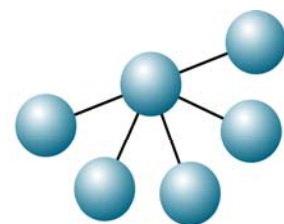


# FUTURE POLICY THINKING

## POLICY ROUNDTABLE – WHAT FUTURE FOR ENGLAND’S STRUGGLING SEASIDE TOWNS?



SHARED INTELLIGENCE

## LEARNING NOTE

This note summarises the background information on the challenges facing seaside towns, which is set out in more detail in our briefing paper, and captures the key discussion points from Shared Intelligence’s policy roundtable on struggling seaside towns. The roundtable, held in July of this year, brought together a group of practitioners with national and regional policy-makers to share their perspectives on the problems facing struggling seaside towns and generate practical solutions for tackling their severe levels of deprivation.

### Summary

Struggling seaside towns suffer from an acute set of inter-connected social and economic problem, stemming from the decline of their traditional tourist industry. However, Shared Intelligence’s Margate Renewal Study and practitioner perspectives on good practice in seaside regeneration provide a convincing case for investment in these towns. They also provide practical solutions to helping them tackle the social and physical symptoms of economic decline, and to giving these towns back their economic rationale. The nature of the problems, some local solutions and the beginnings of a business case for investment are outlined below.

There is significant potential for seaside towns to benefit from economic trends, such as the growth in the domestic tourism market and the conference trade, even during a period of economic uncertainty. At national policy level, the strengthened focus on tackling worklessness and promoting enterprise in deprived places also provides an opportunity to implement more effective and focused responses.

Before places like Margate can benefit fully from these opportunities, the concentration of deprived and vulnerable households and serious imbalances in local housing markets must be fundamentally addressed. At the root of these inter-connected problems is loss of economic rationale, as places have struggled to find a new economic purpose to replace declining demand for low-cost “bucket and spade” holidays.

There are no simple solutions, but practitioners identified three areas for action:

1. **Making the business case for investment in seaside towns** – sharing effective examples of economic regeneration so that practitioners can make a robust case for public and private investment.
2. **Additional freedoms and powers to tackle local problems** – working with central and regional government to agree specific freedoms and additional powers for local agencies.
3. **Building the capacity of partners** – developing new partnerships between different public agencies to pool resources and a sharper focus on realising the growth potential of seaside towns.

The final page of this document provides a more detailed set of proposals for how each of these areas could be developed.

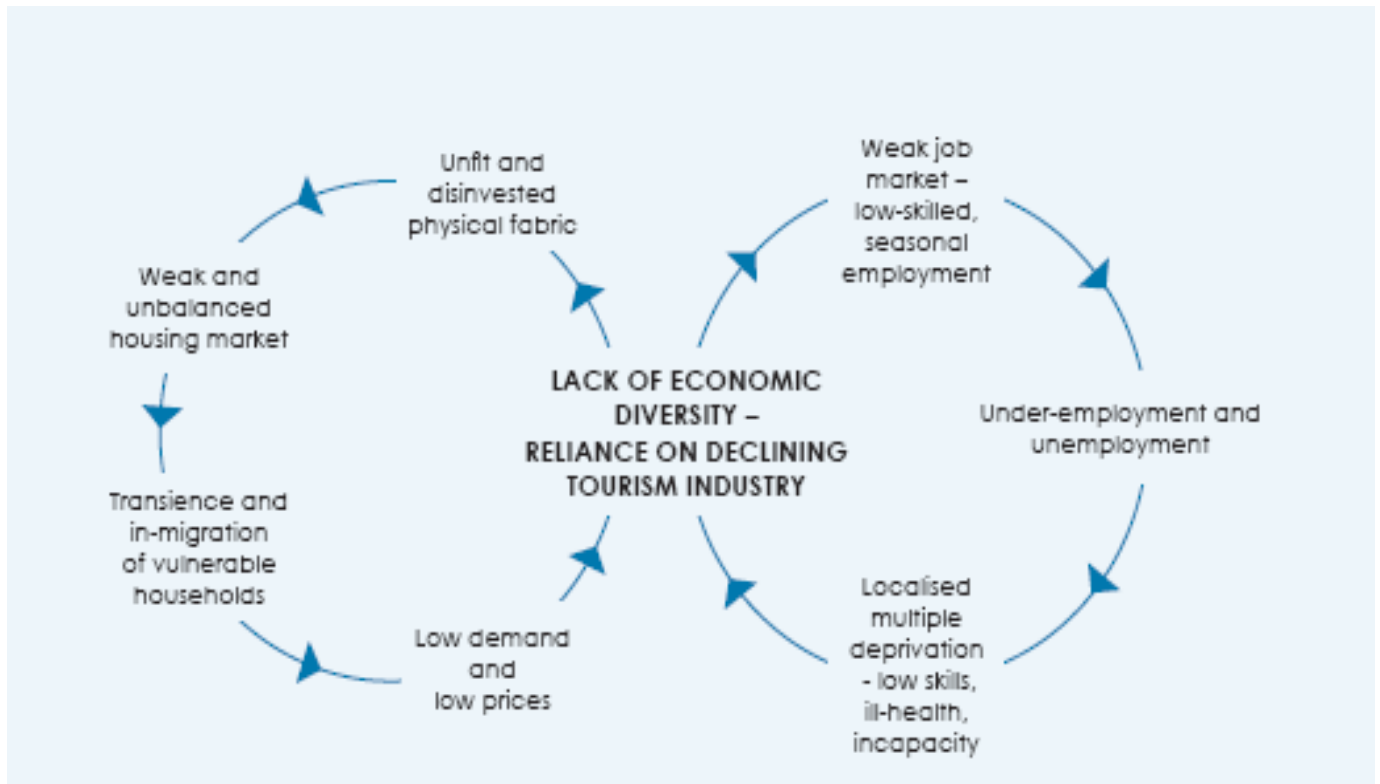
## Barriers to growth

There was broad agreement that the **loss of seaside towns' economic rationale** was the key driver of deprivation. As the market for traditional, low-cost "bucket and spade" holidays has declined, some places have **struggled to diversify** their economic base or **update their visitor offer**.

The consequences of this loss of economic rationale varies from area to area, but there was a common story across the country in terms of:

- **Poor economic growth:** reliance on the traditional seaside economy, lack of demand for visitor accommodation, low-wage and low-skill sectors, high levels of incapacity benefit claimancy, and limited prospects for young people;
- **Housing market imbalances:** unfit and costly physical fabric, predominance of Houses in Multiple Occupation and hostels, low demand for "typical accommodation" (ie. houses with several bedrooms), and low prices;
- **Demographics and deprivation:** ageing population, in-migration of vulnerable households, arrival of European migrant workers, "chaotic lifestyles" of some residents, and stigma;

These problems have taken root in the **cycle of decline** set out below.



Some areas also **face structural factors** that can inhibit positive change:

- **Climate change and erosion:** Seaside towns along some stretches of coast line have an uncertain future because of high and increasing coastal erosion and sea-level rise; and
- **Structural barriers to growth:** the 180° factor (the sea and local topography restricting physical growth), and isolation (“the end of the line”).

These problems are not unique to seaside towns, but **the high concentration of these factors in small and often isolated areas** does set the challenge in seaside town apart from other places.

Practitioners highlighted how, in very practical terms, these factors had impacted on their towns:

- The unbalanced and low-priced housing stock has fostered **high levels of population transience**, undermining the integrity of neighbourhoods and making it very difficult to deliver services to a constantly churning population;
- High levels of transience also make population data unreliable and mean that **real local need is not reflected in funding allocations**, including the **Revenue Support Grant**;
- Arrivals of **looked-after children and placed individuals** (including ex-offenders, homeless households, and others on housing benefit) putting constant and unexpected pressure on local social services without adequate additional funding;

- Privately-rented housing draws in individuals who often already have incapacity or substance dependency. In addition, this poor quality, and poorly managed accommodation is often so indecent in standard that it adversely **affects health of tenants**. All this creates an **enormous public health service burden**;
- **Maintaining ageing tourist structures** – piers, rides, beach huts, harbour arms and seafronts – and **supporting the tourism industry** – through subsidy for events, tourist information, and marketing - has become a massive financial burden for affected local authorities; and
- **Topography and historic physical fabric place great constraint on physical renewal** making the interventions required to transform the town's visitor offer and economic rationale costly, and thereby holding back attempts at regeneration.

## Local responses

The discussions revealed a plethora of interesting and effective approaches developed at the local and regional level to tackle the problems of struggling seaside towns in England. There is no single 'recipe for success', however, some elements of a full set of effective interventions are outlined below.

- **Transforming tourism:** Many areas are working to update their "visitor offer" – retaining their reputation as a resort destination, but transforming what they have to offer to cater to new markets. This is a fundamental part of many towns' regeneration strategies, but need to be achieved in a way that values existing assets and doesn't mimic what is on offer in other places.
- **Residential balance:** Alongside economic development, re-balancing the housing market is a crucial step for future prosperity. Through initiatives like grants to convert bed sits into larger flats in Great Yarmouth, and Margate's use of CPOs, mandatory licensing and the moratorium on 1-bed flats, practitioners are starting to create a better residential balance with more working households.
- **Physical renewal:** Many towns suffer from a tired and degraded physical fabric with constant maintenance challenges. Improving this physical fabric can play a pivotal role both in improving the actual *experience* of people visiting or living in the town, and turning around the *image* of the town. The scale of intervention can vary, and interventions are often most effective when they combine big, long-term projects, with smaller short-term interventions. For example, in Margate the Margate Renewal Partnership is pursuing a comprehensive transformation of the seafront, old and high street, whilst Thanet District Council is distributing small grants to home owners to make improvements to the physical appearance of their property.
- **Private sector engagement:** Almost no seaside town will be able to achieve significant economic and physical renewal without engaging investors

and developers in a constructive dialogue about its future. This means ensuring that plans for redevelopment that rely on private sector involvement are drawn up with some level of private sector participation. It also means ensuring that a realistic level of market orientation – underpinned by an understanding of business needs – is included in plans to renew the retail, food and accommodation offers of seaside towns.

- **Practical multi-agency working:** Individual agencies often don't have the capacity or resources to undertake the sorts of targeted, localised interventions required in struggling seaside towns. By working together, agencies – often alongside voluntary and community groups – can produce tangible and visible outcomes for residents. For example, a multi-agency enforcement programme of “clean sweep” days for the deprived ward of Cliftonville West was delivered by Thanet District Council, Kent Police, Kent Fire and Rescue and the Border and Immigration Agency alongside Pipeline volunteers. It helped to tackle locally prescient issues such as fly-tipping, litter and abandoned cars.
- **Partnership-working:** On the ground, multi-agency working also has to be combined with more strategic approaches to partnership-working. Local Strategic Partnerships can provide a basis for better coordination of action at the local level and the development of more holistic solutions to tackling the problems of seaside towns. However, decision-makers should ensure partnership-working takes place at the appropriate geographic scale in order to maintain focus on local need. In addition, partnership brings a new type of complexity and risk – since it implies engaging with partners who often have entirely different decision-making structures.
- **Coordination of services:** The cycle of decline suffered by struggling seaside towns has implications for numerous service providers and actions by all of them need to be coordinated if this cycle is to be broken. For instance, housing is linked to health in many seaside towns because indecent HMOs impact negatively on tenants' health. Housing is in turn linked to social services because poor-quality cheap accommodation attracts large numbers of placements by social services. Social services is in turn linked to health – because many of those placed by social services already have health needs such as incapacity and substance dependence. Understanding the extent of interrelations and each agency's role is the starting point for turning around seaside towns through effective, coordinated action.
- **Outreach to the most excluded:** Targeting interventions on the most marginalised is a more difficult, but more effective, way of delivering services, helping to address very specific and complex household problems. Working closely with “problem” families and individuals helps to change attitudes to work and lifestyle choices that would otherwise not be addressed.

## Future policy thinking: solutions for struggling seaside towns

Practitioners are developing and implementing the imaginative solutions set out above, but further concerted action is required to fundamentally tackle decline and better position seaside towns to take advantage of economic opportunities.

Practitioners identified three areas for further action:

1. **Making the business case for investment in seaside towns** – working together and sharing effective examples of regeneration so that practitioners can make a robust case for public and private investment, including:
  - Continuing to build the evidence base, with CLG, on the particular problems faced by seaside towns to underpin the case for investment in line with the approach set out in the Regeneration Framework;
  - Exploring any opportunity to review revenue funding and financial regimes, to reflect the particular burdens on seaside towns; and
  - Using funding streams creatively to support more housing renewal teams to tackle the backlog of low-quality private sector housing, including through the “single conversation” about priorities with the new HCA.
  
2. **Additional freedoms and powers to tackle local problems** – working with central and regional government to agree specific freedoms and additional powers for local agencies, including:
  - Really getting to grips with the issue of placements, using existing powers and arguing for stronger regulation and monitoring where necessary;
  - Developing powers to tackle the problems of HMOs and non-decent accommodation in the privately rented sector; and
  - Taking the lessons from interventions such as the Rhyl City Strategy, to support more holistic programmes to tackle ingrained social problems.
  
3. **Building the capacity of partners** – developing new partnerships between different public agencies to pool resources and develop a sharper focus on realising the growth potential of seaside towns and covering:
  - Exploring the scope for a single ‘handbook’ of successful interventions in seaside towns;
  - Working through, and linking up, existing networks to approach CLG/ different RIEPs to support a seaside towns capacity building programme; and
  - Sharing good practice on how to engineer a stronger political focus on seaside towns across different governance structures.