



# Power of community on the coast

Findings from action  
research on the role of  
community organisations  
in coastal communities



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community  
hands

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# Executive summary

Since the first days of the coronavirus pandemic, the consensus that we need to 'build back better' has been growing. For those that believe in the power of community to create a fairer society, we have been holding fast to the hope that the deep inequalities exposed by the crisis can no longer be ignored. At the same time, the agile way in which communities have responded and the local partnerships that have mobilised to tackle not just the public health crisis, but the social and economic one being left in its wake, has shown us like never before the need for greater community power.<sup>1</sup>

Many coastal communities share common characteristics that have put them at the sharp end of the impact of the pandemic. These include structural economic challenges and associated higher levels of deprivation. Our new research looks at the role community power should play in tackling these challenges and in ensuring that a fairer and greener recovery in coastal places is led by the needs and aspirations of local people. We need to ensure that opportunities to "level up" these places are not squandered by top-down plans that have been shown to fail: instead we need to invest in community-led regeneration and put communities in charge of the recovery.

Locality, with support from Power to Change, has carried out an action research project with community organisations and public sector partners in coastal communities around England. We have explored the current challenges they face, examples of innovation and best practice being led by communities, and the opportunities and support required to strengthen the power of community on the coast.

For this research we carried out a rapid literature review to incorporate background evidence and research on the current

## Locality's Coastal Communities network

Our coastal communities have extraordinary assets, and community organisations play a vital role in mobilising these strengths and bringing local people together to create opportunity and tackle local challenges.

Locality's Coastal Communities network brings together Locality members based in coastal communities around the UK for peer-learning, networking and collective voice. With over 60 Locality members based around the English coast, we are also joined by community organisations in other parts of the U.K. via our sister networks in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

By coming together as a network of community organisations, we aim to share best practice, create connection and exchange skills and ideas between communities around our coast. We also seek to strengthen the collective voice of coastal communities and harness our collective evidence base to influence national policymaking.

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<sup>1</sup> See Locality 2020 ["We Were Built for This."](#)

issues affecting coastal communities and the solutions which community organisations provide in these places. We then carried out 21 interviews with voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations, council officers and coastal communities' teams in five places around the coast: Birkenhead; Hastings; Newquay; Amble; and Great Yarmouth. We also held two workshops to share and test our findings with VCSE and public sector participants.

### **The role of community-led regeneration in coastal places**

Across our coastal case studies, interviewees highlighted many examples of community initiatives which are tackling the challenges and harnessing the opportunities of coastal places.

We heard about the role of community organisations in supporting the local economy; such as Amble Development Trust who run a community owned lobster hatchery, which helps to sustain the local lobster population, protect and provide local jobs and training opportunities. We also heard about communities seeking to tackle local housing issues through community-led housing models. Great Yarmouth Community Land Trust (CLT), for example, is developing plans to renovate town centre buildings into new affordable housing, alongside spaces for community businesses and community hubs.

We also heard about green initiatives creating impact in coastal communities – from Energise Sussex tackling fuel poverty and energy injustice in Hastings, to Newquay Orchard in Cornwall, a seven-acre community space in the centre of town, developed by volunteers as a place for environmental education and wellbeing. The role which community organisations can play in tackling health inequalities and supporting wellbeing was also powerfully demonstrated across the coastal places we spoke with, such as the Spider Project in Birkenhead, who provide a creative arts and wellbeing model for alcohol and drug recovery support.

However, we also heard about significant challenges and barriers interviewees have experienced in driving forward local plans and developing community-led approaches to regeneration. These included:

- **Partnership working:** Partnership working stood out as the ingredient that can make or break successful regeneration programmes in coastal communities. In a number of places it was felt that community expertise were underused by local government, and some stakeholders spoke of resistance and lack of trust from local councillors to working with the community sector.
- **Collaboration capacity:** In some places a historic underinvestment in capacity and networks for collaboration with the voluntary and community sector has also presented challenges for working together on common goals.
- **Accessing the right type of funding:** One of the biggest issues which organisations identified is access to sustainable funding and revenue streams, to enable community projects to become established, scale and build

resilience in the long term. Some participants noted that even where there is funding available, too often this is on short-term project funding which limits the potential to build capacity and resource within communities over the longer term.

## Summary of our recommendations

Our case studies demonstrate the power of community to drive forward positive change and harness the unique assets of coastal places for a greener, fairer future. However, too often this role goes untapped, with community power lying dormant without the structures, networks and resources to harness it. We have developed a series of recommendations for policymakers that would unlock the role of community-led regeneration in coastal communities.

- 1) **Put community power at the heart of local regeneration strategies.** Local regeneration strategies, including those developed through local Coastal Communities Teams, are most effective when developed in partnership with communities and when they strengthen opportunities for community ownership in the long-term. This requires:
  - Cocreating the vision for regeneration with communities
  - Building community control of local plans
  - Directly investing in community infrastructure to support an inclusive economy approach to regeneration
  - Creating collaborative public services that unlock community power
- 2) **Opportunities for national government to enable a community powered economic recovery in coastal communities.** The government have committed to levelling-up economies in so called “left-behind” communities, including many coastal places. Past programmes have shown that to build long-term prosperity that reaches all parts of the community, regeneration needs to be locally rooted, community-led, and provide a mix of capital and revenue funding. We believe government has three key opportunities to do this:
  - Ringfence 25% of new economic development funding to be devolved to community-led partnerships
  - Establish an ambitious Community Ownership Fund to capitalise community organisations

# Introduction

Coastal communities in the UK are incredibly varied, from major coastal cities to rural beachside villages. They are united by their proximity to the sea, but it is the common characteristics of many coastal *economies*, and associated levels of deprivation, which have been the focus of much research and funding for coastal regeneration.

Coastal places are also at the frontline of the climate crisis. They are some of the places worst affected by the impacts of climate change, such as coastal erosion and rising sea levels. But they are also at the forefront of potential solutions such as the development of clean energy and ecological solutions which harness the natural assets of the sea.

In this section, we introduce some of the key themes that emerged from our literature review about the common characteristics and experiences of coastal places, before exploring these themes in practice through our case studies.

## Socio-economic context for coastal communities

The structural economic challenges common to many coastal communities are often associated with an over reliance on one key industry – such as seasonal tourism – and the impacts of industrial decline. Since the 2008 economic crash, coastal economies have experienced slower economic growth than the rest of the British economy.<sup>2</sup> The New Economics Foundation's (NEF) 'Blue New Deal' provided a comprehensive analysis of how these economic factors have shaped many coastal communities, leading to:

- higher levels of polarisation and economic inequality;
- lower aspiration and educational under achievement;
- higher levels of long-term health problems;
- higher levels of deprivation;
- higher rates of poor quality housing within the private rented sector (PRS);
- neglected and declining architecture and assets.<sup>3</sup>

Other common features of coastal communities such as poor transport links, geographical location and connectivity also underpin these challenges, impacting access to key services and centres of employment.<sup>4</sup> This has been described as the '180 degree economy' effect - where the coastal boarder can

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<sup>2</sup> Social Market Foundation (2019). "Falling off a Cliff? Social and economic decline by the coast". Available at: <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Falling-off-a-cliff-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> New Economics Foundation (2015). "Blue New Deal". Available at: [https://b3cdn.net/nefoundation/2ec4a9d52360c8dd5a\\_a7m6yt6ik.pdf](https://b3cdn.net/nefoundation/2ec4a9d52360c8dd5a_a7m6yt6ik.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

cut economic opportunity in half compared to inland communities, and this has been a key area of discussion with our coastal communities network.

Many coastal communities are also experiencing ageing populations and higher levels of demographics with complex health needs, which puts additional pressure on health and care services. This can be exacerbated by other issues affecting access to quality health services – such as transport connectivity, geographical isolation and health staff retention and recruitment.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the life expectancy gap between coastal communities and the rest of the UK has widened in the last two decades.<sup>6</sup> Coastal communities have disproportionately higher levels of poor health outcomes, drug and alcohol misuse, and poor mental health.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to suggest that all coastal communities are experiencing the same challenges; indeed, many seaside towns share much in common with non-coastal post-industrial towns. However, there is a disproportionate impact of these socio-economic challenges on coastal places. Despite this, as the House of Lords inquiry on the future of seaside towns reported last year, the policy solutions and initiatives which have been developed in recent years have not been able to shift the dial on these entrenched challenges:

“Despite numerous reports and inquiries... and the introduction by supportive governments of specific coastal initiatives and funding programmes, recent studies have continued to tell a similar story. In summary, disadvantages have persisted and when considering a range of economic and social indicators (such as economic output, earnings and employment) many seaside towns continue to fall below the national average.”<sup>8</sup>

House of Lords Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities

## **The impact of the pandemic on coastal communities**

Coastal communities have been particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. Research from Social Investment Business (SIB) found that 90% of the 20 areas with the highest increase in unemployment in March and April 2020

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<sup>5</sup> House of Lords, Regenerating Seaside Towns Committee. (2019). “The Future of Seaside Towns.” Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/regenerating-seaside-towns>

<sup>6</sup> Social Market Foundation (2019). “Falling off a Cliff? Social and economic decline by the coast”. Available at: <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Falling-off-a-cliff-1.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> House of Lords, Regenerating Seaside Towns Committee. (2019). “The Future of Seaside Towns.” Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/regenerating-seaside-towns>

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

were coastal.<sup>9</sup> The research provided a useful overview of the particular impacts for two categories of coastal communities: traditional seaside resorts with seasonal economies; and ex-industrial towns already struggling with the decline of key industries.

The high presence of sectors most affected by lockdowns and local restrictions – including accommodation, retail, pubs and restaurants – alongside seasonal economic patterns based on tourism has meant that coastal economies have been particularly exposed. On top of this, research from SIB used consumer data to show that low local purchasing power in coastal towns will mean these places will struggle to “bounce back” compared to more affluent areas with higher levels of purchasing power within their local economies.<sup>10</sup>

Researchers for the Centre for Towns, have also highlighted the economic risk factors in coastal towns which have been exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic, including existing “economic decline, social isolation, a lack of investment, under-employment and low levels of social wellbeing.”<sup>11</sup>

## **The climate crisis and coastal communities**

By their location, coastal communities are some of the most exposed to the impacts of the climate crisis. The sea is intertwined with many aspects of coastal life – including the built environment, housing infrastructure, key industries and social and leisure activities. This increases the devastating impact which flooding or coastal erosion can play in seaside places.<sup>12</sup> A research report from JRF almost ten years ago outlined the urgent need to increase resilience in coastal communities, particularly those with higher levels of disadvantage. Socio-economic deprivation, ageing populations, poor quality housing and seasonal and insecure employment all increase the vulnerability and ability of communities to respond to climate change.<sup>13</sup>

NEF’s Blue New Deal sets out the opportunities for coastal places to harness the assets the coast offers in our fight against the climate emergency and as a

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<sup>9</sup> Social Investment Business (2020). “Covid-19 and coastal communities.” Available at: <https://www.sibgroup.org.uk/resources/covid-19-coastal-communities-investing-social-economy-revive-seaside-resorts-and-coastal>

<sup>10</sup> Social Investment Business (2020). “Covid-19 and coastal communities.” Available at: <https://www.sibgroup.org.uk/resources/covid-19-coastal-communities-investing-social-economy-revive-seaside-resorts-and-coastal>

<sup>11</sup> Centre for Towns (2020). “Covid-19 and our towns.” Available at: <https://www.centrefortowns.org/reports/covid-19-and-our-towns>

<sup>12</sup> JRF (2011). “The impacts of climate change on disadvantaged UK coastal communities.” Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/impacts-climate-change-disadvantaged-uk-coastal-communities>

<sup>13</sup> ibid



source of clean energy.<sup>14</sup> However, as it shows, in order to do this effectively, communities must be resourced and empowered to lead the renewable revolution on the coast.

## **Coastal communities policy and regeneration strategies**

The House of Lords inquiry into seaside towns looked at successive place-based initiatives in coastal regeneration. It emphasised the following success factors:

- long-term sustainable investment and planning;
- economic diversification;
- blend of investment which includes physical infrastructure (such as transport and housing), business and enterprise support, and social infrastructure;
- partnership between public, social and private sectors and shared leadership;
- and community and resident involvement.<sup>15</sup>

It is to this last point that we now turn to: the role of community in coastal regeneration. Harnessing community power is essential to tackling the big social, economic and environmental challenges faced by coastal places. We must learn the lessons of successive regeneration initiatives which have poured money into physical infrastructure, without investing in the social infrastructure to ensure it stays there and connects with people that really need it.<sup>16</sup> Instead, to build long-term prosperity and for coastal communities to be flourishing and resilient places, regeneration needs to be locally rooted and community led.

This is also at the heart of NEF's Blue New Deal: from regenerating coastal economies, to planning for resilience to climate change – local people must be in control. The recent SIB report also outlines the impact which investment in the social economy could have on addressing the challenges facing many coastal communities, in supporting alternative ownership models for local economic assets and investing in foundational and core industries.

Our new research report shines a spotlight on case studies of coastal places and the community organisations and initiatives seeking to support these places to thrive. There is a distinctive role for community organisations in addressing regeneration challenges in coastal communities, providing a voice for communities to change power and ownership structures to tackle inequalities as well as mobilising the

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<sup>14</sup> New Economics Foundation (2015). "Blue New Deal". Available at: [https://b3cdn.net/nefoundation/2ec4a9d52360c8dd5a\\_a7m6yt6ik.pdf](https://b3cdn.net/nefoundation/2ec4a9d52360c8dd5a_a7m6yt6ik.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> House of Lords, Regenerating Seaside Towns Committee. (2019). "The Future of Seaside Towns." Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/regenerating-seaside-towns>

<sup>16</sup> Locality. 2020. Communities in Charge. Available at: <https://locality.org.uk/policy-campaigns/communities-in-charge/>

distinctive heritage, local assets and environmental benefits many coastal communities enjoy.

# Insights from our coastal case studies

We conducted 21 interviews with VCSE organisations and councils across our five coastal areas: Amble; Hastings; Newquay; Birkenhead; and Great Yarmouth. We explored their views and experiences of the role in which communities and VCSE organisations can play in the regeneration and sustainable development of coastal places. With many thanks to our interviewees:

- Andrew Gooding, Manager at Amble Development Trust
- Andy Cole, Chairman at Newquay Regeneration Forum
- Andy Dean, Chief Executive at Community Action Northumberland
- Anthony Moore, Housing Growth Manager, Planning and Growth, Great Yarmouth Borough Council
- Carole Dixon, Chief Executive of Education Futures Trust, and co-chair of the Town Deal Board
- Cllr Joanna Kenny, Cornwall Councillor
- Hayley Ball at In2Play
- Ian Sycamore, External Funding Manager at Hastings Borough Council
- Jess Steele, Director at Jericho Road, Hastings Commons and member of the Town Deal Board
- Kate Meakin, Campaigns Manager at Energise Sussex Coast and part of Transition Town Hastings
- Lauren Randall, The Make It Happen team at Voluntary Norfolk
- Matthew Gibbs, Chief Executive at The Carrbridge Centre
- Mel Bowen, Creative Director at the Spider Project
- Nick Wates, of Nick Wates Associates
- Pranesh Datta, Regeneration Manager at Hastings Borough Council
- Reverend Helen Lynch, clerk to Great Yarmouth CLT
- Shelley Feldman, Heart of Hastings Community Land Trust
- Steve Manwaring, Director at Hastings Voluntary Action and Trustee at Sussex Community Foundation
- Susan Bolan, Enabling and Empty Homes Officer, Great Yarmouth Borough Council
- Tony Kirsop, Community Regeneration Manager at Northumberland County Council
- Val Pettit, Chair at Great Yarmouth CLT, Chair at DIAL

## Amble, Northumberland

A small town on the estuary of the River Coquet on the Northumberland coast, Amble is shaped by its industrial history. During the nineteenth century the harbour community became a centre for the transport of coal, and with that came expanding shipbuilding and fishing industries. Much of this industry declined from the 1980s and, more recently, major factory-based employers in the area also closed. While the fishing industry remains central to Amble life, today tourism is one of the most important and growing sectors to its economy.<sup>17</sup>

Amble is set in an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) which has long been part of its appeal to visitors, but recent investment in its working harbour and high street through the Coastal Communities Fund has made the town itself a more attractive tourist destination. Fresh seafood and visits from high profile TV chefs James Martin and the Hairy Bikers have also put Amble on the map as a visitor destination.

We talked to our three interviewees about the challenges of balancing a growing tourist economy with sustainable development and ensuring that local people are able to benefit from gains to the local economy.

In many ways, Amble has been a success story of how to build on distinctive coastal and industrial heritage and harness local entrepreneurial spirit to revive the local economy and create new employment opportunities. Partnership between the public sector, local businesses and the community has been central in identifying the right opportunities for the town. The area's Coastal Communities Team economic plan has sought to harness funding opportunities from central government for projects which develop a sustainable tourism offer and invest in local infrastructure and services.

“Over the past 10 years there has been a change in perception of the town. This has led to a snowball effect, a virtuous circle. Investment in the town has brought more visitors which in turn has enabled more investment.”

Andrew Gooding, Amble Development Trust.

### Community-led regeneration in Amble

Amble Development Trust (ADT) has been a key player in this journey. Established in 1994 to support economic, social and community regeneration in Amble, they have over 500 resident members and a trustee board which brings

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<sup>17</sup> Amble Coastal Community Team, 2017. Economic Plan. Available at: [https://www.coastalcommunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/amble-cct\\_ep\\_update-2017.pdf](https://www.coastalcommunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/amble-cct_ep_update-2017.pdf)

together a partnership of local people, councillors, and business representatives. They led the cross-sector partnership responsible for the transformation of Harbour Village, incubating new local enterprises and bringing in new training and job opportunities. They have played a central part in the physical regeneration of the high street including transforming the old Co-op department store into the Pride of Northumberland shop, and refurbishing the pier, promenade and town square.

They also run a community-owned lobster hatchery. Lobsters are a key feature of seasonal menus at local restaurants and an important Amble export. The hatchery helps to sustain and replenish the local Lobster population and has helped protect and provide local jobs and training opportunities in a skilled industry. The hatchery also has an educational centre providing visitors with information about this important part of Amble's heritage.

Amble Development Trust's<sup>18</sup> approach to regeneration and economic development has involved strong community partnership and building on local assets. The "Ambler" a local newspaper which is produced and funded by ADT, has played an important role in ensuring that new projects are developed with community support and engagement. The paper is distributed to every household, with content created by the community, and is a mechanism for discussion and debate on new projects or developments, from their inception to implementation.

## **Looking to the future**

The pandemic has had a significant impact on Amble's tourist economy. Lockdowns have meant many local businesses have been closed and ongoing restrictions have continued to impact footfall. Retail and hospitality – the two biggest employment sectors in Amble – have been some of the most vulnerable to the economic impacts of the pandemic. Yet, when restrictions were eased over the summer the town experienced an influx of so called 'staycationers'. The unpredictability of the pandemic makes it incredibly difficult for community organisations and local businesses to plan, invest and anticipate the shape of the future visitor economy.

Another key challenge discussed by interviewees is the housing market. Across Northumberland's rural communities second home ownership is increasing and driving up house prices. Securing good quality affordable housing in the town centre will be a priority in Amble to ensure that younger people and those working in service and tourist industries are not pushed out of the town. Andy Dean from Community Action Northumberland identifies community-led housing as being a key solution to address these challenges, pointing to examples across the county including Haltwhistle Partnership<sup>19</sup> who are converting spaces

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on Amble Development Trust, see: <http://www.ambleddevelopmenttrust.org.uk/>

<sup>19</sup> For more information on Haltwhistle Partnerships, see: <https://haltwhistle.org/>

above shops into affordable town centre flats and Glendale Gateway Trust who own and manage 20 affordable homes in Wooler<sup>20</sup>. Amble Development Trust have made inroads with affordable housing by delivering 4 flats over the retail premises they own but are keen to do more to address this pressing issue.

## Hastings, East Sussex

A former Victorian seaside resort on the Sussex coast, Hastings has faced many of the challenges typically associated with similar coastal towns. These include seasonal and insecure employment, lower than average skills and qualification rates, and poor local transport connectivity. Nearly half of Hastings residents live in neighbourhoods of multiple deprivation, and the town has some of the highest levels of poverty in the South East.<sup>21</sup> Recent regeneration strategies in Hastings have focused particularly on the development of the local visitor economy, and the need for greater investment in skills, housing, infrastructure and digital connectivity.<sup>22</sup>

Hastings has a reputation for a vibrant community identity, with a thriving 'home grown' creative sector, local cultural festivals and events. As one of our interviewees described:

"[Hastings] seems to be able to convert marginality into a virtue – both economically and as an opportunity."

The town also has an entrepreneurial and diverse community sector, including a number of stand-out local partnerships which are harnessing community assets to support the flourishing of the town and its people. We spoke to interviewees from across the local community sector and council about the role of community-led regeneration in Hastings.

### The role of community-led regeneration in Hastings

A long tradition of self-help and community initiatives in Hastings was consolidated by the formation of two infrastructure organisations in the 1980s: the Hastings Urban Conservation Project in 1986 (later to become Hastings Trust)<sup>23</sup> and Hastings Voluntary Action (HVA) in 1989.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For more information on Glendale Gateway Trust, see: <https://www.glendalegatewaytrust.org/>

<sup>21</sup> Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019 data accessed via Local Insights: <https://local.communityinsight.org/>

<sup>22</sup> See for example: <https://www.southeastlep.com/good-governance/working-groups/coastal-communities/>

<sup>23</sup> For more information see: <https://www.hastingstrust.net>

<sup>24</sup> For more information see: <https://hastingsvoluntaryaction.org.uk>

The VCSE sector is now playing a key role in Hastings to progress a vision for a fairer, greener future for the town. Like other similar seaside towns seeking to revive their local economies, making sure that the existing community benefits from new opportunities and regeneration is a key concern. Over recent years, lower house prices, transport connections to London and its creative seaside appeal have attracted new residents and new development to Hastings. But this has also created concerns about the pressures of gentrification, with a number of community projects in the town aimed at making sure communities have a say and a genuine stake in a changing Hastings.

There is currently an active and innovative community ownership landscape in Hastings. White Rock Neighbourhood Ventures (WRNV), for example, in partnership with Jericho Road Solutions, Meanwhile Space and the Heart of Hastings Community Land Trust (CLT), is developing genuinely affordable housing for people who are being pushed out by rising property prices. White Rock is one of the UK's most deprived neighbourhoods, with a high presence of derelict buildings and absentee landlords; the area has also been increasingly experiencing the impact of gentrification.<sup>25</sup>

To tackle these trends, the partnership has been working with local people to renovate disused buildings, and then renting them out on affordable rates tied to local incomes, capped at the rate of inflation. They have also created The Hastings Commons, an ecosystem of renovations including converting the Rock House and the former Hastings Observer building into affordable housing, retail and workspace. Through the principles of community organising and community ownership, they are putting power back into the hands of local people to shape change in their neighbourhoods.<sup>26</sup>

Hastings' community sector is also rich with environmental initiatives, seeking to develop a community-based response to the climate emergency. Energise Sussex Coast for example, is a community energy co-operative seeking to tackle energy injustice and fuel poverty (which is higher than average in the town) through the provision of renewable energy, energy efficiency projects and advice.<sup>27</sup> They were also one of the coordinators of the 'Sustainability on Sea' community festival in 2019, which organised a series of sixty events promoting and supporting sustainability initiatives in Hastings and St Leonards.<sup>28</sup> Local initiatives include Project Rewild, which is connecting children in Hastings to the seaside, woodlands and other outdoor spaces through education and

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<sup>25</sup> For more information about WRNV see: <https://wrnv.org.uk/>

<sup>26</sup> For more information about The Hastings Commons see: <http://www.jerichoroad.co.uk/reinvestment/hastings/>

<sup>27</sup> For more information on Energise Sussex Coast see: <http://www.energisesussexcoast.co.uk/>

<sup>28</sup> For more information on Sustainability on Sea see: <http://www.sustainabilityonsea.org.uk/>

play<sup>29</sup>, and the Greenway project which is developing ten miles of car free routes around Hastings for cyclists, walkers and people with mobility scooters.<sup>30</sup>

## Looking to the future

There is a strong ecosystem of VCSE initiatives in Hastings seeking to put community voice and engagement at the heart of the conversation about the future of the town. This includes initiatives such as 'Changing Hastings' a community conversation about the impact of gentrification and the future of the town after Covid-19, and 'Common Treasury', a resident-led ideas hub creating action plans for happier, healthier neighbourhoods.<sup>31</sup>

Interviewees observed that these initiatives, alongside a well-networked and skilled VCSE sector, has meant that the community has a stronger voice when it comes to formal partnership with the public and private sectors, such as through the Hastings Town Deal.<sup>32</sup> But they also spoke about the opportunities that need to be harnessed to enable the roots of community power to fully take hold and to create long-term and sustainable change in the town. One opportunity that was highlighted was to provide training or capacity building about how to engage fully and effectively with partnership working.

There is huge potential to build an inclusive social economy in Hastings by devolving greater power and resources to neighbourhoods – through community asset transfer or local budgets – in order to provide sustainable income streams for community-based initiatives. An example of this is the successful registration as an asset of community value (ACV) and subsequent purchase of the Isobel Blackman Centre by a consortium including HVA, AgeUK East Sussex, Hastings Seniors Forum and the Old Town Residents Association. Such longer-term resources would enable collaboration to move beyond project-based work and be a turning point for a different economic and social model in the town – one which puts communities in charge.

## Newquay, Cornwall

Newquay on the North Cornish coast is one of the UK's major seaside resorts. Its beautiful beaches and campsites, attractive surf and busy night-time economy are at the heart of its tourist offer. Its population of around 22,000 can surge to up to 100,000 during peak tourist season, and its employment

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<sup>29</sup> For more information on Project Rewild see: <https://www.projectrewild.co.uk/>

<sup>30</sup> For more information on Hastings Greenway see <http://www.hastingsgreenway.org/index.html>

<sup>31</sup> For more information see: <https://www.commonwealthtreasury.org.uk/hastings-emerging-futures-map-of-ideas/>

<sup>32</sup> As part of the MHCLG Towns Fund, the Hastings Town Deal will develop a Town Investment Plan for up to £25m funding over the next six years: <https://www.hastings.gov.uk/regeneration/townddeal/>

opportunities are heavily seasonal.<sup>33</sup> A key challenge for the town is to diversify the local economy, and extend its seasonal tourism offer throughout the year.

## Strengthening community partnership in Newquay

We spoke to our interviewees about the role that partnership between the public and community sectors plays in the town and how this could be strengthened in the future.

Successful partnerships such as 'Newquay Clean' were considered to be an example of the community spirit within the town to work together to 'get things done.' This is an initiative which brings together local public agencies, businesses and a representative volunteer group to tackle issues such as litter in the town.

However, one of the key challenges identified by our interviewees was the need to build more sustainable community leadership in the town, through capacity building, funding and devolution. Previous research on localism in Cornwall has also identified that there is huge potential for parish and town councils to work in greater partnership with the VCSE sector to build sustainable networks of community power.<sup>34</sup>

An example of what can be achieved through community power is the Newquay Orchard<sup>35</sup>. A seven-acre community space in the centre of the town, over 600 volunteers have worked to transform it into a community asset, providing environmental education, mental health services, community events and employability services and training.

There is huge potential for community action and enterprise to provide solutions to some of the key challenges Newquay is facing – from regenerating the high street, to developing community-led housing. However, interviewees reflected that this requires strengthening the sector through more opportunities for community ownership, and the devolution of assets, resources and decisions directly to the community. Existing structures such as Community Networks have huge potential to drive forward local plans but are considered by some to be led too much by the local authority and local council rather than by communities themselves.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Prior to the pandemic, Newquay already had higher levels than average employment deprivation; the latest unemployment data shows that unemployment in Newquay West is up 4.5% since March 2020. Data accessed via Local Insight <https://local.communityinsight.org/>

<sup>34</sup> Locality. 2019. 'Power Partnerships: learning from Cornwall.' Available at: <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Power-Partnerships-learning-from-Cornwall.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> For more information, see: <https://newquayorchard.co.uk/>

<sup>36</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/community-and-living/communities-and-devolution/community-networks/>



## Birkenhead, Wirral

Birkenhead is on the Wirral Peninsula, situated on the estuary of the River Mersey across from the city of Liverpool. An urban seaport with a history in shipbuilding and an expansive docklands, today the town's connection to its coastal heritage and identity has in some ways declined along with the industry. As one of our interviewees reflected:

"Birkenhead should be the Brooklyn to Liverpool's Manhattan! Docks and ship building went, and town centre focus moved into town but that needs to shift. The river is not a feature, no one makes it a key part of life....On the Liverpool side there are places for people to visit, on the Wirral there is literally no infrastructure on the coastline, no shops/cafes/pubs. The penny is finally starting to drop and it's slowly starting to happen."

Mel Bowen, Spider Project, Birkenhead.

### **Tackling health inequalities and food poverty: the role of the community sector**

While the Wirral is a relatively affluent borough, many of the neighbourhoods of Birkenhead are amongst the most severely deprived in the country, with high levels of health deprivation. In central Birkenhead current unemployment is at 15%, with one in three people with no qualifications.<sup>37</sup> Job insecurity caused by the lockdown has intensified these challenges. We spoke to community organisations in the town about their role in tackling some of the impacts of social deprivation, poor health and insecurity.

The 'Spider Project CIC' is based in the centre of town in a neighbourhood in the top 1% most deprived in the country.<sup>38</sup> They are a creative arts and wellbeing community recovery programme, working with people who have experienced substance misuse. Through a range of activities and therapeutic interventions, they offer people the opportunity to build their confidence and resilience to help them through recovery and help them stop the revolving door of drug use. Since the pandemic, they have expanded their digital programme and offer many of their activities online. Many of the people who access their support are also volunteers, which helps them get connected to others and find new opportunities in their lives to help them get well.

Public funding cuts to alcohol and drug recovery over recent years have impacted the Spider Project, but they have been able to continue their vital services partly by diversifying their offer to people with mild to moderate mental

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<sup>37</sup> Data from MSOAs Birkenhead South and Birkenhead Central. Data accessed via Local Insight <https://local.communityinsight.org/>

<sup>38</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.spiderproject.org.uk/>

health needs. Through their “Move on Up” programme, which is funded by the Clinical Commissioning Group, they have been working with people who are experiencing poor mental health and supporting them into employment.

We also spoke to Carrbridge Centre, based in Woodchurch on the outskirts of Birkenhead. Based in an area of high deprivation, Carrbridge Centre was saved by local residents in 2008 when it was due to be demolished to make way for new housing.<sup>39</sup> It is now leased to the community on a long-term peppercorn rent. Carrbridge Centre works with the community and other local organisations to develop a range of services from employment support, to health and wellbeing services. Their ‘Social Supermarket’ is a small shop run by the Centre which stocks a range of fresh food and household goods, available to anyone on a ‘pay as you feel’ basis. Not only does this provide an income stream for the centre to develop as a sustainable enterprise, but it is also a way of tackling food poverty in the local area.

## Great Yarmouth, Norfolk

Great Yarmouth is a seaside resort town on the Norfolk coast. Its beautiful beaches and piers, amusement arcades, and historic quayside make it an attractive destination for holiday makers. Tourism is estimated to bring around £635m per year to the local economy.<sup>40</sup> Other major industry in the town is centred around offshore oil and renewable energy in the North Sea.

Despite its considerable assets, Great Yarmouth faces a number of challenges common to other seaside towns. Job opportunities are primarily seasonal and based around tourism sectors; although the energy sector is also a key employer, the higher income jobs are more likely to be held by people commuting from outside the borough.<sup>41</sup> Over a third of the residents of Great Yarmouth town and neighbouring Gorleston-on-Sea have no qualifications, which is significantly higher than the national average. These challenges are exacerbated by poor public transport and low car ownership within the town, restricting access to opportunities elsewhere in the county.<sup>42</sup> As one interviewee in Great Yarmouth described it:

“It’s about being at the end of the line, 50% of our population are fish. We have the same expenses as any inland community but only 50% rail lines in and out and roads don’t go through to anywhere else.”

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<sup>39</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.carrbridgecentre.org.uk/>

<sup>40</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.great-yarmouth.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=988&p=0>

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> Data accessed via Local Insight <https://local.communityinsight.org/>

The closure of businesses due to lockdowns over the past year has had a significant impact on retail, hospitality and leisure and people who work in these sectors. The latest unemployment figures for Great Yarmouth show that unemployment levels are as high as 16% in some neighbourhoods within the town.<sup>43</sup> Interviewees also spoke about the impact of lockdown and decreased footfall on exacerbating high-street decline, where a number of major services including banks and department stores have already closed.

We spoke to interviewees in the council and VCSE sectors about the role which civil society plays within the town, and the potential for strengthening community partnership and community engagement in tackling some of the big challenges facing the town. Interviewees highlighted a number of examples of the impact the charity sector in the town. DIAL Great Yarmouth, for example, is providing advice and support around benefits, debt, and employment support, with particular expertise in working with people with disabilities.<sup>44</sup> Throughout the pandemic, a strong network of community and faith organisations across the borough have supported communities that have been the hardest hit by the pandemic.

There is also an active community-led housing sector across the borough. Great Yarmouth community land trust (CLT) is developing plans to renovate town centre buildings into new affordable housing, alongside spaces for community businesses and community hubs.<sup>45</sup> Deficient supply of good quality, affordable housing for local people is a key challenge for the town. Regenerating assets in this way, with community ownership and governance at the centre of local plans, has the potential to not only deliver new housing, but also bringing employment opportunities and new community services into the town.

Interviewees highlighted that Great Yarmouth has many of the foundations needed for community partnerships to deliver positive change for the town – including a well networked voluntary and community sector, and an entrepreneurial and creative community spirit. However, interviewees also recognised that a long-term strategy is required, matched with funding and resources, to bring this power of community to the fore and unlock its potential.

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<sup>43</sup> Data accessed via Local Insight <https://local.communityinsight.org/>

<sup>44</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.dial-greatyarmouth.org.uk/>

<sup>45</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.great-yarmouth.gov.uk/article/6302/Great-Yarmouth-Community-Land-Trust>

# Our recommendations

Our interviews and case studies demonstrate the power of community to drive forward positive change and harness the unique assets of coastal places for a greener, fairer future. However, we've also found that too often this role goes untapped, with community power lying dormant without the structures, networks and resources to harness it. We have developed a series of recommendations for policymakers that would unlock the role of community-led regeneration in coastal communities.

## Put community power at the heart of local regeneration strategies.

Local regeneration strategies, including those developed through local Coastal Communities Teams, are most effective when developed in partnership with communities and when they strengthen opportunities for community ownership in the long-term. This requires:

- **Co-creating the vision for regeneration:** ensuring that neighbourhoods are put in the lead of shaping the priorities and vision for local change. This requires investment in community engagement, participatory approaches, mapping local assets and strengthening community networks in partnership with the VCSE sector. This also requires ensuring that there are ongoing opportunities for community scrutiny of decisions, plans and how they are implemented.
- **Building community control of local plans:** including through devolution of budgets or assets to communities to implement plans, where there is capacity and appetite. Where there is not capacity, building organisational capabilities and community development should target 'cold spot' areas.
- **Directly invest in community infrastructure to support an inclusive economy approach to regeneration:** including through access to capital investment, community asset transfer (CAT), commissioning, and supporting community businesses and social enterprises in the local economy.
- **Creating collaborative public services that unlock community power:** mobilising community solutions in tackling the big challenges many coastal places face, including unemployment and health inequalities. Fundamentally this involves moving away from competition and targets, to an approach which invests in community collaboration and long-term capabilities within communities to support local delivery and prevention.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> More practical learning on how to embed this in practice is available from Locality's [Keep it Local](#) network.

## Opportunities for national government to enable a community-powered economic recovery in coastal communities.

The government have committed to levelling-up economies in so called left-behind communities, including many coastal places. Past programmes have shown that to build long-term prosperity that reaches all parts of the community, regeneration needs to be locally rooted, community-led, and provide a mix of capital and revenue funding. We believe government has two key opportunities to do this:

- **Ringfence 25% of new economic development funding** to be devolved to **community-led partnerships**: such as through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the new £4bn Levelling-Up Fund announced in the 2020 Spending Review. Community-led partnerships would include local government, community organisations, residents, and local businesses, and existing structures such as Coastal Community Teams. Locality's Communities in Charge campaign has demonstrated that community-led approaches – which put local people in control of how investment is spent and which interventions will work for their places – do not just provide good social outcomes but are also proven to create stronger local economies.<sup>47</sup>

Devolving a quarter of economic development funding directly to local partnerships would provide a huge opportunity to invest in the neighbourhood foundations of long-term prosperity, including through community economic development, community asset ownership, local enterprise support, and employment and skills training.

- **Establish an ambitious Community Ownership Fund to capitalise community organisations**: community ownership of local land and buildings can have a transformative impact for local places and local economies. We are calling for a £1bn investment plan for community assets over the next five years to provide capital and revenue funding to communities to take on local assets. This could enable communities to save important local assets that come under threat, as well as putting disused spaces back into community use through the development of community-led housing or new community businesses.

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<sup>47</sup> For more information from Locality on the background to our campaign to put communities in charge of economic regeneration funding please see: [www.locality.org.uk/policy-campaigns/communities-in-charge/](https://www.locality.org.uk/policy-campaigns/communities-in-charge/)



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