

From prosperity to polarisation: the unlikely town insurgency and the EU Referendum

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Research recently published by the Centre for Cities has identified the cities and towns in the UK where workers' wages are lowest¹. Of these places, many usual suspects are identified. Places like Barnsley, Doncaster and Wigan are following the EU referendum branded 'Leaver' towns, marking a 'revenge of the places that don't matter'². Sat unexpectedly alongside them was the southern town of Worthing. A similar 'Leaver' town, places such as Worthing offer an interesting story in relation to dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Close to Brighton, near the South Downs National Park and in prime London commuter belt, Worthing is on the face of it an unlikely place for such problems. It is in many ways archetypally British, or rather English. It is also my hometown. A seaside conurbation with a façade of fading Victorian hubris and post-war brutalist aberration, it seemed during the depressed 1980's somewhere safe and prosperous. Whilst deindustrialisation drove through much of the UK, in Worthing businesses prospered with the town centre perpetually busy. Common sights of derelict land, closed factories, and empty houses were rarely problems here. Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, the key civic issue I recollect was not unemployment or Government cuts, but growing communal anger over increasingly costly parking in town. To claim the place rooted in provincial concerns would not be overstepping the mark.

Evolving spatial and structural tendencies of the economy have had a profound impact on Worthing. Housing demand in the area remains high. Distribution of job classes and changing demographics have however uncovered problems. A place perennially popular with day-trippers and retirees, increased mass communication and commercial travel saw these demographics converge. As a result, internal consumer demand has rationalised, and expectation of continued growth on several fronts – town centre, out-of-town, online – has taken its toll on retail functions. Large white-collar service employers have disappeared, with jobs offshored, automated, or consolidated into larger operations.

Response to this erosion has come in two forms. First is a tendency toward outmigration for employment. Around 18% of working residents leave Worthing daily³. This figure has seen pronounced increase in those working further from their homes, becoming more pronounced in line with distance travelled⁴. Second is a response to the town's distinctive population. Worthing is a retirement destination ahead of the curve of an ageing population, with 22.5% aged 65+ (18% for

¹ <http://www.centreforcities.org/press/uk-towns-cities-highest-lowest-wages/>

² <https://voxeu.org/article/revenge-places-dont-matter>

³ Annual Population Survey 2016-17

⁴ UK Census 2001; 2011

England) and 4% aged 85+ (2.4% England). Demands of this demographic has seen the Health sector become Worthing's biggest employer, providing 24% of jobs.

Such structural changes have had notable effects on the segmentation of Worthing's population, consolidating in three specific groups. First of these are middle-class professionals. Despite restructuring, 50% of employment in Worthing is in skilled professional occupations. Access to such occupations sees workers travelling greater distances as local roles have thinned out. Commuter belt location and good transport infrastructure (Southern Rail notwithstanding) benefit this demographic. Proximity to Brighton and London offers orthodox trickle-down benefits. Within Worthing, a number of core considerations for this group are met; good schools, healthcare, natural environment. The employment-proximity issue may however explain a detachment between civic culture and citizen, profession replacing place for much social interaction alongside utilisation of virtual over physical networks.

The second group represents the other side of the employment sector. With predominantly low skilled and increasingly insecure occupations, challenges facing this demographic are exacerbated through a housing market with little sensitivity to local income polarisation. Employment in Worthing has been perpetually strong comparative to national figures. Housing-based cost-of-living however presents a distinctive problem. Worthing's average wage of £455 p/w is just higher than Barnsley's of £453 p/w. In comparison, an average two-bedroom house costs £270k in Worthing and £89k in Barnsley⁵. Extrapolating average weekly wages to annual earnings, such a premises in Worthing is 11½ times the average annual salary. The mix of such escalating costs alongside insecure employment and low wages presents a cycle of ongoing pressures and financial hardship.

The final group is the retired community. In towns such as Worthing, this demographic is very influential. Increasing levels of frailty shape funding in local infrastructure, investment interests underwrite a dysfunctional local housing market, and service demands reinforce local dependency on low skilled employment.

Such tensions perhaps partly explain why seemingly prosperous towns such as Worthing elected to leave the EU. The extent of this insurgency is however limited. The referendum result here was marginal, just ahead of the national vote at 53% Leave to 47% Remain. Any challenge to the establishment was muted at the last General Election. In both local parliamentary constituencies the Conservatives were re-elected, although a swing from other parties toward Labour was noted.

The changing structure of places like Worthing does however pose serious questions public policy is struggling to resolve. First of these is about the equity of successful or prosperous places. Polarisation based on occupational skills in terms of wages and security continues to widen. Ongoing success in certain towns and cities at the cost of welfare standards for citizens in more vulnerable employment is a common problem. Perhaps this is why threats of economic slowdown after leaving the EU raise muted concern, fast growth failing to fulfil promises beyond expected gratitude for employment on increasingly feudal terms.

⁵ Home.co.uk

A second question is around the reform of such places considering the changing nature of production and consumption. Retraction of large employers from Worthing has left notable employment gaps. Whilst local markets adapt to maintain relatively healthy employment figures, the quality of this employment is questionable. The changing nature of sectors such as retail present growing problems for secondary centres, unable to offer either quantum or diversity. Adaptation here faces significant structural challenges for people and amenities. Each requires major investment.

Finally, and perhaps controversially, is balancing the needs of resident groups. Worthing's ageing demographic has huge influence on the distribution of public investment, mix of local services, and increasing cost barriers to people in insecure employment. Growing in demand and intensity, needs of the retired community cannot be ignored. Too often however this occurs at the cost of more strategic concerns to maintain prosperous places and represent prolonged needs of a wider group of residents.