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# Coastal towns as 'left-behind places': economy, environment and planning

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Many coastal towns in England face a unique set of overlapping challenges: a longstanding socio-economic stagnation and environmental threats coming from the physical location. This paper examines coastal communities in the context of the left-behind debate. The consequences of de-industrialisation and failures in public policies recall other left-behind geographies. We look at a selection of case studies, apparently dealing with the decline of traditional coastal economic activities, but really affected by a decoupling of their socio-economic profile from their coastal specificity. More work is needed to nurture the existing coastal imaginaries, requiring regional coordination and a place-based approach to regeneration.

## Introduction

The decline of some coastal towns is an entrenched and longstanding problem in the UK, attracting media and political attention. Coastal areas register some of the highest unemployment rates and lowest pay (Beatty et al., 2008; ONS, 2021). Most of the existing academic literature on seaside towns, focuses on former Victorian resort towns, disentangling the effects of seasonality and shifting patterns of tourism in precipitating a drastic fall of visitors. However, there are many coastal areas whose socioeconomic history recalls more the well-documented decline of other 'left-behind' or post-industrial locations such as mining regions (Tomaney, 2020).

Coastal areas face a combination of landward and seaward pressures including limited accessibility and complex environmental risks exacerbated by climate change. We argue that a deeper understanding of the way both challenges interact with one another is needed to draft better planning and regional development policies for the regeneration of these areas.

In this paper, we examine the specific challenges of coastal regions with their set of intertwined pressures. We then scrutinise the governance structures, policies and strategies that have been put in place in selected UK coastal towns and regions to address post-industrialisation processes. In doing so, we link the debates on left-behind regions with the literature on the decline of coastal areas by investigating the governmental challenges from the national to the local scale. We aim to foster a debate around the similarities, differences, successes and failures of institutional responses and regenerative attempts in English coastal regions.

Building on previous research projects, we compare case studies from different coastal areas: Great Yarmouth (Norfolk), Lowestoft and Ipswich (Suffolk) in the East of England and Newhaven (East Sussex) in the South-East. In the last decades, all these areas have experienced socio-economic decline and deprivation. Efforts to restructure the economy to green sectors or alternative industries have not helped in regenerating their town centres or the local socio-economic fabric.

The first part of the article situates our study within the relevant literature. We explore the way de-industrialisation in Britain has been presented, culminating in the recent debate on 'left-behind' geographies (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Pike et al., 2023). Then, we look at the literature on planning governance and urban regeneration noting its relative silence on the peculiar elements of coastal areas in England. In the second part, we present and compare our findings looking at different examples of declining post-industrial geographies. We conclude with a discussion on the future of regeneration policy in coastal towns.

## De-industrialisation at the 'left-behind' border of the UK

The contemporary discourse around left-behind regions (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2021; McCann, 2020; Pike et al., 2023) has proliferated in the UK since the 2016 Brexit referendum, pointing to a renewed attention to the socio-economic situation of post-industrialised regions. Rodríguez-Pose (2017) posts that the rise of populist politics in Europe reflects 'revenge of places that don't matter' as citizens respond to a feeling of neglect (see also Abreu and Öner, 2020). Coastal communities exhibit many of the characteristics of left-behind places, overlaid by additional problems described below, and face distinctive policy and governance challenges.

In reference to de-industrialisation, research within the fields of urban studies and planning has looked at ways to regenerate vacant buildings or derelict land that that are legacies of previous industrial activity. However, research in 'urban regeneration'—as the name implies—has concentrated on cities and the urban dimension of post-industrialisation. There is a challenge to connect the causes of de-industrialisation and economic decline to the spatial consequences and their practical meaning for planning policy, governance and regeneration beyond the big cities, especially in environments like coastal towns.

Our conceptual framework brings together the planning dimension with the literature on left-behind geographies typically emerging from economic geography. We offer case studies of coastal locations in the UK and discuss the unique challenges they face that combine socio-economic stagnation with environmental and climatic threats. We highlight the key planning policy, the governance approaches and the state-led funding frameworks that are intended to support their regeneration and assess their limits.

### De-industrialisation and coastal places

Beatty and Fothergill (2004) highlighted the severe unemployment conditions affecting seaside towns, noting the lack of attention paid by the central government to their de-industrialisation. Following the global financial crisis, the already patchy employment situation has worsened (McDowell and Bonner-Thompson, 2020).

High unemployment rates and seasonal employment, housing and income inequalities, low educational attainment, outmigration of skilled workers and some businesses, nested deprivation, feelings of social isolation and powerlessness are only some of the challenges perpetuating deprivation in some coastal areas. Places like Blackpool are a recurring media benchmark for coastal deprivation (O'Connor, 2017). However, compared to rural or mining areas, they have been less extensively studied. Moreover, much of the existing literature looking at coastal areas focusses on seaside resorts (Beatty and Fothergill, 2004; House of Lords, 2019; McDowell and Bonner-Thompson, 2020), failing to adequately note the dynamics affecting other type of coastal towns, being either industrial port towns or former fishing and shipbuilding centres. It is important to capture the nuances of these places and the way they impact on the local spatial imaginaries (Pike et al., 2023), or in our case on the coastal identities and the coastal imaginaries that have shaped the development patterns of these towns throughout time.

In these locations, the currently perceived socio-economic decline has also been the result of decades of policies that were not adequately place-specific in the way they addressed the local process of de-industrialisation. As for other left-behind geographies, the economic activities found in coastal areas generated a strong local identity that, in the coastal context, is also reinforced by the specificity of the natural landscape (De Ruyter et al., 2021; Tomaney et al., 2019). These are places 'characterized by community and civic bonds that provided a strong sense of belonging' (Tomaney and Pike, 2020: 43). This coastal identity exists in different ways in both resort and industrial towns. In the last decades, particularly on the industrial coast—and as for some other left-behind locations—the public policy and media discourse has contributed attaching a certain negative stigmatisation to the coastal identity, reinforcing the existing socio-economic stagnation (Wenham, 2020).

Several rounds of austerity policies and cuts to local government budgets have exacerbated this decline (Gray and Barford, 2018). The fragmentation of governance and the abolition of strategic planning at the regional level following the Localism Act in 2011 have reportedly contributed the widening of regional inequalities (Tomaney et al., 2019).

From a planning perspective, since the late 1980s de-industrialisation has been a synonym for the conversion of former industrial assets and the birth of urban regeneration strategies. However, especially in the UK, the focus of this body of literature is widely centred around cities and 'urban growth'. Whereas the literature on left-behind geographies clearly suggests a need to enact regeneration strategies also in different contexts.

As we show below, coastal towns present specific challenges for regeneration that require fresh analysis and thinking.

## Coastal towns as left-behind places: local imaginaries and further environmental threats

Coastal towns in England and Wales are more likely to experience higher deprivation rates than non-coastal ones (ONS, 2020). Within the indexes of multiple deprivation, working and housing are the most relevant causes of deprivation in coastal towns. Between 2009 and 2018, 50% of British coastal towns saw a decline in employment (a figure 13% higher than in non-coastal towns), with people who live by the coast classed among the lowest paid in the country (*ibid*). Coastal communities also have registered the worst health outcomes in England during the Covid-19 emergency (DHSC, 2021). This situation is largely a legacy of a long and unaddressed process of de-industrialisation. Like mining regions, the economic specialisation of the towns often contributed to shaping the whole identity of these places. Once these sectors declined, the identity remained attached to them, but no jobs and opportunities were there to support it. Pike et al., (2023) established a connection between local identities—or 'spatial imaginaries'—and the possible material practices that could be redeployed to find alternative spatial and economic futures in left-behind places. For new policies, it is important to disentangle the 'geographical etymology' that led to the current perceived imaginary, or in other words to understand the way these identities have been used by policy makers, institutional agencies and the public and have crystalised over time (*ibidem*: 3). Overall, the key role performed by feelings of place attachments and sense of belonging are still inadequately addressed by both the literature and policy addressing left-behind places (MacKinnon et al., 2022).

A third challenge faced by coastal areas is the environmental threats exacerbated by climate change. As territories at the land-sea border, they are characterised by a set of pressures coming from both the sea and the hinterland, forcing coastal communities to deal with rising sea levels, flooding and coastal erosion (Kantamaneni et al., 2018). A large proportion of the British coastline is at risk of disappearing by 2050 (Sayers et al., 2022). The burden of climate change adds to pre-existing and by-now entrenched challenges described above. Urban economists have highlighted the impacts of natural disasters on the local and regional economies, with additional burden and costs imposed on residential properties, increasing outward migration, further loss of employment and the consequent reduction in household and tax incomes (Boustan et al., 2020). In coastal areas, these threats exacerbate economic shrinkage, local tax erosion and displacements, confounding job and skills retention strategies.

A specific body of literature in urban studies examines the land-sea interface, examining ways to manage the delicate and often conflicting nature of landward and seaward uses and pressures, reflected in the development of suitable marine spatial planning strategies (Howells and Ramírez-Monsalve, 2022). The changes in the UK coastline are exacerbated by the tidal movements and several extreme weather events, requiring more intensive coastal management, including yearly Shoreline Management Plans (EA 2022), further mitigation and adaptation measures, e.g., National Coastal Erosion Risk Mapping, last undertaken for the years 2018-2021 (EA 2018). Marine spatial planning has only recently been adopted in some jurisdictions, with several documented ambiguities and a missing regional equivalent on the 'land' counterpart (Slater and Claydon, 2020). The need for a coordinated strategic vision at the regional scale to tackle the environmental challenges by the coast, is well documented in the literature (Alterman and Pellack, 2021; McElduff et al., 2013), but as noted above, this scale of governance is missing in coastal regions.

Connectivity and a limited labour catchment area are also an issue. In the UK, most coastal towns are part of the least accessible regions to major urban agglomerations, with limited intra-regional public transport connections (cf. UK National Audit Office Accessibility Mapping, NAO 2021). All these contextual variables make developments in coastal areas more complex.

## (Urban) Regeneration policies beyond cities

Urban regeneration strategies emerged in the UK during the 1970s as a practice to repurpose decaying post-industrial sites left-behind by wider economic changes and a gradual shift towards post-Fordism (Lever, 1991). Between 1971 and 1983, a third of the total manufacturing jobs in the country were lost (Tallon, 2010), leaving behind a stock of derelict sites that needed a new purpose. Hence, the origination of 'urban regeneration'.

During the 1980s, big urban regeneration schemes aimed at quickly repurposing brownfields and generating economic growth through property development. Property-led regeneration and private/public partnerships like Urban Development Corporations normalised a market-led approach to urban renewal (Boyle, 1989) designed to attract private investment, with minimal social considerations. By 1987, the model was replicated in many British cities such as Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow. At the end of the 1990s, the social limits of property-led regeneration started to be addressed in the literature (Imrie and Thomas, 1993; Turok, 1992). As the label suggest, they were an 'urban' phenomenon—few big regeneration schemes were undertaken in coastal towns (Barton et al., 2022). Over time, planning and urban regeneration processes became market-oriented, mostly relying on viability assessments (Ferm and Raco, 2020). The size of some

local markets and the lower financial attractiveness of de-industrialising towns do not ensure the financial viability that is required by developers in contemporary regeneration schemes (Colenutt et al., 2015). So, strategic and longer-term social and environmental objectives are very often hard to prove as commercially 'viable'.

More recently, a new wave of urban regeneration policy based on cultural and creative industries (Tallon, 2010) has sought to restructure local economies towards tourism, hospitality and leisure. A specific body of literature looks at waterfront developments in post-industrial cities (e.g., Marshall, 2004). In the UK, Liverpool is a landmark case of this type of post-industrial waterfront regeneration moved by global competition to attract global investments (Fageir et al., 2021). Culture-led regeneration has also been pursued in some seaside/resort towns—that is, in Margate in Kent with the Turner Contemporary. But these approaches are difficult to generalise; intra-regional competition to attract visitors is exacerbated with inevitable winners and losers. In many cases, the smaller and more localised real estate markets of most coastal towns—further away from London—struggle to attract investors and visitors.

Urban regeneration as a general practice still has a city-centric approach, lacking concern with different geographies. Studies beyond the 'urban' are still in their infancy, but there is now speculation that addressing left-behind places ultimately means acknowledging the limits of the, thus far, more common regeneration practices (both property-led and culture-led), the need for regional strategies, longer-term social interventions and the importance of nurturing local identities (Fiorentino, 2023; Rydin, 2023). Tallon (2021) identified the lack of cooperation and coordination between involved actors as a key issue in the history of urban regeneration policy in the UK, contributing to further 'left-behindness'. Local initiatives remain isolated from mainstream and top-down governmental programmes, favouring a 'quick fix' approach that fails to address the multi-faceted nature of problems (ibidem: 295–297).

There is a gap in the existing literature, in policy and in national funding frameworks tackling regeneration in coastal towns and regions. Here real estate markets are smaller but social issues to be addressed are large and often negatively impacted by the additional environmental threats and pressures. Physical regeneration alone is insufficient to solve the underlying problems of left-behind towns. This paper addresses this gap, by opening the debate on regeneration requirements in coastal towns.

## Methodology

The article is the result of a critical dialogue between the authors and the decision to revisit and rework data and experiences from a set of research projects with a focus on coastal towns.[1] Here, we focus on four comparable case studies from coastal regions in England displaying a mix of examples of economic decline enacted by post-industrial transformation processes and situated within the specific set of pressures of coastal areas. We looked at the towns of Great Yarmouth (Norfolk), Lowestoft (Suffolk), Ipswich (Suffolk) and Newhaven (East Sussex). In Norfolk and Suffolk, economic decline resulted from the contraction of the shipbuilding industry, fishing and a budget tourism sector. Severe coastal erosion issues and extreme flooding risk pose added problems. Newhaven suffers from the decline of traditional manufacturing industries and represents a small pocket of severe deprivation surrounded by affluent towns like Lewes and Brighton. Flooding risk, problems of air pollution and land contamination provide additional challenges. Although sharing some things in common, the places also exhibit diversity in terms of the trajectory of economic change, social conditions and environmental challenges. Our aim is to build a comparative discussion on the causes of deindustrialisation and economic decline across our selected case studies and to provide an evaluation of the subsequent policy attempts to steer these coastal towns to a more successful future.

We have adopted a mixed-method approach collating material from interviews that were led across the four case studies, and subsequently leading a policy review and a comparative analysis of secondary data and socio-economic statistics. For the purposes of this article, we have only focussed on the 27 interviews led with the key policy representatives and local stakeholders. We have concentrated on common emerged themes like 'regeneration strategies', 'local decline', 'local imaginaries' and 'socio-economic stagnation' and compared the results. In addition to these interviews, we produced an in-depth policy review (42 documents for Newhaven, a total of 57 documents for Norfolk-Suffolk) and a secondary data analysis to achieve a full socio-economic picture of the four cases and to compare causes and current drivers of deprivation.

Within our statistical analysis, we have crossed secondary data from a variety of public databases from the national to the local scale (Office for National Statistics—ONS; Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities— DLUHC; Land Registry—LR; Zoopla; Department for Business Enterprises and Industrial Strategy—BEIS; Local Health—LH). Defining the local socio-economic baseline and living conditions (that is, local health statistics, census data, voting preferences, local employment data and other living conditions) through the time series of data. Finally, we have scrutinised the present and past policy documents in light of what emerged from the secondary and primary data collected.

The quantitative figures aimed at understanding the type of deprivation experienced by our towns and the way they fit into the debate on 'left-behind' places, whereas

the qualitative data allowed us to learn more about the perceived local identities. In other words, the interviews have helped us disentangle the local perceptions and experiences of such deprivation. These affective dimensions of left-behindness are an increasingly important part of the debate (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Pike et al. 2023), and they are crucial to acknowledge while thinking about potential policy solutions. We intended to unravel these spatial imaginaries in our coastal context.

## Socio-economic decline and (slow) transformation in English Coastal Towns

The four coastal towns display most of the traditional factors of left-behindness pictured by the literature. In Table 1, we have summarised a selection of socio-economic and contextual factors describing the nature of deprivation found in Newhaven, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Ipswich. Despite the potential opportunities offered by the coastal landscape, factors driving local poverty and low quality of life are multiple and often overlapping.

All case studies present pockets of severe deprivation with more than 25% of their small areas (Lower Super Output Area) included in the 10% of most deprived areas in England (DHCLG, 2019). Such deprivation is driven by a variety of factors, that we have plotted thematically in Table 1, referring to the composition of the population, the local socio-political profile, the health conditions and the state of the local economy and of the housing conditions. Educational attainment is low, with a particularly worrying share of the population holding no qualifications at all. All four towns display a larger than average share of workless households, with a high level of people living on different types of benefits or being affected by long-term physical or mental health conditions and restricting their daily activities (ONS, 2011; ONS, 2021).

DHSC (2021) has already highlighted the poor accessibility to healthcare registered in coastal areas, causing higher rates of deaths from severe illnesses like heart disease. Local Health (2022) data map more specifically the correlation between local income deprivation and local health factors, including the number of emergencies and deaths for specific diseases. Looking across data aggregated for our four case studies, all present a moderate higher-than-national income deprivation, but with most local health indicators scoring as severely worse-than-national. Towns like Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft display a very high share of the elderly population with implications for the funding of local services. However, most of the more worrying health factors are related to social issues rather than just infrastructural deficiencies, for example, child poverty (Newhaven, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft), teenage pregnancies (Ipswich, Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth), emergency hospital admissions for intentional self-harm or alcohol-attributable diseases (Newhaven, Ipswich).

The local inactivity patterns are associated also with severe long-term unemployment rates (see Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft). Local voting patterns are also in line with literature on the geography of discontent (McCann, 2020), with all cases being strong heartlands of Leave voters in the Brexit referendum. All have also experienced a low level of immigration, with almost the totality of the population being native British. However, a high level of out-migration of young skilled people and businesses (even in the case of Newhaven which offers better connections to bigger economic and educational centres like Brighton and London) has contributed to eroding local taxpayers.

Over time, the low educational attainments, and the dereliction of the town centres have continued reinforcing the existing decline, the outmigration of young people, skills and jobs, 'leaving behind' the more fragile groups of the population to live and use services locally. Newhaven is the only town with a higher share of the working-age population but with the most worrying low educational levels, despite its proximity to Brighton. INT09 rereferred to a local '*poverty of aspirations*' despite the unusually '*very high working age population*', driving the general belief that success can only be achieved by leaving.

Housing deprivation is equally driven by the social stagnation experienced by the four towns. Despite cheaper housing prices, income levels are lower than the national average, and the demand for second homes impacts on raising the local affordability ratio. For example, Newhaven—in Lewes District Council—is stretched between popular tourist destinations (like Lewes and Seaford) and the wealthier, bigger and more diverse Brighton. Therefore, Newhaven works as a catchment for less affluent households, with higher-income residents driving local prices upwards but usually working outside the local boundaries and therefore not helping improve issues linked to employment seasonality and cross-border competition.

## In what sense is this a coastal region problem?

The coastal specificity is strongly found in the defining identity and post-industrial decline evoked in all case studies, less so in the real economic data. Newhaven is a port town in East Sussex, mostly an industrial heartland with some fishing activities. A moment in its economic decline was the closure of the Parker Pen company factory in 2010 with a registered fall in local employment rates hereinafter (ONS, 2023). The port offers a freight and passenger connection to Dieppe in France, whose ownership and role in the town's imaginary and local economy is quite contested. The infrastructure and the related land are owned by a French authority—the Department de la

**Table 1.** Characteristics of seaside towns in case study regions. Data are the authors' elaboration of a series of statistical data, from ONS and selection of other databases[1].

| Town name | Ipswich | Lowestoft | Great Yarmouth | Newhaven | England |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Location and governance** | | | | | |
| Local government structure | 2 TIERS: Suffolk County Council; Ipswich Borough Council. | 3 TIERS Lowestoft Parish Council. | 2 TIERS Borough of Great Yarmouth. | 3 TIERS Newhaven Town Council. | – |
| Other relevant (soft) institutions | New Anglia LEP | New Anglia LEP; Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft EZ. | New Anglia LEP; Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft EZ. | Coast to Capital LEP; Newhaven EZ. | – |
| **Local population** | | | | | |
| Total Population | 136,913 | 73,800 | 38,693 | 12,232 | 56,536,400 |
| Over 65 | 16.50% | 22.20% | 24% | 17.20% | 18.30% |
| Born in the UK | 82.30% | 96.10% | 90% | 93.50% | 82.60% |
| **Education** | | | | | |
| People with no qualification | 25.80% | 31.20% | 32.80% | 25.80% | 10.5% |
| **Voting preferences** | | | | | |
| Brexit vote, % of Leavers | 58.30% | 63% | 71.5% | Not available | 53.40% |
| **Health** | | | | | |
| People in bad to very bad health | 18.60% | 6.90% | 7.20% | 5.60% | 5.20% |
| Long term sick or disability | 25.20% | 22.4% (*) | 29.50% | 18.9% (*) | 24.1% |
| People with some caring responsibilities | 8.50% | 11.60% | 10.40% | 11.10% | 8.70% |
| **Housing** | | | | | |
| Net annual household income | £27,260 | £25,000 | £26,500 | £26,100 | £39,200 |
| Average housing price | £234,771 | £244,051 | £216,707 | £315,339 (£404,267 in Lewes DC) | £306,447 |
| **Local economy** | | | | | |
| Top 3 economic activities (**) | 1) G 16.9% 3) P 8.4% | 1) G 18.3% 3) C 10.5% | 1) G 18.5% 3) C 10.4 % | 1) G 17.1% 3) F 9.4% | 1) G 15.9% 3) P 9.9% |
| Unemployment rate | 5.10% | 5.40% | 8.20% | 4.50% | 4.2% |
| Job density | 0.87 | 0.74 | 0.75 | Not available | 0.86 |
| Workless households | 32.20% | 41.00% | 42.40% | 34.80% | 14.1% |

[1] (*) Does not include people with long-term physical or mental health conditions not listed in the Equality Act.
(**) Economic activities by industry sectors have been retrieved for built-up areas from ONS (2023), with Sector C: Manufacturing; Sector F: Construction; Sector G: Wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; Sector P: Education; Sector Q: Human health and social work activities.
Socio-economic data in Table 1 have been data re-elaborated by the authors consulting NOMIS (2023), sources include: Office for National Statistics (ONS); Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and local authority and built-up areas profiles. Local health data are from Local Health (2023), cross-referenced with ONS (2023). For the indexes of multiple deprivation (IMD, 2019), see: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019-mapping-resources. Voting patterns analyses are from the Commons Library (2017) and BBC (2016), available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results. Housing prices are from Land Registry (2023) cross-referenced with Zoopla (2023) for a more accurate estimation at the town scale.

Seine-Maritime—fuelling anti-European sentiments in the run-up to 2016 [INT06; INT08; INT10]. Brexit has exacerbated the already problematic relations and negatively affected the local labour pooling causing a shortage of manpower for the remaining industries [INT09].

The decline of Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Ipswich is situated in wider regional decline. Norfolk and Suffolk are mainly rural counties with more limited connectivity in infrastructural terms. In the public imagination, these towns are substantially dependent on coastal tourism, the fishing industry, shipbuilding and some trading in harbours. However, in line with the broader economic trends, both the fishing and tourism industries have declined substantially since the 1970s. At present in Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft, the tourist offer is centred around low-budget offers, for example, in caravan parks, which have limited local economic multipliers.

These are not newly acquired conditions. One would expect the described discontent to be driven by the decline of the local traditional coastal economies and activities. However, the socio-economic data on the main active industrial sectors tells a different story. When looking at the historical time series of main industry sectors represented in the various case studies, already as far back as 1961 and consistently over the 1990s, we find a very low share of typically 'coastal' activities. From the early 2000s to the present, the main economic sectors driving the local economies of these towns are consistently cheap wholesale commerce, health and social services (once again reinforcing the local social deprivation). So, these locations do not effectively have a 'coastal economy'.

To rework Doreen Massey's famous formulation, in what sense do we see a coastal regional problem (Massey, 1979)? Coastal towns have seen a decoupling of their economic path from their specific coastal identity. The highlighted decoupling makes it difficult also to transform the coastal imaginaries into new economic opportunities. So, in places like our four towns, the coast has instead become a synonym for decadence and stigmatisation. Why has this happened? Have these regions really been 'left-behind' by globalisation, or have they rather been affected by decades of stagnation and inadequate public policy? In the next section, we look at past and present (mostly failed) attempts at their regeneration.

## Coastal towns and green industrial revolution?

In each of our cases, efforts to restructure coastal economies towards new, more skilled and maritime-specific sectors included the development of renewable energy through offshore wind farms. In 2018, the Rampion Offshore Windfarm in the English Channel was opened, with one of its operational plants based in Newhaven. In 2017 a new Enterprise Zone (EZ) was created to support the regeneration of the local economy and to ex-

periment with new avenues for growth. Responses to the economic downturn on the East coast included promoting the Offshore Wind Cluster (also labelled as 'Energi Coast'), anchored in the region of East Anglia (where Norfolk and Suffolk are located), with the support of the University of East Anglia and a specialised Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft EZ. However, in both regions, these restructuring efforts have had limited local effects and are viewed sceptically by local communities.

Several respondents have highlighted resistance towards these sectors, mostly about the weak ties with the local economy.

> "Engineers only come here to go off on the platforms but do not really spend locally or contribute to other local sectors". [INT09]
>
> "The development of the Energi Coast has not been felt in the local market. I believe they live in London. People who are not originally from here do barely more here." [INTA]

Residents do not perceive many visible benefits from the renewable energy sector. Another respondent pointed to the long length of these green transitions and the perceived difficulties in becoming part of the local identity [INTD]. Often offshore platforms are operated by international companies or multinationals, and it is even difficult to identify their economic contribution within the existing industrial sectors and traditional classifications, except for the rent they pay to the land/platform owners. As a result, the coastal communities do not perceive such activities as part of a wider regeneration plan, nor as drivers of an uplifted and more positive local identity.

Coastal identities are an integral part of these communities, their nuances are the result of a local specific mix of strong social bonds, the marine landscape and the associated history and development of the local economic activities. All these factors should be acknowledged and integrated into any project for the socio-economic regeneration of the British coastline aiming to be successful.

## Same fate same planning failures? A complex set of challenges and competing priorities

Local efforts to address the multiple challenges described above share some similar stories of failure. As has emerged from our policy review, repeated failed attempts at town centre regeneration have been the norm in all cases. In Newhaven, after two decades of commissioned consultancy reports and regeneration studies, the town centre is still affected by poor air quality and high vacancy rates in the commercial stock. Attempts at capitalising on the passenger ferry and a new potential visitor economy have

failed as the vicinity of Brighton and Lewis offers quite a lot of unbeatable competition. The numerous failed attempts at regeneration and economic restructuring have caused a lack of institutional trust, increasing feelings of discontent.

Our interviewees observed that media outlets and the policy discourse associated with 'left-behind' places also contributed to fuelling stigmatisation. Local Authorities (LAs) must work hard on rebranding the local economy, changing local imaginaries and regaining local trust. Skills retainment is another long-term issue across our case studies, an 'intangible' factor that is difficult to solve with physical interventions and that '*the* [available] *funding won't address*'. [INT09].

Traditional funding frameworks available to local actors in England (e.g., High Street Fund, Coastal Communities Fund, Freeport, etc., now all converged in the Levelling Up Fund) tend to prioritise the tangible aspects of regeneration. Within the various available bids for governmental funding, LAs are required to produce business cases to prove the financial viability of their projects to be considered for funding. Physical interventions like the delivery of new buildings are favoured and easier to get funded than more ambitious and longer-term strategies to improve local skills and social capital, or even to address environmental issues.

> "[The LEPs][2] have cash [...] Do they spend them on enterprise? Certainly not. They spend it on buildings, fibres and roads. [...] they find it very, very hard to fund people and businesses [...], but ... it [is] very easy to fund buildings, because the building is built, you can see the buildings, and you can cut the ribbon." [INT02]

Attracting funding does not guarantee successful regeneration. Many respondents reported struggles in spending the funding received or in efficiently connecting the various initiatives. A landmark example is offered from Newhaven, which has been a recipient of various public funds. One of the projects ensured the delivery of a new building for a University Technical College, pushed forward by elected political representatives for delivery before the end of the mandate [INT03]. The school closed after only 2 years of cutting the ribbon because it did not have enough students. A new funding application was necessary to find a different purpose for a brand-new building. The episode is an example of a lack of a clear future vision for the town, poor strategic planning and failed physical interventions if not supported by wider social measures. Regeneration cannot be achieved if the underlying causes for socio-economic deprivation are not adequately addressed: in this case the causes for poor educational rates. Unfortunately, the example does not stand in isolation.

In addition to social challenges, coastal areas also face environmental threats imposed by the physical proximity to the sea (flooding risk, rising sea levels and coastal erosion). Especially, in industrial heartlands, coastal issues like flooding are mixed with reported high levels of soil and air pollution, requiring additional costs and skills but not bringing new job opportunities [INTC].

No matter how much brownfield land is available—either publicly or privately owned—large public subsidies are constantly needed to attract investors, unlock developments and make developments viable.

> "There are a lot of brownfield sites but most of that land is quite heavily contaminated from previous industrial uses, most of the land is either in severe flooding risk or is in need of extensive remediation. It is very hard to [unlock] a viable development without additional [...] interventions from the government." [INT08]

When approaching regeneration strategies in coastal areas, policymakers are often caught up in a spiral of competing priorities: environmental threats, conflicts at the land/sea interface and pockets of socio-economic deprivation. Most of these challenges are intangible, and difficult to solve through physical interventions alone.

Due to the complexity of the overlapping challenges, once again strategic sites might not end up prioritised, as for any key measures to address the decontamination of soil, coastal erosion or providing new educational opportunities in key marine sectors that might unlock additional regional spillovers. As a result, funding and developments might be redirected elsewhere, lacking a real longer-term strategy.

The conundrum remains: the environmental threats affect local health and wider living conditions, but the high costs of de-contamination or flooding remediation deemed to be most needed make developments unviable. Similarly, social issues, like high unemployment rates and low educational attainment, affect local aspirations and create difficulties in retaining social capital and better jobs locally, but funding these intangible needs is less rewarding for political targets and more difficult through the existing tools. Among our cases, LAs often ended up prioritising short-term quick-fix solutions that do not really address the rooted deprivation.

LAs also lament a lack of capabilities in addressing such complexity. Coastal issues require a variety of multidisciplinary skills that are hard to find in one single LA.

> "The planning departments have been stripped down. There is just no capacity left, and those planners we attract are overstretched. [...] There is just no time to initiate anything new." [INTB]

Addressing these environmental issues requires a longer-term and riskier vision, and an investment that often is outside the scope of a funding bid, one that goes

beyond the span of a political mandate and the restricted capabilities of LAs. In essence, one of the critical issues faced by coastal towns is represented by governance. The current planning system does not allow for a long-term identification of regional priorities, nor coordination in key areas of intervention (including social innovation and environmental threats).

## Asymmetries of governance, thin and stretched local governments

Cross-boundary cooperation is a real issue in coastal management, with environmental threats requiring a strategic vision at the regional scale (Alterman and Pellack, 2021). A variety of actors that play significant roles in shaping the future of coastal regions are rarely an integral part of the regional development process. For example, the port authorities are often owned by a foreign body (like in Newhaven), or the companies managing the offshore wind farm facilities are often the result of complex private/public partnerships. As seen in the previous sections, even within the boundaries of the same town, a thinned and stretched local governance struggles to address these challenges.

The presence of a dedicated regional authority would relieve pressure on local governments and allow for more regional-specific strategies. Following the 2011 Localism Act and the dismantling of regional planning structures, increased burdens are imposed on local governments. Local governance structures are asymmetric and opaque to both business and citizens. As shown in Figure 1, some coastal towns like Newhaven or Lowestoft are part of a three-tier planning governance system, others like Great Yarmouth and Ipswich only have two, and bigger cities like Portsmouth or Blackpool are often unitary authorities (single-tier). The distribution of powers and competencies changes case by case. Cross-boundary cooperation is very challenging in all configurations. In many cases, the different tiers might not even have elected political representatives from the same party:

> "It's a nightmare. […] you have a town council that may have one set of political colours. You have a district council that may have a different set of political colours, and then you have the county council that may have another one." [INT03]

Smaller towns are subject to swing seats, they usually have a less strong voice within the county with negative consequences in protecting their own needs and for ensuring the achievement of longer-term objectives [INT08; INT09]. To work around the fragmentation of local governments and the short-sightedness of the recurring political swings, many areas have set up special-purpose vehicles like EZs, trying to speed up the regeneration process. EZs can foresee a local vision over a longer term and absorb the related risks.

Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft EZ was set up to move forward the vision of the energy coast coordinating activities across six sites in two different LAs. Overall, the creation of the EZ has been positively welcomed. Yet, an interviewee suggested that:

> "Building the enterprise zones currently only helps a few. […] Without regenerating the city centre, offering attractive housing, and upgrading the connectivity, I doubt we will be able to retain high-skilled workers in the long run." [INTD]
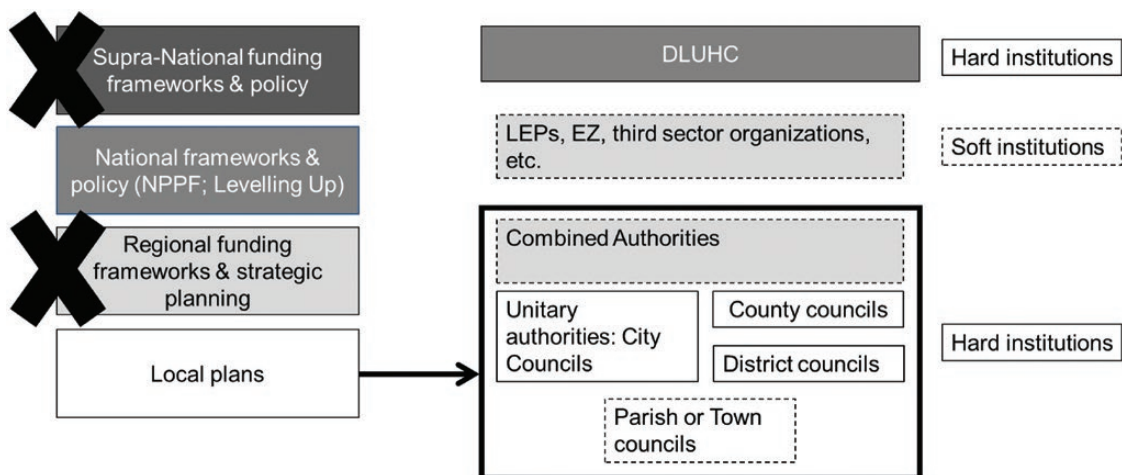


**Figure 1.** The governance structure of England and the existing tiers of planning.
*Source:* the authors.

Like elsewhere, the business of offshore windfarm is still seen as disconnected from the local economy and little has been done to change the local perception and offer skills development opportunities (for example, strengthening the links between the EZ and the neighbouring University of Sussex) and establishing indirect connections between the new sector and other regional opportunities to improve town centres.

In Newhaven, the EZ has also been a way of showing leadership and trying to re-brand the area, entering a dialogue with local businesses, and regaining the local institutional trust that is needed to overturn the local 'poverty of aspirations'. But concerns over business retention have been raised. The EZ covers a selection of eight scattered sites but can do very little to address the wider environmental and social pressures or the competition with the other towns at the regional scale. Even here, the run-down appearance of the town centre raises continuous concerns. Many businesses often settle only the lower-income part of their supply chain in Newhaven, then targeting the more flourishing marketplaces across the region for their sales. To revert the outmigration trends, a wider regional dialogue would be needed.

There is a sense that funding is quite politically influenced. The Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)—the non-statutory bodies that have come to replace regions post-2011—like local governments, also have limited power in cross-boundary decision-making and tax management. Most of the respondents have reported some power dynamics and competition characterising 'unhealthy' cross-boundary relationships [INT03]. Some towns have wider chances to be heard and to influence the development path sponsored by the LEP, with big regional variations according to the number of voters and available parliamentary seats. Combined authorities are a statutory governance tool introduced[3] to encourage regional coordination and to devolve powers to the local scale. However, reaching an agreement to set one up is also quite challenging and it requires overcoming a series of political interests or giving up parliamentary seats in favour of the reorganisation of boundaries [INT08]. None of the case studies we looked at was successful at establishing a combined authority. So, there is effectively a real governance gap between the asymmetric structure of local governments to the contested scale of national funding frameworks.

The current Levelling Up agenda is not perceived as one supporting the general need for wider cross-boundary cooperation to address the coastal challenges. Concerns were voiced about an even stricter centralisation of powers within the national government with even less room for manoeuvring at the local level and for regional cooperation [INT08]. With funding allocated directly from the national to the local scale, political influences and asymmetries of powers are set to grow even further [INT08].

Despite the described shortcomings, a re-organisation of the existing governance structure is not on the future agenda. While the future of the Levelling Up agenda is still uncertain, additional criticisms have already been raised on the framework, above all for its lack of place specificity. The agenda does not follow a place-based approach and it fails to adequately address the different types and sources of inequalities. For example, in the case of coastal towns, it does not contain any specific mention of the additional challenges coming from the land-sea interface, the historical path-dependencies or the environmental threats.

## Conclusions

This article has contextualised the debate on 'left-behind' places in relation to coastal towns in England, which are faced with a unique set of overlapping challenges. The coastal specificity offers a potential set of opportunities linked to the maritime landscape, which is also an additional challenge due to climate change and associated environmental threats. Poor connectivity and limited labour catchment area are often paired with the socio-economic challenges, in most cases originated by a long process of de-industrialisation. Addressing regeneration in these towns means moving beyond policy silos to tackle issues in a holistic and integrated manner.

However, to speak of a 'coastal economy' is misplaced. Our data show that the local economies of such towns is increasingly decoupled from the coastal element. Despite the growing narrative on coastal decline, the coastal specificity of the four towns in this study is not reflected in the real economic data. Since the late 1960s, in all cases, the data time series show a picture of steady de-industrialisation, declining manufacturing jobs and a very marginal role for specific coastal activities like fishing. The coastal specificity is however quite strongly found in the perceived identity and local spatial imaginaries evoked in all case studies.

Recalling seminal work by Massey (1979), we should not generalise the 'coastal problem'. In the same way by which there was a set of faulty assumptions behind the 'regional problem' and the causes for regional inequalities, there are nowadays some issues in generalising the nature, categories and solutions for left-behind places. The causes of regional inequalities and deprivation in left-behind places are equally the result of a complex 'combination of successive layers' generating new types of inequalities (Massey, 1979: 235). Looking at coastal towns these factors include an unequal distribution of resources and infrastructure, de-industrialisation, environmental threats, climate change and ultimately the feelings of decadence and decay recently associated with the 'British coastal' imaginary.

We should understand coastal towns in England as a sub-category of left-behind places, but we should also be

careful in excessively creating a 'fetish' of coastal economic decline. Coastal economies effectively started disappearing in these places a long time ago. There is a clear relationship between the affective and the material dimensions of left-behindness, which is an emerging and increasingly relevant part of the debate (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Pike et al., 2023).

The perceived local imaginaries affect quite strongly the possibilities of achieving positive change and externalities. If not taken into adequate consideration through targeted measures at the regional and local scale, no regeneration measure can be successful in any left-behind context. As shown by our cases, even relocating towards some more coastal-specific economic sectors—like the green (or blue) economy and renewable energies produced in offshore wind farms—can prove problematic, or even fail, if not fully reconnected with institutional work on local perceptions and identities.

Coastal identities like all other local 'spatial imaginaries' attached to left-behind places are an integral part of these communities that we cannot ignore within future regeneration strategies and policies for coastal protection and development. A common thread is most certainly the physical location, which beyond the climate threat can become an opportunity for regeneration. However, as we show, these identities have some local-specific variations that are influenced by bringing together the marine landscape, local history and social agency, and patterns of local economic activities.

Finally, another point which is still relevant from Massey (1979) is the importance of regional policy. Current confusion, inconsistency and uncertainty in regional policy stands as a problematic barrier to tackling left-behind places in the UK. Moreover, the asymmetries found in local government structures, in the devolution of powers from the national to the local scale and in the local government capabilities, are other clear obstacles to regenerative change. This is starkly visible in coastal towns because they are affected by social and environmental threats, whose impacts and solutions go way beyond the borders of a single local authority, and lacking critical mass within the wider local government structure they belong to and depend on.

## Endnotes

1   The three main stream of work we brought together include a specific work package on coastal regions in England as part of the ESPON BRIDGES project, (Gloersen et al. 2019, available at: https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/BRIDGES%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf) that analysed development issues of Europe's territories with geographic specificities (e.g., mountain areas, islands, sparsely populated areas, and coastal regions); a series of pilot projects investigating the state of

the art in several British towns and aimed at producing a taxonomy of British coastal towns for the development of policies for their regeneration (Fiorentino, 2023); and a series of other projects on other very specific left-behind places like mining towns (Tomaney et al., 2023). Our four case studies were selected as the most representative and comparable among the ones previously investigated.

2   LEPs have come to replace Regional Development Agencies, after the Localism Act in 2011. They are typical 'soft' spaces of governance—or soft institutions, supposedly apolitical, that should foster cross-boundary cooperation and support LAs in the process of bidding for funding. They are made up of elected members from both local governments and key private sector partners within the boundaries they cover. They effectively have no regulatory powers; they can only facilitate the definition of shared regional strategies and support the process of funding applications and fundraising.

3   After the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 and the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. Existing local governments within the boundary of a potential combined authority should come together and reach an agreement of the terms and conditions for its establishment and operation. The type of powers effectively devolved by the national government to the constituted combined authority are different case by case. By their constitution, combined authorities are also another asymmetrical governance tool. Each of the existing ones currently work differently.

## Acknowledgements

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