



**THE FIRST REPORT OF
THE COMMISSION ON
BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS
TO EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY**
September 2024



CONTENTS

- 0. FOREWORDS**
- 1. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WISE GROUP**
- 2. ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR ACTION**
- 3. ROUNDTABLE INSIGHTS**
- 4. RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICYMAKERS**
- 5. PINPOINTING FOCUS AREAS THROUGH DATA ANALYSIS**

0: FOREWORDS

0.1 Lord Walney Crossbench Peer and Purpose Coalition Engagement Director



The launch of the Commission to Break Down Barriers to Employment comes at a critical time for the country. Britain must come together - pooling collective efforts - to address systemic inequities and create a more inclusive society.

This challenge is critically important, not only for individuals on the ground, but also to the wider economy.

Built through the Wise Group's expert work and relational mentoring, the Commission signifies a bold commitment to identifying and dismantling the wide-ranging obstacles that impede the progress of individuals striving to improve their circumstances. Through collaborative efforts and unwavering determination, the Commission seeks to pave the way for meaningful change, ensuring

that every individual has the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Central to the Commission's activity is the efforts of the Wise Group Relational Mentors, whose invaluable work on the ground exemplifies the transformative power of mentorship and support.

From providing guidance on employment opportunities to offering essential skills development, energy advice, and community justice initiatives, the mentors embody the spirit of compassion and empowerment that lies at the heart of the Wise Group's mission. Their dedication to serving our communities is truly commendable, and their impact is felt far and wide.

With the input of experts, stakeholders, mentors, mentees, those with lived experiences, policymakers, and key community members - this first report sets out the Commission's insights and strategic recommendations from the programme of roundtable discussions and evidence sessions. These recommendations aim to offer bold and practical solutions to the entrenched barriers that hinder progress and employment opportunity.

It is with great pleasure and admiration that I reflect on the remarkable work being undertaken by the Wise Group, an organisation that has firmly established itself as a driving force for positive change within our communities. With a continued commitment to lifting individuals out of the clutches of poverty and creating avenues of opportunity for the most vulnerable in our society, the Wise Group has become a lifeline for individuals, families and communities across Scotland and the North East.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to work alongside Sean, Victoria, and the entire Wise Group team as we work to bring about positive change across communities.

0.2 Sean Duffy Chief Executive of The Wise Group



Breaking Down Barriers to employment opportunity is the underlying mantra of the Wise Group – our inspirational teams work every single day to build bridges to opportunity for the most vulnerable in society, and lift people out of poverty.

It is over 40 years since The Wise Group was founded by Alan Sinclair – our early team focused on unemployment and substandard accommodation in Glasgow, giving people practical skills for the future. We have come from strength to strength and are now one of the largest social enterprises in the UK.

Our colleagues are at the forefront of everything we do – and we make an impact on people’s lives not only through our work, but the values we uphold

From our employee charity fund which donates to a wide range of causes, to the food bank we run to serve the community, maintained by donations from our team. We work every day to build better lives, better communities, and stronger business – and we don’t do it alone.

That’s why I am delighted to be working with the Purpose Coalition on the Commission on Breaking Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity. Over the last twelve months, we’ve brought together leading businesses, universities, those with lived experience and our colleagues to consider how we can break down the barriers to employment opportunity by improving skills, tackling fuel poverty, and community justice.

Whatever your political views, the General Election on 4th July was a moment of change – a moment to think about how the government works and makes progressive changes for society, and to help the most vulnerable.

The recommendations in this report are practical, simple to implement, and will have a long-term and meaningful impact on society – in the long term, saving money.

I hope that these recommendations set the standard for how society can better serve people’s lives. Over the coming months, we’ll campaign to win people’s support for these changes – and to implement them – and I look forward to continuing to work with the Purpose Coalition on the Commission to break down the barriers to employment opportunity for all.



I.O AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WISE GROUP

The Wise Group, with a history spanning over four decades, was established amidst the backdrop of 1983 Glasgow, a city grappling with the dual challenges of staggering unemployment and poor housing. The group's inception was an act of social innovation, spearheaded by Alan Sinclair and his diligent team, who sought to empower the unemployed with practical skills, while also striving to improve living conditions through widespread home insulation projects.

The Wise Group is an organisation central to driving the much-needed positive change across the UK, transforming outcomes for individuals, including through community Relational mentoring.

Through this underpinning commitment, its team of professional mentors empowers over 85,000 people annually towards critical employment opportunities – critically it is also working to alleviate fuel poverty for the most vulnerable and supporting prison leavers in forging a brighter path. At the core of its mission lies a bold ambition: to generate a staggering £1.5 billion in social return on investment for the whole of the UK over the next five years.

Operating on a national scale, the Wise Group offers a distinctive perspective on intersecting societal challenges - energy, employability, skills, and justice. Through its insightful series, on the back of the invaluable experiences of both mentors and clients, the organisation is achieving actionable solutions. Over the past few years, it has released a number of critical reports, amplifying the voices of those grappling with poverty and adversity, shedding light on the multifaceted struggles faced within homes, workplaces, and communities.

Central to its approach is the role of its professionally trained mentors, who engage with the most vulnerable individuals and households, addressing up to 15 fundamental needs including housing, addiction, employability, and energy security. By fostering trusting and candid relationships, Wise Group mentors serve as catalysts for sustainable change, bridging the gap between data and impactful action.

The aims of the organisation are underpinned by Relational Mentoring, grounded in the belief that comprehensive support across diverse needs delivers enduring results. Unlike traditional services that often address singular issues, such as employment, the Wise Group's holistic approach acknowledges and tackles underlying challenges that cause these challenges. Developed over four decades and informed by the input of both mentors and mentees, Relational Mentoring is defined by its evidence-based progression, compassionate guidance, and unwavering belief in individual potential.

Tailored to each unique circumstance, the Wise Group's Relational Mentoring Framework addresses key areas of need, employing crisis management, coaching, advocacy, listening, and mentoring to deliver life-changing transformative journeys. By going beyond conventional boundaries between health, employment, energy, and housing support, the organisation empowers individuals to access the full spectrum of assistance necessary for sustainable change.

As it embarks on its critical mission to deliver £1.5 billion in social impact over the next five years, the Wise Group remains committed to nurturing holistic, enduring transformations within communities across the UK.

1.2. Breaking Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity

The Wise Group and Purpose Coalition have partnered to launch a Commission on Breaking Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity, bringing together experts and stakeholders to address key challenges in employment accessibility for vulnerable groups.

The inaugural session of the Commission on Breaking Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity, held on December 12th, brought together Wise Group Relational Mentors, former Secretary of State for Education and Purpose Coalition Chair Rt Hon Justine Greening, Wise Group Chief Executive Sean Duffy and Wise Group's Director of Engagement and Policy, Victoria Carson.

The Commission then focused more closely on each of the key identified barriers to employment facing Britain – skills, fuel poverty, and the integration of prison leavers back into positive destinations.

On 29th January 2024, the Wise Group launched a new A Way to Work: Relational Mentoring and the Future of Employability report in the House of Commons, hosted by Shadow Minister Chi Onwurah MP, which was attended by dozens of cross-party MPs including Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee Rt Hon Stephen Timms, Employment Minister Jo Churchill, and a number of SNP Shadow Spokespersons.

Crucially, it featured a panel discussion with Wise Group colleagues, sharing the lived experiences of mentoring individuals and the fostering of employability skills – chaired by Lord Walney.

Following the first session, the Commission then discussed the launch of The Wise Group's latest report on fuel poverty – Fuel Poverty in the UK Tracker 2024. This report followed on from a comprehensive piece of work the organisation undertook at the height of the energy crisis at the end of 2023. The Commission held a roundtable in Westminster on Fuel Poverty, chaired by Lord Walney and Sean Duffy, focusing on the Wise Group's critical research.



The session was attended by a number of leading energy suppliers, industry regulators, and Wise Group colleagues.

Moving on to Justice, the Commission held a key visit and subsequent roundtable, in partnership with leading Purpose Coalition member Sodexo, with Ruth Cadbury MP – Shadow Minister for Prisons Parole and Probation.

The Commission visited HMP Durham, discussing key challenges and potential solutions to the current barriers to employment for prison leavers – as well as successes across the region as a result of the Wise Group's groundbreaking work. Most recently, as part of the Commission's work on skills it held a roundtable in Westminster with Lord John Walney, former Shadow Skills Minister and current crossbench peer. The discussion focused on the current leading relational mentoring work undertaken by the Wise Group, the barriers to both functional and soft skills, and the potential learnings for policymakers.





2.0 ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR ACTION

Across the UK, the convergence of a number of wide-ranging socio-economic challenges - exacerbated by the enduring repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic, increases in the cost-of-living, and entrenched intergenerational poverty - has led to profound impact on the employment landscape. Against this backdrop, the need for decisive action to dismantle barriers to employment has never been more pressing.

Labour market dynamics reveal concerning trends. Job vacancies across diverse sectors are on a steady decline, while the number of individuals unable to work due to long-term sickness has soared to historically unprecedented levels.

The total hours worked have also declined to below pre-pandemic levels, indicative of a labour market struggling to regain its footing - and illustrated by the overwhelming economic inactivity numbers. Standing at a 20.8% inactivity rate currently affecting around 8.68 million people². Most concerning, this figure is 231,000 higher than before the pandemic, however, has decreased by 45,000 people from the last quarter of 2023.


Bringing people currently outside of the workforce closer to employment opportunities and supporting them to flourish and progress is critical to these challenges. However, there is an underlying and increasing trend in in-work or 'working' poverty as a result of a steep rise in households bills and day-to-day expenses.

Factors including high inflation, stagnant wages, and increasing costs of essential goods and services have compounded the issue, rendering it increasingly difficult for individuals to meet their basic needs.

In-work poverty disproportionately affects under-resourced and underrepresented groups, including women and ethnic minorities, who are more likely to occupy low-paying roles, zero-hours contracts, and face challenges balancing work and caregiving responsibilities. Young people, older people, and those with disabilities also experience compounded barriers to accessing sustainable employment opportunities.

Organisations like the Wise Group and its Commission to Break Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity are critical - looking beyond just placing people into a job, supporting the most vulnerable with the intersectional nature of challenges facing them including, critically, steep rises in the price of energy.

The steep rises in the prices of energy are directly causing both energy insecurity and fuel poverty, as well as compounding wider challenges for many across Britain.



The number of households described as in fuel poverty by charity National Energy Action (NEA) increased from 4.5 million in October 2021 to 6.7 million in October 2022, dropping to an estimated 6.5 million households by January 2024. A household living under ‘fuel poverty’ is defined as having to spend a high proportion of their household income to keep their property at a reasonable temperature, however many more households, due to the increases in costs across the board on day-to-day expenses, are classified as ‘fuel poor’ - spending 10% of household income on energy to provide a satisfactory heating regime.

The Government itself has estimated that nearly 9 million households across the UK - 15% of households nationally - could be classified as ‘fuel poor’ using this definition, which is double the estimated level in 2021. This is leading to record levels of energy-related debt, with Ofgem reporting £3.1 billion of energy debt nationally.

The threat of debt further exacerbates the precariousness of employment, with increasing spending on debit and credit cards and a rise in potential redundancies. As a result of energy prices and wider rises in the cost of living, the ONS have

recently confirmed growing concerns regarding a coupling between growing debt and unstable employment. The research also found that in the last quarter of 2023 direct debit failure increased by 7%, driven by increases in the categories “electricity and gas” and “loans”.

The challenges facing those seeking employment, employers themselves, and the most vulnerable households are intersectional and converge as a result of wider socioeconomic challenges.

In this context, the key role of the Commission in pooling political and industry expertise, led by the Wise Group, in breaking down barriers to employment is clear. As we confront the wide-ranging challenges facing the country collaborative efforts aimed at fostering inclusion opportunity, and economic empowerment are vital in paving the way towards a more equitable future.

The Commission has focused in three key areas currently representing the biggest challenges to potential employees, and the wider labour market: Fuel Poverty, Employability, and Justice.



2.1.1 Fuel Poverty

Through the Commission, the Wise Group has contributed towards a wide-ranging agenda, including combatting fuel poverty for the most vulnerable people across the UK. It has conducted internal research into the impacts of the energy crisis on its mentees, giving critical insights into the specific challenges of groups across Britain.

The Wise Group's Home Energy Advice Team (HEAT) is a critical support network for households grappling with fuel poverty across the UK. Operating as a GB-wide service, HEAT offers both telephone and in-person relational mentoring support to address a spectrum of energy-related challenges. In the face of the cost-of-living crisis, HEAT helped over 25,000 households in 2022 alone across England, Scotland, and Wales.

Underpinning HEAT's approach is a commitment to holistic support, including energy efficiency measures, budgeting assistance, retrofitting initiatives, financial aid access, debt relief, and negotiation with energy suppliers. This comprehensive approach not only alleviates immediate financial burdens but also fosters longer-term, sustainable change through relational mentoring.

Throughout 2023, HEAT's impact was been profound, with millions of pounds in financial support distributed and substantial debts cleared. Critically, the Wise Group has also logged interviews and testimonies of over 300 mentees. These interviews have unveiled the stark realities faced by individuals and families struggling with fuel poverty, feeding in100 the wider work of the Commission as one of the three focus areas.

The findings outlined below include a number of interconnected challenges, including low income, unemployment, escalating energy costs leading to self-disconnection, and deteriorating mental health. These challenges not only perpetuate the cycle of fuel poverty but also serve as barriers to accessing employment opportunities.

The critical role of HEAT extends beyond addressing immediate energy needs; it serves as a vital conduit in breaking down barriers to employment. By alleviating financial burdens, mitigating energy-related stresses, and providing essential support services, HEAT empowers individuals to navigate the complexities of the labour market with greater resilience and confidence.

The evidence collected through HEAT's relational mentoring initiatives not only informs the development of tailored support interventions but also contributes invaluable insights to the wider challenge of breaking down barriers to employment opportunities, addressing the intersectional needs of individuals and families grappling with fuel poverty.

The research conducted by the Wise Group was presented in two crucial reports – Lifting People out of Fuel Poverty (2023) and Fuel Poverty in the UK Tracker (2024). The reports fed into and underpinned the Commission which has followed up the two reports with engagement across the industry with key suppliers and regulators.

2.2. Key Evidence

The evidence collected by the Wise Group outlines the profound intersectional impact of fuel poverty on individuals' lives and its far-reaching implications for employment opportunities across Britain.

Through its comprehensive relational mentoring approach, the Wise Group has gained invaluable insights into the number of, and wide-ranging challenges faced by households grappling with the cost-of-living crisis and fuel poverty.

Key findings from the research by mentors with mentees shed light on the pervasive impact of fuel poverty on physical and mental health, employment status, and overall wellbeing:

1. Over two-thirds of individuals reliant on prepayment meters reported adverse effects on their physical health due to the cost-of-living crisis.
2. Nearly 50% of the families in employment have resorted to visiting food banks.
3. Disabled individuals bear a disproportionate burden, with over 80% reporting a deterioration in physical health attributed to rising bills.
4. Retired respondents, comprising 43% of respondents, are forced to ration food when faced with financial constraints, highlighting the stark choices faced by vulnerable groups.
5. The impact on mental health is equally stark, with four in five single parents reporting adverse effects attributable to the cost-of-living crisis.
6. The implications of the evidence for employment are profound, with financial instability and mental health challenges hindering individuals' ability to secure and maintain employment. The erosion of household finances and the strain of fuel poverty threaten to exacerbate existing inequalities, perpetuating cycles of deprivation and dependency.





2.2. Employability

The Commission, led by the Wise Group, has identified another underpinning pillar critical to breaking down barriers to employment opportunity – people’s employability and the current employability offering. Building upon its previous strategies and research, underpinned by relational mentoring, the Wise Group has delivered a range of employability and mentoring services aimed at enhancing the impact for mentees.

In this section, the Commission engages with a snapshot of recent Wise Group services, each providing valuable insights into the requirements for future services. These initiatives highlight a fundamental reality – individuals facing challenges in employment encounter obstacles that extend well beyond their own employability. Only by addressing the holistic needs of individuals and their households, encompassing factors such as fuel poverty, health, rural issues, and confidence, can the attainment of meaningful employment become achievable and sustainable.

One key initiative undertaken by the organisation contributing to the wider work of the Commission was Wise Steps, a social inclusion service that was delivered across Tyne and Wear from 2016 to 2023.

Tailored to individuals of working age confronting various challenges to employment, Wise Steps played a central role in facilitating access to employment opportunities, fostering work experience, enabling the attainment of qualifications, and improving overall wellbeing and life choices for participants over 9 years.

By leveraging the Wise Group’s experience in relational mentoring and wider holistic approach that has produced significant research evidence, the Commission seeks to build upon these foundations, offering actionable insights and recommendations to drive positive change on employability across Britain.

2.2.1 Key Evidence

The wide-ranging evidence from the Wise Group's focus and work in boosting employability outlines the significance of relational mentoring in addressing the varied challenges faced by individuals seeking employment opportunities.

Through initiatives like Wise Steps, the Wise Group has gained unique insights into the effectiveness of its approach in supporting personal growth, skill development, and successful transitions into employment.

Over the course of its operation, Wise Steps supported a total of 4,436 individuals, guiding them towards improved skills, confidence, self-esteem, wellbeing, and improved life chances through relational mentoring.

Most notably, approximately one in four participants were successfully placed into employment or transitioned from economic inactivity to actively seeking employment, while others accessed training or further education programmes.

Self-assessment data collected from 3,322 Wise Steps mentees revealed significant progress across access to services, wellbeing, and self-esteem. This outlines the success of the relational mentoring approach in fostering positive outcomes and empowering vulnerable individuals to overcome barriers to employment. The data analysis based on gender also revealed noteworthy differences, with women reporting higher levels of progress compared to men. This may be attributed to gender disparities in mental health support, as women are generally more inclined to seek help for mental health issues. As a result, their openness to seeking assistance and engaging with support services like Wise Steps could contribute to increased progress and success in the employability journey.



More widely, the Wise Group's findings highlight the critical role of mental health as a barrier to employment, particularly for women, and as a barrier to progression within the workplace for both men and women. By addressing mental health challenges and providing tailored support through relational mentoring, the Wise Group aims to dismantle barriers to employment and foster inclusive pathways to economic empowerment.

The evidence from the Wise Group's critical and comprehensive employability work underpins the importance of holistic support services in addressing the complex and varied intersectional factors impacting employability and wider access to employment opportunity.

By leveraging the experience and evidence gained from the Wise Group's unique relational mentoring and tailored interventions, the Commission is well-positioned to identify challenges and propose solutions to the myriad of barriers to employment opportunity across the UK.



2.2. Justice

The Commission on Breaking Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity has focused on a third pillar – Justice – underpinned by the Wise Group’s leading work in rehabilitation and strategic support for prison-leavers.

The Wise Group has been actively involved and comprehensively contributing to the Commission through its New Routes Throughcare Mentoring service. Operating across all thirty-two local authorities during over 2022/23, this initiative has played a critical role in empowering male prison-leavers to reintegrate successfully into society.

Central to the effectiveness of this service is the Wise Group’s relational mentoring approach, which prioritises building strong and supportive relationships between mentors and mentees. By employing this approach, mentors work closely with individuals both pre- and post-release, over the course of six months. This extended period allows mentors to gain a deep understanding of each mentee’s needs, challenges, and aspirations – enabling them to provide tailored and comprehensive support.

Through the New Routes Throughcare Mentoring service, the Wise Group has demonstrated its commitment to addressing the complex challenges faced by prison-leavers as they navigate the process of reintegration.

By offering holistic support that focuses on various but intersectional aspects of an individual’s life – including housing, employment, education, and mental health – the Wise Group aims to equip prison-leavers with the tools and resources needed to build a positive and sustainable future.

The importance of this work extends beyond the individual level, impacting the wider labour market and society as a whole. In facilitating successful reintegration and reducing rates of re-offending, initiatives like the New Routes Throughcare Mentoring service contribute to safer communities, reduced strain on public services, an increased workforce and a more inclusive and prosperous UK overall.

2.2.1 Key Evidence

Through the Wise Group's focus on Justice as a critical pillar to wider employment opportunity, it has produced compelling evidence contributing directly to the Commission's wider work.

Through its work with mentees within the New Routes Throughcare Mentoring service, the organisation has outlined on the transformative impact of strategic and holistic support – through relational mentoring - on individuals leaving prison.

Over 2022/23, the service welcomed 1,322 prison-leavers, representing a notable increase of 16% on the previous year. Key findings from the Wise Group's work with mentees reveal significant positive shifts in a number of areas:

- 87% of prison-leavers reported increased motivation to engage with interventions, indicating a heightened readiness for change and personal development. Approximately three in four prison-leavers - 73% - expressed motivation to change and improve their financial behaviour, reflecting a desire for financial stability and responsibility. 20% of prison-leavers expressed motivation to participate in education and training opportunities, demonstrating a commitment to improving wider skills and qualifications. 19% of prison-leavers expressed a desire to change their behaviour in relation to employability, highlighting a recognition of the importance of securing meaningful employment.
- Notably, over one in three prison-leavers - 39% - reported an improvement in their financial situation, indicating progress towards economic stability. 14% of prison-leavers reported an increase in their employment skills, suggesting a growth in participants' wider ability to secure and sustain employment.
-



These findings – supporting the Commission's wider work in employment opportunity - outline the positive impact of relational mentoring in empowering individuals exiting prison to make meaningful changes in their lives, particularly in areas such as employability, skills development, and financial management.

The increased motivation and improved attitudes observed among mentees are crucial factors in reducing reoffending rates and facilitating successful reintegration into society – all of which have wider critical labour market benefits. The implications of these findings for the work of the Commission on Breaking Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity are profound. In highlighting the effectiveness of relational mentoring in supporting individuals transitioning from the justice system to the community and labour market, the Wise Group's evidence displays the central importance of investing in holistic support services that address the multifaceted needs of prison-leavers.

Through targeted interventions and tailored support, initiatives like the New Routes Throughcare Mentoring service have the potential to not only reduce reoffending rates but also to empower individuals to lead fulfilling and productive lives post-release.

3.0 ROUNDTABLE INSIGHTS

Over 2023/24, underpinned by the Wise Group's sector-leading approach to relational mentoring – producing comprehensive evidence as displayed in section 2 – the Commission focused on engaging key political and industry stakeholders in key roundtables and panel events.

The session's focused on the three pillars as major identified barriers to opportunity and interacted with politicians from right across the political divide to communicate the expertise the Wise Group gained and engaged a wide range of industry stakeholders to contribute to the Commission's wider recommendations to policymakers on breaking down barriers to employment opportunity.

3.1. Fuel Poverty

On 20th February 2024 in Westminster, the Wise Group held a critical roundtable as part of its wider work contributing to the Commission on Breaking Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity.

Coming out of another winter in the midst of increased energy prices, the roundtable session focused on the issue of supporting individuals grappling with fuel poverty. The Wise Group's engagement and research, outlined in section 2.1.1, displayed that while many had weathered the worst of energy price hikes, the most vulnerable in society continued to bear the brunt.

The session explored the imperative of adopting a long-term approach to alleviate energy costs through measures including energy efficiency initiatives, advisory services, and bolstering local community relationships.

In February, the Wise Group's mentors conducted 142 interviews with customers receiving energy support, findings of which were presented during the roundtable.

1. Families with children were often forced to prioritise heating over eating during the winter.

2. Energy emerged as the primary expense households rationed when finances tightened, closely followed by food.

3. Families with children were disproportionately reliant on food banks compared to those without children.

4. Over four-fifths of respondents reported a decline in mental and/or physical health due to soaring energy costs.

5. Satisfaction with the Wise Group's mentoring team remained exceptionally high, with an average score of 9.7 out of 10.

The Wise Group engaged a number of critical industry suppliers, regulators and political stakeholders:

Lord Walney; Engagement Director, Purpose Coalition Sean Duffy; Chief Executive, The Wise Group Victoria Carson; Director of Engagement and Influence, The Wise Group Harriett Butcher; Head of Public Affairs, Centrica Dan Meredith; Head of External Affairs, E.ON UK Emma Dawson; Research Assistant, The Wise Group Richard Campbell; Mentor, The Wise Group Tracey Dever; Mentor, The Wise Group Alex Warren; Development Director, The Wise Group Katherine Renton; Head of Regulation, Octopus Cody Prior; Partnership Manager, UK Power Networks Dannie Barnes; Director of Development and Partnerships, NEA Cameron Ball; External Affairs Officer, SGN Colin Malaney; Senior Policy Lead, Ofgem

3.1. Key Issues

Fuel poverty emerged as a central concern in the midst of the steep rises in the cost-of-living, with attendees noting its profound impact on mental health – widely affecting both employed and unemployed people. While initiatives like the Wise Group’s £49 voucher provided much-needed assistance, it cannot address the root causes of poverty.

Attendees highlighted the pressing need for increased education on energy bills and navigating the complex energy landscape, as many people face barriers to energy solutions as a result of a lack of understanding of key details.

The discussion shed light on the persistence of pre-pandemic thinking in a post-pandemic world within the energy industry, outlining the need for updated approaches to address current challenges effectively.

Holistic support for the most vulnerable customers was widely deemed critical, with an emphasis on quality over quantity - highlighting the need for comprehensive and tailored assistance for those grappling with fuel poverty. Attendees also stressed the importance of emotional intelligence and trust-building in interactions with vulnerable customers, emphasising the need for direct engagement and community involvement to promote net-zero initiatives.

While smart prepayment meters were acknowledged for their utility, traditional prepayment meters were criticised for their inadequacy, prompting calls for greater clarity and the optimisation of the entire energy framework.

More widely, attendees expressed the need for a systemic overhaul to reduce overall energy demand, highlighting the shortcomings of projects like Great British Insulation Scheme (GBIS) and the ECO Schemes, as well as emphasising the importance of effective communication and education on new energy solutions.

There was consensus on the necessity to remove the standing charge and establish a new social tariff, alongside concerns about the impact of the upcoming election year on fuel poverty initiatives.

Furthermore, the ineffective use of data, particularly concerning households with medical energy dependencies, was identified as a significant issue, with suggestions for its more efficient utilisation to target energy efficiency solutions effectively.

Attendees proposed exploring tax allowances for energy-efficient homes and leveraging data to identify suitable candidates for retrofitting and other efficiency measures, outlining the importance of promoting energy efficiency in addressing fuel poverty effectively.





3.2. Employability

On 29th January 2024 in the House of Commons, the Commission on Breaking Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity held a panel event and launched the Wise Group's 'A Way to Work: Relational Mentoring and the Future of Employability' report.

Critically, the panel, chaired by Lord John Walney, included Wise Group mentors, some of whom were previous mentees, sharing their first-hand experiences and providing insight into the current barriers to employability across Britain, especially for the most vulnerable communities.

The event was led by Chi Onwurah MP, Member of Parliament for Newcastle Central and Shadow Minister, and experienced a wide range of attendees from across the political divide, including Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee Rt Hon Stephen Timms, Employment Minister Jo Churchill, and a number of SNP Shadow Spokespersons.

3.2.2. Key Issues

The panel noted the acute child poverty and health concerns affecting Newcastle, notably the alarming statistic that 42% of children in the city are growing up in poverty. A recent health behaviour survey revealed the severity of the situation, with 40% of 40,000 pupils surveyed reporting they had not eaten breakfast on the day of the survey. These findings were discussed to outline the urgent need to address both economic and health inequalities among children in the region.

Participants also highlighted the complexities involved in the journey to securing employment, emphasising that the pathway to work is not straightforward. Despite efforts to address unemployment, barriers such as lack of confidence and entrenched poverty continue to hinder progress for many individuals.

The report launched during the event - 'A Way to Work: Relational Mentoring and the Future of Employability' - shed light on the significant impact of mental health issues on employability. Mental health emerged as both the biggest barrier to entering the workforce, particularly for women, and a significant challenge for those already in employment. This highlighted the need for holistic support services that address mental health alongside other barriers to work.



Participants emphasised that individuals seeking employment are often confronted with multiple challenges simultaneously. From economic hardship to mental health issues, job seekers face a number of obstacles that require comprehensive support and intervention.

The success of the Wise Group in helping individuals transition from benefits to employment. The Wise Group's launch of a new service in Newcastle, supported by the new prosperity fund, was outlined as a step towards addressing the confidence gap among job seekers. Attendees recognised the importance of initiatives aimed at building confidence and providing tailored support to individuals facing multiple challenges on their journey to employment.

The report launched during the event - 'A Way to Work: Relational Mentoring and the Future of Employability' - shed light on the significant impact of mental health issues on employability. Mental health emerged as both the biggest barrier to entering the workforce, particularly for women, and a significant challenge for those already in employment. This highlighted the need for holistic support services that address mental health alongside other barriers to work.

Participants emphasised that individuals seeking employment are often confronted with multiple challenges simultaneously. From economic hardship to mental health issues, job seekers face a number of obstacles that require comprehensive support and intervention.

The success of the Wise Group in helping individuals transition from benefits to employment was noted as a result of the organisation's human-centred approach. Attendees praised the organisation for treating people with dignity and respect, acknowledging the diverse challenges they face and providing personalised support.

A panel member and Wise Group mentor shared a powerful personal testimony, highlighting the transformative impact of support services on her own life. Having experienced unemployment and struggles with mental health, she recounted how her life changed upon receiving assistance from the Wise Group. Her journey from recipient to mentor underscored the importance of empathy and understanding in supporting others facing similar challenges.

The event concluded with a sobering reflection on the contradiction between work and poverty. Despite the belief that employment should bring economic stability and improved well-being, the reality for many individuals is starkly different. Attendees agreed that tackling this contradiction requires systemic change and concerted efforts to address the root causes of poverty and inequality.

In summary, the Commission on Employability's panel event shed light on the intertwined issues of poverty, health, and employability in Newcastle as an example of the wider challenges in under-resourced communities across Britain.

Through personal testimonies, data-driven insights, and collaborative discussions, participants identified key challenges and emphasised the importance of holistic support services and systemic change in addressing these issues and creating pathways to meaningful employment for all.





3.3. Justice

On 15th March 2023, The Commission on Breaking Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity – led by the Wise Group – held a roundtable in partnership with Sodexo with Ruth Cadbury MP, then Shadow Minister for Prisons Parole and Probation.

The roundtable, following a visit to HMP Durham by those present, focused on the critical task of creating and the sustainment of employment opportunities for those transitioning out of prison - aiming to reduce re-offending rates and support successful reintegration into communities.

The session explored various aspects of supporting individuals leaving prison, from securing employment to addressing basic needs such as accommodation, food, and clothing upon liberation. By engaging with key stakeholders and experts in the field, the roundtable seeks to identify challenges, share best practices, and develop innovative solutions to foster successful reintegration and reduce reoffending rates.

The Commission engaged a number of critical stakeholders including prison-leavers, Wise Group mentors and mentees, as well as key political stakeholders and industry experts:

- Victoria Carson; Director of Engagement and Policy, The Wise Group
- Lord Walney; former Advisor to Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Purpose Coalition Engagement Director
- Ruth Cadbury MP; then Shadow Minister for Prisons, Parole, and Probation
- Rory Allanson; Fraser of Allender Institute (PhD, Impact of justice mentoring services)
- Angela Halliday; Director of Social Impact, Sodexo UK&I
- Julia Harris; The Wise Group
- Elaine Ravenhall; The Wise Group
- (Rehabilitation, finance, benefit, and debt)
- Hamish Robertson; The Wise Group
- (Strategic Development)
- Max Stoker; The Wise Group (Justice Mentor)
- Chris Sopp; The Wise Group (Justice Mentor and Previous Customer)
- Sharon Pickup; Wise Group Customer
- Ardeane Llewellyn; HMP Durham, Head of Reducing Offending
- Stephanie Kili-Guttridge; Durham Police and Crime Commissioner office, Policy and Commissioning Officer

3.2.2. Key Issues

The roundtable opened with a stark reminder of the significant financial burden of reoffending, estimated at £1 billion per year in the UK. This figure set the stage for discussions on the multifaceted challenges faced by ex-offenders upon reentry into society.

Attendees also stressed the need for a more holistic approach to rehabilitation, emphasising the importance of building trust and providing comprehensive support over time.

Ex-offenders present shared personal accounts highlighting the wide-ranging and significant obstacles they encountered upon release from prison. One common theme was the struggle with financial instability, exacerbated by difficulties in accessing benefits and securing housing due to a lack of identification and bank accounts. Despite efforts to engage in education and training while incarcerated, many found themselves ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of life outside prison walls. The experiences shared comprehensively displayed the need for tailored support services to address these barriers and facilitate successful reintegration into society.

Attendees turned their attention to the shortcomings of the probation system, advocating for its outsourcing to address existing deficiencies within the Ministry of Justice. Attendees voiced concerns about the recurring failures experienced by individuals in contact with probation services, citing inadequate post-release support as a key issue.

There was also consensus on the need to reframe the role of probation from that of an authoritarian figure to a supportive resource, fostering a more conducive environment for rehabilitation and reintegration.

A significant portion of the discussion focused on the untapped potential of prison leavers as a valuable talent pool.

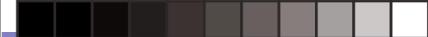
Attendees highlighted statistics indicating a gap in employment opportunities, with many businesses hesitant to hire ex-offenders despite facing recruitment challenges. Recognising the substantial portion of the population with criminal records, participants stressed the importance of engaging this demographic to address workforce shortages and unlock their potential contribution to society. Initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between prisons and accepting workplaces were cited as promising avenues for harnessing this talent, with Sodexo offering a shining example in this space.

The invaluable contribution of social organisations and NGOs within the justice system was a recurring theme throughout the discussion.

Participants acknowledged the extensive work done by these organisations in supporting ex-offenders and facilitating their rehabilitation process. While successful initiatives exist regionally, there was consensus on the need to consolidate efforts under a unified rehabilitation framework. This framework would provide clear metrics for success and foster collaboration between prisons, probation services, social organisations, and employers across the UK.

Overall, the roundtable underscored the urgent need for a coordinated and comprehensive approach to rehabilitation. Addressing systemic barriers, reforming the probation system, tapping into the potential of ex-offenders, and leveraging the expertise of social organisations were identified as key priorities.

RECCOMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE.



IN WESTMINSTER



AND HOLYROOD



1. Fuel Poverty

1.1. Transform the standing charge into a new social tariff

At the Fuel Poverty roundtable, there was a consensus on the necessity to remove the standing charge and the potential to establish a new social tariff, particularly aimed at the most vulnerable households with energy-dependency.

Establishing a strategic sliding scale social tariff is fairer, having the potential to save households across the UK much needed money on their energy bills.

1.2. Establish targeted tax breaks for energy-efficient homes

At the Fuel Poverty roundtable, attendees proposed exploring tax allowances for energy-efficient homes to boost engagement with retrofitting, insulation options, and heat pumps.

However, these currently come at a cost for households in both time and money. Displaying the long-term cost savings could increase energy efficiency across the board as well as saving money for individuals and households.

1.3. Shift the focus on energy solutions education onto the supplier

At the Fuel Poverty roundtable, attendees highlighted the pressing need for increased education on energy bills and navigating the complex energy landscape, as many people face barriers to energy solutions as a result of a lack of understanding of key details.

Policymakers should consider shifting the focus on energy solutions education to energy suppliers in the push towards net-zero and a focus on supporting the most under-resourced customers more proactively.

1.4. Support the most vulnerable through expert customer service

At the Fuel Poverty roundtable, holistic support for the most vulnerable customers was widely deemed as being critical, with an emphasis on quality over quantity - highlighting the need for comprehensive and tailored assistance for those grappling with fuel poverty.

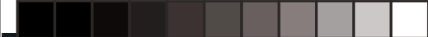
Attendees also stressed the importance of emotional intelligence and trust-building in interactions with vulnerable customers, emphasising the need for direct engagement and community involvement to promote net-zero initiatives.

Policymakers could explore incentivising suppliers to ensure customer service operators across energy suppliers all have achieved or are in process of achieving an NVQ Level 3 Energy Advice Qualification as a wider indirect push to holistic people- focused customer support.

1.5. Ensure checks and balances on energy prices through an Office for Energy Responsibility (OER)

The volatility of the energy market as a result of international pressures was noted at the Fuel Poverty roundtable. Concerningly, these international pressures seem to have increased since the initial energy crisis.

Policymakers could explore a further check and balance on sectoral power over energy prices by creating an Office for Energy Responsibility (OER) that not only monitors the UK's reliance on international energy supply, but also helps to regulate energy prices across the country.





2. Employability

2.1. De-couple the JobCentre+ from Universal Credit conversations with a focus on holistic support to get in to work

At the launch of the Wise Group's 'A New Way to Work' report, we discovered the success of the Wise Group in helping individuals transition to employment, as a result of the organisation's human-centred approach.

Policymakers could explore de-coupling intimate conversations around people's Universal Credit circumstances from direct support to gain employment, in an aim to underpin holistic support addressing all barriers to sustainable employment across the JobCentre+ network.

2.2. Explore the use of Relational Mentoring across careers services in schools and colleges

The successes of relational mentoring as a concept are felt right across the Wise Group's activity.

Policymakers could explore beginning this as early as possible in an individual's development, underpinning it as an approach across the public education system for the most vulnerable students in careers services.

3. Justice

3.1. Transform rehabilitation through a specialist probationary service

At the Commission's Justice roundtable in Durham, the presence of an 'authoritative' figure and/or body in the probationary service was noted as often a barrier to proper and sustainable rehabilitation.

Policymakers could consider devolving probation to a specialist supplier that is outside of the current criminal justice system and offer a truly fresh start to those attempting to rehabilitate back into society. This also has benefits for the wider economy as a whole.

3.2. End court, Friday, and evening releases

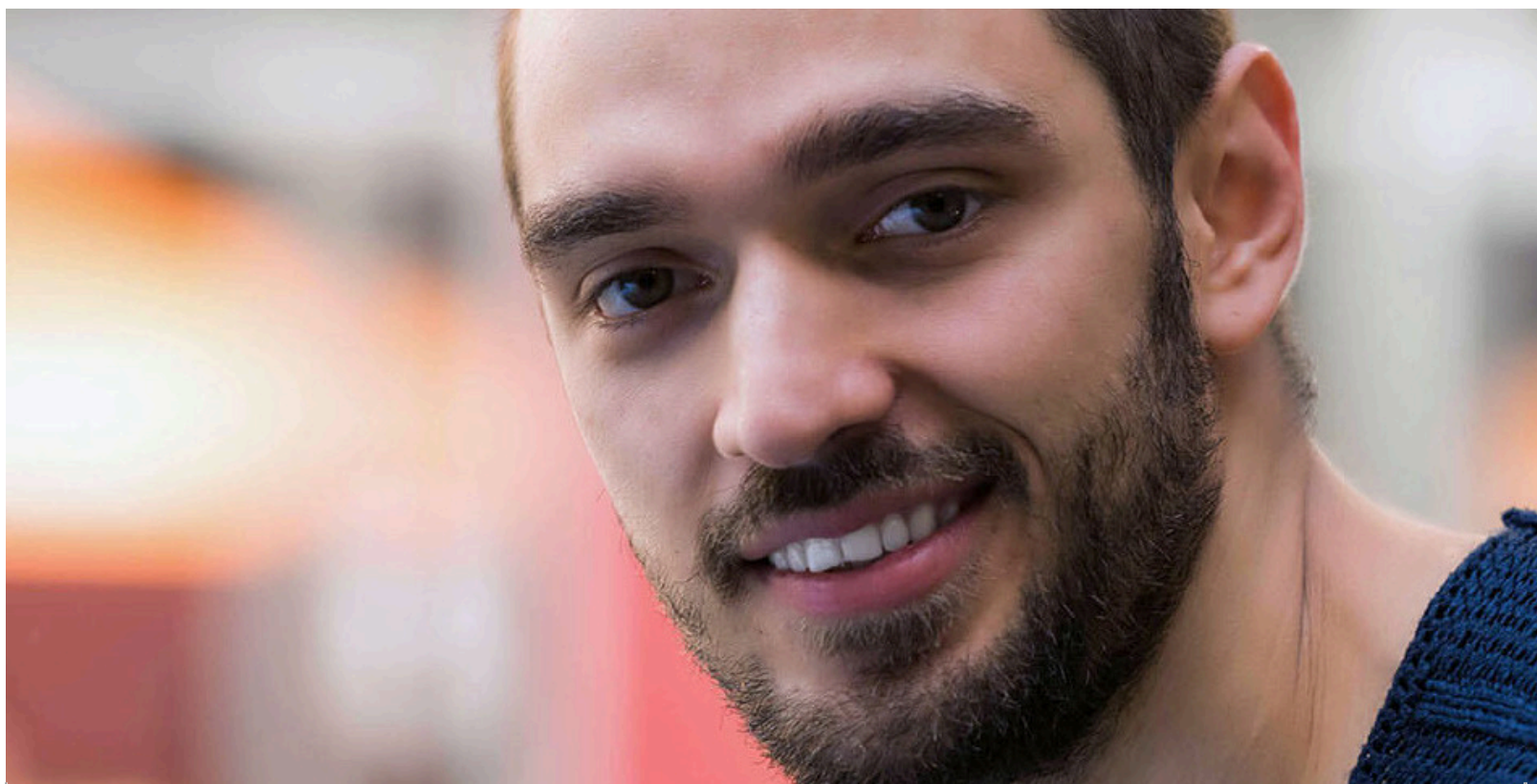
Building on the ending of short prison sentences, policymakers should also consider overhauling the approach to court and prison releases.

This could include the ending of the current unstable system of court releases, Friday prison releases, and evening prison releases. Not only does this help to protect individuals being released and the wider public, but it also ensures policymakers are taking a more strategic approach to rehabilitation more widely.

3.3. Include ex-offenders in employer social value assessments

At the Commission's Justice roundtable in Durham, Sodexo offered a number of best practice examples of the wide-ranging benefits of strategic employment opportunities designed towards ex-offenders, and the wider importance of this to households, communities, and local economies across the UK.

In a revised social value framework, policymakers should consider the activity organisations are undertaking proactively to employ and support those with lived experiences of criminal justice system into organisational assessment measurements to encourage more employers to do so.



4.0 PINPOINTING FOCUS AREAS THROUGH DATA ANALYSIS

In applying the recommendations, the Commission has offered in areas of most need, the Commission on Breaking Down Barriers to Employment Opportunity has identified areas with the highest barriers to employment opportunity that policymakers or industry experts should strategically focus efforts.

Using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), the Commission has identified constituencies outside of the Wise Group's regionality – Scotland and the North East of England – which score the highest on a new combined deprivation weighting assessment – Employment Opportunity Deprivation.

The Commission combined three of the seven Indices of Multiple Deprivation, creating a new domain and producing ground-breaking data analysing employment opportunity across England.

Income Domain

Measures the proportion of the working age population experiencing deprivation relating to low income. The definition of low income used includes both those people that are out-of-work, and those that are in work but who have low earnings (and who satisfy the respective means tests).

Employment Domain

Measures the proportion of the working age population in an area involuntarily excluded from the labour market. This includes people who would like to work but are unable to do so due to unemployment, sickness or disability, or caring responsibilities.

Education, Skills and Training Domain -

Measures the lack of attainment and skills in the local population. The indicators fall into two sub-domains: one relating to children and young people and one relating to adult skills.

5.1.1. Bradford East #1

Constituency Name: Bradford East

Constituency Code: E14001118

In these tables, a lower number is worse. Being in Decile 1 means the constituency is amongst the 10% most deprived areas. Having a Rank of 1 means the constituency is the most deprived constituency in the country.

Conversely, being in Decile 10 means the constituency is amongst the 10% least deprived areas and having a Rank of 550 would mean it is the least deprived constituency in the country.

	Decile	Rank (out of 550)
Employment Opportunity, which combines information from the Income, Employment, and Education, Skills and Training Domain's to produce a measure of barriers to employment opportunity	1	1
Overall, which combines information from the seven 'domains' below to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation	1	9
Health Deprivation & Disability, which measures the risk of premature death and the impairment of quality of life through poor physical or mental health	2	61
Crime, which measures the risk of personal and material victimisation at local level	1	5
Barriers to Housing & Services, which measures the physical and financial accessibility of housing and local services	4	399
Living Environment, which measures the quality of both the 'indoor' and 'outdoor' local environment	1	11



5.1.2. Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough - #2

Constituency Name: Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough

Constituency Code: E14001466

	Decile	Rank (out of 550)
Employment Opportunity, which combines information from the Income, Employment, and Education, Skills and Training Domain's to produce a measure of barriers to employment opportunity	1	2
Overall, which combines information from the seven 'domains' below to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation	1	10
Health Deprivation & Disability, which measures the risk of premature death and the impairment of quality of life through poor physical or mental health	1	31
Crime, which measures the risk of personal and material victimisation at local level	1	15
Barriers to Housing & Services, which measures the physical and financial accessibility of housing and local services	4	400
Living Environment, which measures the quality of both the 'indoor' and 'outdoor' local environment	3	190





5.1.3. Leeds South - #4

Constituency Name: Leeds South

Constituency Code: E14001323

	Decile	Rank (out of 550)
Employment Opportunity, which combines information from the Income, Employment, and Education, Skills and Training Domain's to produce a measure of barriers to employment opportunity	1	4
Overall, which combines information from the seven 'domains' below to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation	1	6
Health Deprivation & Disability, which measures the risk of premature death and the impairment of quality of life through poor physical or mental health	1	34
Crime, which measures the risk of personal and material victimisation at local level	1	3
Barriers to Housing & Services, which measures the physical and financial accessibility of housing and local services	1	378
Living Environment, which measures the quality of both the 'indoor' and 'outdoor' local environment	1	6

31

5.2.1. Walsall and Bloxwich - #3

Constituency Name: Walsall and Bloxwich

Constituency Code: E14001562

	Decile	Rank (out of 550)
Employment Opportunity, which combines information from the Income, Employment, and Education, Skills and Training Domain's to produce a measure of barriers to employment opportunity	1	3
Overall, which combines information from the seven 'domains' below to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation	1	17
Health Deprivation & Disability, which measures the risk of premature death and the impairment of quality of life through poor physical or mental health	2	59
Crime, which measures the risk of personal and material victimisation at local level	2	107
Barriers to Housing & Services, which measures the physical and financial accessibility of housing and local services	4	349
Living Environment, which measures the quality of both the 'indoor' and 'outdoor' local environment	2	97





5.2.2. Tipton and Wednesbury - #6

Constituency Name: Tipton and Wednesbury

Constituency Code: E14001547

	Decile	Rank (out of 550)
Employment Opportunity, which combines information from the Income, Employment, and Education, Skills and Training Domain's to produce a measure of barriers to employment opportunity	1	6
Overall, which combines information from the seven 'domains' below to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation	1	27
Health Deprivation & Disability, which measures the risk of premature death and the impairment of quality of life through poor physical or mental health	1	48
Crime, which measures the risk of personal and material victimisation at local level	2	135
Barriers to Housing & Services, which measures the physical and financial accessibility of housing and local services	4	353
Living Environment, which measures the quality of both the 'indoor' and 'outdoor' local environment	2	77

33

5.3.1. Knowsley - #7

Constituency Name: Knowsley

Constituency Code: E14001317

	Decile	Rank (out of 550)
Employment Opportunity, which combines information from the Income, Employment, and Education, Skills and Training Domain's to produce a measure of barriers to employment opportunity	1	7
Overall, which combines information from the seven 'domains' below to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation	1	5
Health Deprivation & Disability, which measures the risk of premature death and the impairment of quality of life through poor physical or mental health	2	48
Crime, which measures the risk of personal and material victimisation at local level	2	181
Barriers to Housing & Services, which measures the physical and financial accessibility of housing and local services	3	348
Living Environment, which measures the quality of both the 'indoor' and 'outdoor' local environment	2	139





5.3.2. Liverpool Riverside - #13

Constituency Name: Liverpool Riverside

Constituency Code: E14001338

	Decile	Rank (out of 550)
Employment Opportunity, which combines information from the Income, Employment, and Education, Skills and Training Domain's to produce a measure of barriers to employment opportunity	1	13
Overall, which combines information from the seven 'domains' below to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation	1	1
Health Deprivation & Disability, which measures the risk of premature death and the impairment of quality of life through poor physical or mental health	1	2
Crime, which measures the risk of personal and material victimisation at local level	1	25
Barriers to Housing & Services, which measures the physical and financial accessibility of housing and local services	4	376
Living Environment, which measures the quality of both the 'indoor' and 'outdoor' local environment	2	22

35

5.4. Methodology

The Commission produced ground-breaking and unique data set identifying the areas with the highest barriers to employment opportunity across Britain.

Applying the IMD, the Commission combined three of the seven indices of deprivation, picking out the key measures that best apply to employment opportunity:

Income Domain

Measures the proportion of the working age population experiencing deprivation relating to low income. The definition of low income used includes both those people that are out-of-work, and those that are in work but who have low earnings (and who satisfy the respective means tests).

Adults and children in Income Support families

Adults and children in income-based Jobseeker's Allowance families

Adults and children in income-based Employment and Support Allowance families

Adults and children in Pension Credit (Guarantee) families

Adults and children in Universal Credit families where no adult is classed within the 'Working - no requirements' conditionality group

Adults and children in Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit families not already counted, that is those who are not in receipt of Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-based Employment and Support Allowance, Pension Credit (Guarantee), and whose equivalised income (excluding housing benefit) is below 60 per cent of the median before housing costs

Asylum seekers in England in receipt of subsistence support, accommodation support, or both.

Employment Domain

Measures the proportion of the working age population in an area involuntarily excluded from the labour market. This includes people who would like to work but are unable to do so due to unemployment, sickness or disability, or caring responsibilities.

Claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance (both contribution-based and income-based), women aged 18 to 59 and men aged 18 to 64

Claimants of Employment and Support Allowance (both contribution-based and income-based), women aged 18 to 59 and men aged 18 to 64

Claimants of Incapacity Benefit, women aged 18 to 59 and men aged 18 to 64

Claimants of Severe Disablement Allowance, women aged 18 to 59 and men aged 18 to 64

Claimants of Carer's Allowance, women aged 18 to 59 and men aged 18 to 64

Claimants of Universal Credit in the 'Searching for work' and 'No work requirements' conditionality groups.



Education, Skills, and Training Domain

Measures the lack of attainment and skills in the local population. The indicators fall into two sub-domains: one relating to children and young people and one relating to adult skills.

Children and Young People sub-domain

Key Stage 2 attainment: The scaled score of pupils taking Mathematics, English reading and English grammar, punctuation and spelling Key Stage 2 exams

Key Stage 4 attainment: The average capped points score of pupils taking Key Stage 4 (GCSE or equivalent) exams

Secondary school absence: The proportion of authorised and unauthorised absences from secondary school

Staying on in education post 16: The proportion of young people not staying on in school or non-advanced education above age 16

Entry to higher education: A measure of young people aged under 21 not entering higher education.

Adult skills subdomain

Adult skills: The proportion of working-age adults with no or low qualifications, women aged 25 to 59 and men aged 25 to 64.

English language proficiency: The proportion of working-age adults who cannot speak English or cannot speak English well, women aged 25 to 59 and men aged 25 to 64.



LET'S BREAK DOWN BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY



LIFTING PEOPLE OUT OF POVERTY