

Institution: Staffordshire University		
Unit of Assessment: 17, Business and Management		
Title of case study: Tackling Austerity, Welfare and Work in Contemporary Britain		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: May 2017 - December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Names:	Roles:	Period employed by submitting HEI:
Martin Jones David Beel David Etherington	Professor of Human Geography Research Assistant Professor of Local and Regional Economic Development	May 2017 – present May 2017 – Sept 2018 Dec 2018 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: May 2017 - December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Staffordshire University research on deindustrialised city-regions (Sheffield and Stoke-on-Trent particularly) has highlighted how trade unions, local government, and community organisations can address the needs of marginalised workers through securing employment and welfare rights. Staffordshire University research has been central to the Sheffield Needs a Pay Rise (SNAP) campaign and supplied an evidence base for: policies addressing inequality and insecurity in deindustrialised settings; innovative strategies that engage marginalised workers through Job Rotation; and means for hardship advocacy groups and local policymakers (such as Local Enterprise Partnerships LEP) to address low-pay and employment insecurity by creating new paid roles and engaging with local communities.

2. Underpinning research

Over the past decade, the roll out of Universal Credit, combined with legal changes to employment rights and access to trade union representation, has increased social and labour market marginalisation. These 'austerity' policies have had a disproportionately negative and deep impact on Midlands and Northern cities, which have also been seriously impacted by the COVID crisis. Staffordshire University research has examined recovery strategies and policies for employment and social responses. New strategies and policies under study include income safety nets, expanded access to health and safety at work, job and training guarantee programmes, and compensation schemes for Northern cities.

Building on their earlier research on local and regional economic development, Etherington and Jones have researched economic and social restructuring in cities. They have focused on how austerity policies affect social inequality. Since May 2017, Jones' strand of the research has uncovered the mechanisms, institutions, and spaces of subnational economic development. In particular, he has investigated how policymakers frame problems and offer intervention solutions in different cities and regions. His work considers policymaking successes and failures to then explain how uncertain economic development has provided opportunities for stakeholder involvement in 'new locality' settings [3.1, 3.2]. Since December 2018, Etherington's strand has demonstrated the links between economic development interventions, welfare policy, and how the reworking of employment relations has affected social inequalities. By exploring how reforms such as Universal Credit have reinforced employment and social insecurity, Etherington has documented how non-government organisations, trade unions, and policymakers can respond to a welfare agenda that has been shaped to prioritise employment outcomes [3.3].

Etherington and Jones combined the research strands to examine how employment, skills, and welfare policies affected devolution and disadvantage in the Sheffield City Region. This was complemented by research undertaken by Jones and Beel, funded by ESRC as part of Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD), on the role of civil society in city-region economic development governance and policy. The collective research highlighted that current and planned devolution, welfare, employment, and skills policies reinforce economic

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and social disadvantage. It found that disadvantaged groups' opportunities to access sustainable employment were limited and identified three key issues for policymakers and politicians. First, the devolution settlement requires greater consultation and representation through local institutions such as LEPs. Second, demand-side skills approaches were needed alongside greater integration of the employment and skills system. Third, maximising efficacy in any devolved welfare to work system, including Universal Credit, requires a more user-friendly system for claimants that takes account of their voice and aspirations [3.1, 3.3].

With colleagues at Sheffield Hallam and Manchester Metropolitan University, Etherington, Jones and Beel expanded the research for the Trade Union Council's (TUC) 'Sheffield Needs A Pay Rise' (SNAP) campaign. Etherington and Jones led the fieldwork for SNAP from May 2017 and then the drafting of the initial and final reports (July 2020, [3.4]). Supported by the Institute of Employment Rights, SNAP provided insights into how trade unions negotiate and resist the highlighted employment insecurities and how they relate to community organisations and other social movements who act for marginalised people. The research gave detailed insights into how labour movements innovate and organise strategies among workers in precarious employment contexts. The SNAP research has provided one of only a few available case studies on the relationship between government austerity and labour market insecurity before and during the COVID pandemic [3.3].

Etherington and Jones' presentation of the SNAP research findings to Stoke-on-Trent Hardship Commission in March 2020 triggered further research on the impact of welfare reforms on Stoke-on-Trent. The research by Etherington, reported in July 2020, provided early insights into how the COVID pandemic produced a rapid increase in unemployment, significant reductions in household income, and large numbers vulnerable to impoverishment. It showed that all these factors are reflected in the rise of foodbank use. Etherington's report called for a more proactive and inclusive approach to employment policy to promote growth and productivity [3.5]. This approach would include job and training guarantees for unemployed people, and skills investment for workers. It also includes Job Rotation, whereby employers hire unemployed people as temporary workers, while permanent staff members receive further education and training. Job rotation therefore addresses both long-term unemployment and the need to upgrade the skills of employed people. It can potentially enhance the COVID Job Guarantee back to work strategy for young and long-term unemployed people [3.6].

3. References to the research

Etherington and Jones' research has influenced international debates on city-regions and has shaped research agendas that cover the links between institution-building, democracy, and the ways that urban environments can express and reproduce deep social divides. It is published in peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, and policy reports.

3.1 Jones, M (2019) *Cities and Regions in Crisis: The Political Economy of Sub-National Economic Development*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6801>

3.2 Jones, M (2019) 'Spaces of welfare localism: geographies of locality making' in A Whitworth (ed) *Towards a Spatial Social Policy: Bridging the Gap Between Geography and Social Policy*, Bristol, Policy Press <http://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6912>

3.3 Etherington, D (2020) *Austerity, Welfare and Work: Exploring Politics, Geographies and Inequalities*, Bristol, Policy Press <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6821>

3.4 Thomas, P, Etherington D, Jeffery R, Beresford, R, Beel D, and Jones M (2020) *Tackling Labour Market Injustice and Organising Workers: The View from a Northern Heartland*, Sheffield, Sheffield TUC <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6902>

3.5 Etherington, D (2020) 'A disappearing safety net: post Covid-19 crisis and its impact on poverty and disadvantage in Stoke-on-Trent' Report to Stoke Hardship Commission, Staffordshire University <http://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6403>

3.6 Etherington, D, Ingold, J, and Jones, M (2020) 'Job Rotation: an idea whose time has come?' Employment Related Services Association Blog: <https://ersa.org.uk/blog/job-rotation-idea-whose-time-has-come>

Total funding GBP6,208,655, WISERD led by Cardiff University, ESRC, 2014-2019, with 36 partners. Staffordshire University were involved 2017-2019 and received GBP88,211.

4. Details of the impact

The research detailed in sections 2 and 3 has created new insights into the impact of austerity on work and welfare. It highlights specific challenges facing Midlands and Northern cities, and it suggests new ways in which trade unions and civil society can address the problems. These findings form an evidence base to inform policy and practice. The research team's engagement with trade unions and policymakers has led to the following impacts:

4.1 Influencing the Sheffield Needs a Pay Rise (SNAP) Campaign

The SNAP campaign was first launched in 2016 and received support and funding from a range of local unions, political parties, and community groups. It responded to the fact that the 2015 introduction of the National Living Wage (for over-25s) benefitted Sheffield workers more than those in any other UK city [5.1 p. 1]. This fact led to Sheffield being dubbed the '*Low Pay Capital of Britain*'. As stated by the Secretary of Sheffield Trade Union Council, the campaign was previously limited by the need for '*a real evidence base as a way of analysing the degree and extent to which low pay and precarious work had developed in Sheffield*' [5.1 p. 1]. This gap is partly due to the fact that only around 11% of private sector workplaces have trade union representation. Therefore, union leaders lacked key information about the vast majority of private sector workplaces. To address these challenges, the research objectives were impact-driven from the outset (in May 2017). They focused on providing knowledge and strategic direction to support the campaign's development in new ways: '*The emphasis for us was as much on action as well [as] academic content. In this way the SNAP research helped to mobilise people around the aims of the project*' [5.1 p. 1]. The research benefitted the SNAP campaign as follows:

Improved evidence base to inform strategy

The research brought direction and purpose to the SNAP campaign: '*Without the academic support and research ... we would not have had the knowledge or the vision which we needed to make this project the huge success that [it] is today*' [5.1 p. 4]. One key aspect was that SNAP gained a better understanding of what motivates younger people to join a union. This knowledge has informed their campaigning strategy: '*I think interviewing so many young workers (65 and counting) has helped us discern that it is not necessarily traditional issues of pay that might motivate people to join a union, but more issues of respect (often linked to bullying, discrimination and harassment). This is certainly something I've fed back to [union organiser] and which has helped inform her campaigning strategy*' [5.1 p. 3]. The campaign also benefitted from improved knowledge of employment practices at different workplaces across Sheffield, including '*the ownership structure of local non-union workplaces*' [5.1 p. 3].

Increasing engagement and capacity

The research remit included a '*clear aim of engaging workers and other stakeholders who were interested in or involved with low pay and insecure work issues*' [5.1 p. 1]. The new research insights were critical in raising awareness of the extent and urgency of the problems: '*For instance it was very important to learn that as many as 25% of workers in Sheffield are on low pay, precarious or some other form of exploitative contract – a fact which was previously not widely known and helped to shock people out of their complacency. Another important finding was that wage levels are not just stagnating at 2008 levels (the year of the financial crisis) but have sunk further to 2004 levels*' [5.1 p. 3]. To understand the scale of the problem, it is worth noting that according to the 2011 Census, 25% of workers in Sheffield equates to 56,950 people. SNAP used these insights to engage established union branches in Sheffield in fund raising and action. The research led to a dissemination conference in June 2018, which involved a range of trade unions, particularly in the fast-food sector (a SNAP priority sector). At the conference, Etherington, Jones and Beel presented a draft research report on low pay and precarious work

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in Sheffield. The conference was the grassroots catalyst for change. Sheffield TUC strengthened their links with the fast-food campaigns and trade unions, including the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU). The TUC's link with the BFAWU led to their partnership agreement (signed February 2019) and evidence for the need to employ an Organiser for SNAP. This, in turn, led to a successful fund-raising campaign: *'Since we first launched the funding appeal in 2018, we have raised to date approximately GBP25,000 in donations, crowd funding and other fund-raising activities to fund an Organiser. There is no doubt that SNAP research and report findings was key in facilitating this'* [5.1 p. 2]. The first new Organiser role began in April 2019 on a part-time basis. With further funding from BFAWU, the new post became full-time from January 2020 (headcount: 1; FTEs: 1) [5.1 p. 2].

Challenging exploitation

As noted by Olivia Blake, MP for Sheffield Hallam: 'Unlike traditional research projects, Sheffield Needs A Pay Rise demonstrates how academic research can go hand-in-hand with union organising to inspire action and challenge exploitation' [3.5, p.7]. Through being interviewed for the SNAP research, activists have then acted as 'champions' for the campaign. In one example, in 2020 SNAP recruited a Sheffield worker who held two part-time jobs - one at a local cinema and one at a bar. SNAP trained her in tactics for organising conversations and facilitated a meeting between her and the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union (BECTU). This worker went on to recruit 20 people to BECTU, before being elected as the union representative in her bar job, and leading negotiations with management to win increased furlough pay and sick pay [5.1 p. 3]. SNAP has also been central to challenging employers' working practices. In one example from August 2020, SNAP negotiated the payment of backpay for workers at a fast-food outlet in Sheffield (GBP10,000) after organising a lobby of the business by workers [5.1 p.3; 5.2].

4.2 Extending the Impact through new campaigns

'Union organising work on city-wide basis is something new in UK trade unionism' [5.1 p. 4]. This new approach has drawn interest from others beyond the Sheffield-City region. SNAP *'are also in discussion with a number of Trades Councils and organisations about exporting the model into other areas, and the research has helped in terms of building this interest'* [5.1 p. 4].

SNAP research has informed two further 'Pay Rise' campaigns, modelled along similar lines to Sheffield. The Regional Secretary of TUC Yorkshire & the Humber and Board Member of Sheffield City-Region LEP confirms the contribution of the research [3.4]: *'The SNAP report... formed the basis to establishing our own regional campaign – Yorkshire Needs A Pay Rise ... where we produced pocket leaflets 'Know Your Rights At Work' [5.3] 'to hand out to both union and non-union members. This has also inspired the setting up of Leeds Needs a Pay Rise campaign [in 2020], again an initiative that the Regional TUC and Sheffield TUC via SNAP have given support to'* [5.4].

The SNAP report highlighted challenges in organising among unorganised, particularly young, workers. These findings informed the work of the SNAP community organiser. They also influenced the Yorkshire Regional TUC to refocus its work for young people as marginalised workers by arranging targeted events. The TUC drew on lessons from SNAP [5.5] by holding events in April 2020 [5.4].

4.3 Influencing Policymakers

The research has made a policy impact by raising awareness of how austerity and devolution are inextricably linked, and that this link presents significant challenges to the government's devolution and city-region growth agenda. It is essential that major economic interventions such as the Northern Powerhouse (NPH) respond effectively and strategically to these challenges. After taking his post at Staffordshire University in May 2017, Jones was invited to chair an *Inside Government* conference on 'Reviewing Progress and Discussing the Next Steps for Devolution

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and the Northern Powerhouse', 27 September 2017 in Central Manchester. This event involved leading figures in English devolution (including Cllr Richard Leese, Board Member, NPH) and 70 senior policymaker delegates from across the UK [5.6]. According to Nicola Headlam, the former Head of the Northern Powerhouse, Jones *'played a key role in assembling the speakers for this event' and his 'closing policy agenda for the next 5 years, marked in my mind, the turning point in the NPH project towards ... one needing to always consider the distributional aspects of economic development and to put in place policy inclusive growth [which in turn] informed the development of the Northern Powerhouse Strategy Refresh process [2018/19] ... to benefit the people of the north'* [5.7]. Nicola Headlam's testimonial also confirms that Jones's research informed the *'substance and content'* of *'the only face to face meeting [in 2019] that has ever been held between the PM and all the northern mayors. On this agenda, inclusive growth was the first item for discussion. I was closely associated with these arguments and briefed many Special Advisers, senior civil service colleagues and others on key ideas proposed by Martin Jones in support of inclusive growth'* [5.7].

The SNAP report focused attention on the city-region context for labour market inequalities. It especially picked out the prevalence of low-pay and insecure work (prevalence of zero hours contracts). These findings have been highlighted by the Regional TUC representative on the Sheffield LEP Combined Authority Board. The LEP covers an economy of £35 billion. In turn, the LEP Chair has now championed strategies to tackle low-pay [5.4]. The LEP has since directed the Regional Secretary of TUC Yorkshire and the Humber *'to consider how the SNAP findings can inform LEP policies for addressing insecure and low paid work'*. Consequently, the TUC is using SNAP findings to apply *'social outcomes to the strategic economic plan ... raising productivity and wealth'* [5.4]. In addition, as Stoke-on-Trent City Council now transitions to post-COVID planning, it has sought to use Etherington and Jones' research on Job Rotation to aid the city's economic recovery. Stoke-on-Trent City Council previously used this research as a social inclusion pilot *'to support longer-term unemployed adults into temporary work and enable them to gain vital skills and experience'* [5.8].

This case study's research has generated national policy impact. Both Etherington and Jones were invited to submit evidence to the Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry into Benefit Delay Response, 6 April 2020 [5.9a]. The Select Committee published Etherington and Jones' evidence on SNAP and Stoke-on-Trent. The publication acknowledged the impact of benefit delays on hardships for individuals, geographical repercussions, and economic costs for any responding public services. It calls for the elimination of the five week wait for all claimants moving to Universal Credit [5.9b].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Letter Testimonial from Secretary of Sheffield Trade Union Council.
- 5.2 News article: [Restaurant workers win pay dispute after SNAP supported demonstration.](#)
- 5.3 Trade Union Council, campaign leaflet: [Yorkshire Needs a Pay Rise.](#)
- 5.4 Letter Testimonial from Secretary of Yorkshire and Humberside Regional TUC.
- 5.5 Event details: [TUC's Young Workers Organising Weekend.](#)
- 5.6 Chair Information Pack: Inside Government Forum 'Reviewing Progress and Discussing The Next Steps for Devolution and the Northern Powerhouse' 27 September 2017.
- 5.7 Letter Testimonial from Nicola Headlam, former Head of the Northern Powerhouse
- 5.8 *Employment and Skills Strategy*, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, 2017, page 32.
- 5.9a Etherington D and Jones M (2020) [Evidence submitted to Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry into Benefit Delay Response.](#)
- 5.9b ['Universal Credit: the wait for a first payment'](#) WPC Benefit Delay Response, Work and Pension Inquiry, April 2020, Published written evidence 24.