

Understanding the Coastal Communities of North West England: a Qualitative and Quantitative Assessment of Socio-Economic & Environmental Issues and Opportunities for Coastal Communities in North West England

Rob Hindle, Rural Innovation, rob.hindle@ruralinnovation.co.uk;
Caroline Salthouse, North West Coastal Forum, nwcoastalforum@yahoo.co.uk;
James Shorten, c4g, james@c4g.me.uk

Abstract

In England attention has focussed on the socio-economic status of larger seaside towns, with a Government enquiry into Coastal Towns and associated research¹, national research on seaside resorts² and, in the North West, research underpinning regional tourism and economic policy³. However, smaller and non-resort coastal communities have largely been overlooked, so in 2009 the North West Coastal Forum and 4NW commissioned research⁴ to address this gap by establishing a baseline picture of the North West region's coastal communities, their socio-economic and environmental value, issues and opportunities. The research was steered by a range of stakeholder organisations. A representative sample of 47 coastal settlements was agreed with population ranging from under 500 to 705,000. 21 datasets were brought together under the themes of 'People', 'Work' and 'Place'. Analysis of the datasets led to a typology for coastal settlements which was tested with local stakeholders at area-based workshops. The four resulting typologies are: Larger Urban Areas; Maritime Towns; Working Towns by the Sea; Settlements of Choice. This typology fits with, but adds greatly to, the national picture emerging from studies of resort towns. It provides a baseline against which to measure progress and evidence-based policy guidance for each type of community identified. This is important as the national policy focus applies to only one of the diverse settlement types on the North West's coast. The results of the research have contributed to policy development at a regional⁵ and local level. Similar methodology can usefully be applied to any geographic region.

Keywords: *community; economic; policy; social; environmental; typology*

1. National Context

The UK has a long history of publicly-funded intervention and investment in coastal communities. Responsibility for policy affecting these communities has traditionally been split across many government departments and there has been no over-arching policy framework addressing their needs.

¹ The Seaside Economy: The final report of the seaside towns research project, CLG, 2003; English Seaside Towns: A Benchmarking Study, CLG, 2007

² An Asset and a Challenge; Heritage and Regeneration in Coastal Towns in England, English Heritage, 2007

³ A New Vision for Northwest Coastal Resorts, NWDA, 2003; The Strategy for Tourism in England's Northwest 2003-2010, NWDA, 2003; Demography, Migration & Diversity in the Northwest, NWDA, 2008; Historic Towns and Cities in England's Northwest, NWDA and English Heritage, 2005 (and position statement 2007)

⁴ Understanding the Coastal Communities of the North West, 4NW, June 2009

⁵ <http://www.nwregionalstrategy.com>

The plight of the UK's often ageing seaside resorts was highlighted in a report (English Heritage and CABE, 2003), which demonstrated that enhancements to the quality of both buildings and open space can make a significant difference to how historic coastal resort towns attract new visitors. Following this further research took place looking at the challenges and opportunities that resorts face in making the most of their heritage (English Heritage, 2007).

In 2005 a Government Select Committee Inquiry into Coastal Towns sent out a call for evidence. This committee considered English coastal towns only, but the term coastal towns was not further defined to avoid restricting the evidence being collated. The resulting evidence showed that the size and characteristics of settlements on the coast vary considerably from traditional coastal resorts and industrial towns to smaller, more rural towns and villages with differing social and economic profiles and consequent dangers in seeking to generalise 'coastal towns' and their problems. The Government argued that there are many differences between coastal towns, including their "size, the impact of regional and historic contexts and different patterns of economic development. It is therefore difficult to generalise about places ranging from Bournemouth and Brighton to Skegness and St Ives." (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2007).

In 2008 'England's Seaside Towns: A benchmarking study' (Beatty et al, 2008) was published. This was commissioned in response to the Select Committee inquiry and reviewed statistical evidence for socio-economic factors in a selection of 37 English coastal resort towns with population of over 10,000, comparing them with regional and English national averages. It included the three major North West England coastal resorts of Blackpool, Morecambe and Southport. Thirty datasets were analysed and the geographic unit used was ward level.

Regional studies⁶ have taken place in the South East and the East of England regions. Both considered the coastal zone as a collection of local authority districts rather than individual communities. The South East study found that the coastal South East as a whole had under-performed in relation to the region's economy, citing lower levels of business stock and formation, lower earnings and lower skills than the regional average. The East of England study identified a similar economic under-performance, particularly in terms of the availability of jobs, levels of economic activity, skill levels and earnings.

All the research to date indicates that coastal communities face significant social and economic challenges, and although there is considerable variation there are also important commonalities including:

- peripheral locations which are exacerbated by weak transport links
- the impact of changing tourism trends on their economy
- high levels of seasonal unemployment
- a relatively large number of older and younger people
- a high incidence of private rented houses and property in poor condition

⁶

Framework for Action for the Coastal South East, SQW Ltd, 2008; East of England Coastal Initiative - Socio-Economic Research, Globe Regeneration Ltd, 2008

- relatively high proportion of low income households
- relatively low levels of educational attainment and lower life expectancy.

2. Regional Context

Within the North West of England there has been research to underpin regional tourism strategies⁷, economic⁸ and rural⁹ policy.

The coast plays a very important role in economic strategy at regional, sub-regional and local level in the region. Financial commitment given to the region's major seaside resort towns includes the restoration of Southport's Pier and improvements to sea defences and promenades in Blackpool. Many of the region's planned major capital projects are directly linked to the coast. At a local level there are numerous examples of initiatives which seek to link the coast with visions for future economic growth. Such investment is a clear indicator of the economic, environmental and social value placed on the region's coast. The coast is also hugely important environmentally and provides a wide range of opportunities for recreation and leisure. The future role of the coast and its communities is therefore of key importance to policy makers in the region.

Well-being of coastal communities is a key objective of the North West Coastal Forum¹⁰. The Forum recognised that while the issues for larger coastal resort towns were being researched, recognised and to some extent addressed at national level the many smaller or non-resort coastal settlements which make up the bulk of the North West's coastal communities were effectively being overlooked.

Accordingly, 2009, the North West Coastal Forum and 4NW, the then Regional Planning Body for North West England, commissioned 'A qualitative and quantitative assessment of socio-economic & environmental issues and opportunities for coastal communities in north west England', known as 'Understanding the Coastal Communities of North West England'¹¹, with funding from 4NW and Defra. This research was designed to provide an evidence base for future regional and local policy for coastal communities. It would establish a replicable baseline picture of a representative sample of the region's coastal communities, demonstrating the socio-economic and environmental value of the communities, the issues that affect them, the opportunities they offer the region and provide policy makers with a better understanding of their needs. Two further aspects of the study were to determine whether there are distinctive features of those communities compared to similar communities inland and to furnish examples of value added through intervention from within the region and elsewhere.

⁷ A New Vision for Northwest Coastal Resorts, NWDA, 2003; The Strategy for Tourism in England's Northwest 2003-2010, NWDA, 2003

⁸ Demography, Migration & Diversity in the Northwest, NWDA, 2008; Historic Towns and Cities in England's Northwest, NWDA and English Heritage, 2005 (and position statement 2007)

⁹ State of the Rural Northwest Update, NWDA 2007

¹⁰ The North West Coastal Forum is a not-for-profit multi-sector partnership which aims to promote and deliver integrated coastal zone management for the long-term sustainability of the region's coast

¹¹ Rural Innovation, c4g and Smiths Gore, 2009, Understanding the Coastal Communities of the North West, 4NW

It was not within the remit of the study to make specific policy recommendations, however attention was drawn to issues which could offer valuable insight to policy makers at regional, sub-regional and local levels in their consideration of the needs of coastal communities.

The remit applied to the work was broader than that adopted in the other studies mentioned above as it included an assessment of social and environmental as well as economic characteristics and performance. Another key difference was that it sought analysis of individual settlements rather than of a coastal 'zone' or coastal local authority area.

3. Research Approach

The research was steered by a Steering Group formed from a range of stakeholders¹² in the region.

An initial list of 45 representative communities was selected, this was later expanded to 47 due to requests from local authorities. The communities chosen were based on a map review and input from both the Steering Group members and other Forum contacts to ensure fair coverage of both geography and the range of sizes and types of community. The settlements ranged in scale from the City of Liverpool (population 705,336) to small villages such as Ravenglass (population 334) and covered the region from the Welsh border in the south to the Scottish border in the north. A small number of inland settlements were included. These were used during data analysis to see whether emerging trends or characteristics could be said to be specific to the coast.

The research was place-based, with data being gathered at Census Output Areas (COA), postcode sector and Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) geographic scale wherever possible. Data geography posed a constant challenge during the research as difficulties of fit with some of the larger data units on small coastal settlements meant some had to be excluded from certain data analysis.

The research was carried out at two levels. The first involved using data to build understanding of the overall contribution made by coastal communities in the North West and included, alongside the smaller coastal communities, the larger resort towns (Blackpool, Morecambe and Southport) which have featured in much of the national research. The second level was an in depth study of the smaller settlements along the North West coast to build understanding of their contribution and needs and the evidence base for future policy.

An initial analysis of the data available led to 21 datasets (Table 1) being selected and analysed under three headings: people (residents) work (local economy and employment) and place (characteristics of the settlement). The findings were given in sub-regions (Cumbria, Lancashire, Cheshire and Merseyside and individual summaries were produced for each local authority district that contained one or more of the studied communities.

¹² 4NW, Lancashire County Council, Morecambe Bay Partnership, the North West Coastal Forum, the North West Regional Development Agency's Regional Intelligence Unit and the Southport Partnership

Data source	Data extracted
2001 Census	Demographics (count) Household composition (count) Internal/Inward/Outward/Net migration Vehicle ownership (count) Travel to work mode (count) Origin-Destination Travel to Work summary/out/in Tenure (count)
Mid year estimates (Office for National Statistics)	Population Estimates 2001-2007
CACI Paycheck	Household Mean Gross Family Income
Indices of Deprivation 2007 for Super Output Areas	Index of Multiple Deprivation Score
NOMIS (National On-line Manpower Information System): Claimant count with rates and proportions	Monthly Claimant counts and proportions
Benefits Data: Working Age Client Group, November 2007	Benefit claimants 2007
Annual Business Inquiry employee analysis 2007	Industry of employment (count)
Land Registry	Average House Prices 2007 and 2008
2008 Rural Services Data Series (CRC)	2008 Service Availability - % within 0-2km of outlet
2007 Core Accessibility Indicators (DFT)	% Services within x time travelled by public transport, walking or cycling

Table 1. Datasets used

The initial findings were tested and added to by three area-based consultation events held for local people, councillors, public and private sector stakeholders.

4. Research findings

The 47 coastal communities studied account for nearly one third of the region's population - around two million people. They host one in four of the region's jobs and include regional and sub-regional centres such as Liverpool, Southport, Blackpool, Morecambe and Barrow-in-Furness. They also host ten ports which provide substantial economic connections, particularly to Ireland and the Isle of Man. Planned investment in port infrastructure will be a major driver for economic growth.

The coast is a major asset for the region's visitor economy. In 2007 Blackpool Pleasure Beach attracted 5.5 million visitors whilst Morecambe and Southport each attracted in the region of 2.5 million visitors¹³. All the relevant sub-regional Tourist Boards have implemented

¹³

STEAM, Tourism Expenditure by Local Authority 2007

some form of coastal tourism branding. Visitor segmentation research commissioned by the NWDA in 2006¹⁴ found that the seaside still retains a strong allure for visitors.

It is apparent that the coast will play a major part in the economic future of the region. It is also hugely important environmentally, including nationally and internationally important heritage, landscape and environmental sites. It contains a disproportionately high area of England's designated coastal habitats and hosts many of the region's important landscape and historic designations. It provides a wide range of opportunities for recreation and leisure. The role that the coast plays in the future is therefore of key importance to policy makers throughout the region.

'The Coast - so what?' discussion in the final research report emphasised the need for careful and detailed thinking on the potential that the coast offers the successful sustainable future of its communities. Issues associated with rising sea levels, storm surges, increased risk from flooding and erosion together with the need to reduce carbon emissions need to be factored in.

Considered collectively, the North West's coastal communities share some of the socio-economic characteristics of 'Seaside Towns' identified in the national studies for example:

- their demographic profile is older than the regional average
- deprivation (IMD) is higher in the coastal communities
- incomes are lower and the proportion of benefits claimants higher
- there is a higher incidence of lone parent and multi occupancy households.

However coastal communities in the North West are losing rather than gaining population, have high levels of social rented housing stock and overall employment is higher in public administration than the retail and hospitality (tourism) sectors.

Analysis of the coastal communities as a collective was useful to compare the position in the region with that identified at national level, but more detailed analysis was required in order to understand coastal distinctiveness and individual communities. The work has highlighted key differences in the communities up and down the coast and shown that many of the region's coastal communities are very different from 'Seaside Towns' which have been the main focus of national research.

The importance of this difference is a key finding of the research, which concluded that there is a pressing need for the region to make a strong case to national policy makers and interest groups that a focus on 'Seaside Towns' alone will not be sufficient for the North West.

4.1 A Typology for the Coastal Communities

An early study objective was to build a composite picture of the characteristics of the region's coastal communities and compare it with those for the region as a whole. This was done, but it rapidly became apparent that such a composite picture was too compromised to be truly useful. This is partly because the coastal communities in the Merseyside conurbation are far larger than the other coastal settlements. For instance, Liverpool alone accounted for 33% of the COAs which make up the region's coastal communities. It was therefore considered important to look beyond the picture of the region's coastal communities offered by a single

¹⁴

Northwest Visitor Segmentation Research, Locum Consulting, 2006

collective average. The study proposed a typology for coastal communities to assist future policy development and any subsequent intervention. The typology breaks the 47 communities into Larger Urban Areas, Maritime Towns, Working Towns by the Sea and Settlements of Choice, each with a distinct, data-based, profile.

Larger Urban Areas: These are regional and sub-regional centres and post-industrial towns on the coast. They share negative socio-economic characteristics. The influence of the coast is important for these places, but they are also influenced by issues characteristic of post-industrial conurbations and their regeneration. In North West England Large Urban Areas are found only in Merseyside. The maritime character of these settlements is hugely important but will not be the only thing that defines their future. The principal issue for these communities is to ensure that the overall regeneration effort takes full account of their coastal assets. It is a critical point of distinctiveness which offers business opportunities, connectivity, environmental and quality of life benefits.

Maritime Towns: These are the places where the coastal influence is most powerful. This descriptor covers a much broader range of places than the national focus on 'Seaside Towns' and includes small settlements. Maritime Towns have at some point been defined by a functional/economic relationship with the sea. Their future will be heavily influenced by the coastal features which have and continue to attract people and businesses to them. They can be resorts or ports, and are frequently both. Policy relating to Maritime Towns in the North West will need to be alive to their differences. It must consider their coastal location as a core issue, and understand the challenges and opportunities that it provides.

Working Towns by the Sea: These are places which cannot be described as seaside resorts or retirement communities. They no longer have a dominant economic link with the coast and lack the type of infrastructure which typifies coastal settlements - harbours, promenades and beaches. These communities share socio-economic characteristics with inland settlements, yet proximity to the sea still makes up an important element of their character. Future policy affecting Working Towns by the Sea should seek to ensure that the benefits offered by their particular types of coastal location are not overlooked, but will not place their coastal location centrally in their futures.

Settlements of Choice: These are popular communities made even more attractive by the high quality environment of their coastal location. They have a strong link to the sea and have often developed around their role as a harbour or haven. This sort of settlement is unlikely to be high on the agenda of sub-regional or regional policy makers; they are neither large enough nor challenged enough to attract attention. Their coastal location is a very real asset yet it risks prejudicing their future as sustainable communities - both in terms of low carbon living and the balance and vibrancy of their population and business stock. These communities tend not to have structural social economic problems requiring intervention. Instead they need gentle but positive management to ensure they remain relatively balanced communities able to meet the obligations of sustainable living.

5. Discussion

This research offers a deep and place-specific understanding of the region's coastal communities. It has established a valuable baseline against which the effects of policy

interventions can be measured over time and offers suggestions for policy for the four types of settlement identified.

The research findings show that settlements in the Large Urban Areas group are generally already receiving considerable attention. The Maritime Towns are the group most likely to benefit the most from publicly funded intervention in the short term, although some of these communities are already the focus of investment strategies.

There is a need to consider the implications of the coastal context of Working Towns by the Sea across a range of policies including planning, regeneration and housing and to consider what the coastal nuance might mean for policy and action when compared to similar sized settlements inland.

The Settlements of Choice group face issues common with many smaller, rural settlements. These can be collated under the heading of 'sustainable communities' and cover social mix, imbalance in local housing markets, commuting, and adequacy of local services. The need to tackle these issues is hastened by low-carbon imperatives.

In addition there is a need to consider the coast as a whole. How best to make use of the inherent connections and linkage between coastal communities is a difficult, but important issue, because the typology of coastal communities is not geographically distinct. In many areas places of each type are intermingled and adjacent, functioning as part of a wider spatial system. Going forward, the benefits offered by these linkages (including transport, work patterns and personal relationships), anchored in the distinctiveness of the coast, should not be overlooked.

Finally, there is a need to consider visitors. This is a time of considerable change in holiday and leisure choices. The coastal communities of the North West need to maximise the opportunities associated with new trends. The 6.8 million residents of the North West, with large urban populations close to and on the coast, provide an excellent and enduring opportunity for the future of the visitor economy of the region's coastal communities.

6. Application of findings

At a national level the research findings have been circulated to the relevant central Government departments and information from the datasets collated has been used to provide evidence regarding issues for rural coastal communities to the All Party Parliamentary Group's enquiry into Rural Disadvantage in June 2009.

Regionally it was intended that the research would provide part of the evidence base to underpin regional planning policy and would be used for developing coastal policy in RS2010¹⁵, the integrated regional strategy for the region, which would provide joined-up regional spatial and economic policy. Accordingly the typologies and associated policy ideas were included in an unpublished draft RS2010. However, due to a change in national government in May 2010, there is now no statutory regional planning or integrated regional strategy. In the North West local and regional stakeholders have agreed that work on a non-statutory regional strategy containing high-level guidance for the region should continue but it is not clear at the time of authoring this paper what may, or may not, be retained with regard to coastal communities or coastal policies in general.

¹⁵ <http://www.nwregionalstrategy.com>

At a local level the Local Authority District Summaries were distributed to relevant Local Authorities. Two local authorities requested the further definition of three coastal settlements. These were Lytham and St Annes-on-Sea on the Fylde peninsula; two small towns which are closely adjacent and often referred to as one resort: Lytham St Annes, although the two have very different characters, and New Brighton on the Wirral peninsula which again is difficult to separate from the wider community of Wallasey but has a distinct character. The local authority planners in each area assisted with defining the boundaries of these settlements.

Data availability will vary from country to country however the lessons learnt from this research show the value of establishing a replicable baseline using commonly available datasets and assembling and analysing data at an appropriate spatial scale in order to form robust, evidence-based policy recommendations for coastal communities.

7. Further research

An identified gap in the research was a full analysis of the impact of climate change on coastal communities. Although this was included in the research brief the Shoreline Management Plan (SMP) for the North West coastline was under review and the timing of outputs for the SMP meant that communities could not be aware which SMP policy would be proposed for their area. Although the impacts of climate change are much further-reaching than the need for coastal defence it was considered that information on future coastal defence policy was essential in order to be able to have a robust and meaningful discussion with community representatives regarding both issues and opportunities posed by climate change in their local area.

The North West Coastal Forum is keen to commission further research to fill this gap and the project remains an aspiration in the Forum's Programme of Work.

A further aspiration is to repeat the work at a suitable interval, perhaps 5 or 10 years, to assess the effectiveness of policy interventions on the coastal communities in question.

References

Beatty C., Fothergill S., 2003, The Seaside Economy: The final report of the seaside towns research project, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University

Beatty C., Fothergill S. and Wilson I., 2008, English Seaside Towns: A Benchmarking Study, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2007, Coastal Towns: Second Report of Session 2006–07, HC351, House of Commons

English Heritage, 2007, An Asset and a Challenge; Heritage and Regeneration in Coastal Towns in England

English Heritage and CABE, 2003, Shifting Sands: Design and the Changing Image of Seaside Towns

NWDA, 2008, Demography, Migration & Diversity in the Northwest

NWDA and English Heritage, 2005, Historic Towns and Cities in England's Northwest (and position statement 2007)