

Thames Estuary

GROWTH BOARD

Five Point Plan for Fair Growth and Investment

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Foreword

The Thames Estuary is the United Kingdom's number one growth opportunity. Located in the southeast of England on the country's most important and iconic waterway, it is an unparalleled place to invest and grow.

But – and it's a big 'but' – so much of the growth and investment we have seen over the last decades has not been driven fairly or delivered equitably and so has not, in the end, been fair. This means many people and communities have been left behind or, worse, explicitly excluded from economic activity and social engagement. Understandably, trust has been lost. Disparities have grown and become starker. And so much stuff just isn't fair or right or just.

The original focus of our work was 'Levelling Up', but levelling up never really cut it for us. We knew we needed to do things our way, using an approach that was right and proper from the outset – an approach that consistently and truthfully determined what we do and how we do it rather than just being a reflective post-investment assessment of 'How did that go for poor people?'

So, we have undertaken the most detailed assessment of socioeconomic inequality in the Thames Estuary region ever carried out. It is built on robust quantitative data and qualitative interviews. It gets to the heart of not only trends and statistics but also how it feels to live a life where you are disconnected and do not have the fair and equitable access to goods, services, and opportunities that you should.

This data and insight will underpin our work, but the information also has wider implications nationally and internationally. We are a global region – and fairness and inequity often have their roots in global systems. We will learn from our international partners and share our work to help them grow fairly and equitably too. We will work together to more clearly understand the root causes of economic unfairness and inequity and to make sure we all tackle these causes head-on.

The Five Point Plan we have set out here for the Thames Estuary will only be successful if we are joined by others. Enabling a fairer, more equitable approach to investment and growth at a regional level will be hard, and it will take time. However, we have high expectations of our partners, and we know they will respond to this agenda. Many already are. And as we have said, this work doesn't stop at our borders. It has national and global reach – and rightly so.



Five minute summary

The Thames Estuary is an internationally significant growth opportunity. In the last decade, jobs in our region have increased by 24% and business by 62%.

We have headroom for investment and a plan to drive this: The Green Blue Action Plan. We will be a bellwether for the United Kingdom (UK) as we seek to achieve our collective economic growth missions.

The Thames Estuary exhibits a unique set of socioeconomic challenges, combining rapid change and investment, a particularly high cost of living, and acute post-industrial decline in many places. The complexity and depth of some of these issues mean that the Levelling Up approach never really worked for the Thames Estuary, which is why we are focusing on fairness and equity.

A Working Definition of Fairness

Fairness – and what is classed as fair – is complicated and emotive. To inform our debate and planning, we have used the following principles of fairness set out by the Fairness Foundation to guide our research and create a new approach:

- **Fair essentials.** Everyone has their basic needs met so that no one lives in poverty, and everyone can use their own unique skills and knowledge to help their community and local economy.
- **Fair opportunities.** Everyone has the same substantive opportunities to realise their potential, and barriers that stop people from having equal access and opportunity are removed.
- **Fair rewards.** Everyone is rewarded in proportion to their contribution, effort, and talents.
- **Fair exchange.** Everyone contributes to society as far as they can and is supported by society when they need it.
- **Fair treatment.** Everyone is respected and listened to equally and treated equitably in terms of due process, respect, social status, political influence, and public services.

Treating everyone exactly the same is equality. But this doesn't always work. People have varying needs and face different challenges for many reasons – including how they sound or look, where they are from, how much they have, what they have access to, and what they face – because they start from different places in life.

Equity means giving people what they actually need to have a fair chance. It's like recognising that a tall person and a short person might need different size ladders to reach the same height.

To be truly fair, we need to use equity. This means looking at what each person or group needs and removing the things that hold them back. It's not about giving everyone the same thing but about giving everyone what they need to succeed.

Fairness through equity understands that people face different challenges and circumstances. So, to create real equality, we sometimes need to do different things for different people. This recognises that differences exist and that we can work with the varying layers of challenges and realities people live in every day, helping us work together to reduce barriers and create a fairer, more equitable society.

From now on, when we say 'fairness', we mean consideration for equity and the removal of barriers to create equality.

New Research and Reflection

With these principles at its heart, we have undertaken one of the most thorough audits of fairness and inclusivity of any comparable organisation. We have spent three years using data and statistics to benchmark fairness and inequality in the sub-region.

We have gone into some of the poorest neighbourhoods along the Thames Estuary and spoken to residents on the sharp end to understand their lived experience of the different challenges they face.

Seven Barriers to a Fairer Estuary

The depth of the research undertaken to inform our plan has given us a deeper appreciation of the most significant things that need to change if we are to truly deliver fair growth and investment in the Thames Estuary. By blending quantitative and qualitative research, we obtain a clearer view of the nature of fairness and inequity and the ubiquitous barriers we need to remove to become a genuinely fair region.

We have identified seven barriers (listed below) which we think are the most significant contributors to lack of fairness in the Thames Estuary. Each requires new ways of working, and deeper collaboration if it is to be tackled.

1. Lack of appropriate, affordable housing
2. Lack of trust and community resilience
3. The changing nature of work
4. Mobility and access to good local transport
5. Historic racial injustice and disproportionality
6. Disengagement and lack of voice for future generations
7. Just and equitable transition and mitigating impacts of climate crisis

Our Five Point Strategy for Fair Growth and Investment

Our aspirations for fair growth and investment are significant and fundamental. By focusing on fairness, we are choosing to engage with several entrenched issues and challenges which have been forged over decades and, in some cases, centuries.

We need a long-term commitment, underpinned by new ways of working. Our Five Point Plan for Fair Growth and Investment is the founding principle for building a better approach.

Our strategy to enable fair growth in the Thames Estuary is built around five key areas of work, as follows:

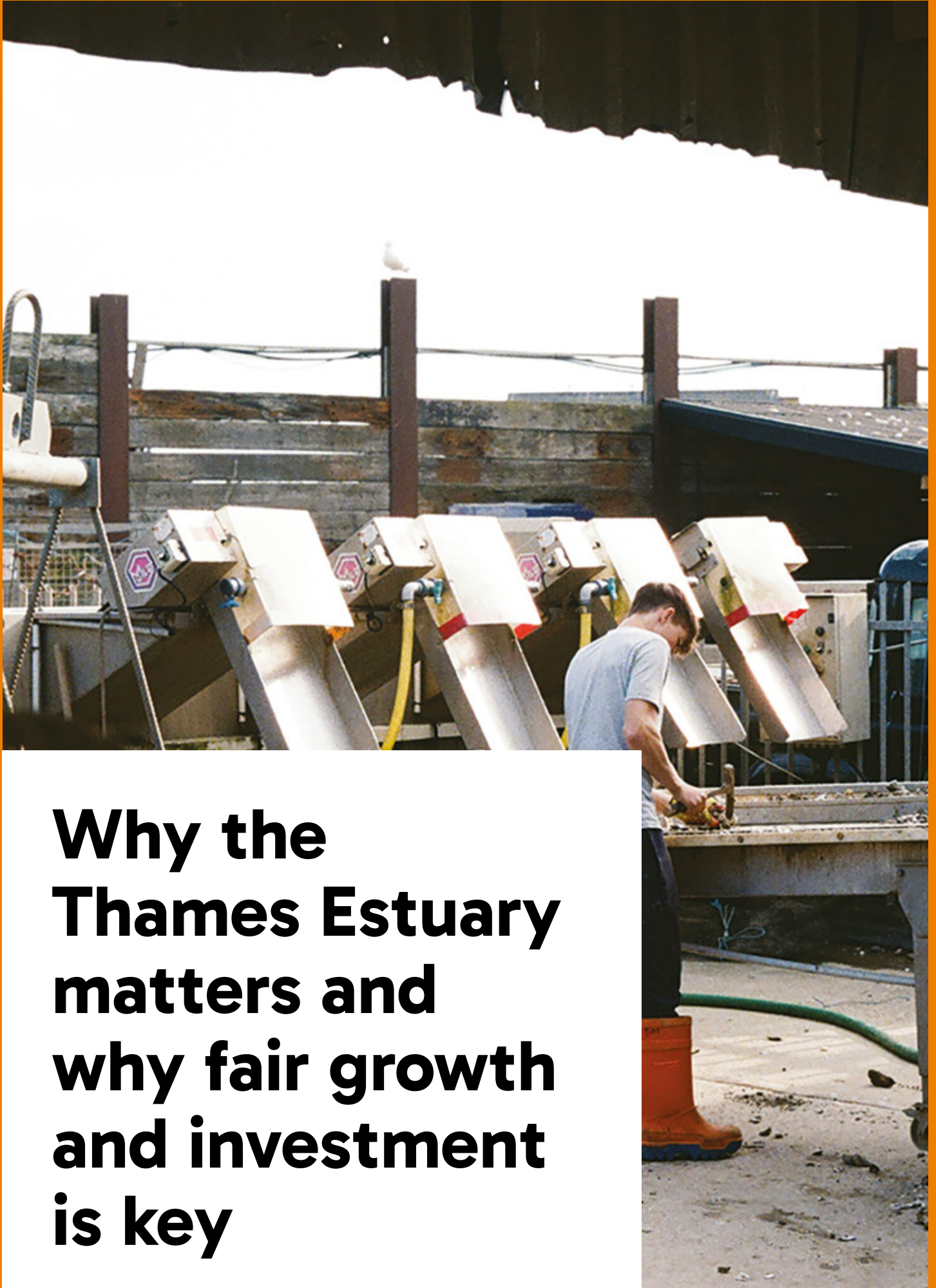
- **Better Evidence** – To deliver fairness, we need to better understand it and the different layers of challenges various people and communities face. We will commit to higher standards of evidence to support direct and impactful action. We need to update and extend the scope of the research, working with partners to do so.
- **Stronger Voice** – To address historic imbalance, we must create new levels of trust and enable a fairer future by giving Estuary residents a stronger voice and increasing the diversity of underrepresented voices. We need to understand the daily experience of those who are not subject to a fair economy and give local people a platform to participate in the future. We need more engagement, events, and connections to make this happen.
- **Fairness First** – We need fairness to be the primary consideration of partners and investors when they are making decisions in the Thames Estuary. We want to drive consistency in the assessment of fairness in the area.
- **Challenging Norms** – The current status quo is not working. We need to identify and remove barriers, work differently, and provoke new approaches, focusing specifically on racial disproportionality and intergenerational inequity. The Thames Estuary must be the national leader in new behaviours which support genuinely fair growth.
- **Empower Grassroots** – Grassroots and community-led organisations already take on the strain of tackling unfairness within our economy, and we need to learn from and empower them to do more while facing fewer barriers as we seek new approaches. We need to support the redistribution of more investment directly to these organisations.

We are committing to five first steps to embed these principles and generate momentum towards more collective ways of working regionally. This includes setting up a **new hub for evidence on fairness and equity**; developing new methods of funding and delivering **continuous resident feedback**; creating **new practices and support initiatives to make it easier for partners and investors to think about fairness first**; convening **global expert provocation** to bring forth new ways of working; and creating a **dedicated Community Champions network** to empower our excellent grassroots organisations to influence this process.

Commitment

Fairness is central tenet of how the the Thames Estuary Growth Board (the Growth Board) works. We will continue to ensure that fair growth investment is at the heart of everything we do.

We work regionally and collaboratively, and our agility and flexibility enable us to act in whatever way is necessary to deliver fair growth. To support the Growth Board, we seek long-term commitments from the national government, local authorities, investors, businesses, and community organisations. Working together, we will deliver tangible and meaningful results.



Why the Thames Estuary matters and why fair growth and investment is key

The Thames Estuary is the UK's number one growth opportunity. Located on the country's most important waterway, the Thames Estuary offers unique advantages to businesses due to its proximity to London, its excellent transport links, and the Thames itself. For hundreds of years, the river has been a primary channel for import and export, intersecting with new technology and forming a gateway to the world.

The Thames Estuary is also a sub-region with particular socioeconomic traits. It has experienced marked industrial decline alongside some of the most rapid demographic changes seen anywhere in the UK. It combines the high cost of living and expensive housing of London and the South East with the low pay and purchasing power of the North and Midlands. It has seen historic patterns of settlement which are chaotic and piecemeal – and which mean that wealth and poverty live side by side. New groups are arriving and creating a home while existing communities are feeling disconnected from their place and society.

Perhaps because of this concoction of factors, the area has tended to be ignored in the 'Levelling Up' debate, which has too often been focused on north and south and been too superficial in failing to recognise the nuance of a region like the Thames Estuary.

The contrasts and contradictions of the region also help to explain why it has historically been so politically significant. It retained its bellwether status at the 2024 general election, a place which offers the UK in microcosm, where we see a third of the population struggling on a daily basis, diminishing trust in institutions and fostering a general feeling that things are not fair.

Fairness is about more than economic opportunity – it is about choice, belonging, mobility, and hope. In convening our globally significant opportunity for growth and

investment, we must collectively do more to create a better society. We must learn from the past, better understand our communities, and strive to deliver a long-term approach to fairness and equity.

The Growth Board has set out its plan for delivering a new generation of investment and growth in The Green Blue¹. The plan aims to unlock the Thames Estuary's potential and make things happen for people living in the sub-region. Through our plan, we will maximise the benefits, potential, and opportunities not only of the River Thames but also of the lands, communities, places, and businesses that are bound to it.

The plan involves key sustainability developments, including using the river for freight and passenger transport and spearheading decarbonisation technologies. It will also improve and maintain the Thames Estuary's beautiful green spaces, making them accessible for everyone.

This Five Point Plan for Fair Growth and Investment complements The Green Blue, setting out how we will work to deliver differently to make our region not only the UK's most significant growth opportunity but also a trailblazer in delivering fairness and opportunity.

Within this document, you will find new primary and secondary evidence which sets out the current state of play, what we think are the key foundational elements that will underpin a fair region in the future, and the five ways we are going to work differently.

We have high expectations of not only ourselves but also our partners in central and local government, new and existing investors, and local community partners. This will be a collective effort that will not only make the Thames Estuary fairer, more equal, and more inclusive but will also set the tone for the UK as a whole.

¹ Action Plan: www.thamesestuary.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Thames-Estuary-Green-Blue-Action-Plan-Updated-Oct22.pdf

Delivery Plan: www.thamesestuary.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Green-Blue-Workplan-final-July-2021.pdf



**What do
we mean
by fairness?**



The previous government’s iteration of regional policy used the term ‘Levelling Up’. And the levelling up agenda’s structure and priorities – as outlined in the 2022 white paper – were aspirations which the Growth Board sought to work to under the previous administration.

In our view, however, the recommendations and definitions used for Levelling Up were insufficient when it came to providing the clarity needed for strategic decision-making. There was too little focus on economic fairness, the concept which is our primary focus.

‘Fairness’ is a difficult word to pin down and means different things to different people. If the Growth Board is to strive for fairness, then we need to define and measure it.

It is impossible to come up with a totally bullet-proof definition, of course; certain elements of fairness will always be intangible, or will otherwise be beyond the remit of an organisation like the Growth Board. So, we need a definition which is ambitious but also useful and realistic.

To this end, we have endorsed the principles of fairness set out by the Fairness Foundation² to guide our research and to create a new approach. These principles are as follows:

- **Fair essentials.** Everyone has their basic needs met so that no one lives in poverty, and everyone can use their own unique skills and knowledge to help their community and local economy.
- **Fair opportunities.** Everyone has the same substantive opportunities to realise their potential, and the barriers that stop people from having equal access and opportunity are removed.
- **Fair rewards.** Everyone is rewarded in proportion to their contribution, effort, and talents.
- **Fair exchange.** Everyone contributes to society as far as they can and is supported by society when they need it.
- **Fair treatment.** Everyone is respected and listened to equally and is treated equitably in terms of due process, respect, social status, political influence, and public services.

These guiding principles relate to elements over which the Growth Board's work carries influence – that is, the nature of business investment taking place and the availability, quality, and accessibility of the paid work resulting from this investment. The principles form the basic structure of sections in this report, which explores in detail the specific barriers to fairness in the Thames Estuary sub-region.

We are conscious that the Growth Board's focus is regional and, hence, that part of our fairness mission is to scale an approach to fair growth and investment at this geography.

We regard this as implicit within our remit as an organisation, the aim of which is to drive growth in the Thames Estuary so that it matches other areas in terms of productivity. However, this goal sits at a stage removed from the fairness agenda as described above, which concerns how the Growth Board will ensure that productivity is shared, that the growth we stimulate is inclusive, and that the opportunities which flow from this plan are spread equitably across different communities.

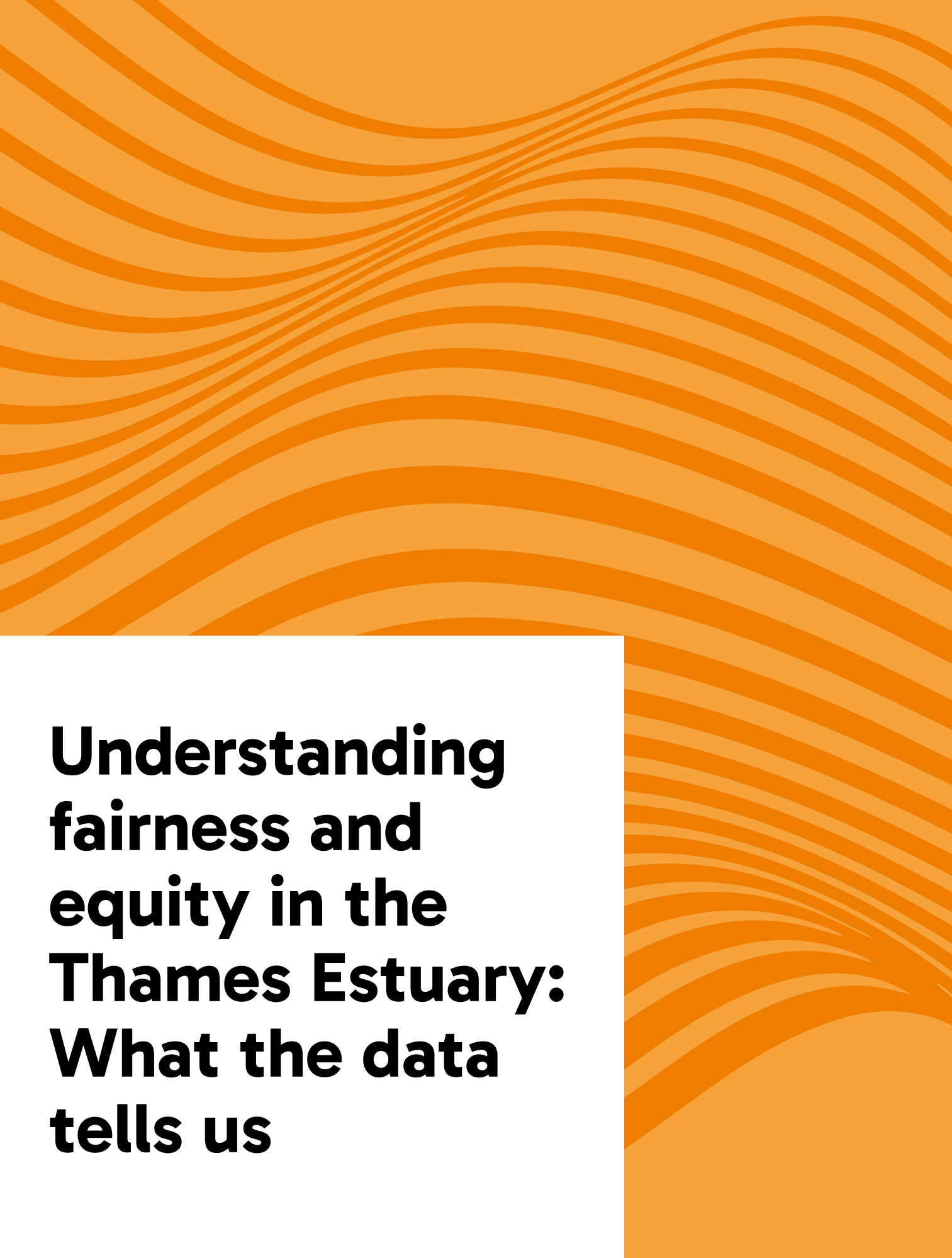
In addition, we recognise that to achieve these aims, we also need to address fundamentals in a way that acknowledges injustice and inequity both today and historically.

This can include being conscious of racial injustice, the barriers to voice for diverse young people, the uneven impacts of the climate crisis, the failing housing market, and the changing nature of work.

Responding to these issues requires a conscious and deliberate approach which recognises the fact that we require a deeper understanding that challenges established norms and systems. This is why we have started developing a significant new evidence base to understand the basis for economic fairness and equity in the Thames Estuary.

² www.fairnessfoundation.com/fairnecessities/summary



The background of the page is a dark blue-grey color. A large, vibrant orange graphic covers most of the page, consisting of numerous wavy, concentric lines that create a sense of movement and depth. These lines vary in thickness and curvature, some appearing as broad, shallow waves while others are more tightly packed and curved. The overall effect is reminiscent of water ripples or a stylized landscape.

Understanding fairness and equity in the Thames Estuary: What the data tells us

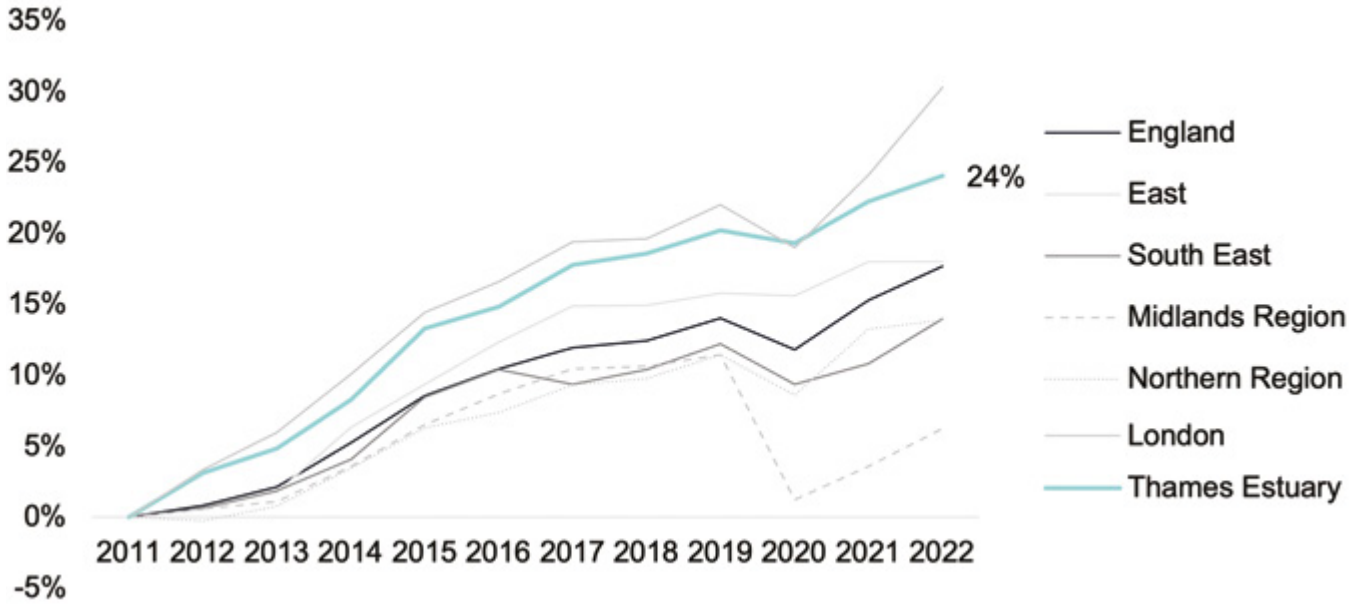
Underpinning our approach to fair growth and investment is good evidence.

We have embarked upon the largest regional study of fairness and equity ever undertaken in our area, using government data to measure how we are doing against the principles of the Fairness Foundation to develop a deeper understanding of the specific barriers at the regional level.

Economic Growth in the Thames Estuary: How is it going?

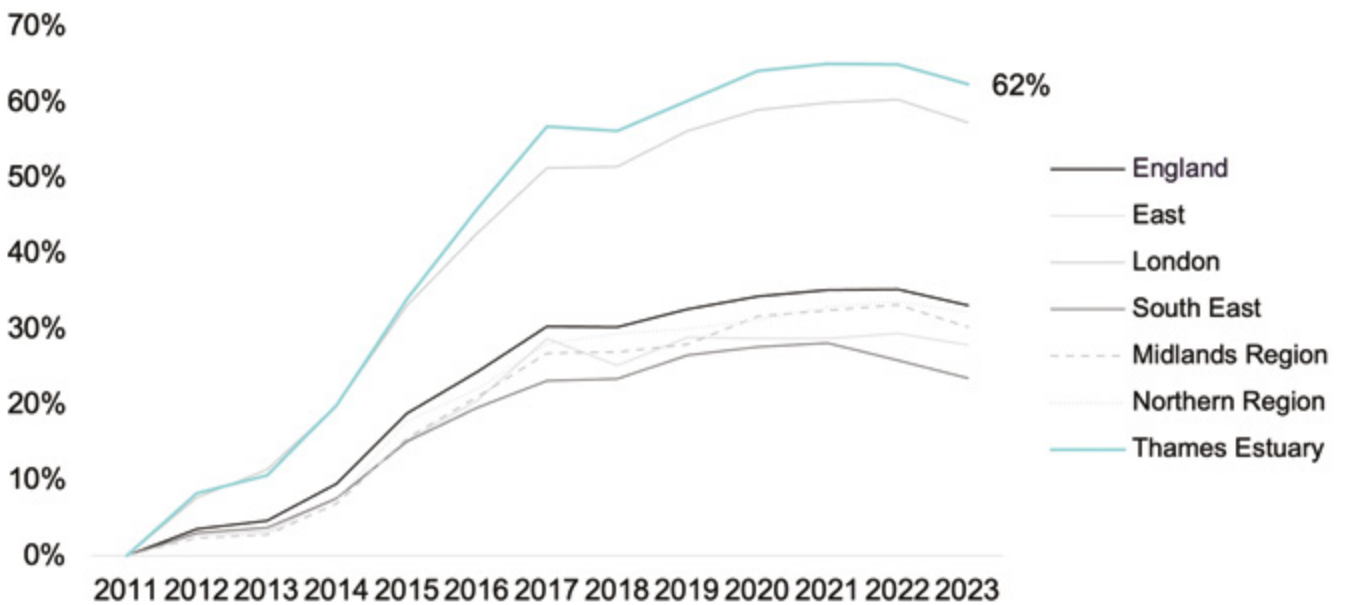
Against the traditional headline economic metrics, jobs, businesses, wages, and Gross Value Added (GVA), the Thames Estuary has 'Levelled Up' with the rest of the UK and now outperforms other regions in the country.

There has been a 22% increase in number of jobs between 2011-2021. ³



The number of businesses has grown at a significant rate, exceeding growth not only in the UK but also in London too.

Business numbers increased at the highest rate of all comparators between 2011 and 2022. ⁴



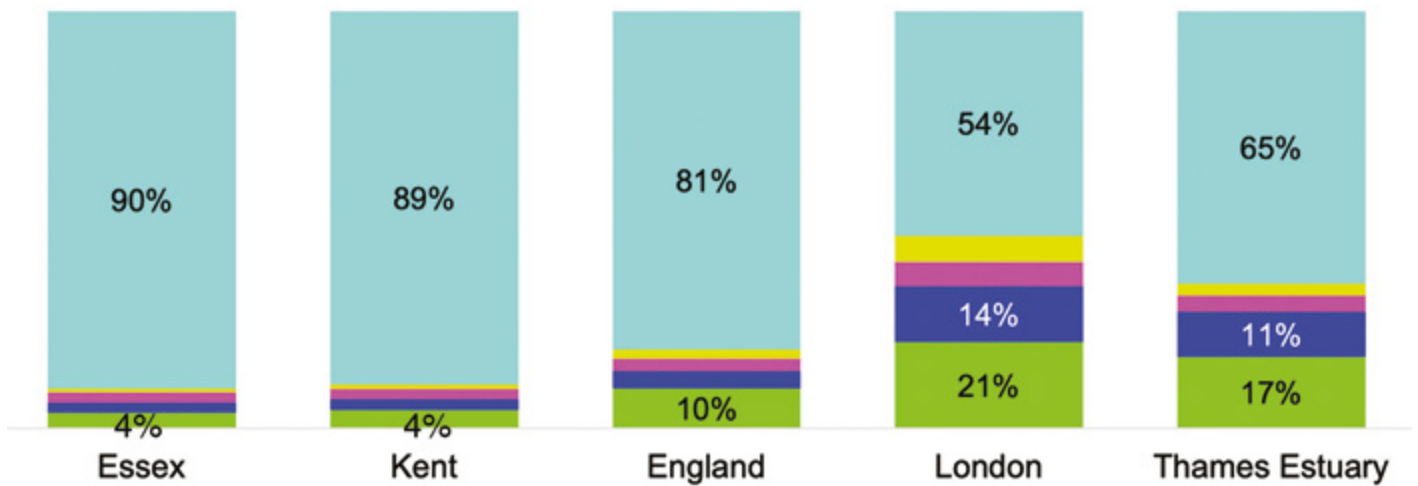
³ Business Register and Employment Survey, ONS

⁴ UK Business Counts, ONS

The population of the Thames Estuary has evolved significantly within the past 10 years, with high population growth making the population younger and more diverse than it used to be. Overall, residents are more qualified and have higher-level occupations now compared with 10 years ago. However, this change is being driven by the new residents moving into the area rather than an improvement in the economic prospects and mobility of the existing population.

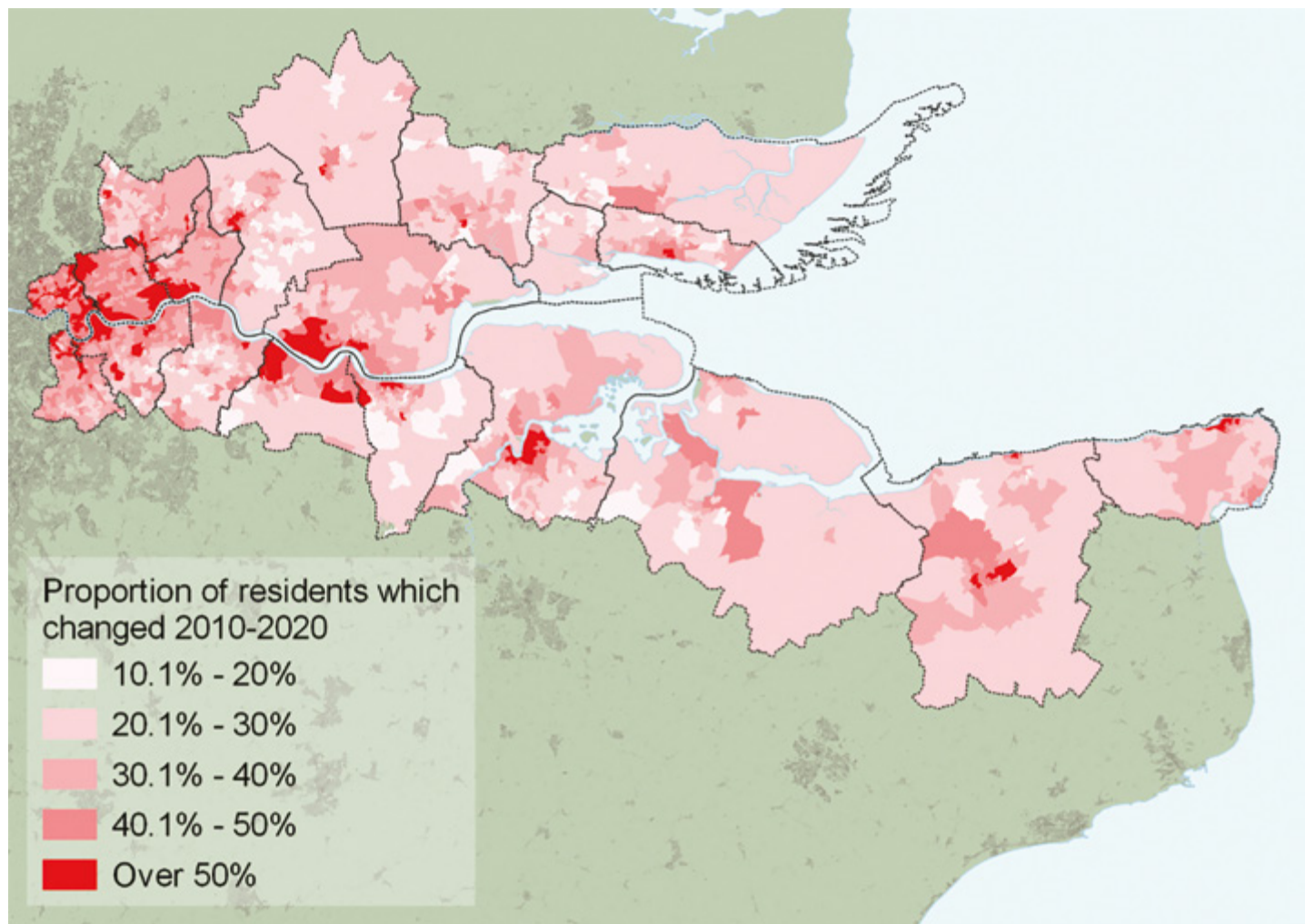
The proportion of residents by ethnic group in 2021 was as follows:

- Residents identifying as Bangladeshi or British Bangladeshi and Indian or British Indian formed a high proportion of Asian, Asian British, or Asian Welsh residents.
- Residents identifying as Nigerian and Caribbean represented a high proportion of those from Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean, or African backgrounds.
- Other ethnic groups comprised residents of Arab and Middle Eastern origin, Sikhs, Hispanics or Latin Americans, Kurdish residents, and residents from the rest of the world.



- White
- Another ethnic group
- Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups
- Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African
- Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh

Population churn (i.e. the number of homes in which the residents changed) between 2010 and 2020; in some cases, this was over half of the population.⁵



Ostensibly, these are measures of positive change. However, we know that this does not necessarily reflect the daily experience with economy that most Thames Estuary residents experience. Based on our previous Levelling Up Atlas, we are also aware that the benefits of the last decade of growth in the Thames Estuary are not shared and that some of our communities live in the most severe poverty in the UK.

We need to understand the daily experience of economy of Thames Estuary residents. This includes determining where they can access good opportunities, their earnings, their access to services and well-being, and their perceptions of prosperity. Here is where we start to see the difference between inclusive growth and fair (equitable) growth.

⁵ Residential Mobility Index (Churn), CDRC

Using statistics to understand fairness

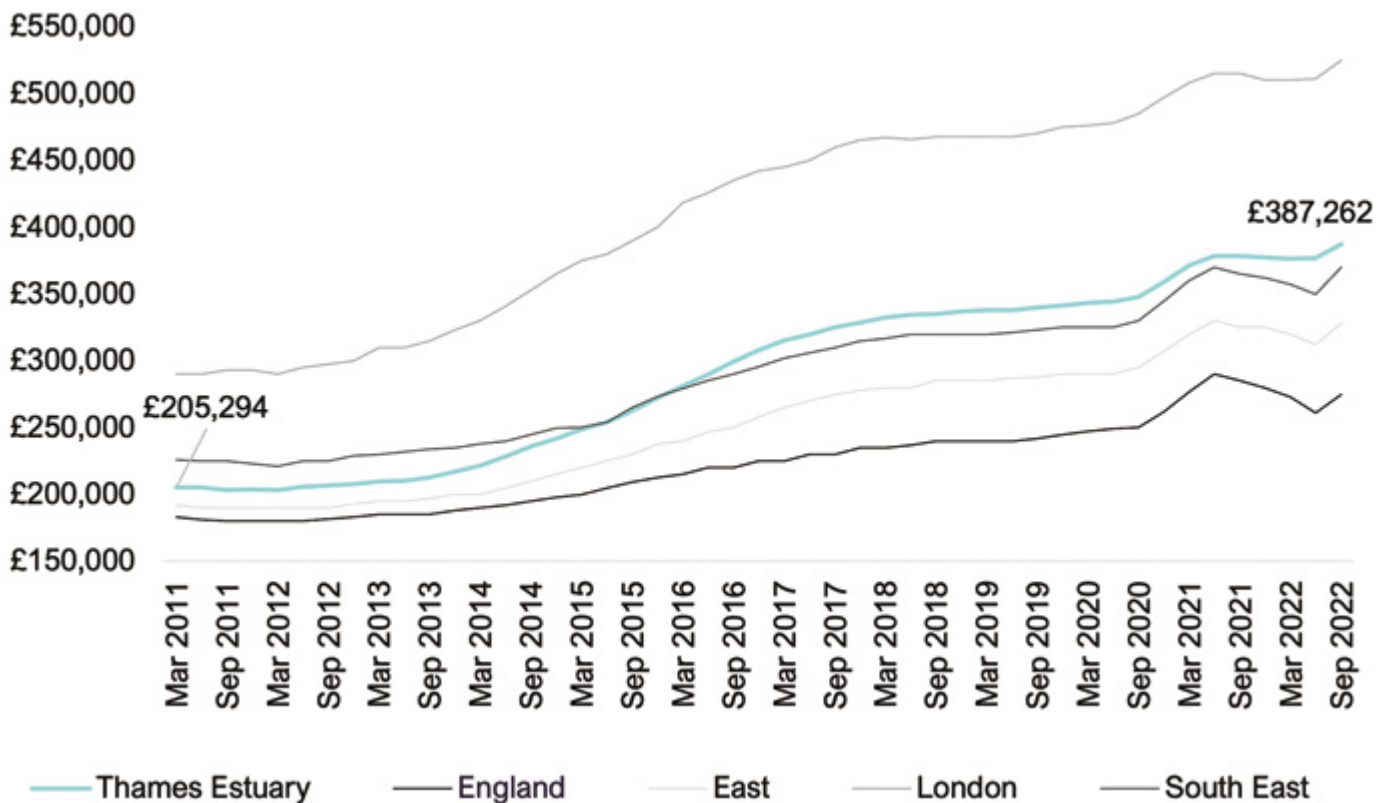
Employing the principles set out by the Fairness Foundation, we have used data to uncover the story and geography of fairness in the Thames Estuary.

1. Fair Essentials: Everyone has their basic needs met so that no one lives in poverty, and everyone can use their own unique skills and knowledge to help their community

There are both financial and physical barriers to residents being able to meet their basic needs, and there are communities within the Thames Estuary experiencing deep poverty.

The rising cost of living in the Thames Estuary has been driven by very high housing costs. The region has experienced the highest house price growth of all comparator areas (89%), and prices within the Thames Estuary are now higher than those within the South East. This increase has far outstripped resident earnings, and housing is now out of reach for most residents, with median prices now 10.6 times local earnings.

House prices within the Thames Estuary have increased faster than those of any comparator areas and are now the second highest after London.⁶



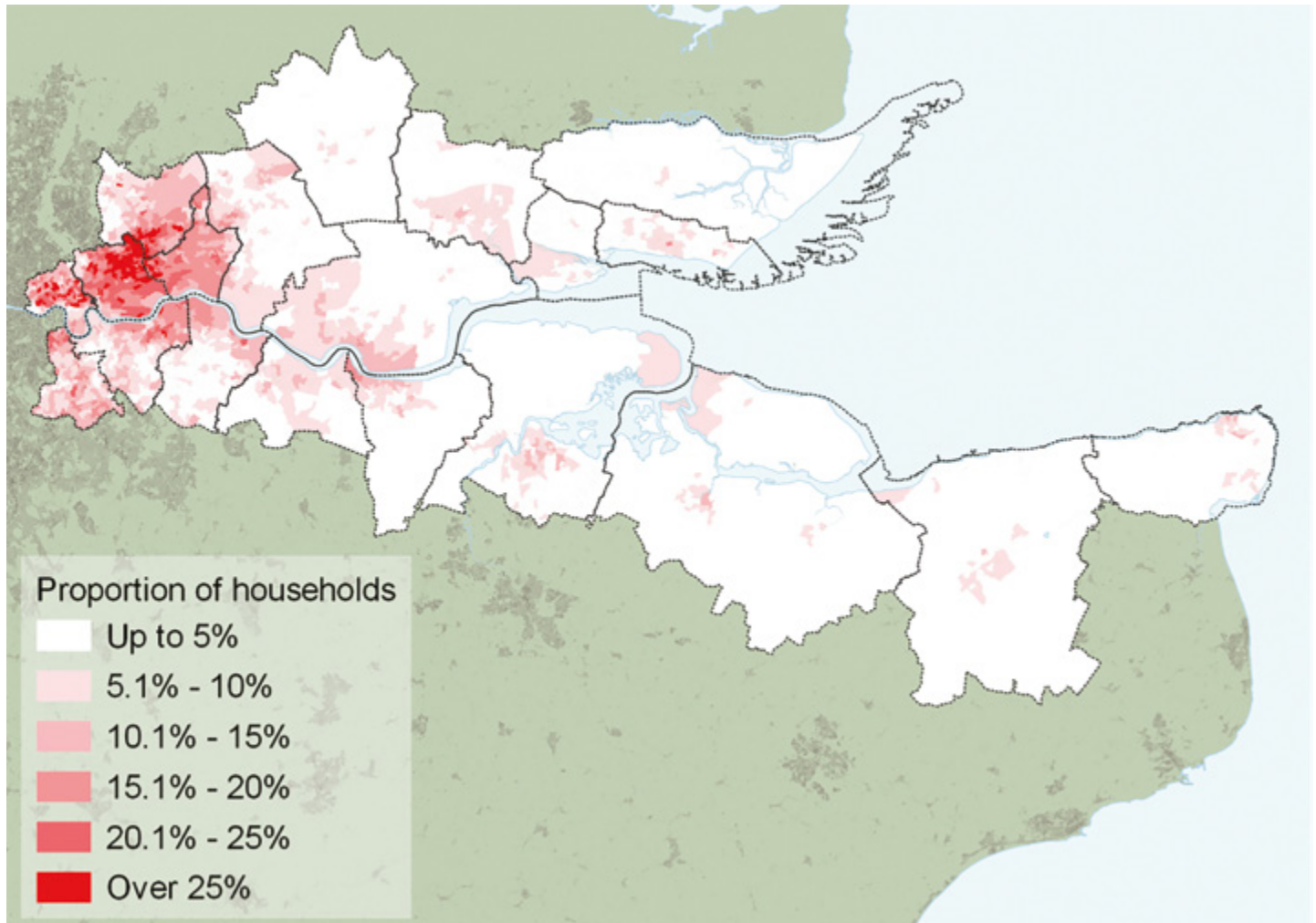
For some residents, this means they will no longer be able to access housing suited to the needs of their family. Overcrowding is more common in the Thames Estuary than in England as a whole (9% of households are overcrowded), especially in East London.

The area is likely to have higher housing costs – reducing the ability for residents to afford the size of housing they need – and to have more flats and private rented accommodation, which is more likely to be over occupied. Overcrowding is disproportionately experienced by residents of certain ethnic groups, with 31% of Asian and 30% of Black residents living in overcrowded accommodation compared to 16% of the total population.⁷

⁶ House Price Statistics for Small Areas, ONS

⁷ ONS Census 2021

Proportion of households which are overcrowded.⁸



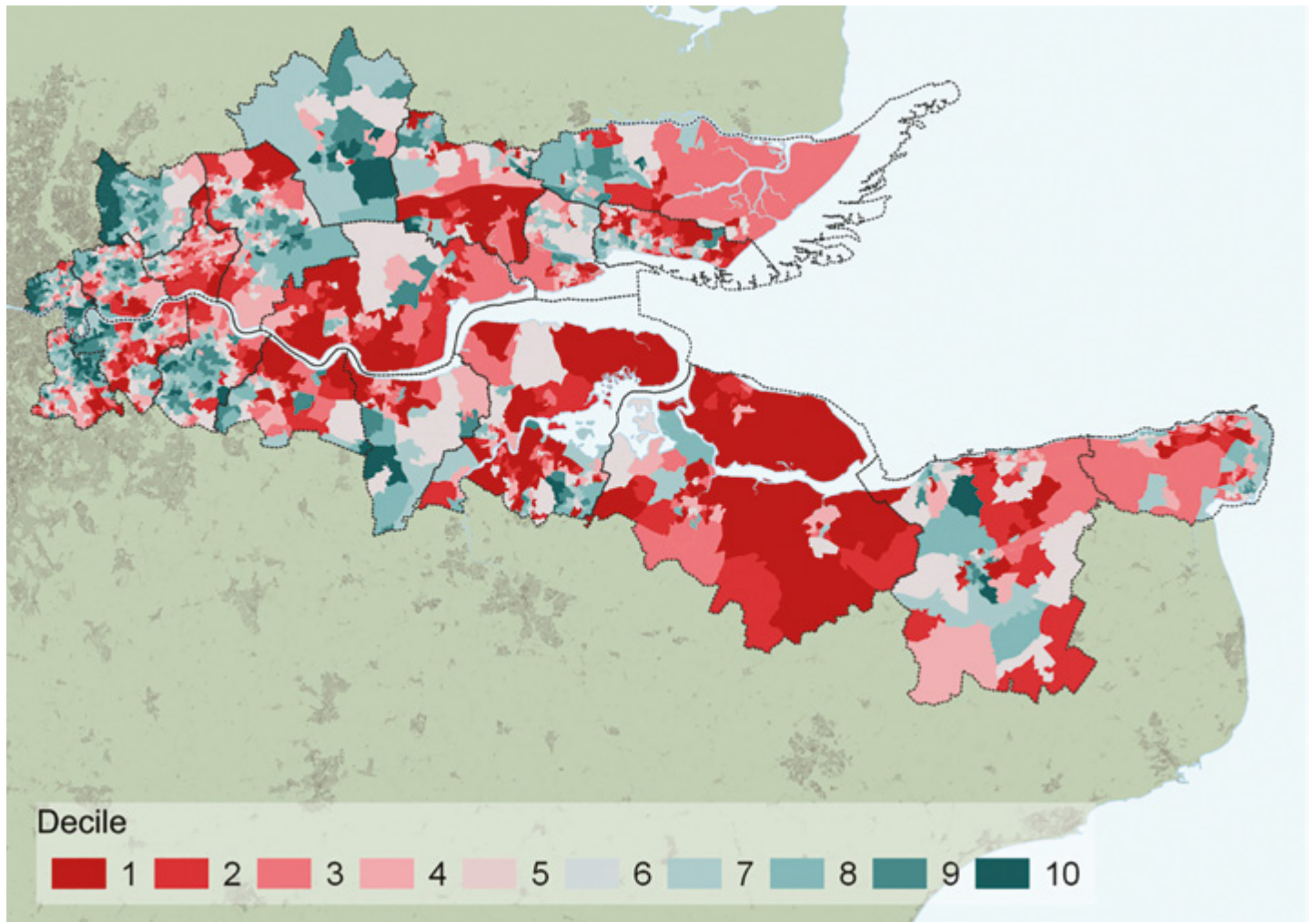
Tenure security is important to enable residents to engage in their local community and the labour market. While 58% of all residents within the Thames Estuary own their own homes, only 34% of Black residents do. More than 30% of those from Asian, mixed, or other ethnic backgrounds are living in private rented accommodation and are much more likely to be exposed to insecure living arrangements.

Similarly, only 34% of trans, nonbinary, and intersex residents are homeowners, while 44% are private renting.

Alongside housing, it is becoming increasingly difficult for residents to afford other essentials. There are households within both urban and rural neighbourhoods which are likely to face food insecurity due to financial, social, and physical barriers to accessing and cooking healthy food.

⁸ ONS Census, 2021

The Priority Places for Food Index. ⁹

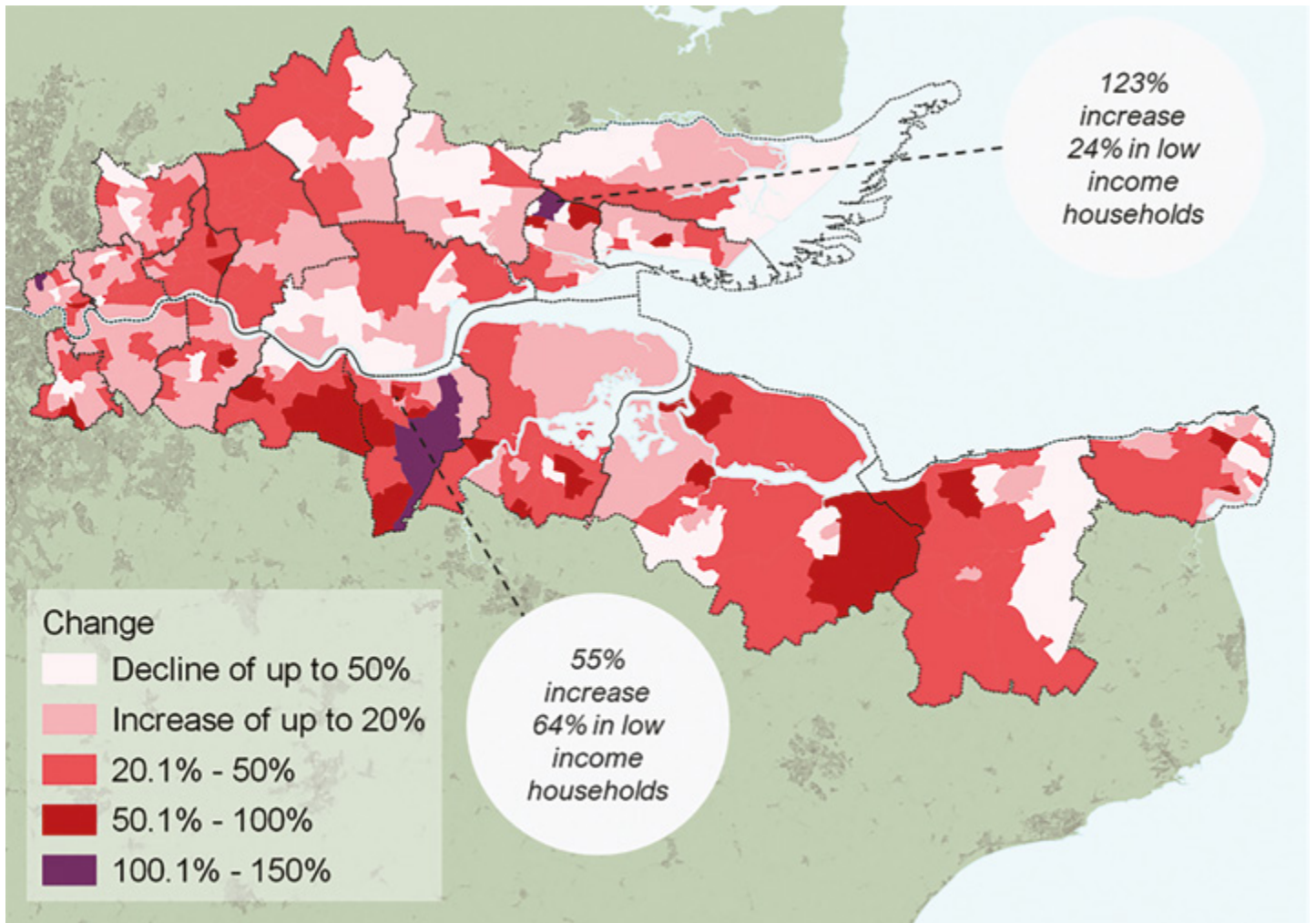


These challenges are particularly acute for families with dependent children. Childcare is now out of reach for all families within the lowest 25% of earners.

More generally, children are more likely to be impacted by poverty and income inequality than other groups. Almost all neighbourhoods within the Thames Estuary have seen an increase in the proportion of children living within low-income households.

⁹ Priority Places for Food Index, CDRC

The proportion of children within low-income families increased in almost all neighbourhoods within the Thames Estuary between 2015 and 2021.¹⁰



Access to essentials is vital to enable wider involvement in the economy, but it must be viewed holistically. Services like healthcare and education are vital. Students from disadvantaged communities in Essex and Kent are significantly less likely to progress to higher education and training (88%–89% non-disadvantaged progressing compared to 80% of disadvantaged students).¹¹

Only 34% of disadvantaged students in Kent progress to higher education compared to 50% of non-disadvantaged students. This has significant knock-on impacts, reducing social mobility and limiting employment opportunities later in life. For instance, 71% and 72% of those with Level 4 qualifications in Kent and Essex, respectively, are in employment compared to 56% and 59% of residents with Level 2 qualifications in Kent and Essex, respectively.

¹⁰ Children in low-income families, local area statistics, ONS

¹¹ Student Destinations 2017/18, Department for Education

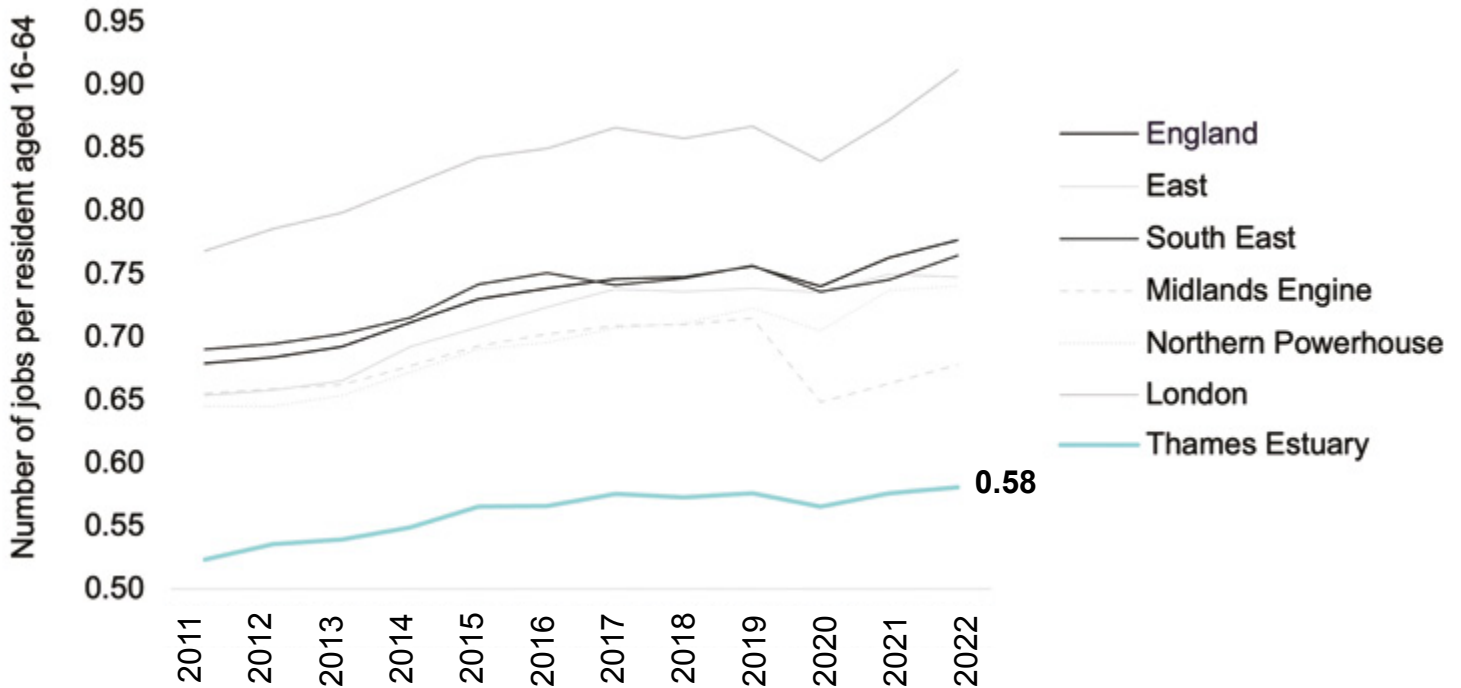
2. Fair opportunities. Everyone has the same substantive opportunities to realise their potential, and the barriers that stop people from having equal access and opportunity are removed

Increases in the number of jobs and businesses in the Thames Estuary have not led to improved employment opportunities for residents. The increase in jobs has not matched the increase in population, nor has it been equally distributed across the Thames Estuary. Some residents face the same barriers to work as they have for decades, and since the COVID-19 pandemic, more residents have been leaving the workforce due to ill health.

The ratio of jobs to residents shows that the area has significantly fewer jobs per working age resident than other regions, suggesting that there is deficit in local opportunities and that residents will often need to travel to access work.

Business growth has been driven by micro businesses, which are not scaling and, hence, not generating further employment opportunities.

The density of jobs within the Thames Estuary is significantly lower than that of any comparators.¹²



In common with the rest of the UK, there have been fundamental shifts in the Thames Estuary’s labour market within the last decade. While overall unemployment has declined, more residents are leaving the workforce altogether or turning to self-employment (which can include insecure ‘gig economy’ work).

The proportion of economically inactive residents within the Thames Estuary remains lower than the England average at 36.2% but has increased since 2011 by 21%.

There are differences in exposure to this changing pattern across occupation classes. Residents in semi-routine and routine occupations are more likely to be unemployed compared with those in higher managerial positions (3% compared to 1%) or those who have left the workforce due to economic inactivity (38% compared to 16% in higher managerial positions). It is reasonable to conclude that, for many, this is because they cannot access employment opportunities which are suitable for their needs, or which offer a viable route to prosperity and an improved life.

¹² Annual Population Survey, ONS; Business Register and Employment Survey, ONS

The proportion of residents who are economically inactive has risen; the number of those unemployed has declined¹³ at a slower rate than the rest of the UK.



Caring responsibilities and illness are increasingly preventing people from working.

A greater proportion of residents are leaving jobs to look after their home or family (21% increase across the Thames Estuary, 35% increase in London) compared to 2011 numbers, and there has been a 5% increase in the proportion of residents leaving the workforce due to long-term sickness or disability (including a 14% increase in Kent local authorities and an 11% increase in Essex).

Economic inactivity is not experienced evenly between the different groups in the Thames Estuary. In 2021, women in the area were 10% more likely to be economically inactive than men. Economic inactivity is significantly higher for Jewish and Muslim communities (47% and 43%,

respectively) compared to residents with no religion across the Thames Estuary (28%). Only 50% of residents who are trans, nonbinary, or intersex are in employment compared with 57% of the total population.

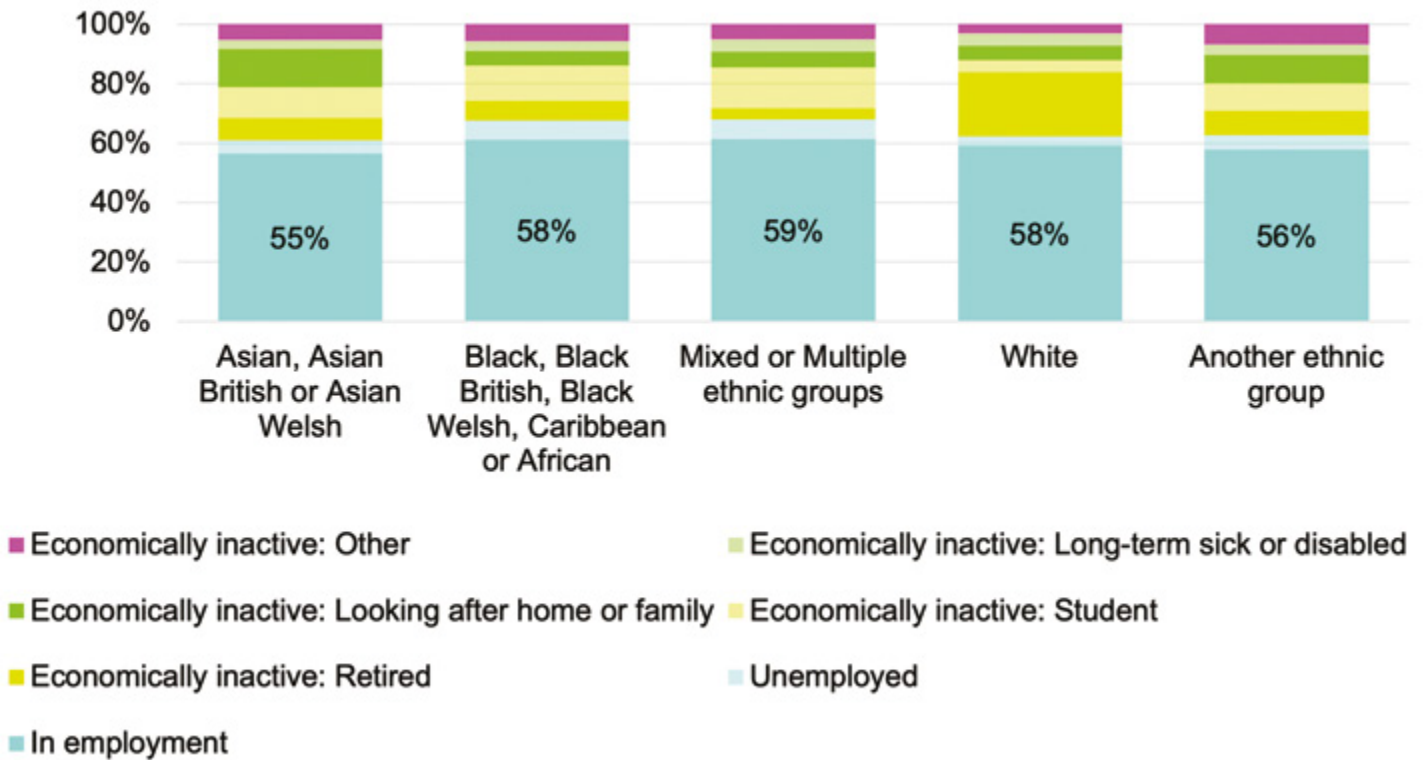
In addition to overall levels, there are also different reasons for economic inactivity among different groups.

Retirement is the most common reason for White residents to be out of work.

Residents from Asian, Asian British, or Asian Welsh backgrounds are much more likely to have caring responsibilities, while Black, Black British, Black Welsh, or African or Caribbean communities experience much higher instances of unemployment.

¹³ ONS Census 2011; ONS Census 2021

Economic activity by ethnic group, Thames Estuary, 2021. ¹⁴



Physical accessibility to employment opportunities is a major barrier to employment within the Thames Estuary, both in towns and cities and in more rural areas. Employment centres are concentrated in London, with clusters found around the major towns in Essex and Kent. In more rural parts of the Thames Estuary, there are sizeable parts of the geography where the minimum journey time to a major employment centre (i.e. a place with more than 5,000 jobs) is over 30 minutes – exacerbated by a reduction in local bus routes and a lack of investment in active travel alternatives.

Even where transport does exist, it may not be accessible for communities due to cost or physical access needs. Even jobs themselves may not be accessible. Disabled residents are half as likely to be economically active compared with the overall population, pointing to ableist barriers in access to employment opportunities.

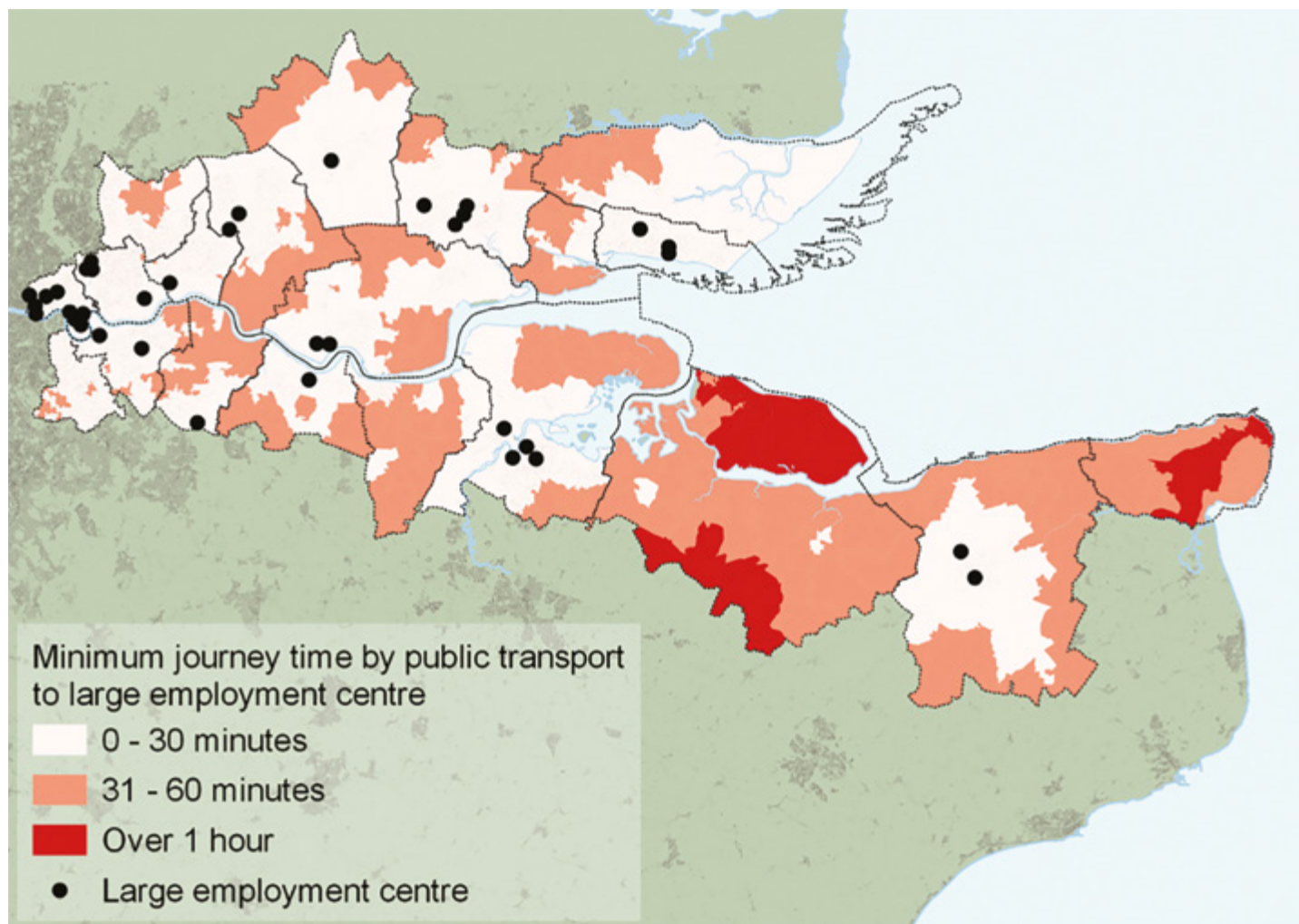
Moreover, residents who are economically active and female are much more likely to be unemployed compared to all women in the Thames Estuary (10% compared to 6%).

There is intersectionality among ethnicity, disability, and employment across England and Wales, which we also expect to be experienced within the Thames Estuary. The unemployment rate for disabled Arab residents in England and Wales is 21.1% and for disabled residents from mixed White and Black African or White and Caribbean ethnic groups 19% and 18%, respectively. This is compared to 8% of White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, or British disabled residents.

Further intersectionality is not explored within this report due to lack of available data. This is something we will seek to improve through our plan.

¹⁴ ONS Census 2021

Journey time by public transport to employment centres.¹⁵



¹⁵ Transport accessibility to local services: a journey time tool, National Audit Office, 2020, public transport data from 2017

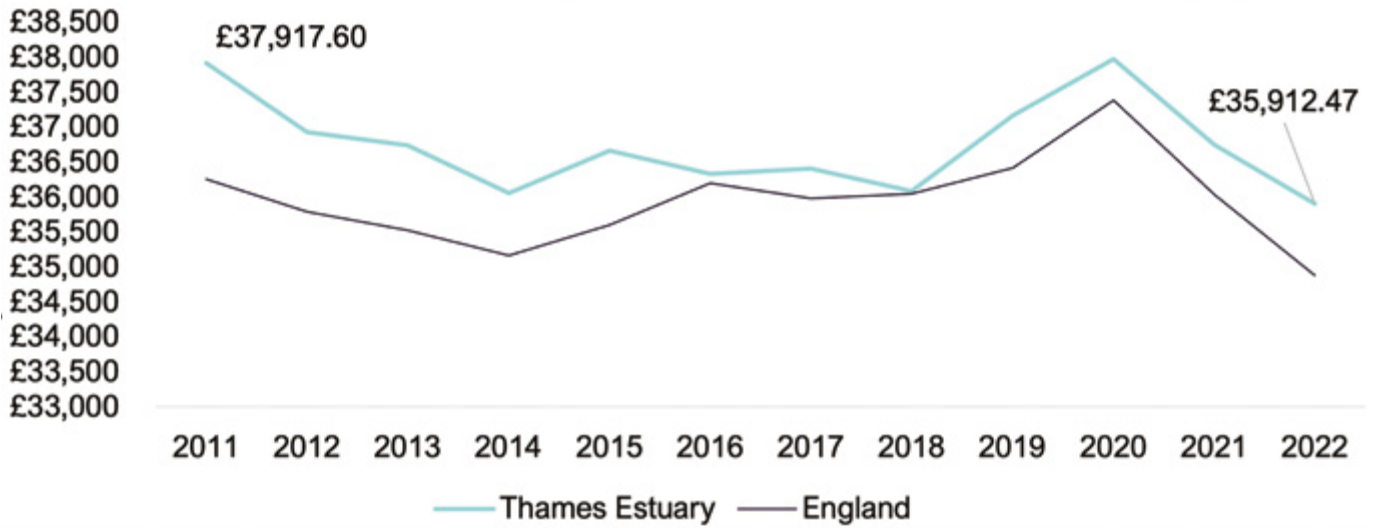
3. Fair Rewards: Everyone is rewarded in proportion to their contribution, effort, and talents

Not all residents within the Thames Estuary are equitably rewarded for their work. Earnings are not keeping up with inflation. Moreover, there is a significant gender pay gap, and a disproportionate number of female residents and residents from Black, Black British, Black Welsh, or African or Caribbean communities are providing essential caring roles which are poorly compensated, if at all.

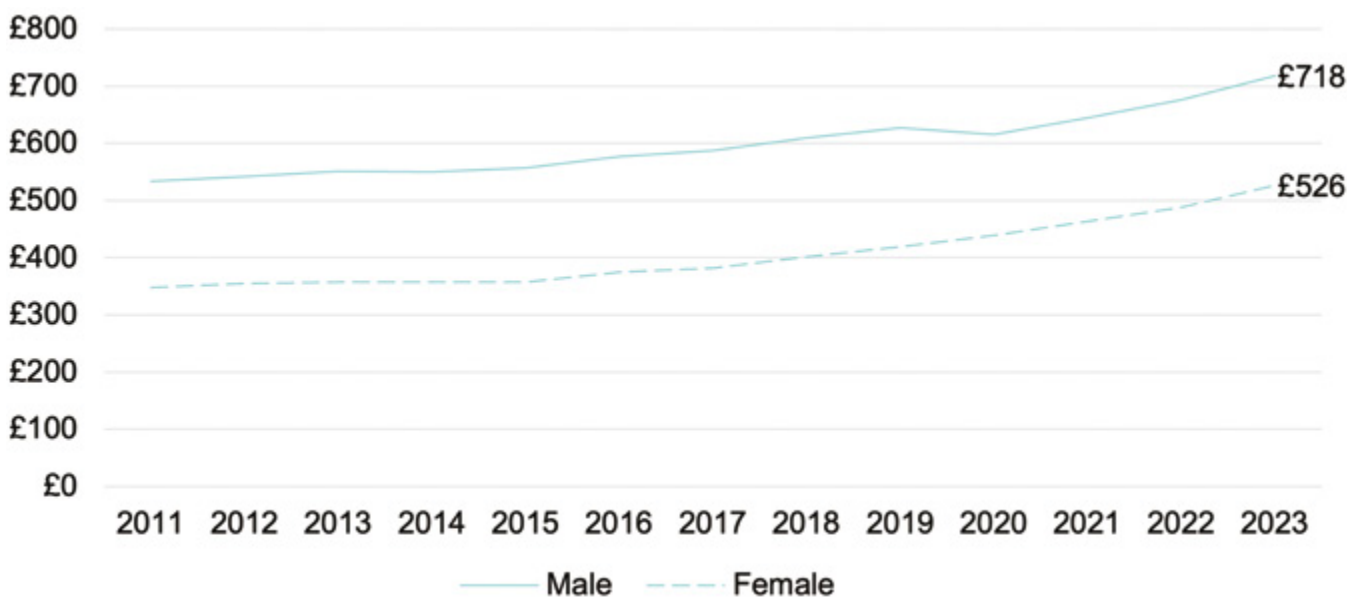
Across the Thames Estuary as a whole, earnings are higher than the averages for Kent and Essex, but this is inflated by high-earning occupations in East London. Despite a decade of sustained growth, living standards have declined across the Thames Estuary – an issue that has clearly been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.

When inflation is accounted for, pay has declined across the Thames Estuary, and there is a significant gender pay gap. Men in the area earn on average £192 more per week than women, and this gap has not closed over the past decade. Further research will be needed to understand other intersections of unfairness in pay, particularly in terms of faith and a wider understanding on a gender basis.

Incomes in real terms across the Thames Estuary are now lower than they were in 2011.¹⁶



Median gross weekly pay for male and female residents in the Thames Estuary.¹⁷



¹⁶ Bank of England Inflation Calculator, ONS Survey of Hours and Earnings

¹⁷ Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, ONS

A significant proportion of residents and workers within the Thames Estuary have poorly paid occupations.

For the lowest 10% of workers, earnings are below £20,000 – lower than the London and South East averages. The proportion of residents in typically low-paid work has remained at 35%,¹⁸ and within all local authorities across the Thames Estuary, there are neighbourhoods with high concentrations of jobs within typically low-paying sectors. Nearly one in five jobs within each local authority in the Thames Estuary pays below the living wage, rising to 30% in Bexley and Redbridge.¹⁹

Low-paid jobs are often important, providing essential services, including retail, hospitality, leisure, and childcare work. There are, however, certain neighbourhoods which only have opportunities for low-paying work (e.g. Southend-on-Sea and the Isle of Sheppey). In these places, residents can feel very disconnected from higher-paid opportunities and career progression.

Across the Thames Estuary, the number of residents within occupation classes 6, 7, 8, and 9 – which normally encompass low-paying jobs – has increased within the past decade, and there are 12,000 more residents in caring, leisure, and other service occupations.²⁰ Thames Estuary residents from Black, Caribbean, and African backgrounds are twice as likely to have these occupations as White residents (12% compared to 6%), and 79% of the caring, leisure, and service workforce is female.²¹

While the proportion of work-related benefits claimants is declining, it is still above pre-COVID-19 levels and much higher in the Thames Estuary compared with the national rate. This is mostly driven by residents who are out of work. However, over 13,700 residents are in employment and claiming work-related benefits, something that has stayed relatively consistent over the past decade.

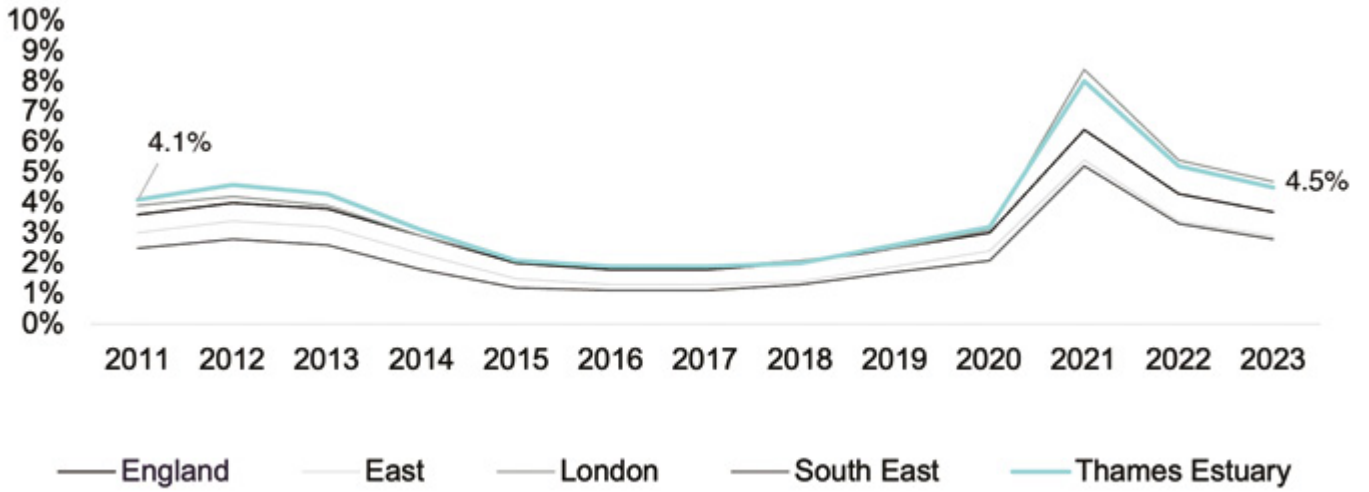
¹⁸ Business Register and Employment Survey, ONS. Low pay industries PRD definition

¹⁹ Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2023

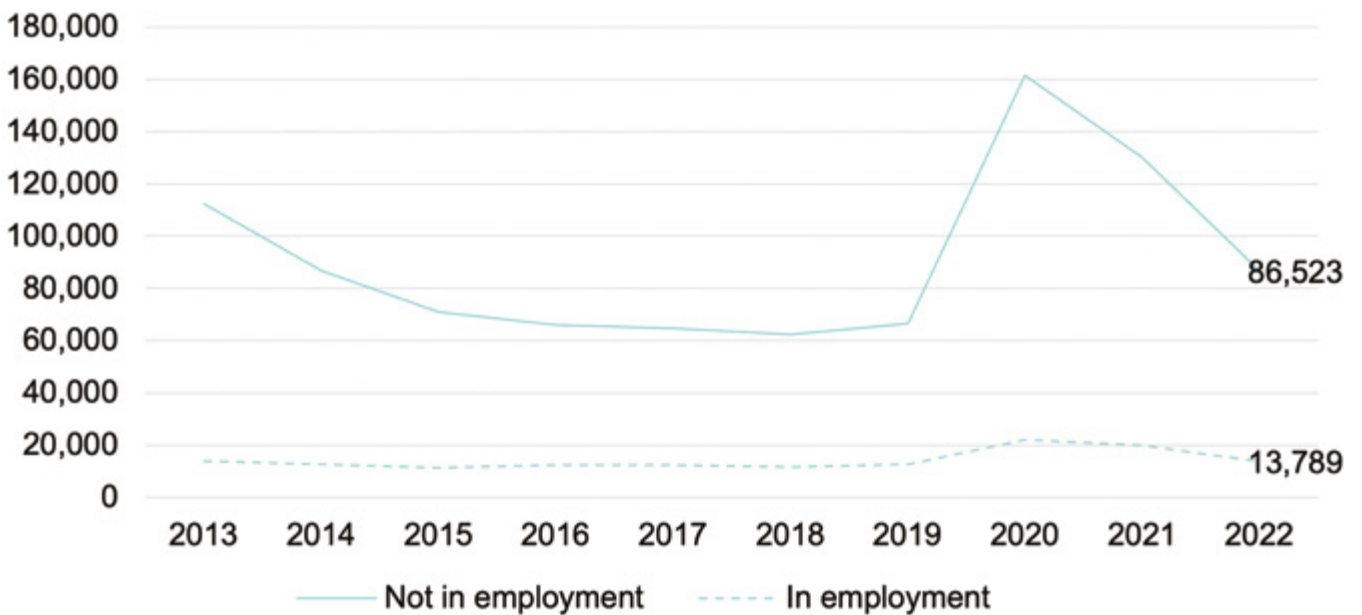
²⁰ ONS Census 2021

²¹ ONS Census 2021

Work related benefits claimants as a proportion of residents aged 16-64.²²



Thames Estuary residents claiming work-related benefits, in and not in employment.²³



²² Claimant Count, ONS

²³ Alternative Claimant Count, Department for Work and Pensions

4. Fair Exchange: Everyone contributes to society as far as they can and is supported by society when they need it

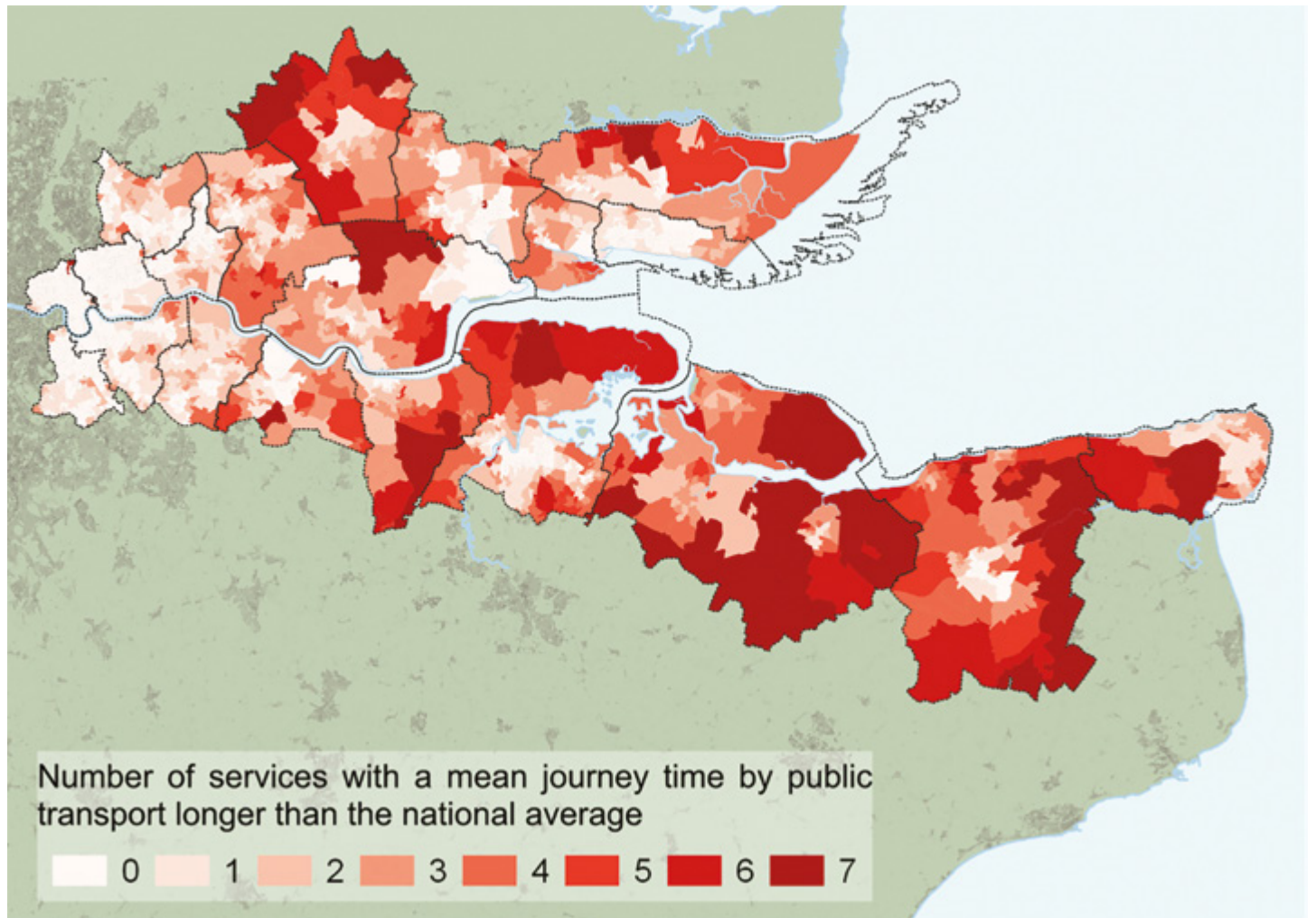
Residents across the Thames Estuary need to be able to access public services, be supported to live healthy lives, and be protected from hazards associated with the climate crisis.

The provision of accessibility to essential services varies significantly across the Thames Estuary due to a combination of lack of direct provision and limited support for residents through public transport and active travel routes.

Neighbourhoods within London tend to have good access to all services, while areas of Kent and Essex have below-average access. This is particularly true of more rural locations, where there are poor public transport links and large distances between services.

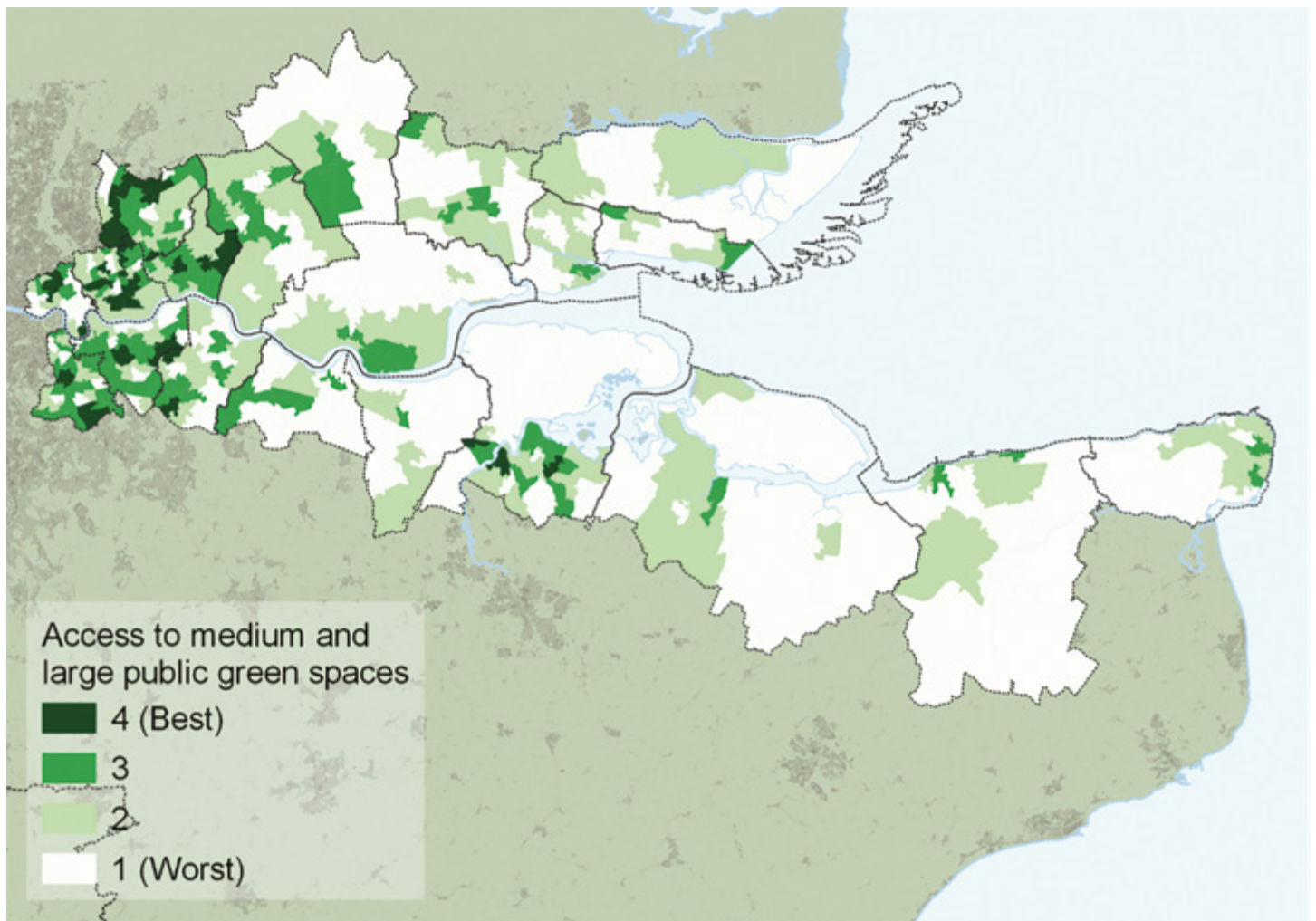
The number of services (out of seven) in each area with a mean journey time, by public transport, longer than the national average across England.

Services included in the measure include the following: primary schools, secondary schools, further education establishments, acute hospital trusts, GP surgeries, large employment centres (places with over 5,000 jobs), and town centres.



Despite being a beautiful part of the South East, certain areas of Essex and Kent have some of the worst access to publicly maintained green spaces in the country.

Green space deprivation indicator, based on an estimated percentage of the population living within 300 meters of an area of green space of at least two hectares (i.e. excluding small public gardens).²⁴



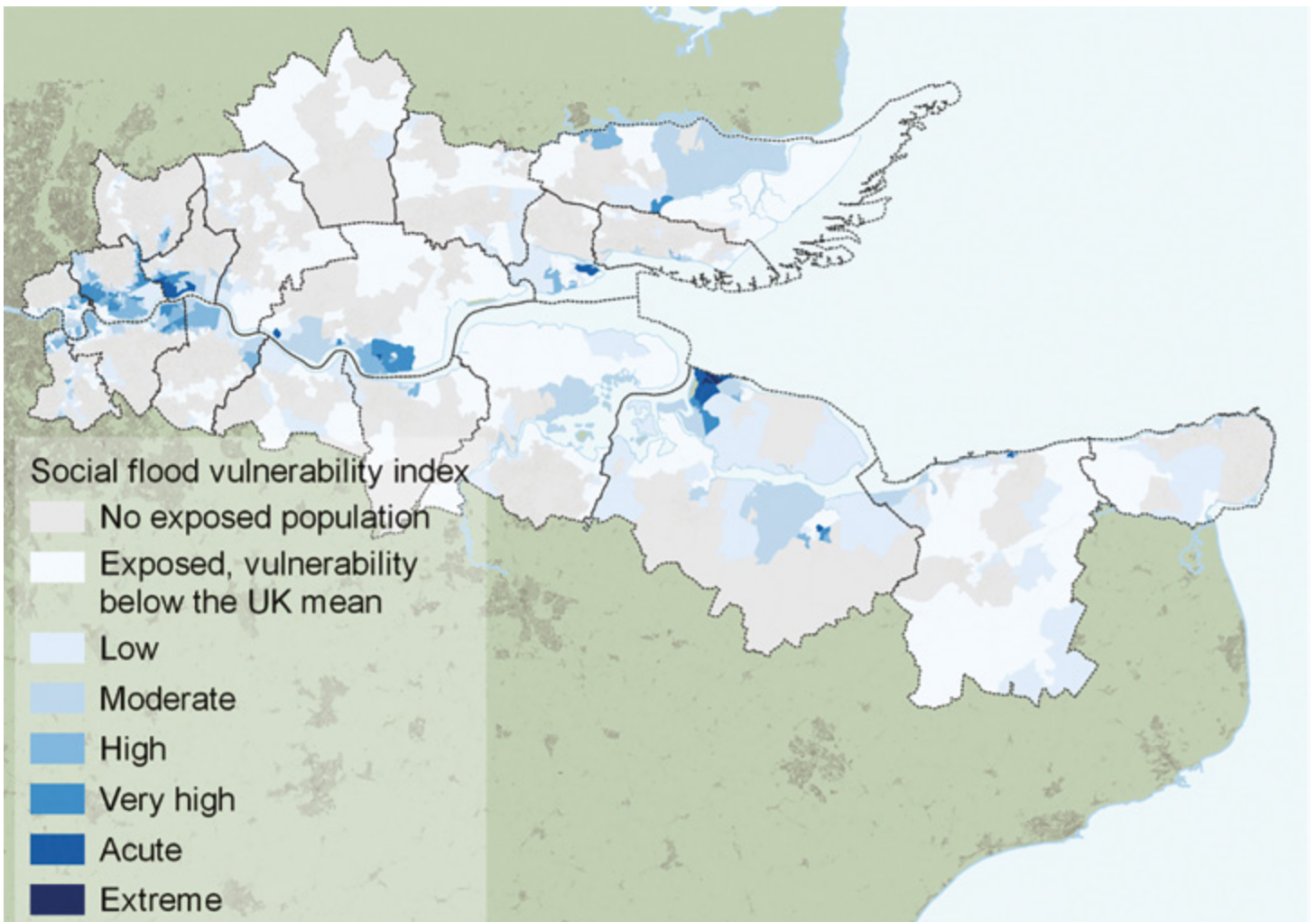
Parts of the Thames Estuary are and will continue to be exposed to flooding due to increased water levels and storm frequency.

The risks associated with flooding and the ability to recover from it vary significantly based on social and economic circumstances. There are areas within the Thames Estuary with extreme

social vulnerability to flooding – should a flood occur, they are unlikely to be able to mitigate the damage caused by the disaster, whether physical or financial, and respond to it. It is important to acknowledge that for certain residents, exposure to climate crisis is a great risk and could contribute significantly to further inequity in the Thames Estuary.

²⁴ Friends of the Earth

The Social Flood Vulnerability Index. ²⁵

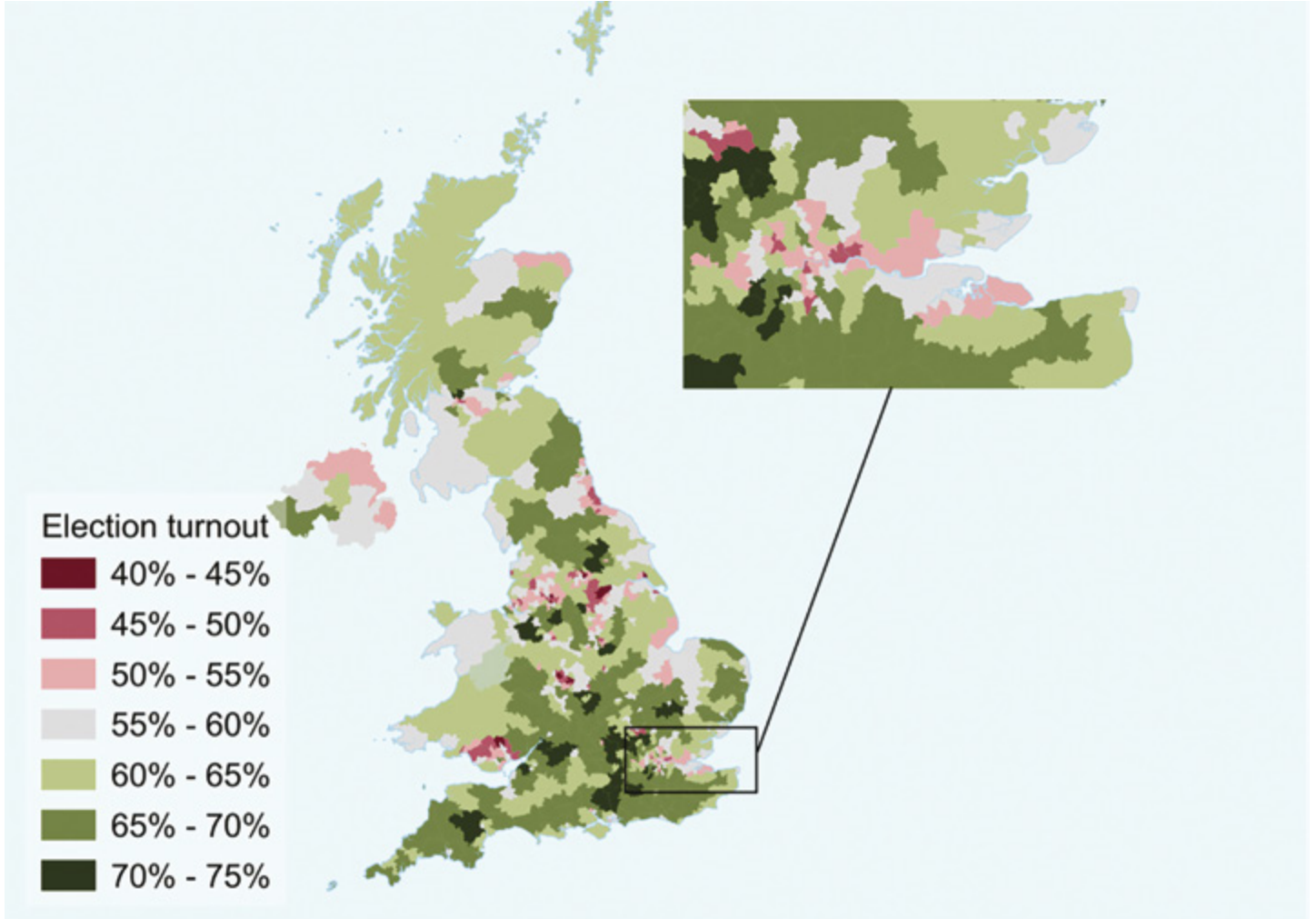


²⁵ ClimateJust, 2022

5. Fair Treatment: Everyone is respected and listened to equally and is treated equitably in terms of due process, respect, social status, political influence, and public services

There is limited analysis of local engagement through the data. However, based on the analysis in the following section, we know that trust in public services and institutions is low. The data does tell us that residents within the Thames Estuary are not as politically engaged as those in other parts of the country. Constituencies within the Thames Estuary had some of the lowest voter turnout for the 2024 general election in the nation.

The 2024 general election turnout by Parliamentary Constituency. ²⁶



This is accompanied by lower-than-average rates of volunteering and high levels of isolation in some locations within the Thames Estuary. For example, in Basildon, 13.6% of the population is often or always lonely – almost double the England average of 7.3%. Additionally, only 14% of the population in Havering volunteered in the past year compared with the England average of 21.5%. However, this is not consistent across local authorities, with 30.4% of the population of Rochford never lonely and 29% volunteering in the past year.²⁷

These statistics start to give us an idea of the scale of the challenge of creating a fairer Thames Estuary and also provide a notion of the breadth of factors we need to consider.

We also need to be aware of the limitations of relying solely on quantitative data and statistics when we are working in such a dynamic and changing region. Statistics can be several years out of date, relying on assumptions and failing to capture the diverse and intersecting experiences of living in the Thames Estuary. This is why we decided to look more deeply into how our residents experience some of the fairness principles in their diverse communities.

²⁶ House of Commons Library, 2024

²⁷ Sport England Active Lives, 2024





Understanding fairness and equity in the Thames Estuary: What our communities tell us



Our aim is to ensure that the growth and investment opportunities created by the Growth Board are inclusive, fairly distributed, and accessible to everyone. They should meet the real-world challenges communities face and respond to local needs. Moreover, they should contribute to people feeling more heard and more connected to the investment and change they see in and near their neighbourhoods.

The quantitative data in the previous section tells us about the ‘shape’ of deprivation, fairness, and inequity along the Thames Estuary – what is going on and where. The information outlines clear challenges for fairness but only tells us so much. It is also important to understand the lived experience of residents across the sub-region, how they feel, and whether they consider themselves as being fairly treated in the current context.

To this end, we undertook further, deeper, qualitative research, delivering a series of in-depth interviews with residents, focusing specifically on the areas where the data told us the challenges are most acute. We wanted to pinpoint difficult-to-reach neighbourhoods, which risk being bypassed without the correct support.

Choosing the ‘communities of interest’

When choosing our neighbourhoods of focus, it was important to bear in mind that the Thames Estuary is a large and varied area. The nature of deprivation differs from place to place, and if you look at only one sort of deprivation, you miss the bigger picture.

To narrow things down, we chose three primary categories of challenge, borrowing from the Levelling Up White Paper, as follows:

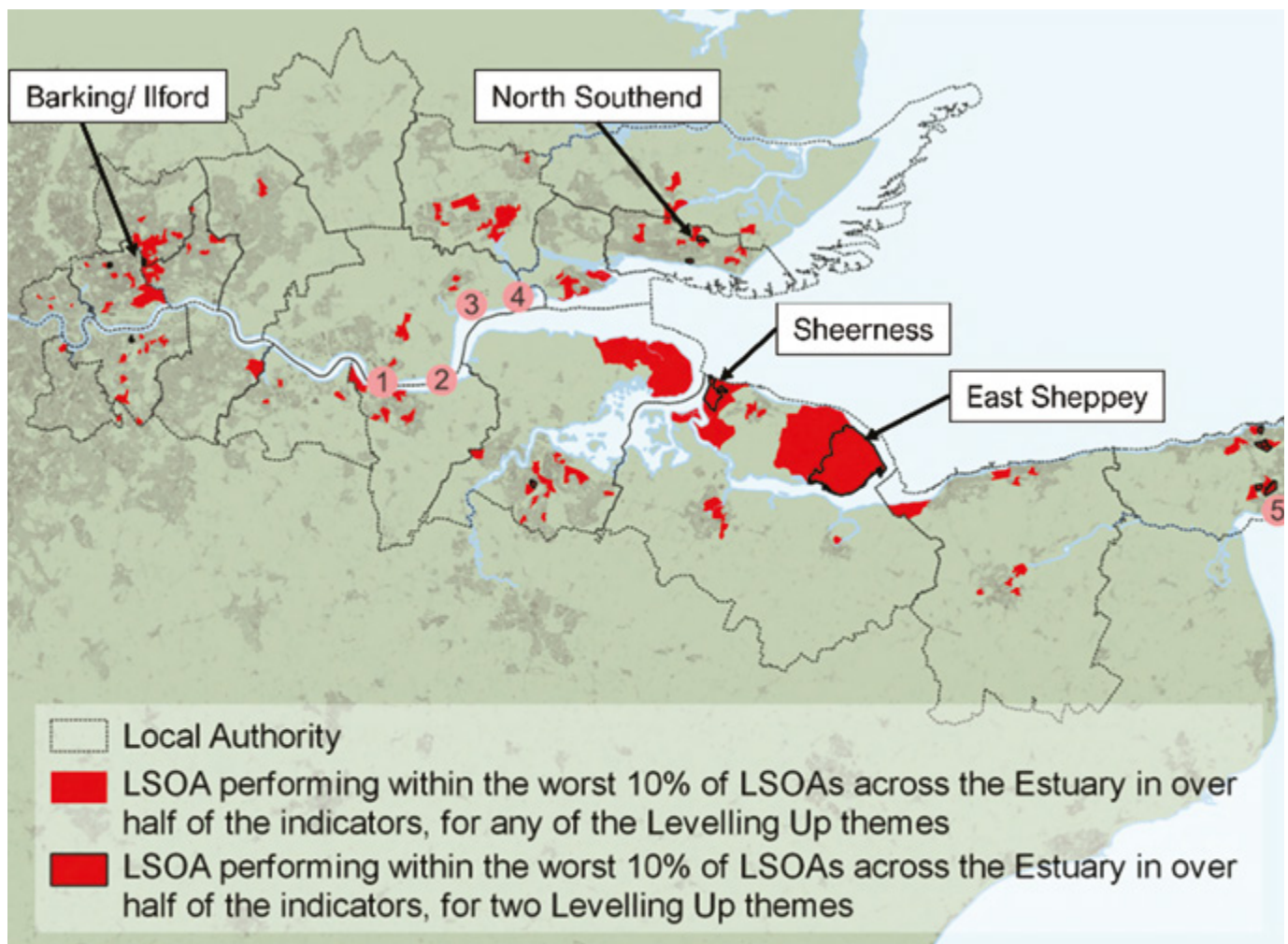
- Low productivity, pay, jobs, and living standards.
- Few opportunities and poor service access.
- Less sense of community, pride, and belonging.

We then identified a set of indicators, available at the Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA) or Middle Layer Super Output Area (MSOA) level, as data metrics for each category (Appendix 1 shows what these metrics were). We identified LSOAs in the most deprived 10% for at least half of the metrics in each category, as shown in red on the map. (Those outlined in black were deprived according to at least half the indicators in *more than one theme*.) This gave us a longlist of potential ‘communities of interest’ (COIs) to choose from.

From this longlist, we eventually chose the following four COIs to work in:

- North Southend
- Barking/Ilford
- Sheerness
- East Sheppey

These are flagged on the map and were all places facing acute challenges for fairness. However, they were also different to each other, not only in terms of geography – spanning east London, Kent, and Essex – but also in terms of the types of challenges faced. (Appendix 2 provides more detailed data about the four areas chosen.)



1 = Port of Tilbury

2 = Lower Thames Crossing

3 = London Gateway

4 = Thames Enterprise Park

5 = Port of Ramsgate

What the process taught us

In each of the four COIs, we carried out a daylong site visit, during which we recruited members of the public living or working in the respective locales and engaged with community organisations.

The interviews themselves were carried out later, over the phone, at a time which was convenient. This more human-centric approach allowed trust to be built in person while also being time-efficient and treating people as experts in their own terms.

Our goal was to understand the experiences of those in the areas facing the most acute challenges. In doing this, we knew that we would not always be engaging with those first in line for jobs in new industries. While most of those we eventually spoke to were of working age, some were physically unable to work, and others faced different employment challenges (e.g. a criminal record or caring responsibilities).

However, the COIs epitomised the issues which feature, to a greater or lesser extent, across much of the sub-region when it comes to inclusive and equitable growth. For the Growth Board's work to achieve fairness, the benefits of new industries and sectors ought to be felt in places like our four COIs, at least as much as they are elsewhere. Solving issues for people who face the biggest challenges often creates solutions that help the whole community – even those who are already better off.

The dock at Sheerness, seen from the Southend-to-Sheerness tourist ferry.



This was a qualitative piece, aiming for depth not breadth. We conducted a small number of long interviews, each lasting 20–30 minutes. The interviews followed a semi-structured topic guide (Appendix 3), and we also took down demographic and economic information. The topic guide asked about local identity, trust, community, opportunities, and jobs. The conversations were often highly biographical, focusing on people’s personal journeys through the jobs market.

The table below shows the people with whom we engaged, and the graphic below gives more info about the profiles of those we met. We engaged with more women than men, largely due to women being generally more willing to participate. Those in Sheppey were least likely and those in Southend most likely to be council residents – partly due to differences in the housing market.

(It is worth noting that while we have presented the results for the education question to the GCSE level, A-level, or degree level, most of the qualifications were technical or practical equivalents, e.g. a BTEC or diploma.)



Who we spoke to



24 women, 12 men



28 white British, 4 Asian, 4 black or mixed-race



12 social renters, 7 private renters, 11 homeowners, 6 living with family



14 aged 16-34, 14 aged 35-54, 8 aged 55 or older



18 work full-time, 8 work part-time, 4 unable to work, 4 caring, 2 not working



2 with no quals, 12 with GCSEs equivalent highest qualification, 7 with A level equivalent highest qualification, 5 with degree equivalent highest qualification*

*We added this question later, meaning we did not ask this to residents in Southend; a few struggled to answer exactly, so the responses are approximate in places

Difficulties explaining the project

The initial plan had been to go door to door and to recruit via Family Liaison Officers at local schools.

These methods were successful in previous research, including when consulting about a local GP provision. However, the abstract nature of our research field – combined with the fact that the Growth Board does not have the name recognition of a council or the NHS – meant people were less comfortable engaging. This is a finding in itself, with implications for how we discuss the Growth Board's work.

Generally, growth and productivity remained abstract for most people. Many struggled to relate these factors to the day-to-day economy in which they live. Interviewees did not always venture strong opinions about the local economy despite much prompting, and some of the interviews were short as a result. These residents were focusing on immediate life challenges and were not thinking about root causes or their area in the wider economic context. This is worth bearing in mind for future engagement.

Community organisations

The approach which worked best was to go via community groups. These organisations worked with those on the sharp end. They were trusted by residents and were able to broker introductions. In north Southend, we spoke to The Experience Project. As a foodbank run by the church, it has become an integral community resource, with as many as 300 weekly users. On the day of our visit, there was a lengthy queue.

In Barking/Ilford, we went to Barking Mosque, which also functions as a multi-faith food bank, and to Abbey Community Centre, a cash-strapped local facility which was running a dance club for local teenagers on the day we visited.

In Sheerness, we engaged with the Lighthouse (aka the Hope). This is a community café run by volunteers. It was well known by residents and was clearly a lifeline for some. We also spoke to the team at Sheppey FM, a radio station for the island.

In east Sheppey, we had the greatest difficulty in recruiting, as we struggled to find equivalent organisations at first. East Sheppey Big Local recently opened a hub in Leysdown-on-Sea, which ultimately helped a great deal, but we did not establish contact with them at first. This meant that initial recruitment involved going from kiosk to kiosk among the small businesses which form the bulk of the village's economy.

The above organisations do valuable work, and their role in this research represents a key learning. In many of the areas where we worked, trust was low, and people predominantly listened to those they already knew. Going via the existing social infrastructure is therefore essential for any future engagement around economic opportunities. Additionally, keeping these community organisations up and running is a vital means of supporting and reaching communities.



Community assets, pictured left to right: The Experience Project in Southend, Barking Mosque, Leysdown Community Hub in east Sheppey (run by Big Local), and a flyer from Sheppey FM radio in Sheerness

The role of technology

Technology and residents' relationship with it was a final learning from the process. The original plan had been that we would perform some of the interviews via Zoom. However, most ended up preferring to use the telephone. (In Sheppey, this was a particular issue. Most of those in Sheerness asked to receive the payment vouchers offered in return for participation by post rather than email, for instance.)

There were some descriptions of social media use during the interviews, so it was clear that these residents were not fully offline. Many used Facebook, which seemed to play the same role that a local newspaper would once have done. The issue was more that channels of communication were informal and face-to-face, with people often living near each other. This is another important finding when thinking through how to make sure everyone can hear about and take advantage of economic opportunities.

[NB: In addition to the COI research, it is worth noting that we have previously undertaken research in several Estuary communities. This is outlined in Appendix 4 and has been incorporated into the thinking and findings.]

Observations from site visits

Below are some short descriptions of the four sites, based on the visits, along with photographs of the areas.

North Southend (Essex)



This neighbourhood of Southend-on-Sea is in the northeast of the city. It consists of three main streets: Archer Avenue, Newington Avenue, and Canterbury Avenue. Hamstel Road borders the estate to the west, and the A1159, which forms the outer perimeter of the city, flanks it to the northeast. A footbridge under the motorway leads to a private golf course – illustrating the unequal nature of Southend's economy.

There are a few takeaways from Hamstel Road and a nearby McDonalds drive-through. The estate itself has few amenities, with a Budgens being the only shop. The neighbourhood has an open space and some allotments. There is also a school, a nursery, and a branch of the Methodist church. The neighbourhood is not as cut off as some and has a bus route during the day. However, it is very much on the edge of the city, with a 35-minute walk to the city centre. The housing is a mix of high rise and low rise.

Barking/ Illford (London)



The presence of the North Circular, intersecting with train tracks and industrial canals, means this cluster of LSOAs feels very urban. These factors also mean that neighbourhoods can be cut off despite being physically close to amenities. In many cases, motorways and train tracks need to be navigated. There are few green spaces beyond a basketball court and playground. There are several tower blocks, and many of the older terraced houses are dilapidated. LB Newham and LB Barking have seen some of

the highest rates of pub closures in the UK during the past decade – a phenomenon which COVID-19 exacerbated. For instance, the Jolly Fisherman, one of the only pubs serving the community, closed a few years ago. Changes like this illustrate subtler challenges around community infrastructure and social networks, which are not necessarily reflected in the raw data.

Sheerness (Kent)



This LSOA comprises about half of the residential postcodes in Sheerness. It is largely made up of low-rise, semi-detached social housing in the places furthest from the town centre. The neighbourhood is criss-crossed with pylons and overlooked by wind turbines. Residential postcodes sit next to commercial ones, with warehouse facilities housing light industries – including a chemical company and a haulage firm – running the full length of the estate on one side.

The estate is served by a bus route, but the last services are at 3:30 pm. There are two convenience stores and one fish bar. A thin green space called The Fleet runs through the middle of the area. When we visited, there were very few people about. Generally speaking, the atmosphere was friendly but quiet.

East Sheppey, Swale, Kent



This area is at the other end of the Isle of Sheppey. It takes 20–25 minutes to drive between the two areas. Despite looking big on the map, the LSOA's population is centred upon the village of Leysdown-on-Sea, a resort with 1,000 residents. The feel of the area is different to that of Sheerness. The homes are a mix of stationary caravans, prefab housing, and makeshift flats. Planning is chaotic, with areas of wasteland between streets. At the centre of the village is a strip, with slot machines, kiosks, and takeaways.

It being a hot day during the summer holidays, the town was very busy when we visited, with holidaymakers filling every arcade and eatery and the beach packed. There were car boot sales in several parking lots.

What we learned

The essentials



Housing, pictured left to right: private sector rental housing in Ilford, a street in Southend, bungalows in east Sheppey and social housing in Sheerness.

Housing was clearly a big issue, frequently cited as a negative. Those in Barking/Ilford noted the large amounts of housing going up but feared that long-standing communities would not benefit and would eventually be pushed out. Some talked of the extra pressure on services. This was less of a factor in the Southend COI – perhaps because most were social renters – but it was certainly an issue in the Sheppey areas, where many spoke of houses going up without services to support them.

The nature of the housing itself is clearly different in the dense neighbourhoods of Barking/Ilford to that in the rural scenery of Sheppey. But the core issue is the same: both areas are comparatively cheap compared to their immediate neighbours. Push-out from central London is making them attractive places to move and to build. In east Sheppey in particular, the comparative affordability of housing has allowed older people to retire early to the area. One resident had retired and bought a cheap bungalow there with savings, having previously been a council tenant in Hackney.

This can mean homeless residents from more expensive areas being rehoused in our COIs or those in private sector accommodation choosing to relocate to somewhere cheaper. Yet in neither area are local economies

providing jobs and pay in line with this, meaning that those moving in tend to be either not working in the area or not working at all.

Transport turned out to be one of the other problems in the COIs. In north Southend, the removal of evening bus services fed directly into quality of life and employment prospects. Most did not drive, and cuts to bus routes meant they struggled to capitalise on job opportunities in central Southend.

This issue was even more acute in our Sheppey COIs. The discontinuation of bus routes came up in Sheerness – along with the irregularity and unreliability of the train. And in east Sheppey, the issue was genuinely debilitating. People felt ‘stranded’ as a result of evening bus services being cut and were limited to the low-skilled, cash-in-hand opportunities in their immediate area. There was a general view that without a car, their options were severely limited.

Barking was the exception that proved the rule here. The improvements to Barking station – along with improvements to bus routes and access to the London ferryboat services – were cited by many as being the best features of living in the area. While most Barking residents were commuting locally, rather than going into central London, they relied heavily on rail connections.

Opportunities to succeed



Pictured left to right: the high street in Barking, the Budgens corner shop in Southend, the town centre in Sheerness and a car boot sale in east Sheppey.

The discussion about jobs was the most important part of the topic guide. Most of the jobs people had were low-skilled, including retail, hospitality, social care, and warehouse work. Retail, in particular, was the first thing respondents in all four COIs thought of when asked. Many residents' experiences were of types of work with comparatively little career progression or job satisfaction. One woman had worked in the same a national chainstore for 20 years without her role changing.

When pressed, there turned out to be enormous appetite for work which offered pathways to greater skills and higher pay. A number of the people we spoke to, particularly younger respondents, were looking to climb a ladder in the sorts of jobs sectors mentioned (retail, hospitality, etc.) – with varying levels of success.

A young man in Leysdown, for instance, had left his job at a kiosk to work at a warehouse on the other side of Sheppey. He hoped this would let him progress to a team leadership or management position. Meanwhile, a young woman in Southend had moved from hospitality into social care in search of on-the-job training. And a young man at Barking Mosque was undertaking a lengthy commute – into London and then back out again to Loughton – to do an apprenticeship in engineering.

Vocational and on-the-job training was therefore seen as the primary route to success. However, there were currently too few opportunities of this kind. The departure of the docks was frequently brought up in Sheppey – by those who could remember it – as the point when things took a turn for the worse.

An astute observation made by respondents in both Southend and east Sheppey was about the abundance of 'first jobs' in their areas. For children aged 16 and upwards, there was no shortage of work in food kiosks, sweet shops, and amusement arcades. This employment was often seasonal, zero hours, and at or below the minimum wage. One person described the practice of paying people below the minimum wage if jobs were cash in hand. Another talked of the practice of paying people a £15 stipend to be nearby and 'on call' for a day – in case customer numbers increased and extra people were needed.

These conditions are clearly wrong from the perspective of job security. But they do mean that young people can gain experience in summer jobs and start to earn. The major challenge is what happens after this, as many tend to get stuck. One of the residents described the lack of viable courses at the local college. The boys did carpentry, while the girls did hair and beauty, she explained. She had bucked the trend by enrolling for carpentry in the hope that it would give her the skills she needed.

Ibrahim*, under-18, Barking, Male

Ibrahim is 18 and has lived in the Barking/Ilford community his whole life. He has a lot of love for the area, mainly thanks to the strength of his social networks there. People often socialise with their own communities, he says, but everyone gets on.

Ibrahim volunteers at a local faith organisation and has been given increasing levels of responsibility in doing this. In principle, he would not have a bad word to say about Barking and particularly praises the train links, which have enabled him to work in Lakeside. This is a part-time retail job, which he does alongside his studies.

Ibrahim considers himself lucky to have this job and describes many others of his age and older struggling to find opportunities. Usually, people must go out of the area to find work or training, and in some cases, they end up turning to the ‘bad side’. Others focus on what Ibrahim calls ‘network growth’ – unreliable self-employed work which relies on using social media platforms like TikTok to boost their reputation. One friend of

Ibrahim’s has set himself up as a freelance barber and is trying to build his reputation and client base this way.

Ibrahim goes to college outside of Barking, further into Essex. This is because he wants to become an engineer, and the college he chose was the only one offering this course. When he finishes next year, he hopes to get an apprenticeship and build his experience in work rather than go to university. However, the only apprenticeship he has been able to find is in another part of London. If he cannot make this work, he will try and get more retail work.

Despite liking the area, Ibrahim sees his future further out of London, in Essex. This is down to the lower crime rates and cheaper housing outside of London. The former is a particular issue, and Ibrahim describes the threat of knife crime in his area. He says this reached a peak just before COVID-19, with the park a no-go area after dark, but it has stabilised a little in the past couple of years.

*Some personal details changed for confidentiality



A slightly different phenomenon we came across concerned female workers who were looking to move out of retail or hospitality and into the public or third sector. There were several examples of this, including the following: a receptionist who wanted to train as a nurse; a woman who had left a high street chain to work for a charity; and a woman who moved from cleaning to working at a community centre. This shift tendency was motivated by two things: a desire for more rewarding work and a need for more flexible hours to accommodate caring commitments, school hours, and term times.

Rewards for effort and work

Within our sample, there was a separate group whose circumstances meant that finding work was significantly more difficult. While they had much to offer, they faced explicit barriers. Some suffered from anxiety, some had learning differences including dyslexia, and some cared for disabled family members. Invariably, their experiences of education and/or the workplace had been negative, and their feelings of confidence or agency were low. In Southend, we talked to a woman who struggled to use transport because of anxiety. She had been signed off work and needed a job that would let her ease in gradually, with some leeway and flexibility.

The people in question often required patience and pastoral care from an employer to make the most of this. Some had deliberately sought out volunteering to try and find a supportive environment of this kind. They operated within informal, face-to-face circles and relied on community and faith organisations.

The other big finding in relation to rewards for work was about the relationship with London. We spoke to one woman in the Southend COI who commuted into the City of London each evening for four hours to work in events. Her aim was to earn enough to buy her mum's council house to give her mother financial security in old age. Her story was interesting, but she was unique in commuting to London. Most people tended to be 'facing away from' the capital.



Donna*, 55 – 64, Sheerness, Female

Donna has lived in Sheerness her whole life. She enjoys living there thanks to its proximity to the centre but has felt isolated in recent years due to the lack of shops.

For Donna, this is one of the main issues of the Isle of Sheppey. At points, it can make the town feel ‘depressing’ – like a ‘ghost town’. It can also mean that people ‘slag the area off’ unfairly.

For her own part, Donna is proud of her area and the community living there. Those who bring things down are, she says, a minority. She points out that people who move from London to Sheppey – or who come on holiday in the summer – enjoy the more relaxed atmosphere.

Donna believes the island feels increasingly cut off due to the lack of traffic management and poor road links. Members of her family work on the roads but have had to leave the island in recent years to find work. The other big challenges concern education for young people, many of whom have few opportunities to channel their interests.

Donna worked for many years as a cleaner. This job was hard going, she remembers, as well as being financially difficult due to the work being seasonal. A decade ago, she moved away from this type of work and into a job for a charity, which she finds more rewarding.

She believes that the tourist industry could still play a positive role on the island and that more could be done to attract visitors – the sea being one of the island’s ‘selling points’. The difficulty is in making this type of seasonal economy work for local people.

*Some personal details changed for confidentiality

Those in Barking/Ilford, for example, were often commuting out rather than in. Two of the younger Barking participants worked at a sports shop.

The relationship with London was particularly interesting in Southend. The city has a significant commuter population, but those in our COI were disconnected. Across all the COIs, there was a feeling that the bargain their respective areas had struck with London was not fair. They were getting all the negatives without any of the positive benefits in terms of pay or earnings.

Exchange: What you put in and get out



Pictured left to right: a youth club in Sheerness, an empty pub in Barking, a diner in east Sheppey, and football changing rooms in Southend.

A big issue across the COIs was high streets and, more generally, things closing. In Southend, there was a sense that the high street had become a worse area to spend time thanks to issues including drug use and street drinking. The COVID-19 pandemic was felt to have dealt a blow from which the town was yet to recover.

In Barking, it was the same story. Higher-status shops had closed and been replaced by nail bars and vape stores. Some of the more long-standing residents struggled to think of a reason they would go into Barking town centre, and for them, this marked a major decline.

Sheerness had the most acute issues, however. The closure of Shoe Zone, the last shoe shop on the Isle of Sheppey, was totemic. It was the latest in a string of retail departures, with several high street banks also leaving. Moreover, a supermarket had moved out of Sheerness and to a retail park in neighbouring Queensborough, meaning that residents without a car could not shop. One resident, who was long-term unemployed, complained of being charged £3 for a cup of tea at the Costa when he went to this retail park.

These changes were also felt in Leysdown, which relied on Sheerness as one of the nearest large towns. The loss of the high street was mourned by everyone, both from a consumer perspective and for the loss of potential retail jobs.

Alongside shop closures, people described the departure of other community assets, including a youth club in the middle of the Southend estate, or the loss of funding for the Abbey community centre – which is now run by volunteers.

Another big factor was crime. In Barking/Ilford, the responses we heard usually related to the most serious crimes. One of our residents in this area, who was in his late teens, said that the fear of being caught up in this was a significant spur for him to move elsewhere.

Crime also worked to undermine trust in the north Southend COI. One of the respondents described nuisance neighbours, and another told an anecdote about going to a party where someone was badly physically attacked.

Young people to do as an original root cause. In Sheerness, a host of problems were mentioned, from intergenerational inequality to antisocial behaviour to drug use.

The nature of crime was less organised and severe in Southend and the Sheppey COIs compared to in Barking/Ilford. However, it clearly created a sense – as with the death of the high street and community centres – that the basic quality of life one should be able to expect was in decline.

An interesting topic which was less commonly noted than expected was immigration. Despite rising diversity along the Thames Estuary, cohesion between new and existing communities did not seem to be a factor. In Barking/Ilford, there was some awareness of community tensions being a negative aspect of the area's history. But for the most part, people saw the area's diversity as a strength or simply did not mention it.



Mo*, 45 – 54, north Southend, Female

Mo moved to Southend from ‘overcrowded’ London in the 1990s. She wanted to be closer to the sea and to have more space. Both her children, now grown up, live close by.

Mo believes that the reputation of the area is not as good as it could be and attributes much of this to COVID-19 and its impact on retail. The pandemic caused shops and restaurants to close, meaning too few higher-end retailers. She says that COVID-19 caused some large businesses to become less committed to their communities.

The transport within Southend is, for Mo, a major issue. She has been employed as a shop worker for a high street chain since she moved to the area and says that ‘trying to get a bus from work to home is nonexistent’. For most shifts, Mo must undergo a long walk into town or arrange a lift. She doesn’t enjoy the walk, particularly late at night, thanks to violence and petty crime on the high street.

She describes bored teenagers causing issues. On a positive note, however, Mo says The Experience Project’s food bank is a lifeline, describing the huge contribution to the community of the volunteers working there.

How can the neighbourhood attract businesses and investment? Mo’s view is that this is rooted in retail. Her hope is that this could, in turn, bring in more business. Without this, she fears that the number of retailers closing will undermine any effort to train and skill up the local population.

*Some personal details changed for confidentiality

Treatment, respect, and pride



Pictured left to right: allotments in Southend, fields in east Sheppey, The Fleet Park in Sheerness, and an outdoor gym in Barking.

Narratives of decline were in evidence in all four of the places we visited. This was not always acute, and people could name positives about their area. However, there was often a sense of being marginal or ‘back of the queue’.

In the Sheppey COIs, attitudes were the most positive. People felt pride in being from Sheppey for its beaches and greenery. But they were also the most aware of poor perceptions – describing an unfair stigma directed at island residents via slurs and stereotypes. They wanted people to take another look at Sheppey.

Our Barking/Ilford community generally saw the area as just a place to live, especially among younger residents. And, like many of those living in Sheppey, they were conscious of their community being looked down upon by neighbours.

While those in the two Sheppey COIs often saw their futures being there, for better or worse,

many of the Barking residents thought their futures lay elsewhere. We had thought some might be looking to move further into London once they could afford to, but the opposite was the case. People spoke of moving out into Essex, where they could get more for their money and a better quality of life.

Those in the north Southend COI had the least strong responses to the questions about pride and identity. Many simply saw Southend as a place to live. Most recognised the attractions – including the seafront – but were living in a part of Southend which did not necessarily benefit from them.



Kim, 18 – 24, east Sheppey, Female

Kim is 18 years old and works in Leysdown-on-Sea. She feels as though the area is very friendly, describing the atmosphere as ‘chill’. The community in east Sheppey is tightly knit, she says, and speaking for herself, she sees a future for herself on the island.

But east Sheppey is not without challenges. One of the major downsides of life there is the lack of public transport. If you don’t drive, Kim says, then your options are severely limited.

Her own job at a food kiosk is seasonal, and this links to another problem for the local economy: in the winter months, opportunities for work are virtually nonexistent. Workers and business owners alike tend to hunker down and live off what they have earned in the summer.

Kim says that people who visit the Isle of Sheppey have a positive perception of the island; she thinks Leysdown has the most positive atmosphere on the island thanks to the range of activities on offer.

The positive atmosphere on the island, Kim believes, links to the growing diversity of both the local population and the customer base. Kim herself is mixed race, and she has experienced increasingly positive and accepting attitudes to diversity on the island over the time she has lived there.

One element of Sheppey life which Kim sees as a missed opportunity is opportunities for children and young people. The area would benefit from clubs, groups, and other similar activities for young people. This would reduce the pressure on parents, Kim argues. In line with this, there should be better educational opportunities in east Sheppey.

Kim went to sixth form for a year and then started work in her current role. She was keen to go into nursing after school but struggled to find an apprenticeship scheme. She hopes she can move into this sector in the future.

*Some personal details changed for confidentiality.

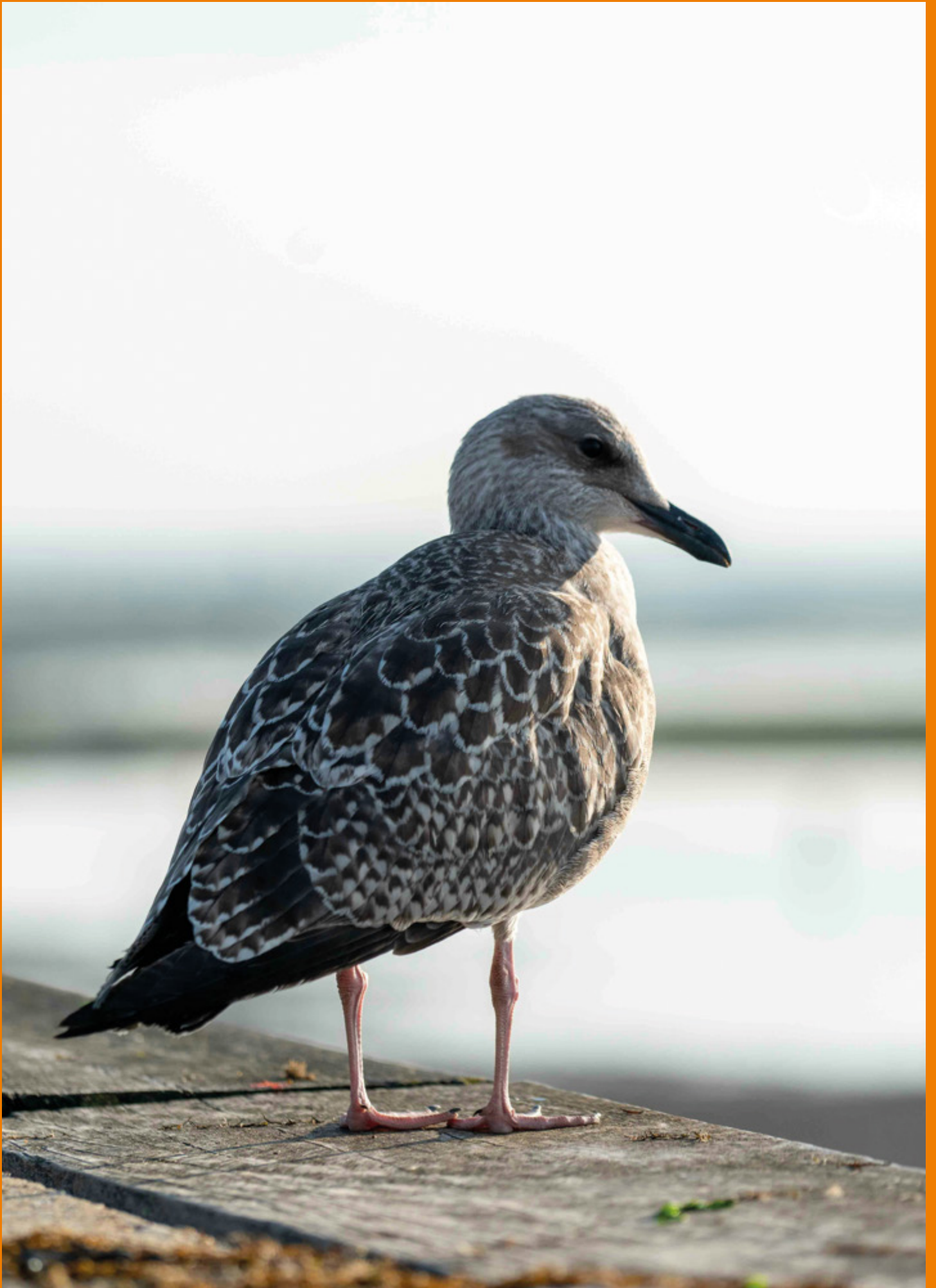
Generally speaking, levels of trust between residents seemed to be quite high – especially in the two Sheppey COIs, which were tightly knit. In Leysdown, a community organiser described the mutually supportive atmosphere at the local food bank. With this said, one Leysdown resident described differences between generations. She spoke of a tension in east Sheppey between younger people who were looking for more connections and opportunities and older residents who were more traditional.

The story in Southend was more mixed. The area was acknowledged to be tight knit, but there was also significant talk of crime.

Barking, meanwhile, had the most transient community by far, and many of those we spoke to seemed to be getting on with their lives and keeping themselves to themselves.

With this said, there were clearly strong community bonds around The Experience Project in Southend and around the Abbey Community Centre and the mosque in Barking. When we asked who the ‘local leaders’ were, it was the staff at these organisations whose names repeatedly came up. This was somewhat self-selecting, with the individuals having often been recruited via these centres in the first place. However, the strength of feeling was nevertheless apparent.

In some of the areas, trust for the council or other government agencies was low. Often, this was based on an individual’s perceived ill-treatment at the hands of these stakeholders, including through an unsatisfactory exchange with someone on the council housing team. Often this was based on historic events, or anecdotes heard second hand. But it is nevertheless interesting to note the impact that this can have.





The barriers to a fairer Thames Estuary



The depth of the research undertaken to inform our plan has given us a deeper appreciation of the significant things that need to change if we are to truly deliver fair growth and investment in the Thames Estuary. By blending the quantitative and qualitative research, we have a clearer view of the nature of fairness and the ubiquitous barriers we need to overcome to be a genuinely fair region.

In the past, the tendency has been to assume that the route to prosperity and social inclusion is through access to better work. While it goes without saying that good jobs are vital, our research has shown that to genuinely achieve fairness, we need to think more broadly.

To do this, we have identified seven areas for consideration.

1. Lack of Appropriate, Affordable Housing

Housing is becoming increasingly unaffordable for those who live in the Thames Estuary. Migration from London and lack of adequate supply has led to many of London's issues increasingly being mirrored in the Thames Estuary. The housing market itself is not fair and too often does not provide the basic foundations that our communities need to live a fair and happy life.

Making Big Changes:

We need a radical new approach to housing in the Thames Estuary, with fairness and well-being at its heart. This will mean new housing products and approaches to finance – accelerating supply and quality on a regional (rather than site-by-site) basis.

2. Lack of Trust and Community Resilience

Residents feel let down, and trust in institutions is low, with a feeling of being disengaged both physically and psychologically. The Thames Estuary is still dealing with the long-term impacts of deindustrialisation, which is exacerbated by a feeling of change that is not benefitting the area. Residents can no longer think long-term due to immediate challenges, nor are they able to see themselves staying in the Thames Estuary.

Making Big Changes:

We need a commitment to long-term practices which restore trust and rebalance power in favour of communities that feel excluded and left behind. This will be a decade's work; requires improving relationships with the council and between new and existing community members; and will fundamentally enable fair growth and investment.

3. The Changing Nature of Work

Real incomes have declined in the last decade, with work no longer providing a route out of poverty. People in the Thames Estuary work (often more than one job) and still cannot afford life's basics. Training routes and physical connections are often not strong enough or sufficiently resourced, meaning significant parts of the population are not linked to the opportunities in their area. Flexible work is important for many; however, working conditions can vary, and employment rights are sometimes overlooked. More meaningful work, wider college courses, and apprenticeship routes need to be created.

Making Big Changes:

We need a broader approach to the function and role of work. We need to pool resources at a regional level to enable not only progression and adaptation in careers but also a deeper focus on supporting workers across the Thames Estuary.

4. Mobility and Access to Good Daily Transport

The decline in local public transport infrastructure (specifically buses) is cited as one of the most visible factors that impact fairness and perceptions of change. Lack of reliable and more accessible transport is a major barrier to engaging in opportunities and connecting with others. Many places and communities are effectively cut off after 5 pm due to lack of local bus services.

Making Big Changes:

We need local bus services to be restored and transport cold spots addressed. We require a regional approach to local transport, working across the three transport authorities to connect the Thames Estuary's transportation network.

5. Historic Racial Injustice and Disproportionality

If we are serious about fairness, we need to recognise the impact of historic racial injustices, be they conscious or unconscious. We know that non-White and migrant communities are more likely to be excluded from the housing market, have low-paid work, and experience ill health. The disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 in parts of the Thames Estuary showed that this disparity remains an issue and that the failure to offer equal access to opportunity on racial grounds is a barrier to the area being a truly fair and equitable region.

Making Big Changes:

We need to be better informed about the experiences of different groups living in the Thames Estuary, elevating diversity and culture as a distinctive feature while more actively connecting previously underrepresented communities to the benefits of growth and investment.

6. Disengagement and Lack of Voice for Future Generations

Young people in the Thames Estuary do not feel they are getting a fair deal. Increasing housing costs, a lack of social and community spaces, and unclear routes to work worsen their life chances and access to opportunities. To become a fair region, we need to elevate the role of and conversation with young people, giving them a stronger voice and creating intergenerational dialogue, which recognises the importance of future generations as agents of change and safeguards their needs and interests, respecting their need to connect and grow differently.

Making Big Changes:

We need to collectively work towards the aspirations of the UN's Declaration on Future Generations²⁸. This means going beyond talking to young people and giving them more control to influence their future and those of others.

7. Just and Equitable Transition and Mitigating the Impacts of the Climate Crisis

Just and equitable transition means increasing equality and improving health in the region. The Thames Estuary already experiences extreme weather events, fuel poverty, and soaring living costs; unchecked, all of these issues will exacerbate the inequity among our diverse communities. We need to make sure that we are ahead of potential increased costs of living, migration pressures, and unpredictability and scarcity of supplies (including food), ensuring that the climate crisis does not create further imbalance in our region.

Making Big Changes:

The climate crisis needs to be acknowledged as an issue of fairness and inequality. We need billions of investments across the Thames Estuary to create warm, efficient homes and green public transport and to support greater ecological diversity. These initiatives, alongside our existing plans for hydrogen power and zero carbon freight, will deliver a greener area – which means a fairer area

²⁸ www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-declaration-on-future-generations-rev3.pdf

The background of the page is a solid orange color. Overlaid on this background are several thin, wavy, light-orange lines that create a sense of movement and depth, resembling a stylized landscape or water ripples. These lines are more prominent in the lower half of the page, where they appear to curve upwards and then downwards, framing the text.

A Five Point Strategy for Fair Growth and Investment

Our aspirations for fair growth and investment are significant and fundamental. By focusing on fairness, we are choosing to engage with several entrenched issues and challenges which have been forged over decades and, in some cases, centuries.

We therefore need a long-term commitment, underpinned by new ways of working. Our Five Point Plan for Fair Growth and Investment comprises the founding principles for the start of this new approach.

Our strategy is set out below, with five initial activities to start delivery. We set out the role of the Growth Board and expectations of others as we coordinate fair growth and investment.

Five point strategy for fairness

Our strategy to enable fair growth in the Thames Estuary is built around five key areas of work, as follows:

1. Better Evidence

To deliver fairness, we need to better understand it, along with the different layers of challenges people and communities face. We will commit to higher standards of evidence to support direct and impactful action. We need to update and extend the scope of the research, working with partners to do so.

2. Stronger Voice

We must address historic imbalance, create new levels of trust, and enable a fairer future by giving Estuary residents a stronger voice and increasing the diversity of underrepresented peoples. We need to understand the daily experience of those who are not experiencing a fair economy and give local people a platform to participate in the future. We need more engagement, events, and connection to make this happen.

3. Fairness First

We need fairness to be the first consideration for partners and investors when they are making decisions in the Thames Estuary. We want to drive consistency in the assessment of fairness in the area.

4. Challenging Norms

The current status quo is not working. We need to identify and remove barriers, work differently, and provoke new approaches, focusing specifically on racial disproportionality and intergenerational inequity. The Thames Estuary must be the national leader in new behaviours which support genuinely fair growth.

5. Empower Grassroots

Grassroots and community-led organisations already take on the strain in tackling unfairness within our economy. We need to learn from and empower them to do more while ensuring they face fewer barriers as we seek new approaches. We need to support the redistribution of more investment directly to these organisations.

First Steps

The Growth Board will lead on the key elements which will act as a foundation for a regional approach to fairness.

1. Hub for Evidence on Fairness and Equity

Using this report as our base, we will create a fairness evidence hub which provides local partners and new operators with the information they need to place fairness at the heart of their plans. It will also provide a repository for local evidence to enable a deeper understanding through better information.

2. Continuous Resident Feedback

We will develop processes to continue the resident conversations which have started in this report. We will seek to amplify the voices of young people and the increasingly diverse communities within the Thames Estuary to address imbalances and provide new, more representative perspectives.

3. Enabling Support for Partners and Investors

We will develop the tools and facilitate the links that will help our partners deploy consistent approaches which provide a strong collective strategy to achieve fair and equitable growth, embodying our aspiration to think about 'fairness first'.

In supporting patient investment and investors to maximise their economic impact in, and for, the wider community, we commit to working with Fair investors to help them:

- Fully understand their local communities offering our analysis model.
- Find solutions to ensure local people - and those furthest from the labour market - are able to access employment opportunities and meet their skills needs.
- Coordinate local bodies and groups with a commitment to fairness to support fair investment and investors.

4. Expert Provocation

We will engage experts to consider more deeply the barriers to fairness we have identified, developing provocations and recommendations which could enable and embed new behaviours. We will pursue international partnerships which connect us to the best practices in the world for each of our First Steps.

5. Community Champions Network

We will build a network of local community advocates acting as champions for local approaches while providing new insight from the Thames Estuary's communities. We will link this to board decisions, ensuring fairness and equity are an inherent part of the way we work.

Our Commitment

The Growth Board will lead by example.

We will review the composition of our leadership teams to ensure that the voices of young people and diverse ethnic communities within the Thames Estuary are better represented.

We will connect the community champions network to our Board and ensure that the insights and reflections they are able to draw from their communities are heard by the Growth Board, the government, and investors.

We expect the partners with whom we work to demonstrate a commitment to fairness and equity first through the provision of both resources to support local research and better links to grassroots community-led organisations.

We will test new ideas and work globally to find the best partners and precedents to help us with this mission.

Working with Others

Issues of fairness are significant and systemic; solutions will only work if we can convene a coalition of partners working towards a single goal. This partnership will be broad and deep, with national and local governments, investors, businesses, and local civil society at its heart.

National Government

The Thames Estuary will be a trailblazer for fair growth and investment at the regional level. We can provide the structure and convening power to enable this to happen at scale but need central government to partner with us to provide the mandates and resources required to work differently.

We need government support to intervene and accelerate the delivery of affordable housing across the Thames Estuary, build grassroots capacity within communities, and increase mobility. We need a consistent long-term partner to support our role as a broker of fair investment, supporting our approach and endorsing the outcomes we identify through our evidence.

Local Authorities

The 25²⁹ authorities which make up the Thames Estuary are a vital connector in our approach. In most cases, it is the local authority who is the custodian of the public good and the route to connections with grassroots community-led organisations and key community voices.

Therefore, we need councils to embrace a consistent approach to fairness and equity which is embedded in policy and planning. Practically, we need to work in partnership to come to shared positions on housing, local transport, labour markets, young people, and just and equitable transition. Without local endorsement, we cannot deliver a genuinely regional response to fairness.

Investors

We expect investors to fully engage with our approach on fairness. We can support better Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) and social impact, but this needs to be accompanied by long-term committed finance. This is not about charity – it will also support longer-term commercial success and better financial returns, which we will be able to demonstrate through the assembly of better evidence.

We will work with willing investors to build capacity to support engagement with this plan. We will provide the evidence, insights, and connections, which will enable greater impact and enhanced development. In return, we need all investors to endorse a ‘fairness first’ approach, providing more deliberate funding to address the challenges we have identified here.

Businesses

We need business to embrace the principles of fair employment and practices already successfully deployed in parts of our region. We need fair wages and good, inclusive employment practices to persist across all aspects of the Thames Estuary economy.

We will advocate for a regional employers compact which recognises the good employment practices and work that provide the foundation for a fair life in the Thames Estuary. We need our larger employers to be the example and champion higher standards and inclusive practices that create equitable access, technical qualifications options, apprenticeship routes, and opportunities for young people, disabled individuals, and our diverse communities.

Civil Society and Community Groups

The Thames Estuary’s civil society sector and community groups are a vital and sometimes overlooked asset in supporting fairer growth and investment. They are our connection to grassroots organisations and are experts in experiences which relate to fairness (or a lack of it). We need them to feel empowered to communicate daily lived experiences and to come together and collaborate on new solutions which make our region fairer.

We will advocate for new resources to enable this collaboration and provide the platform for these groups to connect to and support investors, businesses, and government to do better.

²⁹ While there are 18 Local Planning Authorities bordering the River Thames, the Growth Board works more widely, reflecting the corridors and patterns of growth in and around the Thames Estuary.



Appendices

Appendix 1) Data used for identifying communities of interest longlist

The chart shows the three umbrella areas we used to identify our composite measure and the metrics we employed for each one. The COI longlist comprises those which were deprived according to all three metrics.

Levelling up themes

Boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards by growing the private sector, especially in places where they are lagging

Spread opportunities and improve public services, especially in those places where they are weakest

Restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost

Indicators matched to sub-themes

Living standards – pay and employment

- Economic inactivity
- Economic inactivity due to looking after home or family
- Economic activity due to being long-term sick or disabled
- Self-employment
- Unemployment
- Job density
- Creative jobs
- Knowledge intensive jobs
- Low paying jobs
- Income after housing costs
- Work-related benefits claimants
- Claimants who are 16-24
- Children in relative low-income households
- Residents in occupation classes 6, 7, 8, 9

Digital connectivity

- Digital propensity score

Skills – high quality skills training

- Residents with no qualifications
- Residents with Level 4+ qualifications

Health – healthy life expectancy

- IMD healthy and disability sub domain
- Self-rated general health

Well-being

- Deprivation in at least two dimensions
- Priority places for food
- Population not living within 300m of green space

Pride in place – satisfaction with town centre and engagement in local community

- Local election turnout
- Residents who cannot speak English well or at all

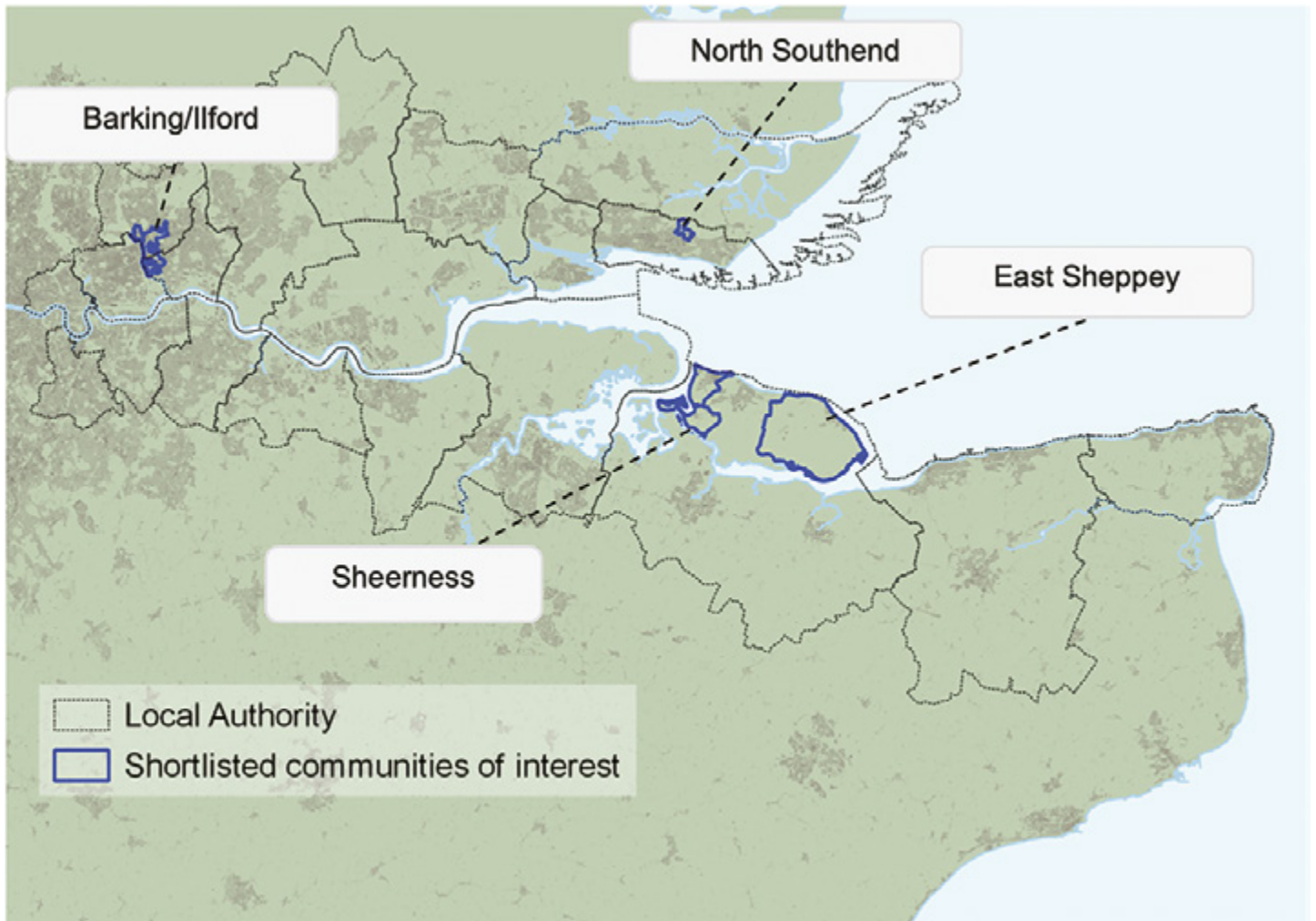
Housing – rents will have secure path to ownership, non-decent homes to have fallen

- Housing affordability ration
- Household overcrowding

Crime – homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood violence will have fallen

- Annual deprivation index

Appendix 2) Communities of interest in detail



From our longlist, we chose four LSOA clusters as our COIs: north Southend, Barking/Ilford, Sheerness, and east Sheppey. These areas were chosen because they enabled us to capture in depth the very different types of challenges that exist along the Thames Estuary – spanning both sides of the River Thames and running across inner city, town, and rural areas.

This information could be extrapolated to understand the experiences of other regions. The rationale for choosing two COIs on the Isle of Sheppey was that we wanted to understand the specific nature of rural deprivation, which is particularly acute in east Sheppey. Following is a short data profile of each COI.

North Southend (Essex)



The COI in Southend-on-Sea has many young residents and residents over the age of 65.

Neighbourhoods here experience deprivation in terms of pay, living standards, and opportunity. A high proportion of residents are economically inactive or unemployed. There is significant deprivation due to health and disability, and many have left the workforce because they are experiencing long-term illness or disability or are looking after their home or family. There are also high crime rates.

Headline statistics:

- 14.8% of the population is over the age of 65.
- 87.4% of the population is White.
- 46% of residents are economically inactive, including 8% who are looking after home or family and 12% who are experiencing long-term illness or disability.
- All LSOAs are within the worst 10% nationally for the health domain of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.
- 9.5% of residents rate their general health as bad or very bad.

The following locations are expected to experience similar challenges:

Ramsgate and Margate, Thanet

Neighbourhoods in Ramsgate experience acute deprivation in relation to economic inactivity, unemployment, and low-paying work. Residents are likely to face barriers to employment (e.g. due to illness and disability), having fewer formal qualifications and lower digital proficiency. Within Margate, residents face similar challenges, with a high proportion of economic inactivity and low-paying opportunities. Here, residents are likely to face food insecurity, and there is limited access to green space.

Chatham, Medway

There is a high rate of economic inactivity due to residents having caring responsibilities or experiencing long-term illness or disability. There is a low jobs density and few opportunities in creative or knowledge sectors. There is a high proportion of residents with no qualifications. Many residents are also experiencing food insecurity.

Basildon

There is significant overall deprivation and a high proportion of residents without qualifications in Basildon. The area also has specific health challenges, and residents face barriers to accessing the goods and services they need, including food and green space.

Ilford/ Barking (London)



The COI in Barking/Ilford straddles Redbridge and Barking and Dagenham local authorities. The population is highly diverse, with most residents from Asian and Asian British/Welsh backgrounds and a smaller but significant proportion from Black and Black British/Welsh/African/Caribbean backgrounds. There are many families with dependent children and a large working-age population.

Neighbourhoods experience deprivation in terms of pay, living standards, and community. There are high rates of economic inactivity, and the area has experienced a large increase in work-related benefits claimants. Housing is increasingly unaffordable in comparison to income, and many people live in overcrowded households. There is also a language barrier for many residents.

Headline statistics:

- 37.2% of the population is under the age of 24.
- 56.6% of the population is Asian and Asian British/Welsh with a high proportion of residents of South Asian ethnicity (Pakistani, 20%; Indian, 17%; and Bangladeshi, 14.4%).
- 24.4% of households are lone-parent families with dependent children.
- 39% of residents are economically inactive.
- There was a 60% increase in work-related benefits claimants between 2011 and 2021.
- 25% of households are overcrowded.
- 9% of residents can't speak English well or very well.
- This is one of the most deprived places in the country regarding housing affordability and outdoor environment deprivation.

The following locations are expected to experience similar challenges:

Stratford, Newham

There is acute deprivation with high economic inactivity, low incomes, and a high proportion of residents who are in work and claiming benefits. The area has acute health challenges, with low self-rated general health and a high proportion of reception pupils who are obese. Residents also face the challenges of household overcrowding, and a high proportion cannot speak English well.

Woolwich, Greenwich

There is deprivation in relation to unemployment and incomes, and the proportion of working residents who are claiming benefits is high. There is also limited access to green space and high crime rates. Household overcrowding is a challenge, and a high proportion of residents cannot speak English well.

Sheerness (Kent)



The COI in Sheerness and Queenborough has a majority White population. The working-age population is relatively small, and there are high proportions of young people.

Neighbourhoods experience deprivation in terms of pay, living standards, and opportunity. There are high rates of economic inactivity and unemployment, with low average incomes. Nearly a third of residents aged 16+ have no qualifications. The area is relatively isolated and faces barriers to accessing food.

Headline statistics:

- 35.2% of the population is under 24.
- 95% of the population is White.
- 12.5% of households are lone-parent families with dependent children.
- 45% of residents are economically inactive, and 5% are unemployed.
- 31% of residents have no qualifications.
- 9% of residents have bad or very bad health.
- Seven out of eight LSOAs are within the top 20% for Priority Places for Food.

The following location is expected to experience similar challenges:

Canvey Island, Castle Point

Residents of Canvey Island are likely to face barriers to accessing opportunity due to having poor health, fewer formal qualifications, or a lack of digital access. Average incomes are also low, and there are areas with food security challenges.

East Sheppey (Kent)



The COI in east Sheppey is a largely rural area. Over half of residents are aged 50+, and a third are over the age of 65.

Neighbourhoods experience deprivation in terms of pay, living standards, and opportunity. There are high rates of economic inactivity and poor general health, with low average incomes. This area has the second highest proportion of residents with no qualifications in the Thames Estuary. Accessibility to infrastructure, essential services, and opportunities is an issue, and the area is the fourth most deprived in the Priority Places for Food Index in the Estuary.

Headline statistics:

- 58% of residents aged 16+ are economically inactive, 9% due to long-term sickness or disability.
- 75% of jobs are in low-paying industries.
- Household income after housing costs is £21,300 (2018).
- This area has the twelfth-lowest digital propensity of neighbourhoods within the Estuary.
- 13.2% of residents have poor general health, the second worst in the Thames Estuary.

The following location is expected to experience similar challenges:

Hoo Peninsula, Medway

Neighbourhoods on the east and west of the Hoo Peninsula have high rates of economic inactivity and low levels of formal qualifications. There is significant health deprivation, and some neighbourhoods have low levels of food security.

Appendix 3) Topic Guide

Thames Estuary Growth Board – Topic guide for engagement with Communities of Interest.

Section	Content	Time	Total time
1. Introduction & housekeeping	<p>Hello, thank you for agreeing to take part in this conversation. This is a piece of research for the Thames Estuary Growth Board – an organisation looking to strengthen the economy in the Thames Estuary area.</p> <p>The conversation will take about 25-30 minutes. Afterwards I will send a short form asking for a few details about you, including an email address so we can send you a voucher to pay you for your time.</p> <p>There are a couple of housekeeping points to begin with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no right or wrong answers, so please feel free to be as honest as possible about your views • There is a lot to get through, so please don't be offended if I move the conversation on • I will record the conversation, and we may share the audio with colleagues • However, everything is completely confidential in terms of names – nothing will be attributed to you, and nothing will use your name 	2	2

Section	Content	Time	Total time
2. Place	<p>I would like to start by talking about the area you live in and your relationship with it.</p> <p>How long have you lived in your neighbourhood?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>If moved in the last few years:</i> Where were you living before? Why did you move here? Did you want to move here? • What are the advantages of living here? • Do you work in the area as well as living here? <p>Do you see yourself living here in five years' time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>If no:</i> Where will you like to have moved to? • <i>Probe:</i> Further into London? Further away from London? Further north/ south? Somewhere else completely? What would your reason for moving be? <p>Where would you say you lived, if someone who did not live in the area asked you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Probe:</i> Town name? Estate name? County name? London? • What would you say is the reputation of this area? What do other people know it for? • Do you feel proud to live in this area? • <i>If yes: Why? If no: Why not?</i> <p>And what would you say is the reputation of the part of the country where you live more generally?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it something you are proud of? Is it positive? • Are there aspects of the area's past that create a shared history? 	7	9

Section	Content	Time	Total time
3. Change	<p>I would now like to talk briefly about changes in the local area.</p> <p>Are you optimistic about the future of the area?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>If yes: Why? If no: Why not?</i> • What are the things you would like to see? • What would make you more optimistic? <p>How would you say the area has changed during the time you have lived here?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Probe:</i> Have you noticed changes in terms of in the people who live here and the makeup of the population? • <i>Probe:</i> Have you noticed changes in terms of the economy and jobs available locally? • Are these changes a good or bad thing? <p><i>For those who feel it has got better:</i> Do you personally feel that you and your family benefit from economic improvements to the area?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you feel included in them? If not: What could be done so that improvements benefited, you personally? <p>Would you generally see others from outside moving to the area as a positive thing for the local community? Or as a negative thing?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel about the relationship with London [<i>for those in Essex/ Kent</i>]/ with Essex/ Kent [<i>for those in London</i>] with somewhere else locally? Would you like to be more connected? • If people move to the area from London does the area as a whole benefit? • How about tourists and visitors? If more people came to visit the local area, would you see that as a positive thing? 	7	16

Section	Content	Time	Total time
4. Trust	<p data-bbox="406 436 1013 470">Next, I would like to talk briefly about trust.</p> <p data-bbox="406 515 1077 582">How well do people in the area get on with one another?</p> <ul data-bbox="406 593 1189 862" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="406 593 1061 627">• <i>Probe:</i> Do people tend to trust each other? <li data-bbox="406 638 1125 705">• How many of those living on or near your street do you know? <li data-bbox="406 716 1189 784">• <i>Probe:</i> How many people within walking distance would you feel able to turn to if you had a problem? <li data-bbox="406 795 1109 862">• <i>Probe:</i> Are there threats to trust or people you don't trust? <p data-bbox="406 907 1109 974">Where do you tend to get your information about what's going on in the wider area?</p> <ul data-bbox="406 985 1141 1052" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="406 985 1141 1052">• <i>Prompt:</i> Social media? Local newspapers? Word-of-mouth? Local TV or radio? Somewhere else? <p data-bbox="406 1108 1157 1142">Are there local leaders who you would tend to trust?</p> <ul data-bbox="406 1153 1157 1265" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="406 1153 1157 1265">• <i>If yes:</i> Who are these people? <i>Prompt:</i> Business owners in the community/ faith leaders/ someone else? 	4	20

Section	Content	Time	Total time
5. Opportunities	<p data-bbox="408 439 1134 510">Lastly, I'd like to talk about opportunities for you and your family.</p> <p data-bbox="408 562 1086 629">Do you feel that local area has the right sorts of opportunities when it comes to jobs and work?</p> <ul data-bbox="408 640 1094 748" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="408 640 1094 707">• What is working well? What would you like to see more of? <li data-bbox="408 719 1027 748">• What is working badly? What is missing? <p data-bbox="408 797 1126 904">Do you feel that the local area has the right sorts of opportunities when it comes to skills, education and training?</p> <ul data-bbox="408 916 1094 1023" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="408 916 1094 983">• What is working well? What would you like to see more of? <li data-bbox="408 994 1027 1023">• What is working badly? What is missing? <p data-bbox="408 1072 1094 1144">How much of a priority is it for you that jobs are local, rather than requiring a travel elsewhere?</p> <ul data-bbox="408 1155 1070 1263" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="408 1155 1070 1223">• What would the impact be for your family if you could work closer to where you live? <li data-bbox="408 1229 1007 1263">• <i>Probe:</i> Driving versus public transport? <p data-bbox="408 1312 1086 1384">Which types of jobs would you like to see more available in the area?</p> <ul data-bbox="408 1395 1174 1621" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="408 1395 1118 1462">• <i>Probe:</i> Short term? Long-term? Flexible hours? Part-time? <li data-bbox="408 1473 1054 1541">• What sorts of businesses would you like to see settle? <li data-bbox="408 1552 1174 1621">• Why would these opportunities help? <i>Probe:</i> Children can live closer. Older relatives can retrain? <p data-bbox="408 1671 1142 1778">Thinking in a longer-term sense, what would be your hopes for the future in terms of yours and your family's job and career?</p> <ul data-bbox="408 1789 1134 1863" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="408 1789 1134 1863">• <i>Probe:</i> Higher wages? Retrain in something else? More sociable 9-5 options? 	8	28

Have you heard much about new businesses setting up in this part of the country?

- *If yes:* Which ones have you heard about? Would you expect this to have a positive impact for you and your family?
- What would be the obstacles to your family and other local people benefiting?

How can employers and businesses settling in the area ensure that local people benefit from new jobs?

- What are the barriers for local people? Probe: Transport? Training? Awareness?
- What can businesses locating do to overcome these barriers?

Section	Content	Time	Total time
6. Conclusion	<p>Thank you very much for taking part in the conversation today. I will send you a follow-up email with a short form including your email address, so that we can pay you for your time.</p> <p><i>Offer to take a postal address to send a voucher, for those without email/ internet.</i></p>	2	30

Appendix 4) Additional Qualitative Findings

In addition to the COI work, we have done other work in Estuary authorities. The below draws upon a range of engagement exercises, conducted for other purposes but relevant to the question of fairness in the Thames Estuary. While there is evidence for only some areas, we expect many of the themes to extend to other local authorities.

i. Identity and pride in place were generally positive across the Thames Estuary within existing research

When engaged in Margate, Tower Hamlets, Barking and Dagenham, Canterbury, and Lewisham, residents expressed pride in where they live and satisfaction with their region while also identifying challenges within the local area.

Margate's Town Deal engagement found that 57% agreed/strongly agreed that they were proud to live in Margate, while 63% in Lewisham were proud to live where they did. Moreover, 74% of residents responding to the Tower Hamlets Residents Survey said they were satisfied with their local area, as did 74% in Canterbury.

There are signs that this attitude might be changing. The Multilevel Regression and Post-stratification (MRP) polling by YouGov from early 2023 looked at attitudes towards change, decline, and the future at every local authority in the UK. The analysis focused on 'Levelling Up' and asked whether people felt that their areas were getting better, getting worse, or staying about the same. Of 363 authorities polled, 142 said their area was declining. All the Thames Estuary authorities on both the north and south sides of the river fell into this group, with the exception of Newham and Greenwich. A similar sentiment was also reflected in the Havering STAR survey, as 45% of

respondents felt that their neighbourhood had greatly or slightly declined in the last three years.

The YouGov research also identified authorities which local populations describe as 'the sort of place people try to get away from' – as opposed to 'the sort of place that people would like to move to'. The Thames Estuary is also heavily represented among the 'sort of place people try to get away from'.

Sources:

Margate Town Deal: Community and Stakeholder Engagement Summary, October 2020

The focus of this engagement was on developing a shared vision for the future of Margate and understanding the perceptions of the town and the focus for change and development.

Ramsgate Future Investment Plan: Phase 1 Engagement Summary, August 2021

The Thanet District Council asked local people and stakeholders to join the conversation about the future of Ramsgate.

Tower Hamlets mid-pandemic residents survey, June 2021; Barking & Dagenham residents survey, 2021; Canterbury City Council residents survey, 2019; Lewisham residents survey, autumn 2021

These surveys explored residents' views about the council, services, and local area. *GLA Civic Strength Index, 2022*

This report and tool aimed to begin to measure what makes a strong community to ensure it is understood and valued. *Havering Housing STAR Survey, Nov 2022*
This was a broad-ranging survey of tenants and leaseholders.

MRP Polling, YouGov

This analysed the impact of 'Levelling Up' on local public pride.

Breaking Barriers Innovations Research, Isle of Sheppey

ii. There is evidence of community integration and mixing, especially in London boroughs which are more diverse

In Tower Hamlets, 79% of residents agreed that people from different backgrounds got on well with each other; similarly, in Barking and Dagenham, this figure was 82%. Within other areas, community cohesion was lower. For instance, in Ramsgate, 46% agreed that there was a strong sense of community compared to 25% who did not, and 42% of residents strongly felt that they were a part of their local community. However, there was evidence of a divide between old and new residents.

There were different perceptions of place depending upon the social and economic characteristics of residents and when they moved to the area.

In both Margate and Ramsgate, newer residents were more likely to be proud of where they lived, and the Margate Town Deal survey respondents felt that investment within the area was not necessarily serving long-term residents but rather contributing to an 'us and them' situation. In Lewisham, those in the Affluent Achievers ACORN category of respondents were most likely to be satisfied with their local area as a place to live (92%), and 62% of respondents to the Residents Survey agreed that the gap between the rich and poor was growing.

Overall, feelings of dissatisfaction generally stemmed from the maintenance of local town centres and highstreets and antisocial behaviour. In Ramsgate, over half of those surveyed felt that the area didn't have a thriving town centre and that it wasn't clean and well looked after. In Barking and Dagenham and Havering (Residents' Survey and STAR Survey, respectively), residents felt that crime was an issue within their area. Barking and Dagenham, Newham, Redbridge, and Bexley scored

poorly within the GLA Civic Strength Index Public and Social Infrastructure category.

iii. Residents have identified barriers to opportunity within their local areas

Within Margate, one in three residents did not agree that it was a great place to work, identifying a desire for a more balanced and year-round economy which is less focused on tourism and the arts/creative industries. In Ramsgate, only 29% of businesses surveyed agreed it was a great place to have a business. In Swale, research by Breaking Barriers Innovations into opportunity pathways for residents found that locals faced barriers to identify both the jobs which were available to them and potential career pathways once in employment. The lack of opportunity was especially acute for young people. In Ramsgate, 78% of residents felt that there were no opportunities for young people, and young people themselves didn't feel confident about their chances of building a career there.



Thames Estuary

GROWTH BOARD

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00.01 AM – MONDAY 14 OCTOBER 2024