

Not left behind? Five questions that need answering before the Copeland and Stoke by-elections

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There will be two by-elections this month, yet the focus is more on who will win than on what policies they will adopt if they do win. [Peter Kenway](#), [Dan Corry](#), and [Steve Barwick](#) outline the main problems facing Stoke and Copeland, and set some key questions that will make for a more substantive debate.

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On 23 February, the country faces two by-elections – one in Stoke, one in Copeland. While attention is inevitably focusing on the way that the various parties are approaching them and on who is going to win, we think that the media should also highlight the economic and social situation facing these local areas.

For while both areas have specific issues to deal with, they highlight several key points about the current state of England overall, the policies that have got us here, and the potential ways forward that are not being discussed enough as Brexit dominates.



Copeland is unusual. It has well-paid jobs at the heart of its economy: few other places in England can boast of weekly earnings 29 per cent above the national average and more than a third of jobs in manufacturing. What stops it from thriving is that this strength is matched by weakness, with an employment rate for men 9.5 percentage points below the national average, an underqualified working-age population, and an elevated long-term dependence on social security, with 71 per cent of claimants receiving it for at least two years. Moreover, 37 of its 49 local areas have levels of deprivation above the national average, with six of them being in the most deprived 10 per cent. One is in the most deprived one per cent. Prosperity clearly does not trickle down within Copeland.

Stoke of course does not even have the higher paid work. The employment rate may be only five percentage points below the England average, but full-time weekly earnings are 24 per cent below the average. Just 1 in 12 are in manufacturing work and a low percentage work in professional, scientific, and technical trades. Skills are lacking – with almost double the proportion of the working population with no qualification.

While there's little new about the existence of local inequality in Copeland, or general low wages and prospects in Stoke, the last few years have seen a sharp decline in national government's willingness to do anything about these all-important issues.

Local areas – urban and rural alike – have been left to their own devices. In a microcosm of much of the country, the industrial and social policy followed at national level has not created broad prosperity for these areas while austerity has withered the public realm leaving local public services, and the jobs that go with them, severely reduced. Central government data shows that total expenditure by Copeland District Council dropped 40 per cent over the five years to 2015/16 while that by the county (Cumbria) fell 8 per cent. In Stoke-on-Trent, a unitary council, the fall was 25 per cent. These eye-watering cuts are before the effects of inflation are taken into account – and the cuts are continuing.



These areas should not be expected to deal with this on their own. Instead, they need a fair share of the wealth that is created in London and England's other big cities to provide them with the resources they need. This entails a proper ability to set policy at a sub-regional level through devolved powers as well as an ambitious industrial strategy. It also needs a new financial settlement for local government, which can foster an English unity, in which burdens and rewards are shared and where nowhere is left behind.

Copeland and Stoke voted for Brexit, but to make a success of it for their residents requires politicians and negotiators who understand the needs of the areas; an active policy to encourage activity and to up-skill the population through schools and FE/HE; a health system that delivers good quality care and better public health; government money so councils can start to restore local services and repair the crumbling infrastructure; and a commitment to devolution that also delivers for these two areas and not just the six areas heading to metro mayor elections on 4 May.

So, as we debate these by-elections, here are some of the more difficult questions for the political parties that need to be asked – and answered – before the 23 February:

1. How would they build on Copeland's strengths? A community with so many good jobs must have ways of spreading its prosperity. And how will they bring real hope to Stoke?
2. What industrial and sub-regional policies will they be urging the government to adopt to support Stoke and Copeland – and who should be in charge of those policies?
3. How much more austerity can local services in Stoke and Copeland stand – and where, besides social care, is the need for more government money greatest?
4. What support through the social security system will they be asking central government to provide for the residents of Stoke and Copeland who have been left behind?
5. What do they see key in the Brexit settlement to the prosperity of everyone in Stoke and Copeland, and how will they argue for it?

Note: the authors write here in a personal capacity; they have also co-authored the report [Beneath the Bonnet](#).

About the Authors

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