]; York Poverty Truth Commission, *Charter for Organisational Standards: TOGETHER Promoting Dignity and Respect for Those Facing Poverty* (York Poverty Truth Commission, 2024) <*https://yorkcvs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/PTC-Organisational-Standards-Booklet.pdf*> [accessed 2 June 2026]; City of York Council, *Adoption and Implementation of the York Poverty Truth Commission's Charter for Organisational Standards*, Decision Report (City of York Council, 2025) <*https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s181925/Poverty%20Truth%20Commission%20Report.pdf*> [accessed 2 June 2026].

22 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *UK Poverty 2026*.



4. THE ROLE OF SCHOOL FOOD IN ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY

Nicola Nixon, Sundus Mahdi, Rob Oxley and Maria Bryant

Chapter Findings

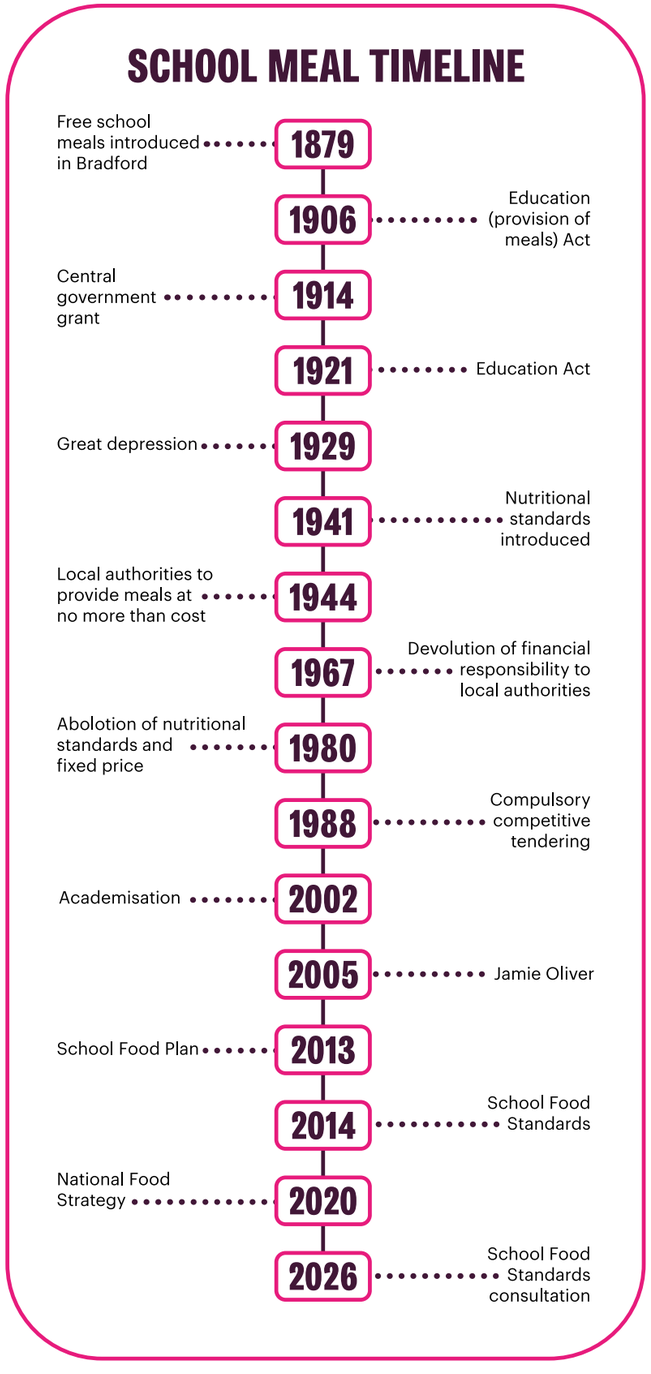
- **POLICY EVOLUTION**: School food transitioned from 1944 welfare mandates to 1980s commercialisation and deregulation. While nutritional standards were reinstated in 2014, the current system remains fragmented and lacks consistent oversight.

- **SYSTEM BARRIERS**: School food systems face several challenges, including lack of funding and deprioritisation over other curriculum based commitments. Stigma and administrative hurdles leave 220,000 eligible families unregistered for free school meals. Additionally, the allowance provide often results in secondary students having to choose less healthy ‘grab and go’ options.

- **INNOVATION**: York-based and FixOurFood programme initiatives like auto-enrolment and Universal Free School Meals have successfully increased funding, reduced stigma and improved school readiness and attendance.

- **FUTURE VISION**: Stakeholders advocate for adequately funded meals, appropriate monitoring of the school food standards, universal free school meals and a ‘whole school approach’ to enable schools to become drivers of community wellbeing and food education.

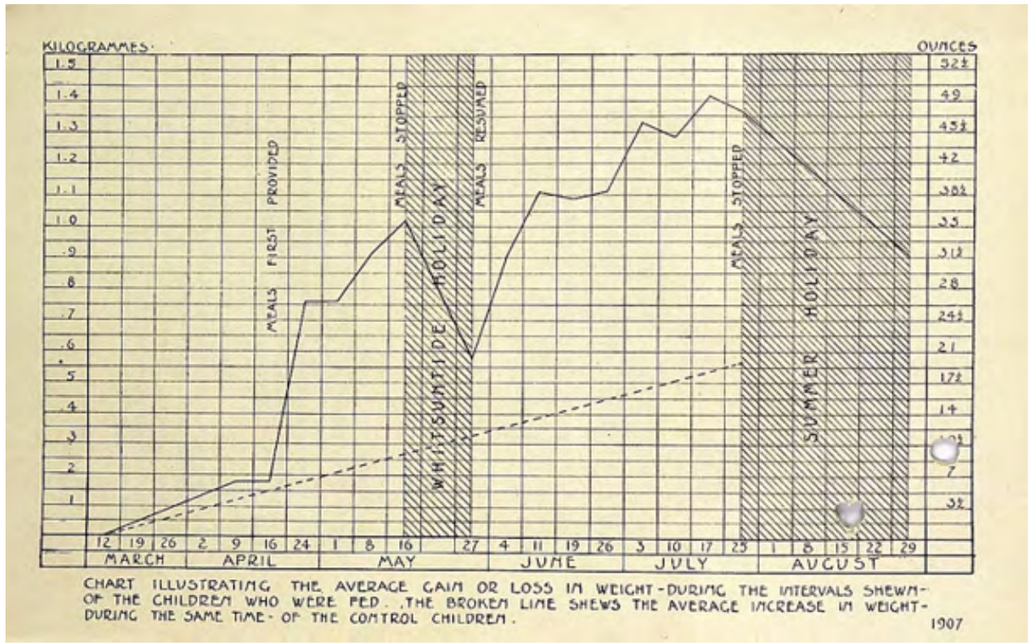
Figure 4.1: Key events in the provision of English school meals 1879 to 2026



© University of York, Sources: Gillard 2003, Passmore and Harris 2004

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN YORK

Figure 4.2 The impact of school meals on the weight of children in Bradford in 1907



© The National Archives, School dinners

A century of school food provision

Schools serve as a vital universal setting for large-scale nutritional and environmental interventions. In 2026, millions of children consume school meals each day, which provide at least 30% of their daily nutrition. When implemented through a 'whole school approach to food,' schools provide a unique platform to tackle health and equality through delivering essential nutrition, fostering lifelong positive relationships with food and providing food and cooking education. In addition, Free School Meals remain a critical lifeline for children from low-income households, often serving as their primary source of daily nourishment and a key tool in mitigating the effects of poverty. Although school food provision was absent from the 1901 Rowntree report, its role in managing population health and inequality was already recognised. In Yorkshire, Bradford pioneered free school meals for malnourished children in the 1870s. Since then, the provision, funding and uptake has varied with health and education priorities of the government in situ and is summarised in Figure 4.1.

The Rise of State Provision (1906–1944)

Legislation began with the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act, which permitted, but did not mandate, local authorities to provide school meals. Early experiments in Bradford (1907) revealed the necessity of this provision; children gained weight during term time but lost progress during holidays (Figure 4.2).

Government support expanded through a 50% grant in 1914 and the 1921 Education Act requiring the provision of free school meals. Although the Great Depression triggered funding cuts, the 1940s marked a golden era for school nutrition. To counter the negative impact of World War II rationing on children's diets, the government introduced nutritional standards in 1941. The 1944 Education Act further mandated that local authorities provide a school meal sufficient to be the main meal of the day at a nominal cost to parents.

Deregulation and Commercialisation (1967–2002)

Starting in 1967, the state began devolving financial responsibility of school meals to local authorities. This decentralisation accelerated in 1980 with the removal of national nutritional standards and fixed price charge for school meals. The 1988 introduction of compulsory competitive tendering shifted school food from a predominantly welfare service, to a more commercial model focused on cost. By the late 1980s, uptake plummeted to 43%, from 70% in the 1970s, as benefit changes restricted eligibility. The introduction of Academies in 2002 further fragmented the system, enabling schools to operate independently of local authority oversight whilst maintaining state funding.

Modern Advocacy and Policy (2005–2026)

The decline in quality following the transition from a predominantly state provision for welfare purposes, to a devolved model with a commercial focus was highlighted in 2005 through Jamie Oliver's public advocacy. However, despite the resulting support and advocacy for improving the quality of school meals, significant policy change was not forthcoming until the 2013 School Food Plan. This led to the 2014 reinstatement of nutritional standards and the introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals.

The 2020 National Food Strategy highlighted the potential of school meals to improve the dietary health of children on a population scale. However, the importance of several recommendations from the School Food Plan, yet to be implemented, were reinforced; particularly regarding universal primary school meals and robust monitoring. Today's system is characterised by fragmentation and a lack of public health oversight, facilitating inequalities in child nutrition. In response to ongoing concerns about the dietary health of children and advocacy for improvement, a public consultation on revising School Food Standards was launched in 2026.

The importance of school food

Evidence from an annual nationally representative survey indicates that most children, young people (and indeed, adults) fail to meet the recommended intake of nutrients, with consistent data suggesting children eat too much free sugar (over twice the recommended amount of 5% of energy) and saturated fats and not enough fibre, fruits or vegetables.[1] In years 2019-2023, less than 10% of 11-18 year olds ate the '5-A-Day' target of fruit and vegetables, whilst consuming an average of 124 millilitres of sugary drinks each day. 96% of young people in the same age group did not meet the recommended intake of fibre (15-25g/d depending on their age).

These findings are worse in children and young people who live in the most deprived areas, where only 6% of children aged 11-18 years met the 5-A-Day recommendation for fruit and vegetables, compared to 13% in the least deprived. Similarly, those living in the most deprived circumstances consumed the most sugar sweetened drinks. Findings are consistent with evidence on food insecurity, whereby 23.2% of children globally are affected by stunting[2] leading to poor growth and development and impacting on learning and health (including increased risk of infections, obesity and poor dental health). In the UK, 15 % of families with children experience food insecurity.[3]

Indicators of poor dietary health such as obesity and diabetes prevalence are higher in Yorkshire than the national average. In line with national trends, obesity prevalence more than doubles whilst children are in primary school, highlighting the potential for better quality school food to address child dietary health. Child obesity prevalence in Yorkshire is 9.9% (England, 9.2%) in reception, and 24.1% (England, 22.7%) in year 6 (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2021). This varies widely by area with the lowest obesity levels in York (7.8% in reception and 18.7% in year 6) and the highest in North East Lincolnshire in reception (11.6%) and Doncaster in year 6 (27.7%). Diabetes prevalence is 8.1% in Yorkshire (England, 7.7%), with hospital admissions for under 19 year olds at a rate (per 100,000 population) of 54.8 compared to England at 52.4.4

Working towards a better school food system

There has been recent political commitment to support school food through improved school food standards and increased funding for free school meals,[5] however, there is still much to do to ensure that it provides a high quality diet and reduces health inequalities. Academics in Yorkshire (University of York and Leeds) have supported local authorities including City of York Council by providing evidence, and opportunities, to optimise school food. FixOurFood was a 5.5 year research programme focused on transforming the UK food system into one that is regenerative, whilst prioritising human welfare and the health of the planet.[6] Through research in schools and the involvement of young people evidence and support was provided to inform major policy directions such as a pilot of Universal Free School Meals in City of York Council, healthier and more sustainable school meals in Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council and a new food strategy in North Yorkshire Council.

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

I'm encouraged that pilots have been introduced in York, but they are the iceberg tip of a much wider problem.

CASE STUDY 4.1: ENHANCING FREE SCHOOL MEAL POLICIES

Evidence suggests that stigma is associated with accessing free school meals and the presence of educational inequalities arising from food insecurity. To overcome this, City of York Council had a vision to provide all primary school children with one free school meal per day.[7] To support this objective, City of York Council piloted Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) at two York-based primary schools in 2024. In one school, the offer included free breakfasts for all, whilst in another school the offer included free school dinners for all children. An evaluation of the pilot by suggested the UFSM met needs for: (1) Affordability – UFSM helped alleviate family financial pressures, whilst ensuring children are not starting their day hungry or have inadequate packed lunches; (2) Human rights and equalities – UFSM helps overcome stigma associated with free school meals that could make children feel different to their peers, whilst improving educational outcomes through improved school readiness, wellbeing, attendance and punctuality; (3) Health – there was positive parent and child perceptions of school food quality and variety; (4) Environment – children often finished their food though food waste was common for the healthier components, such as vegetables. Additional findings suggested UFSM provisions improve uptake for both breakfast and school meals.

1 Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, *National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2019 to 2023: Report* (Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, 2025) <*https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-diet-and-nutrition-survey-2019-to-2023/national-diet-and-nutrition-survey-2019-to-2023-report*> [accessed 18 August 2026].

2 UNICEF, *Malnutrition in Children* (UNICEF, 2025) <*https://data.unicef.org/topic/nutrition/malnutrition/*> [accessed 26 June 2026].

3 Food Foundation, *Roadmap to Reducing Food Insecurity in the UK* (2025) <*https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/roadmap-reducing-food-insecurity-uk*> [accessed 9 August 2026].

4 Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, *National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2019 to 2023*.

5 Department for Education, *New School Food Standards: What Parents Need to Know*, 13 April 2026 <*https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2026/04/new-school-food-standards/*>; Department for Education, *Free Meals in Further Education Funded Institutions Guide: Academic Year 2025 to 2026* (Department for Education, 2026) <*https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-meals-in-further-education-guide/free-meals-in-further-education-funded-institutions-guide-academic-year-2025-to-2026*> [accessed 9 August 2026].

6 FixOurFood, *FixOurFood in Schools. Fix Our Food* (2026) <*https://fixourfood.org/what-we-do/our-activities/schools-and-nurseries/*>.

7 City of York Council, *One City, For All: City of York's Council Plan 2023-2027* (City of York Council, 2023), York, North Yorkshire, England, United Kingdom <*https://www.york.gov.uk/council-plan-1/one-city-2023-2027*> [accessed 2 June 2026]; York Labour, *Our Pledges* (2026) <*https://www.yorklabour.org.uk/category/policies/local-ledges-2023/*> [accessed 9 August 2026].

Since the Education Act of 1944, registration for free school meals has been an opt-in system, requiring families to register. Over recent years, this opt-in approach has been reevaluated, with data suggesting that ~220,000 eligible families remain unregistered,[8] due to barriers including stigma, shame and administrative hurdles.[9] To address this, with support from the FixOurFood programme at the University of York, many local authorities have begun implementing new 'auto-enrolment' processes. Families are identified using welfare data and automatically registered unless they opt-out, making free school meals more inclusive by addressing registration-related barriers.

In 2024, City of York Council implemented a successful auto-enrolment pilot project, which was expanded to all schools in 2025. Councillor Bob Webb revealed that auto-enrolment had 'saved families over £21,000 and come with additional Pupil Premium funding of over £61,000'.[10] Despite making a difference to the lives of many children and schools, the local barriers to implementation suggest a needed move towards a centralised, government-led approach.[11]

Given the importance of free school meals to support children whose families live on a very low income, it is imperative that the food provided is nutritious. In 2025/2026 the daily free school meal allowance for secondary school pupils equated to £2.61.[12] In 2022, FixOurFood worked with young people as citizen scientists across seven Yorkshire schools to investigate whether healthy, tasty and sustainable food can be purchased within the FSM daily budget.[13] Findings suggested that pupils had restricted choices and often had to opt for meal deals, which were sometimes unhealthier and

In 2025/26 the daily free school meal allowance for secondary school pupils equated to

£2.61

included a plastic bottled drink. A lack of clear pricing led to pressurised unhealthy choices and embarrassment, due to unaffordability, at point of purchase. The allowance could not be rolled over or used at breaktimes. Short lunch breaks led to unhealthy 'grab and go' choices, and a lack of clean drinking water forced pupils to spend their allowance on bottled drinks. Alarmingly, no fruit was purchased over the entire week in 4 out of 7 schools.

Given findings that the FSM allowance may not be sufficient to allow healthy and sustainable food choices, the young researchers hosted a parliamentary event calling 'a better deal for free school meals'.[14] FixOurFood research has highlighted continuously the need for enhanced school food policies that support child welfare, ensuring that children in need are not just fed, but fed right. A revision of the school food standards in 2026 is well received, but it is clear that the school food system will need to continually to evolve to support children, particularly with regards to the need to ensure that the implementation of policies are regularly monitored.

8 Feeding Britain, *Extending Opportunity, Strengthening the Safety Net: An Options Paper for Modernising Free School Meal Registration in England* (2024) <*https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Feeding-Britain-FSM-registration-working-group-final-report-Nov-2024-v2.pdf*>.

9 S. Iniesta-Martinez and H. Evans, *Pupils Not Claiming Free School Meals* (Department for Education, 2012); P. Sahota and others, 'Factors Influencing Take-up of Free School Meals in Primary- and Secondary-School Children in England', *Public Health Nutrition*, 17.6 (2014), pp. 1271–79, doi:10.1017/S136898001300092X.

10 A. Kavanagh, *New Free School Meal Enrolment System Saves York Families*, 13 November 2025 <*https://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/25619007.new-free-school-meal-enrolment-system-saves-york-families/*>.

11 Maria Bryant and others, 'Auto-Enrolment of Free School Meals: A "No Brainer"?', *Public Health Nutrition*, 28.1 (2025), p. e70, doi:10.1017/S1368980025000382; Rob Oxley and others, 'Improving Access to Free School Meals: Evaluating the Implementation of a New Free School Meal Auto-Enrolment Process', *The Lancet*, 404 (2024), p. S38, doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(24)02007-5.

12 Department for Education, *Free Meals in Further Education Funded Institutions Guide*.

13 Sundus Mahdi and others, '"Will My Fingerprint Be Enough?"Secondary School Students Struggle to Purchase a Healthy, Tasty and Sustainable Meal on the UK Free School Meal Allowance', *Public Health Nutrition*, 28.1 (2025), p. e19, doi:10.1017/S1368980024002593.

14 Food Foundation, *School Students Campaign for Better School Meals in Parliament*, 7 December 2023 <*https://foodfoundation.org.uk/news/school-students-campaign-better-school-meals-parliament*> [accessed 9 August 2026].

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

£3 pound per day cannot buy a meal. A snack may cost £1, leaving less for a meal. Parents are topping this up each day – so not FREE – say £2 extra, £10 per week per child.

Optimising quality to make a difference to child health

School food was not mentioned in the original 1901 Rowntree report however, a 1907 report noted the type of food recommended. Oatmeal porridge with milk and treacle, followed by bread and margarine or dripping and milk to drink for breakfast. There were 17 recommended dinner recipes, all made from scratch, including vegetable soups with beans and pulses (over half of the meals were vegetarian) served with traditional desserts such as jam roly-poly (over half of which contained fruit). This compares to the current provision which has been found to be high in ultra processed food[15] and characterised by low levels of variety, with a common weekly rotation in many schools of pizza on a Monday, roast dinner on a Wednesday and fish and chips on a Friday.[16] The re-introduction of school food standards initially improved quality[17] but a lack of monitoring and support, out of date requirements and confusion over terminology, has led to a system meeting standards 'on paper' but not in practice.[18] Early findings from the FixOurFood programme highlight that the current school food system is not optimised for child health. Whilst the meals provided generally met, or were close to, many UK nutritional recommendations, what the children consumed fell significantly short in some nutrients important for child growth and development such as, Vitamin C, Iron, Zinc and dietary fibre.

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

This is scary to read, we're still faced with the same concerns as when Rowntree did his study!

The provision of school food has changed in the last decade. In Yorkshire, there has been a mass migration from what was predominantly a local authority catered provision (82%) in 2013 to a more mixed provision split between local authority caterers (49%), commercial caterers (30%) and in-house (9%) in 2024.[19] This is important, as early findings from FixOurFood indicate that local authority catering organisations have better connections with local authority public health teams and provide higher nutrition quality compared to commercial caterers (unpublished). The responsibility for school food rests with school leaders who have to juggle many conflicting priorities for resources and often feel the need to prioritise educational outcomes and safeguarding as these are formally reported, evaluated and monitored. This lack of monitoring and prioritisation was perceived to facilitate inconsistent, and at times, inadequate school food quality. Caterers were often motivated to prioritise less healthy foods, reflecting what they believed to be child preferences for ultra processed meals and sugary desserts, in order to avoid child hunger or optimise uptake for financial reasons. This was reflected in children's meal choices containing high levels of free sugars and low levels of fibre. High quality nutrition from school meals is particularly important for tackling inequality as children from more deprived backgrounds suffer from worse dietary health overall than children from less deprived areas.[20]

FixOurFood findings support the importance of school meals for tackling inequalities with

15 Jennie C. Parnham, Christopher Millett, and Eszter P. Vamos, 'School Meals in the UK: Ultra-Processed, Unequal and Inadequate', *Public Health Nutrition*, 26.1 (2023), pp. 297–301, doi:10.1017/S1368980022002336.

16 N. Nixon, 'Exploring Models of School Food Procurement to Optimise the Quality of School Meals for Primary School Children' (unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of York, 2025).

17 Ashley Adamson and others, 'School Food Standards in the UK: Implementation and Evaluation', *Public Health Nutrition*, 16.6 (2013), pp. 968–81, doi:10.1017/S1368980013000621.

18 Nixon, 'Exploring Models of School Food Procurement'.

19 Nixon, 'Exploring Models of School Food Procurement'.

20 Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, *National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2019 to 2023*.

lunches served in schools with high levels of deprivation being nutritionally superior to those served in less deprived areas. In particular, they served higher amounts of dietary fibre, Vitamins A, C, D and E, folate, potassium, calcium and iron. However, the schools in the most deprived areas also served more sugars, including free sugars and saturated fat. The nutritional advantage from meals served in more deprived areas was often lost at the point of consumption with children in these schools consuming similar levers of dietary fibre, and important micronutrients to children in less deprived areas. There are opportunities for the nutritional content of meals to be improved through introducing new meals to school menus and blending additional vegetables and pulses into existing ones. The FixOurFood Menu Swaps pilot project demonstrated that swapping menu items in this way increased fibre by up to 334% and reduced saturated fat by up to 89%, on a cost neutral basis for caterers.

Working in partnership for a shared future vision of school food

Many researchers and implementers, including FixOurFood are working towards making improvements to school food as part of a shift across wider food systems. Food systems are responsible for 30% of climate change and, while there is enough food to feed the whole population, many people go hungry or suffer with inadequate diets.[21] Thus, the systems approach advocates a move from a current degenerative food system, described by unequal nutrition, concentrated power and ecological degradation, towards a food system that boasts local diversity, empowerment and universal access to nutritious food especially for those needing it the most. FixOurFood applied an approach to develop a shared vision for school food called the Three Horizons[22] with young people, teachers, caterers, policy makers and national experts. This recognises the challenges faced by schools of being underfunded, with weakly enforced school food standards, and high levels of food waste and set a future vision where schools are seen as drivers of community wellbeing, able to provide high-quality food and food-based education for all children, whilst working towards zero-waste environments.[23]

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

My daughter and her mates are aware of choices and climate impact. She asks questions, 'Will I be alive when it's too hot?' They would be sad and angry to hear about the impact of school lunches. If clearly articulated, I think they would want to do something about it?

In order to achieve the goals of school food system transformation, it is crucial that actors across the system are actively engaged. In 2021, FixOurFood explored the school food priorities from over 300 primary and secondary school children in Yorkshire.[24] Through multiple events involving these system actors, the top five priorities for school food transformation were identified. These included: Universal free school meals; school trips (e.g. farms) to learn about food through practical experience; recycle and compost; everyone has a say on what is on the school menu; and more availability of vegetarian and vegan options as well as breakfast clubs for all. Involving children in decision making can empower children, create a sense of ownership and increase acceptability of new policy implementation whilst reducing backlash[25] and collectively working towards a shared vision that healthy, tasty, sustainable food is the default option in all schools.

21 Laura Batlle-Bayer and others, 'An Explorative Assessment of Environmental and Nutritional Benefits of Introducing Low-Carbon Meals to Barcelona Schools', *Science of The Total Environment*, 756 (2021), p. 143879, doi:10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.143879.

22 Bill Sharpe and others, 'Three Horizons: A Pathways Practice for Transformation', *Ecology and Society*, 21.2 (2016), p. art47, doi:10.5751/ES-08388-210247.

23 Sam J. Buckton and others, 'Transformative Action towards Regenerative Food Systems: A Large-Scale Case Study', *PLOS Sustainability and Transformation*, 3.11 (2024), p. e0000134, doi:10.1371/journal.pstr.0000134.

24 FixOurFood, *What Do Children Think about School Food?* (2023) <*https://fixourfood.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/School-food-research-report.pdf*>.

25 Didier Jourdan and others, 'The Involvement of Young People in School- and Community-Based Noncommunicable Disease Prevention Interventions: A Scoping Review of Designs and Outcomes', *BMC Public Health*, 16.1 (2016), p. 1123, doi:10.1186/s12889-016-3779-1.

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN YORK

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Review funding models**: School food (and wider associate activities) must be adequately funded the free school meal daily allowance must be enough for young people to buy nutritious, filling meals.
2. **Strengthen monitoring and accountability for School Food Standards**: The Department for Education should embed School Food Standards compliance checks directly into statutory Ofsted inspections. This creates a robust enforcement mechanism with clear consequences for non-compliance, directly addressing the current issue where school food is deprioritised by school leaders over other formally monitored, curriculum-based commitments.
3. **Auto-enrolment for free school meals**: Introduce national auto-enrolment to improve free school meal uptake and support children living in deprivation, without application barriers (stigma, shame, language/literacy).
4. **Roll out universal primary school meals**: Implement UFSM for all primary school children (after successful York pilots) to eliminate financial stigma, alleviate household poverty, and improve school readiness and attendance.
5. **Meal co-design**: Update the nutrient content of foods through innovation in meal design. Involving children in this to increase acceptability and uptake.



5. HOUSING EXCLUSION

Nicholas Pleace

Chapter Findings

- **THE BANANA-SHAPED TRAJECTORY OF YORK'S SOCIAL HOUSING STOCK:** The roll-out of Britain's welfare state and associated public policies in the post-war period meant that by 1980 nearly one third of York's households lived in social housing, with modern amenities such as central heating and indoor toilets becoming standard across the country. By 2025, York's social housing stock had dropped by 51%, from 14,952 to 7,470 homes.

- **HOUSING AFFORDABILITY AND HOUSING EXCLUSION:** York has seen a sustained drop in housing equality since 1980. As of 2026, York is the least affordable local authority in Yorkshire, with an average house price of £311,000 and a median house price-to-earnings ratio of 8.5. Housing costs have a severe impact on child poverty in York, which rises from 13.9% before housing costs to 18.2% after housing costs. The city now faces persistent challenges with rough sleeping and a significant number of homeless families living in temporary accommodation.

- **POLICY FAILURES:** York's shortage of affordable social housing reflects the fact that many former council homes sold under Right to Buy are now in the private rented sector, which is often more expensive and of poorer quality, and councils have been unable to replace them. Local authorities, hit by decades of public sector cuts under austerity, lack the resources to monitor housing conditions effectively or take enforcement action against widespread issues such as damp, mould, and poor repair in the city's ageing private housing stock.

Falling housing inequality and the Rowntree Legacy 1900-1980

> *The land round the ancient Eboracum is flat and almost featureless, so we may surmise that it was no great rural charm which caught the eye of Joseph Rowntree when his mind had conceived this venture of importance. He knew his own city of York, with its many crowded and dilapidated houses; he knew the lives of the workers and their social needs: he knew, moreover, industrial England, and the way of its development for a century of "progress" and dissatisfied with its pace, he determined to try an experiment in sociology and housing and planning.*[1]

Housing played a fundamental role in the life and legacy of Joseph Rowntree that carried over into the life, works and legacy of his son. The 'flat and almost featureless' land became the garden village of New Earswick, providing high quality, affordable homes, aimed mainly at the working class in the city.[2] The idea that inadequate housing in inadequate places was at the core of the deep inequalities in British society had gained currency in the late 1800s. Charles Booth had mapped spatial concentrations of poverty, inequality and disease across London[3] and Seebohm Rowntree, drawing on Booth's methods, went on to map inequality in York, reporting:

> *To sum up the information given in this chapter, we have seen that whilst about 12 per cent of the working-class population in York are living in comfortable and sanitary houses, the housing conditions of many of the remaining 88 per cent leave much to be desired.*[4]

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

I don't see much difference 125 years on.

Seebohm described slums, with rampant overcrowding and unaffordable rents, noting:

> *And finally, we have seen that York, although a comparatively small city, contains slums which are probably as bad as any to be found in London.*[5]

This was nothing new, in 1844, a Board of Health report into a cholera epidemic had described a York that was full of:

> *Slaughter-houses, dung-heaps, pigsties, etc. which unfortunately subsist in the heart of the town [and] generate contagion. The dampness of the dwellings is prejudicial to the health of the inhabitants.*[6]

Cholera had been followed by typhoid, which another public health reported noted had spread rapidly in several 'insanitary parishes' in York. Even in 1901, a fifth of York households shared a privy.[7]

Almshouses had been around since the 10th century, housing those who were defined as the deserving poor,[8] while the 'houseless poor' were dealt with a workhouse system had been developing since the mid 17th century.[9] Delivering good housing and affordable rents as an intervention at *scale,* building or rebuilding whole estates and neighbourhoods, or creating garden villages like New Earswick, 'for the improvement of the working classes'[10] was something new. Slum clearance also suited Britain's image of itself. Churchill, on reading Seebohm's book, had remarked 'For my own part I see little glory in an Empire which can rule the waves and is unable to flush its sewers'.[11] By 1939, 10% of English households were living in social housing, mainly built and managed by local authorities and by 1980, it was 31%.[12]

York benefited from housing policies that built social housing, regulated the private rented sector and which directed grants at cross tenure home improvement throughout the postwar period until the 1980s. In 1980, 14,952 council homes were under the then York District Council's management, which was equivalent to close to one third of all households in the city.[13] In England, in 1960, around 6% of UK homes had central heating and in 1971 the English General Household Survey found that 10% of households still had an outside toilet,[14] by 1991, 75% of homes had central heating and outside toilets had all but disappeared. Most of the York specific records are yet to be digitised, but the scale of the differences between how York was housed in 1900 and how York was housed in 1980 was enormous, because that was the picture across England.

Council housing was not perfect. Some huge mistakes had been made in how tower and deck access social housing had been planned, built and managed, but most social housing, which was mainly council run, was unremarkable and housed many working people. Yet successive governments could never really give up on maximising owner occupation, which was also seen as maximising votes, and British society, even under early Labour governments. never fully committed to a future in which much of the housing stock was a public asset.[15]

In 1977, new laws granted priority access to social housing for people who had dependent children, or whose 'vulnerability' was exacerbated by homelessness, defining homelessness as having no accommodation that could reasonably be occupied, which included risks of domestic abuse. The laws set a lot of hurdles, as the Poor Laws were all the way out of national psyche yet, so homelessness had to be 'unintentional' and to be in 'priority need' an individual or household had to be defined as unable to help themselves within strict parameters. Nevertheless, as the eighties dawned, the UK was, briefly, reacting to homelessness by housing many people who experienced it, in decent, legally secure and affordable social homes.[16] These laws stopped the UK experiencing homelessness as a widespread social problem to an extent that is not widely understood.[17] Between 1978 and 2024/25, some 4.02 million households, around 75% of which contained dependent children, were accepted as homeless and as owed the main (housing) duty (initially priority access to social housing, later a right to assistance with finding settled housing).[18]

In 1990

14,952

council homes were under the then York District council's management

Complete figures are not online, but York accepted 656 households as statutorily homeless in 2004/5, at a point at which statutory homelessness was growing (135,590 households in 2004 in England, 237% of the level in 1979). Figures fell, as government introduced a new raft of preventative measures, to 406 in 2005/6

1 W. Loftus-Hare, 'New Earswick: The Work of the Joseph Rowntree Village', *Town and Country Planning*, no. 10 (1935), pp. 46–55 (p. 46).

2 L. E. Waddilove, *One Man's Vision: The Study of the Joseph Rowntree Village Trust* (Allen and Unwin, 1954).

3 M. S. Morgan and I. Sinclair, *Charles Booth's London Poverty Maps* (London School of Economics and Thames and Hudson, 2019).

4 B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (Macmillan, 1901), p. 179 <*https://wellcomecollection.org/works/cv2ekdg7*> [accessed 12 March 2026].

5 Rowntree, *Poverty* (Macmillan, 1901), p. 179.

6 Cited in A. Digby, 'Relief of Poverty in Victorian York: Attitudes and Policies', in *York 1831-1981: 150 Years of Scientific Endeavour and Social Change,* ed. by C. Feinstein (British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1981).

7 Digby, 'Relief of Poverty in Victorian York: Attitudes and Policies'.

8 The Almshouse Association, 'History of Almshouses', The Almshouse Association, n.d. <*https://www.almshouses.org/history-of-almshouses/*> [accessed 18 August 2026].

9 P. Higginbotham, *The Workhouse Encyclopaedia* (The History Press, 2014).

10 Loftus-Hare, 'New Earswick: The Work of the Joseph Rowntree Village'; Waddilove, *One Man's Vision: The Study of the Joseph Rowntree Village Trust*.

11 Bradshaw, 'Preface for the Centennial Edition'.

12 R. Tunstall, *The Fall and Rise of Social Housing* (Policy Press, 2020).

13 MHCLG, 'Live Table 116: Local Authority Dwelling Stock', 2025 <*https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-dwelling-stock-including-vacants*>.

14 Office for National Statistics (ONS), 'General Household Survey, 1971 – – Archives Hub', n.d. <*https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb1956-ghs*> [accessed 18 August 2026].

15 Ian Cole, with Robert Furbey, *The Eclipse of Council Housing*, Routledge Library Editions: Housing Series, 1st ed (Taylor & Francis Group, 1994); P. Malpass and A. Murie, *Housing Policy and Practice,* 5th edn (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999); Tunstall, *The Fall and Rise of Social Housing*.

16 S. Lowe, 'Homelessness and the Law in Burrows', in *Homelessness and Social Policy,* ed. by Pleace N. and D. Quilgars (Routledge, 1997), pp. 19–34; N. Raynsford, *Substance Not Spin* (Policy Press, 2016).

17 S. Fitzpatrick and N. Pleace, 'The Statutory Homelessness System in England: A Fair and Effective Rights-Based Model?', *Housing Studies*, 27.2 (2012), pp. 232–51.

18 Source: MHCLG and earlier housing ministries/departments, note that local authority duties both expanded and contracted under alterations to the original 1977 law, although the core Main Duty element was only expanded slightly (see Fitzpatrick, S., and L. Davies, 'The "Ideal" Homelessness Law: Balancing "Rights Centred" and "Professional-Centred" Social Policy', *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law,* 43.2 (2021), pp. 175–97). Author's calculations.

and levelled out at between 150 to 200 between 2006/7 and 2015/17 and, following a renewed emphasis on homelessness prevention, hovered around 80 in from 2022-24.[19] At a conservative estimate, however, several thousand homeless households, often containing dependent children, were housed by York between 1978 and 2025.

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

I don't trust these statistics as many people I know are hidden homeless, sofa surfing, living in cars.

Rising housing inequalities

The City of York is a far better housed city than it was in 1926 and almost unimaginably better housed than it was in 1826. However, York in 2026 was also a city that was unaffordable to many low and middle and income households. The average house price was £311,000 and the average private rented sector (PRS) rent was £1,178 a month in May 2026.[20]

In 2023/24, York had an affordability ratio of 8.5 (median housing prices to earnings ratio), which was something of an improvement on the 9.3 reported in 2022/23.[21] According to Nationwide building society data on mortgages, York had a house price to earnings ratio of 6.3 in 2024, making it the least affordable local authority in Yorkshire.[22] House prices had risen from an average of £217,761 in November 2015 to £302,931 in November 2025, a 39% increase, yet while this was broadly in line with wider inflation, York's housing costs were already comparatively high

In York

13.9%

of children were in poverty before housing costs and

18.2%

after housing costs in 2024/5

and remained so.[23] In York, 13.9% of children were in poverty before housing costs and 18.2% after housing costs in 2024/25.[24]

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

Everything I've experienced is around rent rises, service charge rises, often making my payments more than a mortgage.

Substantial elements of York's housing were also part of investment portfolios. The 2021 Census showed that 10.5% of homeowners in York had (at least one) other home elsewhere (the UK average was 4.1%)[25] and there were also 1,491 active listings on Airbnb in 2026.[26] In 2023, there were 1,209 households on the waiting list for social housing, equivalent to 1.4% of the 85,458 estimated households in the city,[27] or 81% of the listed Airbnb stock. As a point of comparison, 13,456 new homes in total, across *all* tenures, including owner occupation, were added to the city's housing

19 MHCLG, 'Statutory Homelessness: Detailed Local Authority Data (Quarterly, by Financial Year)', Time Series Data Tables, 2026 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>.

20 ONS, *Housing Prices in York: How Average House Prices and Rents Are Changing in York* (2026) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/housingpriceslocal/E06000014/>.

21 York Open Data, 'Housing Affordability (Median House Prices to Earnings Ratio) – Performance Indicator : CJGE171', n.d. <https://data.yorkopendata.org/dataset/kpi-cjge171/resource/c51dab98-0a2d-4b8a-9486-2c0aac003d1e?view_id=83ed9723-52b7-4b92-ade6-5f9a00149a3c> [accessed 18 August 2026].

22 Nationwide, *House price index* (2025) <https://www.nationwide.co.uk/media/hpi/reports/affordability-stretched-but-gradually-improving>.

23 City of York Council, *Housing Affordability Summary* (City of York Council, 2025) <https://data.yorkopendata.org/dataset/housing-affordability-summary/resource/fd1e2804-8aa0-4c7f-9a85-f10daa795686>.

24 ONS, *Local Indicators for York* (2026) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E06000014-york/indicators#economy>.

25 ONS, *How Life Has Changed in York: Census 2021* (2022) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E06000014/>.

26 AirROI, 'York, England Airbnb Data 2026: Occupancy, Revenue & STR Market Report', AirROI – Airbnb Data Analytics, 8 August 2026 <https://www.airroi.com/airbnb-data/united-kingdom/england/york> [accessed 18 August 2026].

27 City of York Council, *One City, For All*.

stock between 2001/2 and 2024/5.[28]

In December 2025, the city of York had 63 statutorily homeless households (owed the main duty of settled housing), 23 of which contained 50 children, in temporary accommodation.[29] York had, unlike some other cities, bought and repurposed a former office block, which meant it was less reliant on costly and low standard temporary accommodation provided by the private sector than some other authorities.

Social housing supply in York had dropped from 14,952 homes in 1980 to 7,470 social homes in 2025.[30] York's population, in the meantime, had increased considerably, from 158,170 people in the 1981 Census, to 202,821 at a 2025 estimate (projected to rise to 215,821 by 2032).[31] York in 2025 had a population 28% higher than it had been in 1981 and 51% fewer social homes.

The city's housing stock was also deteriorating. In common with most local authorities in England, York ceased its regular surveys of housing conditions in the city as it faced the very deep and sustained cuts in local government funding that have been a feature of English public policy, conducting the last survey in 2008. That survey reported widespread poor conditions in much of the private rented sector, particularly concentrated in the older, nineteenth century and earlier housing. One of the challenges in understanding what has happened to housing in York and the UK more widely, is that local authorities now lack the resources to develop data driven local housing plans. From what is known; however, damp, mould, poor repair and poor thermal efficiency are very widespread in a city in which many homes are at least fifty years old.[32]

Rough sleeping has become a small, but persistent, problem in York since the 1990s, with 25 people living rough at the most recent count in February 2026.[33] Although a more significant challenge exists around a small group of around 70-80 people experiencing long-term homelessness associated with multiple and complex needs. The city had consulted with people with lived experience and worked co-productively with them as it assembled its new homelessness strategy, which aimed to address the needs of this specific group, of high cost, high risk individuals through the Housing First model.[34] Resourcing this strategic shift and finding housing to support it has proven to be a major strategic and logistical challenge for the city, which is ongoing at the time of writing.

Seebohm, looking at York now, would think the city far better housed than it had been in 1901. Yet the situation is in reality one of marked and sustained deterioration, not from a state of perfection, but from a high point which had resulted from decades of public policy success in reducing housing inequalities.

York in context

Prime Minister Thatcher really did not like social housing. For her, it was the ultimate expression of an inefficient, growth suppressing, bloated state that promoted idleness and irresponsibility. Much of her attitude was expressed within the sentence that preceded her most infamous statement:

> *"I am homeless, the Government must house me!" and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing!*
> **Prime Minister Thatcher in Women's Own, 31st October 1987.**[35]

The rapid gains before 1980 and sustained

28 MHCLG, 'Live Tables on Housing Supply, Table 3b – House Building: Permanent Dwellings Started and Completed, by Sector, England, Historical Calendar Year Series', 2025 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-house-building>.

29 MHCLG, 'Statutory Homelessness: Detailed Local Authority Data (Quarterly, by Financial Year)'.

30 MHCLG, 'Live Table 116: Local Authority Dwelling Stock'.

31 City of York Council, *One City, For All*.

32 City of York Council, *One City, For All*.

33 City of York Council, 'Number of People Sleeping Rough – Local Data – (Snapshot): Actual Rough Sleeping (Local Connection) – York Open Data', 29 June 2026 <https://data.yorkopendata.org/dataset/kpi-hou214e> [accessed 18 August 2026].

34 City of York Council, *Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2024-2029* (City of York Council, 2024).

35 'Interview for Woman's Own', Margaret Thatcher Foundation, n.d. <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689> [accessed 18 August 2026].

losses in housing inequalities after 1980 are the direct result of a sustained strategy to 'de-municipalise' housing policy in England.[36] Some 1.9 million units of existing council housing to sitting tenants at very substantial discounts, which created a temporary bubble in home ownership levels, between 1980 and 2016, under Thatcher's flagship 'Right to Buy' policy.[37] Some 40% of council housing sold in England under Right to Buy is now in the private rented sector.[38]

The capacity of local authorities to build any new council housing was effectively ended so this housing could not be replaced. Housing associations, the charitable sector providing social housing could still build, but their financing was increasingly privatised from 1988 onwards. This meant that rather than loans or grants from government, the housing associations had to borrow privately, creating a new form of 'affordable' housing that was 30% more expensive than social housing to pay the interest on loans. Government facilitated this by raising housing benefits, which were also there to subsidise a now deregulated private rented sector that at the lower end was characterised by poor standards and landlord criminality[39]. The housing benefit budget was projected to be £37.3 billion in 2025/26[40], equivalent to 62% of the £60.2 billion defence budget[41]. Shortfalls of affordable and social housing supply have been sustained. England built 225,000 homes in the year to March 2025, well short of the government target of 300,000 and 14,600 social rent homes, something of an increase on recent years. In 1954, 207,730 new *social* homes were finished[42]. In December 2025, there were 134,210 statutorily homeless households containing 176,130 dependent children in temporary accommodation in England[43], the annual cost for which was reported as more than £2.8 billion[44].

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

I was afraid to tell my landlord that repairs were needed, rent hikes or eviction always a possibility, like asking them to help was a reminder to ask for more.

Approaching a third of York's population lived in social housing in 1980 around one fifth still do at most. York is a city in which 18% of children are in poverty after housing costs and in which around 50 dependent children are homeless in temporary accommodation at any one point. Housing policy is the apotheosis of the Thatcherite or Neo-Liberal project, which has now shifted towards an anti-state populism, it has seen a deeply ideological, evidence-free, attack on one of the most effective examples of sustained public policy success in the last century and a half. For most of the last fifty years, British housing policy has been founded on nonsense, predicated on the 'efficiency' of the same free housing markets that built the slums and home ownership as the only desirable tenure. Pushing at the margins of owner occupancy, dismantling the public realm in housing and, literally, enabling a criminal class within the wider private sector to flourish, has shown us nothing but the inherent folly in allowing ideological conviction to run ahead of any other considerations.

36 P. A. Kemp, 'Reserved for the Poor? Social Housing in a Liberal Market Economy', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy,* 41.1 (2025), pp. 167–78.

37 Tunstall, *The Fall and Rise of Social Housing*.

38 New Economics Foundation, 'More than 4 in 10 Council Homes Sold under Right to Buy Now Owned by Private Landlords', New Economics Foundation, 10 May 2024 <*https://neweconomics.org/2024/05/more-than-4-in-10-council-homes-sold-under-right-to-buy-now-owned-by-private-landlords*> [accessed 18 August 2026].

39 J. Rugg and D. Rhodes, *Vulnerability amongst Low-Income Households in the Private Rented Sector In* (Centre for Housing Policy, 2018); Julie Joyce Rugg and others, *Landlord Criminality in the Private Rented Sector in England: Findings and Policy Recommendations*, 2025 <*https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/238869/1/Landlord_criminality_in_the_Private_Rented_Sector_in_England_-_findings_and_recommendations.pdf*>.

40 Source: DWP

41 Source: MoD.

42 MHCLG, 'Live Tables on Housing Supply, Table 3b – House Building: Permanent Dwellings Started and Completed, by Sector, England, Historical Calendar Year Series'.

43 MHCLG, 'Statutory Homelessness: Time Series Data Tables', Time Series Data Tables, 2026 <*https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness*>.

44 Shelter England, 'Bill for Homeless Accommodation Soars by 25%, Hitting £2.8 Bn', Shelter England, 18 September 2025 <*https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/bill_for_homeless_accommodation_soars_by_25_hitting_28_bn_*> [accessed 18 August 2026].

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Focus policy on housing as a public asset**: National government must commit to prioritising housing as a public asset, moving away from prioritisation of owner occupation. Westminster must follow Scotland and Wales in ending the 'Right to Buy' social housing.
2. **Restore the capacity for social housing construction**: National government should restore the capacity of local authorities to build new council housing to replace lost stock.
3. **Adequately resource local housing services**: Local authorities require increased funding to engage in strategic planning and enforcement of standards, such as conducting regular housing surveys and developing data-driven local housing plans.
4. **Expand and resource Housing First**: National and local government must embrace and fully resource the Housing First model to address long-term homelessness amongst people with complex needs. While the city of York has identified this as a strategic priority, finding suitable housing and funding to support the shift remains a major logistical challenge.



6. FUEL POVERTY IN YORK

Carolyn Snell, Kit Colliver and Nicholas Pleace

Chapter Findings

- **GOVERNMENT DATA OFFERS A PARTIAL PICTURE OF FUEL POVERTY:** Measures of Fuel Stress (spending more than 10% of household income on energy) show fuel poverty in York has surged since the 2021 energy and cost of living crisis but the official Low Income Low Energy Efficiency (LILEE) measure is not sensitive to price increases, masking the scale of the problem.

- **THE ENERGY CRISIS BROUGHT FUEL POVERTY TO WORKING HOUSEHOLDS:** Under the Fuel Stress measure, national rates of fuel poverty increased from 17.4% in 2019 to 35.5% in 2023. Fuel poverty is now also affecting those higher up the income ladder, including those in full time work, with high energy bills and poor housing conditions/energy efficiency dominating people's daily lives.

- **YORK IS PART OF A REGION UNDER PRESSURE:** The latest data shows Yorkshire and the Humber experiences elevated rates of Fuel Stress: in 2023, 43% of households in the region exceeded the threshold, compared to the national average of 35.5%. Renters are suffering the most.

- **ENERGY CRISIS CAN HAVE EXTREME IMPACTS ON INDIVIDUAL LIVES:** Our qualitative data of lived experience of fuel poverty in York shows that it can have a life-shattering impact for the most vulnerable households, pushing people into destitution and blocking exits from homelessness.

- **SUPPORT SCHEMES ARE STRUGGLING:** There is a mismatch between schemes in place to alleviate fuel poverty and knowledge and take up of these schemes. Some of York's frontline support organisations that help people access services have seen their operational costs skyrocket with rising energy bills.

Introduction

Energy costs began to escalate in 2021 and worsened following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This has been characterised as an energy crisis[1] and formed part of the wider cost of living crisis. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), gas prices in October 2023 were 60% higher than in 2021, while electricity prices increased by 40%.[2] The rising costs of embodied energy have also contributed to the higher prices of essential goods and services, such as food and transportation.[3] Whilst the price of energy eased in 2023,[4] following the most recent conflict in the Middle East, they have begun to rise again, with the Energy Price Cap being set to rise by 13 per cent in July 2026, taking an average dual fuel bill from £1,641 to £1,862.[5]

These increases have led to significant concerns being raised about an increase in fuel poverty, which is generally characterised as the compounding effects of poor energy efficiency, high energy prices, and low incomes.[6] The UK has been a leader in this field and perhaps this is unsurprising given historically poor housing conditions (see Chapter 5), income inequality, privatised energy markets, and a reliance on imported energy. The result of this is that the UK has higher rates of fuel poverty compared to similar countries[7] and has been hit harder by the energy crisis.

It is important to note at this point why fuel poverty matters. There is a well-established literature on the consequences of fuel poverty including increased physical and mental health risks, poorer life chances amongst children (e.g. educational attainment), given the well documented relationship between living in hazardous housing and health conditions.[8] There is also substantial evidence about the societal benefits of addressing fuel poverty e.g. savings to public health budgets, improved mental health outcomes, especially via energy efficiency measures.[9]

It is within this context that this chapter is written: escalating and unstable energy costs and the significant risk that fuel poverty poses to both physical and mental wellbeing. Whilst fuel poverty was not explicitly mentioned in the original Rowntree report, its underpinning drivers including housing conditions, low incomes, and the impact of high living costs certainly were. As such, this chapter represents a contemporary take on an ongoing, long-term problem within the city. The chapter is written with the intention of exploring the extent and experience of fuel poverty within York and its surrounding area. It presents data from a number of sources: official fuel poverty statistics, local fuel poverty policy and action, and qualitative data collected between 2022-2024 that highlights the experiences of people managing the effects of high energy bills, and the struggle experienced by organisations trying to help them.

Current Statistical Trends

Our analysis of official fuel poverty statistics over time (Figure 6.1) shows that the Yorkshire and Humber region has above average fuel poverty levels (just under 15 per cent compared to the national average of just over 11 per cent according to 2023 data). York itself is marginally above the national average.

1 See National Energy Action (NEA), *Energy Crisis Timeline* (National Energy Action, 2026) <*https://www.nea.org.uk/about-us/energy-crisis/energy-crisis-timeline*>.

2 Office for National Statistics (ONS), *Cost of Living Insights: Housing* (ONS, 2023) <*https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/costoflivinginsights/housing*> [accessed 15 June 2026].

3 Y. Guan and others, 'Burden of the Global Energy Price Crisis on Households', *Nature Energy*, 8.3 (2023), pp. 304–16.

4 Paul Bolton, *Gas and Electricity Prices during the 'Energy Crisis' and Beyond*, Research Briefing (House of Commons Library, 2026) <*https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9714/*> [accessed 18 August 2026].

5 Ofgem, *Energy Price Cap Unit Rates and Standing Charges* (2026) <*https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/information-consumers/energy-advice-households/energy-price-cap-unit-rates-and-standing-charges*> [accessed 15 June 2026].

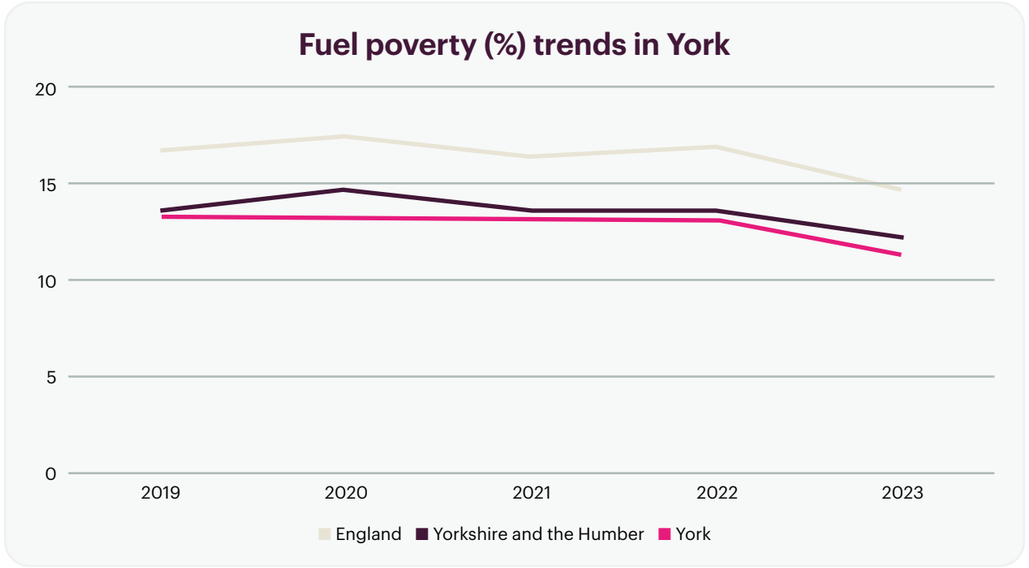
6 B. Boardman, 'Fuel Poverty Is Different', *Policy Studies*, 12.4 (1991), pp. 30–41, doi:10.1080/01442879108423600.

7 EU Silc Data cited by S. Hunsaker, *How Bad Is Fuel Poverty in England?* (UK in a Changing Europe, 2024) <*https://ukandeu.ac.uk/how-bad-is-fuel-poverty-england/*> [accessed 15 June 2026].

8 M. Marmot and others, *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On* (Institute of Health Equity, 2020); M. Braubach and J. Savelsberg, *Social Inequalities and Their Influence on Housing Risk Factors and Health* (World Health Organization Europe, 2009); C. Liddell and C. Morris, 'Fuel Poverty and Human Health: A Review of Recent Evidence', *Energy Policy*, 38.6 (2010), pp. 2987–97, doi:10.1016/j.enpol.2010.01.037.

9 e.g. B. Heyman, B. Harrington, and A. Heyman, 'A Randomised Controlled Trial of an Energy Efficiency Intervention for Families Living in Fuel Poverty', *Housing Studies*, 26.1 (2011), pp. 117–32, doi:10.1080/02673037.2010.512787.; C. N. B. Grey and others, 'Cold Homes, Fuel Poverty and Energy Efficiency Improvements: A Longitudinal Focus Group Approach', *Indoor and Built Environment*, 26.7 (2017), pp. 902–13, doi:10.1177/1420326X17703450.

Figure 6.1: Official fuel poverty rates



Source: English Housing Survey: Fuel Poverty Dataset 2019-2023

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

Feels likes fuel poverty is higher than said.

However, we agree with the community researchers that these figures do not reflect the lived experience. Indeed, these figures should be considered with caution – the current measure of fuel poverty 'Low Income Low Energy Efficiency' (LILEE) is not sensitive to price increases, and rather, reflects issues of poor energy efficiency. It was also designed to only capture households on low incomes, in order to prevent wealthy households living in expensive-to-run properties being captured within the definition. Under the LILEE measure only low-income households with an energy efficiency rating of D or lower can be classified as fuel poor, immediately excluding around 40% of households.[10] See Bolton and Hinson[11] for a full discussion of this debate. The LILEE measure has faced growing criticism over the course of the energy crisis[12] and has been accused of masking the extent of the problem.

Given this, official figures now also include a 'Fuel Stress' variable, akin to the original 10% measure of fuel poverty, where households are considered under stress if they have modelled required energy costs of greater than 10% of their After Housing Costs household income.[13] Under this measure the figures look very different, with 43% of households in the

10 T. Semple and others, *An Empirical Critique of the Low Income Low Energy Efficiency Approach to Measuring Fuel Poverty* (N/LAB, 2024) <*https://www.nlab.org.uk/project/measuring-fuel-poverty/*> [accessed 15 June 2026].

11 P. Bolton and S. Hinson, *Fuel Poverty in the UK*, Research briefing CBP-8730 (House of Commons Library, 2025) <*https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8730/*> [accessed 15 June 2026].

12 See, for example, A. McKnight, 'There's a Problem with How We Measure Fuel Poverty', *British Politics and Policy at LSE*, 2025 <*https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/*> [accessed 15 June 2026].

13 Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, *Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics Report: 2026* (Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 2026) <*https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/annual-fuel-poverty-statistics-report-2026*>.

Table 6.1: Households in Fuel Stress England/Yorkshire and Humber and Tenure

Location	Tenure			
	Owner occupied	Private rented	Local authority	Housing Association
England	25.5%	44.6%	57.0%	56.2%
Yorkshire and Humber	26.5%	49.1%	49.1%	61.3%

Source: English Housing Survey: Fuel Poverty Dataset 2023, using 10% fuel stress measure

Yorkshire and Humber region exceeding this threshold in 2023, compared to the national average of 35.5%, and compared with a national figure of 17.4% in 2019. This matters as it shows the increased pressure that the price of energy is placing on a high proportion of households, not just those on low incomes or in poor quality housing.

In analysing the fuel stress variable further, we can see a strong relationship with tenure, with renting households in the Yorkshire and Humber region experiencing high levels of fuel stress in comparison to owner occupiers (and this is something we explore further in the qualitative data below). Notable, is that the region has higher levels of fuel stress within the PRS and Housing Authority dwellers compared to the national average.

It is also important to note that there has been on going criticism of the way fuel poverty in England is conceptualised and measured. Critics have argued that official measures have a tendency to underreport fuel poverty levels amongst some groups of people, including disabled people, women, and people of colour (Snell 2015), and to ignore some groups completely, including homeless people.[14] Our next section digs into issues that are not, or cannot be reflected in the quantitative data.

Experiences of living in York during the energy crisis

Exploring hidden fuel poverty

Our initial research conducted in 2022 came from the criticism above, our concern that homeless people were completely invisible within both academic and policy discussions of fuel poverty, and anecdotal evidence about the link between homelessness and rising energy costs. Our qualitative interviews with homelessness experienced people in York alongside a series of practitioner interviews confirmed our initial suspicions – that increasing energy costs had had a significant, enduring impact on people who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness, with energy debt having a compounding effect on other debts, and in some cases leading to eviction in the case of 'Owen':

> *I still owe British Gas from my last house cos when it all happened…I just drained everything…and I fell behind a couple of months on rent. It was only 6 months later when they changed the rules with landlords, that him and his mate come to door first, before, before they came in the house. "Where's my fucking money?"… [and he said] I just want you out. I want the house back, I'm selling it."*

14 C. J. Snell and others, 'The Energy Crisis, Homelessness, and Fuel Poverty', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 2025, pp. 1–23, doi:10.1332/17598273Y2025D000000048.

For others, who had been supported into independent living, being able to manage this was very much on a knife edge, as we found with 'Robin' who was living a property with no carpets, with little heating or lighting, and will all the classic signs of being in fuel poverty (limiting food intake, living in the dark, being cold, being in energy debt). Throughout our fieldwork within the homelessness space, extreme forms of poverty and destitution were described – with substantial discussions around exposure to the cold, hunger, housing precarity and eviction, and debt. One of the most notable comments from a stakeholder interview was:

> *I think the other thing for me, we've got people begging on the streets of York. And we've seen a rise in people begging, 'to put lecky on,' their words.*

This initial research, which is fully documented in Snell et al (2025), also uncovered a number of unexpected findings. Whilst this first wave of interviews suggested that our group of participants selected on the basis of their experiences of homelessness experienced fuel poverty in a profound, life changing way, there was also substantial evidence of fuel poverty being experienced amongst those working within the homelessness and wider third sector, despite being in employment. These households are those likely to be excluded from the LILEE measure of fuel poverty, but highly likely to be defined as being under fuel stress. Here, living in the PRS was identified as a compounding factor. Given this, conducted a new set of qualitative interviews between 2023-2024 with a sample drawn from the PRS, initially in York, and then beyond to enhance the sample (here we report on the York-only findings).

When asked specifically about energy costs, our second wave of York participants described the shock and impact of rapidly increasing energy costs, with rapid action taken to mitigate these. All participants had taken action to manage bills (see below), with many, including those in full-time, well-paid employment, 'turning off' heating and lighting, rather than 'turning down'. Multiple 'coping strategies' were described across the interviews. Most participants had taken action to manage/reduce/stabilise energy bills. This included using alternative heat sources (e.g. using a log burner as an alternative to any other heating), cooking foods that cooked quickly, using DIY 'hacks' to reduce drafts, turning the heating off completely, using more blankets and jumpers, and only heating children' s rooms. Further, 'spatial shrink' – where the space used within a home is reduced – was evident across the interviews. In some cases, households stayed in the home as little as possible, including giving up working from home.

Our interviewees reported multiple experiences of fuel poverty:

> *I've moved the [children] out of certain bedrooms because of the mould in them.* **(Y1)**

> *There was black mould coming through from the roof….we don't really want to go to them with any repairs, in case they put the rent up to do the repairs.* **(Y2)**

As the second quotation presented here implies, private landlords had a particular role within this set of experiences in addition to increases in energy costs. Landlord unwillingness to undertake repairs or energy efficiency improvements was regularly cited, as were concerns about rent increases (or worse) where these were undertaken. Whilst these interviews were undertaken with PRS reforms on the horizon, there was no sense of hope amongst participants that changes in regulation would make a difference.

The effectiveness of fuel poverty and energy efficiency policy support

During both data collection periods we asked our participants about the effectiveness of policy support on offer during this period. In terms of national schemes available at the time our stakeholder interviewees were concerned about narrow eligibility criteria, the exhaustion of emergency funds, and ability of people living in the city to take up support available to them. It became evident through our second set of interviews that as the 'symptoms' of fuel poverty had begun to creep up the income scale, and had started to affect working people, support to alleviate these symptoms has not followed suit with updated eligibility criteria.

In terms of local support, residents experiencing fuel poverty previously had access to the York

Fuel and Food Voucher scheme during our research (most recent round of funding ended 31st March 2026). Despite this, when asked, no participants reported receipt of this.

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

Fuel vouchers are inconsistent, inaccessible and late in arriving.

Some participants will have been able to access locally supported energy efficiency schemes such as ECO Flex during the period of fieldwork. Access to this type of scheme was only reported in one interview, and unfortunately in this case, the participant's landlord had prevented it from going ahead:

> *There was...an energy scheme last year, and... because I was on universal credit they would have put in [free]..wall insulation, and..the smart radiators and my landlord wouldn't do it.*

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

People don't know about support schemes. [There need to be] appropriate ways for people to learn about access to help, being mindful of no-tech members of the public.

At the same time, concerns were raised in our interviews that PRS landlords had undertaken (largely subsidised) energy efficiency improvements and then increased the rent to cover 'their' costs. Indeed, our tenants discussed experiences of this, in some cases having substantial rent increases passed on to them for this very reason:

> *So my rent's going up by 175 pounds because of the new windows, which, incidentally, I feel like I've paid for over the last 3 years.*

The experiences of organisations providing support to residents

Our initial research in 2022 indicated that whilst York residents were struggling with escalating costs, however so too were the services there to support them. Interviews with local organisations highlighted the impact of rising energy bills. For example, some described being hit with unexpected increases in energy bills and other costs associated embedded energy costs, for example, in one York based organisation told us:

> *So bearing in mind, you know, similar to everybody else, we're going through an energy crisis as well. Our electric, our gas and electric gone from 7,000 pounds to 30,000 pounds. So we're kind of heads down trying not to go bankrupt.*

In most cases these organisations reported no financial support with these rising costs, with many being charged energy costs at business rates (and thus were ineligible for enhanced energy support schemes offered at the time). At the same time, and perhaps unsurprisingly, most organisations we spoke to described an increase in demand for their services. Rising costs also affected *how* organisations could provide support. One organisation providing fuel poverty and energy efficiency support across the region (including York), told us:

> *It has impacted because the major way that we could save money previously was switch tariffs or change tariffs. We do about 4,000 home visits and advice calls every year on average. Previously in our history it was an average about 274 pounds you could make saving, just by switching your tariffs...That's completely off the table now.*

Equally, organisations providing homelessness services described being both affected by rising costs, which then limited the services they were able to provide. It also meant that some service users within York were unable to move out and into their own accommodation, as the cost of their energy bills would render this impossible, and where they had, they had returned to rough sleeping as a result of unmanageable costs.

Conclusion

Our qualitative data suggests three things that are likely to be hidden within the official fuel poverty statistics within York: the impact of escalating energy costs on the poorest, most vulnerable households; the impact of these costs on households that wouldn't typically be characterised as fuel poor (for example working households); and the impact of energy bills and rising fuel poverty on services occupying non-domestic buildings. Whilst support has been and is still available to households, as previous work suggests[15] there is often a mismatch between schemes and recipients: with recipients unaware of schemes, restrictive eligibility criteria that does not reflect the rise in need, especially amongst households that are newly experiencing fuel poverty/fuel stress, and other barriers, such as landlord behaviour. These issues are present in national policy debates, and it appears York is no exception to this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Retain and utilise the 'Fuel Stress' measure of fuel poverty**: In the absence of changes to the Low Income Low Energy Efficiency (LILEE) measure of fuel poverty, which is not sensitive to price increases and excludes about 40% of households, national government should retain the 'Fuel Stress' measure (spending more than 10% of income on energy) to capture the impact of fluctuating energy prices on households across all income levels.
2. **Use diverse indicators for local assessment**: Local authorities should not take official statistics at face value as they can mask the true extent of fuel poverty. A range of indicators should be used to guide their assessment and responses.
3. **Increase support for frontline organisations:** National, regional and local governments should provide greater recognition and financial support to organisations that assist people with food poverty.
4. **Update eligibility criteria for support schemes**: Narrow criteria excluding working people on low income and those newly experiencing fuel poverty are failing to reflect rising needs.
5. **Encourage energy efficiency improvements in the private rented sector**: Local government should consider incentive and enforcement schemes to promote energy efficiency improvements amongst PRS landlords and protect tenants from disproportionate rent increases.

15 Committee on Fuel Poverty, *Understanding the Barriers and Enablers to Supporting Fuel Poor Households Achieve Net Zero* (Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 2024) <*https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66cde72225c035a11941f63b/fuel-poverty-barriers-enablers-net-zero-report.pdf*> [accessed 15 June 2026].



7. ADDRESSING POVERTY AND INEQUALITY THROUGH COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING

Amy Barnes, Owen Powell, Maddie Baxter, Kelli Kennedy and Kate Pickett

Chapter Findings

- **COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING:** Could be a transformative strategy to address 'hidden' poverty and inequality in York.
- **REDIRECTING POWER AND WEALTH:** Large public organisations (the council, universities and NHS) spend millions each year. Intentionally redirecting this towards local democratic and inclusive enterprises could build community wealth in all its forms.
- **DEMOCRATIC AND INCLUSIVE OWNERSHIP:** Expanding worker cooperatives, social enterprises, and community land trusts could give residents more control over local jobs, wages, housing and wellbeing.
- **BUILD ON LOCAL SUCCESS:** York has pioneering examples of community wealth building – such as SPARK and YorSpace – but to tackle poverty, the city must move past isolated projects and build an integrated, city-wide community wealth building network, focused on sectors and areas where there are low wages and vulnerabilities.
- **A REGIONAL APPROACH:** Because many workers are priced out of the city, a coordinated regional approach, with support from the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority (YNYCA), is vital to solve issues of poverty and build community wealth at a regional scale.

Introduction

As other chapters of this report have shown, on the surface, York is a wealthy, high-employment city. Yet it is also a place with deep-seated structural poverty that is more hidden than in other cities in the North of England; with poverty characterised by precarity, low wages, and high costs, particularly for housing (see Chapters 3 and 5). Vulnerable groups – including single parents, larger families, disabled residents, and workers in tourism, retail, hospitality, and care – struggle to afford essentials. This crisis stems from a lack of economic security, voice, and democratic control over local wealth. Major regeneration initiatives like York Central and York Station Gateway promise investment but risk exacerbating inequalities unless they intentionally build and distribute community wealth.

This chapter examines community wealth building as a strategic approach in York and considers its capacity to shape people's lives across the city, particularly those living on a low income. The analysis draws on policy documents, academic literature, and a series of research interviews about community wealth building from May and June 2026 with a small group of local stakeholders actively shaping York's economy (including social innovators, co-operative members, social enterprise leads).[1]

What is Community Wealth Building?

At its heart, community wealth building (CWB) is a strategic framework, designed to give residents more democratic control within the economy.[2] It involves a practical toolkit of integrated actions to advance systemic change in how we produce and provide for one another locally, and ensure that prosperity is shared more fairly.[3]

Key actions include:

1. **Redirecting the buying power of 'anchor organisations':** Anchor organisations are large, established public sector employers that are unlikely to leave the city, such as City of York Council, York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, York St John University, and the University of York. Anchor organisations can leverage their collective buying power to ensure that public contracts create local jobs, fair work, training opportunities, and supply chains that can benefit residents, particularly those on a low income.
2. **Growing democratic and inclusive enterprises:** This involves scaling up inclusive and democratic business models – such as worker cooperatives, social enterprises, and employee-owned firms – that offer secure contracts, fair wages, and a genuine voice at work. It includes supporting these enterprises to compete for contracts to drive up employment standards in low-paid sectors.
3. **Using land and property as community assets:** This involves managing land, property, and regeneration projects to prioritise long-term community benefit, local wealth retention, and affordability.
4. **Locally-rooted finance:** Growing local lenders and investors that recirculate money locally (rather than extract it) is important, to target investments in neighbourhoods to address poverty and inequality and ensure low-income families can access affordable, ethical credit.

This integrated approach to CWB originated through work in Cleveland, Ohio (USA) by the Democracy Collaborative and has been supported in the UK by the Centre for Local Economies (CLES), who have explored its adaptation in different local contexts.[4] CWB has been increasingly adopted by organisations across the UK and was enshrined into law in Scotland in March 2026 (Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Act).

1 Please note, pseudonyms are used in place of the real names of the people who took part in the research.

2 Joe Guinan and Martin O'Neill, *The Case for Community Wealth Building*, Case for Series (Polity, 2020); Marjorie Kelly and Ted Howard, *The Making of a Democratic Economy: Building Prosperity for the Many, Not Just the Few*, First edition (BK Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2019).

3 J. Guinan and M. O'Neill, 'The Case for Community Wealth Building. Case for Series, Polity', 2020; Democracy Collaborative, 'Community Wealth Building – How It Is Practiced', 2026 <*https://www.democracycollaborative.org/case-studies*.>.

4 Kelly and Howard, *The Making of a Democratic Economy*; Guinan and O'Neill, *The Case for Community Wealth Building*; Centre for Local Economies, 'Community Wealth Building', 2026 <*https://cles.org.uk/expertise/community-wealth-building/*> [accessed 30 June 2026].

Figure 7.1. Key elements of community wealth building.



Source: Evans and Longlands, 2026

In August 2025, regional momentum shifted, with the launch of a landmark York and North Yorkshire Community Wealth Building Commission (YNYCWB) – the first of its kind in England. The Commission's remit was to advise the Mayor on practical measures to improve people's economic and social future and 'lay the groundwork for fairer... and more prosperous communities across the region'.[5] The Commission reported in June 2026, chaired by Sam Leach and supported by CLES.[6] Two of us (Owen Powell and Kate Pickett) served as Commissioners. The Commission's fifteen recommendations span procurement and social value, community ownership of land, anchor collaboration, democratic ownership, transport, finance and decent work, each accompanied by short-, medium- and long-term actions. The first, and the most consequential for York, asks the Mayor and York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority (YNYCA) to adopt CWB not as one initiative among many but as the overarching framework for the region's economic strategy, written into the Corporate Plan, Economic Framework, Local Growth Plan, Local Transport Plan and business support strategy. Without that commitment, the Commission warns, implementation risks being 'piecemeal and peripheral'.[7]

In addition, and funded by the YNYCA, Fieldwork York and the York Social Enterprise Coalition are developing a localised CWB action plan to build on the city's strengths and address structural gaps in the economy.[8] To support this, a Community Wealth Building Hub has been set up, based at Spark:York – an affordable business incubator and vibrant community space (see Box 7.1) – to explore how to drive CWB.

5 Sarah Evans and Sarah Longlands, *Resilient, Thriving and Healthy: Building Community Wealth in York and North Yorkshire – The Findings of the Mayoral Community Wealth Building Commission* (CLES, 2026) <*https://cles.org.uk/resilient-thriving-and-healthy-building-community-wealth-in-york-and-north-yorkshire/.*>; York & North Yorkshire Combined Authority, *New Group Takes First Step towards Community Wealth Building* (2025) <*https://yorknorthyorks-ca.gov.uk/community-wealth-building/.*>.

6 Evans and Longlands, *Resilient, Thriving and Healthy.*

7 Evans and Longlands, *Resilient, Thriving and Healthy.*

8 Fieldwork, 'Fieldwork – Home Page', 2026 <*https://wearefieldwork.org/*> [accessed 30 June 2026].

Many elements of CWB practice are already in place within York, but CWB is 'a journey not a destination, and there will always be room for improvement and refinement'.[9] The success of CWB depends on how it is put into practice: a key challenge is ensuring that low-income residents are equitably included and genuinely share in the benefits of democratic ownership.[10] We discuss this challenge below in the context of action being taken in York and consider potential solutions.

Before doing so, it is important to highlight that, in discussions with local stakeholders who are actively involved in changing York's economy, it was emphasised that CWB is about more than economic metrics. It is not only about 'bring[ing] wealth and power closer to where people live' (John, social enterprise lead, June 2026), but also about fostering a holistic 'sense of prosperity in terms of… health and abundance, and relationships… [and] self-esteem… meeting other people, and being able to be who they are' (Tom, local social innovator May 2026). In other words, it is about creating an economy that promotes wellbeing.

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

This needs reimagining beyond what might feel attainable. Minor adjustments […] won't do here.

Redirecting the buying power of local anchor organisations

This involves key York anchor organisations (e.g. City of York Council, York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, York St John University, University of York) intentionally redirecting their financial power; for example, via public procurement processes and contracts, towards actively creating a more sustainable economy and community wealth. This requires strategic commissioning practices that: invest locally to support fair work, including secure contracts, a Real Living Wage, and genuine voice at work;[11] advance environmental and sustainability objectives; and reduce inequality, for example, by creating opportunities in York's more deprived wards, such as Westfield or Clifton.

Substantial public spend is frequently extracted away from local economies through private corporate profits and shareholder dividends, rather than being recirculated locally. A recent analysis of three English regions showed that private social care providers extracted over £250 million in profit over three years.[12] Retaining this money locally could have helped to reduce poverty and inequalities, for example, by uplifting the low wages of care workers or supporting unpaid carers.[13]

In York, the local authority alone spends over £145m on goods and services each year (including £70m on social care) alongside a substantial capital budget for initiatives such as affordable and sustainable housing and transport infrastructure.[14] Given this scale, there is considerable scope to check whether public expenditure is being effectively reinvested to grow community wealth. Doing so means asking whether the right providers are delivering public services like social care (e.g. York's domiciliary care, specialist transport provision), whether more local opportunities can be created for democratic and inclusive enterprises (e.g. democratic local social care providers) which support wellbeing by offering secure contracts, fair wages, and voice at work (see also Growing democratic and inclusive enterprises below);[15] and thus whether strategic commissioning and purchasing frameworks are being used effectively to create 'social value'.

Regionally, the scale is larger still: CLES analysis for the YNYCWB Commission found that six anchors alone – YNYCA, City of York Council, North Yorkshire Council, York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, York St John University and the University of York – have an annual spend of over £1.2 billion and employ almost 30,000 staff.[16]

CWB can be measurably embedded through strategic community benefit policies, weighted social value decision-making, and contracts that reward the contribution of inclusive and democratic businesses, particularly those supporting fair work principles and offering social benefits for residents (e.g. young people, those living on a low income).[17] Local anchors such as the council and York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust are already testing social value criteria within their tender processes.[18]

More could be learnt from other English examples, such as Preston's comprehensive model which led to improved wages and mental health outcomes;[19] Westminster's small and medium enterprises (SME) capacity building; and Manchester's co-designed social value policy.[20] Social value policies do not appear to increase costs and may support SMEs.[21] Further action in York to redirect the buying power of local anchors could potentially turn procurement into a stronger pathway for social mobility, sustainability and income security.

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

[There are] So many great ideas from people, that current formal work structures won't support.

Growing democratic and inclusive enterprises

This means increasing democratic and inclusive enterprises – such as worker cooperatives, social enterprises, and employee-owned firms – that offer fair wages, a genuine voice within the local economy, and bring social benefits to communities[22] (Barnes et al. 2026). There are many examples to be found across different sectors in York, including cooperatives in manufacturing (e.g. York Disabled Workers Coop), hospitality (e.g. The Golden Ball – York's first community co-operative pub) and housing (e.g. Lowfield Green Housing Co-op); and not-for-profit social enterprises that operate across York's hospitality and tourism sectors (e.g. Invisible Cities – supporting tour guides who have experienced homelessness or social disadvantage, and SPARK – providing space for businesses and community wealth to grow, see Box 7.1). CWB also operates through the everyday solidarity of locally-rooted SMEs that lack formal social designations. For instance, John, a social enterprise lead, highlighted Crystal Clean Windows, a small local business that proactively removed racist graffiti targeting a Chinese restaurant in Foxwood (John, social enterprise lead, June 2026). While not formally structured as a social enterprise, their community care exemplifies how local SMEs naturally anchor wealth and social cohesion.

9 Democracy Collaborative, 'Community Wealth Building – How It Is Practiced', Democracy Collaborative, 2026 <*https://www.democracycollaborative.org/how-it-is-practiced*> [accessed 30 June 2026].

10 Morag E. Redwood and others, 'Community Wealth Building or Local Authority Rhetoric?', *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit*, 37.7 (2022), pp. 602–21, doi:10.1177/02690942231171657.

11 Neil McInroy, 'Wealth for All: Building New Local Economies', *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit*, 33.6 (2018), doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094218803084.

12 Leah Millthorne and others, *Ending Extraction in the UK Care System* (Centre for Local Economies (CLES), 2025) <*https://cles.org.uk/ending-extraction-in-the-uk-care-system/*> [accessed 30 June 2026].

13 Millthorne and others, *Ending Extraction in the UK Care System*.

14 Care Quality Commission, *City of York Council: Local Authority Assessment* (2025) <*https://www.cqc.org.uk/care-services/local-authority-assessment-reports/york-1225*>; City of York Council, *Statement of Accounts 2024-25* (2025) <*https://www.york.gov.uk/downloads/file/10651/statement-of-accounts-2024-to-2025*>; City of York Council, *Social Value Policy* (City of York Council, 2025) <*https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s181065/Annex%201%20-%20Social%20Value%20Policy.html*> [accessed 18 August 2026].

15 Leah Millthorne and others, *Public Money, Public Purpose: A Good Practice Guide to Maximising Public Value through Procurement* (Centre of Local Economics (CLES), 2025) <*https://publication.cles.org.uk/publicvalue*>.

16 City of York Council, *Social Value Policy*; Evans and Longlands, *Resilient, Thriving and Healthy*.

17 Millthorne and others, *Public Money, Public Purpose: A Good Practice Guide to Maximising Public Value through Procurement*.

18 North England Commercial Procurement Collaborative, *Addressing Regional Health Inequalities through Targeted Social Value* (2024) <*https://www.noecpc.nhs.uk/news/addressing-regional-health-inequalities-through-targeted-social-value.*>; T. C. Rose and others, 'The Mental Health and Wellbeing Impact of a Community Wealth Building Programme in England: A Difference-in-Differences Study', *The Lancet Public Health*, 8.6 (2023), pp. 403-410, doi:10.1016/S2468-2667(23)00059-2.

19 Rose and others, 'The Mental Health and Wellbeing Impact of a Community Wealth Building Programme in England: A Difference-in-Differences Study'.

20 Centre for Local Economies, *Community Wealth Building* (2026) <*https://cles.org.uk/expertise/community-wealth-building/.*>; Greater Manchester VCFSE Leadership Group, *How Manchester City Council Co-Designed Its New Social Value Policy* (2025) <*https://www.vcfseleadershipgm.org.uk/news-and-events/how-manchester-city-council-co-designed-its-new-social-value-policy*>.

21 R. Ahmed and others, 'Local Government Procurement Costs and Community Wealth Building Initiatives in England', *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*, 97.2 (2026), pp. 537-550, doi:10.1111/apce.70028.

22 Barnes, Amy, Maddy Power, and Kelli Kennedy, 'Creating Health-Promoting Spaces for Change within the Economy: The Role of Food Co-Operatives in England', *Health Promotion International*, 41.2 (2026), doi:https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daag038.

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN YORK

Across York and North Yorkshire, CLES has identified 111 co-operatives, but the composition is telling: 49 are community-of-interest and 45 consumer co-operatives, while just one is a worker co-operative[23] (Evans and Longlands 2026). The ownership models most directly able to raise pay and voice in low-wage sectors are the least established. Growing these foundational enterprises through business support, grant funding, and social value-oriented procurement by local anchors helps drive wealth, improve employment standards in low-paid sectors, and tackle in-work poverty in the city (see Chapter 3). Yet, to address poverty and inequality, it matters 'who' in York's communities can participate in them. York's newer, smaller enterprises and co-operatives are often financially precarious, which creates economic barriers to involvement and risks exclusion, particularly for those living on a low income.[24] Internal working practices can also entrench pre-existing racialised, gendered, or classed inequalities.[25] Reaching their CWB potential requires a supportive ecosystem to ensure these enterprises emerge in low wage sectors (e.g. hospitality, tourism, social care) and areas, so that they can 'reach a scale that has [transformative] impact' for poverty and inequality.[26]

There are signs of institutional support emerging from City of York Council via business support services in the city and from the passion and commitment of staff who care deeply about the city. However, integrated, cross-departmental support is needed to prevent initiatives 'getting stuck' in frustrating institutional loops (i.e. being passed from one department or staff member to another). Similarly, targeted structural interventions are needed to reduce operational costs, such as localised business rate relief (which happens in other cities in England), to reduce barriers and lower costs for new and emerging enterprises and expand opportunities for low-income residents. Charities automatically receive up to 80% mandatory rate relief, while social enterprises with identical social missions must apply discretionarily and often receive nothing. The YNYCWB Commission's report recommends a consistent regional policy extending mandatory 80% relief to social enterprises and the wider voluntary and community sector.[27]

There is an important role here for other local anchors beyond the council. NHS Trusts and the universities could more proactively audit their practices and adapt commissioning and procurement systems to ensure they support local enterprises that can create community wealth, in all its forms.

> *...it's a bit frustrating when you are trying to put forward a case of wanting to do something positive and you just get met with "No" rather than like, "Well, in order to do that, you would have to do this." It's like, "Give me the next step that I can do rather than pushing me back and, like, having me try and invent what the next step could be."*
> **Tom, local social innovator, May 2026**

Using land and property as community assets

This is about managing land and property to prioritise community benefit, wealth retention, and affordability. Community Land Trusts (CLTs) achieve this by treating land and buildings as collective assets. Intentionally locking them into community ownership provides long-term protection from market speculation, ensuring housing and workspaces remain affordable for local residents across generations.[28] Access to affordable housing is a critical issue in York (see Chapter 5), while securing land and affordable commercial rents is a major barrier to scaling the city's social sector (e.g. community groups, co-operatives, social enterprises), which acts to address it.

Using land and property to build community wealth has achieved proof-of-concept in York through the pioneering work of YorSpace, which has successfully developed Lowfield Green via a CLT and housing co-operative model (see Box 7.1). However, this project highlights the challenge that community-led models face in maintaining affordability. Since its inception, the project has navigated macroeconomic shocks and rising construction costs, as well as shifting central government policy that constrained access to capital and thus affordability metrics. While it has been possible to offer homes at 70% of market value, given York's hyper-inflated housing market (see Chapter 5), this still presents a significant financial barrier for low-income families.

Unlocking fairer forms of ownership that genuinely serve the poorest requires resilient, long-term regional investment, grant funding and new housing developments for social rent (see Chapter 5). It also requires action to address the difficult financial positions of anchor organisations (e.g. universities, councils), which create strong economic pressure to sell under-used public assets to the highest private bidder for short-term capital gain, rather than evaluating their long-term community value. The YNYCWB Commission's proposed response is institutional: a York and North Yorkshire land commission with a remit across community ownership, housing and renewable energy, tasked with mapping publicly owned and underused land, identifying sites for community land trusts and community-led housing, setting realistic sale windows for community assets, and assessing mayoral acquisition powers to bring vacant commercial property into community or local authority ownership (Evans and Longlands 2026).

Anchors like the council have shown important foresight by investing in dedicated internal roles that support CWB, including community-led housing models: 'they've got a community and self-build officer... to have that role in the city is really good' (Jim, co-operative member, June 2026). There are also successful examples of temporary land activation supported by the council, though the exact benefit to York's low-income communities remains uncertain (see Box 7.1). Too often however, inconsistent or risk averse institutional governance frameworks stall community-oriented property developments. More consistent support would allow public spaces to be incubated by local talent for 'meanwhile' social benefit.

One barrier to making better community use of property assets is the pressure of the modern media and social media landscape. Local council officers and politicians often operate under highly visible public scrutiny, where 'unconventional' actions risk being framed as 'mistakes' that can be 'blown up into something [political]' (John, social enterprise lead, June 2026), leading to risk-aversion. However, building community wealth requires risk-*taking*, and a cooperative, experimental culture that gives residents the trust and space to safely test new ideas.

> *I think the appetite for risk in the financial sector doesn't exist... we're a small organisation that's emerging, we're ultimately a startup... we're considered high risk, because we're on the periphery... they're just going, "No. It's too risky. I don't want to know. We'll add an extra couple of percent," which then makes, ironically, makes [things] unaffordable.*
> **Jim, co-operative member, June 2026**

23 Evans and Longlands, *Resilient, Thriving and Healthy.*

24 Barnes, Amy, Power, and Kennedy, 'Creating Health-Promoting Spaces for Change within the Economy: The Role of Food Co-Operatives in England'.

25 Barnes, Amy, Power, and Kennedy, 'Creating Health-Promoting Spaces for Change within the Economy: The Role of Food Co-Operatives in England'.

26 M. Hoover and H. Abell, *The Cooperative Growth Ecosystem: Inclusive Economic Development in Action, Democracy at Work Institute, Project Equity and Citi* (2016), p. 2 <*https://institute.coop/resources/cooperative-growth-ecosystem-inclusive-economic-development-action*>.

27 Evans and Longlands, *Resilient, Thriving and Healthy.*

28 Tom Moore and Kim McKee, 'Empowering Local Communities? An International Review of Community Land Trusts', *Housing Studies*, 27.2 (2012), pp. 280–90, doi:10.1080/02673037.2012.647306; Wendy Wilson, *Community Land Trusts – Briefing Paper, Number 4903, 13 June 2017* (2017) <*https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04903/SN04903.pdf*> [accessed 30 June 2026].

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BOX 7.1. COMBINING FEATURES OF COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING

When institutional support, democratic ownership, and community assets have been successfully aligned in York, initiatives have created multiplier effects within the city. These examples showcase how the pillars of CWB can operate together in practice. The challenge is to initiate more enterprises like this and connect them up.

SPARK YORK 'THIS IS WHERE PEOPLE HAVE A GO'

Activating land to build community wealth: Established over 10 years ago to regenerate unused, vacant public land in the centre of York

Incubating inclusive enterprises: Provides accessible, flexible, and affordable micro-spaces for independent, values-driven local startups, particularly those led by young people

Retaining local wealth: Operates as an accredited Real Living Wage employer, with all corporate profits directly reinvested back into community initiatives in accordance with its Community Interest Company status

Building social infrastructure: Works as an open, non-transactional public space where anyone can spend time without pressure to spend money

Enhancing food access: Hosts a zero-waste supermarket distributing repurposed surplus food at low cost, alongside the 'Spark 7' initiative on Tuesdays and Thursdays, offering nutritious meals from local food businesses for £7.

YORSPACE, YORK COMMUNITY ENERGY AND LOWFIELD GREEN HOUSING CO-OP

Democratic ownership: Democratically run, operating on a 'one member, one vote' principle and working on ways to permanently protect land in York from market speculation and for community benefit,

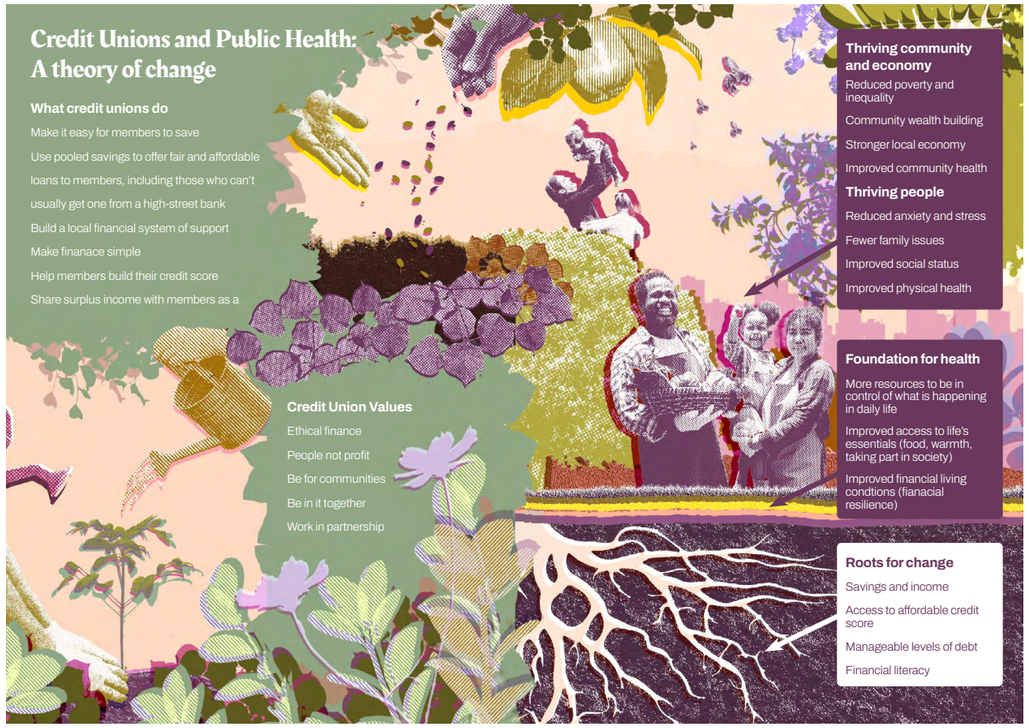
Lowfield Green housing development: Successfully leveraged £422,000 in community shares alongside regional grants and institutional investment to build an innovative community housing development,

Long-term affordability: Despite macroeconomic material inflation, homes are locked out of market speculation and sold at 70% of market value using permanent community land covenants,

Sustainable design: Built using One Planet Living principles, incorporating restricted car parking, extensive cycle workshops, sustainable water management, and local food-growing spaces,

Co-operative ecosystem: Partnering with York Community Energy and Lowfield Green Housing Co-op to install community-owned green infrastructure, including a large-scale community battery and solar array backed by the Community Energy Fund.

Figure 7.2 Credit unions and Public Health: A theory of change.



Source: Barnes et al 2025 (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

Locally rooted finance

Retaining and redirecting money within York is essential to provide targeted anti-poverty investment and ensure low-income families can access affordable, ethical credit. Localising financial power involves several inter-linked dimensions, including advancing the reach of community development credit unions (CDCUs): member-owned, democratic financial institutions that support saving and provide fair, affordable loans to members, including families who cannot get one from high-street banks;[29].[30] CDCUs are often deeply embedded in their communities to help them avoid unaffordable debt and make sound financial decisions (Nembhard 2013; Made in Common 2025). Crucially, CDCU surpluses are returned to members as dividends rather than extracted as corporate profit, keeping money circulating locally to build community wealth and wellbeing[31] (see Figure 7.2).

A practical example is City of York Council's interest-free loan pilot with the Community First Credit Union. The initiative provided 0% interest loans to financially vulnerable residents who do not qualify for traditional grants, providing a safety net for essential household needs, like energy-efficiency upgrades and white goods.[32]

However, York's institutional architecture lacks locally grounded lenders and investors

29 Jessica Gordon Nembhard, 'Community Development Credit Unions: Securing and Protecting Assets in Black Communities', *The Review of Black Political Economy*, 40.4 (2013), pp. 459–90, doi:10.1007/s12114-013-9166-6.

30 Made in Common, *Credit Unions: Where You Can Save Money and Build Community* (University of York, 2025) <*https://heyzine.com/shelf/madeincommon*> [accessed 30 June 2026].

31 Barnes, Amy, Kelli Kennedy, and Maddie Baxter, *Credit Unions and Public Health: A Theory of Change.*, 2025 <*https://heyzine.com/shelf/madeincommon*> [accessed 30 June 2026].

32 City of York Council, *City of York Council and Community First Credit Union Interest Free Loan Pilot Scheme Privacy Notice* (2025) <*https://www.york.gov.uk/benefits/city-york-council-community-first-credit-union-interest-free-loan-pilot-scheme-privacy-notice*>; York CVS, *Bringing Credit Union Services into York's Communities* (2025) <*https://yorkcvs.org.uk/bringing-credit-union-services-into-yorks-communities/.*>.

dedicated to building community wealth and addressing poverty and inequality. Many traditional financial institutions lack the cultural and operational frameworks to understand and support alternative models of business ownership and community asset locks.

By misinterpreting collective equity and democratic structures as high-risk rather than diversified security, they drive up borrowing costs and stifle local innovation. For CWB to succeed, a range of alternative lending and investment pathways are needed. Ethical finance networks, social wealth funds, community shares platforms, community banking, regional development funds and maximising the social return of public pensions could all play a role.[33] Establishing these locally rooted investment pathways in York, will require coordinated action from across York's anchor organisations and the YNYCA.

The YNYCWB Commission has put figures to several of these. The North Yorkshire Pension Fund holds around £5 billion in assets; a 5% local allocation would unlock some £250 million, and the Commission argues the target should be at least 10%, directed towards social housing, retrofit and local energy. It also recommends a social economy investment fund modelled on Kindred in the Liverpool City Region and the North East's Flexible Social Finance fund, and a task force to test the feasibility of a regional mutual bank.[34]

Conclusion: The need for a regional community wealth building approach

While York acts as the economic heart of the wider North Yorkshire region, the structural challenges highlighted throughout this chapter cannot be solved within the city walls alone. Hyper-inflation housing costs, financial constraints on anchor organisations, barriers for inclusive and democratic enterprises and low-income residents, and risk-averse commercial lending are realities that require action on a broader scale. Regional connection is essential to achieve the necessary shifts in procurement, supply chains, equitable participation and community asset locks to create tangible for community wealth, poverty and inequality.

The YNYCA and its Community Wealth Building Commission offer foundational and a strategic mechanism to align policies and resources for public good. The Commission has been explicit that action must outlast it, recommending that its own tenure continue until a permanent Community Wealth Building Advisory and Accountability Panel is established within the Combined Authority's governance structure, on a defined three-year renewable term.[35] Ultimately, structural issues such as in-work precarity, lack of influence and control, and wealth extraction are regional liabilities that need shared solutions. Through developing a coordinated, regional network of community-oriented businesses and democratic organisations, the combined authority and local anchors can, together, increase opportunities for residents, particularly those on a low income, to benefit from York's economy. At the moment, however, these are commitments rather than outcomes. The YNYCA Commission itself acknowledges that without dedicated capacity and resource its recommendations risk becoming 'an unfunded list of aspirations', and wider evidence cautions that CWB can amount to local authority rhetoric where it is not resourced, governed and held to account.[36] CWB can drive up employment standards and increase the availability of secure employment and enterprises that pay a fair wage and support wellbeing. Adopting a CWB approach provides a practical pathway to translate local powers into concrete opportunities for the most vulnerable, laying the groundwork for a more equitable future.

33 Democracy Collaborative, *Locally-Rooted Finance Elements* (2026) <*https://www.democracycollaborative.org/locally-rooted-finance-elements*>.
34 Evans and Longlands, *Resilient, Thriving and Healthy.*
35 Evans and Longlands, *Resilient, Thriving and Healthy.*
36 Evans and Longlands, *Resilient, Thriving and Healthy.*

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Establish a York Community Wealth Building Partnership:** Key York anchors (e.g. Council, NHS Trusts, both Universities) should form a strategic partnership to develop and implement a coherent and comprehensive CWB plan that addresses the needs of local communities, particularly focusing on low-income residents.
2. **Embed social value in public contracts:** Anchor organisations should audit their procurement practices to ensure they prioritise social and community impacts (e.g. secure jobs, voice and influence, Real Living Wage in low-paid workers such as care, retail, and hospitality) rather than choosing only lowest price, and work together to identify opportunities for collaborative action on procuring for social value.
3. **Remove barriers to unlocking community assets and inclusive enterprises:** York authorities should provide integrated support and targeted interventions (e.g. business rate relief) for new and emerging cooperatives, social enterprises and community land uses. Reducing initial costs will expand opportunities for residents (particularly those from the most deprived neighbourhoods) to participate and benefit equitably.
4. **Scale up ethical credit and regional investment:** York anchors should expand partnerships with community credit unions (e.g. Community First Credit Union, Darlington Credit Union) and collaborate with each other and the YNYCA to develop alternative regional finance pathways that provide financial safety nets for inclusive enterprises and shield vulnerable families from high-cost debt.

PART THREE: LIVING EXPERIENCE



8. GROWING UP IN YORK: YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

Aniela Wenham, Maddie Baxter, Katherine Smith and Antonios Roumpakis

Chapter Findings

- **THE PARADOX OF AFFLUENCE:** Young people frequently characterised York as 'safe', 'historic', 'beautiful' and 'comfortable'. These positive experiences coexisted with socio-economic pressures that shaped their everyday lives and future aspirations. Despite York's affluence, many experienced inequalities and hardship associated with the high cost of living, employment insecurity and restricted access to affordable housing. These challenges contributed to growing uncertainty around transitions to adulthood.

- **ESCALATING PRESSURES AND MODEST AMBITIONS**: Educational pressures, family relationships and financial insecurity intersected to shape young people's experiences of education, employment, and adulthood. Many participants described modest aspirations centred on stability, security, and wellbeing.

- **MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS:** Mental health emerged as a major concern throughout the research. Young people linked increasing stress and anxiety to educational pressures, the cost of living, employment insecurity, the longer-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and unequal access to timely support.

- **BELONGING AND CULTURAL EXCLUSION:** Despite a deep emotional attachment to the city, young people report a lack of affordable, youth-oriented spaces and feel that York increasingly caters to tourists rather than local residents. Marginalised groups, including LGBTQ+ youth and young people of colour, often feel excluded due to a lack of visible diversity and representative community anchors.

- **HOLISTIC POLICY NEEDS:** Young people's experiences of growing up in York are shaped by the interaction of place-based inequalities, housing, employment, mental health, social relationships, and access to support, highlighting the need for holistic policy responses that place young people's voices at the centre of decision-making.

Youth Inequalities and Transitions to Adulthood

Across the UK, there is growing concern regarding widening inequalities among young people as transitions to adulthood have become increasingly prolonged, uncertain and unequal.[1] These experiences are shaped by the interaction of socio-economic circumstances, place-based inequalities, housing affordability, labour market conditions and uneven access to support.[2] Current policy debates, including the development of a National Youth Strategy[3] and renewed attention to young people who are not in education, employment or training, increasingly recognise these interconnected challenges.[4] This chapter examines how young people in York navigate these transitions to adulthood and how they perceive their futures within the city.

Youth Geographies of Inequality Project

This chapter draws on findings from the *Youth Geographies of Inequality Project*, a research programme funded by The Health Foundation exploring young people's experiences of growing up in York and how they negotiate emotional support across family and community networks, and the role of place in shaping opportunities and wellbeing. The research utilised participatory and qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, and arts-based workshops such as mapping, walking interviews, zines, and filmmaking.

A central feature of the project was the involvement of young people as co-researchers, who helped shape the research process and conducted interviews with adults from the local community to explore intergenerational experiences of support and care. This provided a broader understanding of young people's relationships, mental health, and experiences of growing up in York.

Key findings

Growing up in York: Affluence, inequality and the cost of living

While young people often described York as a prosperous and attractive city, they emphasised that the city's reputation for affluence could obscure significant inequalities and experiences of hardship. Young people repeatedly described York as expensive and compared living costs to those of larger urban centres, alongside strong concerns over food insecurity and sharp divides between affluent and deprived neighbourhoods:

> *We never have a lot of food in the house, like there's just never ever a full fridge... It makes me worry because I'm worrying where my little brother's next meal is gonna come from.*
> **(Jerry, 16)**

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No money for activities, like Scouts, judo, climbing etc.

Housing affordability was a particularly significant concern. Many young people wanted to stay in York due to family ties, friendships and a strong sense of belonging, but rising rents and house prices led many to fear being permanently 'priced out' of their home city:

> *I'd love to stay in York, I've always said this... I've grown up here, everything's here for me, but then it's expensive; I know people are struggling to get houses.*
> **(Hannah, 17)**

Parents reinforced these concerns, frequently contrasting their own transitions to adulthood with the systemic barriers their children now face. Several noted how pathways to secure local employment and affordable 'starter homes' have been eroded and gradually replaced by an inflated housing market and tourist-centric economy:

> *I really worry that York isn't a viable place for our young people to build a life or start a family anymore. It's completely transformed into a playground for tourists... When I was younger, you could leave school, get a decent clerical job... and actually afford a starter home... Now? The next generation is being systematically priced out...*
> **(Gary, 44)**

Parents viewed housing and employment as interconnected challenges, expressing concerns that local wages no longer matched the cost of living. Like young people, many questioned whether remaining in York would be financially achievable.

Education, employment and transitions to adulthood

Young people's transitions through education and employment were shaped by labour market conditions, mental health, family relationships, and wider socio-economic pressures.

Many young people and graduates emphasised how the local labour market was highly competitive, with strong fears over their capacity to secure 'good employment'; the dominance of hospitality and tourism-related job roles meant that most available work was often low paid, insecure and/or lacking progression opportunities.

Stable employment was a key aspiration. Participants described modest ambitions centred on financial security and wellbeing, but anxiety surrounding underemployment and long-term financial instability was widespread, particularly among young people with mental health difficulties, neurodivergence or caring responsibilities:

> *I often worry about the fact that I don't think that I'm gonna be able to do the whole work thing; like I really, really want to but I have big barriers put in place because I'm autistic.*
> **(Davina, 17)**

Experiences within the secondary school system also emerged as highly significant in shaping later transitions. Young people frequently described school as heavily focused on examinations and attainment pressures which often negatively impacted wellbeing and self-confidence:

> *I think exams cause a lot of stress and worry.*
> **(Sarah, 23)**

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And school refusal [by some children] which can impact later in life with life skills, exams and work.

Parents also highlighted these concerns, with several questioning the rigid expectations of a linear pathway (school to university to immediate career). They instead advocated for providing young people with space and flexibility to explore different pathways:

> *When I went through education thirty years ago I was supposed to be an engineer and I kinda got pushed down this route of, you know, maths and science... and I realised it was not for me but it was too late.*
> **(Jim, 46)**

> *...she started a degree and decided it wasn't for her, and now she's working full-time in a café and really happy, and lives at home...*
> **(Lisa, 56)**

1 Signe K. Bennetsen and others, 'Childhood Adversity, Early School Leaving and Long-Term Social Benefit Use: A Longitudinal Mediation Analysis of a Population-Wide Study', *Social Science & Medicine*, 370 (2025), p. 117770, doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2025.117770; A. Furlong and F. Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*, 2nd edn (Open University Press, 2007); S. Irwin and A. Nilsen, 'Understanding Youth Transitions in Difficult Times', in *Transitions to Adulthood Through Recession: Youth and Inequality in a European Comparative Perspective* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–16, doi:10.4324/9781315231686-1.

2 A. Roumpakis, Wenham A, and K. A. Smith, 'Putting Together a Jigsaw Puzzle? Family, Emotional Support and Youth Transitions', *Social Policy Review*, 37 (2025), pp. 104–21, doi:10.51952/9781447377245.ch006.; I. Schoon and J. Bynner, 'Risk and Resilience in the Life Course: Implications for Interventions and Social Policies', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 6.1 (2003), pp. 21–31, doi:10.1080/1367626032000068145.

3 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy* (GOV.UK, 2025) <*https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy*> [accessed 26 June 2026].

4 R. Casey and J. Elliott, *Unlocking the Potential of Young People Furthest from the Labour Market* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025) <*https://www.jrf.org.uk/work/unlocking-the-potential-of-young-people-furthest-from-the-labour-market*>; A. Wenham, 'Wish You Were Here"? Geographies of Exclusion: Young People, Coastal Towns and Marginality', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23.1 (2020), pp. 44–60, doi:10.1080/13676261.2019.1704408.; Julia Diniz and Louise Murphy, *False Starts: What the UK's Growing NEETs Problem Really Looks like, and How to Fix It* (Resolution Foundation, 2025) <*https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/false-starts/*> [accessed 18 August 2026].

These findings challenge assumptions that successful transitions to adulthood follow a singular pathway through education and employment. Instead, young people's experiences point to the importance of recognising diverse and non-linear trajectories, shaped by a range of interconnected socio-economic factors.

Mental health and wellbeing

Mental health was consistently identified as one of the most significant issues affecting young people, characterised by increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional pressures:

> *I don't know a single parent or a young person in York that hasn't mentioned that in some way at least... the pressure or the stress.*
> **(Esther, 24)**

While young people recognised that mental health difficulties were shaped by multiple factors, the Covid-19 pandemic was repeatedly described as a significant turning point. Participants discussed how isolation, disruption to education and separation from support networks negatively affected wellbeing. Concerns over attainment and future prospects frequently overlapped with broader anxieties surrounding the economy, housing and financial security.

Intergenerational accounts linked educational pressures to both mental and physical health challenges. Parents described witnessing profound declines in wellbeing among young people navigating examinations and transitions:

> *We talk about university and careers like it's this automatic, mandatory given. But when your child physically collapses from the sheer pressure of GCSEs and develops a chronic illness like ME, your entire timeline for them changes overnight.*
> **(Nina, 55)**

Another participant described the necessity of privately funded support:

> *We had to pay for private care just to get her stable enough to even think about a future, to get her through her exams so she had options. But it makes you bitter. What about the kids whose parents can't drop thousands of pounds?*
> **(Helena, 52)**

These accounts demonstrate stark inequalities in access to support, whilst highlighting how educational pressures can shape young people's wellbeing long before they enter adulthood.

For families of neurodivergent young people, transitions to adulthood can be particularly precarious, sometimes making conventional pathways to independence through education and employment challenging to achieve:

> *My logical, analytical brain wants to map out a clear, traditional path—sixth form, university, a stable career. But for a neurodiverse kid who finds the physical environment of a school deeply traumatic, that path simply doesn't exist.*
> **(Michelle, 58)**

This vulnerability is compounded by a perceived 'cliff edge' in institutional support as young people transition into adulthood:

> *When they turn eighteen, the child services support just vanishes overnight. You are expected to transition them into this cold adult world of DWP assessments, PIP[5] forms...*
> **(Jessica, 53)**

These findings suggest that assumptions surrounding independence often fail to reflect the realities experienced by neurodivergent young people and their families. Rather than representing a singular transition point, adulthood was frequently described as an extended and uneven process requiring ongoing support and flexibility.

Young people described significant challenges accessing mental health support, citing long waiting lists, overstretched services, and unequal provision. Some noted that access to private mental health services increasingly depended on family financial resources:

> *I was lucky to be born with parents that can afford to pay my therapy.*
> **(Anna, 22)**

These accounts highlight how inequalities in access to support may reinforce wider socio-economic inequalities, creating uneven opportunities for young people to access help during periods of emotional distress. The findings also demonstrate the importance of relationships and emotional support networks as important protective factors for wellbeing. Conversely, experiences of isolation, instability and insecure living circumstances were frequently associated with poorer mental health outcomes.

Young people's wellbeing was shaped by the cumulative effects of educational pressures, labour market insecurity, housing affordability, financial strain, access to services and the availability of supportive relationships within families and communities. The intersection and exacerbation of these factors over time can shape a young person's wellbeing long before they enter adulthood.

Place, belonging and youth spaces

Despite the challenges identified throughout the research, many young people expressed a deep emotional attachment to York, describing it as 'safe', 'beautiful', 'historic', 'warm' and 'comfortable'. The city's architectural character, manageable size and familiar atmosphere were often viewed positively, particularly in comparison to larger urban centres:

> *It's a beautiful place... it's different to other cities... and just like the feel of it... it's in a very, very old place with the cobbles everywhere... Compared to other big cities it's a lot safer in York and I feel like being able to be in a safer environment is just better to grow up in.*
> **(Xander, 16)**

However, young people also described a lack of youth-oriented spaces and affordable activities, particularly for those interested in music and creative industries:

> *There's not that much you can really do.*
> **(Louise, 23)**

There were also concerns that the city increasingly catered towards tourism rather than local communities. Young people described the city centre as becoming overcrowded during peak tourist periods, noting that the retail and hospitality landscape feels financially exclusionary:

> *Most of the stuff probably caters for tourists and stuff cos it's a touristy city isn't it?*
> **(Jamie, 23)**

Young people, particularly those identifying as LGBTQ+, described limited opportunities for community-building and inclusive social spaces.

Intergenerational accounts highlighted concerns regarding whose futures are imagined within the city. In particular, parents from ethnic minority backgrounds expressed anxieties that young people of colour often feel excluded from York in the long-term due to a lack of visible diversity:

> *When you look at the future for young people of colour here, they are looking outward. They don't see a long-term trajectory for themselves in York because the city lacks those cultural and community anchors that make you feel settled as an adult.*
> **(Amaya, 48)**

These findings suggest that a young person's sense of belonging is shaped not only by emotional attachment to place, but also by the wider social setting in which they live. This includes material conditions such as housing and employment opportunities, relational networks and access to representative spaces that allow diverse youth to feel included.

5 Personal Independence Payment

CASE STUDY 8.1: ADDRESSING YOUTH INEQUALITIES ACROSS YORKSHIRE

Adam Formby, Aniela Wenham, Rebecca Kerr and Maddie Baxter

Across the UK, concerns are growing about rising numbers of young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). Recent estimates suggest that the number of young people who are NEET could reach 1.25 million by 2031.[6] This trend reflects the long-term decline of entry-level employment and increasingly prolonged and uncertain transitions to adulthood.[7] In 2026, 13.9% of young people (just over one million) were classified as NEET (ONS, 2026).

The consequences of being NEET are profound, including poorer employment prospects, worse physical and mental health, and enduring 'scarring' effects across the life course.[8] Increasing concern has also been expressed regarding the relationship between worsening youth mental health and labour market inactivity, highlighting the need for policy responses that move beyond narrow employment-focused interventions and address the wider factors shaping young people's lives.

Across Yorkshire and the Humber, these challenges are evident, although they play out differently across localities. In York, as noted above, young people describe growing uncertainty surrounding employment, housing, and the cost of living. Along the North Yorkshire coast, including Scarborough as a local coastal town, the legacy of economic restructuring and the dominance of tourism-based employment contribute to experiences of marginalisation, insecure employment, and uncertainty about future opportunities.[9] In Bradford, post-18 young people experience deeper marginalisation from the labour market: 8.1% of 16-to-24-year-olds in Bradford were included in the Universal Credit 'Searching for work' conditionality regime, amongst the highest local authority rates in Great Britain in 2025.[10] These regional differences demonstrate the importance of place-based approaches to youth inequalities.

Building on this work, the Born in Bradford Centre for Social Change is developing a programme of research focused on youth inequalities, transitions to adulthood and social change across Yorkshire. Bringing together the internationally recognised Born in Bradford research programme, the Healthy Livelihoods team within the Department of Health Sciences at the University of York, and the York Policy Engine, the Centre seeks to generate evidence that can inform more effective policy and practice.

A programme of complementary work is now underway to explore these challenges further. The first, led by Dr Adam Formby, draws on data from the Born in Bradford *Age of Wonder* study to examine transitions to adulthood among 16-18-year-olds in Bradford, identifying ways to improve education, employment, and wellbeing outcomes. The second project, led by Dr Aniela Wenham, examines the relationship between welfare policy, employment insecurity and youth mental health. Comparing experiences across Bradford and Scarborough, the project explores how welfare conditionality, benefit sanctions and insecure employment shape the wellbeing of young people under 25. The third project, supported by the Yorkshire and Humber Policy and Evidence Research Network and the York Policy Engine and led by Dr Rebecca Kerr and Dr Aniela Wenham, explores the experiences of young people aged 16-24 who are currently, or have recently been, NEET. Focusing on Bradford and Scarborough, the study adopts a place-based approach to examine how mental health, disability, caring responsibilities, and poverty intersect with local labour markets and support systems to shape young people's transitions to adulthood.

Together, these projects are building an evidence base to inform more effective, place-sensitive responses to youth inequalities across Yorkshire.

6 Department for Work and Pensions, *Young People and Work: Interim Report* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2026) <*https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report*> [accessed 26 June 2026].

7 K. Ralston and A. Formby, 'Inequality Restructured: A Regional Comparison of the Occupational Position of Young People before and after the Great Recession of 2008', *People Place and Policy Online*, 14.2 (2020), pp. 90–112, doi:10.3351/ppp.2020.4298645632.

8 Z. Feng, 'Long Term Health Effects of NEET Experiences: Evidence from a Longitudinal Analysis of Young People in Scotland', *International Journal for Population Data Science*, 1 (2017) <doi:10.23889/ijpds.v1i1.327.>; S. Atwell, M. Vriend, and D. Finch, 'Why Are a Growing Number of Young People Who Are NEET Reporting Work-Limiting Health Conditions?', *The Health Foundation*, 2026 <*https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/analysis/why-are-a-growing-number-of-young-people-who-are-neet-reporting-work*> [accessed 26 June 2026].

9 Wenham, 'Wish You Were Here"? Geographies of Exclusion: Young People, Coastal Towns and Marginality'.

10 Department for Work and Pensions, *Get Britain Working: Labour Market Insights January 2026* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2026) <*https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/get-britain-working-labour-market-insights-january-2026/get-britain-working-labour-market-insights-january-2026*> [accessed 26 June 2026].

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Conclusions

Young people's experiences of growing up in York are shaped by the interaction of economic, social and spatial inequalities. While many participants expressed strong attachment to the city and valued its safety, history and distinctive character, these positive experiences coexisted with concerns surrounding affordability, employment insecurity, mental health pressures and a perceived lack of youth-oriented spaces and opportunities.

Transitions to adulthood were frequently experienced as uncertain and increasingly precarious. Housing affordability, insecure employment and the high cost of living contributed to anxieties surrounding independence, stability, and the possibility of remaining in York in the longer term. At the same time, pressures associated with education and examinations often intersected with mental health and wellbeing, shaping young people's experiences long before they entered adulthood.

The findings emphasise the importance of adopting holistic approaches to youth policy. Young people's experiences cannot be understood through isolated policy domains such as housing, employment, education, or mental health. Rather, these issues intersect in complex ways, influencing young people's everyday lives, wellbeing, and future opportunities. Place-based inequalities are particularly important in understanding these experiences. While York is often represented as affluent and prosperous, participants' accounts reveal uneven access to resources, support, and opportunity across the city.

Intergenerational findings demonstrate that concerns surrounding young people's futures extend beyond young people themselves. Parents, carers, and family members described growing anxiety regarding housing affordability, employment opportunities, mental health, and educational pressures, while challenging narrow understandings of success, emphasising the importance of recognising diverse and non-linear pathways through education, employment and adulthood.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of placing young people's voices at the centre of policy development and service design. Young people provided nuanced accounts of both the opportunities and challenges associated with growing up in York, alongside clear reflections on what needs to change. Listening to and acting upon these experiences will be essential for developing effective, place-sensitive policies that support young people's wellbeing, belonging and transitions to adulthood in York.

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

As a parent I do believe the pressure of school is a big issue. my daughter has been out of school for 6 months... I requested early help and was told I didn't meet the requirements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Adopt whole-system approaches** to youth policy that recognise the interconnected nature of housing, employment, education, mental health, and family support.
2. **Improve access** to affordable housing and secure employment to support young people's transitions to independent adulthood and enable them to remain within their local communities.
3. **Increase investment** in early mental health support, reducing waiting times and addressing inequalities in access to services.
4. **Expand youth-focused spaces**, activities, and participation opportunities, ensuring young people are actively involved in shaping local policy and service design.
5. **Develop place-sensitive policy responses** that recognise how inequalities differ across neighbourhoods and communities, including the experiences of marginalised and underrepresented groups.



9. LIVING WITH POVERTY IN YORK TODAY

Community Researchers, Healthwatch and Lived Insights

Chapter Findings

- **SHAME, STIGMA AND THE MENTAL HEALTH TOLLS OF POVERTY:** Community researchers described feeling 'trapped' by vicious cycles of interconnected challenges stemming from poverty. Social and institutional hostility lead people to internalise shame, deterring them from seeking help and contributing to profound loneliness.

- **SCARCITY AND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES:** Insufficient income and an inadequate benefits system perpetuates a sense of competition for scarce resources. People described how activities in the 'informal economy' such as sex work, drug dealing and the black market can be used to survive.

- **STRUCTURAL FAILURES IN SUPPORT SYSTEMS:** Drivers of poverty in York include 'broken' systems such as housing market hyperinflation and proliferation of zero-hours contracts but findings also highlighted how failing state support, such as inaccessible NHS services, can normalise reliance on charities that try to fill the gaps.

- **THE POWER OF COMMUNITY AND RECIPROCITY:** Community connection and acts of solidarity are powerful counter-forces to stigma and isolation. Shared spaces and community hubs foster dignity and safety.

I already know what's happening, I live it every day, I know what would make things better.

Like Seebohm Rowntree's original study, our community-led research explores poverty in relation to the places where people live. It highlights how neighbourhoods, communities and support systems influence experiences of poverty and inequality in York today. Embedded within York's designated-as-deprived neighbourhoods, including Walmgate, Tang Hall and Foxwood, community researchers combine tacit knowledge with trusted local relationships, creating the conditions for honest conversations that generate context-sensitive insights into how poverty is experienced.

Using participatory research methods, including mapping, timelines and community conversations, our work documents the practical strategies people use to navigate poverty and show how structural inequalities, everyday pressures and emotional realities are experienced, enriching statistical evidence by making visible the human dimensions of poverty.

The research team identified a number of themes that reflect how poverty and our understanding of it has evolved. These themes – mental health, stigma, the informal economy, and perspectives on immigration – expand on some of the aspects of poverty that were not a primary focus of Rowntree's original study and offer insight into experiences that remain underrepresented in public and policy discourse.

Mental health

I think it's a very vicious circle...obviously you get down because you can't afford things, do I pay my council tax or feed my children?

Mental health emerged as a significant cross-cutting theme, with researchers describing how poverty affected their mental health, making it harder to access support and navigate everyday life.

Shame and trauma

I grew up feeling like I'm on my own... in no man's land... disposable.

The findings showed that poverty shaped some researchers' earliest experiences of instability, leaving them feeling responsible for circumstances beyond their control. One expressed how childhood experiences of rejection contributed to feeling 'on my own' and 'disposable'. Other findings centred on the impact of 'financial strain, addiction and social judgement', describing 'the guilt, the shame', as a 'heavy weight'. The research captured how intergenerational poverty can become internalised, negatively impacting mental health.

Loneliness and social isolation

I just felt isolated, completely isolated.

Experiences of poverty were repeatedly associated with isolation, as evidenced through researchers' accounts of standing alone against bullies 'I wouldn't be a sheep... I got beaten up so many times for that', trying to rebuild life in a different, unfamiliar city, 'coming back to just me and my son... felt isolated completely' and returning each night to an empty home when in crisis, 'going home to an empty space... it's very isolating'. These experiences were shaped by structural conditions, including limited opportunities for connection and the absence of community spaces.

These findings demonstrate that poverty and mental health are deeply interconnected. Financial insecurity and associated trauma negatively impact wellbeing, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage.

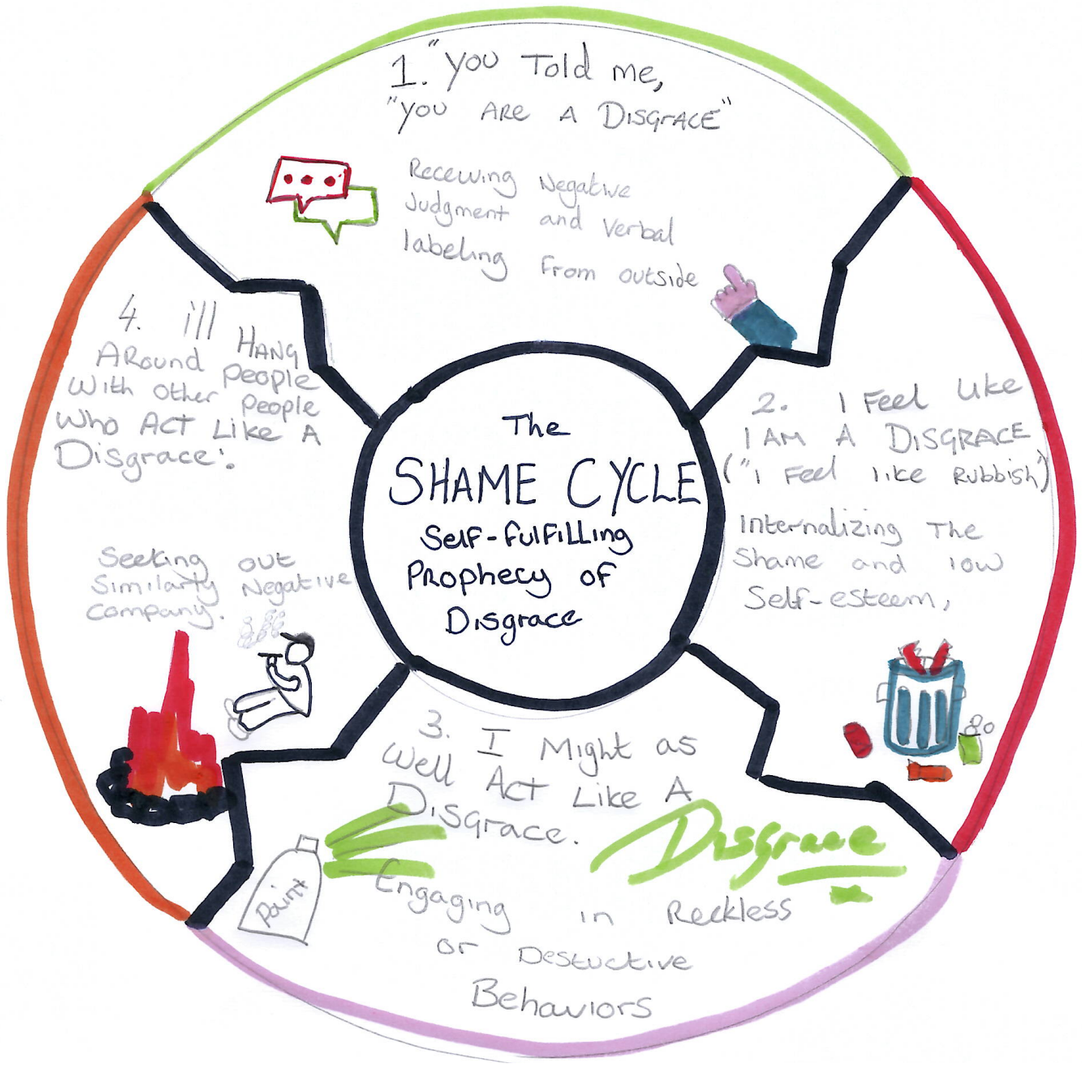
Stigma: Judgement and shame

I did feel really guilty...I was in a terrible situation. I felt ashamed, I was in addiction, I had no money, being judged as a parent, as a mother... even within our own community there was an extra layer of stigma because I was a mother.

Findings highlighted how the lived experience of poverty was compounded by stigma, influencing how people were perceived, treated and accessed support.

Members described stigma as a 'mark of disgrace' attached to identity, intersecting with 'class, disability, hidden pain, learning difficulties, addiction, mental health' as well

Fig. 9.1. The shame cycle



Articulated and sketched by community researchers

as being labelled 'a burden to the system'. Findings showed how stereotypes, misperceptions and 'the current useless government', create an environment where people are called 'scroungers', 'scum' and are treated as though they are less human.

Researchers described how pervasive judgement leaves deep psychological and physical wounds 'another blow... another trauma... another injury' and highlighted the constant scrutiny they experienced, being 'judged for being addicted and not managing money', conversely, being 'judged for having my hair done'. These accounts demonstrate how corrosive the stigma attached to poverty is, 'we can cope with low wages but can't cope with stigma'.

*You're a f*ing disgrace.*

Institutional stigma was captured, members recalled experiencing overt hostility from services, such as hospital staff saying, 'Oh look, he's overdosed again!' The requirement to provide invasive 'proof of

lifestyle', such as 'gambling in bank statements', has caused a noticeable 'decline in people asking for help'. One member articulated that continuous condemnation creates a destructive cycle of shame, being told 'you are a disgrace' leads to feeling like one, which in turn leads to behaving like one and associating with other people 'in disgrace'.

The findings highlight how stigma acts as a reinforcer of poverty. By attaching blame and shame to people's circumstances, stigma can permit poverty to persist, making inequality appear acceptable.

'Off the books': York's informal economy

> *And obviously, they didn't add tax, it was all backhanders, cash in hand.*

The team identified that York's 'off the books' activity is not marginal or exceptional but a routine, if rarely spoken about, part of everyday survival. Our findings show that the informal economy operates alongside formal income generation to sustain people where needs are not fully met.

Sex work

> *She's got no money whatsoever but she's still doing prostitution... to make ends meet.*

Experiences of sex work and exploitation captured within the research were linked to financial desperation, not choice, 'the room was available yet hidden, unsaid benefits were expected'. Findings described a local economy where women worked 'behind the Minister itself' and charged '£20 to £50 an hour' simply to cover basic costs. Some people sold used underwear and photos online, 'like eBay...used underwear', reflecting how digital platforms are tools for survival strategies. These practices are a crucial income for some.

Drug dealing

> *There's drug dealing going on in my estate.*

Findings showed that drug dealing is visible and normalised across neighbourhoods, operating 'absolutely everywhere' on streets, in parks and within 'respectable houses'. Predatory 'County Lines activity' was frequently observed around hubs, particularly bridges and described as contributing to a 'crisis of safety'. Those experiencing extreme poverty described becoming trapped into 'owing money to dealers' and forced into 'shoplifting to pay themselves out of debt'. Involvement in networks brought risk, including 'visible knife and gun crime' and fatal violence, 'he pushed... she banged her head and she died', as a consequence of poverty-related insecurity.

Black market trade

> *People are coming into the pubs... they're shoplifters.*

'Tins of meat, big joints of beef, champagne' captures some of the stolen goods described by researchers in circulation, including shoplifted food, alcohol and cigarettes sourced from abroad being sold in pubs, where a '£30–£40 pack could be bought for a tenner'. Some members described tools stolen from work vans and sold at car boots, fake branded clothing appearing around Christmas and perfumes and shirts traded informally, 'I think there's a lot of counterfeit items out there'. These goods meet essential needs in communities where retail prices are unaffordable. Although recognised as responses to financial pressures, some members questioned the ethics of profiting from hardship, stating that 'making profit on it is wrong'.

Making ends meet

> *She gets new outfits every weekend...then sends them back, gets a refund.*

Informal money-making strategies emerged as a recurring theme within researchers' accounts, used to manage appearance, access essentials and generate additional income. Some relied on wardrobing, 'she wears the clothes with tags before returning' others bought from door-to-door sellers, 'Do you get people knocking on your door?' 'Every day', offering cheap goods for cash. Digital monetisation added another income stream, from TikTok gifts to OnlyFans, 'income they don't declare'. Cash-in-hand work remained central, with people cleaning windows, labouring and doing bar shifts paid off the books 'It was all backhanders, it was cash in hand'. Some households navigated welfare rules by not declaring cohabitation or health changes, 'Single parent... boyfriend's actually living there... but you don't declare it'. One researcher noted a possible cycle, 'fiddling the system, taxes rise, benefits reduce, fiddling the system'.

The informal economy, driven by structural and material inequalities, highlights how off the books activities emerge as survival strategies in response to poverty.

Immigration

> *It comes up a lot in Britain.*

Discussions highlighted immigration as a complex and contested theme within experiences of poverty, informed by concerns about resources, fairness and conversations with immigrants.

A range of perspectives were captured 'they take all the stuff from the food bank' answered with, 'you would if you didn't know when your next meal is coming'. Findings revealed frustration regarding local deprivation 'why are people here homeless?' and 'we don't have enough' while others challenged punitive responses, saying 'violence is never the answer, they are innocent people'.

Conversely, engagement with immigrants challenged some individuals' perspectives. One member attended a meal at the local Mosque, saying 'it's good to find out... They were very nice, quiet'. Researchers also gathered refugee voices, including accounts of beatings, broken bones, fake passports, smugglers and dangerous channel crossings 'he's fully under the water...please help me...he was dying', which caused visible distress when heard.

> *I had to leave my kids...I couldn't feed them...on the journey, only had water for four days...they beat us. This way for us is normal, my country is worse than the trip...I miss my kids.*

Some members felt influenced by political narratives 'we are succumbing to the populist story', others maintained a commitment to kindness, 'I don't want any more coming, but I will do anything to help those already here'.

Findings highlighted how poverty interacts with immigration creating pressure points, with limited access to much-needed resources intensifying competition and conversations with refugees challenging assumptions.

Reflections

Have things changed?

Our community-led research captured experiences of financial insecurity, housing instability, community disinvestment and barriers to accessing support, including healthcare, food aid and welfare benefits. Although characteristics of these conditions have changed since Rowntree's original study, they remain as central drivers of poverty.

> *There's still inequality, the area is affluent and working class.*

Contemporary poverty is sustained by structural conditions that reinforce financial insecurity. The findings demonstrated this, where members reflected on a sense of being 'cornered' within a hyper-inflated housing market, where a 'basic 3 bed is £1,250 – £1,500 is the new reality'. Findings showed the proliferation of AirBnBs and student developments was identified as contributing to the displacement of local families, leaving residents 'priced out of their own communities' and trapped in 'awful housing' under the constant 'fear of Section 21 evictions'. Researchers also noted that neighbourhoods are increasingly 'designed for visitors rather than them'.

We have to move...can't afford to live in this area, it's so sad.

Instability is reflected in the labour market, findings showed that the 'old contract that employment ensures security is broken', establishing a baseline of the 'working poor' where zero-hour contracts eliminated financial security. Consequently, the cost of living imposes a structural 'poverty premium' that forces individuals to choose between 'eat or heat'. Members reported that after paying 'out-of-control' bills, they felt 'punished for being poor' with financial pressures forcing them to 'withdraw from social life and hobbies'. To compound, researchers reflected that the navigating benefits support is 'impossible', where Universal Credit is 'fraught with difficulties' and 'not enough', failing to account for modern pressures like 'crippling childcare

costs of £750'.

You have all the bills to pay and there's no money left. No treats. No time out.

Additionally, the research highlights a breakdown in state infrastructure, with members experiencing '20-hour waits' in A&E and 'no NHS dentists'. Gaps in statutory support has created a normalised reliance on charity, the group observed a 'staggering' rise in foodbank use, climbing from 'only 20 a day' in 2020 to '200 a day' by 2026, making the 'struggle for food and foodbank vouchers' a persistent feature for many.

Diabetes costs £50 every 2 weeks.

These accounts bring to life the current realities of poverty in York, one member stated, 'benefits and wages don't match the percentage in food increase', illustrating simply, how poverty still persists.

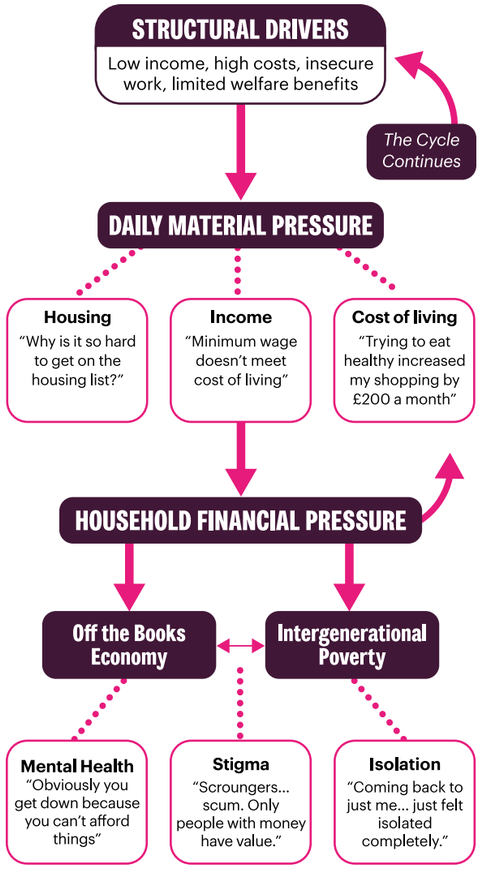
Of all this modern technology, all these jobs available, we can't scratch two pennies together

Across the findings, precarity, the constant instability created by systemic failures, emerged as a thread, running through daily experiences of uncertainty and limited opportunities. Researchers described poverty as a 'trap' where 'life-altering events create a cycle that is nearly impossible to escape' and that 'circumstances alter, 'frequently, 'starting over' after a job loss or repossession is 'never easy'. Although poverty may appear 'less visibly obvious' than Rowntree's time, findings suggest it has become 'hidden' within a 'web of struggle' caused by 'failing schools, discrimination and Universal Credit'. Instability was linked to complex barriers including the 'PIP fight process'. Our group found that precarity is relentless and exhausting, even 'working full-time is no guarantee' of relief.

Reciprocity and Belonging

Poverty is sustained by wider structural inequalities, but the findings demonstrate relationships, reciprocity, collective action and access to spaces where people feel valued and able to exercise personal and collective agency, can enable people to find pathways towards a different future.

Figure 9.2 The poverty cycle as captured by our community researchers.



That's why I do it because I just love all these people.

During periods of financial hardship, the findings showed that community connection helped to lessen the emotional impact of poverty. Acts of solidarity countered isolation, such as neighbours helping, 'she'd been around every supermarket looking for boxes for me' or local venues offering warmth, 'they lit me a fire... we have somewhere warm'.

Members described the impact of shared food and conversation, 'your mood lifts... you feel like you belong to something', transforming 'a negative into a positive'. Spaces where 'we were all just different' were described as places of safety and community, 'I feel safe at the Hub' and 'all the members are like family that I've never had'.

Fig. 9.3. Breaking the cycle of stigma



Articulated and sketched by community researchers

These experiences show that belonging and reciprocity can act as powerful counterforces to the isolation and stigma associated with poverty.

Community spaces create opportunities for dignity, connection and action.

Conclusion

Our community-led research demonstrates that precarity and stigma define many aspects of the lives of those experiencing poverty. Housing, work, health and diminished local services emerged as interconnected parts of a reinforcing cycle that deepens inequality, limits opportunity and erodes community life.

Findings reinforced that combining more effective support systems with local community investment could help alleviate poverty, restore dignity, strengthen connections and create opportunities to thrive. This is where agency resides, in listening to the firsthand experiences of people living in poverty and supporting spaces where community-led solutions can emerge.

> *...after all, the question is, not what is likely to be done, but what ought to be done; and it is an encouraging fact that in most things in this world, when a right course is recognised, it is somehow or other eventually carried out.*[1]

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Reform institutional practices to reduce stigma**: All government agencies and service providers should adopt York Poverty Truth Commission's Organisational Charter and implement training and policy changes to eliminate institutional hostility towards people experiencing poverty.
2. **Invest in community hubs and support services:** Local hub and frontline services need reliable sources of funding to maintain community spaces as stable sites of connection and belonging.
3. **Address the structural causes of in-work poverty:** Government must create greater financial security for York's residents by controlling the city's hyperinflated housing market and regulating the insecure low-wage visitor economy.
4. **Restore essential state infrastructure:** National government must invest deeply in restoring basic public services, enabling people to access support in their most vulnerable moments rather than being pushed deeper into precarity.
5. **Embed lived experience in policy design:** Local and regional government must involve people with lived experience of poverty in the design of support systems, drawing on their context-sensitive knowledge to ensure interventions will meet local need.

1 Edmund A. Parkes, *A Manual of Practical Hygiene: Intended Especially for Medical Officers of the Army and for Civil Medical Officers of Health* (1873), p. 140 <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/k2fw54zs/items> [accessed 29 July 2026].

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN YORK





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10. PUBLIC HOUSES (PUBS)

Victoria K Wells and Nadine Waehning

Chapter Findings

- **SHIFTS IN THE SECTOR:** Between 1901 and 2026 York pub numbers have declined significantly (by 21.19%) while food establishments selling alcohol and home drinking have expanded considerably.
- **PUBS' PLACE IN SOCIETY:** In 1901 York pubs were a quick pit stop with consumers popping in for short periods of time or picking up drinks to take home (30-40% of men and 70-98% of women stayed for less than 15 minutes). Now over 80% of consumers spend between 1-3 hours in a pub when visiting, suggesting the contemporary York pub is used for extended socialising.
- **CALMER AND MORE DIVERSE ENVIRONMENTS:** Compared to the 1901 pub the 2026 pub is quieter, safer and less drunken (more than 25% of modern patrons say they never see drunkenness, and 51.5% haven't seen a pub argument or fight in over a year). New pub activities have emerged since 1901 and the spaces are now used for eating (55.1%), pub quizzes (42.6%), watching live sports (36.1%), reading (24.7%), and even remote working/studying (9.5%) as well as drinking and general socialising.
- **TREND TOWARDS MODERATION:** While York remains a 'beer city' 26.7% of modern pub-goers regularly drink No and Low alcohol (NoLo) beverages in the pub and 46.7% report actively moderating their alcohol intake.

Rowntree's Public Houses ('Pubs')

In the original 1901 chapter on Pubs, the opening sentence stated: 'The facts set forth have been collected by the writer with the view of forming some estimate of the place which public houses occupy in the social life of the working classes' (pp306/307). In our updated chapter, we state that the facts have been collected to estimate the place public houses occupy in the social life of *all classes*. This reflects that contemporary York has a significant percentage of residents (28.7% in 2023) in the highest social grade classifications[1] and that pubs have increasingly targeted all demographics to ensure survival.[2] This chapter draws on public and academic sources, alongside the authors' own observations and an online survey.[3]

In 1901, York had 338 premises licensed to sell 'intoxicating liquor': 236 on-licences (hospitality venues) and 102 off-licences (shops/beer houses). City of York Council data[4] now shows 186 pubs/bars and 157 supermarkets/off-licences. This represents a 125-year reduction of 50 on-licences and an increase of 55 off-licences, reflecting a UK-wide decline in pub numbers from roughly 96,000 in 1901[5] to about 45,000 in 2026.[6] Additionally, there has been a shift toward home, often supermarket bought alcohol consumption.[7] Additionally, driven by the rise of gastropubs and café culture since the early 2000s,[8] 337 restaurants and cafés now hold licences to sell alcohol in York. Comparatively York is still considered a UK significant pub city, relating to density and options.[9]

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

Cafe culture for the middle classes.

In 1901, with a York population of 77,793, there was one 'on' licence for every 330 people (one per 230 for all licences). By the 2021 census, the population grew significantly to 202,821. Consequently, there is now approximately one 'on' licence premises (excluding restaurants/cafés) for every 859 people (one per 600 including off-licences), showing that licensed venue growth has lagged behind population growth. Only when including cafés and restaurants does the ratio drop to one per 195 people (exceeding the 1901 level), reflecting a clear shift toward food provision alongside alcohol, and aligning with the gastro-pub trend (Lane, 2018).

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

Gastro pubs, why?

Maps of York pubs (see Figures A.1 & A.2) show that, as in 1901, venues are unevenly distributed, with the highest density in the city centre and fewer in outlying areas. In 1901, the smaller city was categorised into business districts (central York), the poorest districts (within the walls near the station, Walmgate, Aldwark, and Layerthorpe), servant-keeping areas (Scarcroft, Clifton, Bootham, Monkgate,

1 Horner, 'Over a Quarter of Households in York Are in "Highest Social Class"'.

2 Kneale, *British Drinking from the 19th Century to the Present*.

3 The original chapter was researched through documentary sources and observations. We supplement these same methods with an online survey, an approach unavailable 125 years ago that allows us to access a wider consumer sample and better understand contemporary pub-visiting behaviour in York. Approved by the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of York research committee in April 2026, the survey was conducted in May/June 2026 via Google Forms. Invitations were distributed through social media, mailing lists, and posters. The survey had 263 respondents. 59.7% of the sample were full time employed/self-employed, 9.5% are part time employees/self-employed, 20.9% are retired, 7.6% are students and 2.3% are 'other' (homemaker, volunteer etc). Household chief income earners were classified as 32.4% higher managerial administrative and professional, 36% Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional, 16% supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, 5.2% skilled manual worker, 0.8% semi-skilled and unskilled manual worker and 9.6% state pensioner, casual/lowest grade worker. Other respondent details are in the chapter.

4 At February 2026.

5 Kneale, *British Drinking from the 19th Century to the Present*.

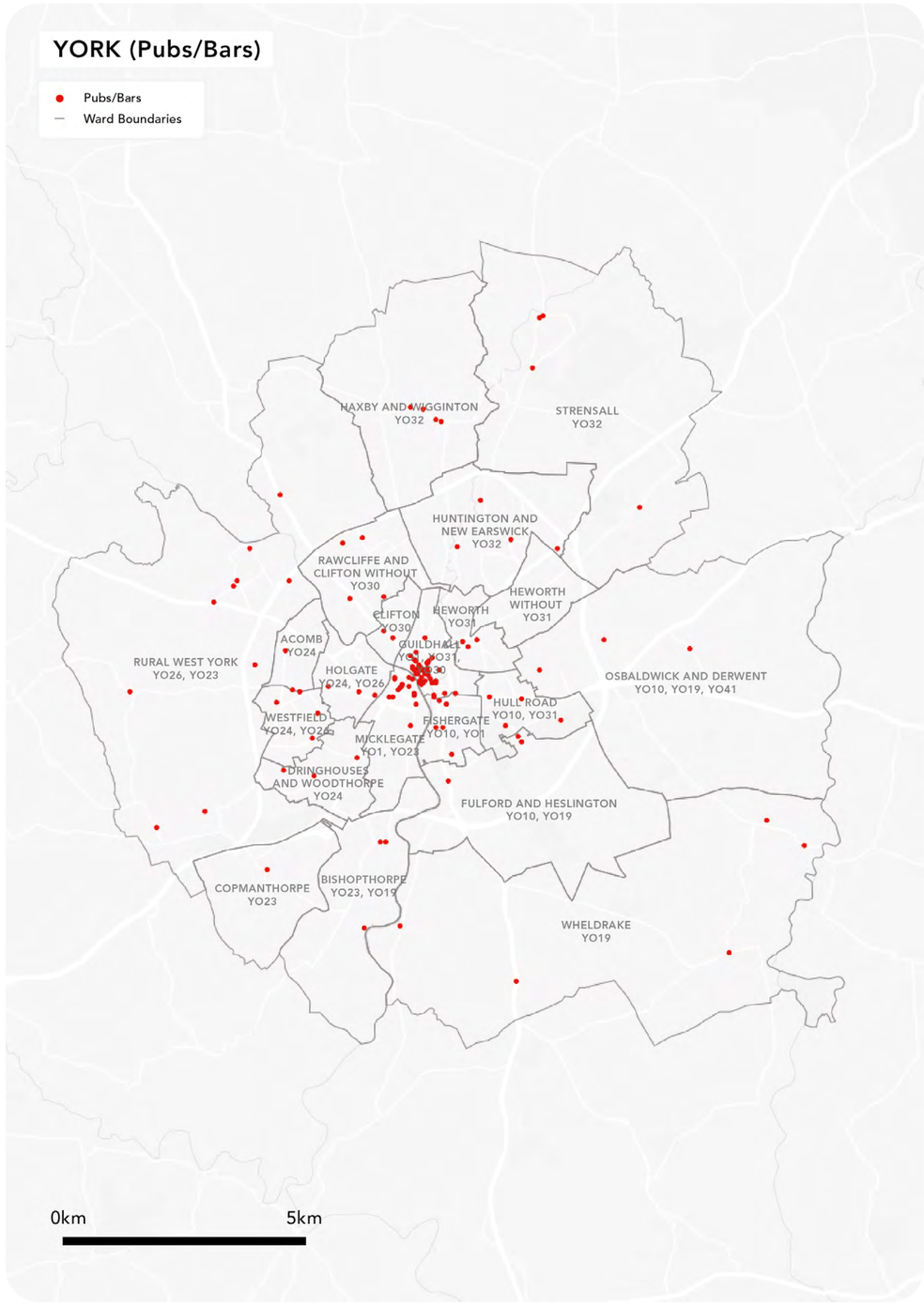
6 Thatcher, 'ANALYSIS: More than 16,000 Pubs Lost since 2000'.

7 Foster and Ferguson, *Home Drinking in the UK: Trends and Causes*.

8 Lane, *From Taverns to Gastropubs: Food, Drink, and Sociality in England*; Ferreira, 'Café Nation? Exploring the Growth of the UK Café Industry',.

9 Wells, 'A Guide to York in Five Heritage Pubs for Historical Interior Enthusiasts'; Booth, 'Does York Have 365 Pubs? True Number for 2024 Revealed'.

Figure 10.1: York Pub Map (all wards)



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(instagram: @samj.armstrong, Linkedin: https://www.linkedin.com/in/sam-armstrong-412b621b8/)

The most popular pub activities were drinking

96.2%

and chatting/socialising

94.3%

Heworth Green, and Fulford Road), and widespread working-class districts. Over the last 125 years, York has expanded significantly, notably in wards like Dringhouses and Woodthorpe, Westfield, Rawcliffe and Clifton Without, Huntington and New Earswick, and outlying villages. In 2025, York was the least deprived area in Yorkshire, though its most deprived areas remained Westfield, Clifton, Heworth, and Guildhall (Business Intelligence Hub, 2025). Guildhall still contains the most pubs within York, as part of a cluster of venues within the city walls (also contained within the Micklegate ward) (See Figure A.2). Clifton, which existed at a smaller scale in 1901, has fewer pubs than in 1901, while Westfield and Heworth, which have been areas developed in the last 125 years have relatively few pubs, but a comparable number to other wards in the city. Pub dispersion appears to be determined more by proximity to the city centre rather than by the sociodemographics of any particular ward (these can be seen in detail in Figure A.3).

In 1901, Seebohm Rowntree concluded that 'it is certain that at the present time the number [of pubs] is enormously in excess of those required to meet any reasonable demands of the neighbourhood' (pp. 309). This reflects late 19th and early 20th-century views of public houses as havens of crime, drunkenness, and temptation,[10] alongside a strong temperance movement advocating for their reduction.[11] Conversely, in 2026, there is considerable concern about the rapid loss of pubs nationwide. With comparable infrastructure declining, many pubs serve as vital community hubs which host local clubs, act as warm spaces in winter, and provide essential informal support systems for social aggregation[12] so it is welcoming that these are still available across all York wards.

The use of public houses for social purposes

The 1901 report highlights the important role pubs played in the social lives of York residents. The original report listed various observed activities, including smoking, chatting, drinking, playing games (darts, dominoes, billiards), society meetings, listening to music, singing, shouting, raffles, gambling, and prostitution. In 1901, the noise of singing and shouting inside pubs was described as 'almost deafening,' with a 'good deal of noisy quarrelling.' Pubs were lively, with a few forcible ejections due to drunkenness, though suggested occasional rows were not directly observed.

Our survey allowed us to explore what consumers do when visiting pubs in 2026. The most popular pub activities were drinking (96.2%) and chatting/socialising (94,3%) suggesting on the surface that there is little difference between pub visits in 1901 and 2026 with sociability being key. As in 1901 respondents also noted that in the pub patrons would play games (29.7%), listen to music (background/live) (36.1%/39.9%), attend meetings (21.7%) and take part in raffles and charity events (6.8%/9.9%). While smoking (6.5%),[13] singing (4.6%) and gambling (2.3%) still appear to take place; these activities were only reported by

10 Cestr, 'Public-House in Public Hands'.

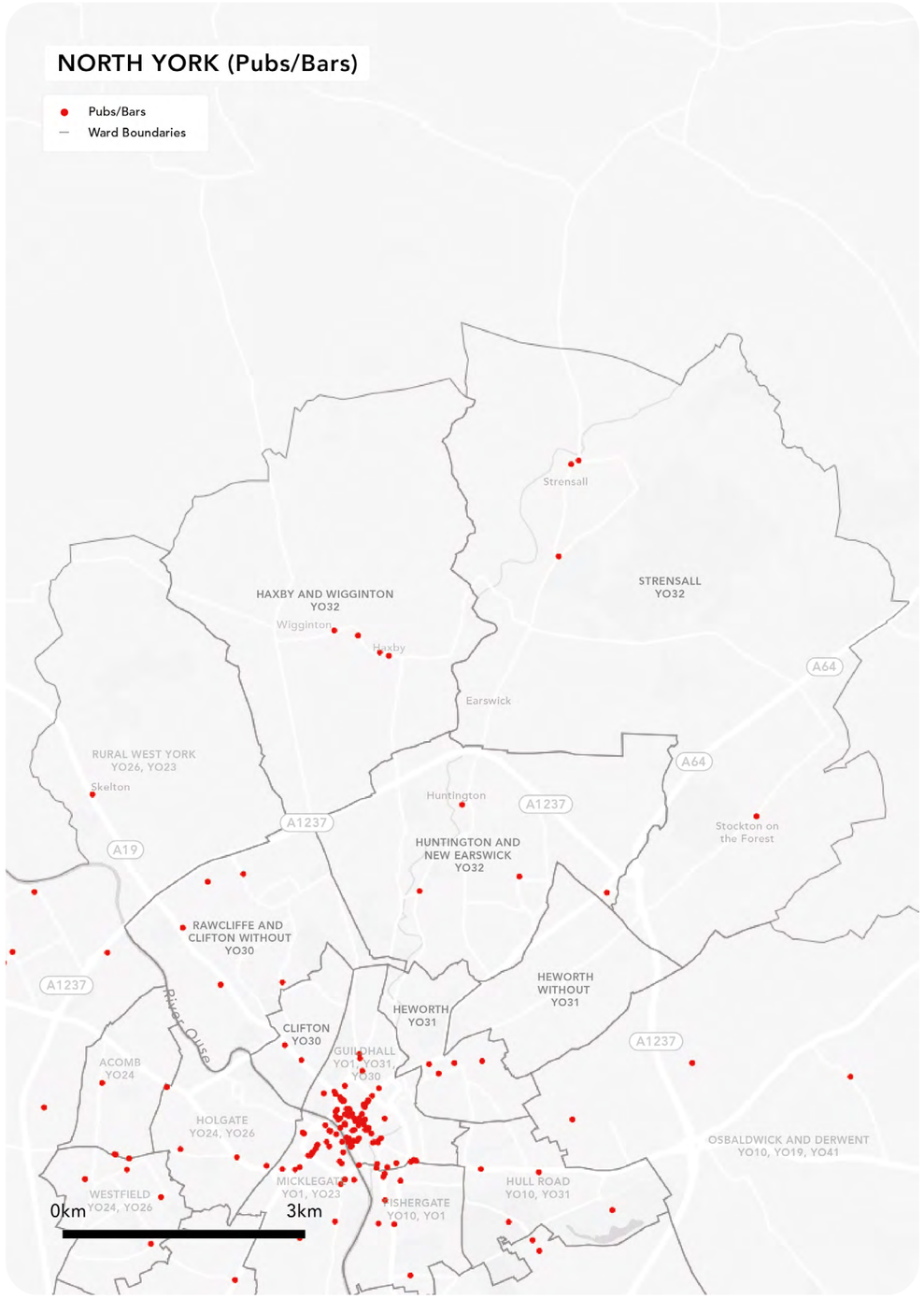
11 Leppington, 'The Latest Lights on the Temperance Question'; Devas, 'The Moral Aspect of Consumption'.

12 Mount and Cabras, 'Community Cohesion and Village Pubs in Northern England: An Econometric Study'; Thurnell-Read and Deakin, 'Consolation, Community, National Identity: What Is Lost When Pubs Close – and How They Can Be Saved'; Weller, 'Study Shows the Human Cost of Pub Closures'.

13 UK smoking levels have dropped significantly due to strong public health messaging, with only 10.6% of the population smoking today (Office for National Statistics, *Adult Smoking Habits in the UK: 2024).* compared to 1940s rates of 82% for men and 45% for women (Ash (Action on Smoking and Health), *Smoking Statistics).* Additionally, a 2007 ban prohibited smoking inside public places, including pubs (Barbry et al., *https://Ash.Org.Uk/Uploads/Smoking-Statistics-Fact-Sheet.Pdf?V=1697728811).* While critics feared this would devastate the industry, broader factors like the economic outlook, high beer duty, and other taxes have arguably had equal or more impact (Triggle, 'Pub Smoking Ban: 10 Charts That Show the Impact').. Many venues adapted by providing covered outdoor smoking areas (Taylor, '"Smirting" in the Designated Area: The Smoking Shelter and the English Public House'). or shifting their focus toward food, families, and younger children (Triggle, 'Pub Smoking Ban: 10 Charts That Show the Impact').

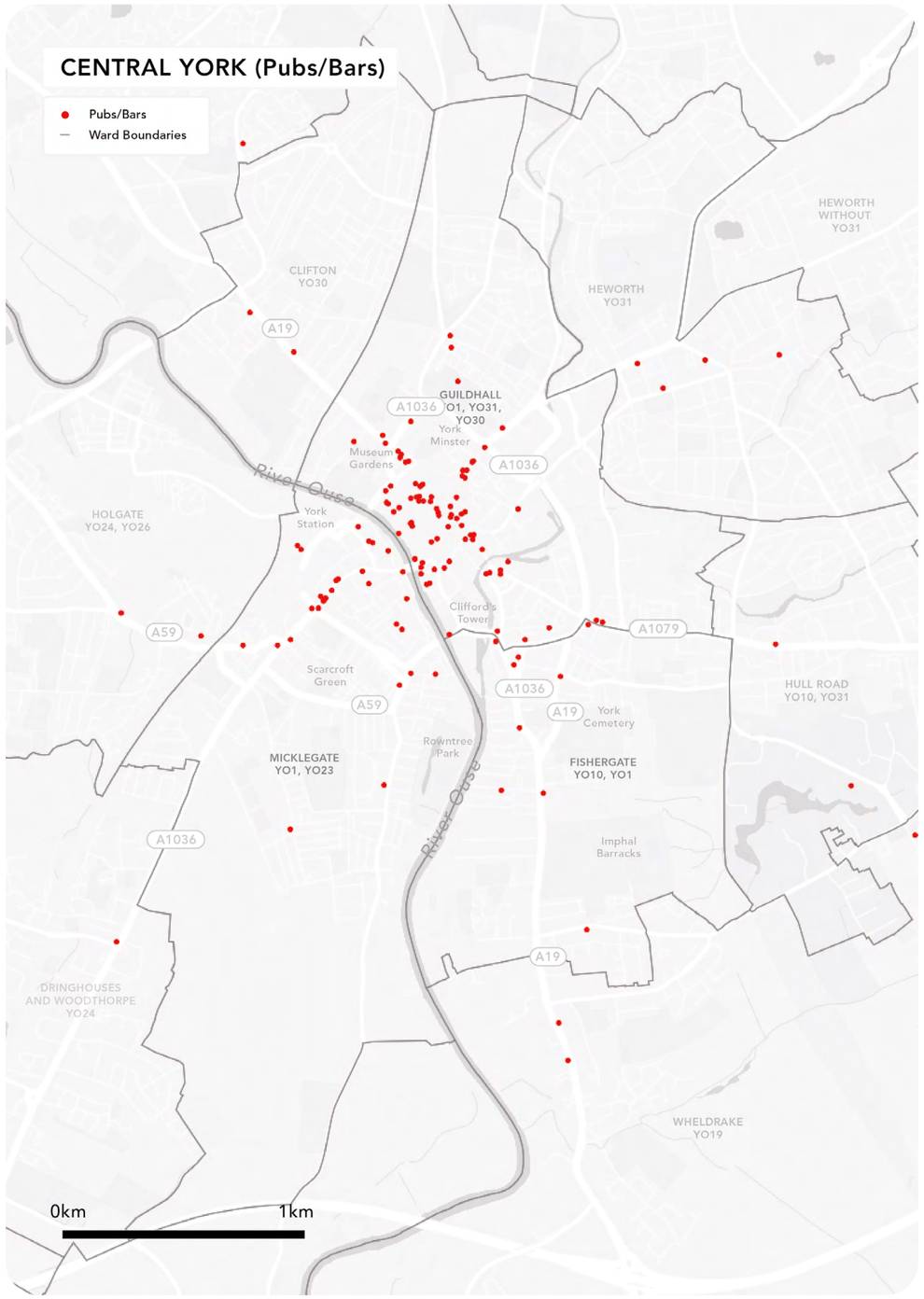
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Figure 10.2: York Pub Map (Central York)



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Figure 10.3: York Pub Map (Northern & Central York)



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a handful of people suggesting these activities have dropped significantly since 1901. We can also observe new activities which have developed becoming part of pub culture such as watching sports on TV (36.1%), taking part in group activities (3-4% depending on activity (e.g. reading groups, knit and natter etc), attending a pub quiz (42.6%), reading (24.7%) (which would have been almost impossible due to the noise in 1901), eating (55.1%) and working or studying remotely (9.5%).

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

Gentrification of our pubs now.

Our survey suggests that drunkenness is something that is still observed in pubs, with respondents saying that they had observed drunkenness in a pub in the last week (16.8%), month (18.7%) or 6 months (23.3%). However, unlike 1901, a significant proportion note that they have either never seen drunkenness in a pub or have not seen it in the past year (25.5%). In terms of arguments, quarrels or fights a relatively small number of respondents said they had observed this in the last 6 months (24.4%) with a significant proportion (13%) saying they had never or only over a year ago (51.5%) experienced this. While not conclusive it does suggest that with less singing, less drunkenness and fewer arguments and quarrels that contemporary pubs can be calmer places than those in 1901.

In 1901 Seebohm Rowntree concluded that 'York is a beer drinking town' and in 2026 when visiting the pub, the two most popular drinks in 2026 were beer (cask) (66.4%) and beer (keg) (45.8%). Other alcoholic drinks are also popular with respondents noting drinking cider (24%), wine (32.1%) and spirits (25.2%). Additionally soft drinks (28.6%), hot drinks (11.8%) and very different from 1901, no and low alcohol (NoLo) drinks are also drunk widely (26.7%).

LIVED EXPERIENCE COMMENTARY

Same price as alcoholic drinks.

We have seen reduced drinking levels and over the last 10 years a significant increase in the purchase of NoLos and moderation (drinking less) trends.[14] Within the survey 46.7% of respondents said they were moderating their drinking, while 47.5% reported that they were not suggesting a dichotomy between moderating and non-moderating pub visitors.

Amount and character of trade done in public houses

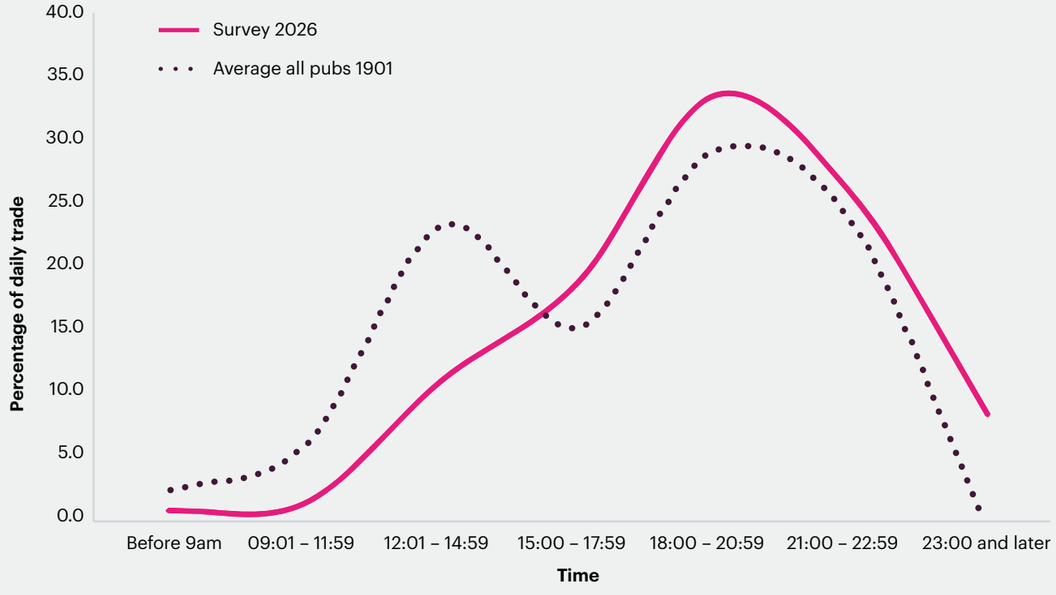
Three questions were asked in the original chapter: (1) What is the extent of trade done i.e. the number of persons entering the public houses daily?; (2) What proportion of these persons are men, what proportion are women, and to what extent are children employed to fetch liquor?; and (3) At what hours of the day are public-houses chiefly visited? Here, using our survey data, we examine these questions from a contemporary perspective.

In 1901, Seebohm Rowntree's team determined trade levels by counting daily entries at a small selection of pubs. We asked survey respondents how often they visited York pubs on average. Most pub goers visited the pub at least once a week (48.7%), 19.9% visited every two weeks and 31.4% visited once a month or less suggesting a split between those who visit often and those who visit less regularly. The 1901 team also recorded how long individuals spent in the pub. In 1901 between 30-40% of men and as much as 70-98% of women stayed in the pub for 15 minutes or less. In 2026 pub visitors suggested that the majority visited pubs for between 1-2 hours (43.7%) and 2-3 hours (38.4%), a much greater length of time than in 1901. Only small numbers visited pubs for less than an hour (9.9%) or more than three hours. No respondents visited a pub for less than 30 minutes. That people stay for longer periods may reflect that pubs are more important for extended socialising than in 1901.

Answering their second question, the 1901 team

14 Nicholls, '"More than Just a Vehicle for Getting Drunk": Class, (Serious) Leisure and the Discerning "No and Low" Craft Beer Drinker'; Waehning and Wells, 'Product, Individual and Environmental Factors Impacting the Consumption of No and Low Alcoholic Drinks: A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda'.

Figure 10.4: Pub visiting during the day (1901 v 2026)



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recorded the gender split of pub visitors and the number of children fetching liquor. A clear modern difference is that children no longer fetch liquor (becoming illegal for under-14s in 1908[15] and for under-18s in 1923). In 1901 men accounted for 59%-88% of adult trade depending on the pub. The original chapter notes that for one pub (where men made up 82%-88% of visitors), '… this does not adequately represent the proportion of the drinking that is done by men, for…there is a considerable jug trade done here; of the 200 women who entered on the three days not less than 94 carried away beer in jugs'. Jug trade (takeaways from pubs) is relatively rare these days with only 10.3% of respondents reporting this behaviour. In 2026 58.8% of visitors were men, 38.5% were women and 2.7% were non-binary/other/did not report. While we know that children are no longer lone visitors to pubs only 9.9% of respondents stated they visited pubs with family including children. Respondents were much more likely to visit pubs with friends (77.9%), a partner/spouse (61.5%), adult family (25.2%), colleagues (27.1%) or on their own (28.2%). In 1901 treating (buying rounds) was a consideration and the team took observations of whether people were arriving alone and in groups. They noted that the majority of visitors entered the pub singly rather than in couples or in larger groups suggesting a more social approach in 2026, although this does not take into account that in 1901 those arriving singly may have been meeting with friends.

The final consideration for the team in 1901 was at what hours of the day public houses are visited. We first examined on which days of the week respondents visited the pub. The three most popular days of the week were over the weekend (Friday 74%, Saturday 69%, Sunday 42.2%). Numbers of visitors were lowest on Mondays (20.9%) with steady growth through the week to the weekend. In 1901 some pubs opened two times a day, generally for lunch (approximately 12:00-14:00/15:00) and from approximately 18:00 (see Figure A.4) while others opened all day. Since the introduction of the 2003 Licensing Act there have been no statutory opening hours for licensed premises and venues can apply for flexible opening hours up to 24 hours a day.[16] In 2026 the most popular time for visiting pubs is between 18:00-20:59 (86.2%), followed by 21:00-22:59 (66.3%) and 15:00-17:59 (48.3%). The least popular time for visiting pubs is before 09:00 (1.9%), 09:01-11:59 (3.4%) and after 23:00 (21.5%). Pubs attract 28.4% of visitors over the lunch period (12:00-14:59). Comparing this pattern with 1901 (see Figure A.4) shows that in percentage terms there were more visitors earlier in the day in 1901 and more visitors later in the day in 2026.

In 2026 the most popular time for visiting pubs is between 18:00-20:59

86.2%

followed by 21:00-22:59

66.3%

and 15:00-17:59

48.3%

An additional reflection we were able to collect data on is based on the assumption that in 1901 the pub was visited by those local to the area, although this isn't stated explicitly. In our survey 30.8% of York pub visitors lived in York city centres, 45.6% in York suburbs and 16% in York outer villages. Additionally, 7.6% also stated 'other' suggesting that some regular York pub visitors come from outside of York.

Conclusions

Over 125 years, York's pubs have transformed from male-dominated spaces under temperance scrutiny into inclusive, multi-demographic community hubs. While traditional venue numbers have declined, the industry has successfully adapted through the rise of gastropubs and a cultural shift toward home consumption.

Modern patrons often stay significantly longer, visiting in social groups rather than alone. Driven by policy changes and health awareness, the rowdy shouting and indoor smoking of 1901 have given way to dining, entertainment, and a rising moderation trend. Additionally in York, high levels of tourism[17] and a significant higher education sector[18] may have supported the survival and evolution of some of these venues. Ultimately, contemporary pubs have evolved into more peaceful, vital 'third spaces' where connection matters just as much as the alcohol.

It is also important to question our own findings. Methodologically, the reliance on QR codes for data collection may have introduced a social class and or age bias due to availability and use of smartphones and technology,[19] potentially influencing survey uptake. Additionally, while the rising cost of living has increasingly positioned a pint of alcohol as a luxury expense,[20] the level and type of pub usage observed here might reflect the more affluent demographic within the city. Consequently, these findings offer a valuable snapshot, but they should potentially not be viewed as representative of pub-visiting behaviours in other cities, across all sociodemographic groups, or rural communities.

15 Moss, '"A Grave Question": The Children Act and Public House Regulation, *c*.908-1939'.

16 The earliest opening hours of any pub in York at the time of writing was 08:00 with hours of closing varying by pub and day of the week.

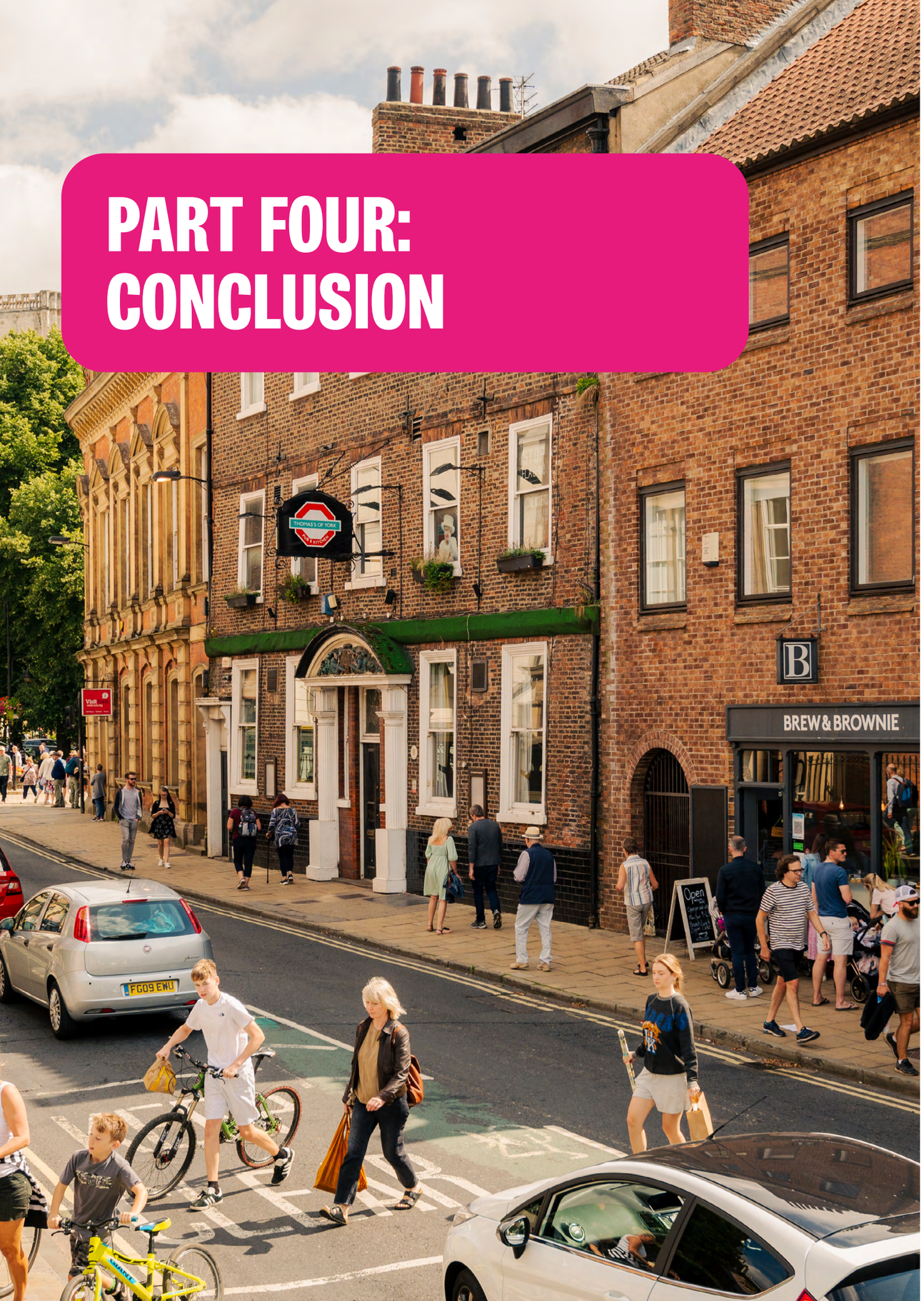
17 Centre for Cities, *York Ranks Highest for Visitor Spending out of UK Towns and Cities, with Visitors Accounting for £1 in Every £3 Spent*.

18 Cannings et al., *The Economic Impact of the University of York's Activities*.

19 Tsetsi and Rains, 'Smartphone Internet Access and Use: Extending the Digital Divide and Usage Gap'.

20 Walker, 'Pint at Local Now "Luxury" after Post-Pandemic Price Increases'.

PART FOUR: CONCLUSION



11. CONCLUSIONS

Kit Colliver and Neil Lunt

The city of York has changed in many ways since Seebohm Rowntree's 1901 report but, as the community researchers observed, some markers of poverty recorded 125 years ago endure today. As Rowntree's work demonstrated, the causes of poverty are structural: unaffordable housing, insecure and low paid employment, stigmatising and inaccessible support services are all parts of the 'web of struggle' facing low-income residents of York. These challenges are interconnected and require holistic responses, requiring strategic effort from actors across the system, from macro-level national policy change to micro-level investments and reforms in local services.

The chapters of this report represent distinct research projects that speak to current conditions in the city. Despite their separate origins, the recommendations arising from these studies cluster around a series of clear themes: the importance of investment in local infrastructure and services, opportunities to remove barriers to and improve targeting of existing support, the necessity of cross-sector and multi-tier collaboration to make the most of local and regional resources and advance shared agendas. Across all of these, repeated calls for co-design make it clear that anti-poverty efforts in York cannot succeed in the absence of meaningful work alongside people with lived experience of poverty who hold place-based, situated knowledge about what works, what does not and why.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Remove the barriers to existing support**
2. **Invest in local infrastructure and services**
3. **Work to a shared agenda across all sectors and tiers of government**
4. **Co-design policy and practice with the people they should serve**

All recommendations

Poverty in contemporary York

1. **Long-term targeted support**: Local government should continue its data-driven approach to developing and monitoring York's local anti-poverty strategy, making use of RAPID and LIFT together with other data sources to target support and evaluate the efficacy of anti-poverty initiatives over the longer term.
2. **Collaboration and co-design**: Local government should work closely with the city's Voluntary, Charity, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector and those with lived experience of poverty in the development and roll-out of anti-poverty initiatives, including activity arising from the new Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF).
3. **Coordinating to tackle child poverty**: Local and regional government should explore new ways of working with each other and national government as part of the UK-wide Child Poverty Strategy.

The role of school food in addressing child poverty

4. **Review funding models**: School food (and wider associate activities) must be adequately funded the free school meal daily allowance must be enough for young people to buy nutritious, filling meals.
5. **Strengthen monitoring and accountability for School Food Standards**: The Department for Education (DfE) should embed School Food Standards (SFS) compliance checks directly into statutory Ofsted inspections. This creates a robust enforcement mechanism with clear consequences for non-compliance, directly addressing the current issue where school food is deprioritised by school leaders over other formally monitored, curriculum-based commitments.
6. **Auto-enrolment for free school meals**: Introduce national auto-enrolment to improve free school meal uptake and support children living in deprivation, without application barriers (stigma, shame, language/literacy).
7. **Roll out universal Primary School meals**: Implement UFSM for all primary school children (after successful York pilots) to eliminate financial stigma, alleviate household poverty, and improve school readiness and attendance.
8. **Meal co-design**: Update the nutrient content of foods through innovation in meal design. Involving children in this to increase acceptability and uptake.

Housing exclusion

9. **Focus policy on housing as a public asset**: National government must commit to prioritising housing as a public asset, moving away from prioritisation of owner occupation. Westminster must follow Scotland and Wales in ending the 'Right to Buy' social housing.
10. **Restore capacity for social housing construction**: National government should restore the capacity of local authorities to build new council housing to replace lost stock.
11. **Adequately resource local housing services to engage in strategic planning and enforcement of standards**: Local authorities require increased funding to conduct regular housing surveys and develop data-driven local housing plans.
12. **Expand and resource Housing First**: National and local government must embrace and fully resource the Housing First model to address long-term homelessness amongst people with complex needs. While the City of York has identified this as a strategic priority, finding suitable housing and funding to support the shift remains a major logistical challenge.

Fuel poverty in York

13. **Retain and utilise the 'Fuel Stress' measure of fuel poverty**: In the absence of changes to the Low Income Low Energy Efficiency (LILEE) measure of fuel poverty, which is not sensitive to price increases and excludes about 40% of households, national government should retain the 'Fuel Stress' measure (spending more than 10% of income on energy) to capture the impact of fluctuating energy prices on households across all income levels.
14. **Use diverse indicators for local assessment**: Local authorities should not take official statistics at face value as they can mask the true extent of fuel poverty. A range of indicators should be used to guide their assessment and responses.
15. **Increase support for frontline organisations:** National, regional and local governments should provide greater recognition and financial support to organisations that assist people with food poverty.
16. **Update eligibility criteria for support schemes**: Narrow criteria excluding working people on low income and those newly experiencing fuel poverty are failing to reflect rising needs.
17. **Encourage energy efficiency improvements in the private rented sector (PRS)**: Local government should consider incentive and enforcement schemes to promote energy efficiency improvements amongst PRS landlords and protect tenants from disproportionate rent increases.

Addressing poverty and inequality through Community Wealth Building

18. **Establish a York Community Wealth Building Partnership:** Key York anchors (e.g. Council, NHS Trusts, both Universities) should form a strategic partnership to develop and implement a coherent CWB plan, covering all pillars, that addresses the needs of local communities, particularly focusing on low-income residents.
19. **Embed social value in public contracts:** Anchor organisations should audit their procurement practices to ensure they prioritise social and community impacts (e.g. secure jobs, voice and influence, Real Living Wage in low-paid workers such as care, retail, and hospitality) rather than choosing only lowest price, and work together to identify opportunities for collaborative action on procuring for social value.
20. **Remove barriers to unlocking community assets and inclusive enterprises:** York authorities should provide integrated support and targeted interventions (e.g. business rate relief) for new and emerging cooperatives, social enterprises and community land uses. Reducing initial costs will expand opportunities for residents (particularly those from the most deprived neighbourhoods) to participate and benefit equitably.
21. **Scale up ethical credit and regional investment:** York anchors should expand partnerships with community credit unions (e.g. Community First Credit Union, Darlington Credit Union) and collaborate with each other and the YNYCA to develop alternative regional finance pathways that provide financial safety nets for inclusive enterprises and shield vulnerable families from high-cost debt.

Growing up in York: Young people's experiences and perceptions

22. **Adopt whole-system approaches** to youth policy that recognise the interconnected nature of housing, employment, education, mental health, and family support.
23. **Improve access** to affordable housing and secure employment to support young people's transitions to independent adulthood and enable them to remain within their local communities.
24. **Increase investment** in early mental health support, reducing waiting times and addressing inequalities in access to services.
25. **Expand youth-focused spaces**, activities, and participation opportunities, ensuring young people are actively involved in shaping local policy and service design.
26. **Develop place-sensitive policy responses** that recognise how inequalities differ across neighbourhoods and communities, including the experiences of marginalised and underrepresented groups.

Living with poverty in York today

27. **Reform institutional practices to reduce stigma**: All government agencies and service providers should adopt York Poverty Truth Commission's Organisational Charter and implement training and policy changes to eliminate institutional hostility towards people experiencing poverty.
28. **Invest in community hubs and support services:** Local hub and frontline services need reliable sources of funding to maintain community spaces as stable sites of connection and belonging.
29. **Address the structural causes of in-work poverty:** Government must create greater financial security for York's residents by controlling the city's hyperinflated housing market and regulating the insecure low-wage visitor economy.
30. **Restore essential state infrastructure:** National government must invest deeply in restoring basic public services, enabling people to access support in their most vulnerable moments rather than being pushed deeper into precarity.
31. **Embed lived experience in policy design:** Local and regional government must involve people with lived experience of poverty in the design of support systems, drawing on their context-sensitive knowledge to ensure interventions will meet local need.

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