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Community Understanding(s) of the High Street's Decline in Berwick-upon-Tweed, UK.

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Aim: Drawing from 65 interviews with residents of the rural, coastal Northumberland town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, this brief outlines how the high street's decline is diversely understood and narrativized by various groups in the community.

Summary of Findings:

- Both the high street's decline and its relationship to broader place-based issues are not similarly experienced, understood, or deemed significant across identity groups in Berwick-upon-Tweed.
- For those most marginalized in the community, the decline of the high street reflected broader systematic issues such as the decline of social infrastructure, accessible transport, and affordable retail and disparately impacted their daily lives.
- The extent to which investment in the high street is considered capable of creating structural changes is variable across socio-economic and place-based identity groups.

I. Introduction

Understanding local residents' relationship to the high street is particularly important to addressing the broader long-standing and entrenched decline of coastal communities. These communities are often defined by their histories of deindustrialization (Telford, 2021), declining social infrastructure (Fiorentino et al., 2023; see also Beatty et al., 2008) and high indices of socio-economic deprivation (Centre for Social Justice; Corfe, 2017). However, the relationship between the high street's decline and other entrenched place-based issues as well as its impact on local residents' place-based understandings are not explicitly explored within relevant policy analyses (e.g. House of Lords, 2019; Barton et al., 2022) nor in academic literature focused on subjective experiences of coastal communities (e.g. Bonner-Thompson & McDowell, 2020; McDowell & Bonner-Thompson, 2019; Wenham, 2020).

Therefore, this policy brief outlines how participants from various identity groups in the rural, coastal Northumberland town of Berwick-upon-Tweed narrativized the decline of the high street in relation to their place-based understandings and experiences. Summarizing responses from 65 interviews with Berwick residents, this brief demonstrates that there are diverse, sometimes competing, perspectives on the high street and its decline within the local

community. This includes its relationship to place-based issues, its economic and social significance, and the potential impact of future investment.

II. Research Overview

This policy brief draws from "Solidarities Under Strain: Place-Based Identities in Turbulent times," a Horizon 2020 funded doctoral research project (grant agreement number: 956919) conducted with the Marie Skłodowska--Curie ITN, SOLiDi. "Solidarities under Strain" broadly explores the dynamics of socio-political, place-based solidarities in the Northeast's 'left-behind' rural, coastal communities under the context of intersecting crises. It predominantly focuses upon:

1. The diverse forms of labour that go into maintaining solidarities and forms of place-based identity, pride and collectivity in the context of political crisis.
2. The geohistorical and contemporary tensions and fractures of place that undermine and challenge solidarities, addressing how solidarities may fail, or be overridden.

Given its coastal, rural geography and related place-based conditions, Berwick-upon-Tweed presented a unique opportunity to explore these dynamics, how they are maintained and challenged in the turbulent politics of the present, and their relationship to 'left-behindedness.' Located approximately five kilometers from the Scottish border, it has been described as "one of Northumberland's most deprived towns" with a fragile economy, limited job opportunities, low wages, and limited educational facilities (CCT, 2017: 3; ONS, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Goodair & Kenny, 2019). Furthermore, due to its geographical location, Berwick-upon-Tweed is largely considered isolated and remote despite its transport connections to Newcastle and Edinburgh (Goodair & Kenny, 2019; see also Atterton, 2008). However, there has also been a significant rise of middle-class incomers and retirees into the area, particularly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (ONS, 2021; see also Tighe, 2019). These changes simultaneously illustrate the growth of Berwick's tourist and seasonal economy (Menuge & Dewar, 2009) and the town's increased income inequality (ONS, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2021) over the past decades.

This research utilized a multi-method, qualitative research approach to explore these place-based conditions and their effects on various place-based solidarities. Its methodological framework consisted of ethnographic methods, including interviews, field-observations, photography, and 'walking as method,' and document analysis of archival material, related media, and relevant policy documents. Ethnographic data was collected between July 2022-October 2023 after receiving ethical approval from Durham University in July 2022 and data related to archival, policy, and media analysis was collected from February 2022-October 2023. Ethnographic data was pseudo-anonymized to protect participants' identity. Both sets of data are stored on Durham University's encrypted server. The results and recommendations of this policy brief are derived from 65 interviews with various actors and groups in Berwick-upon-Tweed.

III. Research Results

Result I. Relationship Between the Decline of the High Street and Place-Based Issues

Self-identified long-term locals or members of Berwick's working-class defined the high street in relation to the town's history of deindustrialization, arguing that the decline of Berwick's diverse agricultural economy in the 1980s and 2000s significantly impacted the economic viability of high street and its role in the community (see also Menuge & Dewar, 2009; Jarvis & Holland, 2017). A vast number of interviewees emphasized that the high street's continued decline exacerbated broader place-based issues related to the effects of deindustrialization regardless of whether they had knowledge of Berwick-upon-Tweed's industrial history, however. Crucially, the relationship between the high street's decline and Berwick's other place-based issues—namely, the decline of social infrastructure-- was highlighted across participant responses but was specifically identified as impacting retirees, economically or socially precarious residents, and/or those with limited access to transportation. Key issues included the lack of public transport to reach shopping centres outside of Berwick-upon-Tweed or over the border, the decrease of affordable shopping remaining on the high street, lack of accessible walking infrastructure, lack of affordable housing on the high street or poor housing quality, and the decrease in publicly funded health services on the high street. Relatedly, most participants expressed concern about how the effects of decline would be further exacerbated under the cost-of-living crisis.

Frustrations over the current structure of government and lack of governmental support in resolving these issues of decline, place, and crisis were notably raised across identity groups. A number of participants specifically identified the local Berwick town council's limited capacity. The belief that Berwick Town Council lacked the power to make changes on the high street or in place also coincided with some participants' feelings that Berwick-upon-Tweed was "neglected" or "forgotten" by regional and national branches of government as well as its geographic isolation (December, 2022). These feelings often co-constituted one another and were generally expressed by those who were employed in sectors heavily reliant on governmental support such as non-profits, charities, community interest companies or involved in local community or labor campaigns. Herein, these participants expressed their desire for either local branches of government to have more control in addressing the decline of the high street or for further support/engagement from regional and national governmental institutions to/with grassroots, community initiatives for the high street.

Result II. Competing Understandings of the High Street's Significance

The majority of research participants expressed that the decline of the high street was an issue for Berwick-upon-Tweed. However, the extent that participants considered the high street's decline to have an impact on Berwick-upon-Tweed's socio-economic potential and community varied across identity groups. Particularly for those who self-identified as incomers from urban areas, retirees, or middle-class residents, the high street was not considered representative of what Berwick-upon-Tweed broadly "had to offer" (August, 2022). Many of these participants instead stressed Berwick's unique border history, its natural beauty as a rural, coastal town, its viability as an attractive historical site, and its growing arts and cultural scene. Notably, those who identified as long-term locals, working-class, or part of Berwick's small youth population (defined here as early to mid 20s-30s) also

recognized these more positive aspects of living in Berwick-upon-Tweed. Where participant responses differed, however, was in relation to each group's belief that the current state of the high street minimized the visibility of these potentially economically lucrative assets as well as undermined the cohesiveness of community.

The different perspectives on the high street's role in defining the conditions and potential of place were particularly illustrated in different groups' comparisons of the high street to other areas in Berwick-upon-tweed, predominately Bridge Street and West Street. In contrast to the town center, retail and services on Bridge and West Street have increased in the last few decades (see also Berwick's Future Partnership, 2010). For many participants who identified as middle-class, retiree, and/or incomers, this growth was perceived as illustrative of Berwick's attractiveness and could help support the growth of its tourist and seasonal economy. However, for those who self-identified as working class or long-term locals, the viability of Bridge Street and West Street was juxtaposed with the 'death' of the town centre. Moreover, these spaces were largely deemed exclusive due to the lack of affordable retailers. They were also perceived as predominantly tourist and/or middle-class areas. Some participants even posed that the growth of these streets and the type of retailers they attracted-- such as boutiques, micro-pubs, independent bookstores, and art galleries--evidenced Berwick's growing gentrification (see also Hubbard, 2019).

Result III. Differential Beliefs Related to the Remit, Benefit, and Effects of Investment

Berwick-upon-Tweed has started to receive financial investment from the North of Tyne Authority and the Borderlands Inclusive Growth deal (Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal, 2021). Notably, specific initiatives of these deals target the regeneration of Berwick's town center, such as the "High Street Challenge" scheme under the North of Tyne Combined authority (Holland, 2022). Nevertheless, understandings of how these investments would impact Berwick-upon-Tweed, their benefits, and their capacity to address the high street's decline was a highly contentious subject for participants:

Many participants who were employed within governmental, civil servant, or regionally and/or nationally supported social support sectors expressed optimism towards this investment and its potentially beneficial influence on the high street and Berwick-upon-Tweed overall. However, this optimism was not shared by those employed by organizations with less governmental funding or for those heavily involved in local grassroots campaigns. These participants broadly believed that funds from these initiatives were disparately distributed across organizations and/or causes and did not inherently help create structural support systems.

In a similar vein, those who identified as working-class, long-term locals, or those with precarious employment expressed uncertainty over who would benefit from these investments and whether they would provide anything more than "superficial changes" (March 2023). Long-term locals felt particularly skeptical, citing the infrastructural changes "often promised by national government" but which "never happened" such as the dualling of the A1 carriageway (February,

2023). Others argued that local regeneration projects supported by this investment would further marginalize or displace working class groups. Notably, participants who identified middle-class or incomers also shared these feelings of uncertainty if they also self-identified as supportive of the Labour party, Liberal Democrats, and/or Green Party.

IV. Key Message and Recommendations:

These diverse understandings and experiences of the high street's decline, its relationship to broader place-based issues, its economic and social significance, and the perceived capacity/ benefits of government investment highlight key tensions regarding the regeneration of high streets in coastal communities like Berwick-upon-Tweed. In relation to these findings, therefore, this policy brief outlines interconnected three recommendations:

I. Engaging with disparate understandings and experiences of the high street's decline and place.

As illustrated, there are diverse perspectives surrounding the high street and its decline in coastal communities like Berwick-upon-Tweed. While engaging with these disparate understandings constructs a more heterogeneous portrait of the high street and its significance, it is important for policy-makers to recognize and engage with how these various perspectives relate to residents' understandings of their place-based identities, histories, and senses of belonging (see Mackinnon et al., 2022). Doing so helps to identify potential obstacles for engagement and ensure high street redevelopment accounts for various groups' needs and desires. Broad engagement, however, is not easily accomplished. Therefore, to maximize participants, policy-makers should promote accessible engagement forums such as holding online and in-person sessions, offering consultations in multiple community areas, engaging with local stakeholders, and outlining the benefits of engagement when advertising.

II. Ensuring regeneration schemes prioritize accessibility and affordability within communities.

Concerns regarding affordability and accessibility to health, social, and retail services as well as housing were central to participant responses. As noted by Hubbard (2019), the redevelopment of the high street often equates to attracting middle-class groups into declining areas (see also Gonzalez, 2018). However, this risks potentially gentrifying these areas. These concerns should be prioritized in high street redevelopment to ensure these groups are not displaced from their communities. To do so, policy makers should situate commercial displacement within more systematic analyses of residential displacement and vice-versa. Policy-makers should also seek to engage with how changes to retail, health services, social services, and housing impact community members' daily lives, their understandings of accessible and affordable spaces, and how they navigate these spaces.

III. Promoting community ownership on the high street.

Underused properties and absent landlords were highlighted by a number of residents in Berwick-upon-Tweed. This issue is also reflective of a broader trend for spatial ownership on coastal and rural high streets (see Armstrong & Wiejack-Roy, 2023; Leyshon & French, 2009). To therefore address the diverse needs and desires of various groups and ensure accessibility and affordability, investment should be targeted at local community ownership initiatives that aim to 'buy back' these properties. Recent research on high street community ownership (e.g. Craig et al., 2023; Dobson, 2022; Lee and Swan, 2020) demonstrates that community ownership models of development offer a greater sense of ownership and agency within communities and greater participation from various identity groups. Future investment should therefore be targeted at promoting these initiatives rather than supporting 'top-down' models of regeneration.

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