

INDUSTRIAL COMMUNITIES CROSS PARTY GROUP

NOTES OF MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 25TH FEBRUARY 2021 VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

1. JOINING THE MEETING

Vikki Howells MS, Chair; Robin Lewis, Office of Vikki Howells MS; Cllr D White, Bridgend CBC; Peter Slater, ICA Wales; Steve Fothergill, Sheffield Hallam University; Joan Dixon ICA National Secretariat; Cllr Dai Davies, Blaenau Gwent CBC; Cllr Gareth Jones Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC; Cllr Robert Wood Neath Port Talbot CBC; Cllr Graham Thomas, Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC; Alun Davies MS; Julie Davies Neath Port Talbot CBC; Alun Taylor CRT; Paul Hudson Caerphilly CBC; Callum Mcorley, Office of Huw Irranca Davies MS; Alexander Still, Office of Hefin David MS; Stephanie Lynch, Office of David Rees MS; Abigail Chatterjee, Office of Helen Mary Jones MS; Gareth Richards, Office of Dawn Bowden MS; Cllr Jayne Brencher, Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC.

2. Apologies

David Rees MS; Dai Lloyd MS; Dawn Bowden MS; and Angela Burns MS.

3. Welcome

Vikki Howells MS welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced Professor Steve Fothergill, Sheffield Hallam University, co-author of the report commissioned by the ICA and CRT on the impact of the Coronavirus Crisis on older industrial Britain.

4. Professor Steve Fothergill, Sheffield Hallam University.

Professor Fothergill began his presentation with an outline of how his research examined the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the health, economy and labour markets of older industrial Britain, bringing together a wide range of official statistics to plug the evidence gap.

Starting with the situation prior to the pandemic he emphasized that much of older industrial Britain was already lagging behind in terms of the following key indicators: populations were older and less healthy and at higher risk from the virus; there were higher numbers on disability benefits; output (GVA) per job was lower; job growth had been slower between 2012 and 2019; overall job densities were lower.

Moving on to the impact of the pandemic on public health he explained how the rate of confirmed infections in older industrial Britain was 10-20% above the UK average. This was particularly evident in the Valleys

with Merthyr Tydfil, for example, having a rate of 10,570 per 100,000 population compared to a UK rate of 6,200. Limited opportunities for working from home may have been one explanatory factor, given that only 38% of the workforce in coalfield areas were able to do so compared to 48% in London. The cumulative death rate per 100,000 population revealed a similar pattern with areas such as Rhondda Cynon Taf recording a rate of 326 compared to the UK average of 113. The reasons for the difference in death rates were unclear but the most likely explanation was the higher proportion of vulnerable people with the populations of older industrial areas including greater proportions of older people and those with long-term health problems.

Turning to the impact of the pandemic on the economy and labour markets, the meeting was informed that roughly one third of jobs in the coalfields were eligible for furloughing, which was about the same as the UK as a whole. However, if a third of those who are furloughed eventually lose their jobs, this could result in an extra 230,000 redundancies in older industrial areas of which 80,000 will be in former coalfields.

The research also revealed that the claimant unemployment rate among 16-24 year olds had doubled in older industrial areas, standing at 10% in Blaenau Gwent, for example, which compares to the UK average of 7.3%. The overall out of work and in work benefit claimant rates had also increased significantly in older industrial areas.

Professor Fothergill concluded his presentation with the following points: older industrial Britain entered the pandemic lagging behind the rest of the country; the public health crisis in older industrial Britain was worse; there has been substantial damage to the economy of older industrial Britain which will still lag behind most of the country when the crisis recedes. He went on to state that the evidence shows that the problems of older industrial Britain have been made substantially worse by the pandemic, and that there is a pressing need for the government to stick with the levelling up agenda.

The Chair thanked Professor Fothergill for his presentation, and there followed a discussion on the report's findings. Cllr Graham Thomas, RCT CBC, commented that the pandemic was the latest in a series of events impacting on older industrial areas, which included the financial crisis, austerity, Brexit and climate change. He also made reference to the impact of technology on the nature of work and the role of measures such as a universal basic income.

Cllr Jayne Brencher welcomed the report and emphasized the need for the UKSPF and the Barnett Formula to properly address the economic inequalities revealed by the research, whilst Cllr David White queried the long-term impact of the virus on employment. In a wider context, Alun Davies MS referred to the complexity of regenerating the valleys, the role of the public sector and the importance of connectivity and the

delivery of the metro. Reference was also made to the report he commissioned from the Bevan Foundation on the A465 HOV corridor, which it was agreed to circulate.

5. Future topics

Vikki Howells suggested that it would be useful to have a joint meeting between the Industrial Communities Cross-Party Group and the Westminster APPG.

6. Closing remarks.

Vikki Howells thanked everyone for their contribution and support and commented on the value and high quality of the information and research provided by the ICA.

Peter Slater
Industrial Communities Alliance Wales
8 March 2021