Coastal ACTION

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IMPROVING A DEPRIVED COASTAL COMMUNITY

A Stronger Economy for Hastings & Rye

Measures to improve a depressed seasonal coastal community economy.

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POLICY PAMPHLET



FINDING SOLUTIONS TO THE POLICY PROBLEM HARMING COASTAL COMMUNITIES

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The Local Economy, High Street & Tourism

Hastings' economy performs more poorly than the national average. From 2014 - 2023, annual economic growth (GDP) in Hastings was 1.9%, whereas across England it was 2.8%[1]. Figure 3.1 highlights how economic growth has stagnated since the 2007 recession. In the same period, Hastings saw GDP per capita increase by £4,888, whereas across England it grew by £7,747[2]. Hastings also has a lower Gross Value Added output (GVA). This measures the value of goods and services produced in the local economy. In East Sussex, £10.7bn is produced. Yet, only £1.7bn comes from Hastings[3]. This is lower than the £2.1bn produced from Lewes, the £3.0bn from Wealden and the £2.2bn from Eastbourne[4]. GVA per head is the total economic output divided by the total population of an area. Hastings produces £18,881 per person, whereas the English average is £23,996 and the South East average is £34,845[5]. Since 2021, GVA per head has increased by 41.7% in Hastings. Yet, in Lewes, it increased by 57.8%, 50% in Rother, 44% in Eastbourne and 46% across the whole of East Sussex[6]. A measure of productivity is GVA produced per job each working hour. Across the UK, there was a score of 100. Yet, Hastings only outputs 79.1[7]. Therefore, overall, Hastings produces less per person and is less productive than the national, regional and county average.

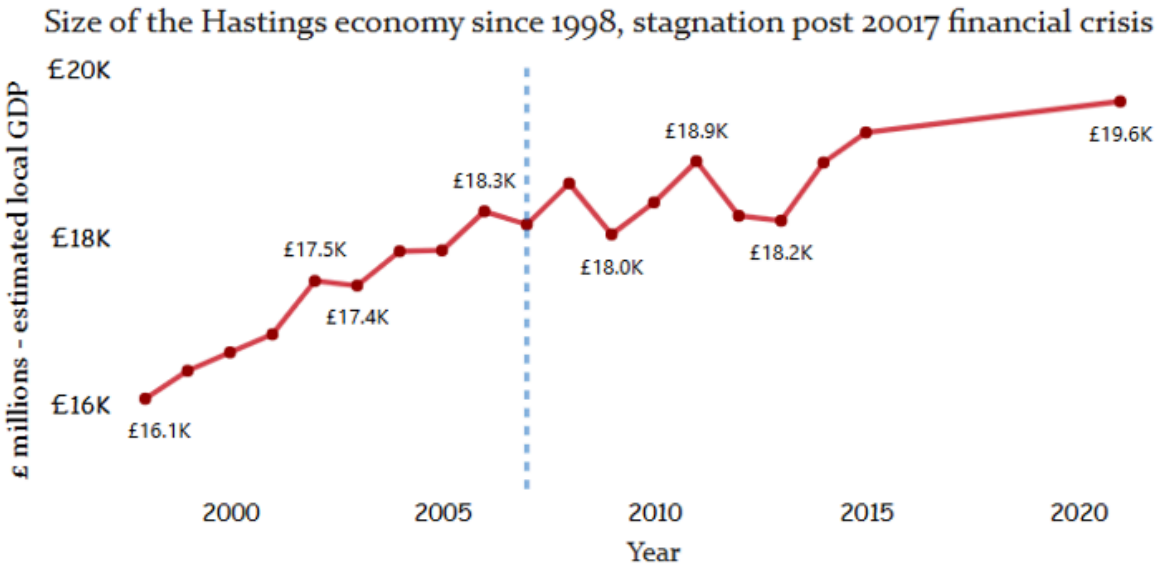


Figure 3.1 - Size of the Hastings economy since 1998 - stagnation post 2017 financial crisis. Source: Varbes local economic statistics.

Economic activity:

This has profound consequences on economic outcomes. Firstly, this has produced higher-than-average levels of unemployment. From 2010 onwards, in Hastings & Rye, the unemployment rate has floated around the 5.0% mark, with the absolute average being 4.6%[8]. The national average unemployment benefit rate in the same period was 3.2%, and the regional average was 2.8%[9]. As of April 2025, the unemployment rate was 5.0%, and this represents 3,170 people claiming unemployment benefit[10]. This is compared to the then national average unemployment rate of 4.4%. Yet, it should be noted that these figures do not include people who have left the workforce to retire early and other people who have left the workforce but have not claimed benefits. There is also a dependence on other forms of benefits, with 30.1% of people being on some form of benefit[11]. This is compared to 19.0% of households across the UK and 15.3% in the South East. The greatest proportion of benefits is allocated for housing support. In Hastings, 18.2% of all households require support with housing costs[12]. This is compared to 12.0% across the UK and 10.0% throughout the South East. The next largest proportion of these benefits comes from costs involving child support, with 12.5% of all people in Hastings & Rye requiring support raising children[13]. This is compared to 8.7% across the UK and 7.4% throughout the South East. Another large source of benefit spending comes from incapacity support (disability benefits)[14]. 8.6% of households in Hastings & Rye receive some form of support relating to a disability. This is compared to 3.8% of households in the UK and 2.4% in the South East[15].

The higher proportion of individuals unable to participate in the workforce has also impacted economic activity. Economically active people are defined as individuals between the ages of 18 – 66 who are in the Labour market, actively seeking work, or are self-employed. The proportion of the Hastings population defined as this was 76.1% at the time of the last census, 2021[16].

This is much lower than the South East average of 80.1% and lower than the national average of 77.5%. This results in a smaller proportion of the population creating and contributing towards economic output, explaining the lower GVA and poorer productivity. The measure also identifies a higher proportion of people who can be described as unemployed than the benefit claimant figures indicate. Such measures estimate the Hastings & Rye unemployment rate is 8.4%, whilst across the South East it is only 4.4% and throughout the UK 5.7%[17]. ONS data also reveals that in Hastings, wages from 2013 – 2023 increased 18.6%, whereas they increased 30.6% nationally[18]. This would again indicate that the town's lack of economic activity is creating greater-than-average unemployment problems and a heavy reliance on welfare.

For those in work, the lack of economic activity, output and productivity makes it harder to earn a good standard of living. The most obvious indicator of this is average pay, see Figure 3.2. From 2021 to 2023, ONS earnings data shows us that in Hastings, the average wage (in real terms) increased from £20.8K to 24.7K, a £3.9k increase[19]. Across the UK, average pay rose from £27.1k to £35.4K, an £8.3k increase. This widened the deficit of average real-term wages between Hastings and England by £4.4k[20]. Hastings particularly has a large gender pay gap. Since 2012, women have consistently earned considerably less than men. In 2014, women earned £19.4k per year (in real terms). In contrast, men earned £25.5k, a £6.0k difference[21]. In 2023, women's average wages had only risen to £20.7k, whilst men's rose to £29.7k, a £9.0k gap. Therefore, the wage gap has extended by £3,000[22]. This particularly highlights how women within Hastings have lost out and indicates how the economy within Hastings is structured in a way that greatly disadvantages women. It would also indicate that squeezes to the cost of living and austerity have most adversely affected women in Hastings.

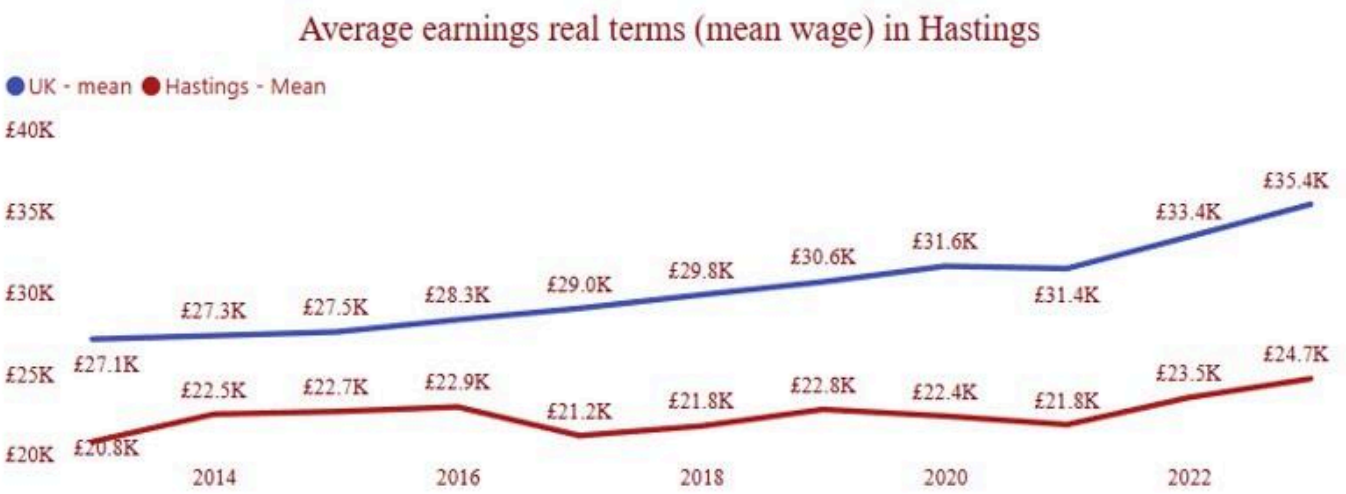


Figure 3.2 - Real terms man wages in Hastings, 2012 - 2023. Source: ONS pay data.

Average wage figures also reflect how the rise in the cost of living has been harsher for Hastings than compared to the English average. Interestingly, this would indicate that poorer towns like Hastings have probably been disadvantaged by the recent spike in inflation after lockdowns were lifted. This also highlights how historically Hastings has been reliant on a low-wage economy that has gradually fallen further behind the rest of the country. It also implies that a lack of economic investment in the town has occurred in the last decade and that the town struggles to attract high-income jobs. Again, this would indicate structural economic problems that result in less production, lower productivity and lower wage growth for Hastings compared to the regional and national average.

The structure of the Hastings & Rye economy is very unbalanced. Compared to the national average, there is a heavy skew towards health and social care work, retail trade, food and drink services, accommodation businesses and the arts. The strongest skew is towards health and social work employment, where 24.3% of the overall workforce is situated, compared to only 13.5% of the workforce in Britain[23]. The food and drink economy is also prominent in the town, and so is trade around accommodation. These two sectors employ 12.2% of all workers within the town, 4.2% higher than the national average[24]. Retail trading, self-employed traders and transport-related jobs

also employ a large proportion of the workforce within Hastings (16.2% – 2.2% higher than the national average)[25]. Arts, entertainment and recreation also disproportionately shape the local economy, with 3.4% of the Hastings workforce employed in this sector, 1.0% higher than the national average[26]. The reliance on these sectors can partly explain the low-wage economy that exists within Hastings, as these sectors tend to produce, on average, lower wages.

Despite the perception that manufacturing is weak within the town, Hastings & Rye does slightly outperform the national average in terms of the overall workforce employed in the sector. 8.1% of the workforce within Hastings is employed in manufacturing, 1.1% greater than the national average[27]. Hastings & Rye also mirrors the national patterns for the proportion of people employed in construction. This would indicate it is not weaknesses in these sectors that are causing the imbalance, low pay and weak productivity within the local economy.

Instead, the census revealed weaknesses within sectors that tend to be higher earning; see Figure 3.3. Specifically, it revealed weaknesses within the local economy that rest within its ability to attract professional, scientific and technical occupations. Only 4.1% of the workforce is employed within this sector, a sector that nationally employs 9.0% of all employees[28]. It also experiences weaknesses in creating and sustaining financial and insurance services and creating employment in the information and communication sector. Together, these sectors employ only 3% of employees within the Hastings & Rye area, nearly 5% less than the national average. Additionally, there is a smaller proportion of people employed in the education sector (0.5% less than the national average), likely due to the lack of higher education and further presence in the town[29]. Over time, the proportion of the workforce working in this sector has declined. In 2015, 9.7% of people were employed in the sector, and this declined to 8.0% by 2021[30]. This also indicates an increasing inability to recruit individuals into the teaching profession, something confirmed in chapter 5. This is problematic as it makes it harder to address skills gaps within the town.

Over time, the local economy has become more dependent on the sectors that employ the greatest proportion of people. For example, the health and social care sector in 2015 employed 22.2% of individuals, with this rising to 23.7% post-pandemic - See Figure 3.3[31]. This growth in the sector is likely to continue, with coastal communities being more likely to have growing health needs, partly due to their naturally ageing population[32]. Additionally, there has also been a small growth in the retail and arts sectors since 2015. In contrast, the proportion employed in information, technology and communication services has declined by 0.3%[33]. Importantly, the growing reliance on these sectors and the lack of opportunities in higher-skilled and higher-paid sectors highlight how it will be very difficult to change the structure of the economy. This is because expanding these sectors will require great efforts in training people to obtain the higher skills sought in these sectors. Additionally, it indicates that investment and recruitment over time are increasing in the sectors the town is already reliant on, something which will pull more of the workforce to these sectors. Finally, due to the lack of skills and investment in other sectors, it will be hard to secure the investment needed to expand other sectors. This will limit growth in these sectors and weaken incentives to train people to work in these areas, as once trained, it is unlikely that jobs will be available locally. This means skilled people would have to move or commute to find work. Vitally, this means training people for more skilled, higher-paid jobs will likely be costly and have limited payoff. Therefore, training people for growing sectors, such as health, will likely continue.

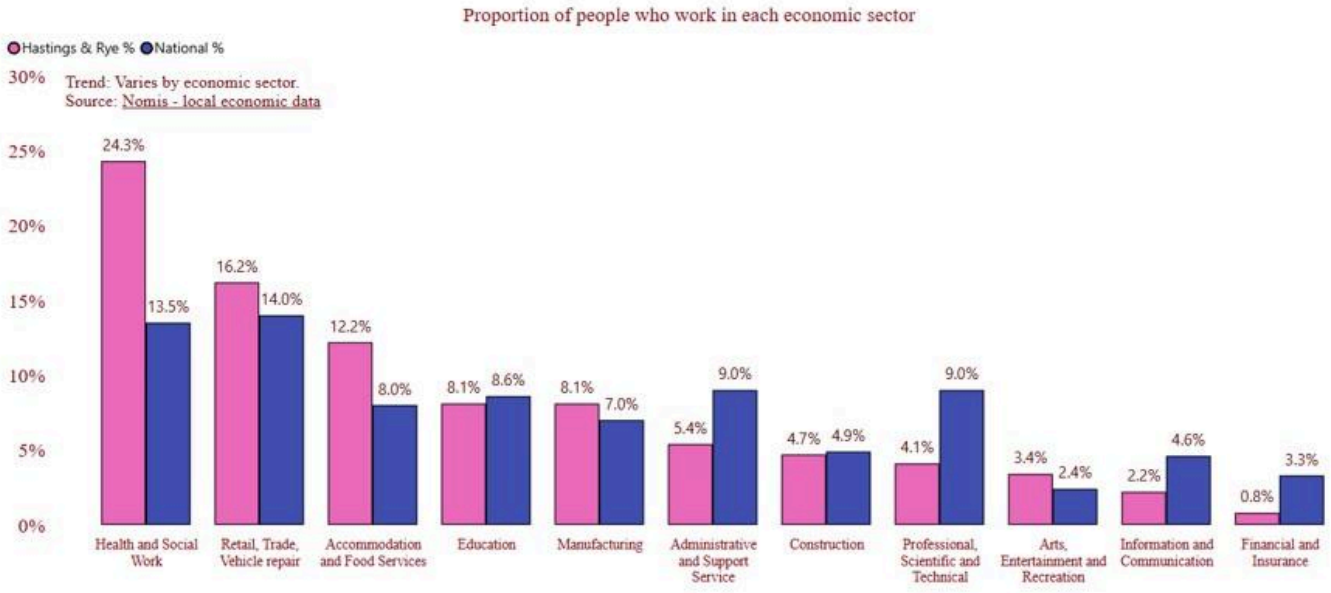


Figure 3.3: Proportion of people who work in each economic sector who live in Hastings. Source: Nomis – local economic data.

A large proportion of all employees being employed within a small number of specific sectors is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it has created an unbalanced economy, meaning that the town is very reliant on specific sectors. This becomes problematic when the economy experiences downturns within specific areas that the town is reliant upon. For instance, the recession of 2008 hit the retail and trade sector very hard, and this has led to fewer job opportunities, more competition for the same jobs, lower pay and more insecure work. Also, the decline of seaside tourism in favour of foreign trips has long depressed these sectors within many coastal communities. Secondly, the specific sectors Hastings is reliant upon are problematic as they tend to produce greater numbers of low-paid, part-time, insecure employment. In contrast, the sectors Hastings is lacking tend to produce better working patterns, more flexibility, higher pay and more secure forms of employment. In part, this has resulted in Hastings having an economy structured around lower wages and greater levels of part-time work.

The data shows this to be the case. Out of the 69% of all adults in the Hastings & Rye workforce, 35% work on a part-time basis, 5% more than the

national average[34]. 10% of these people are self-employed, 3% more than the national average. 25% are employees, 2% greater than the national average[35]. Interestingly, women are more likely than men to be working part-time hours, a trend that has strengthened over time. In 2014, in an average working week, women worked 27.5 hours, men worked 34.9[36] - a gap of 7.4 hours. In 2020, (just before lockdown), women were recorded as working 27.1 hours and men 36.8 - a gap of 9.7 hours[37]. This indicates that women are more reliant on sectors producing part-time work, and this is a trend that has strengthened over time. Therefore, as the employment in Hastings & Rye becomes more focused on sectors where part-time, insecure working patterns are more common, this is disadvantaging women. This is because women appear to be gravitating to these jobs, meaning they more frequently become exposed to low pay. This is again backed up by the data. Dividing average annual earnings by the average number of hours worked for people in Hastings, it can be calculated that men are paid £15.30 an hour and women are paid £13.90[38]. Therefore, the structure of the economy clearly disadvantages some over others. These groups tend to be those less educated, women and those with caring responsibilities requiring more flexible working patterns.

The data over time also indicates a growing reliance on self-employment. The percentage of those being recorded as self-employed increased from 17.9% in 2021 to 23.4% in 2024[39]. This increase has mostly come from a transfer to the public sector, where employment has decreased from 42.6%[40] of all employees to 24%[41] in the same period. This indicates that some of the workers displaced by the heavy cuts to local government services have gone into self-employment or the private sector. This has been reflected by the rise in the proportion of people registering as self-employed and the total number of businesses registered in the Hastings & Rye area. In 2010, 2,300 businesses were registered[42], which grew to 3,700 in 2015[43] and 3,665 in 2024[44]. Interestingly, the proportion of people saying they worked part-time has increased, with it particularly increasing in areas of the town reliant on retail and traders looking to sell products. For instance, Figure 3.4 below

shows that the proportion of the workforce residing in part-time work within Central St Leonards has increased by 6.1%. This would indicate that the shift into the private sector and self-employment has produced a great deal more small businesses that can't be sustained on a full-time basis. This indicates that many of these new businesses are small businesses that offer lower pay and less secure forms of employment. House of Commons Library data indicates 90% of these businesses are now recorded as micro businesses (businesses that employ less than 10 people)[45]. Indeed, the GVA data outlined earlier also indicates that increasing forms of self-employment have not greatly increased economic output. This indicates self-employed businesses are struggling to produce full-time work that generates sufficient income to increase living standards. Indeed, data relating to wages outlined earlier showed real-term earnings have been stagnating for many in the town. Further, Figure 3.4 shows that part-time work has increased most in areas where there has been a visible increase in retail units only open on a part-time basis, such as in central St Leonards[46]. This again indicates a lack of full-time businesses capable of generating higher incomes.

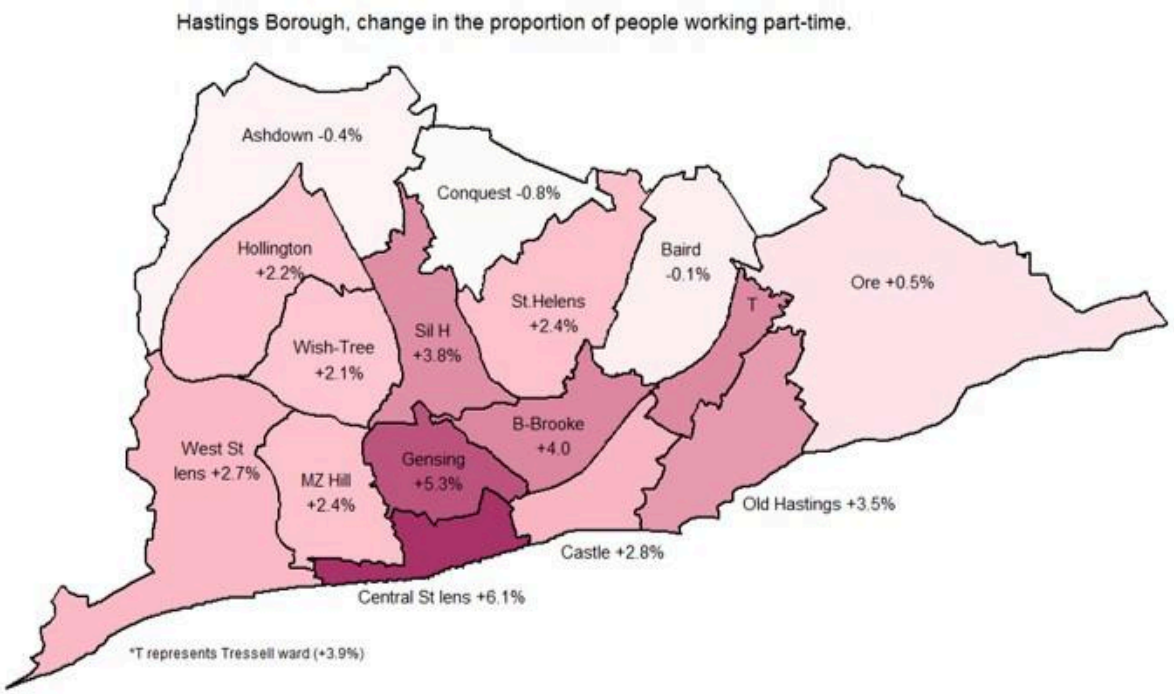


Figure 3.4: The change in the proportion of people working part-time in the Hastings borough area. Source: Census data – comparing 2011 – 2021.

All the evidence outlined so far indicates that the economy within Hastings lacks competitiveness and is struggling to sustain an adequate number of jobs that can produce higher living standards. To change this, a number of problems will need to be addressed.

A more detailed breakdown of reforms can be viewed at the end of this chapter. But, in terms of assisting the overall economy, the following measures summarise essential intervention.

- Increasing welfare for those in work, especially part-time, insecure work. This will incentivise people to return and stay in work, as it will ensure that all those in employment are not falling into poverty.

- Improving education to create an increase in skills. This will help the area fill vacancies in key sectors and provide more skills in sectors that the Hastings & Rye economy is lacking. This will encourage business expansion and encourage investment in the higher earning industries that the local economy is short of. Education reforms are explained in more detail in the education Chapter 3.

- Increasing the amount of affordable housing to ease the cost of living and free up capital within the local economy. This is especially needed for more highly educated and skilled younger people to ensure skills stay in the area.

- Investing in infrastructure to encourage greater economic investment and activity in the town. Making it easier to get into the town should increase economic activity and encourage businesses to invest. This is covered in more detail in Chapter 4.

- Investing in tourism and the image of the town. Developing a tourism strategy for the town that will give it a clearer identity and allow it to better market itself to tourists. This will help entice people to the town and encourage them to stay and spend money. This is something that

might also help create future investment in key sectors within the seaside town.

- Tackling depressed high streets and empty shops. The area's depressed economy has left many empty shopping units vacant, something that has been a growing problem.

- In 2009, 16.9% of all shops were vacant – 63 units[47]. In 2011, there were 58 vacant units (17.6% of all shops), equating to 4,460 sq.m of empty space – 5.4% of all space[48]. In a 2014 report, HBC reported there were 66 vacant units, covering 6,560 sq.m – 7.9% of all floorspace[49]. Currently, HBC says 68 units are vacant**,** producing a shop vacancy rate of 11.7%, significantly higher than the national average.

For a seaside town, this is disastrous as it creates the impression that the town is not open for business, is likely troubled by problems like anti-social behaviour and is not a desirable place to visit. This negative image can deter tourism, thus making it harder to regenerate depressed coastal communities. Tackling this problem is what the chapter now turns to.

The Decline of Local High Streets:

High streets have taken quite a battering, and coastal communities have been particularly hit hard by this decline[50]. The Borough of Hastings has inherited several large high street areas from the Edwardians, with St Leonards, Silverhill, Hastings town-centre, the Hastings Old Town and Ore all having competing retail areas. Most have witnessed a heavy decline. This means the town is facing a unique high street problem; it is trying to sustain several high streets in an era of decline. This has caused there to be several hotspots of economic inactivity that are spread across the town, creating a sense that the entire town is struggling economically. These multiple troubled areas mean it is hard to completely tackle the problem, as one strategy will likely not work for all localities.

Understanding the problem:

Back in Edwardian times, each area having its own shopping centre made sense. Car transportation was limited, road developments connecting villages had not yet occurred, and people often worked, lived and shopped within a small area. As people could not shop around, a large number of independent shops focusing on everyday items, like food and clothes, were needed. However, with the development of the car, the expansion of villages into towns and changes in work-lifestyle patterns, people were no longer confined within a small area, giving people access to a greater variety of shopping experiences. Further, supermarkets opened and offered free parking, allowing people to conduct their weekly shop in one more affordable place. Additionally, high streets on the coast were often sustained by a steady flow of tourism, but foreign travel has reduced tourism flows. The decline of tourism has left coastal communities reliant on specific sectors that often do not offer full-time work and create low-wage economies. This results in limited income to sustain high streets, something that led to high streets within coastal communities being dominated by affordable options, such as retail units, fast food outlets, betting venues and charity shops. Yet, as income stagnated, the explosion in retail was often funded by debt, something that would become a problem after the largest recession since the Great Depression emerged. The Great Recession particularly forced many small and medium-sized businesses to close, with some empty units remaining unused. The economic downturn particularly hit the retail units that had borrowed heavily and relied on customers' spending with debt. This economic decline left cash-strapped councils with little option but to raise car-parking fees, further limiting how many can afford to regularly shop on the high street. Further, the rise of internet shopping has decreased retail footfall, something that has been devastating for the retail sector. As a result, high streets historically dominated by retail could no longer be sustained, and empty shops started to emerge.

More recently, banking moving online has caused high-street banks, the economic centre of local economies, to pull out. This has reduced the

number of ATMS and deters some who prefer using cash to shop, again limiting footfall. As the pandemic forced lockdowns, this again caused shops to close, some of which did not reopen. Further, changes in working patterns created from the pandemic (increased at-home working) have taken more people away from the high street, further decreasing footfall. Again, big British brands pulled out, with some going online and others going out of existence. Economic stagnation and increased inflation post-pandemic have reinforced the declining trend of many high streets in coastal communities. Moreover, the retail units left are often downsizing or are offering less in order to stay afloat, reducing incentives for people to go to the shops as they can get better choices online.

The decline of the town centre is particularly problematic for coastal communities, as they are particularly reliant on a seasonal economy and require a vibrant local economy to attract tourists. However, many coastal communities are struggling to portray the image of vibrancy because their high streets are struggling to survive. Such communities have a large number of empty shopping units and are reliant on relatively few types of shops that do not necessarily appeal to tourists seeking a different experience. With new brands not coming forward, a lack of choice on the high street has emerged. This creates a long-term image problem, as tourists who do visit and feel underwhelmed by the lack of economic activity will be less likely to return. This bad image then filters into the press, who run stories of avoiding deprived coastal communities when planning day trips and holiday experiences. This theory is reinforced by travel day trip data. In the period of 2006-2008, the town experienced 311,000 day trips and 198,000 holiday trips[51]. But, as the recession hit and the high street declined, by the end of the last decade (2017-2019), the town only experienced 262,000 day trips (-15%) and 144,000 holiday trips (-27%)[52]. This only limits income further, and coastal communities become reliant on specific outlets, leaving high streets oversaturated with shops offering the same product, chasing the same £10. Therefore, the decline of the high street has not just weakened the local economy but also taken away from coastal communities' identity.

Indeed, such communities have struggled to rebrand due to the high number of empty units, creating a sense that these towns have little to offer. Consequently, it will be very hard to tackle coastal communities' image problems and sense of economic isolation without revitalising their town centres and creating a sense of economic activity worth experiencing.



A row of empty shops in Hastings Town Centre - 4 in one small area - July 2025.

The suppression of a key part of coastal communities' economies has left many people urging local authorities to intervene to try to address the decline. Yet, poorer tax returns and dwindling national finances have left councils unable to afford intervention. As a result, local high street regeneration rarely occurs, with many authorities now failing to create regeneration strategies.

Regenerating Town Centres:

Learning from past failure:

The Portas High Street project was designed to be a case study on how to regenerate town centres. However, a review of the pilot found that 10 out of the 12 high streets selected for the case study experienced further reductions in trade[53]. Two years on from the scheme's launch, these areas witnessed a rise in the proportion of empty shops and a lack of new thriving businesses[54]. A review of the scheme criticised a lack of direction in the money that was allocated to high street projects, with money often being spent in a disjointed way[55]. Some money was allocated to single events designed to increase footfall, whilst other resources were directed to new shopping outlets without any market research having been conducted. These one-day events were successful but failed to sustain footfall throughout the year. Also, money was often not allocated to infrastructure that would enable events to be held throughout the year, which is vital for sustaining high footfall[56]. This was a particular problem for coastal communities where trade can often significantly dip in parts of the year, depending on how tourist-friendly weather patterns are. Further, in some areas, only 12% of the money had been spent, indicating there was a limited plan on how to spend allocated funding on high street developments. This also indicates a lack of an overall regeneration plan, something that can direct policy solutions and behaviour in a coordinated manner. The project also failed to identify local leaders who could continue the progress once government intervention had receded, meaning the scheme rarely had a long-term impact.

High Streets require a cultural regeneration and tourism plan:

To ensure wider intervention does not fail and that taxpayers' money can be used effectively, lessons from past failures must be learnt. In 2018, Bill Grimsey conducted a review of our high streets. He argued that the high street, as we have historically known it, has had its day, and it needs to be reinvented so it can be regenerated[57]. He asserts that high streets are often too long and have a large number of shops selling similar products, making it

hard to attract footfall and sustain economically. He also argues that there is a need to move away from large shopping centres that are economically failing[58].

Instead, coastal communities should seek to protect a smaller high street based around a distinct local culture that offers an experience that cannot be gained elsewhere. It is about moving coastal communities' image away from a declining resort full of care homes to something more positive[59]. Therefore, high streets need to tell a story of what a locality has to offer so people will understand what positive experiences they will gain when visiting the town. It is about selling a new identity. This magnitude of rebranding requires a wider cultural regeneration and tourism plan that allows for coordinated action that can last throughout the entire year[60]. Such plans allow for a range of different events throughout the year to provide the same narrative, giving these economic areas a clear identity that can attract a targeted audience throughout the year.

Such regeneration plans are based around cultural experiences, art events, vibrant scenes, live entertainment, street markets, key landmark festival events and small business days designed to support independent shops unique to the area[61]. In terms of specifics, such regeneration strategies should be based on changing market tastes. Food and drink outlets are particularly key, with independent shops offering unique dining experiences that cannot be delivered by most fast food chains. These types of shops also tend to offer artisan products or cater to hobbies[62]. Creating such outlets allows people to feel they are supporting small businesses whilst also experiencing something different, thus incentivising people to come back to the high street, increasing footfall for the long term. All this replaces the sense of emptiness and overcomes the old-fashioned seaside image. Critically, creating such a plan will also allow local authorities, community associations and cultural groups to come together and focus on supporting one agreed programme. This would also allow for better direction of resources, enabling a series of connecting events to be much better financially supported than past interventions.

Creating a cultural regeneration and tourism plan:

Firstly, regenerating a high street sometimes involves removing non-pedestrianised areas. This is because turning roads into public walkways would allow for greater space for benches that food outlets and bars could use. It would also allow for more street markets to be held throughout the year. The concept behind this idea is known as “Food Street” and envisages holding street markets on roads full of cafés, bars, food outlets and independent shops to entice people back to the high street. Such visions are based on successes in Europe, where pedestrianised high streets flourish[63].

This sounds straightforward, but many councils face great barriers when trying to pedestrianise roads. For instance, Hastings Borough Councillors campaigned to stop traffic entering the main Hastings town centre high street for four years before they were able to get permission to raise barriers that stop traffic flow during shopping hours. Therefore, many coastal communities often find they do not have the power to shape high streets as they see fit, limiting the action councils can take.

Secondly, another key aspect of renewed high streets is that they must have the infrastructure in place to support the planned regeneration activities. This requires building venues that can sustain cultural events throughout the year[64], vital in coastal communities, which can often experience periods of harsh weather. Such venues will need to cater for the modern food and drink economy, live music, theatre and art gigs in both sunny and rainy conditions. Due to the pandemic, cost of living pressures and poor council finances, many of these venues have not been well supported, and some have been lost. For example, in Hastings, St Mary’s in the Castle is now shut. Consequently, cultural regeneration plans will have to factor in rediscovering such venues so live music and arts events can be held throughout the year. Additionally, business rates are also damaging these venues’ capacity to survive and thrive, meaning reforms to how local government is funded may be needed in order to assist economic growth and regeneration within coastal communities.

Following this, a third essential aspect of cultural regeneration involves a clear programme of varied events based on the modern food and drink economy, local creativity and a diverse set of identities[65]. This can include public art, festivals, food and drink events, gigs, cultural days and events unique to a local area. Such a focus will encourage leaders in these areas to come forward, making it easier to sustain a regular set of events. Supporting such leaders will help to create a set of unique experiences that will entice greater numbers of people to visit the town, increasing footfall to town centres throughout the year. A sustained events calendar for coastal communities would help them to capitalise on the assets they have, namely, enabling them to utilise the arts and culture they possess and function as tourist destinations. Coastal Communities like Hastings are well-placed to create such an events calendar due to the high concentration of artists, the natural landscape offering a different marketable culture (such as the seafood economy) and the increased diversity of these communities. Vitally, these events help to create economic activity and better-paid jobs all year round for a greater range of people, such as those with more creative skills. Therefore, this would incentivise people with a range of skills to live and work by the coast. Vitally, supporting the cultural sector helps diversify the economy away from the public and care sector, helping to make these economies more resilient to economic shocks. Also, such an economy would assist in creating a sense of place and creating a more positive image for these communities, thus challenging the narrative that these places are forgotten and not worth visiting.

Fourthly, any regeneration of the high street requires empty units to be filled or at least used more efficiently than they currently are. Empty ground-floor units could receive government investment to install small independent start-ups based around a town's regeneration plan[66]. Funding could be directed to businesses not yet featured on a high street, to ensure that all high streets would produce a variety of businesses that would ensure a diverse economy. Empty floors above shopping units make the high street look less appealing. Such units could be converted into affordable housing

for young creatives that can help rebrand coastal communities' image. Due to the housing crisis, young people in particular need affordable housing to stay local. By providing accommodation at an affordable price, these communities can keep cultural leaders in their local area, enabling them to carry out work that will help shift the image of a locality. This will help protect aspects that make coastal economies attractive and enable those with creative skills to benefit from positive economic developments. It also helps avoid the trap that many coastal communities face of just becoming a nice retreat for the wealthy.

For example, in Eastbourne, the council has assisted artists with living costs and employed them in street art projects that have helped to attract new footfall and given these deprived areas a much-needed image boost. In Hastings, many empty units exist, making such action viable. For instance, shops with multiple floors in the town centre are often left empty, with large retail units like Debenhams having abandoned the high street.

If young, talented creatives are priced out of housing and can't find sustainable employment, they will seek work elsewhere. If young people are lost, this will limit regeneration strategies that can be used, and this will make it harder to improve Hastings' high streets. By providing affordable housing and a regular event list that runs throughout the year, young creatives can be kept within Hastings, making it easier to regenerate the town.

Fifthly, better transport links into the town centre are also required to ensure that individuals with limited resources are not excluded from economic centres[67]. Transport links into deprived coastal communities often need to be improved, with such areas regularly facing longer travelling times than the places they economically compete with. For instance, although Hastings and Brighton are the same distance from London, travelling times vary greatly, with Hastings taking 45 minutes longer than Brighton. Further, roads into deprived coastal communities are often less developed, again discouraging footfall. Additionally, the number of buses providing access to these

economic centres within the town has also been reduced. Therefore, for cultural regeneration plans to generate the best returns, transport infrastructure should also be improved, as it will enable more people to attend events in these communities that traders are reliant upon. Additionally, councils seeking to increase income through car parking charges also limit economic activity, meaning local government funding reforms may be needed so councils can afford to reduce parking charges.

Finally, a cultural regeneration plan requires crafting a new, exciting narrative that will attract people to the high street. Coastal communities are ideal for this type of rebranding as they are often rich with history. For instance, English history is often argued to have started in Hastings, and the town has a Norman castle to boast about. Further, Eastbourne was built as a seaside retreat for the wealthy and has many historical features to be proud of. However, these historical buildings were often neglected by the Victorians and Edwardians and councils today often struggle to bring them up to a standard fit for tourists. Again, this sense of deprivation drives people away from the coast. Therefore, any cultural regeneration strategy must protect heritage by finding a more modern use for such buildings so the old-fashioned, deprived image of coastal communities is removed and replaced by a sense of fun by the sea. For example, although Hastings Castle is in a rough state, in the summer it could be used as a wedding or festival venue, or it could use more interactive features to tell people about the town's history. Also, Hastings could rejoin the 1066 tourism area, enabling it to tap into its long history better and sell itself to tourists more easily. Such measures could reduce a sense of shabbiness and also create a sense of vibrancy within the town, helping it to attract people to the town and its high streets.

Funding a cultural regeneration plan:

Currently, funding for such projects is funnelled through the levelling up project. Towns are required to bid for this fund, meaning that not all deprived coastal communities can receive regeneration support. In the latest round of

funding, Hastings Borough Council was unable to secure assistance largely because the council does not have the staff to complete such an application, partly due to the colossal cuts they have experienced. This brings us to the central problem of the current funding model, deprived councils with significantly limited resources are less able to secure funding. Further, these applications can be highly technical and often require experts in their field to complete them to a competitive standard. These consultants are not common and can be quite expensive to employ, meaning that those with more resources tend to benefit from the process, as they can afford expertise in the application process. Moreover, these people tend to work for the same organisations, meaning select organisations with access to specialists in the third sector tend to be able to secure significantly more funding. Other sources of funding come from the Town Deal Board. But, again, those who understand the funding system will have an advantage. At worst, there is emerging evidence that funding has been horribly allocated by town deal boards that are not democratically accountable. One such case that has reached parliament is OWENS. Here, the town deal board invested £400,000 in a child play centre that closed after amassing huge debts[68]. Later, it was discovered that the owner of the business had donated large sums to the Conservatives when in government, and the business was likely to be unviable from the start[69]. It is also likely the council did not receive thousands in business rates[70]. All this means that funding is not always efficiently used, and there is a lack of coordinated action as funds often go to projects that are not connected. This means that events often do not run throughout the year, footfall in deprived town centres is not increased in a sustained manner, and shops remain empty.

This inefficient use of resources risks losing a fantastic opportunity to direct resources towards deprived coastal communities in the form of regeneration funds. Therefore, rather than continuing with the levelling up and town deal board model. The money should be sent directly to councils. Deprived coastal communities could be allocated part of this budget to create a regeneration and tourism plan that would ensure coordinated action, which

would increase economic activity throughout the year. For example, Hastings could use the money to fund more street markets, invest in start-ups and fund important cultural events that lost funding during the austerity years, like Jack in the Green.

Regeneration is possible:

A photo showing Kings Road in Central St Leonards, seeing regeneration through street markets.

In Hastings, one high street is bucking the trend. Where other economic centres have continued to decline, the St Leonards high street has thrived. This high street was once forgotten about and contained many empty shops, but recently these empty shops have been filled with more modern independent units offering a variety of products that cater to a more creative audience. Indeed, the regeneration has been so successful that some independent outlets have moved from wealthier economies, such as Lewes and Brighton, to open a new unit in St Leonards. One key reason for this is that local leaders have organised consistent street markets that have attracted greater levels of footfall throughout the year, with tourism from London visibly increasing. This has helped to sustain new independent shops that have opened, with the food and drink economy particularly being well supported. This sense of vibrancy has also been supported by a well-planned events calendar that is attracting people to the high street throughout the year. One such event is Coastal Currents, where artists showcase their work in their homes and on the street in order to attract people to the town. With the growth of artists and street art in the town, the event has rapidly grown in size, with estimated audiences visiting the town increasing from 1,000 in 2012 to 125,000 in 2019. Projected footfall is also thought to have risen from 130,000 in 2018 to 1.3 million in 2023. These events are mostly run by volunteers and have only gained limited support from funding bodies, but have greatly benefited St Leonards in terms of the tourism it attracts. It has showcased a more positive image of the town, made the high street appear a more attractive, safer place and encouraged tourists from London to more

regularly visit the area. Another example can be seen within local art shows, such as in Bottle Alley, where a mile-long show of art attracted 8,000 people in 8 hours across one weekend – selling 800 artworks[71].

Vitally, this demonstrates how high streets that have dedicated leaders who are willing to organise street markets, open independent shops and run regular cultural events can reverse their declining state. Crucially, this shows the importance of creating a regeneration and tourism plan that is well supported by local people and funding agencies.

Policies for regeneration:

Funding:

- Devolve levelling up funding to councils specifically for the purpose of regenerating economic centres through a cultural regeneration plan.
- Allocate a proportion of the funding to protect and promote heritage in deprived coastal communities so as to assist them in developing trade around their rich histories.
- Reform business rates or replace rates with a new funding system to help struggling town centres. For example, lower business rates could be applied to new shops that operate within high streets that contain a large proportion of empty units.
- Allow councils to lower business rates for new independent shops that open on high streets when they offer a service not currently being provided within the local area. One such example could be when a wood and steel crafting business opened in a depressed high street within Hastings.

Economic reforms:

- Review taxes on pubs that focus on selling food and drink, so as to better support the growing food and drink economy and to keep pubs open.

- Support the food and drink economy by making it easier for small independent businesses to obtain licenses that allow them to serve food and drink outside, which should become more common in pedestrianised zones.
- Intervene in the insurance industry to make it easier to insure public events.
- Review VAT policies within the struggling retail sector.
- Develop a system to stop late payments to small businesses, which can cause small independent businesses immense hardship.
- Reform the bank holiday system to spread them throughout the year, allocating days encouraging people to visit events hosted by coastal communities. This will help to make such areas less reliant on seasonal trade.

Improving infrastructure:

- Improve transport links within deprived coastal communities to assist isolated people in accessing the economic opportunities that renewed high streets can bring.
- Improve links to coastal communities so people from outside spend less time whilst travelling to visit.
- Assist local government in building infrastructure to support the high street, such as venues that can hold events throughout the year.
- Incentivise banks to return to the high street to ensure people have access to cash and ATM services. This will help increase a sense of economic activity within town centres.
- Introduce banking hubs, places where people can access deposit and other cash services. Also, give the FCA powers to prevent areas from becoming “banking deserts”.

Increasing local powers:

- Give councils the power to compulsorily purchase long-term empty shopping units. Often, long-term empty shopping units can be left empty for years, with councils unable to take action; giving local authorities more powers over this could help reduce the number of empty shops.
- Give councils the power to stop the oversaturation of the high street, such as refusing new shops when a significant number of shops already offer the same service.
- Make the planning process easier for applications that seek to convert empty units within depressed high streets into housing.
- Devolve authority of roads in town centre areas to the lowest level of local government so all authorities can manage the high street as they see fit. This will allow localities to pedestrianise high streets more easily, giving more space for businesses to operate in.
- Empower local government where needed to enable local people to re-design their high streets around local demands. This will help local people shape and create regeneration.
- Empower local government to make it easier for localities to allow independent shops to open early until late, incentivising more people to visit the high street after work. This would also help coastal communities generate a larger night-time economy, something they often lack.

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