Turning the tide: Social justice in five seaside towns

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Summary

• The think-tank Centre for Social Justice published a report called Turning the Tide on 5th August 2013. The report is a short study of five seaside towns – Rhyl, Margate, Clacton-on-Sea, Blackpool, Great Yarmouth – looking at how social breakdown has affected some smaller communities, asking what factors continue to hold them back, and considering what more can be done to help them move on.

  The report argues that there is a clear case for additional transport infrastructure, increased localism and renewed investment in struggling seaside towns - but that the towns will not prosper unless people are given aspiration, education and skills, as well as a welfare system that supports more people back into work. The report recommends that public policy must do what it can to nurture strong families.

  The report further argues that there is a case for devolving greater powers to district level so that they can invest in more proactive services. The authors suggest that allowing local areas to step up and take power and responsibility for local regeneration could create opportunities for action based around the particular needs of the locality.

• This briefing would be most relevant to all tiers of councils, to officers and members working in tourism, economic development, welfare reform and housing.

Briefing in full

The Centre for Social Justice asserts that cities have come to embody how we think about deprivation and poverty in the UK - yet some of the most pronounced disadvantage in our country exists away from the big cities. Their short study of five
seaside towns – Rhyl, Margate, Clacton-on-Sea, Blackpool, Great Yarmouth – looks at how social breakdown has affected some smaller communities, asks what factors continue to hold them back, and considers what more can be done to help them move on.

**Case study 1: Rhyl**

Rhyl is a coastal resort in North Wales of about 25,000 people. The latest figures reveal that one neighbourhood in Rhyl is the most deprived in the whole of Wales. Two other areas in the town are amongst Wales’ 15 most deprived areas.

The CSJ report says that whilst Rhyl was once one of the foremost tourist destinations in Wales, over time it’s fortunes faded. Of the 18 properties across Rhyl’s West Parade that functioned as tourist accommodation in the late 1970s, only four remained open for this purpose by 2000. Much of this decline can be traced to the rise of cheap air travel since the late 1970s, which has been nothing short of disastrous for Rhyl.

With less demand for hotels and guesthouses, a large share of this accommodation has been bought up by private landlords and converted into houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). This is typically cheap and of very poor quality, so has attracted those who are living on very low incomes and reliant on welfare. Many of these bedsits were advertised in prisons across the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, contributing to a disproportionately high number of ex-offenders in the town. This flow of people moving into Rhyl has intensified the town’s problems. Cheap housing has also attracted a large number of young single mothers to the town without any support networks.

The declining demand for Rhyl as a seaside resort means that job opportunities are now few and far between, and the town has an alarmingly high level of worklessness. More than a quarter of Rhyl’s working-age population claims out-of-work benefits, and in one neighbourhood in Rhyl West it is as high as 67 per cent. This problem has escalated following the closure of a number of major retailers such as Marks and Spencer and Next in Rhyl. Where employment opportunities in Rhyl do exist, they are frequently of a low quality.

However, the report argues that worklessness is not a new issue in Rhyl. It has plagued the area for many years. This long-term worklessness has depleted the local skills base. Around a third of people in Rhyl have no qualifications and consequently face a major barrier to employment. Some in Rhyl also highlight a culture of dependency and ‘welfare mentality’ which is holding the town back.

Despite these problems, the report says that there are some encouraging signs. The Chief Executive of Denbighshire County Council, Mohammed Mehmet said: ‘Up until now the strategy has been about ‘managing deprivation’ and just supporting poverty. There is now a recognition that the town needs major structural changes and a different social mix to transform it’. At the heart of this has been the Rhyl City Strategy (RCS), established in 2007 to develop and deliver locally tailored solutions to unemployment and economic inactivity in Rhyl and the surrounding area. It brings together representatives from the County Council, Jobcentre Plus, Clwyd Coast Credit Union, local colleges and others.
Over the last few years the West Rhyl Regeneration Area has focused its activity on significantly reducing the number of HMOs and generally improving the quality of housing and the surrounding environment. The aim is to work with private sector developers to build new homes that will attract and retain economically active people. Part of this involves the acquisition and demolition of existing obsolete housing (particularly HMOs) and other ‘worn-out’ buildings.

The report says that strategies such as these directed at the specific problems faced by Rhyl are its best chance for regeneration. The challenge will be in building a new economy which is not entirely dependent upon tourism and finding people with the right skills to power it.

Case Study 2: Margate

The report says that since the 1960s, when its traditional tourist base dried up, Margate has increasingly become known for its high levels of deprivation, child poverty, drug addiction and educational failure. It’s a town of over 43,000 people, and in terms of overall deprivation, approximately 30 per cent of neighbourhoods in Margate are in the poorest 10 per cent of the country.

The disappearance of tourism has had a wide impact. The city is now littered with old hotels, guesthouses and holiday flats that are unsuitable for families and declining in value. During the last housing survey Margate’s two most deprived wards had vacancy rates of between 16-20 per cent, half of which were long-term. Of those that are occupied, nearly half are only suitable for single-person occupancy. The report says that the local sense of community is heavily disrupted by an annual turnover of more than 30 per cent of residents. As property prices decreased investors bought up old properties to turn them into houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). However, these properties were often treated poorly by tenants and absentee landlords, leading to a further decline in both property values and the character of the community. In Margate Central ward one in 20 houses lacks central heating and almost one in five homes are overcrowded.

Almost one in four working-age residents are in receipt of out-of-work benefits, with the numbers soaring to around 40 per cent in the most deprived wards. More than one in ten working-age people claim some form of illness- or sickness-related benefit, which includes those claiming as a result of drug and alcohol dependency. The extent of Margate’s decline means that since 2000 the number of people claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance has on average only decreased by five per cent during the summer months. This is in sharp contrast to the overall trend which has seen a 76 per cent increase in the total number of people claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance over that same period.

The report says that steps have been taken to bring investment to Margate, but there appears to be a divide about how best to bring long-term sustainable change. Councillor Iris Johnston believes that one example is the Turner Contemporary Gallery, opened in 2011. While it is true that the gallery has undoubtedly been successful, some in Margate seem disillusioned by the idea that restoring Margate as a tourist attraction will halt its decline.

A major concern is the large number of young people with skills who want to find work,
but couldn’t as there simply are no jobs. One positive is the High Speed 1 train line that has made it possible to commute to London. Further improvements in transportation would help keep people in Margate, as they would be able to find well paying skilled jobs further afield, yet also benefit from housing prices that are a fraction of those in the capital. Almost one third of residents in Margate over 16 have no qualifications at all. This educational failure begins early, as the number of primary school leavers meeting the expected standard is 14 percentage points lower than the national average.

The report argues that family breakdown also inhibits children’s learning and development. One in four adults not living in a couple are either divorced or separated and more than a third of families with dependent children are headed by a lone parent. The CSJ was told by the head teacher that pupils were living in homes where no one had worked for two generations, and where there was a complete lack of aspiration making it harder for dedicated teachers to reach pupils.

But the report says that, for all the problems, there is hope. It gives as an example the award-winning work of the Margate Task Force (MTF), which is specifically tasked with fighting poverty in Margate, which has helped to ensure public services work together, respond to the community’s needs and deliver better, more cost efficient services. Specifically the task force operates a joint office with representatives from 14 agencies including the police, social services, the housing regeneration team and Jobcentre Plus.

Children in care and other vulnerable people are being relocated to Margate due to overstrained services in other areas, and low rents. However, the report says that too often adequate risk assessments from ‘out of Kent’ agencies are not conducted, and outside agencies do not communicate with local service providers, meaning that vulnerable children are often placed in areas with ex-offenders, high numbers of people with mental health issues, or near other vulnerable children who have had previous criminal involvement. The integrated approach of the MTF has allowed these situations to be successfully addressed and avoided.

The CSJ says that the results of the MTF in reversing this have been impressive. From a policing perspective, there was a four per cent crime reduction in Cliftonville during the last financial year, and so far this year there have been 160 fewer victims of crime and anti-social behaviour, significant achievements for an area with a crime rate and anti-social behaviour rate that is almost twice as high as the rest of Kent. In addition, there has been a considerable improvement in the regeneration of local housing stock and street cleanliness, generating increased external investment into the area.

Part of Margate’s renewal has been led by the Housing Regeneration Team. They have worked to bring in enforcement laws to ensure landlords adequately maintain their properties. Planning laws have been modified to limit the creation of new single occupancy flats and HMOs. Direct action has also been taken to restore several old hotels and convert them into family homes. The CSJ was told such projects were essential for changing the attitude of the community and to restore a sense of pride and aspiration.

While the Turner Gallery and similar efforts are not an end in themselves, the CSJ was told that they have helped signal a change in attitudes and encouraged further government investment. Examples include £23 million for housing regeneration and £10 million from the Big Lottery Fund to regenerate a historic amusement park.
The combination of improved transport links to the capital and the development of a skilled local workforce will hopefully bring further private investment into the area and decrease unemployment rates. If properties are bought up by commuters a stronger housing market will deter government agencies from using Margate as a cheap dumping ground for its ‘problem cases.’

The report argues that efforts at housing and community regeneration, led by the MTF, must be continued in order to tackle the problems of poverty already present. Perhaps most important is the efforts they have made to engage the local community and simply improve community cohesion, responsibility and decrease visual blighting of neighbourhoods. With high levels of family breakdown it is also important that more is done to help keep families together.

**Case Study 3: Clacton-on-Sea**

The report argues that since the 1980s Clacton’s greatest problem has been a stagnating economy, fuelled largely by a lack of sustainable jobs and high levels of worklessness. In one neighbourhood in the Pier ward, 54 per cent of people aged 16-64 are on out-of-work benefits – the fifth highest percentage in the country. Just a few miles along the coast from Clacton is Jaywick, which according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2010 has the most deprived neighbourhood in England. In Jaywick some 35 per cent of working-age people claim some form of out-of-work benefit and 54 per cent of the population aged 16 and over have no qualifications.

The CSJ reports that major barrier to employment is a low skills base – 41 per cent of adults in Clacton have no qualifications, which is almost double the national average for England and Wales. The number of children in Clacton passing five GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths is only 43 per cent – below the national average in England of 59 per cent.

The CSJ was told that one of the biggest social problems is that the town has a high number of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). The Essex town is home to a large number of bed and breakfasts, many of which have been turned into bedsits or other kinds of temporary accommodation. Some officials in the town have said that there has been an increase of HMOs since the Tendring Night Shelter was opened in the town around four years ago. The shelter aims to provide support so clients can become independent. Residents, who are allowed to stay for 28 nights, are provided with support from Tendring Mental Health Support and local charities. After clients of the shelter complete their stay, many move into HMOs and need continuing support.

The TDC has said that if it was given greater powers to deliver services, the local area would benefit. Ian Davidson, Chief Executive of TDC, said: ‘Giving greater power and accountability to the districts could help solve the problems in our local areas. We are on the ground and we have the local knowledge and an understanding of the local agencies. If it’s done at a local level you can actually switch money to being less reactive and more proactive. We recently ran a ‘families with complex needs’ pilot and it worked very well because we could co-ordinate it better with the local agencies. We would like to see this delivery model used more in the future – it is better for the taxpayer, the community and people we want to help.’
Case Study 4: Blackpool

The report says that Blackpool, by far the largest town considered in this report with a population of 142,000, is an example of a community blighted by family breakdown and the wider social problems which can be associated with it. Blackpool is the ninth most deprived local authority district in England, with an increase in overall deprivation of a marked 17 per cent since 2007.

The CSJ reports that family breakdown here is acute. Across Blackpool, one in three families with dependent children is headed by a lone parent; in three neighbourhoods it is more than one in two. The area also tops the local authority teenage pregnancy chart, with 58 under-18 conceptions per 1,000 young women.

Unemployment in Blackpool is above-average and increasing. No industry has taken the place of tourism. As of June 2013, more than one in 20 working-age people were on Jobseekers’ Allowance – 50 per cent higher than the national average. At the end of last year unemployment stood at over 10 per cent. These problems are compounded by the fact that 14.5 per cent of working-age people in Blackpool have no educational qualifications. Unemployment sits alongside underemployment. Nearly a third (31.4 per cent) of Blackpool’s residents are employed in distribution, hotels and restaurants, and 16.4 per cent are employed in tourism-related industries. Many of these jobs are seasonal and poorly paid, part-time and often associated with the night-time economy.

Economic problems have resulted in very low property prices – at the time of writing one five-bedroom, terraced house was on the market for £50,000. The availability of low-cost accommodation, much of which is sub-standard, has attracted a vulnerable and transient population. The CSJ has learnt that prisons in the north west of England, such as those in Manchester, have sign-up sheets for Blackpool accommodation for offenders on release.

Blackpool has one of the highest levels of population mobility of children and young people in England. Indeed, in some of Blackpool’s schools the annual turnover of pupils can reach 30 per cent. The transience of the population affects the severity of family breakdown and the issues presented to the council’s services. Indicative of this, ‘30 per cent of high-risk domestic abuse referrals involved families who had lived in Blackpool for fewer than three months’ in 2010. This is closely associated with the area’s alcohol and drug problem: Blackpool has the highest alcohol-specific mortality rate for men and the second highest for women in the UK: and 47 per cent of cases of domestic violence in the town are alcohol-related. Blackpool has the highest rate in England of alcohol abuse related incapacity benefit claimants and has the second highest prevalence of opiate and/or crack use.

Such issues contribute to the Blackpool local authority having the highest rate of children looked after by a local authority in the whole of England – 150 per 10,000 population – far exceeding the English average of 59 and North West average of 76. Blackpool has poor results for young adults leaving care, and tops the table for the highest percentage of young people aged 19 who were looked after aged 16 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) in England. Over 2010-12, 62 per cent of care leavers
aged 19 who were looked after in care at 16 were NEET, compared with the English average of 34 per cent.

The CSJ argues that many of the issues outlined here exacerbate and are exacerbated by family breakdown. Yet although some attempts have been made to stimulate the local economy, a coherent and holistic approach to rebuilding family stability in Blackpool has, so far, not been attempted. The CSJ regards this as one of the missing pieces in the puzzle.

Case study 5: Great Yarmouth

Great Yarmouth is a coastal town with just over 71,000 residents. The report says that whilst it was once a very popular holiday destination, it now suffers from poor health, high unemployment and low educational attainment. Just over 19 per cent of working age adults were on out-of-work benefits in November 2012. However unemployment in the town rises and falls with the seasons. On average between 2000 and 2012, the number of people claiming Jobseekers Allowance decreased by over 20 per cent during the summer months. Today, the workforce that does exist in Great Yarmouth is primarily made up of people in wholesale and retail, motor mechanics, and health and social work.

Local initiatives to turn things around have included renovating the town to make it more desirable for tourism. Though the report says that there is little that they can do to control whether or not Great Yarmouth comes back into vogue. Another major new plan is being created to try and capitalise on the booming energy industry. Plans are underway for an Energy Production Innovation Skills Centre (EPIS Centre) to be built in Great Yarmouth. This centre would be a hub for training people to work in the energy industry. The plan is for the centre to be funded partly by grants for regional development, partly by local councils and partly by the energy industry. If the centre achieves its aims, 20,000 people a year would learn or improve skills through the centre.

One in three adults has no qualifications at all. 22 per cent of all households with dependent children in Great Yarmouth have no one in the household working and 19 per cent of children in the wider Primary Care Trust of Great Yarmouth and Waveney are obese by the time they reach year six.

Alcoholism and drug abuse are also problems in Great Yarmouth. Significantly more men from the borough of Great Yarmouth die from alcohol-specific causes and liver disease than the national average. Within Norfolk, the borough has one of the highest rates of young people in drug or alcohol treatment, and alcoholism in the town fuels a high rate of alcohol-related violent crime.

The CSJ reports that a recruiter for a major employer in the region says that despite unemployment in Great Yarmouth, he struggles to find locals he can employ. Many locals come ‘with the wrong attitude’ and can’t be relied on to turn up for their first day of work. Each year he recruits 450 workers from Portugal to work for him during his busiest season.

However, the CSJ celebrates a Community Alcohol Partnership initiated in 2012 which
has seen local retail outlets, community organisations and the police working together to tackle underage and street drinking. A range of community initiatives exist in the town and there seems to be a willingness for agencies and groups to work together to find solutions. The CSJ argues that the challenge for Great Yarmouth is to take that strength and initiative and turn it into visionary action for the future of their town.

Report conclusion

The Centre for Social Justice argues that to truly develop, these seaside towns must build economies which are dependent on neither tourism nor welfare. Whilst each town has its own particular problems, a recurring theme has been that of poverty attracting poverty. As employment has dried up, so house prices have fallen and so less economically active people – such as single-parent families and pensioners – have moved in, seeking cheaper accommodation and living costs. Similarly, vulnerable people – such as children in care and ex-offenders – have been moved in as authorities take advantage of low-cost housing as large properties have been chopped into houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). The report argues that parts of these towns have become dumping grounds, further depressing the desirability of such areas and so perpetuating the cycle. This can place substantial strain on local services and, ultimately, put people at risk as vulnerable groups end up living in the same neighbourhoods.

The report argues that central government initiatives have potential to make an impact. Since 2010 the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has given councils additional freedoms to control high concentrations of HMOs where the local authority decides there is a problem. The Department for Education’s (DfE) drive to ensure that more children in care are placed closer to home may reduce the density of vulnerable young people in such places. This alone will not solve the more substantial problem of why so many children need to be taken into care, but it will help to prevent too many vulnerable children being placed in close proximity to each other and so straining services’ capacity to serve their needs.

Similarly, the CSJ suggests that there is potential in the DCLG’s Coastal Communities Fund (CCF), which has, until 2015, pledged 50 per cent of the revenue generated by the Crown Estate's marine assets to give funding to create sustainable economic growth and jobs. Both Great Yarmouth and Rhyl have been granted awards, £600,000 and £300,000 respectively, to help develop local businesses and skills.

According to the CSJ, the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) will encourage more people to take minimum wage employment and progress in work. By allowing people to keep more of their benefits when moving into work and working more, UC will help to ensure that employment always pays. However the taper rate for the removal of benefits should be adjusted – from the planned 65 per cent to 55 per cent – so as to make work more viable.

The CSJ argues that there is a strong case for overhauling the way in which Jobcentre Plus (JCP) operates so that its central focus is on removing the barriers faced by people to work. An improved JCP would be measured on its success in getting people into sustained employment by finding them the training and skills they need. The poor level
of skills and qualifications found in many seaside towns was recently highlighted by Ofsted. The onus must now be on the inspectorate and the DfE to drive up standards in local schools and on the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to improve Further Education colleges so that they can provide people with the skills appropriate to local employment. Once the skills gap starts to close, government should look at how it can incentivise business to set up in areas of low employment. This will be the subject of a future paper by the CSJ.

However, according to the CSJ, central initiatives can only do so much. As the CSJ heard from an official in Clacton, there is a case for devolving greater powers to district level so that they can invest in more proactive services. Allowing local areas to step up and take power and responsibility for local regeneration could create opportunities for action based around the particular needs of the locality.

The CSJ recommends that both local and central government need to give urgent consideration to how family breakdown can be reversed. This is a problem that seriously affects many of the communities here discussed, just as it affects the country as a whole. Instability at home affects children’s chances at school, in work and in future relationships. If we are to help communities achieve long-term resilience and upward mobility, it is essential that we help more people get together and more couples stay together.

The CSJ argues that the challenges our coastal towns face are not unique, they are different versions of the problems found elsewhere in the UK. Wherever long-term worklessness, family breakdown and educational failure loom large, so too do more complex social problems. These pathways to poverty are currently the subject of a major policy review being conducted by the CSJ as part of Breakthrough Britain II which will present ideas on how to tackle many of the issues that affect the towns considered here.

**Comment**

This report highlights the many challenges faced by seaside towns whose economies have never fully recovered since the introduction of cheap flights. The challenges highlighted will hardly be news to the local authorities responsible for these areas, but hopefully the report will serve to underline to central government those themes running through all five towns which need urgent attention: the concentration of vulnerable people, worklessness and a lack of jobs, a skills gap, educational under-attainment, family breakdown and substance abuse.

The huge cuts to local government budgets over the past few years can’t have helped these local authorities address challenges which the report makes clear have been around and worsening for decades. However, the report does celebrate initiatives to tackle some of these challenges, such as the Margate Task Force, and it’s call for continuing and greater investment are welcome.

A further welcome element of the report is the call for greater devolution of power to local areas, which could give those local authorities greater power and freedom to deal
with problems specific to their locality, and which they have the knowledge and understanding to tackle.

Great Yarmouth Borough Council leader Trevor Wainwright has responded, saying that the report recognises it can take years to reinvigorate the economy of a town through investment following the decline of traditional industries. He said that the report “highlights issues which we are acutely aware of and some of work we have been undertaking to address them,” adding that the council is “working with partners to boost jobs and skills, like the new EPIS Centre (Energy Production Innovation Skills Centre), and the Nexus Centre at Beacon Park, which is a training centre for the engineering sector, as well as developing the enterprise zone, and developing a comprehensive enterprise support offer through Enterprise GY.”

In addition, Mick Castle, who has been on Great Yarmouth Borough Council for 10 years, said: “It’s not so much people being dumped on Yarmouth, it is more a question of seaside towns like Yarmouth having a lot of available bed space that is relatively cheap.

“There have been many millions of pounds of investment in the town over the past decade. I used to be chairman of the port authority and investment in a new outer harbour has secured lots of energy jobs for decades to come. If this report sends out a message to government, it is keep investing in the town.”