

POLICY BRIEF

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Towards a more local caring economy: Addressing 'care work' in the Pathways to Work Strategy in Barnsley

Summary

This policy brief advocates for the 2024 Pathways to Work Strategy published by Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council to incorporate a care work approach in its implementation. Care work involves an ethics of care to ensure that people's wellbeing is maintained and repaired in inclusive and democratic ways. Without this approach, the Strategy's implementation risks becoming exclusionary and fragmented. Research carried out in 2024 found that volunteering is key to redressing economic inactivity. This brief suggests the Strategy needs to be more inclusive of the contributions of third sector partners for successful implementation. This brief begins with a short background to the Strategy. Recommendations are presented on what the local third sector could do to be more proactive in this Strategy's implementation.



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The absence of ‘care work’ in the Pathways to Work Strategy

In July 2024, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council (hereafter Barnsley Council) published its Pathways to Work Strategy (PtWS), which aims to reduce the levels of economic inactivity, especially among young people. Economically inactive people are not counted as unemployed in national statistics, but as individuals who are out of work and who are not seeking employment due to studying, ill health, caring responsibilities or being of pensionable age.

The PtWS was informed by multi-agency research commissioned to develop an integrated and in-depth diagnosis of South Yorkshire’s economic and employment landscape. Research results were presented by the Pathways to Work Commission to all four South Yorkshire local governments and the mayoral combined authority. Through its holistic methodology, the research unveiled the needs that individuals face in their everyday lives when searching (or not) for a job. The research produced an innovative place-based approach that complemented Barnsley Council’s employability and skills policy. With this research local politicians have also sought to inform national policy – such as the *Get Britain Working* white paper, published in November 2024.

However, the PtWS overlooks the ‘care work’ necessary for its success. Care work is a concept borrowed from feminist and environmental studies, which aims to recognise the paid and unpaid activities that produce and sustain human life and its environment (JTCL, 2024). The concept involves an ethics of care at an individual, collective and systemic level to ensure that people’s wellbeing is maintained and repaired in inclusive and democratic ways (Tronto, 2013:19).

In practice, care work not only includes traditional activities that look after others, such as child and adult care, but also collective activities such as volunteering in communities. Community volunteering is important because it contributes to the making of, and pride in, place. An independent research project, ***Precarious Work, Community and Local Governance*** (Annex 1), shows the importance of volunteering in Barnsley to achieve successful implementation of the PtWS.

This research found that community volunteering is key to providing the social infrastructure and networks that contribute to motivating disadvantaged individuals to join stepping-stone initiatives that lead to the local job market (Guarneros-Meza, 2024). Yet, the PtWS overlooks this crucial aspect. This is surprising given that councillors and officers in Barnsley Council recognise that local government needs community volunteering to provide more adequate support to communities, especially in the governance of its neighbourhoods and wards.

Overlooking the work of volunteers is a missed opportunity in developing a stronger partnership between Barnsley Council and the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in the borough. *The Value of Small* report (CRESR, 2018: 28-29) underlines the added value that small and medium-sized charities generate through their volunteering activities. Charities contribute to the self-development of individuals, which

over time turns into hard outcomes when people improve their skills and access education, training and work.

The PtWS overlooks the added value generated by the VCSE sector - the sector in Barnsley should advocate more strongly about its vital role.

How the VCSE sector can help overcome the omission in the PtWS

The findings of the independent research show the importance of VCSE premises in bringing people together and for people to begin interacting with confidence classes, Level 1 training courses and volunteering. Examples include the Unique Me and Beyond Programme run by the Forge Community Partnership in Hoyland, and the job fair and employability events organised by partners of the Migrant Network in Barnsley town and Big Local Thurnscoe (and its legacy Thurnscoe Regeneration).

Several of these premises are owned or managed by VCSE organisations, but smaller organisations and community groups tend to rely on private funding (e.g. National Lottery, South Yorkshire Community Foundation) to pay their rent. Without these premises, these activities that encourage people to attend stepping-stone initiatives towards work or employment would simply not take place.

Barnsley Council acknowledges this fact. Furthermore, care work practices are not absent from the council's procedures, a case in point its area council teams working as part of the neighbourhood governance model in the borough. In particular, stepping stone initiatives were found in the Central Area, where the area team supports people with special learning needs or poor mental health to build confidence to start a new hobby, volunteer or seek a job. Importantly, these activities also made use of VCSE premises, such as the YMCA.

The support provided by the VCSE sector is important for Barnsley Council, so why is the PtWS not giving the sector a more central role?

In the VCSE sector, the research found care work in the initiatives promoting recovery from the complex challenges posed by deprivation, low social mobility, austerity and ill health in the borough. Among these initiatives is Creative Recovery in Barnsley's Central Area, which brings together creativity and mental health to uplift and renovate green/public spaces, through community volunteering.

Meanwhile, Station House has spent decades making the value of childcare more palpable by supporting working women and their families with after school services in

Thurnscoe. These initiatives are the foundations on which the PtWS is built, but the role of the VCSE sector in building these foundations - that allow people to go to work and that prepare them for work - are not explicitly recognised.

The ethics of care focus of this independent research raised questions about race. Black and minority ethnic groups are a small proportion of the borough's population (3.3%, ONS, 2021); however, that is no reason to overlook this aspect in the PtWS. As part of the Pathways to Work Commission, local government obtained data identifying that BAME groups are more exposed to precarious forms of work.

Precarious work is understood as a combination of contractual insecurity, financial insecurity and lack of employment rights. The *South Yorkshire: City Region Employment Profile* report (Fitzmaurice et al., 2023: 6) states that, within the region, Barnsley 'is the hotspot' of insecure work, while BAME background workers across South Yorkshire are 1.8 times more likely than White workers to experience severely insecure work.

Refugee Action (2024) and FLEX (2024) report how intertwined are racism and labour exploitation of people seeking sanctuary in England. These people are more vulnerable when their rights to access services such as housing, education, employment and health are not explained to them. These experiences chimed with the experiences of the VCSE organisations in the Migrant Network in Barnsley town when helping migrants and refugees.

Furthermore, the volunteering that refugees and asylum seekers carry out in community activities has proved vital in helping people to integrate slowly into Barnsley. Through volunteering and labour integration initiatives, the Migration Partnership¹ aims to overcome the spiralling-down trajectories of migrants and refugees and raise the aspirations of the institutional environment to which they are subject (Migration Partnership Barnsley, 2024). And yet, the PtWS left out race and new comers in its consideration of labour integration.

A more inclusive labour integration is a dimension in which the VCSE sector can play an important role. This should not only be left to those organisations or groups working with migrants and refugees. Instead, the full weight of the VCSE sector is needed to help the PtWS overcome this omission.

Although the quality of labour is not a direct remit of the PtWS, it is included in Barnsley Council's broader 2030 Strategy on economic growth (www.barnsley.gov.uk/services/our-council/barnsley-2030). This is important to consider as the borough hosts several businesses that offer precarious work in the retail, food and logistics sectors, which are likely to carry on dominating the local job landscape

¹ This partnership is formed by Migrant Action, Educational Learning Support Hub, Polska Bioblioteka and Feels Like Home.

in the near future. These jobs are recognised by local government as ‘non-ideal’ jobs, but are expected to be a first step to the job market that can help develop people’s professional careers.

However, the career shift is not automatic, especially for some BAME groups, migrants, people with special educational needs and disabilities as well as people who have suffered from some kind of trauma. Medium and long-term care and support such as the provided by Dearne Electronic Community Village and The Forge Community Partnership are needed. Through their volunteering activities, these non-for-profit organisations specialise in providing ongoing support and encouragement to different beneficiaries.

The absence of this automatic shift in people’s careers underlines once more the importance of the VCSE sector in supplementing the precarity of people’s jobs - through community caring activities and services that combine food provision, child and adult care and stepping-stone initiatives to improve employability and well-being. Given that precarious work is foreseen to remain in Barnsley over the near future, the VCSE sector needs to remember that the insecurity this type of work brings will carry on relying on the communities of care this sector provides.

Recommendations

The importance of care work is key. It provides the foundation for the PtWS and has hitherto been overlooked by Barnsley Council. This poses risks to the implementation of the PtWS despite the recognition by local government officers of the contribution of the VCSE sector in the promotion of employability and skills.

The VCSE sector, especially those organisations and groups that specialise in the provision of employability and skills, should come together and collectively lobby local authorities about the sector’s vital role in making the PtWS implementation more inclusive. The VCSE sector could do this by:

- Flagging the omissions of the PtWS in spaces such as the multi-stakeholder partnerships, where the VCSE and business representatives and local authorities already meet. These spaces could aim for better coordination between VCSE activities and stakeholders included in the chain of provision of the PtWS.
- Requesting that the Employability and Skills Service Division in Barnsley Council carefully unpacks where the VCSE sector is identified in the PtWS implementation plan (as illustrated in page 83 of document). At the moment, the role of the VCSE sector is omitted from such strategy.
- Lobbying local councillors (such as those with Regeneration and Culture, Public Health and Communities portfolios) and trade unions to build better links and information exchanges between the services that the VCSE sector offers and the channels that exist to help people into the employment market.

- Pushing for an agenda that is more inclusive of labour integration beyond the White native population, and is more responsive to the challenges of social integration faced by Barnsley's communities.

By taking a more proactive role, the VCSE sector can become a counterweight to the existing relationship between Barnsley Council and the business sector. The development in the PtWS of a 'good business charter' is a valuable initiative to overcome precarious working conditions. However, the ethos of care that the VCSE sector encompasses and reproduces through its own initiatives and volunteering schemes is also required to achieve a more caring local economy.

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Annex 1: Research Methodology

The research project aimed to study how job insecurity (low paid (or unpaid), short term contract, multiple jobs, self-employment) defines community services provided at a local level by state authorities and other non-state service providers. The project also aimed to identify how blurred boundaries between home, community and work provide new insights into the governance of local service provision in post-industrial towns, with a particular focus on Barnsley borough.

By focusing on community, residents and workers (who may not necessarily live in the same geography as their workplace), the research sought to find answers that explained:

- what are residents and workers doing to make ends meet?;
- what routes are they taking to build networks of support and solidarity?;
- how do people's daily routines blur the spaces between home, community and work?; and
- how can this blurring of spaces inform local service provision regarding learning, employability, and care/support for others?

Visits and research fieldwork took place between September 2023 and September 2024. Data was gathered from 39 informal and formal semi-structured interviews with local government officers, councillors, community members and local VCSE organisations. Also, 24 hours of observation were carried out of community events in Barnsley Town, Hoyland and Thurnscoe. A documentary review of local government reports, webpages and local flyers and magazines was conducted. Finally, the researcher worked as a volunteer at the Educational Learning Support Hub for 30 hours. This experience was very insightful to understand the precarious organisational environment in which many VCSE organisations work to support vulnerable and disadvantaged people, in particular migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

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