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What became of the likely lads?

Looking back on a decade of regeneration funding since the Brexit referendum

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Contents

04 Executive summary

07 Methodology & data

10 Headline findings

1 Governments of every party funded the same kind of place: deprived and distrustful of politics

2 Funding broadly followed deprivation, not the electoral map

3 Heavily funded areas show consistently higher Reform support than similarly deprived places

4 Residents in our focus groups could see that money had been spent, but not what difference it had made

5 Beneath everything was a pervasive sense of decline

6 There was little active enthusiasm for Reform itself

29 Conclusion

30 Annexe: detailed methodology

Executive summary

For the last decade, governments of different political stripes have tried to speak to and make policy for 'left behind' Britain. Typically, this refers to coastal towns and former industrial areas with complex, multifaceted deprivation, weak local job markets, and a long-standing distrust of national politics. Since the Brexit referendum, the voters living in these areas have come to look decisive for national elections, courted by Labour and the Conservatives alike as 'hero voters' who determine who governs. And since Boris Johnson's government in particular, a key tool for addressing their discontent has been targeted regeneration funding; money allocated to renew high streets, build skills, and support local economies.

In this report, we ask: one decade on and £19 billion of government spending later, where did this money go, what are those places like now, and how have they voted since?

We mapped ten years' worth of government data on regeneration funding to every local authority in the UK, comparing disbursements with deprivation, voting intention and electoral marginality. Working with the Financial Times, we also held focus groups in Blackpool and Clacton-on-Sea to understand how regeneration funding has or has not translated into sentiment on the ground.

Three findings stand out. First, the places that received the most funding were not just highly economically deprived areas, but places which were very disenfranchised about establishment politics. In other words, successive governments have consistently identified and targeted a specific kind of deprived, politically alienated community. Hartlepool, for example, received well over three times as much funding per head as the average English authority.

Second, ten years of regeneration funding has not worked in terms of bringing these communities towards the political mainstream; as we see, these areas remain distinctly more supportive of right-leaning populist parties than the rest of the country, even compared to other places with similar levels of deprivation.

Third, the problem goes beyond the paucity or visibility of regeneration funding. Focus group participants could often point to local regeneration projects, but described them as isolated improvements in a town they still saw as struggling. What lingered most was a more pervasive sense of decline—more crime, more poverty, less opportunity than a decade or two ago—that people felt keenly but couldn't fully explain.

Regeneration funding was intended, in part, to rebuild trust in places that had lost it. On the evidence here, it has not done so. The spending is sometimes visible; its effects, to the people living alongside them, are not. That gap may help explain why support for the established parties has continued to fall in some of the places they have spent the most.



Blackpool town centre

Methodology & data

This report combines a full map of a decade's regeneration funding with qualitative research in one of its largest recipients. The aim was both to measure where the money went and to understand how it has been received.

We pay particular attention to English local authorities as this analysis looks at funding disbursed by Westminster governments and does not consider devolved funding pots.

We define regeneration funding narrowly and consistently. To qualify, a fund had to meet three tests:

- In selecting recipients for funding, one criterion or consideration was an area's level of deprivation. We define deprivation in a broad sense, and include funds which consider an area's relative educational attainment, health outcomes, and social care needs as well as formal metrics of socioeconomic deprivation.
- The primary purpose of the funding pot was to address regeneration, and / or equitable growth. This means we exclude schemes where local governments may have used some of their funding for regenerative purposes but national government's express logic for providing funding was different, e.g. to boost post-pandemic recovery, facilitate investments into infrastructure more broadly, or encourage private-sector-led growth.
- Funding was allocated at a relatively local level, to a designated project, neighbourhood, local authority district, or handful of local authority districts together.

We identified a list of relevant funds, spanning across successive governments, and expressed the collective value of these funds by local authority district in 2025 prices. We divide by population to identify the areas that have received the most funding for local regeneration per capita to date.

Harmonising the data was our main technical task: bids were reported variously by Local Enterprise Partnerships, combined authorities, councils, towns or individual projects. We translated everything to local authority districts on 2024 ONS boundaries, disaggregating higher-level awards using population weights and geocoding individual projects to their host authority where names alone were insufficient. The full approach, with a complete list of funding pot, is set out in the annexe.

We then ran secondary analysis to learn more about the places which received regeneration funding, comparing them against:

- A composite household-deprivation score built from the 2021 Census.
- Quarterly ward-level voting intention and seat marginality from the SHGH MRP, run every quarter between the 2024 general election and December 2025.

Finally, in April 2026 we held focus groups in Blackpool and Clacton-on-Sea in partnership with the Financial Times. We chose two areas where Reform is gaining ground against Labour but which received very different amounts of regeneration funding. Blackpool was among the highest-funded places per head, with a particularly large share of Levelling Up funding; a fund disbursed long enough ago to have plausibly been spent, but recent enough for its effects to be remembered. Clacton-on-Sea received far less. The contrast allowed us to see whether attitudes to regeneration and to the local area differed between the two.



Clacton-on-Sea

Headline findings

1 Governments of every party funded the same kind of place: deprived, and distrustful of politics.

Over the last decade, national governments committed around £19 billion of regeneration funding across the UK. This amounts to almost £53 million for the average local authority, or £282 a head.

Within this, the distribution is uneven: Hartlepool, the most heavily funded authority per capita in England, has had about £974 a head committed — well over three times the English average — with Blackpool, Ashfield, Boston, and Lancaster close behind.

Two patterns sit behind this distribution. First, funding is strongly linked to household deprivation as the schemes intended: over the decade, the most deprived tenth of authorities received around £470 per person, compared with about £60 per person in the most affluent tenth. Across the table, each move into a more deprived decile is associated with roughly £50 more per person in funding.

Second — and not unrelatedly — funding is also strongly associated with support for Reform UK. As of the last quarter of 2025, support ranged from around 12% of intended votes in places like Cambridge and Oxford to over 50% in Boston and Ashfield. The tenth of authorities most supportive of Reform received about £485 per person, compared with about £75 per person among the least supportive, with each ten-point rise in Reform support associated with roughly £170 more per person.

£19bn

Total regeneration funding committed

£282

Average per head, across all authorities

£974

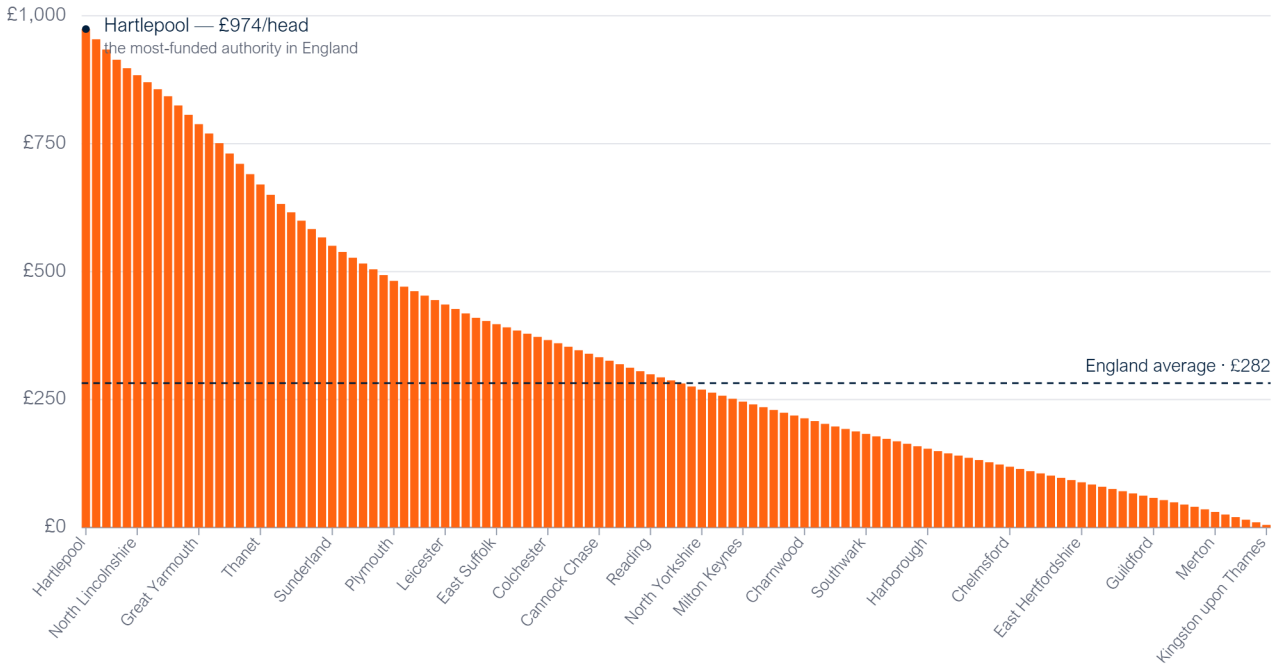
Highest per head (Hartlepool, the most-funded English authority)

In other words, the places chosen for regeneration funding tend to be both deprived and politically estranged; seaside and former industrial areas in the North, East Midlands, and East of England where trust in national politics was already low. Governments of different parties, using different funds, repeatedly arrived at a similar list.

FIGURE 1

English local authorities by regeneration funding allocated per head

Each bar is one English local authority on 2024 boundaries, ordered from highest to lowest per capita total funding, in 2025 prices.



Source: Public First analysis of MHCLG / DLUHC funding data, harmonised to 2024 ONS local authority boundaries. Selected authorities labelled.

TOP TEN ENGLISH LOCAL AUTHORITIES BY REGENERATION FUNDING PER HEAD, 2024 BOUNDARIES

	LOCAL AUTHORITY	FUNDING PER HEAD
1	Hartlepool	£974
2	Blackpool	£936
3	Ashfield	£930
4	Boston	£929
5	Lancaster	£913
6	Cumberland	£904
7	Lincoln	£872
8	Darlington	£855
9	Great Yarmouth	£851
10	Newark and Sherwood	£846

2 Funding broadly followed deprivation, not the electoral map.

Regeneration funding is sometimes assumed to follow electoral need, with money channelled towards marginal seats. We find little evidence for this. When we compare the relative funding an area got from each party with that area's marginality at national elections — or with how likely that party is to be genuinely competitive there — we find no consistent relationship across the country.

Some smaller, localised trends remain. Within the deprived areas most commonly targeted for regeneration funding, both Labour and Conservative governments sometimes directed more funding towards the types of seats they typically held or had a realistic chance of winning. However, these effects are limited when set against deprivation, which remains the strongest single predictor of where the money went.

> *The government's not interested in the north. It's all down south, where the money is. They forget about us up here.*

Man, Blackpool

> *We are left behind here.*

Woman, Blackpool

Nonetheless, the residents we spoke to from deprived places did not experience this as a meaningful focus from government. They could recognise that their areas needed support, but even where money arrived, it did not necessarily feel like recognition, attention, or lasting change.

3 Heavily funded areas show consistently higher support for Reform than similarly deprived places.

This is one of the most significant findings from our analysis. It suggests that a decade of regeneration funding has not shifted the political dial as much as Labour or the Conservatives might have hoped. Areas that received more funding are not less Reform-leaning than comparable places; if anything, they are consistently more so.

To test this, we used ward-level voting intention from our MRP and compared better-funded authorities with less-funded authorities that had similar levels of deprivation. This distinction matters because regeneration funding was deliberately targeted at more deprived places, meaning a simple comparison between funded and unfunded areas would be misleading. Across local authorities in the UK, we therefore used statistical matching to compare authorities with above-average funding to less-funded authorities with the same composite deprivation score.

The pattern is clear. In every quarter since the 2024 general election, better-funded authorities show higher support for Reform UK than otherwise similar places, with a gap of around five to seven percentage points. This difference is statistically significant throughout. It also holds across a range of matching approaches, including specifications that adjust for the size of the foreign-born population locally, suggesting that levels of deprivation on its own do not account for the pattern, and neither does local immigration.

> *Labour is becoming more Conservative, and the Conservatives are trying to become more Labour, just to win votes. I don't think there's much of a difference between them at the moment.*

Woman, Blackpool

> *Why did I vote for Reform? I'm not interested in ... funds here in Clacton. The sole argument for me is foreigners coming into this country.*

Woman, Clacton-on-Sea

This means that regeneration funding reached many of the places where political trust was already weakest, but has not yet rebuilt it. The money may have addressed some local needs, but it did not change the underlying political story that these communities still feel overlooked, and that many voters have turned to the party least associated with the governments that promised to fix things.

4 Residents in our focus groups could see that money had been spent, but not what difference it had made.

Blackpool received roughly £135 million in regeneration funding over the decade—around £936 per person, or almost 3.5 times the England average—making it the second most heavily-funded authority in England. Around half of this came through rounds of the Levelling Up Fund.

When we put this to our focus group participants, the response was neither gratitude nor anger but a kind of resignation. Several people pointed to projects they felt had absorbed money without making much difference: the refurbished Houndshill shopping centre, partly empty office space, a tram extension few of them use.

> *Quite sad, really. Take the Houndshill Centre — they spent a tonne of money on that place, but what have they actually done for it? It's just going downhill again. It never really went uphill to start.*

Man, Blackpool

Attitudes in Clacton were similar:

> *It all seems to take so very long that you lose confidence and faith in what's going on. So we just hear these figures, and then you just see these boards going up.*

Woman, Clacton-on-Sea

When Blackpool's participants worked through the figure, it seemed smaller than the headlines suggested. Both groups assumed that much of the money went on administration rather than reaching the town itself—a view that, whether accurate or not, shapes how future rounds of funding are received.

> *[About] £930 a head over ten years — well, that's £93 a year per head. When you put it in those terms, it doesn't sound an awful lot, does it?*

Woman, Blackpool

> *Like a charity — some of the money goes on administration, not to the people who need it. That's what's happening with the money coming into Blackpool.*

Woman, Blackpool

> *Who's dipped in and taken a bit? Yeah, I'm not very trusting. I'm certainly not trusting of governments, that's for sure. They dish the money out. What are they doing with our money? Do we really see that much improvement?*

Woman, Clacton-on-Sea

Where people did identify improvements, these centred around transport and accessibility — better bus routes and some new roads. However, they often credited this to private operators rather than the council, and treated them as isolated rather than part of a broader recovery. Their description of the town was much the same at the end of the session as at the start: struggling and worse than the resort many of them remembered from the 1990s.

> *[The town] is just dying, isn't it? It needs investment in the right areas.*

Man, Blackpool

> *What are we doing? We're just putting sticking plasters over problems most of the time.*

Man, Clacton-on-Sea

Another key theme in the discussion was not a shortage of money but a lack of say in how it is used. Participants felt that funding decisions were taken elsewhere and presented to them as settled.

> *I don't think the council particularly listens to Blackpool people anyway. Once they get in, they don't bother — they just make their own rules up.*

Woman, Blackpool

Asked what they would fund instead, the group was consistent: housing, services for older people, and somewhere for young people to go. They judged the larger projects against those priorities. The proposed £40 million Multiversity campus in Blackpool divided opinion, welcomed by some as an opportunity for local young people but questioned by a recent graduate of the existing university, who thought the money would be better spent on housing and on services for residents.

> *If you want to go to university, Preston's ten minutes away. It needs to go on housing, and on things for the kids, the old people, the people who live here.*

Man, Blackpool

In Blackpool, the same sense of misallocated money came up over an asylum hotel on the seafront. Whatever views were of the wider policy, it felt the kind of visible, everyday contrast that reinforced beliefs that the system was not set up for local residents.

> *You've got Blackpool homeless sleeping in doorways under duvets, and the people in the hotel opposite getting three meals a day and a roof over their heads. Our local homeless haven't.*

Woman, Blackpool

5 Beneath everything was a pervasive sense of decline.

The dominant theme of the focus group was decline. Asked simply to describe the state of Blackpool and Clacton, participants reached for the same kinds of words: “pretty rough”, “poverty”, a place that has been “left behind”. It was where the conversation started, what it kept returning to, and where it ended.

> *Poverty, really. There’s a lot of poverty in Blackpool. It’s being left behind.*

Man, Blackpool

Much of it was expressed as loss, measured against a Blackpool or Clacton-on-Sea the older participants remembered. Several had known their towns since childhood, when the high streets were busy and seafronts packed. They now described boarded-up shops and town centres they avoided.

> *I’ve been here since the ’70s, and back then it was brilliant — thousands on the front, you couldn’t find a place on the beach. Now Blackpool has become a dump.*

Woman, Blackpool

I don't really see a way out of it now. With online shopping … people just can't really afford to open new businesses for lots of reasons. And sometimes they do open and they shut down just as quickly as they've opened.

Woman, Clacton-on-Sea

Asked directly whether the last ten years had made things better or worse, the answer was unanimous: worse. They pointed to rising crime and homelessness, public services thinning out, and the feeling that what was being built was aimed at tourists rather than the people who lived there. When asked when they had last felt good about the town, the group settled after some discussion on the early 1990s — a generation ago.

I was a barmaid in the bars on the front, and it used to be heaving — five rows back before you could get served. Not now. You don't even get that [now].

Woman, Blackpool

That's just the change in society. I actually know a couple of security guys that are told not to engage people [stealing]. They're told not to go near them because the bottom line is the shops would rather lose the money and write it off than have one of their security guards stabbed and have to pay out for it. So they're actually told not to engage these people. Again, this is the high street everywhere.

Woman, Clacton-on-Sea

Yet pinning down when the decline had set in proved much harder. Answers ranged widely; the early 1990s for some and the years around the pandemic for others, while the rise in crime was dated to the last five or ten years. No single turning point emerged; the impression was of a long, continuous slide rather than a sudden fall.

The cause was just as hard to identify: participants reached variously for the pandemic, Brexit, council decisions, and a government they felt looked after the South first. More than a specific date or a culprit, there was a diffuse, strongly held conviction that things had simply got worse—more poverty, more dilapidation, less opportunity—in a way that had not been true twenty years ago, and perhaps not even ten.

An apparent rise in crime was one concrete point many touched on—shoplifting the police would not attend, "county lines" drug activity, and children riding around in balaclavas—with one retail worker recalling a security guard stabbed chasing a shoplifter "for a pound box of Maltesers."

6 There was little enthusiasm for Reform itself.

A lot of the support for Reform observed in these areas was driven by resignation and a sense of few other options rather than active enthusiasm for the party. Asked whether Reform would spend the money any better, participants were uncertain, and tended to fold the question into a general view that politicians promise and do not deliver.

> *Possibly. I'd have to look into it more, really.*

Man, Blackpool

> *They'd just be the same as all the other governments — saying they'll do this and do that, and nothing gets done.*

Woman, Blackpool

> *Too early to tell. The proof is in the pudding.*

Woman, Blackpool

I couldn't call it and say that they would do anything better. I'm disillusioned with a lot of things at the moment. There's so much going on with all these wars and stuff going on and the effect of petrol and everything. I'm almost giving up.

Woman, Clacton-on-Sea

The support we see in our quantitative analysis appears to rest less on deep attachment to Reform than on repeated disappointment with the parties that have come before.

In the last decade, many of these regions have already moved from the Conservatives to Labour and now to Reform, suggesting a restless protest vote rather than a settled realignment. In principle, their support remains available to any party able to offer a credible plan or make a visible difference. However, the speed with which these voters have moved on shows that this is easier said than done, reflecting something hard to fix: a deep sense of dejection that one more funding round, promise or political reset may not be enough to shift.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, regeneration funding was meant to show places that felt overlooked that the system could still work for them. After £19 billion of government spending, the authorities that received the most are not better off relative to the rest of the country, and have moved further towards Reform than comparable areas.

This is not a case of money sent to the wrong places. Funding broadly followed deprivation, not the electoral map, and it paid for real projects. However, a series of discrete capital schemes have failed to mitigate a pervasive, diffuse sense amongst residents that their town has got worse. In Blackpool, people could list funded projects without naming one that had changed daily life. The money was visible, but it did not make a meaningful difference.

In turn, this has driven a decade of political churn as voters in these regions turned first to the Conservatives, then to Labour, and now to Reform as a rejection of governing policies which they feel have not delivered for them.

On this evidence, the bet behind a decade of regeneration funding has not paid off. Whoever next commits to turning life around for these regions will be heard against ten years in which similar promises were not met.

Annexe: detailed methodology

Selecting funds

We conducted desk research on UK government funds addressing local economic growth, equality of opportunity, and regeneration since 2010, guided in part by the House of Commons Library's list of national regeneration funds. From a long-list of sixteen programmes, almost all administered by MHCLG / DLUHC, we kept only those whose primary purpose was local regeneration or equitable growth, which used an area's deprivation as one selection criterion, and which were allocated at a local level. This excludes broader growth, investment and Covid-recovery schemes.

The qualifying funds, spanning governments from 2010 to 2026, are: Pride in Place (Phase 2); the Plan for Neighbourhoods (Pride in Place, Phase 1); the UK Shared Prosperity Fund; the Levelling Up Fund; Investment Zones and Freeports; the Community Ownership Fund; the Community Renewal Fund; the Towns Fund (Town Deals); the Future High Streets Fund; and the High Street Innovation Fund. Over 99% of this funding was disbursed after 2016.

We restrict our scope to funding from Westminster; devolved funding in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland was not included in any totals and averages.

Harmonising geographies and prices

Bids across these funds are reported against a range of geographies: Local Enterprise Partnerships, combined authorities, upper- and lower-tier authorities, and individual projects. We expressed all funding at the level of local authority districts (LADs) on 2024 ONS boundaries. Awards reported at higher geographies were disaggregated into constituent LADs using 2024 mid-year population estimates. Where funds were reported against project or town names, we first parsed names for clear geographic identifiers; where these were insufficient, we geocoded location and venue details via the Google Places API and joined the coordinates to the 2024 LAD boundary shapefile, with desk research resolving the remaining cases. Cross-boundary awards were assigned to the LAD containing the largest principal settlement; awards explicitly shared between authorities were split by population share. All values are in 2025 prices.

Secondary analysis

Deprivation. We built a composite household-deprivation score for each authority from the 2021 Census (ONS), and found a strong correlation between deprivation and funding per head.

Support for Reform. Using quarterly ward-level voting intention from the SHGH MRP, from the 2024 general election to December 2025, we find a strong correlation between funding and current Reform support. On matched comparisons that adjust for composite deprivation scores and foreign-born population share, better-funded authorities show higher Reform support than similar places in every quarter tested. We test the robustness of this result by applying twelve different matching specifications; six algorithms, ranging from simple nearest-neighbour matching to more demanding optimal, full, calipered, and genetic methods, each applied with the funding distinction between better-funded and less-funded authorities set at national mean and median levels of funding. The gap remains positive and significant in each quarter though in a couple of specifications it narrows from five to seven percentage points to two to five.

Marginality. Relating funding under each government to local support for Labour and the Conservatives, and to marginality at national elections, adjusted for time in office, we find no consistent relationship between marginality and funding, and only weak evidence of parties favouring their own seats.

Qualitative research

Focus groups were held in April 2026 in Blackpool with 2024 Labour voters now considering Reform and 2024 Reform voters in Clacton-on-Sea. Local residents of mixed ages and occupations were recruited and the discussion followed a single semi-structured guide covering the state of the town, local services and infrastructure, awareness of funding, and political attitudes. Quotations have been lightly edited for readability and participants anonymised.



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