ENGLAND'S COASTAL TOWNS

A short review of the issues, evidence base and research needs

For NCRA Panel

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The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be taken as representing the view of Communities and Local Government, nor do they represent Government policy.

Summary

This report examines the existing evidence on coastal towns and seeks to identify the information gaps that need to be filled by new research.

The report argues that 'coastal towns' are not a coherent category and that it would be better to focus attention on 'seaside towns' (or resorts), which are a slightly narrower group. England's 37 principal seaside towns have a combined population of 2.8m – as much as a small region. The report also argues that a coherent and consistent ward-based definition of the towns needs to be adopted to facilitate research and policy intervention.

Existing evidence about seaside towns points towards and unusual combination of population and employment growth, on the one hand, but continuing labour market imbalances on the other. Incapacity claimant numbers are particularly high, for instance. The evidence also indicates that, contrary to some popular mythology, there remains a large and apparently resilient British seaside tourist industry.

There is nevertheless evidence of substantial variation in socio-economic conditions between seaside towns. The present evidence base is also patchy, with a distinct dearth of reliable information on some key issues, including seaside tourism itself and the cost of service delivery and infrastructure provision. Some of the existing information (on population and employment for example) could also do with up-dating.

The review concludes that there should be four priorities for new research:

- *A 'benchmarking' exercise for seaside towns*
- *A study of incapacity claimants in seaside towns*
- *An assessment of the role of seaside tourism*
- *The costs and funding of service delivery in seaside towns*

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1. PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THE REVIEW

This review has been commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). Its aim is help inform the Department's emerging thinking on England's coastal towns in the wake of the 2007 Select Committee report[1]. The review summarises the existing evidence and identifies the information gaps that might usefully be filled by new research.

Section 2 seeks to provide a better definition of the localities under consideration. There has hitherto been much sloppy thinking on the definition of 'coastal towns' and until this question is resolved there seems little prospect of carrying out meaningful new research.

Section 3 reviews the principal issues raised in the context of coastal towns (or, more accurately, seaside resorts) and considers the existing evidence base.

Section 4 draws conclusions about the research that might now be commissioned to fill the most important information gaps.

The review draws heavily on the 2003 report[2], *The Seaside Economy*. It also draws on other available evidence and on knowledge of the issues most frequently raised by representatives of the towns.

2. DEFINING THE AREAS

Coastal towns or seaside resorts?

'Coastal towns' and 'seaside resorts' are not precisely the same places. The recent policy debate has tended to use the terms interchangeably, which is misleading, and the 2007 Select Committee report, *Coastal Towns*, did not help in this respect. Coastal towns are a slightly wider group than seaside resorts, and directing the Select Committee inquiry at this wider group no doubt extended the appeal of the inquiry to some of the Committee's members. However, this has been at the expense of clarity of focus.

The arguments in favour of looking at coastal towns as a whole is that their location on the coast means that they lose half their natural hinterland, that they are peripheral to the country's main transport network, and that they are all to some extent subject to the physical ravages of the sea. Beyond this, it is hard to identify unifying features across the whole group.

Seaside resorts, on the other hand, are a more clearly identifiable group of places. Because of their history of tourism (and in most cases the continuing significance of this sector) they tend to share a number of characteristics that distinguish them from other places along the coast or inland. This includes a specialist tourist infrastructure (promenades, piers, parks etc), holiday accommodation (hotels, boarding houses, caravan sites), and a distinctive resort character that is often reflected in the built environment. Seaside resorts also share a number of socio-economic characteristics (in-migration, an older population, seasonal work etc) that set them apart. Moreover, while some resorts have fared better than others they have all to a greater or lesser extent faced challenges arising from the changing structure of the UK holiday trade.

Table 1 is intended to illustrate the point that coastal towns and seaside resorts are not synonymous:

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[1] Communities and Local Government Committee (2007) *Coastal Towns,* Second report of session 2006-07, House of Commons HC 351, The Stationery Office, London.
[2] C Beatty and S Fothergill (2003) *The Seaside Economy: the final report of the seaside towns research project*, CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.

- The first column lists England's 37 principal seaside resorts. The list is taken from the *Seaside Economy* report, and all the towns on the list have a population of 10,000 or more. As the *Seaside Economy* report noted, there isn't a hard and fast dividing line between a resort and other places along the coast, but the list was based on detailed consideration, including discussions with the British Resorts Association.
- The second column lists 18 other significant towns around England's coast.
- The third column lists a further 7 estuary towns that might, in theory, be described as 'on the coast'.

To anyone with reasonable knowledge of the geography of Britain it will be immediately obvious that the towns in the second and third columns are very different from the seaside resorts in the first. Sunderland and Portsmouth, for example, are large industrial and commercial cities, quite different in scale, character and economic function to, say, a Great Yarmouth or a Scarborough. Seaham is an ex-mining town. Hartlepool and Workington are essentially steel towns. Redcar is an integral part of industrial Teesside. Felixtowe, Harwich and Dover are primarily ports. Barrow is first and foremost a shipbuilding town. The estuary towns are, by and large, even further removed in character from the seaside resorts in the first column.

A location on the coast or the presence of some amusement arcades on the front (as in say Redcar, or more extensively in the Cleethorpes part of Grimsby) does not mean that the town or city as a whole should be regarded as a resort.

Table 1 : England's principal coastal towns

SEASIDE RESORTS (ranked by population)	**OTHER SIGNIFICANT COASTAL TOWNS**	**ESTUARY TOWNS**
Bournemouth	Berwick	Middlesbrough
Brighton	Blyth	Hull
Blackpool	Tynemouth	Medway Towns
Worthing	South Shields	Southampton
Southend on Sea	Sunderland	Plymouth
Isle of Wight	Seaham	Birkenhead/Wallasey
Torbay	Hartlepool	Liverpool
Hastings/Bexhill	Redcar	
Thanet	Grimsby/Cleethorpes	
Southport	Felixstowe	
Eastbourne	Harwich	
Weston super Mare	Frinton	
Whitstable/Herne Bay	Dover	
Folkestone/Hythe	Newhaven	
Lowestoft	Portsmouth/Southsea	
Clacton	Barrow in Furness	
Great Yarmouth	Whitehaven	
Scarborough	Workington	
Weymouth		
Morecambe/Heysham		
Bognor Regis		
Whitley Bay		
Exmouth		
Bridlington		
Dawlish/Teignmouth		
Deal		
Newquay		
Penzance		
Falmouth		
Burnham on Sea		
Skegness		
Sidmouth		
Whitby		
Minehead		
St. Ives		
Ilfracombe		
Swanage		

The point is that 'seaside resorts' (or 'seaside towns' – these terms are more interchangeable) are a coherent category whereas 'coastal towns' are, for most purposes, probably not. To conflate statistics for all towns along the coast runs the risk of obscuring the distinctive socio-economic issues in seaside resorts by diluting them with the figures for quite different places. Moreover, there is no question that the representatives of seaside resorts do see their towns as a distinctive group, and it is doubtful that they would be at all convinced by aggregate figures that lumped them together with other places along the coast.

Compiling and publishing figures for every individual town around the coast does not circumvent these concerns. The policy interest is unquestionably in the aggregate figures – how a particular category of towns compares with other areas and national average. It is vital therefore that the category makes sense.

The remainder of this review therefore focuses on seaside resorts / towns.

The 37 English seaside towns listed in Table 1 have a combined population (in 2001) of just over 2.8 million. Adding in the smaller seaside towns around the English coast, with a population below 10,000, would take the total figure a little over 3 million. This is equivalent to a small English region and exceeds the population of North East England (2.5m) or the whole of Wales (2.9m).

Boundary issues

One of the reasons why the evidence base on seaside towns is limited is that statistical research requires a clear geographical definition of the towns. Three approaches have been deployed in recent evidence:

- Using district-level data as a proxy for the seaside town within a district. This practice was adopted by ODPM in its evidence to the Select Committee inquiry[3] and more recently by the Local Futures Group[4].
- The ward-based definition of seaside towns deployed by the DTI (now DBERR) in preparing background statistics for government[5].
- The ward-based definition of seaside towns developed by Sheffield Hallam University for the *Seaside Economy* report.

The use of district-level data is seriously flawed. The boundaries of seaside towns and local authority districts rarely coincide. Some towns (eg Skegness) are only one part of a much larger district (in this case of East Lindsey). The built-up area of others spills over into neighbouring districts (as in the case of Blackpool, Bournemouth and Brighton for example). A sub-set of seaside towns can be more closely matched to district boundaries, and DWP adopted this approach in its evidence to the Select Committee[6], but even this is less than satisfactory.

The unitary authority of Blackpool, for example, is in fact only the central part of a larger Blackpool conurbation that also includes Lytham St Anne's (in Fylde DC) and Fleetwood (in Wyre DC). Figures for Blackpool BC in isolation give a distorted and unduly negative picture because this is in a sense the 'inner city' (though it is certainly true that the urban area as a whole has problems). Adding Fylde and Wyre districts to Blackpool BC doesn't solve the statistical problem because these districts have extensive rural hinterlands.

The DTI and Sheffield Hallam approaches are in principle similar and much superior, and they also use the same list of towns (from the *Seaside Economy* report). The full details

[3] Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2006) Memorandum to the Coastal Towns inquiry, CT 54 and 54a.
[4] Local Futures Group (2007) *The State of England's Seaside Towns*, Local Futures Group, London.
[5] Unpublished analyses by DTI made available to the present author
[6] Department for Work and Pensions (2006) Memorandum to the Coastal Towns inquiry, CT 60b.

of the DTI mapping procedure have not been published but it would be surprising if the DTI's procedure was as thorough as the one carried out by Sheffield Hallam, which involved fine-grain maps overlaying ward boundaries on the underlying urban geography. The Sheffield Hallam approach also matches ward boundaries at several points in time, allowing trends trough time to be monitored.

A great deal of data is now available down to ward level – benefit claimant statistics, ABI figures on employment and deprivation statistics are just three examples. Given the heterogeneity of some of the districts that include seaside towns, it is also a sounder approach to impute data for those towns (using for example a combination of 2001 Census data for wards and more recent district-level trends) than to use district data as a proxy. Ward-based definitions are especially necessary in order to examine trends in most of the smaller seaside towns around the coast.

The point here is that in order to take forward meaningful research a settled, ward-based definition of seaside towns needs to be adopted, and the starting point should probably be the Sheffield Hallam definition from the *Seaside Economy* report.

There are parallels here with research and policy intervention in the former coalfields. For the coalfields, which also do not fit neatly with district boundaries, DCLG and its predecessors have adopted a standard definition, the core of which was originally developed for academic purposes by the same Sheffield Hallam team behind the *Seaside Economy* report.

The proviso that must be attached to any definition of seaside towns, however, is that *interpretation* of at least some of the socio-economic trends in the towns requires reference to the wider sub-regional and regional context. Housing and labour markets, in particular, can operate over very wide areas. The apparent resilience and prosperity of Brighton, for example, owes at least something to the nature of its relationship to London and the wider South East.

A typology of seaside towns?

The DTI's recent statistical work on seaside towns divides them into three groups:

- 'Performing well' – defined as those with an employment rate above the England average

- 'Maintaining' – defined as those with an employment rate within 3 percentage points of the England average

- 'Declining' – defined as those with an employment rate more than 3 percentage points below the England average

This last group comprises Blackpool, Bridlington, Clacton, Falmouth, Great Yarmouth, Morecambe & Heysham, Penzance, Skegness, St Ives, Thanet, and Whitby.

This list of seaside towns with on-going labour market difficulties is actually not very different from the one that might be drawn up from a number of tables in the *Seaside Economy* report. However, it is questionable whether such a simplistic typology offers a way forward.

One problem is that seaside issues are multi-dimensional. A focus on employment rates does not, for example, address housing problems. Nor does it pick up any of the issues concerning an elderly population.

A second problem is that unadjusted employment rates give a false impression of the health of the seaside economy. The distortion here concerns economically inactive students in full-time education, who are these days very numerous and concentrated in a few key locations, especially the big cities. Seaside towns have few universities or higher educational institutions (Brighton is the notable exception) and this has the effect of boosting their employment rate compared to areas where students are more numerous. For this reason the DTI's comparisons between employment rates in seaside towns and a number of urban areas (eg Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham) are flawed and unfairly flattering to seaside towns. The proper comparison is between employment rates *excluding economically inactive students*.

A third problem is that a single indicator at a single point in time – like employment rates – lumps together towns that may be heading in quite different directions. Some may be improving relative to the national average, others declining.

The *Seaside Economy* report argued that a 'one size fits all' approach to seaside towns is inappropriate. Whilst there are some towns that are clearly struggling with considerable economic difficulties, there are others whose economy looks distinctly healthy. Whether differentiation is best achieved by a typology or classification of seaside towns is however questionable because in reality there is a gradation of places from the very best to the very worst and the precise ranking will depend on the issue under consideration. Better at this stage, perhaps, to improve the research base for all seaside towns.

Competing perspectives

As any participant in 'seaside town' conferences becomes aware, there can be less common ground in defining seaside issues than is perhaps the norm in other localities. Thus in the former coalfields, for example, regeneration in the wake of colliery closures tends to dominate the agenda. The seaside agenda can however quickly fragment into at least four competing preoccupations:

- *Socio-economic issues.* These include employment and joblessness, incomes, deprivation, housing, service delivery and the impact of a skewed population structure.

- *Tourism.* There can be a tendency among some players to talk as if tourism and the local economy of seaside towns are one and the same thing. And the interest in tourism can spill over into 'culture' as much as 'economy'.

- *Architecture.* This includes the future of piers, the conservation of historic buildings such as hotels and shops, and the maintenance of public infrastructure such as promenades and parks.

- *Natural environment.* This includes coastal erosion and flood protection, wildlife and pollution control.

In the real world there are clearly points of contact between these competing preoccupations, but there can be a 'dialogue of the deaf' among the protagonists, even where they may come from the same seaside town.

The present review focuses on socio-economic issues and, as part of this, on the role of the tourist sector. DCLG should nevertheless be aware that there are also competing seaside agendas, some involving DEFRA, that government as a whole may need to address.

3. THE EVIDENCE BASE

What's available?

The 2003 *Seaside Economy* report[7], widely referenced by the Select Committee and in submissions to its inquiry, remains the benchmark study on socio-economic trends in seaside towns.

The report was the main output of a substantial study funded by the government's Economic and Social Research Council, by four case study towns, and by the Housing Corporation – a total budget of £230,000 at the time (or around £400,000 at current prices and on current 'full economic cost' ESRC accounting rules). The *Seaside Economy* report comprises statistical analysis of labour market trends in all Britain's principal seaside towns going back as far as 1971. It also includes the results of a survey of 1000 non-employed adults of working age in the four case study towns (Blackpool, Great Yarmouth, Southport and Thanet). The limitation of the *Seaside Economy* report is that its main statistical analyses stop at 2001.

By comparison, there is surprisingly little other systematic, quantitative evidence on seaside towns (or maybe this is not so surprising given the boundary problem mentioned earlier). Recent statistical analyses by the Local Futures Group[8] are a notable exception. These provide a good range of contemporary data on 20 districts containing seaside towns, covering the economy, health, crime and the environment. The disadvantage of Local Future's work is once more the reliance on district data, which automatically rules out consideration of several seaside towns and has shortcomings in accurately describing trends in others.

The unpublished statistical analyses of seaside towns undertaken by DTI[9], mentioned in Section 2, are rudimentary but very useful because they cover all 37 of England's principal seaside towns and do so using ward-level data.

The government's *State of the English Cities* report[10] covered just six seaside towns – Blackpool, Bournemouth, Brighton, Hastings, Southend and Worthing – though for each of these it provides a wealth of statistical data. A limitation, however, is again reliance on district-level figures.

The most pertinent academic study is a 1997 book, *The Rise and Fall of British Coastal Resorts*[11]*.* This provides an historic and cultural view of changes over the whole of the twentieth century.

The British Resorts Association (now BRADA) produced a 1999 pamphlet, *Behind the Facade*[12]*,* which detailed many of the issues but without a numerical base. The English Tourism Council produced a 2001 report, *Sea Changes*[13], outlining the challenges for seaside tourism, but again without a strong quantitative base. The British Urban Regeneration Association (BURA) have organised a number of conferences and events on seaside towns, which have been helpful in raising awareness of the issues.

Beyond the national documents there are local studies, which can have a stronger empirical base. The Lincolnshire Coastal Action Zone, for instance, which covers Skegness and Mablethorpe, has commissioned studies including one on seasonality and the benefits system[14]. This identified serious flaws in the application of benefit rules to seasonal workers in the local area. Individual RDAs are also likely to have addressed

[7] C Beatty and S Fothergill (2003) op cit.
[8] Local Futures Group (2007) op cit.
[9] DTI (2007) op cit.
[10] M Parkinson et al (2006) *State of the English Cities*, ODPM, London.
[11] G Shaw and A Williams (eds) (1997) *The Rise and Fall of British Coastal Resorts: cultural and economic perspectives*, Pinter, London.
[12] British Resorts Association (1999) *Seaside Resorts: Behind the Façade*, BRA, Southport.
[13] English Tourism Council (2001) *Sea Changes,* ETC, London.
[14] C Beatty, S Fothergill and R Powell (2006) *Coastal Proofing the Benefits System*, report to Lincolnshire CAZ, CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.

seaside towns either directly or as part of wider initiatives, but there has been no general survey of this activity.

A parallel stream of literature concerns the built environment of seaside towns. This includes the *Shifting Sands* study by the Commission on Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE)[15] and a new study by English Heritage[16]. While the latter, in particular, spills over into regeneration issues, the focus is on individual projects rather than socio-economic data.

The written evidence to the Select Committee inquiry[17] is therefore particularly useful, not least because it includes contributions from some of the more vocal seaside local authorities. The report of the inquiry itself[18] also contains useful supplementary evidence, not least from DWP.

A summary of current knowledge

Population

Seaside towns have a growing population. The *Seaside Economy* report noted that the working age population (16-59/64) of Britain's seaside towns rose by 270,000 between 1971 and 2001, and that this growth was steady over three decades. Just about all seaside towns have shared in this growth, though not all to the same extent.

Population growth in the towns is driven by in-migration (not to be confused with *immigration,* though that will be a part of the jigsaw) rather than by natural increase, which actually seems to be negative at least for adults of working age. The net in-migration is greatest among the over-35s, the *Seaside Economy* report found. There is some evidence in the report that in-migration may be rather greater than might be expected on the basis of employment growth alone, and that residential preference – wanting to live in a seaside town – seems to play a part.

The population of seaside towns is skewed towards older age groups. DTI's figures show that 21 per cent of seaside residents are over 65, compared to an English average of 16 per cent. Every English seaside town has an above average share of over 65s according to these figures.

Employment

The *Seaside Economy* report found that employment in seaside towns is growing. Employment was up by around 320,000 between 1971 and 2001 and growth had been particularly marked in the 1980s and 90s. Virtually all seaside towns shared in the growth, though to widely differing extents. There is little reason to suppose that, in the context of rising national employment since 2001, the job growth in seaside towns has not continued.

Employment growth in seaside towns has been faster than the national average. Moreover, a substantial share has been in the sectors most closely linked to tourism – distribution, hotels and restaurants. The *Seaside Economy* report took this to indicate that there is still plenty of life left in the British seaside tourist industry and speculated that it was able to survive alongside rising numbers of foreign holidays because growing affluence and consumer spending meant that in total there is more tourist spending to share around.

[15] Commission on Architecture and the Built Environment (2003) *Shifting Sands: design and the changing image of English seaside resorts*, CABE, London.
[16] English Heritage (2007) *Regeneration in Historic Coastal Towns*, English Heritage, London.
[17] Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee (2006) *Coastal Towns,* vol 2, Written Evidence, House of Commons HC 1023-ii, The Stationery Office, London.
[18] Communities and Local Government Committee (2007) op cit.

The *Seaside Economy* found that on average the seaside towns of the South West are the star performers in terms of employment growth, followed by those in the Greater South East. The laggards are those along the East Coast. The report argued that the seaside towns in the Greater South East (defined to include places such as Bournemouth) are probably benefiting from the growth of the wider regional economy, whereas job growth in the seaside towns of South West is probably underpinned by tourism and a milder climate.

Commuting

Seaside towns are net exporters of commuters to other areas but not on a huge scale (around 80-90,000 in 2001 according to the *Seaside Economy* report) nor consistently across all the towns.

The 'South East England model', whereby seaside towns act as dormitories for London, is not universally applicable according to the detailed figures assembled for the *Seaside Economy* report. Some seaside towns elsewhere in the country actually act as commuting nodes for surrounding areas. There was nevertheless evidence that a number of seaside towns are becoming significantly more dependent on jobs outside the area – Thanet and Weston super Mare are examples.

Labour market imbalance

The DTI's figures show that the employment rate across England's seaside towns as a whole is only around 1 percentage point below the national average, though there is diversity among the towns.

A central feature of the *Seaside Economy* report was an investigation into the scale of the continuing imbalance in seaside labour markets and the underlying causes. The report concluded that although employment in the towns is growing, so too is labour supply, especially because of in-migration, and this has caused labour market imbalance to persist in some of the towns. In a sense, because of in-migration the economy of seasid

Claimant unemployment

The *Seaside Economy* report found that claimant unemployment (the numbers on Jobseeker's Allowance) is nearly always higher in seaside towns than in their immediate hinterlands – sometimes substantially so. On the other hand, by historic standards claimant unemployment is very high nowhere at present, and the report noted that in seaside towns it was barely above the GB average. This is confirmed by DTI figures showing that on the wider ILO measure of unemployment England's seaside towns are only a little above the English average.

There is an oft-expressed view that seaside towns' unemployment is to an extent 'imported' from neighbouring areas and further afield. This is only partially supported by survey work in the *Seaside Economy*, which suggested that only between a quarter and a third of the unemployed in seaside towns had lived there for less than five years.

Incapacity Benefit

Incapacity claimants are these days by far the largest group of non-employed working age claimants across the UK, including in seaside towns.

One of the statistics in the Select Committee report that attracted the greatest attention was that between 1997 and 2006 the number of incapacity claimants in seaside towns increased by 12.3 per cent compared to 2.2 per cent across GB. This way of expressing the data is actually misleading – the gap between the incapacity claimant rate in seaside towns and the national average had in fact only increased from 0.5 to 0.7 percentage points over this period, as DWP data in the Committee's report shows. Moreover, the trend in seaside towns is probably not unusual: on the whole, between 1997 and 2006 the incapacity claimant rate slipped a little in the very worst areas around the country (mostly older industrial Britain) but rose marginally in places where the claimant rate had previous been lower.

Even so, incapacity claimants are unquestionably a major group in seaside towns – DWP figures suggest 8.4 per cent of working age residents; more robust DTI figures point to 9.3 per cent. This represents approaching 150,000 men and women.

Incapacity claimants in seaside towns are not a well-understood group. They were included in the *Seaside Economy* survey of non-employed residents and the findings suggested that only around a quarter say they 'can't do any work' and approaching half would like a job. One theory is that seaside incapacity numbers are inflated by those who move into the area to be on benefit – because of available housing perhaps, but more generally because claimants think it is nicer to be on benefits by the sea than anywhere else. There is scant reliable evidence on this point.

Survey research is currently underway into incapacity claimants in two seaside towns – Blackpool and Great Yarmouth – as part of a wider national study of IB claimants, and a third survey area (East Lindsey) includes a substantial seaside element. This research, funded by ESRC and local partners, is being carried out jointly by Dundee University and the Sheffield Hallam team behind the *Seaside Economy* report.

Tourism

It is surprising how little is understood about the contribution of tourism to the economy of seaside towns, which is perhaps one reason why the observations about employment growth in the *Seaside Economy* report came as a surprise to many people. There are statistics on visitor numbers – some from consultants, some from official bodies – that tend to be quoted but these are a long way from a proper measure of the relative importance of tourism to the local economy.

Measuring the contribution of tourism is actually not very easy because tourist spend and tourism jobs don't fall neatly into standard statistical categories and there are multiplier effects as well. There is also a common view – again not well supported by hard evidence – that at least a proportion of the tourist sector is within the 'black economy'.

The absence of good information about the seaside tourist economy applies not just to its overall importance but also to trends through time and the differences between individual towns. A casual observation would be that some smaller seaside resorts (eg St Ives, Skegness, Newquay) are much more tourist-dependent than say a Brighton or a Bournemouth.

Seasonality

Seaside tourism tends to be seasonal, even if there is also an all-year-round element in some places as well. Some elements of seasonality are well documented, others much less so.

Regarding seasonal fluctuations in claimant unemployment, the *Seaside Economy* report found that there is still a clear annual cycle in seaside towns, for both men and women, but that the size of the fluctuations is tending to diminish – it was down to around one-and-a-half percentage points for men and about half a percentage point for women by the first part of the present decade. Moreover, seasonal fluctuations in claimant unemployment affect some towns far more than others. Skegness is the worst affected of all, followed by Great Yarmouth, Whitby and several smaller towns in the South West, but places such as Brighton and Bournemouth show barely any seasonal pattern at all.

Employment is likely to fluctuate rather more than claimant unemployment. Some people will simply drop out of the labour market in winter, and some summer jobs are filled by students and temporary migrants. Even for those employed in the tourist sector all year round, working hours are likely to vary with the seasons. These seasonal fluctuations are much less well documented.

Migrant workers

A growing issue concerns migrant workers from abroad. This is not unrelated to seasonality. One possibility is that migrant workers are now filling more seasonal jobs – there is anecdotal evidence to support this – and that they don't claim benefits out of season because they return home. The low-wage nature of much of the employment on offer in the seaside tourist sector also suggests that, if experience elsewhere in the economy is any guide, it is likely to attract migrant workers.

The statistical base for monitoring migrant workers is improving. In particular, figures on new National Insurance number registrations by non-UK nationals, by district, have recently become available. These have not yet been analysed systematically for seaside towns, and the raw data has limitations, but it is noticeable that the figures for at least some seaside towns are large – around 1,400 new registrations a year since 2005 in Blackpool for example.

Pay and conditions

Seaside economies are mostly low wage, low productivity economies. This isn't documented in any systematic way but a cursory examination of earnings statistics (from the government's Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings) backs up this point. None of this is surprising. The tourist sector is mostly a low-paid sector and, as the *Seaside Economy* report showed, seaside towns lack many of the well-paid jobs in banking and finance, for example, that boost earnings elsewhere. Few national or international businesses are headquartered in seaside towns.

The *Seaside Economy* report found that a disproportionately large share of the jobs located in seaside towns are part-time. The residents of the towns, however, are only a little more dependent on part-time employment than the national average. This is because some seaside residents commute to full-time jobs elsewhere and some of the part-time jobs in the towns themselves are filled by in-commuters from neighbouring areas.

Skills

The DTI's figures show that the proportion of adults (of working age?) in seaside towns with no formal qualifications is the same as the national average – 23 per cent – though the proportion with the highest level of qualifications (degrees etc) is slightly below the national average.

The issue regarding skills seems to be more one of variation between towns. In Brighton for example, the DTI figures show that only 16 per cent have no formal qualifications, compared to 31 per cent in Blackpool and 39 per cent in Skegness.

To some extent these local differences will reflect the nature of local job opportunities – as a general rule the greater the proportion of low-skill tourism-related jobs, and the lower the proportion of high-tech manufacturing or sophisticated services, the more the local workforce is likely to mirror the jobs that are available. It is a common view, for instance, that the bright and able youngsters from many seaside towns move away to university, never to return. Partly, however, the size of the cohort with no formal qualifications will reflect the age structure of the local population, given that older workers tend on average to have fewer formal qualifications. Thus Brighton has not only the lowest share with no qualifications but also the youngest population of all England's seaside towns.

England's seaside towns nearly all lack universities. Brighton is an exception – it has two – and Bournemouth has one.

Deprivation

The availability of fine-grain data from the Indices of Deprivation means that in theory it should not be difficult to document many aspects of deprivation in seaside towns, though this has never been done in any systematic way.

Blackpool is the local authority that made the most of this data in its submission to the Select Committee[19] – hardly surprising perhaps given that the IMD shows that Blackpool is the most deprived seaside town. Blackpool's analysis, which covers 16 districts with seaside towns, suggests that most of them rank between 80 and 200 (on quite a range of indicators) out of well over 300 English authorities in all. What this tells us is that seaside towns are not on the whole the most deprived districts in England – these tend to be a number of older industrial areas and inner cities – but neither are they firmly in the most prosperous half of the country.

Housing

Existing knowledge about housing in seaside towns is partial.

One of the issues most frequently raised by representatives of the towns is that there is a proliferation of houses in multiple occupation, often in poor repair. Some of these are former hotels and boarding houses that have proved well suited to sub-division into small privately rented flats that, the argument goes, act as a magnet for benefit claimants. Added to this there is an issue of 'holiday' caravans that in fact operate as the main all-year-round home for some low-income individuals and families.

Houses in multiple occupation are often seen as lying at the heart of a wider complex of social problems. These include drug use, 'chaotic lifestyles', and a very high turnover of population that leads to serious instability in some school rolls. DCLG-funded research about to start in parts of Margate, one of the epicentres of this phenomenon, may shed further light on the processes and what might be done about them.

One of the subsidiary reports of the *Seaside Economy* study dealt with housing, largely utilising the findings from the survey of non-employed adults[20]. This found clear evidence that the private rented sector is acting as a point of entry to the seaside town housing market, and that many people then move on to accommodation in the social housing sector (council or housing association) in the same town. Among the individuals surveyed, however, only around one-in-seven had moved to a seaside town specifically for housing reasons.

What this particular study also noted is that seaside towns differ from the big cities and from many industrial towns in that social housing comprises a relatively small proportion of the overall housing stock.

Public service provision

Another anxiety often expressed by representatives of seaside towns is that public services in the towns face unusual strains. Two problems tend to be mentioned.

The first is that the high proportion of elderly residents – documented in the DTI statistics mentioned earlier - places strains on social services and the health service. The perceived problem is not just that there are large numbers of over 65s in need of support but that there are large numbers of the *very old*, many of whom have moved from elsewhere and lack local networks of family support.

[19] Blackpool Council, CT 47 in Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions (2006) op cit.
[20] C Beatty, S Fothergill and N Barraclough (2003) *Labour Market Flows and the Demand for Social Housing: a case study of seaside towns and comparisons with other areas,* Seaside Towns Research Paper no 7, CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.

The second problem is that the population of some seaside towns rises and falls with the seasons because of visitors, and this is seen as putting strains on services such as policing, cleansing and the health service.

It is unclear that these pressures have ever been properly documented. Moreover, it is unclear whether or not local government and health service funding formulas adequately reflect the perceived additional costs. The expressed view on data on visitor numbers, which does play a role in funding formulas, is that the data that is currently used is badly flawed. Whether this is indeed the case is impossible to tell at present.

Infrastructure

It is undeniably true that local authorities in seaside towns take responsibility for a wide range of infrastructure that is essential to a resort but only rarely found on the same scale elsewhere – promenades, shelters, piers, parks, swimming pools, boating lakes, cliff lifts and so on. Some of these can generate revenue, in public hands or hived-off to the private sector, but it is inherent in the nature of some of this infrastructure that it cannot generate funds in its own right or that it cannot cover its full costs. There is additionally the very real need to spend more on maintenance on buildings and structures exposed to the sea.

In days gone by this infrastructure was funded by the local council from the rates or by borrowing and it represented a charge on local businesses and residents that was well understood and supported as in everyone's best interests. These days, the opportunities for funding essential tourist infrastructure from local sources are more circumscribed. This applies particularly to revenue costs, but also to capital costs as well.

In principle, there would seem to be a legitimate issue here. There would not however appear to be any systematic evidence to underpin an informed policy debate.

4. A RESEARCH AGENDA

The suggestions for further research, below, flow from the review of existing evidence and have also been informed by the issues identified by the Select Committee as in need of further investigation. Two general points, arising from Section 2 of this review, should however be an integral part of any research planning:

- Research will be more useful if it is focussed on 'seaside towns' (or resorts) rather than on 'coastal towns'. The latter category lacks coherence. The exception is any research that might be carried out on coastal erosion / flooding / natural environment, which is more logically carried out for all coastal settlements,

- Socio-economic research on seaside towns needs a consistent and defensible definition of the towns. The Sheffield Hallam ward-based definition probably offers the best way forward.

PRIORITY 1: *A 'benchmarking' exercise for seaside towns*

There is a pressing case for a straightforward 'benchmarking' study covering a wide range of data on seaside towns in a way that is also consistent and comprehensive.

The statistics underpinning the *Seaside Economy* report are becoming dated. They provide a picture of trends up to 2001 but there is a clear need for more up-to-date figures. Moreover, the *Seaside Economy* report only set out to cover labour market issues in any depth, whereas the interest in seaside town issues extends more widely.

Other recent statistical work on seaside towns is partial at best or, in the case of the DTI statistics referred to in this review, not even in the public domain.

The sorts of basic socio-economic information that it would be useful to have available for seaside towns include figures on population, employment, migration (including migrant workers from abroad), earnings, unemployment, incapacity, benefits, skills, education, deprivation, health and housing – and where possible on trends through time. This requires existing national datasets to be married to a sensible definition of the towns themselves. The information does however need to be available not only for seaside towns as a whole but also for each individual town. Again, this is not difficult.

There is the potential for using this information to make straightforward comparisons – with national and regional averages, but also with comparator areas such as the cities, coalfields and rural areas. Investment in a benchmarking exercise need not be tied to any single potential policy initiative. Rather, the intention would be to provide a resource that could be deployed by a range of users for a variety of purposes.

PRIORITY 2: ***A study of incapacity claimants in seaside towns***

The Select Committee were right to highlight this issue, given that the numbers are so large. With respect to the rising incapacity numbers in the towns, the Committee said *"We recommend that the Government investigates this trend with a view to identifying and addressing its causes."* (Recommendation 7)

Incapacity claimants are unlikely to disappear as a focus of concern for welfare-to-work policy, given the huge numbers (2.7m nationally), and in seaside towns approaching one-in-ten of all working age adults claim these benefits. There is a suspicion, too, that in seaside towns not all these claims originate locally.

There is a need for a better understanding of just who these people are, and why they are on incapacity benefits, if effective interventions to reduce the numbers are to be developed.

It would be sensible to start by building on research that is already underway. The research into IB claimants in Blackpool and Great Yarmouth was mentioned in Section 3. Findings should begin to become available early in 2008. On the other hand these are simply two case studies (out of eight) within a wider national project, the aim of which is not specifically to explore 'seaside' issues, though some of the data could be used for these purposes. Additionally, there are risks in trying to generalise about IB claimants from data for just two seaside towns.

The team responsible for the *Seaside Economy* report is playing a leading role in the incapacity claimant study. It would be pragmatic to explore with them the potential for synergy between the 'seaside' and 'incapacity' research agendas. The Blackpool and Great Yarmouth studies are both proceeding on the basis of co-funding from local partners, and an extension of this approach should be possible for other areas.

PRIORITY 3: ***An assessment of the role of seaside tourism***

It is astonishing that there is so little understanding of the scale and contribution of the seaside tourist industry. The Select Committee agreed: *"We recommend that the Government conducts an immediate study on coastal tourism, including evaluating levels of spend of domestic and inbound visitors to the coast in comparison to non-coastal areas"* (Recommendation 8)

It came as a genuine surprise to many people that the *Seaside Economy* report found that the British seaside holiday industry still shows plenty of signs of life. However, precisely how big the industry remains, how much it contributes to local economies, its current trends and how the situation varies from town to town all remain very unclear. Even total employment in the industry remains unclear. In this respect the seaside tourist industry may be unique: it is hard to point to another significant British industry about which so much basic information is unknown.

Assembling this sort of information is not an end in itself. The seaside tourist industry would seem as worthy of public support and encouragement as any other. RDAs and other bodies need to consider how their activities might best address the industry's needs. An information base is the first requirement. What is needed is a careful, statistics-and-economics driven study.

Seasonality is an important component of any investigation of the seaside tourist economy. This should include consideration of the consequences for individuals and communities.

PRIORITY 4: *The costs and funding of service delivery in seaside towns*

There will be no resolution to the argument that seaside towns face unusual costs in delivering public services and in providing key elements of the tourist infrastructure until firm evidence is available. The Select Committee said *"We agree with witnesses that Government funding to local authorities should reflect the impact of day visitors on the costs associated with maintaining the public realm in the formula for funding allocations. We suspect that witnesses are correct in their assertions that the funding formula methodology needs to be improved….."* (Recommendation 28)

This is a technical area that requires careful investigation that brings together information on local authority and other public body costs with an understanding of funding formulas. This assessment also needs to be informed by an understanding of the distinctive claims on public services and public expenditure likely to arise in the context of seaside towns, including seasonal fluctuations in visitor and population numbers.