

Two very different corners of Greater Manchester, one very similar problem

SPECIAL INVESTIGATION Youth unemployment is rising across the country, and The Manchester Evening News has delved into the latest figures

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The numbers are stark. More than one million under-25s across the country are not in education, employment or training according to the latest official figures.

Greater Manchester is no different. Unemployment is rising among young adults and it's a problem of which political leaders are only too aware.

Both Sir Keir Starmer and his likely-successor **Andy Burnham** have been discussing ways to tackle it over recent days. But the problem isn't straightforward.

The causes of rising youth unemployment appear to be varied - and the end result is being seen in communities with very different demographics.

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The *Manchester Evening News* has delved into the latest figures from the House of Commons Library which show the number of people aged 18 to 24 who are claiming either Jobseeker's Allowance or Universal Credit with a requirement to seek work. The data is broken down into parliamentary constituencies.

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The three areas with the highest proportion of claimants aged 18 to 24 are in parts of north Manchester, **Rochdale** and **Oldham** boroughs, which traditionally

have higher levels of deprivation as part of a well-recognised 'north-south divide' within Greater Manchester. But at a time of rising youth unemployment, those areas have not seen the biggest annual increases in claimants.

And the three constituencies where the number of 18 to 24-year-old claimants has increased most sharply include some of the region's most affluent areas. MPs in some of the worst affected areas point to different factors which are driving unemployment in their communities - but the end result is ultimately the same.

The data shows that the Greater Manchester constituency with the highest percentage of 18 to 24-year-olds who are claiming either Jobseeker's Allowance or Universal Credit is **Blackley** and **Middleton** South, at 10.2 per cent. Neighbouring constituencies **Heywood** and Middleton North, and Oldham West, **Chadderton** and Royton, follow closely behind on 9.8 per cent each.

All other constituencies in Oldham, Rochdale and **Tameside** have figures above nine per cent. But not all of those constituencies have seen rapid growth in the number of claimants over the last year.

While the number of claimants increased by 15 per cent annually in Heywood and Middleton North, the increase was eight per cent in Blackley and Middleton South, and just four per cent in Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton. Those numbers point to more long-standing issues affecting employment rates for young adults in those areas.

Meanwhile, the three constituencies which saw the highest increase in 18 to 24-year-old claimants were all in the **Stockport** borough.

The **Cheadle** constituency - arguably the most affluent part of the borough, including **Bramhall** and Cheadle **Hulme** - saw the largest year-on-year increase across all of Greater Manchester, at 35 per cent.

Hazel Grove followed with a 25 per cent annual increase in claimants, while the Stockport constituency was third with a 23 per cent increase. The Stockport seat includes some areas with higher levels of deprivation, such as Brinnington and **Reddish**, and the recent rise has led to 9.7 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds in the constituency claiming out-of-work benefits - the fourth highest figure in the region.

The data used is considered the best way of tracking unemployment across different parts of the UK - revealing the areas that could benefit from targeted support. It is different to the broader youth unemployment rate, which is

measured through surveys and includes everyone looking for and available for work, whether or not they are claiming benefits.

A tale of two constituencies

Official figures show Blackley and Middleton South is the constituency with the highest level of deprivation in Greater Manchester - and the ninth highest across the UK. It is in that context that Graham Stringer MP is 'not surprised' to see the area having the highest percentage of 18 to 24-year-old claimants of out-of-work benefits - but he admits the figures are 'concerning'.

"It's very sad and it looks like it's going to get worse," he told the Manchester Evening News. "We always end up in cycles and it's always the poorest people and the least achieving people [academically] that are most badly hurt."

Labour veteran Mr Stringer, who has served the Blackley community as MP for 29 years, believes unemployment issues in his constituency stem from the education system. The Labour veteran argues that children who are not supported when they begin to fall behind at primary school often face increasing difficulties in the years ahead.

"Those people with less work experience or less educational achievement are the people first hit," he said. "So you see in the unemployment figures people who the education system has failed, or they have failed in the education system. Those are the people who find it difficult to retain employment or get employment in the first place.

"The shocking thing in one way is, I'm not surprised that the poorest parts of Greater Manchester see the highest numbers of young people suffering unemployment. At source, there needs to be more focus - more education intensity when children starting failing, because once students start failing, then it's very difficult for them.

"There's a ridiculously high number of 11-year-olds who are not at the reading age you would expect them to be at. Once they get there, and they move to bigger school, they get lost. They stop going. They find it very difficult because their literacy levels are poor. I think you have to view it not just as unemployment, but you have to view it as why certain people are more vulnerable than others."

Mr Stringer believes there should be additional support for students who fall behind with literacy and numeracy skills at school, to prevent them becoming

'one of those statistics' in the unemployment figures in years to come. It's a different diagnosis offered for the same problem which is being experienced on the other side of Greater Manchester.

Tom Morrison, Liberal Democrat MP for Cheadle, claims the current Labour government 'has been nothing short of shambolic' when it comes to supporting businesses. He says that in his constituency, the key issue driving up youth unemployment is the increase to national insurance contributions paid by businesses, which was introduced in Rachel Reeves' first budget as Chancellor in 2024.

Mr Morrison says firms who typically hire university graduates have been badly hit by the move. He said: "The businesses I'm speaking to, the ones that are taking on graduates normally, what they are calling 'the jobs tax' - the national insurance contribution rise that the government put in place in the first budget - has really hammered them.

"That's had an impact on employing young people - graduates mainly... It's no secret that the government inherited a terrible mess from the last one when it comes to youth unemployment, but this government policy on national insurance contributions has made the mess a catastrophe."

The former councillor also pointed to concerns about artificial intelligence (AI) having an impact on entry-level graduate jobs, suggesting the Government 'is not catching up' with how the new technology is transforming the 'world of work'. He believes lawmakers 'need to move faster' on training young people with AI and helping businesses use it 'in a way that does not impact jobs' - although he believes the rise in national insurance contributions for firms is currently the bigger factor affecting youth unemployment.

A brighter future?

There are concerns that unemployment figures could get worse before they get better. Job vacancies have slumped to their lowest level in five years, as firms pull back from hiring amid economic uncertainty and soaring wage costs.

Helen Dickinson, chief executive at the British Retail Consortium, said: "If the Government is serious about tackling youth unemployment, it must bring down the cost of employing young people and ensure employment reforms support entry-level recruitment and progression."

Yet key figures in the [Labour Party](#) are well aware of the situation. The current Prime Minister announced a new youth jobs grant earlier this week. The move will see firms offered £3,000 to hire an 18 to 24-year-old who has been on Universal Credit for six months or more.

Sir Keir said the youth jobs grant will go hand in hand with the jobs guarantee, which funds six months' part-time employment for those out of work for at least 18 months. A report from the Resolution Foundation think tank estimated the youth jobs grant will create 2,800 additional jobs at a cost of around £36,700 each, while the jobs guarantee comes in at roughly £38,000 per additional job, making it three-and-a half times cheaper than scrapping employer national insurance contributions.

Sir Keir also pointed towards the idea that there should be a greater emphasis on technical and vocational education, rather than universities being seen as the main route for progression. He said: "It is crucial that when we say every young person should go as far as their talent and ability will take them, we mean it."

In a statement responding to the figures explored by the M.E.N., Work and Pensions Secretary Pat McFadden said 'ongoing instability in the Middle East is causing uncertainty in our labour market'. He added: "We have the right economic plan for growth and stability in a volatile world – and we are taking action to create opportunity and make sure that no one is left behind.

"We are pushing ahead with the biggest youth employment reforms in a generation to create almost a million opportunities for young people, boosting skills through our Youth Guarantee backed by a £2.5 billion investment and supporting 300,000 disabled people through our Connect to Work programme to futureproof our workforce to help more people into work."

Meanwhile, the political attention is largely shifting away from Sir Keir's leadership and towards the former Greater Manchester mayor, who is widely expected to replace him as PM in the coming weeks. Mr Burnham discussed the issue of youth unemployment during his recent speech at the People's History Museum.

"We need a complete rethink of how we support the next generation to succeed, and it has to start with the education system," he said. "The days of a school system configured entirely around the university route will be brought to an end.

"University is great for those who want it - but when are we going to focus on the life chances of those kids who want something different? When? The country hasn't done that for a long, long time.

"People have argued for many years for an education system based on parity between academic and technical and that is what we will build, giving every young person growing up here a clear path into a reindustrialised Britain.

"Where young people need mental health support, it should be provided as part of in-work support. And we will answer the call from mayors, and particularly the mayor of the North East, for devolution of employment support and changing the way we support and sustain people in employment, working much more through our community and voluntary sector at a grassroots level."

Cheadle's MP is optimistic for the future - but says he 'needs to see the details' on Mr Burnham's plans. Mr Morrison said: "I've had a good working relationship with Andy, since I have been elected he has been a really good mayor to work with. I think he has a good track record in Manchester around youth employment, so I'm hoping that he will take that forward.

"Whatever he does, it can't be any worse than the current way of working. This government and its support for business has been nothing short of shambolic. Young people have paid the price for that."

Over in Blackley and Middleton South, Mr Stringer is also keen to see attention shift away from university degrees and onto apprenticeships. He said: "To be fair to Andy, he has looked at this - with the MBacc and on training, a focus on apprenticeships rather than just going to do a degree at university.

"Some of those degrees are economically pretty worthless. He's been trying to get national education to make the apprenticeships, I suppose more attractive, to give them equal value to degrees because they often are more financially useful to young people going into employment."