



# **Garon Park - Levelling Up Research Report**

*July 2024*

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# Executive Summary

Disparities in the quality of opportunities, both across and within different regions and cities of the United Kingdom have stood to leave the British economy among the most unequal of industrialised nations. The consequent combination of lower incomes, poorer health outcomes and low levels of life satisfaction in some areas have generated poorer life outcomes for millions of people based solely upon their geography. Successful investment in the ‘levelling up’ of underperforming areas, such that they converge with national averages across several domains would generate a significant improvement to the citizenry’s wellbeing, equivalent to hundreds of billions of pounds nationwide.

Poor outcomes in health, economic, social and environmental domains suggest Southend-on-Sea is in need of such investment. Productivity consistently ranked within the nation’s bottom decile, above average unemployment rates, poor health outcomes associated with a lack of physical activity and an environment among the nation’s most wanting for green space make it a place pockmarked with deprivation. The disparities between ‘commuter belts’ on the city’s fringes and its central wards reliant on a weak local economy in need of wealth creation also sees the gap between the city’s most and least deprived areas among the nation’s largest, undermining social trust. In order for the city to start serving its local community more justly and effectively, it is clear that change is needed.

Garon Park CIC (*GP CIC*) is able to help deliver much of this change. Through providing facilities across its 32-acre site for use by local companies, charities and community groups, and its own activities through its charity arm Wellbeing at Garon Park (*WGP*), it has the potential to help meet six of the government’s twelve missions through driving improvements to four of the six capitals driving prosperity. This is achieved particularly with a focus on providing opportunities to young people, with more than half of the site’s visits by under 18s. The presence of multiple alternative education providers, community events throughout the year, youth clubs, holiday groups and dozens of youth sports teams drove more than 100,000 unique visits in 2023, with the potential to expand further in the presence of both greater youth involvement in decision making, and in a wider range of facilities.

Involvement with the GP CIC site has already driven improvements in user’s lived experience, with survey data from 2023 and 2024 suggesting prominent advances in people’s health, socialising and sense of community among other benefits. GP CIC’s delivery of the Community Renewal Fund aimed at promoting local prosperity on behalf of Southend-on-Sea City Council accommodated nearly twice the numbers targeted and was adjudged to be ‘of an exceptionally high standard’. These findings suggest the extent of positive deliverable outcomes by GP CIC’s community engagement model can be broad and is limited only by the extent of its facilities.

# Background Information

## Levelling Up across the UK - A Summary

The UK government's levelling up agenda seeks to address the spatial inequalities in opportunities across and within different areas of the UK leading to significant disparities in life outcomes based solely upon geography. Whilst there are notable success stories in the UK economy, these have not been shared equally and has led to a 'postcode lottery' that is unreflective of the spread of the country's talents.

The UK government states that *"Levelling up is a mission to challenge, and change, that unfairness. Levelling up means giving everyone the opportunity to flourish. It means people everywhere living longer and more fulfilling lives, and benefiting from sustained rises in living standards and well-being"* (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022).

It is hoped that a mixture of public and private investment as well as public policy changes will serve to achieve four primary objectives. These are:

- Boosting productivity, pay, jobs and living standards by growing the private sector
- Spreading opportunity and improving public services
- Restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging
- Empowering local leaders and communities

Progress towards these objectives is set to be measured against twelve medium-term targets, or **missions**, to be met by 2030. These are<sup>1</sup>:

### **Boosting Productivity, Pay, Jobs & Living Standards**

1. Rising pay, employment and productivity in every UK region
2. Increased public R&D spending outside the South East
3. Improved public transport connectivity
4. Nationwide gigabit-capable broadband and 4G coverage

### **Spreading Opportunity & Improving Public Services**

5. 90% of primary school children to achieve expected reading, writing and mathematical standards
6. A significant increase in people successfully completing high quality skills courses across the UK
7. Increasing healthy life expectancies and narrowing gaps between the highest and lowest performing areas
8. Wellbeing improvements in every area of England, with closing gaps between high and low performing areas

### **Restoring a Sense of Community, Local Pride & Belonging**

9. Pride in place, such as people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing
10. Increased rates of first-time home ownership and falls in the number of non-decent rented homes
11. Falls in homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood crime

### **Empowering Local Leaders & Communities**

12. Devolution deals and simplified long-term funding settlements for every region of England that wants one

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<sup>1</sup> Missions have been paraphrased and adapted from *Levelling Up the United Kingdom - Table 2.1*.

## Drivers & Motivations

**Table 1 - The value of ‘levelling up’ underperforming areas to national averages<sup>2</sup>**

‘Levelled up’ element in lower quartile areas	Value nationwide
Additional economic output per annum	c.£50bn
Average increase in annual income per worker	c.£2,300 per worker
Annual increase in life satisfaction	£57-92bn (income equivalent)
Annual increase in life expectancy	c.£44bn
Total value of increase in qualifications	£46-78bn

Regional differences throughout the UK have widened notably from the second half of the twentieth century to the present, to the extent that after past improvements; spatial disparity in health, educational and economic outcomes is similar to that found a century ago. The UK’s spatial disparities are also significantly larger than those found in comparable advanced economies, to the extent that *“the UK is one of the most regionally unbalanced countries in the industrialised world”*, only performing better than Slovakia and Ireland in a survey of interregional inequality of 30 OECD countries (McCann, 2019).

The government’s four primary objectives to improve public services are particularly focussed on areas that are presently ‘underperforming’ in these respects compared with national averages. Of the 11 largest International Territorial Levels (ITL1s), only London and the south east of England have productivity levels above the national average. By raising the poorest 25% of UK places to national averages (as of 2022) in the following areas, it is estimated that the value to the UK economy would be as displayed above in Table 1.

While it is obviously impossible for the UK to become a place where ‘all the children are above average’, successful convergence of underperforming areas towards the national average, far less their higher performing counterparts, would be worth billions of pounds worth of gains for the UK economy; as well as producing improved health, education, wellbeing and higher living standards for millions of people.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from *Levelling Up the United Kingdom - Table 1.6*.

## Driving Factors

The UK government states that there is a combination of **six** capitals that determine differences in prosperity across different regions. These are:

- **Physical capital:** Infrastructure, machines and housing
- **Human capital:** The skills, health and experience of the workforce
- **Intangible capital:** Innovation, ideas and patents
- **Financial capital:** Resources supporting the financing of companies
- **Social capital:** The strength of communities, relationships and trust
- **Institutional capital:** Local leadership, capacity and capability

It is theorised that areas with high volumes of these capitals will have high levels of prosperity and low volumes of these capitals will have low levels of prosperity. Moreover, these capitals are agglomerative rather than merely cumulative. This suggests that they have the tendency to reinforce one another, and can then drive circles that are either **virtuous** (if these capitals exist in high quantities) or **vicious** (if they exist in low quantities). Areas with highly skilled workforces, high quality infrastructure and available support in the form of financing and robust communities and institutions will be more capable of attracting, developing and retaining greater volumes of such capital in the future. Similarly, an area with poorer skilled workforces, poor infrastructure and poor institutional support with no public trust will generate lower productivity companies and subsequent lower degrees of public trust. It is also more likely that success stories that do emerge in such a context are willing to fly the nest, weakening communities to drive productivity and trust down yet further.

This approach suggests that in the UK context, money has begotten money and that without policy action this will continue to occur with subsequent regional disparities growing yet further. Any government interventions are therefore predicated on trying to break vicious circles in less advantaged areas. According to the UK government, *“This programme [of interventions] has to be broad, deep and long-term. It has to be rooted in evidence demonstrating that a mix of factors is needed to transform places and boost local growth: strong innovation and a climate conducive to private sector investment, better skills, improved transport systems, greater access to culture, stronger pride in place, deeper trust, greater safety and more resilient institutions”* (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022).

## Pertinent Government Missions

### Health

The government's health mission states that ***"By 2030, the gap in Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE) between local areas where it is highest and lowest will have narrowed, and by 2035 HLE will rise by five years"***. HLE is defined as *"the average number of years that an individual is expected to live in a state of self-assessed good or very good health, based on current mortality rates and prevalence of good or very good health"* (Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, 2023).

The government's policy programme (devolution notwithstanding) to achieve this mission is (which has, at least as far as addressing disparities between regions is concerned, been significantly hampered by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic) is predicated upon:

- Improving public health
- Supporting food and dietary changes
- Tackling diagnostic backlogs.

### Wellbeing

The government's central wellbeing mission states that ***"By 2030, well-being will have improved in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing"***. The holistic nature of wellbeing means improvements to the value and distribution of employment, education and skills are considered paramount to meeting this aim. Its missions in this regard are that ***"By 2030, pay, employment and productivity will have risen in every area of the UK, with each area containing a globally competitive city, and the gap between the top performing and other areas closing"***, ***"By 2030, the number of primary school children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths will have significantly increased. In England, this will mean 90% of children will achieve the expected standard, and the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the worst performing areas will have increased by over a third"*** and ***"By 2030, the number of people successfully completing high-quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK. In England, this will lead to 200,000 more people successfully completing high-quality skills training annually, driven by 80,000 more people completing courses in the lowest skilled areas"*** respectively.

## **Pride in Place**

The government's mission in this respect states that ***“By 2030, pride in place, such as people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing.”*** As part of restoring a sense of community and belonging, it is also hoped that ***“By 2030 renters will have a secure path to ownership with the number of first-time buyers increasing in all areas; and the government's ambition is for the number of non-decent rented homes to have fallen by 50%, with the biggest improvements in the lowest performing areas.”*** and ***“By 2030, homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood crime will have fallen, focused on the worst-affected areas”*** respectively. The government proposes that delivering pride in place is predicated upon urban regeneration, and improvements to community and community sites, including green spaces and cultural and heritage sites.

## Delivery & Outcomes

### Health

Addressing public health disparities is predicated on NHS England's approach of *Core20Plus5*, approaching a target population (the 20% most deprived in the country) and 5 key areas that require accelerated improvement (NHS England, 2021). There is also a significant emphasis on non-medical interventions in the form of social prescription, of which £5.77m will fund a cross-government project aimed at poor mental and physical health through nature-based activities, or green social prescription. Other policies include the launch of the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and the 2021 ten-year Drug Strategy, as well as the piloted Better Health: Rewards programme in Wolverhampton, making incentives available for changes to diet and exercise (Department of Health & Social Care et al., 2023). Food and dietary changes have also been championed by the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme for those eligible for free school meals; pilot programmes with 18 local councils to ensure that current food standards are met (Kantar Public, 2023); new elements of the school curriculum and Community Eatwell schemes where GPs are able to prescribe fruit, vegetables, food-related education and social support.

Diagnostic backlogs are designed to be in part addressed by the establishment of 160 Community Diagnostic Centres (CDCs) in a variety of settings and opened a year ahead of schedule broadly outside London and the South East to improve diagnostic capabilities across a wide range of fields, including MRI tests, ultrasounds, blood tests and heart scans (Department of Health & Social Care & Barclay, 2023). It is hoped that between them, CDCs will produce an extra 8 million tests per year and 23,000 subsequent years of improved life quality.

While these interventions have at the time of writing been unsuccessful in terms of their ultimate ambition (Office for National Statistics, 2024) (Munford et al., 2023), the adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that have helped inform these results should fade in the future.

## Wellbeing

As wellbeing is an all-encompassing concept, there is an extent to which improving wellbeing is an element of every government policy. However, in addition to the health policy changes outlined above, improvements to education and skills are also regarded as critical.

Spatial disparities in educational attainment are "*clear, and often entrenched*" (although Southend-on-Sea has for the most part been on the correct side of these divides (Department for Education, 2023) (Department for Education, 2019)). In a bid to improve educational outcomes, the UK government has sought to encourage schools to join multi-academy trusts; professional development in young teachers through the early career framework; new funding formulae for local authorities; the establishment of Education Investment Areas containing 55 local authorities, and the establishment of the Oak National Academy. Concern for factors beyond the classroom have also led to £500 million of funding for Family Hubs, Start for Life programmes and the Supporting Families Programme (for which Southend City Council received just under £800,000 of funding for 2023-24 (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2023)).

As has previously been noted, "*Productivity isn't everything, but in the long run, it is almost everything. A country's ability to improve its standard of living over time depends almost entirely on its ability to raise its output per worker*" (Krugman, 1994). Crucial to this is improving people's skills and work training, particularly in more deprived areas, with low productivity jobs feeding into a vicious circle of brain drains, economic inactivity and poor health outcomes.

The policy prescription to improve this is based upon:

- Putting local employers at the heart of provision
- Strengthening locally accessible institutions such as further education colleges
- Ensuring lifetime access to training
- Greater opportunities for in-work progression
- Providing employment support for disabled people and those with health conditions

Amongst the policies designed to address this are the implementation of Local Skills Improvement Plans and Skills Bootcamps with guaranteed job interviews upon completion;

the instigation of T Levels and Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs); pilot pathfinder initiatives within the Department for Work and Pensions; the instigation of the Further Education Capital Transformation Fund and nine new Institutes of Technology (including the South East Institute of Technology delivered in part by South Essex College Group and City of Southend College (SCC) on its Luker Road and Stephenson Road campuses); the Lifetime Skills Guarantee aiming to provide free qualifications at NVQ Level 3 to the unemployed; funding for numeracy courses and student loans reform. To help further progression in employment and addressing pay disparities, there have also been minimum wage increases and cuts to the tapering rate of Universal Credit, as well as further investments in the UK's In-Work Progression offer aimed at providing work coaches to support those on low incomes and address skills shortages.

The House of Commons' Public Accounts Committee has noted that *“It is right that the Department [for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities] is working to simplify the funding system and reduce the administrative burdens on local authorities, including simplifying the variety and complexity of multiple funding streams and reducing the burden of data collection”* (Committee of Public Accounts, 2024). Amongst those designed to enhance pride in place include the Levelling Up Fund; Community Ownership Fund; Transforming Cities Fund; Towns Fund, Brownfield Housing Fund, Getting Building Fund, the Long-Term Fund for Towns and the Places for Growth Programme. By December 2023 however, £1.24 billion had been spent on the ground with a further £2.46 billion received by local authorities.

In addition to those funds administered by local authorities, it will attempt to actively engage other local authorities to deliver 'transformational' offers in places with the most need, and refocus Homes England to use its statutory powers to support regeneration schemes. High street rejuvenation is predicated on freezing of the business rates multiplier and incentivising landlords to make greater use of vacant lots, including potential forced renting to prospective tenants. Green space improvement is based upon a 10% biodiversity net gain commitment, with expansion of the green belt; Environmental Land Management Schemes and Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

## **Pride in Place**

Community improvements are centred around support for young people, investment and empowerment. This includes a National Youth Guarantee, which aims to ensure that by 2025 every young person should have access to out of school activities, adventures away from home and volunteering opportunities, supported by new youth facilities; reformation of the National Citizens' Service; ensuring the Duke of Edinburgh's Award is offered in every English secondary school and eliminating waiting lists for non-military Uniformed Youth Groups.

The Community Ownership Fund has allowed for communities to take control of local institutions with private sector backing through matching funding, as well as neighbourhood governance reviews and new models for community partnerships, including Community Governance. Among these reforms are the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which seeks to fund community and neighbourhood activity in areas where social capital is weakest, and the Dormant Assets Scheme which seeks to fund social and environmental initiatives when these assets cannot be reunited with their current owners. Cultural access is based upon significantly increasing cultural investment outside London (including funding for an £8 million redevelopment of the Cliffs Pavilion), the Cultural Investment Fund managed by Arts Council England and the identification of 'priority places' that should be the focus of additional Arts Council engagement and investment. In addition, sports facilities, particularly 3G pitches, will be established throughout the country in attempts to improve grassroots access to high quality sporting facilities, most often through the Football Foundation.

# Southend’s Capital Deficiencies

## Physical Capital

**Table 2 - A Concerning Lack of Green Space in Southend-on-Sea<sup>3</sup>**

Green Space Indicator	Nationwide Rank
Tree Canopy Cover	250 <sup>th</sup> of 308 (England only)
Tree Canopy Cover (Urban Authorities)	147 <sup>th</sup> of 175 (England only)
Average Population per park/public garden	351 <sup>st</sup> of 371
Average size of private outdoor space (Houses)	276 <sup>th</sup> of 371
Average size of private outdoor space (Flats)	348 <sup>th</sup> of 371
Percentage of addresses with private outdoor space	313 <sup>th</sup> of 371

While Southend is clearly well served with regard to its provision of blue space in the form of seven miles of coastline and four Blue Flag award winning beaches (Visit Southend, n.d.), the absence of access to green space in the area is more concerning. The local authority’s deficit of green space provision is outlined above in Table 2, which shows a lack of tree cover compared with both England’s other urban areas and more generally, a low number of public parks for the city’s population.

Data from Fields in Trust leads to public green space provision in the local authority of just 12.29m<sup>2</sup> per person, well below its minimum standard of 24m<sup>2</sup>; a standard that is not met by either of the city’s two parliamentary constituencies and by only one of the council’s 17 wards (Shoeburyness). This is also set to weaken across the next 20 years (Fields in Trust, 2024). In addition to this, more than 14,000 people in the city have been judged to be more than 10 minutes’ walk away from a green space access point. This problem is also made more pertinent by the prospect of a changing climate, where the urban heat island effect is liable to put more strain on a population that through a combination of deprivation and poor health would otherwise be worse equipped to cope with rising temperatures.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from *Spreadsheet of tree cover by English local authority areas; Access to garden space, Great Britain and Access to public green space in Great Britain.*

This absence of green space is a cause for concern, particularly given the positive effects associated with green spaces for a variety of morbidities (Maas et al., 2009), with anxiety disorders and depression most strongly affected. Attention restoration (Herzog et al., 2003); reduced stress and heart rate reduction (Brown et al., 2013) and higher IQs and behavioural development (Bijnens et al., 2020) are also cited among the benefits associated with access to green space. Moreover, there is also a lack of alternative provision in private spaces, where the local authority ranks in the bottom quintile for addresses with access to private green space, barely outside the bottom quartile for the size of private outdoor space associated with houses, and in the bottom decile for the size of private outdoor space associated with flats.

While recent reporting suggests that differential access to green spaces in schools is a notable problem nationwide (Horton et al., 2024), the situation in Southend is also unsatisfactory. 10 of the local authority's 20 primary schools having little or no green space on their own premises to speak of. Improvements in the access and volume to green space for the city's residents, which as cited in Southend's Parks and Green Spaces Strategy would extend not only to these personal health and wellbeing benefits but would also help to attract investment, boost property prices, foster social ties, enhance biodiversity and contribute towards climate change mitigation (Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, n.d.).

## Human Capital

Human capital pertains to the workforce's skills, health and experience. While there are undoubtedly successful areas of Southend in this respect, all three of these are in need of addressing, particularly in neighbourhoods where health and economic deprivations can be well masked by averages that stand up to nationwide comparisons.

## Skills & Experience

The new government's insistence on economic growth as the driver of living standards was a key part of its pitch to voters, with its manifesto stating that "*Sustained economic growth is the only route to improving the prosperity of our country and the living standards of working people. That is why it is Labour's first mission*" (Labour Party, 2024). Keir Starmer also stated during the election campaign that wealth creation in the UK was the "*number one mission*" of an incoming administration ("Keir Starmer: Our Number One Mission Is Wealth Creation," 2024). Given that the associated rise in living standards would to a large degree be borne of rising incomes, productivity gains as a result of changes in the skills and experience of the workforce are a vital part of meeting this mission. This is particularly true in areas where productivity is particularly low, with diminishing marginal returns meaning that gains can be easier to achieve in lower performing areas than in higher performing ones.

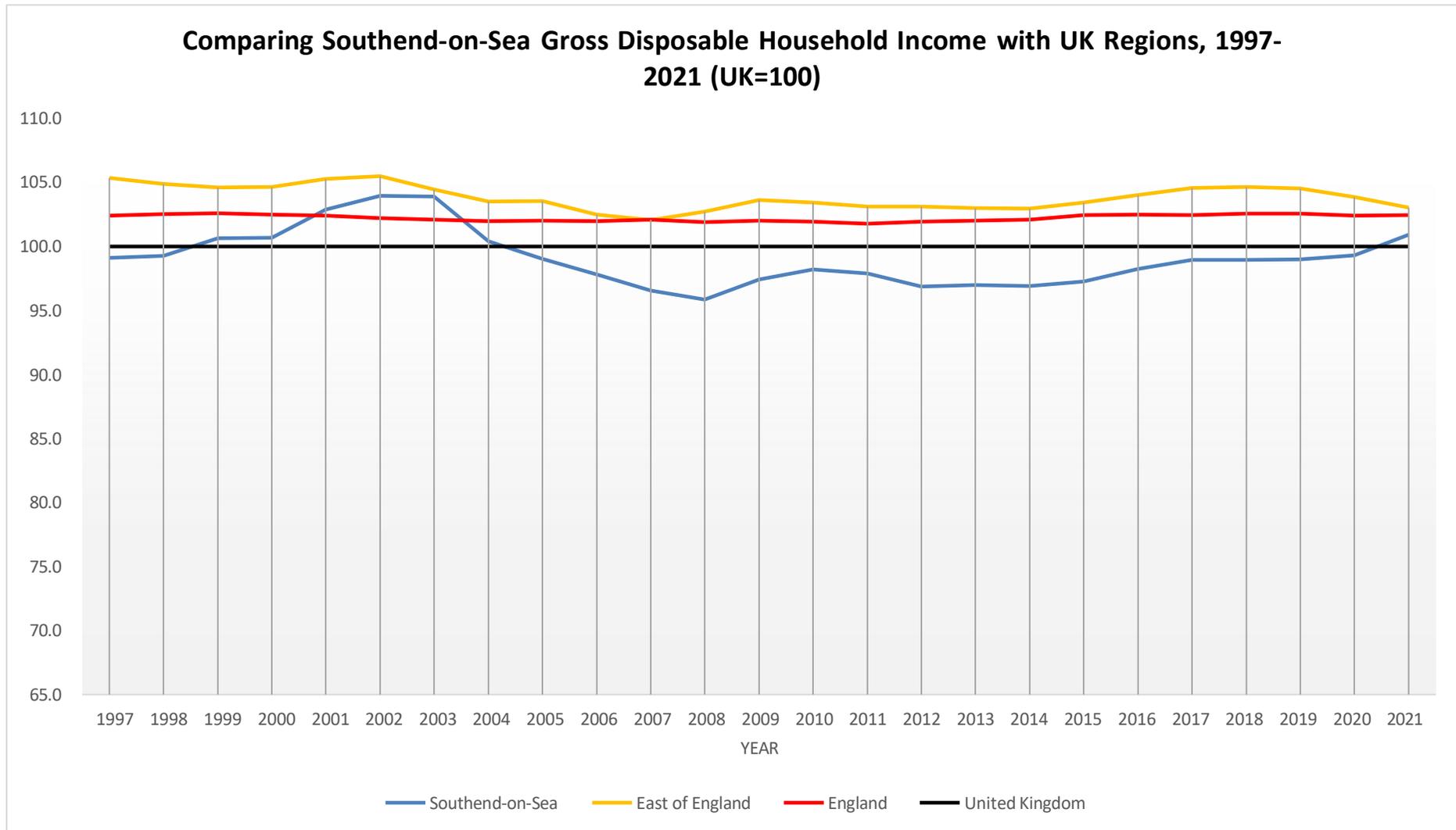
Analysis from the Office for National Statistics outlines that "*We would generally expect household incomes to be higher where productivity is higher. However, it is possible for the two to diverge, such as in the case of the "commuter effect" ...Looking at the relationship between productivity and income in different parts of the UK can tell us about the economic characteristics of that region*" (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Of the UK's 12 ITL1s, the differential between productivity and income was most positively pronounced in the East of England, with household income 5.2% above than the UK national average while productivity was 4.8% below than the national average.

Southend-on-Sea's **gross disposable household income** (Average income per person after taxes and direct benefits, **GDHI**) over the past quarter century has for the most part been modestly below that of the United Kingdom, England and the East of England; but has had some brighter moments, most notably at the start of the 2000s. This is demonstrated below in Figure 1.

Southend's average incomes are however, only able to hold their own compared to the nation more broadly at large as a result of this 'commuting effect', with the differential between income and productivity far greater than in any larger region and productivity incredibly weak by national standards. In the ONS's analysis of 2018, while Southend had annual disposable household income 0.2% lower than the UK average; productivity was **27.3% lower** than the UK average. This has been a repeated feature of the past 20 years, with Southend's productivity consistently lagging behind national averages, to the extent that the city's productivity levels in 2022 were both in the bottom 5% of local authorities nationally, and in improving gross value added (*GVA*) to £28.50 per hour achieved levels the UK on average reached in 2007. The extent of this weakness compared with the nation at large is shown below in Figure 2, and its poor comparison with other local authorities is showcased in Figure 3.

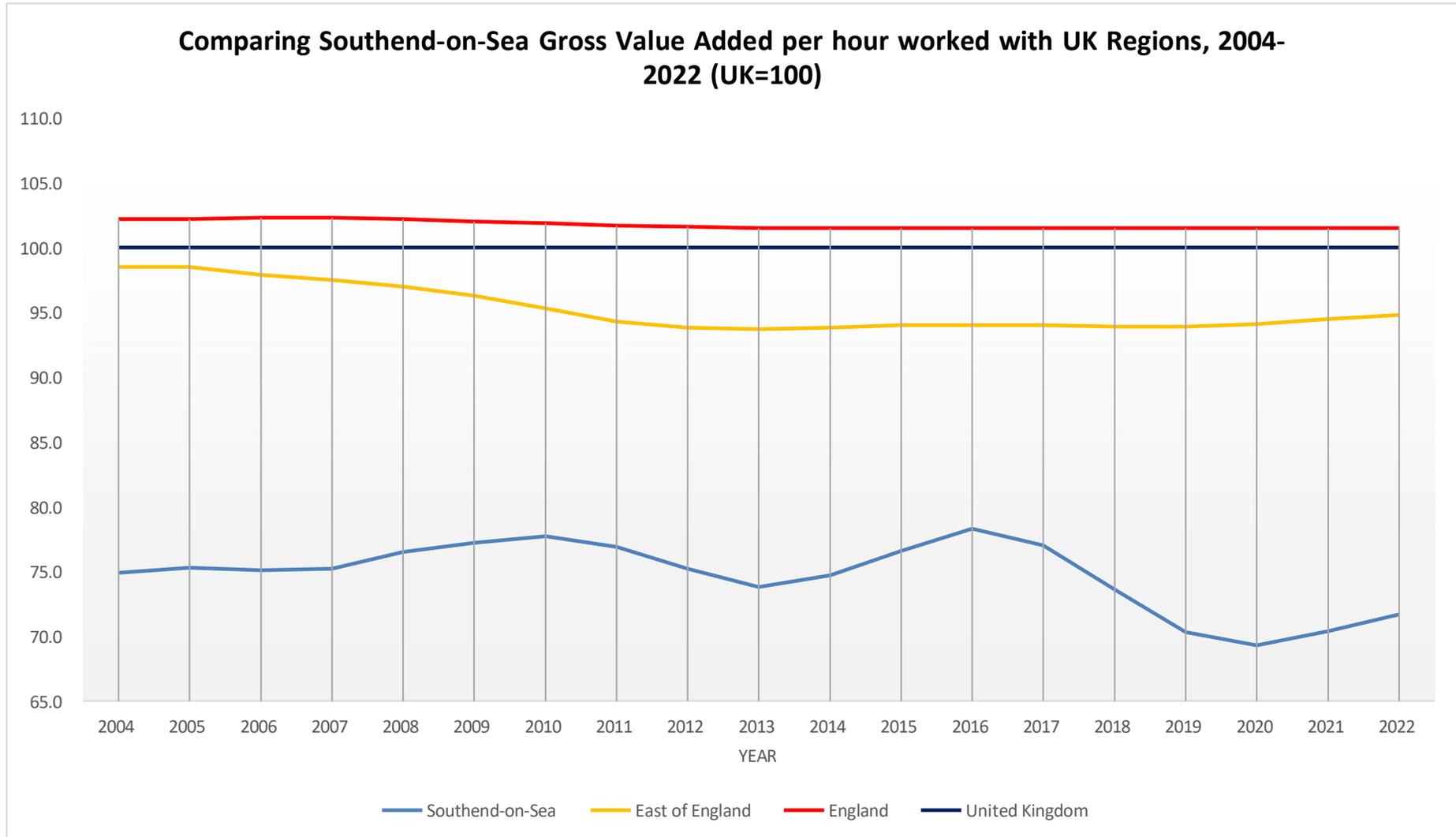
As a consequence of the differences between the city's residents and its workforce, internal disparity between Southend's most and least income deprived areas were in 2019 the 32<sup>nd</sup> highest of 316 local authorities measured, with multiple neighbourhoods featuring in both the top 5% of most and least income deprived neighbourhoods in England (Office for National Statistics, 2021). The local economy remains incredibly weak by national standards, persistently ranking in the bottom quintile for productivity since 2004 and featuring in the bottom decile of local authorities since 2018. Such weakness has led to the significant income deprivation in some areas of the city, with 61% of Southend's 107 neighbourhoods ranking in the most income deprived 50% of neighbourhoods in England, 24 among the 20% most income deprived and 13 among the 10% most income deprived. One of these neighbourhoods (E01015842, Kursaal Ward) was among the 100 most income deprived of 32,844 in England, with 3 others (E01015895, Victoria Ward; E01015916, West Shoebury Ward; E01015886, Southchurch Ward) among the top 1,000.

Raising Southend's productivity even to that of Essex at large (to say nothing of higher performing areas) would over the course of a full-time work week currently be worth more than £300 per week and £15,000 per year in added value, easing this internal disparity and aiding improved social cohesion. More information on the deficiencies of Southend's productivity, and the relative skills shortages that may be informing this, is provided below in Table 3.



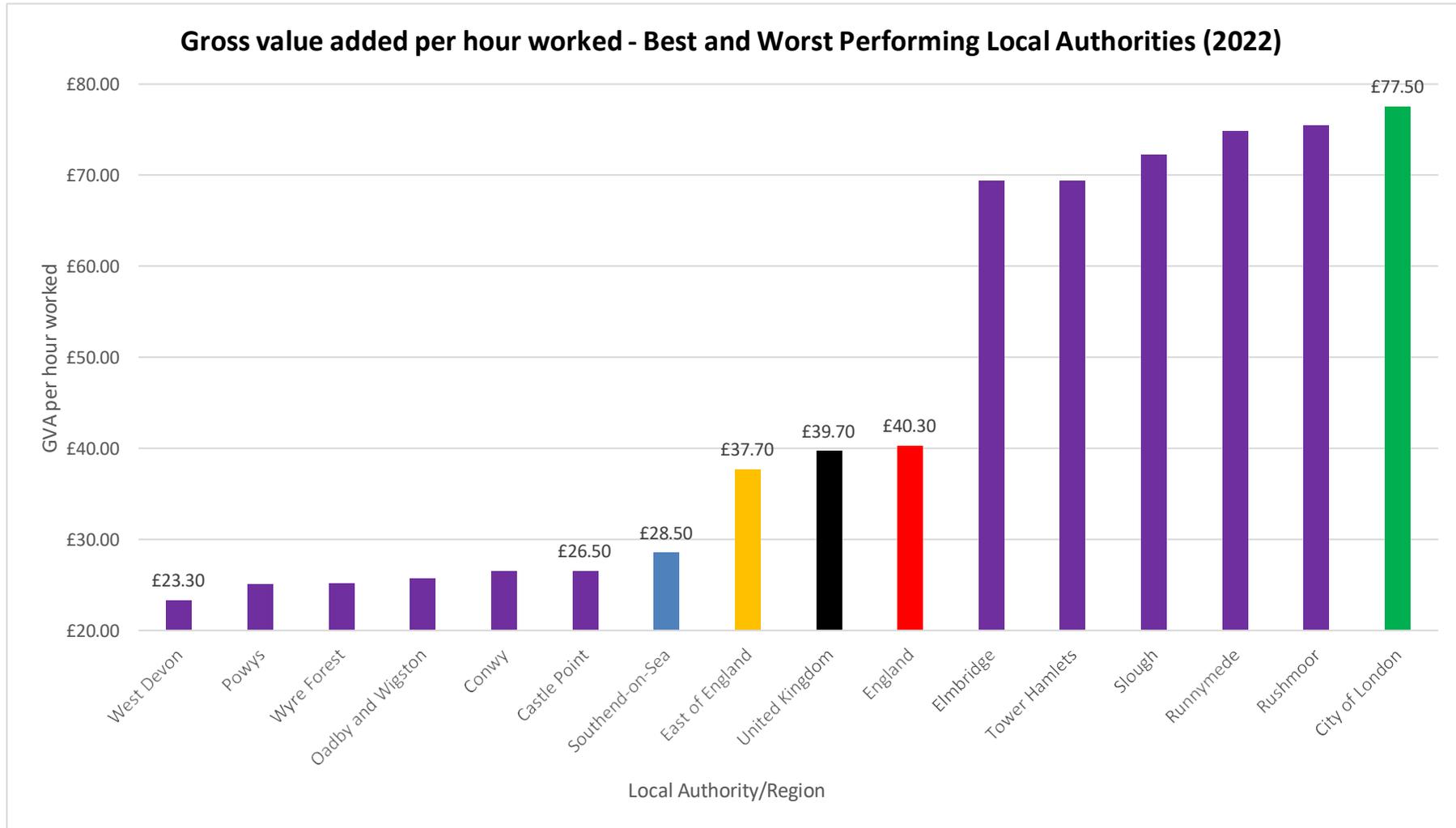
**Figure 1 – Southend-on-Sea’s GDHI relative to the rest of the UK<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from *Regional gross disposable household income, UK: 1992 to 2021*.



**Figure 2 – Southend-on-Sea’s gross value added per hour worked relative to the rest of the UK<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from *Subregional productivity: labour productivity indices by UK ITL2 and ITL3 regions, 2004-2022*.



**Figure 3 - Best and worst performing local authorities by gross value added per hour worked<sup>6</sup>**

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from *Subregional productivity: labour productivity indices by local authority district* and *Subregional productivity: labour productivity indices by UK ITL2 and ITL3 subregions*.

**Table 3 - Relative weakness in the Southend-on-Sea economy<sup>7</sup>**

<b>Economic Indicator</b>	<b>UK Median Local Authority</b>	<b>Southend-on-Sea</b>	<b>Ranking</b>
Economic Inactivity Rate (2023)	21.0%	21.0%	166 <sup>th</sup> of 337
Employment Rate (2023)	76.8%	75.6%	210 <sup>th</sup> of 362
Modelled Unemployment Rate (2023)	3.4%	5.2%	316 <sup>th</sup> of 345
Gross Value Added per hour worked (2022)	£36.10	£28.50	344 <sup>th</sup> of 361
Population with Level 3+ NVQ qualifications (2021)	60.4%	56%	245 <sup>th</sup> of 362
Apprenticeship starts per 100,000 population (2022-23)	946	784	226 <sup>th</sup> of 296 (England only)
Apprenticeship achievements per 100,000 population (2022-23)	455	359	241 <sup>st</sup> of 296 (England only)

Southend-on-Sea City (then Borough) Council’s 2021 New Local Plan identified **a low wage economy, a need to improve the skills base of residents and an overreliance on retail in the High Street** among its significant future challenges. While immediately addressing the last of these concerns is clearly beyond the remit of a green space miles away, the possibility of the site providing valuable skills, experiences and opportunities to the city’s workforce that helps address the first two of these challenges makes far more probable the growth of new, non-retail businesses that would reduce the High Street’s reliance on retail. It would also lend itself to helping meet the national mission of wealth creation. Given the low skills and productivity base of the city’s economy, investment in Southend may offer an opportunity to make significant economic improvements not available in more affluent areas and ease the requirement of the ‘commuter effect’ to provide income to areas close to London.

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from *Local Indicators for Southend-on-Sea, ONS, 2024* and *Subregional productivity: labour productivity indices by local authority district*.

## Health

**Table 4 - Concerning Health Indicators for Southend-on-Sea local authority<sup>8</sup>**

Health Indicator	UK Median Local Authority	Southend-on-Sea	Ranking
<b>Adult Obesity Prevalence (2021-22)</b>	25.7%	33.5%	275 <sup>th</sup> of 309 (England only)
<b>Overweight Prevalence in Children at Reception Age (2022-23)</b>	12.3%	13.9%	250 <sup>th</sup> of 292 (England only)
<b>Cancer Diagnosis at Stage 1 &amp; 2 (2021)</b>	54.4%	50.4%	234 <sup>th</sup> of 264 (England only)
<b>Cigarette Smokers (2022)</b>	12.4%	14.0%	=242 <sup>nd</sup> of 373
<b>Preventable Circulatory Mortality (under 75, per 100,000, 2020)</b>	28.2	32.3	199 <sup>th</sup> of 292 (England only)

Health can be a particular problem area in the Southend context when compared with the nation at large. Intracity disparities are also significant, with the New Local Plan noting a **10-year difference in life expectancy between those in the most and least affluent areas of the city** as another notable challenge. (More granularly still, the neighbourhood in which Garon Park is located is amongst the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods nationwide in health terms, as well as being bordered by a neighbourhood amongst the 10% most deprived (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities & Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019)). Table 4, above, shows some local indicators that compare poorly with national averages.

As the UK government outlines, *“Health is a national asset: a healthy, resilient population means a healthy, resilient society and economy. Good health is a key determinant of people’s well-being, their ability to work, and a key element of human capital”* (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). While HLEs are broadly in line with national averages, there are significant gains that could be made to these by alleviations of the

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from *Local Indicators for Southend-on-Sea, ONS, 2024.*

physical health risks associated with obesity and smoking in particular, as well as improvements in performance in the lowest performing neighbourhoods. The New Local Plan states that as of 2021, **a third of the city’s residents were classed as physically inactive and at risk of ill health.**

The presence at Garon Park of abundant sporting facilities and groups to provide for the less able; green spaces and opportunities to volunteer in an area of health deprivation and in fashions that involve significant physical work mean that it is well placed to address health problems in the city and provide for this key capital. Alignment with the local authority may also play into the hands of the council’s health and wellbeing strategy, which lists among its priorities that *“Partnerships work in a coordinated way to ensure system alignment, shared resources and focus on co-production, to make Southend a healthier place”* and *“health services are designed to be as accessible as possible for users, identifying, reducing and removing barriers to access”* (Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, 2021).

## Social Capital

**Table 5 - Southend-on-Sea’s frayed social fabric<sup>9</sup>**

Element of Social Fabric Index (2020)	Local Authority Nationwide Rank
Relationships	321 <sup>st</sup>
Physical Infrastructure	125 <sup>th</sup>
Civic Institutions	330 <sup>th</sup>
Economic Value	237 <sup>th</sup>
Positive Social Norms	308 <sup>th</sup>
Overall	<b>307<sup>th</sup> (of 380)</b>

Social capital refers to “*the extent and nature of our connections with others and the collective attitudes and behaviours between people that support a well-functioning, close-knit society*” (Office for National Statistics, 2022). While national data on these measures are broadly of a high quality (Concerning personal relationships, social network support, civic engagement and trust & cooperative norms), this data is not disaggregated in a way that makes comparison across local authorities in the manner of health or income straightforward. There are some indications however that Southend-on-Sea’s social capital is weak by national standards. According to UK Onward’s 2020 report *The State of Our Social Fabric*; Southend-on-Sea ranks 307<sup>th</sup> of 380 local authorities nationwide in its *Social Fabric Index*, created to map the changing nature (and for the most part, decline) of community life. Moreover, this ranking is largely bolstered by the quality of the city’s physical infrastructure (of which Garon Park is an element), with more traditional measures of people’s relationships with each other even worse. These rankings are summarised above in Table 5.

The city also scores particularly poorly for ‘Community Cohesion’ in 2022’s *Thriving Places Index* (Centre for Thriving Places, 2023). Such a poor national rating in a context of decline is a significant concern, with Southend particularly suffering in this facet rather than merely stagnating as the rest of the nation moves ahead. The deepening of community relationships in lower trust areas has been estimated to generate improvements in life satisfaction with equivalent value of billions of pounds nationally, and while such a darning of Southend’s

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from *The State of Our Social Fabric*.

social fabric would not make up for other deprivations, they would significantly enhance residents' lived experiences.

### **Institutional Capital**

The way the UK measures and targets the local leadership, capacity and capability of an area largely based upon the institutions of local government, and the way it seeks to enhance this capital nationwide is through the devolution of local decision making in limited policy areas (such as Transport; Fire & Rescue; Police & Crime and Land & Development) and limited tax raising powers (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2024).

Southend is not at the time of writing due to be covered by such an arrangement (Sandford, 2023), although plans for a Level 2 devolution deal that would give the county more control over investment spending and skills programmes are currently being put in place for Essex as part of a collaboration between Essex County, Southend City and Thurrock Councils (Essex County Council, 2023).

While the tax raising powers of local institutions is well beyond Garon Park's purview, the role of *informal* institutions as well as those of the state is also emphasised as being important owing to their ability to generate leadership within communities and capacity within civic institutions to provide services when the state does or cannot. Given the extent to which Garon Park is able to play host to different community groups and future plans for its own operations, it can provide fertile ground for such leadership potential to flourish.

# Garon Park's Contribution

## Garon Park CIC's Model & Ethos

The description of levelling up as a “*moral, social and economic programme for the whole of government*” (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022), which insists both upon weakening spatial disparities on the basis of health and upon increasing wellbeing **particularly in areas where this is currently lowest** is well aligned with the initial mission of WGP, which sets out the object in its constitution of:

*“assist[ing] charities and charitable bodies working for the benefit of the inhabitants of the Borough (sic) of Southend on Sea and surrounding areas by providing and maintaining secure and private facilities:*

*a) to promote and protect the good physical, mental and sensory health of the residents; and/or*

*b) for the recreation or other leisure time occupation of those residents who have need of such facilities by reason of their health, infirmity or disablement in the interests of social welfare and with the object of improving their conditions of life.”*

The role of the managing company, GP CIC, is therefore for the most part to provide the high-quality facilities in which *other organisations* who are better equipped to meet their clients' needs and demands are able to thrive. (The sole long-standing programmes run by its charity arm, WGP, are its work experience and volunteering programmes, community events and Garon Park Youth Club.) The company's aim is to leverage its 32-acre site to allow for multiple uses at any one time by a multitude of different groups. This serves to spread the costs associated with the site's management and upkeep and lower them for any one party. This makes the facilities available to groups without large financial resources who may not otherwise be able to use it, and who can then in turn use it to provide services to their potentially financially disadvantaged clients. Moreover, that 61% of the city's neighbourhoods are among the 50% most income deprived nationwide suggests that such a model is required to ensure access.

Such provision is focussed upon, although not limited, to young people. More than 100,000 unique visits to the park in 2023 were made by under 18s, constituting more than half of the total. This is done on the basis that providing opportunities to young people to improve their health, education and skills and to find their purpose in life leaves them best equipped to deal with life's challenges and should help to prevent the deprivations that currently affect their neighbourhoods from replicating themselves across generations.

Through partnerships with different local groups, Garon Park is either currently or could potentially be in a position to make significant contributions to **six** of the government's twelve missions through providing improvements to **four** of the city's six capitals. The missions that can be met, the possibly providable capitals that these missions would require and the activities that Garon Park would be able to deliver in order to increase them is outlined below Table 6. This is followed by an exemplar of how the company's model is designed to work in Figure 4.

**Table 6 - Garon Park’s ability to deliver the levelling up agenda<sup>10</sup> (continued overleaf)**

<b>Meetable Missions</b>	<b>Required Capitals</b>	<b>Deliverables at Garon Park</b>
<p>1. By 2030, pay, employment and productivity will have risen in every area of the UK, with each area containing a globally competitive city, and the gap between the top performing and other areas closing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Physical Capital</li> <li>● Human Capital</li> <li>● Social Capital</li> <li>● Institutional Capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Volunteering Programmes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Business Administration</li> <li>○ Conservation &amp; Maintenance</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Work Experience Placements</li> <li>● <i>Youth Council &amp; Youth Development Framework</i></li> </ul>
<p>5. By 2030, the number of primary school children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths will have significantly increased. In England, this will mean 90% of children will achieve the expected standard, and the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the worst performing areas will have increased by over a third</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Human Capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Alternative Education Provision <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Achieve, Thrive, Flourish (ATF) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Adventures Away from Home</li> <li>■ HAF Programme</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Education Hub for Children &amp; Parents</li> <li>○ Raw Learning</li> </ul> </li> <li>● <i>Early Learning Pods</i></li> <li>● Garon Park Youth Club</li> <li>● Visits and Day Trips by Local Schools</li> </ul>
<p>6. By 2030, the number of people successfully completing high-quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK. In England, this will lead to 200,000 more people successfully completing high-quality skills training annually, driven by 80,000 more people completing courses in the lowest skilled areas</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Human Capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Apprenticeships</li> <li>● <i>Carpentry/Joinery Workshop</i></li> <li>● Level 2 and Level 3 BTECs provided by Southend United Community Foundation (SUCF), previously SUCET</li> <li>● <i>Foundation Degrees (from September 2024)</i></li> <li>● Garon Park Shed</li> <li>● Volunteering Programmes</li> <li>● Work Experience Programmes</li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup> Missions are taken from *Levelling Up the United Kingdom - Table 2.1*. The required capitals are taken from *Levelling Up the United Kingdom: Missions and Metrics*. Planned facilities have been italicised.

Meetable Missions	Required Capitals	Deliverables at Garon Park
<p>7. By 2030, the gap in Healthy Life Expectancy between local areas where it is highest and lowest will have narrowed, and by 2035 HLE will rise by five years</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Human Capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Exercise Classes</li> <li>● Enhanced Green Space <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Green Gyms</li> <li>○ Wellbeing Trail</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Sporting Endeavours <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Cricket</li> <li>○ <i>Cycling</i></li> <li>○ Football</li> <li>○ <i>Hockey</i></li> <li>○ Netball</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Volunteering Programmes</li> </ul>
<p>8. By 2030, well-being will have improved in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Physical Capital</li> <li>● Human Capital</li> <li>● Social Capital</li> <li>● Institutional Capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Activity Hubs</i></li> <li>● <i>Arts &amp; Crafts Centre</i></li> <li>● Community Events</li> <li>● <i>Fishing Stations</i></li> <li>● Friendship Meals</li> <li>● Garon Park Shed</li> <li>● Garon Park Youth Club</li> <li>● <i>Respite Camping</i></li> <li>● Sporting Endeavours</li> <li>● Volunteering Programmes</li> <li>● Wellbeing Trail</li> </ul>
<p>9. By 2030, pride in place, such as people’s satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Social Capital</li> <li>● Institutional Capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Enhanced Green Spaces</li> <li>● Hosting Community Groups &amp; Events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Little Heroes ASD Support Group</li> <li>○ Open Arts</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Volunteering Opportunities</li> <li>● <i>Youth Council &amp; Youth Development Framework</i></li> </ul>

Garon Park  
Delivers Facilities

- Garon Park provides educational facilities and safe outdoor space on grassland

Facilities Used by  
Partners

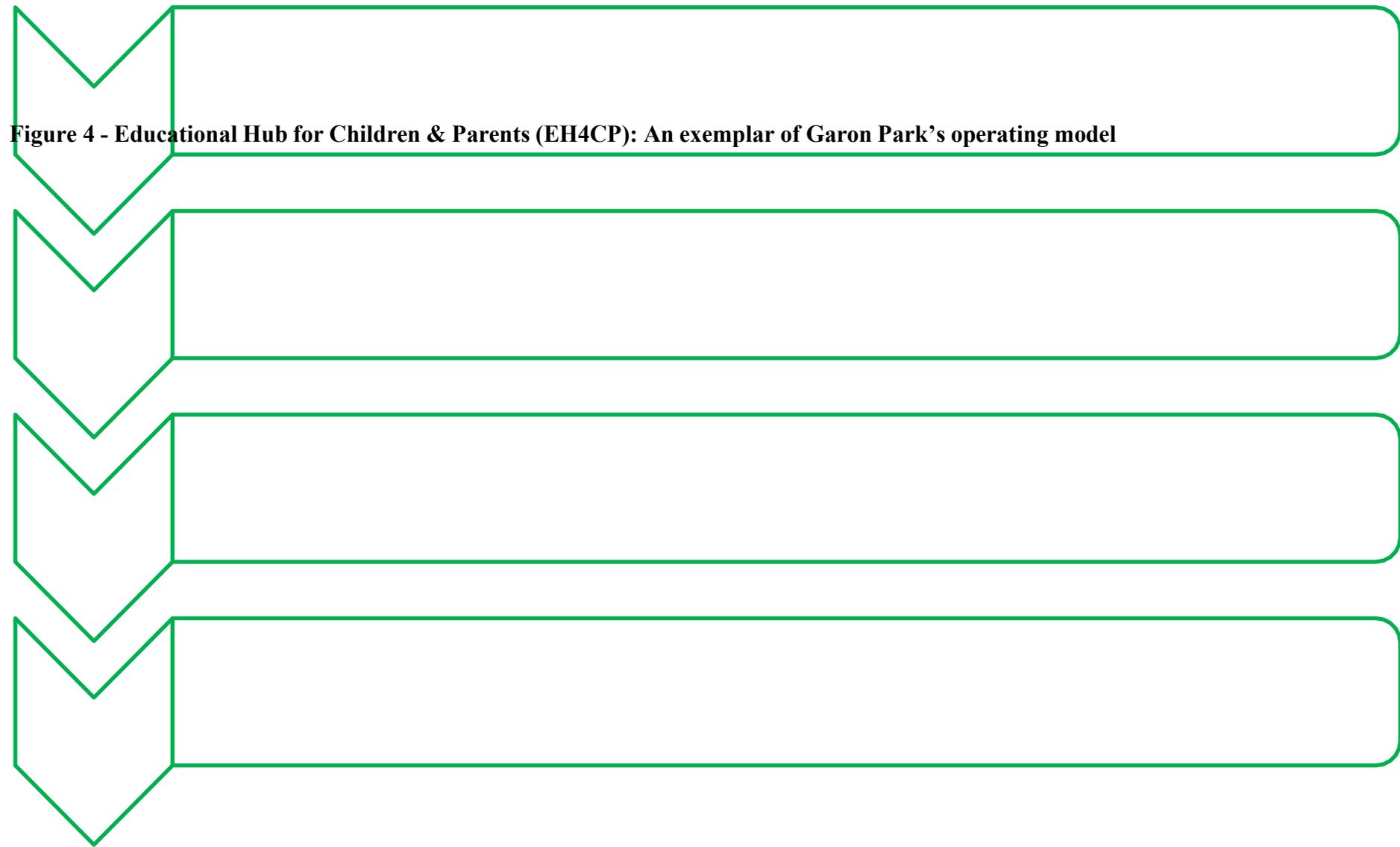
- EH4CP uses them as a base for 35 hours a week

Partners Drive  
Capital  
Improvements

- Children struggling in a mainstream setting get support they need and a better environment to learn in, increasing human capital stocks

Capital  
Improvements  
Meet Missions

- Educational performance improves; expected reading, writing & maths standards are met



## Delivering Facilities

Given the company's vision primarily as a provider of facilities rather than activities, physical capital improvements are predicated on the site itself rather than in other domains such as the city's housing stock or transport infrastructure. The development of the site since WGP's 2017 institution has however been stark. An area that had (with the exception of the cricket field and its associated pavilion) previously only been used as grassland has seen significant installations and renovations over the last half a dozen years to turn the site into a park that is more authentically meant for a wide range of public uses. These include:

- Garon Park Shed, a community workshop specialising in woodworking, opened in 2020
- The installation of a full sized, floodlit, 3G football pitch, completed in 2020
- The Wellbeing Trail, the 750m long centrepiece of the site linking discrete areas and complementing the site's other facilities, completed in 2020
- The installation of seating areas and outdoor exercise equipment around the Wellbeing Trail in 2021
- The establishment of the Community Garden, growing food to be used on site, in 2021
- The Heritage Orchard, planted with heritage fruit trees by local families, schools and community groups in January 2022
- The Hive Nature School, an outdoor nature base, providing a blend of outdoor, educational, creative and wellbeing experiences for all ages and abilities, officially opened in 2022
- Vitality Centres I and II, indoor spaces for small social and educational groups, opening in 2021 and 2023 respectively
- The creation of more than 8,000m<sup>2</sup> of habitat through the planting of 12,000 trees and 2km of hedgerow whips, currently leading to approximately 4,000kgCO<sub>2</sub>e of sequestration per year. Over the course of the next 10 years, it is hoped that the further growth of this habitat and further planting efforts will move the site's operations towards carbon neutrality.

The work of the site's managers, staff and volunteers in this period has been recognised by WGP's winning of the Green Flag Community Award in May 2023, one of only three Green Flag Community Award winners in the city; and one of only twelve Green Flag Award winners of any type.

The site's more recent history as a sports venue has also been catered for. This includes the refurbishment of the clubhouse, which as well as for myriad daytime community uses (see [Sport, Fitness & Social Functions](#)) has also been occupied by Old Southendian F.C. (OSFC) and Old Southendian & Southchurch C.C. (OSSCC) as a bar and pavilion since 2015.

## Facility Use by Partners

For the most part, Garon Park CIC's role in capital development is in the management and delivery of a high-quality facility through which **other groups** are able to deliver activities tailored to their users' needs. This use of the site is currently undertaken by more than 100 separate user groups in and around the city. Some of the scale and uses of these facilities are:

- 3G Pitch - The daytime uses of the pitch by regular groups such as City of Southend College and SUCF as well as Southend United Ladies, OSFC and Old Southendian Youth F.C. (OSYFC), in addition to hire of 5, 7, and 11-a-side sized spaces on weekday evenings by coaching academies and local teams across ages and abilities means that over 100,000 unique visits were undertaken to the site in 2023 for pitch use
- The Pavilion - The refurbishment of this previously derelict space has allowed for its use for social events by OSFC and OSSCC; fitness classes by groups such as LIFE Fit, Yoga4All, L4 Exercise; and wellbeing groups and events such as Welcome to the UK, Women's Wellbeing Hub; Hartbeeps and Music-on-Sea, leading to 6,000 unique visits in 2023
- Vitality Centres I and II - The permanent presence on site of Education Hub for Children and Parents (EH4CP) has led to more permanent use of these spaces for education during school hours, which at the time of writing serve 13 children a day across term time, equivalent to approximately 2,500 schooldays throughout 2024
- Nature School & The Hive Nature School - The introduction of Raw Learning to the site in 2024 has, at the time of writing, provided an educational facility for neurodivergent children, delivering around 4,000 hours of education to those unable to access mainstream offerings since January. The Hive Nature School, currently run

by Steps Ahead for use as an alternative education facility by local schools and occasional events space, welcomed 2,000 visitors in 2023 in addition to providing work opportunities for the site's volunteers

- The Wellbeing Trail - The wellbeing trail has provided a home to Walk & Workout by The Fitness Shack, but has also served as the anchor to community events such as *Light Up the Park* and *Feel Good Festival*, which throughout 2023 saw over 8,000 visits. It also critically links discrete areas of the large site, making them accessible and usable by people of all abilities
- The Community Garden - The use of the site by school groups and volunteers led to up to 5,000 visits in 2023
- Outdoor Exercise Equipment - The presence of The Fitness Shack; a group of personal trainers, has seen use of training equipment by multiple different training regimes offered by the company. It has also formed part of the activities offered on site by ATF and EH4CP
- Garon Park Shed - The thrice weekly opening of the woodworking workshop led to 2,300 visits in 2023

Within this framework, there also exists scope for a single user group to take advantage of many of the site's facilities. The most obvious example is the use by sporting teams of both the playing grounds and the clubhouse, but the variety of facilities is such that groups that are hosted more regularly can involve themselves in numerous different activities. A child on site could play football on the pitch, do some planting in the community garden, immerse themselves in the nature school and have an ordinary classroom lesson, all within the same day (and educational offers made by EH4CP and ATF have started to operate on site employing such a varied programme of activities, see [Alternative Education & Skills Providers](#)).

An outside group's ability to provide opportunities of this type is ultimately rooted however in its ability to host them in a place that can manage and cater for such opportunities. This is a function which, thanks to its wide array of physical infrastructure, Garon Park has started to fulfil.

## Driving Capital Improvements & Meeting Missions

The construction of a high-quality green space in a city that is lacking for it in both public and private provision may make for a worthy end in itself. The extent of the Garon Park site combined with Southend's deficits in human and social capital however mean that physical capital improvements are a necessary, rather than sufficient condition both in fulfilling the site's potential and in driving city-wide wellbeing improvements. *Levelling up the United Kingdom* notes that both living standards and wellbeing are dependent upon **all six** capitals.

Owing to the nature of the company's business model, physical capital improvements are focussed so the site exists to provide local organisations with as many ways to deliver improvements to their users' outcomes as possible. (This also means that the principal limit on the company's ability to drive positive outcomes is the scope of its facilities rather than its workforce - for plans on how the company intends to expand these facilities, see [Future Provision](#)). The provision and generation of financial or intangible capital for local organisations also lies beyond the company's brief. This does however leave scope for the site's activities to generate improvements to **human, social and institutional** capitals, with a consequent ability to generate progress towards missions concerning **productivity, education, skills, health, wellbeing and pride in place**. These activities, and the improvements that the site's users say that these have generated, are discussed below.

### Wellbeing at Garon Park's Activities

While many of the site's activities are delivered by external providers, the value of WGP's own operations in helping to build local stocks of human, social and institutional capitals should not be understated.

#### Volunteering & Work Experience

Productivity's role as "*almost everything*" as a long-run determinant of living standards make its relative absence (see Figures 2 and 3) in large swathes of Southend's economy particularly concerning. While improvements to education provision and youth outcomes should help to generate future improvements (see [School Visits](#); [Alternative Education & Skills Providers](#); [Future Provision](#)), the mission of improving pay, employment and productivity in the shorter term has to be focussed upon creating improvements to employability and productivity among people **currently of working age**.

The primary way in which WGP seeks to do this is through its volunteering and work experience schemes. These schemes, designed to provide for the continued upkeep and improvement of the facility, typically extend to areas such as supporting the site's conservation and maintenance in the community garden and groundskeeping as well as business administration opportunities. Volunteers also provide critical support to the running of the site's community events, but these are less regular (and when taking place at evenings or weekends, also more likely to be engaged with by those who are already in full-time employment).

These benefits were in total assessed nationwide to be worth around £24 billion of economic output through formal volunteering in 2012, with a further £19 billion through informal volunteering. These economic benefits are further complemented by (systematically underestimated) private benefits, with personal wellbeing estimates nationwide roughly equivalent to that of playing sport, and equivalent to approximately £2,400 per annum per volunteer (Haldane, 2014).

Previous offers of volunteering and work experience have been supported through government In2Work and In2Volunteering programmes, funded by the UKSPF and the Community Renewal Fund (CRF) respectively. In 2022, the company as a consequence of this funding was able to:

- 125 economically inactive people were reached, against a target of 40
- 110 unemployed people were reached, against a target of 100
- 58 people gained a qualification to support volunteering or job searching
- 30 people were newly engaged in job searching against a target of 20
- 252 people newly engaged in life skills against a target of 75
- 175 people got into volunteering, against a target of 110
- Attended 32 events to promote volunteering, compared to a target of 5

While movement into employment was not a stated objective of the In2Work and In2Volunteering programmes, 10 people managed to move into employment following a period of volunteering. Individuals stated that they had raised self-esteem and confidence as a result of the programme and were able to progress into employment.

Southend-on-Sea City Council noted at this time that *“Your CRF [Community Renewal Fund] funded delivery has been of an exceptionally high standard. You and the team at*

*Garon's (sic) have done a fantastic job under challenging circumstances... The In2Work outputs and outcomes are exemplary, and you have helped some participants to go way beyond being 'closer' to the workplace and have progressed directly into work. Economically and socially, that is a significant value adding bonus, which wasn't even one of your targets. Equally as important, so many others have left with increased confidence and skills - enabling them to move forward positively towards employment."*

Even in the absence of further funding for these programmes, throughout 2023 volunteers provided around 3,500 hours of their time; equating at prevailing minimum wage rates to at least £38,000 worth of work at the Garon Park site. This work is equivalent to around one fifth of Wellbeing at Garon Park's annual turnover. As a consequence of these efforts, those involved in volunteering at the site are given a valuable chance not only to improve their own physical and mental wellbeing through engagement with both nature and the wider community, but also to learn new skills and have new experiences that will help them (back) into the world of work. Such an offer has also been previously supported by the presence of a Job Club with a member of Southend Careers Service on site helping volunteers once a week with job searches, CV writing and interview technique amongst other services.

120 visits geared towards work experience, in the form of either were also conducted in 2023 by those between the ages of 14 and 17 attending schools in the local area. These have been supplemented by further work experience visits by schools, which throughout 2024 has seen 13 students engage in one or two weeks of work the site.

It is also true that even while not meeting the mission in the technical sense provided by the UK government's ambitions, the definition of a skill as a particular ability to perform a task to a high standard through training or experience (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.) will be enhanced by providing volunteering and work experience opportunities to exercise and enhance those abilities. Between these and the twice weekly sessions of Garon Park Shed, over 5,000 visits were made in 2023 with a view towards enhancing their skills in addition to those who had previously engaged with gaining qualifications and life skills through funded programmes.

Visitors to the park seem to be broadly satisfied with their experiences. In survey data taken between November 2023 and April 2024, 57 of 86 respondents said that visiting Garon Park had been 'Beneficial' or 'Very Beneficial' to them developing new or improved skills or

interests. When volunteers who took the survey were asked whether they felt that Garon Park had improved their employment prospects, 7 of the 8 who considered it applicable agreed that it had.

### **School Visits**

The aforementioned positive health and wellbeing effects of access to green space (see [Physical Capital](#)) represent a key benefit that the Garon Park site stands able to provide to the residents of both the city and its immediate surroundings through both formal and informal programmes. Making sure that children in the local area are able to access these benefits is a key pillar of this, with 50% of the local authority's primary schools having poor or inadequate access to green spaces on site.

The 2024 launch of Wellbeing at Garon Park's Schools Outreach Project is an attempt to ensure that this inadequacy of green space in the local area is addressed; drawing upon the charity's aims of promoting health and wellbeing and enhancing local biodiversity, with the secondary aim of helping children understand where food comes from. Funded by the CIB and Rural Payments Fund, the 25 annual visits to Garon Park combine interactive team building exercises with educational activities that allow young people to experience the outdoors in ways that would not be available to them on their own sites.

Positive testimonials from teachers involved with the school sessions include:

*"The children enjoyed all of the activities. Liam, the leader was excellent at rearranging our day to suit the adverse weather conditions. He was extremely knowledgeable as was the volunteer who helped with the gardening activity - both gave us great advice and tips to take back to school. The children loved their day"* – Mike Smith, Sacred Heart Catholic Primary School

*"First-hand experience of the natural world is so important for children's learning. This project has given our pupils the opportunity to gain more in-depth knowledge about plants and the process of growing crops from experts, which enhances our science curriculum. Having access to this green space will help cultivate an appreciation of being outdoors - improving their wellbeing, whilst also boosting their 'working scientifically' skills as they observe and record changes over the seasons"* – Joanna Rea, Porters Grange Primary School

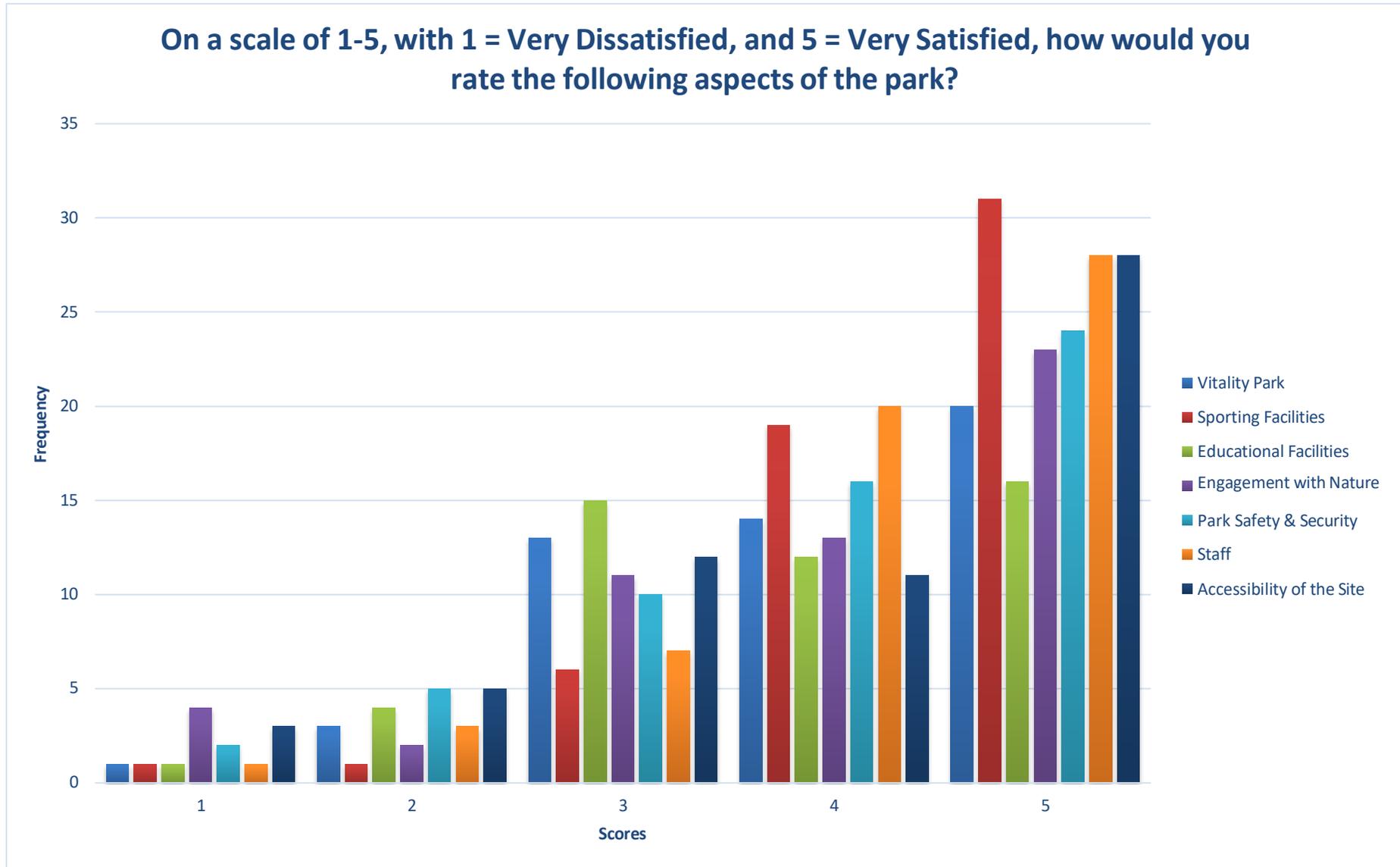
*“The session was really enjoyable for all the students and all the activities were really well run. All the students engaged really well, even those that are not always easy to get involved in new things. They all asked to come back!” – Jack O’Connor, EH4CP*

These successes would suggest that there are clear benefits to be wrought in the project’s extension.

### **Further Education & Apprenticeships**

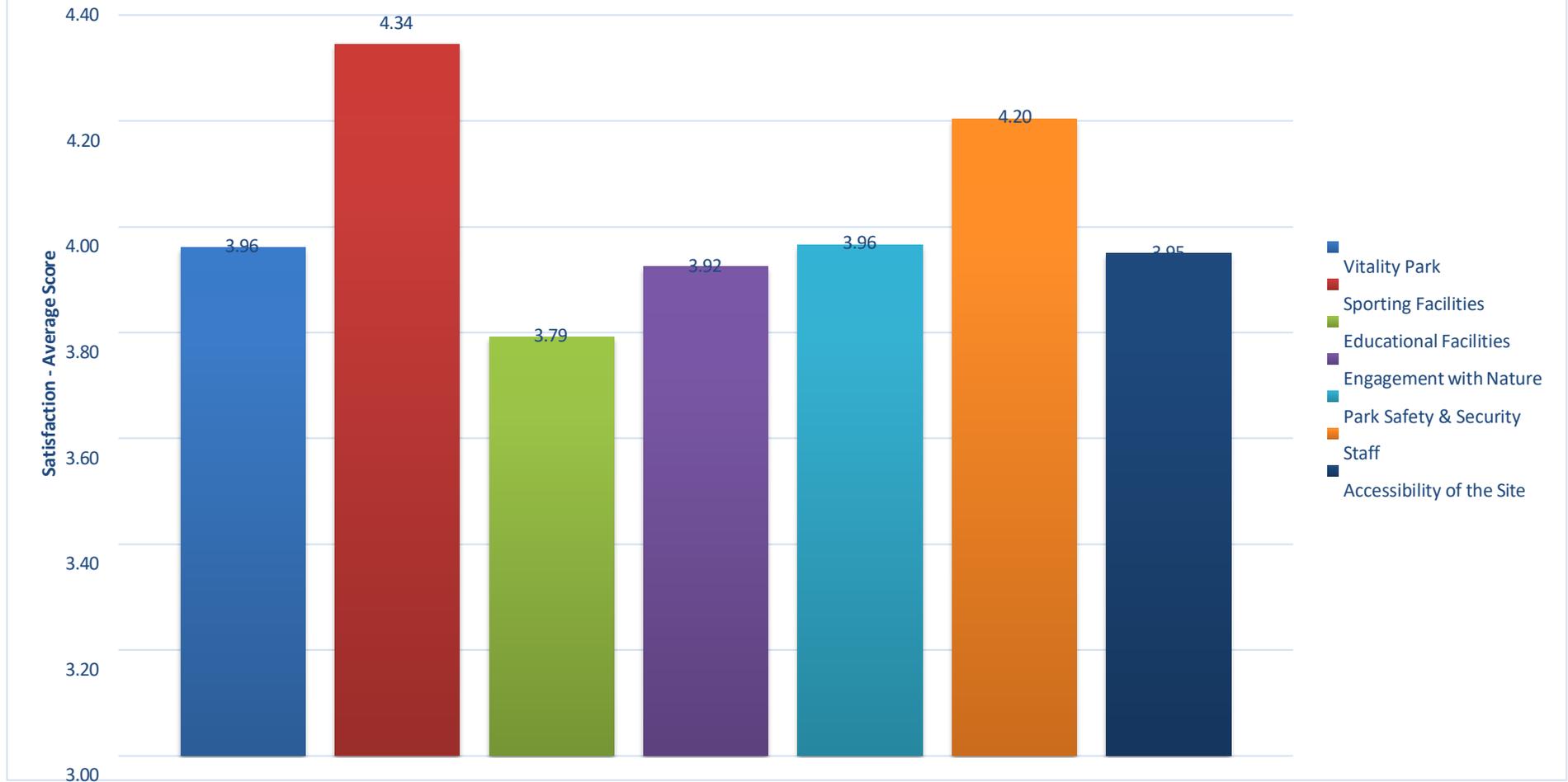
Owing to a current lack of indoor facility that is regularly available on location, the scope of the organisation itself to provide A-Level equivalent qualifications and further education to adults is somewhat limited, which may in turn be diminishing the prospects of the people currently using the site. When survey respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with different aspects of the site, ‘Educational Facilities’ had the lowest average score (see Figures 5 and 6, below). Of nine volunteers to the survey question *‘What services could Wellbeing at Garon Park provide to enhance your employment prospects?’*, six stated that *‘Accredited Vocational Courses/Apprenticeships’* would be helpful.

This need is supported to an extent by SUCF, but largely provides for school leavers rather than adults and which owing to the organisation’s orientation towards football have a naturally limited scope. The invitation of other organisations that have a broader focus such as City of Southend College (part of South Essex Colleges Group, formerly South Essex College, which was mentioned as a desired local participant organisation in the original gap analysis) may help to provide a wider range of further and technical education to be delivered on site, either in whole or in part. The organisation has also previously provided a business apprenticeship, completed in 2022, an offer the type of which could be expanded in the presence of further infrastructure (see [Future Provision](#)).



**Figure 5 - Survey responses to aspects of Garon Park’s facilities (59 respondents)**

*On a scale of 1-5, with 1 = Very Dissatisfied, and 5 = Very Satisfied, how would you rate the following aspects of the park? - Mean Scores*



**Figure 6 – Mean scores of survey responses to aspects of Garon Park’s facilities**

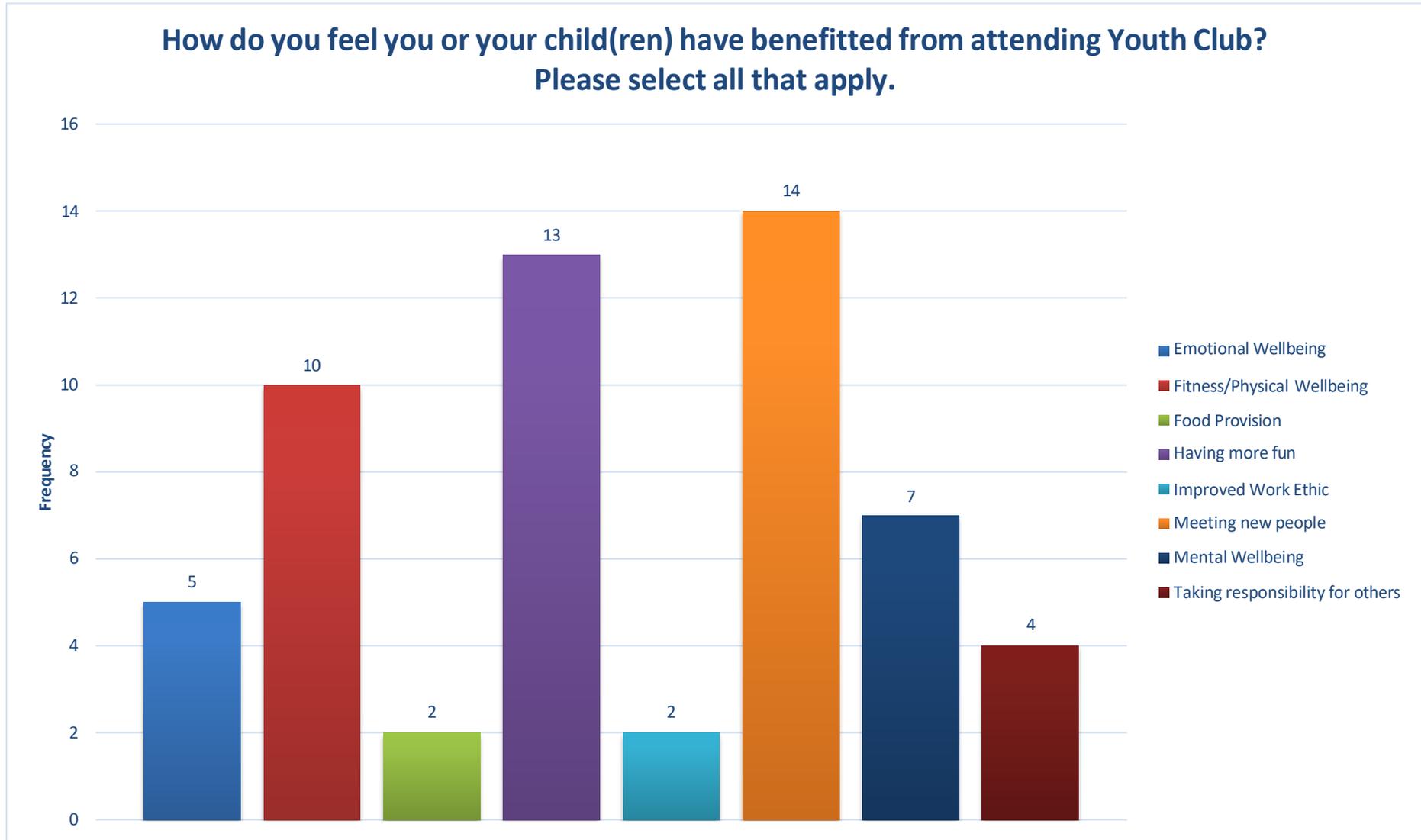
### **Garon Park Youth Club**

Children's social needs are catered for through Garon Park Youth Club, formed in August 2022. Running for two hours a week on Wednesday evenings and supported by a team of ten adult volunteers, a wide range of sporting and social activities is made available in the pavilion and across the Garon Park site for children between the ages of 8 and 15. At the time of writing, around 430 children are signed up as members of Garon Park Youth Club with an average attendance of around 70 suggesting more than 3,000 visits annually.

Data suggests that attendance of the club has been worthwhile for the children involved. In a survey designed for Garon Park Youth Club attendees and their parents, 70% of children that Youth Club had benefited from meeting new people; 65% said they were having more fun, and 50% said they had seen improvements to their fitness or physical wellbeing. In a question from the same survey, 57% of respondents said that they were able to make new friends and take part in fun activities that they wouldn't be able to at home, and 52% stated that they were able to pursue new skills or interests (see Figures 7 and 8.)

In addition to the new opportunities and health and wellbeing improvements that the Youth Club's formation has generated for attendees, it is also hoped that the responsibility given to the club's eight Youth Leaders (all between the ages of 12 and 15) in the running of Garon Park Youth Club is an example of generating leadership capability in communities through informal groups regarded as a component of institutional capital. It is hoped that the site's near future will see greater opportunities for youth leadership to come to the fore in the form of the YouthHOPE Council, which will serve to advise WGP on youth-related topics around the site and whose chair will have a seat on the GP CIC board (see [Future Provision](#)).

The building of such capacity with regard to youth is particularly valuable. Recent findings suggest that *“There is a clear association between participation in youth provision and positive short-term outcomes relating to physical health and wellbeing, pro-social behaviours and education. **There is also strong evidence that these short-term outcomes are sustained over decades, and compared with non-participants, people who attended youth clubs continue to score more highly for several...indicators of wellbeing**”* (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2024). Creating such a framework that enables children to form connections to the site at an early age and benefit from its positive effects before eventually stepping into leadership roles is not only valuable to the children themselves but also enhances the community's knowledge and skills, as well as ensuring the site's long-term relevance.



**Figure 7 - Benefits to attendees of Garon Park Youth Club (20 respondents)**



**Figure 8 - Access to opportunities for attendees as a consequence of Garon Park Youth Club (21 respondents)**

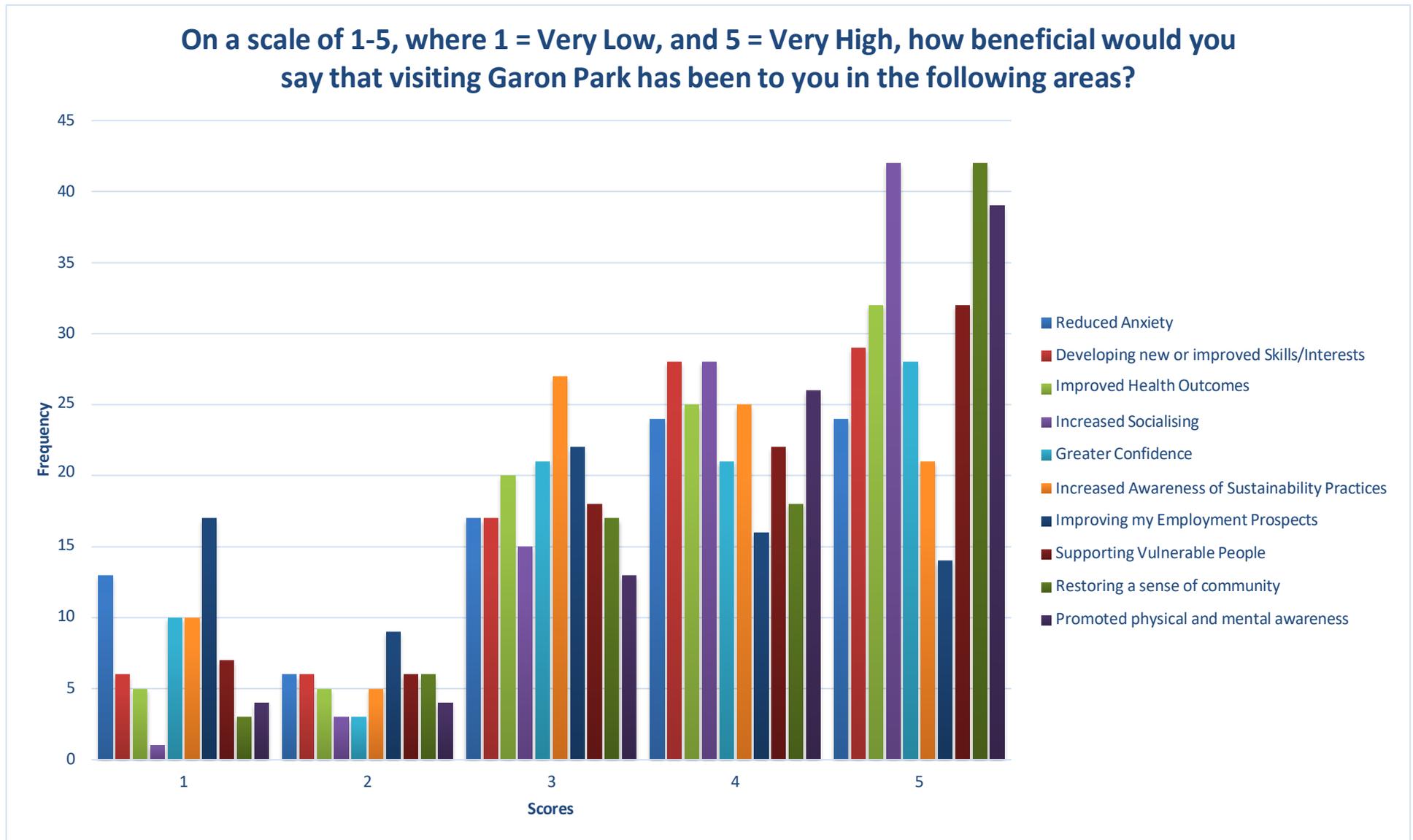
## Community Events

Improvement of social and institutional capitals are considered the main mechanisms by which pride in place, which describes matters such as people's satisfaction with their town centres and **engagement in local culture and community**, can be improved. Garon Park is well placed to enhance community trust through its hosting of community days. In addition to regular activities such as Garon Park Youth Club and volunteering that help to serve social purposes, there were over 14,000 unique visits to the park owing to community days and events in 2023, in which the company provides various forms of entertainment and local community groups are encouraged to come to the park to advertise their services to attendees. In addition to June 2023's Eid event that attracted over 4,000 visitors to the events space, the series of community events taking place in the Wellbeing Park in the form of 13 days of a Christmas lights show, 4 days of summer fairs and 2 days of celebrations following King Charles III's coronation also led to nearly 7,000 unique visits throughout 2023.

The social aspects of Garon Park's offerings were among its most highly valued by survey respondents, with *Increased Socialising* and *Inspiring a Sense of Community* both among the three highest scoring of ten elements assessed (These are presented with frequency and average scores in Figures 9 and 10, both below). Furthermore, when asked *How has your time at Garon Park influenced your view of the Southend area?*, 60% of 91 respondents said that it had inspired a sense of community, and 54% said that it had improved engagement and partnership with local organisations.

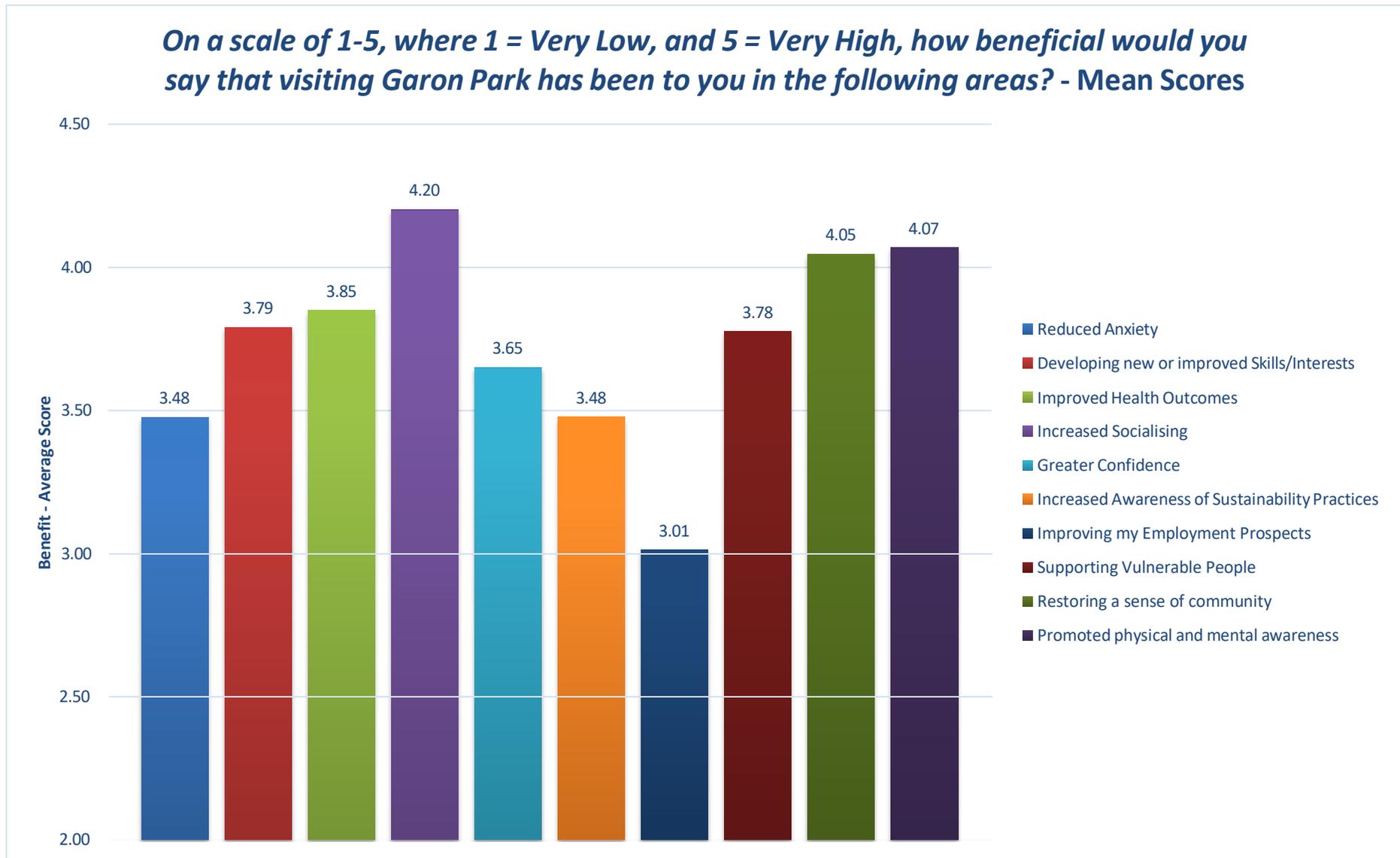
The principal objectives of the UK's pride in place mission are "*restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they are slipping.*" Current measures of pride in place are currently hazy, with the Bennett Institute for Public Policy stating "*The lack of neighbourhood level data, or even local authority level data, is likely to be a serious barrier to measuring the impact of any interventions in this space, and more careful thinking is needed about the merits and weaknesses of commonly used proxies such as belonging, local area satisfaction and civic participation*" (Shaw et al., 2022).

The reliance on such imprecise government data makes it difficult to gauge Southend's current success or failure in this respect, though some studies have suggested that both the city's parliamentary constituencies are underperforming national averages with regard to what their residents considered to be important (Demos, 2021).



**Figure 9 – Positive aspects of visiting Garon Park to survey respondents (89 respondents)**

*On a scale of 1-5, where 1 = Very Low, and 5 = Very High, how beneficial would you say that visiting Garon Park has been to you in the following areas? - Mean Scores*



**Figure 10 – Average scores of positive aspects of visiting Garon Park to survey respondents**

However, the building of a user base for the site that considers it to be a social boon for the city and connecting the local community, whether it be amongst adults or children, is a valuable resource. Whilst there is not necessarily a community in the fashion of other local facilities such as a ‘Friends of’ group that might safeguard the future of the site with the current atomisation of the site’s regular users, there are ways this could be changed. The presence of further community days and parts of the site where members of groups are more likely to intermingle with each other (see [Future Provision](#)) is likely only to help inspire this sense of community further.

While also a longer term goal for the site, a place with high quality facilities that can successfully deliver on its promise across multiple spheres such as biodiversity gain, widespread health and wellbeing improvements; providing otherwise unavailable sporting and educational opportunities to the underprivileged; community events that strengthen social ties and best in practice volunteering that can improve people’s skills and experience is also the kind of locally valuable and highly visible project that would be well set to generate further pride in place.

## **Partners’ Activities**

### **Alternative Education & Skills Providers**

Southend-on-Sea’s record of educational attainment in school settings is, for the most part, fairly strong (Department for Education, 2019) (Department for Education, 2023), with 62% of Key Stage 2 pupils in the local authority reaching expected standards in 2022-23 (a number that, following the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, has not recovered from its 2018-19 level of 68%). Meeting the government’s ambition of 90% of primary school children meeting expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics does require broad improvements however, with even the best performing local authority since 2016 only reaching 76% (Department for Education, 2023).

To reach such an imposing target, **it is critical that those who are among the least likely to reach such standards in more conventional educational settings are also able to succeed.** Provision of offers at Garon Park for such children, in addition to those at higher ages who may find a more mainstream setting not suited to them, is addressed below. In addition to the near 2,000 annual visitors between the ages of 5-11 to The Hive Nature School and

aforementioned day visits by schools in the local area, other alternative suppliers have also begun to permanently operate on site. These are detailed below.

#### **ATF**

Achieve, Thrive, Flourish (ATF), is a local charity designed to provide meaningful engagement with the local community to its users through a wide variety of activities, with intentions to expand their already impactful operations in Basildon and throughout South Essex into Southend<sup>11</sup> On the Garon Park site in particular, these offers have included:

- Stay & Play - A free, weekly playgroup for preschool children which at the time of writing has seen over 500 visits to the site from the start of 2024
- Education programmes on weekdays which has provided 58 sessions to 479 children from May 2023 to April 2024 as part of the company's Positive Futures programme
- Adventures Away from Home - A programme outside of term time to give disadvantaged children between the ages of 11–18 opportunities to engage with outdoor learning experiences. The first of these programmes, delivered in February 2024, interacted with 80 children over the course of two days.
- Southend's HAF Programme, providing activities and food outside of term time for those eligible for free school meals aged 5-16. The most recent of these at the time of writing, delivered in April 2024, supported 40 children a day over 4 days.

Garon Park has also provided for ATF's offer to adults in the form of the weekly Women's Wellbeing Hub, which since its launch in July 2023 to April 2024 has seen over 900 visits to the site, and playing host to two community 11-a-side football teams at weekends. An expansion of ATF's offer in the Southend area that encompasses Garon Park's facilities similar to that which it provides in Basildon is planned in the form of life coaching with those in contact with criminal justice, volunteering opportunities and community and cultural activities. Such programmes are not only designed to improve educational outcomes, but are also sufficiently wide ranging to improve young people's broader skills, health and wellbeing.

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<sup>11</sup> More detail on these operations can be found [here](#).

#### **EH4CP**

EH4CP has provided an alternative education offer on the Garon Park site for children who have been struggling in a mainstream setting owing to problems with behaviour, personal development, special educational needs or social, emotional and mental health concerns. This offer is based around one-to-one support, improving practical skills and parental support. In 2023, 1,200 unique visits to the site were made by those undertaking the programme, and since the expansion of this offering in 2024, the company has interacted with 13 children a day during term time for 35 hours per week, currently delivering an equivalent of 2,500 school days per year.

#### **Raw Learning**

Following the completion of a Nature School near the community garden in early 2024, Raw Learning has made Garon Park its home and provided an alternative education offer both in the nature school and Garon Park's Vitality Centres for 26 hours per week, meaning around 5,000 hours of education has been provided for those unable to access mainstream education owing to neurodivergence since January 2024.

#### **SUCF**

Since 2022, Garon Park has become the permanent home of Southend United Community Foundation (formerly Southend United Community & Educational Trust), who have 5 classrooms on site for those between the ages of 16 and 18 to complete either a BTEC Level 3 Sports Coaching & Development Diploma and Extended Diploma, or a Level 2 BTEC in Sports Industry Skills. From September 2024, a 2-year foundational degree in Community Football Coaching and Development in conjunction with the University of South Wales is also due to be offered partly on site.

Despite the relative dissatisfaction with the site's educational facilities (see Figure 3), 58% of survey respondents suggested they were either 'Satisfied' or 'Very Satisfied' with the site's current educational facilities. 66% of those surveyed also suggested that they found coming to Garon Park as a way of developing or improving new skills and interests as either 'Beneficial' or 'Very Beneficial'. Initial outline plans for the space suggested that the Garon Park area be used to *"fill major gaps in the local provision of health, fitness, social interaction **and education**"* (Johns Associates, 2016; emphasis added). Over 30,000 visits to the site in 2023 were for educational purposes; a number that following the expansion of these providers' offers on the site is only set to grow. In addition to future planned

developments of educational facilities in conjunction with local providers, these efforts suggest that the plan to fill this gap is well on the way to being delivered.

### **Sport, Fitness & Social Functions**

Given the availability of green space; the site's recent history as a first-class cricket venue (which the Wellbeing Trail runs around) and the near-immediate installation following GP CIC's founding of a floodlit, all-weather football pitch, the centrality of sport and fitness to many of the site's user groups is unsurprising. 2023's usage figures suggest that more than 130,000, or 69% of all visits to the site, had some kind of sporting purpose. Among the organisations involved with these key facilities are:

- Ben Bradford Goalkeeping Academy, a group of specialist goalkeeping coaches for children operating 4 nights a week
- Essex CCC, hosting 2<sup>nd</sup> XI and age group fixtures at Garon Park
- Essex FA Soccability, a bimonthly meetup for football training for those with special needs
- Get The Kids Out, an organisation providing food support, day trips, short breaks and activities to children and young people in Southend
- Lancaster Lions, a weekly training session for a football team for those with special needs
- OSFC, hosting training and matches for six 11-a-side football teams at Garon Park
- OSSCC, hosting training and matches for six senior teams and five youth teams, as well as training for those between the ages of 5-18 in the form of an All-Stars Cricket Programme, day camps during holidays, and weekly training sessions during the cricket season. Approximately 70% of these youth visitors are between the ages of 8 and 13
- OSYFC, hosting training and matches for 22 age group teams from under-7 to under-17, responsible for over 18,000 annual visits
- Soccer 66, a girls' only coaching school run twice a week and responsible for over 5,000 annual visits
- SUCF, who in addition to the football teams associated with their education offers also run walking football and Soccability teams, soccer schools outside of term time, and conducted a HAF programme in August 2023

While competitive sport unquestionably serves a fitness function, there are other groups who are engaged in different activities on the site for those of all abilities, such as:

- The Fitness Shack, a group of three personal trainers who provide four different training regimes on site including Walk & Workout, as well as one-to-one and two-to-one sessions
- LIFE Fit, a weekly holistic fitness programme designed to enhance physical, mental and emotional health
- L4 Exercise, an exercise group operated by Macmillan Cancer Support
- Yoga4All, a local group designed to deliver specialised yoga classes to all regardless of age, ability or income

The positive health impacts of using the park, whether in conjunction with these partners or through private use of the park on open Sundays are apparent in Garon Park's survey data. Figure 8 says that among the health benefits of attending Garon Park, respondents reported the following as either 'High' or 'Very High':

- Promoted physical and mental awareness - 76%
- Improved health outcomes - 66%
- Greater confidence - 59%
- Reduced anxiety - 57%

In a city where adverse health outcomes are not uncommon (see Table 3), the ability to host more facilities and activities that are compatible with the needs of and may be more appealing to a community that clearly has much to gain from the use of such green space for health purposes is invaluable.

Amateur sport has, of course, also historically performed some social function. (Two key sporting partners, OSFC and OSSCC, are both affiliated with the Old Southendian Association, an alumni group for a local school.) The renovation of the pavilion has however provided an opportunity for its use far beyond that of a clubhouse. Alongside Garon Park Youth Club and the social aspects of volunteering, regular users of the site's infrastructure as a social space include:

- Hartbeeps, a provider of weekly sensory music classes for young children, from newborns to toddlers
- Little Heroes ASD Support Group - A support group for families of children on the autism spectrum providing support sessions and activities, driving over 1,000 visits in 2023 and hosted on site from April 2024
- Open Arts, a community arts and health programme affiliated with the NHS and trying to enhance health and wellbeing through creative outlets hosted on site since 2023, moving into the Garon Park Community Centre in April 2024
- Soroptimists, a global volunteer movement for the advancement of women and girls hosted monthly
- Welcome to the UK Friendship Meal, hosted monthly and providing 500 meals for refugees new to the local area

As outlined above, the site's value as a social hub is a key pillar of its success, with surveys of both park users and youth club attendees outlining its social function as among its most impactful. (see [Community Events](#), [Garon Park Youth Club](#)). Among survey respondents:

- 79% said attending Garon Park was 'Beneficial' or 'Very Beneficial' to them increasing socialising
- 64% said Garon Park was 'Beneficial' or 'Very Beneficial' in supporting vulnerable people
- 60% said that it had inspired a sense of community in the Southend area
- 54% said that it had improved their engagement with local organisations
- 46% said that it had enhanced users' quality of life

Expansions to this social function is also among the ways the site can deepen its impact in the city, with 90% of infrequent users saying that more community events would help when asked the question *How could we encourage you to make greater use of the Vitality Park?* 83% of Garon Park volunteers also listed *Supporting my local community* as among their initial motivations for volunteering.

Providing a high-quality site to be enjoyed or a programme to be undertaken that addresses any concern regarding a lack of employability, poor health or inadequate social outcomes for anyone constitutes progress of a sort. However, providing such a site in an area where it will be used by people that are most in need of respite from one or more deprivations is likely to

produce a disproportionately positive impact upon their wellbeing. Most pertinently, the government points out that *"Like living standards, well-being depends on all six capitals."* Whatever activity that therefore has the ability to improve people's skills, health or strengthen social trust in their community and generate local leadership and capacity constitutes a step forward towards the company's ultimate aim of improving the wellbeing of the local area's residents, and by doing so also helping to meet the government's missions. Whether it be through volunteering, providing sporting opportunities, alternative education provision or social events and spaces, survey data from the site's users indicates that their use of Garon Park has helped to deliver positive changes to their health, educational and social outcomes, and in how they perceive the Southend area.

## **Future Provision**

Over the past decade, Garon Park CIC has installed a wide range of facilities that have allowed for a panoply of groups to deliver a similarly wide range of benefits to their users. WGP and its partners have previously showcased their ability to generate positive outcomes through a range of social, sporting and educational opportunities in the midst of high-quality facilities, with the sporting facilities rated particularly highly by survey participants<sup>12</sup>. The availability of the space to those of all abilities is showcased in particular by the cricket ground, which despite its regular use by Essex CCC and history as a first-class and List A ground also regularly plays host to youth training and school festivals.

However, in order for these benefits to be extended to greater numbers, there is a need to extend the park's facilities to further cater to the community's needs. The company's focus on providing opportunities to young people means that not only will changes be focussed around providing facilities for youth use, but also in the formation of a Youth Council at Garon Park to guide the site's future activities and opportunities. Plans for these are delineated below.

## **Improvements to Facilities**

### **Wellbeing Park**

The aforementioned transformation of the Wellbeing Park since the company's inauguration has been significant, but the development of the site's northeastern corner by the scoreboard has been restricted to the trail's pergolas and registry hut. The addition of some built infrastructure to support outdoor learning and other opportunities will make the site a more viable venue for would-be partners and user groups while not damaging the core offer of a large, open green space that can deliver such a space's associated benefits.

Among these plans are the installation of six four-person respite camping/classroom pods, two activity hubs, a second playground and the conversion of the scoreboard so that its inside, currently a storage space for vehicles, can be used as an arts and crafts centre. This would serve to increase both the volume and quality of educational spaces that the site is able

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<sup>12</sup> In surveys conducted in March and April 2024, 50 of 58 respondents said that they were 'Satisfied' or 'Very Satisfied' with the park's sporting facilities.

to provide, better able to cater to a variety of different subjects within the curriculum and to user groups within the broader local community.

As highlighted above, the delivery of a project that provides respite from a particular deprivation will have disproportionately positive impacts in more deprived areas. The concentration of deprived neighbourhoods in the central Southend area proves the need for such a facility. The concentration particularly with regard to the poverty of the living environment to the site's immediate south in wards such as St. Luke's and in central Southend in areas such as Kursaal, Milton and Westborough wards makes such a facility where people can stay and spend more time removed from poorer quality living environments a potentially invaluable resource.

### **Youth Commemoration Ground**

The development of the nearby 40-acre Youth Commemoration Ground, an area of land that according to an internal scoping review is *“currently used on a Sunday morning during the football season and is totally rundown, gets waterlogged every year and heavily vandalised”* so that its use is potentially 13 hours a day and 7 days a week offers the chance to provide large community benefits of the type that are currently only available on the main Garon Park site. The transformation of this facility has already begun in earnest, with Little Heroes ASD Support Group and Open Arts Essex now permanently housed from the refurbished clubhouse, now the Garon Park Community Centre.

Among planned facilities are a Youth Community Centre that could serve up to 200 people at a time; serving as an educational facility during the day before later playing host to Garon Park Youth Club as well as a Youth Hub and Youth Café, allowing for social opportunities to be delivered in a safe and controlled environment.

Partnering with national sporting associations and bodies, it is also hoped that facilities could be built to cater for and host high-quality small-sided football, cricket, cycling, netball and hockey. The site's ability to serve as a place to engage with nature would also be enhanced, with 5 acres of woodland and ancient grassland forming the backbone of a conservation and wellbeing trail to the site's east.

As with the current Garon Park site, the Youth Commemoration Ground's size offers it the chance to host different groups with a wide variety of interests at any one time. This also leaves it open to be used for work experience and volunteering programmes, workshops

providing practical education, and trips outdoors and away from home for those from disadvantaged groups.

The installation of such a setting designed specifically for youth, in addition to creating capacity on Garon Park's current site for adults, would allow for the creation of a range of opportunities for young people across several domains. Perhaps most valuable however, is the creation of a free space in which children are able to be themselves and play in a secure and supporting environment away from their often-deprived neighbourhoods. The Parent Infant Center notes play's importance to creativity, learning through experience, cultivating social skills and fostering resilience. It also stresses that *"Play is not just a pastime, it's a fundamental aspect of childhood that lays the foundation for a child's overall development. As we champion the power of play, we empower children to learn, grow, and flourish in all aspects of their lives"* (Parent Infant Center, 2024). Building such a facility is also valuable in a context where *"In many ways, children's right and opportunities for play are constrained within modern urbanised societies within Europe. This appears to be a consequence of the environmental 'stressors' of contemporary life...[and] the separation from nature"* and *"Poverty and urban living, resulting in stressed parenting and lack of access to natural and outdoor environments, can lead to relative play deprivation."* (Whitebread et al., 2012).

The generation of a site where such environmental stressors are removed, separation from nature is ended and the developmental aspects of this play are not merely tolerated but actively encouraged away from the pressures of the city provides such a foundation for the health and empowerment of Southend's children, allowing their flourishing from an early age and for the fulfilment of the promise of the Garon Park site at its donation.

## **YouthHOPE Council**

The prominence of such facilities for youth opportunities, particularly where income deprivation among children is becoming more prevalent, is valuable. However, the provision of any facility stands liable to prove an irrelevance if they are designed for uses where the young people themselves have no interest. To ensure that the site's offer remains relevant to their wants and needs, WGP will establish a youth council composed of local young people to advise it on youth related issues, and whose chair will be given a place on the Garon Park CIC board. Responsibilities of the YouthHOPE Council will include:

- Advising WGP on youth related issues and topics
- Helping to create initiatives and projects that will resonate with young people
- Gathering evidence and evaluating outcomes from these initiatives
- Increasing WGP's visibility to young people through social media, youth events and community projects

This approach will not only allow WGP to provide the best quality initiatives that have the greatest impact on young people's health and broader wellbeing over the longer term, but will also serve as a way of developing the confidence and leadership abilities of those sitting on the YouthHOPE Council, and its Chair in particular.

Empowering young people with this responsibility to shape and deliver their own projects in a secure environment with the support of a company with their best interests at heart ensures that the site remains relevant to the community it has been built to serve. In conjunction with improvements to the site's facilities, this empowerment will allow the best delivery of initiative to drive improved health and social outcomes. They will also foster valuable new skills, and offer young people the opportunities to find their purpose, allowing them the ideal platform to start finding their way through the world.

The provision of such opportunities to young people across the area regardless of their home circumstances will produce more just outcomes, more connected communities, and more fulfilling lives.

# Conclusion

“[Taking] the radical steps needed to make us more prosperous and more united by tackling the regional and local inequalities that unfairly hold back communities and to encourage private sector investment right across the UK” was described in 2022 as the “*defining mission of this [Boris Johnson’s] government*”. The focus of these changes has also been primarily through capital improvements and subsequent funding from the private sector rather than simple redistribution.

Garon Park CIC’s business model of partnering with a wide array of companies, charities and community groups to lower their costs has ensured that opportunities to access stocks of human, physical, social and institutional capital and access to improved health, social and educational outcomes the site’s partners can offer is not limited by ability, geography or income. The emphasis on the use of the private and third sectors as the source of much of the government’s desired change is also in line with the company’s ethos, which states its interest is in community self-help and “*working in partnership with local organisations to ensure that the value and use of the facilities at Garon Park is maximised*”, with the central focus being the delivery of a high-quality facility to allow these organisations to flourish.

Through these partners and the company’s charity arm, usage numbers at Garon Park over the past half dozen years have continually increased, covering an increasing range of activities. A space that has for much of its existence been used as a sporting facility has not only been able to improve this function through the installation of a 3G pitch, but has also added conservation, educational, employability and social functions. These programmes have led to notable improvements in the lived experiences of their users; whether it be in Wellbeing at Garon Park’s core aims of health and wellbeing, or in the realms of social belonging, academic achievement or employability.

Delivery of these programmes is widely appreciated by the local community and continually assessed to ensure that it continues to meet the high standards required to drive growth in the park’s usage, and the positive outcomes with which such usage is associated. Testimonials from users of the impacts of their usage include:

*“Better physical health & sense of community”*

*“Youth Club very valuable to children/vulnerable families”*

*“My ability to speak to new people, work with new people, learning new skills”*

*“I see the great work Garons (sic) staff do with the local community”*

*“Bringing different communities together”*

*“Providing a space for school groups - in our case sports' day, shows that there is a willingness to engage with and support schools so that hopefully the young people will return either during times of leisure or indeed when they are older themselves”*

*“It's Very important in an urban area to have little nature oasis and outdoor space for fitness and socialising”*

*“I think it fantastic (sic) the sight (sic) is being nurtured to become so welcoming to nature and improve the environment”*

*“More people need to know about what's on at Garons (sic). A lot of people think it's just big events or sporting events. They don't realise there are day to day activities”*

*“Thank you for being (sic) a sense of community”*

Efforts are being made to ensure there is something for everyone. While adults are catered for through social events, arts and sport; volunteering and work experience; youth is supported through the widespread support given to different community groups. Aside from the site's alternative education offers, the presence of groups and initiatives such as Hartbeeps, ParkPlay, Garon Park Youth Club, youth sport, HAF and adventures away from home provide young people with the chance to express themselves and have meaningful experiences in the outdoors. Further changes to WGP's structure intended to put youth voice at the centre of the site's future operations also stand to ensure that this delivery continues to improve, by providing more varied and meaningful opportunities to young people on the site regardless of their interests, and by helping to foster new community leadership.

A concerning lack of opportunities and poor outcomes in employment, education and health in Southend-on-Sea and its most deprived communities make clear the need for high quality green space and the improvement of community and educational resources that can help this happen. Garon Park's ability to be one of these resources is clear. The change the city needs is possible. The ability to make this change happen is being showcased, and the ability to make further strides lies in the extent of its facilities.

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