



best practice in small town regeneration

Totnes town centre (courtesy gavinandrewstewart at flickr)



7.1 Introduction

Concern about the declining fortunes of small town centres has been reflected in a series of policy initiatives over the past 10 years. Local authorities, development agencies and others have promoted a variety of approaches to regeneration, and there now many success stories which can teach us important lessons about **what works – and what doesn't**. Small towns are already popular places: as a group, they have experienced strong population growth in recent decades. Traditional town centres have been through a challenging time but we are now seeing **signs of recovery** in many places. There are good examples close to Dawlish: **Totnes** is seen by many as a pioneer of rural town renaissance; towns like **Topsham** and **Kingsbridge** have prospered by serving the needs of local residents, but also by making themselves attractive to people living in the wider catchment area and holiday visitors.

7.2 Learning the lessons

What **lessons** can we learn from these success stories? One feature that they all have in common is a willingness to **treat change as an opportunity rather than a threat**. The places whose fortunes have been turned around have recognised that **town centres need to compete**. If local people can choose to shop or spend their leisure time elsewhere, it



follows that **people living in the surrounding area can choose to spend time and money in your town** – but only if there are facilities and features to attract them. For Dawlish, this means thinking not just in terms of serving a local market of 13,500, but of attracting visits and expenditure from the 400,000 people who live within 30-45 minutes drive time. The problem at present is that **Dawlish has very little to offer this large resident market** (equivalent to a city the size of Edinburgh or Bristol) so it is missing out on opportunities to capture discretionary expenditure.

Small towns should not try to fight battles they cannot win. Dawlish cannot compete with city centre department stores, out of town hyper markets or multiplex cinemas. When local people want these facilities they will travel to Exeter or other nearby towns to find them. The lesson from the case studies is that successful **small towns differentiate themselves** from city centres and regional shopping-leisure centres by offering an experience that other places cannot replicate. The best small towns have:

- a core of respected high street multiple stores, complemented by an array of **high quality independent and speciality shops**: people will make a special trip to visit these shops because they offer unique products and personal service; in Devon there is a growing demand for locally sourced and organic food products

Topsham, Devon (courtesy cheesytourists at flickr)



- a choice of **good places to eat and drink**, ranging from coffee shops and bars, to gastro-pubs and restaurants: food towns like Padstow and Ludlow have become major attractions; Devon is earning a national reputation for its commitment to local food with the success of Dart's Farm, Riverford Field Kitchen, the Venus Beach cafes and others
- an attractive and well-maintained **public realm**: people enjoy the scale, and character of smaller towns, but they also expect to see evidence of civic pride, with well-maintained buildings, parks and streets

- a regular programme of **events and festivals** to attract day visitors and tourists: the Dawlish Carnival is a remarkable community enterprise and a huge draw for visitors, but it needs to be complemented by a year-round programme of smaller scale events; this model has been used successfully at Ulverston in Cumbria
- **arts, crafts and culture** can also be popular attractions: visitors enjoy seeing artists and craftspeople at work, or visiting galleries like the popular Devon Guild of Craftsmen in Bovey Tracey; the presence of working artists adds vitality to a town and encourages new forms of retailing and enterprise
- successful small town centres have a **diverse economic base**: business and professional services, civic functions, public services, culture and leisure activities all help to keep the town centre at the heart of the life of the community, and to generate year-round footfall and vitality
- lively and active **community life**: visitors to small towns want an *authentic* experience in contrast to the sanitised commercial environments of many city centre streets and shopping malls; they enjoy seeing – and taking part in – local traditions and events.

The last point leads us to another very important message: if a town centre performs well for the people who live and work in the town it is more likely to attract visitors – so

getting it right for the people of Dawlish is the absolute priority. Whether they live locally or further afield, people are attracted to lively, comfortable, successful places. It is no longer realistic to expect people to be “loyal” to their local town centre: they have choices about where to shop, eat out or spend leisure time, and **their allegiance has to be earned.** If more local people choose Dawlish, the town’s reputation will grow and it will begin to attract **visitors from all parts of the Exeter-Torbay region.**

This message is consistent with what we know about the contemporary **tourism market.** Food, culture, speciality shopping and events are all important to the discerning, high spending visitors who come to Devon looking for an authentic experience.

When these elements are combined with attractive places to stay, small towns can become popular destinations in their own right: Bridport is a good example in the south west of a small market town which has become a fashionable place to stay.

There is a growing body of research evidence on **seaside regeneration.** English Heritage and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment have both documented success stories throughout the country. Their joint report, *Shifting Sands* (2003) explored the role of

Bridport Museum (courtesy will plant at flickr)



design in changing the image of seaside resorts¹. *Shifting Sands* identified nine key lessons:

- the importance of forming effective **partnerships for success** in which local and regional agencies work with the private sector to deliver investment
- creating **living communities** where people want to live, work and visit
- agreeing ways of **measuring success** in the economy, the housing market and community health
- recognising the effects of the **seaside environment** and the need to protect coastal features and marine habitats
- protecting the quality of beaches and the **public realm**
- **striking a balance:** raising quality without losing the “capricious charm” of the English seaside
- **stretching ambition:** English Heritage and CABE argue that too many seaside initiatives are modest in scale, when they should be bigger, better and more inventive
- **good design represents good value:**
 - it needn’t cost more or take longer
 - it delivers high investment returns and helps attract investment
 - it enhances workforce performance and occupier prestige
 - it confers benefits on all stakeholders

¹ English Heritage/CABE: *Shifting Sands: Design and the Changing Image of English Seaside Towns*, 2003.



- **restoring confidence** lies at the heart of successful regeneration.

English Heritage has just published a major new study on **heritage and regeneration in coastal towns in England**². The report documents a number of case studies of successful seaside regeneration, and identifies a similar set of **key drivers for success**:

- **improved transport links**: fast and direct links to major population centres, especially by rail
- **investment in a high quality public realm** helps to encourage a café culture and restore retail trade
- **a dynamic visitor offer** based on niche markets such as food and culture
- **clear target markets** and a strategy to serve them in terms of accommodation, attractions, restaurants, shops and services
- **economic diversification** to reduce seasonality and create a more sustainable economy
- **new coastal leisure activities** such as sports, recreation and spas
- **capitalising on the natural environment** by making seaside towns gateways to the surrounding coast and countryside
- **high quality development** to maximise visitor



Whitstable, Kent



- expenditure and attract skilled workers to the area
- **strong, visionary leadership** with a key role for local champions
- **clear strategic direction** leading to reinvention and economic diversification.

7.3 Seaside regeneration: best practice

We have reviewed examples of **best practice in coastal and small town regeneration** throughout the UK, including the English Heritage case studies. Devon already has some of the most successful and best-loved small towns in the country: **Totnes, Kingsbridge, Salcombe** and **Topsham** are all examples of places which have adapted to a changing market place, and which appeal to discerning, high spending visitors from within the travel to work area and beyond. They all offer interesting and attractive accommodation, excellent local food and a range of good quality independent shops in attractive urban environments. Just along the coast in Dorset, **Bridport** is a traditional centre of rural industry which has reinvented itself as a busy and appealing small town, with a lively cultural scene, good shops and services and a smart boutique hotel.

Like Dawlish, these are all places with a rich history and heritage but – unlike Dawlish – they have brought their offer up to date and made themselves attractive to a new

² English Heritage/Urban Practitioners: An Asset and a Challenge; Heritage and Regeneration in Coastal Towns in England, October 2007

generation of residents and visitors, without losing the qualities that make them distinctive and special.

From a long list of possible exemplars we have identified three coastal towns whose experience is particularly relevant to Dawlish. **Whitstable** in Kent was in deep decline, with unemployment running at almost 10% in 1990. Since then, an estimated £5.5m has been invested in the town, and it is now a popular place to live and visit, noted for fine food and a strong creative and cultural scene. Public sector investment in the restoration of historic buildings, townscapes, the public realm and a new arts centre has stimulated private sector investment in new hotels, restaurants, marina developments and speciality retail, making Whitstable one of the most fashionable weekend break destinations in the south east. The combination of food and art – and synergies with Canterbury and the Turner Contemporary project in Margate – have helped to attract visits throughout the year, boosting average household income. The transformation of the town’s image and reputation has helped to attract new businesses, especially in the creative industries, contributing to a better balanced and more diverse local economy.

St Anne’s on Sea was created in the 1870s. The developers laid out a spacious “garden town” on the Fylde Coast as an upmarket alternative to the popular attractions of



above: Weymouth Harbour below: St Anne’s on Sea



nearby Blackpool. Although the town had continued to be a popular place to live, the decline of traditional seaside holidays eroded the town’s economic base in the late 20th century. The town centre began to show the effects of long-term under-investment, and the retail vacancy rate rose to 25% in 1998. Although apparently better placed than many coastal towns to respond to changing aspirations, St Anne’s had slipped into decline and a once elegant town centre had become shabby and tired. Since 2001, grant support totalling £4m has been used to renovate Victorian shop fronts, parks and public spaces, and this has leveraged an estimated £20m of private sector investment in shops, restaurants and hotels. There has been a marked improvement in business confidence, and St Anne’s has begun to recover its status and prestige. The retail vacancy rate has dropped to 4% and Wood Street has become a popular café quarter.

Weymouth has felt the combined impact of a collapse in traditional tourism, the decline of the commercial port and the loss (in the mid 1990s) of the naval base. Together these trends accounted for an estimated loss to the local economy in the order of £40m a year, and this was reflected in the run down condition of many of the town’s Georgian and Victorian terraces. A long-term programme of investment in the Esplanade helped to stop the rot, and to create the conditions for the diversification of the local economy.



There has been a big drive to develop water sports and other outdoor activities and recent investors include outdoor clothing designers, a sailing school and yacht builders. Weymouth is being promoted as a gateway to the Jurassic Coast. The former Weymouth Brewery has been converted into a mixed use development, including a new museum. There is now strong developer interest in the town, with plans for a new hotel, marina and theatre due for completion in 2011.

In all three cases the **regeneration of historic buildings and the public realm** has helped to restore the confidence of businesses and to act as a catalyst for private sector investment. All three towns were under strain and had struggled to respond to changing social, economic and market conditions. In these circumstances it is easy for towns like Dawlish to become victims of events and to slip into a **cycle of decline**. They begin to conform to the syndrome of “ageing infrastructure, tired ideas and low quality accommodation” described by the Consumers’ Association and they fail to keep pace with the rising aspirations of sophisticated and empowered consumers. Some towns are still in a **state of denial**, and behave as if the tired and dated traditional seaside offer is going to come back into fashion, even though there is no prospect that this will happen.

But Whitstable, St Anne’s and Weymouth – and many other

coastal and small towns we could have cited – have **taken control of their destiny** by recognising that the world has changed, and that the expectations of residents and visitors alike have moved on. None of these towns is “fixed”: some problems and challenges persist, but all have had the **vision** to look to a better and more sustainable future and the **drive and energy** to make things happen. Critically, the joint efforts of communities, businesses, local authorities and other agencies have helped to create a **climate of confidence** which encourages investors and entrepreneurs. The recent decision by Venus Beach Cafes to open their first “urban” café in Newquay was influenced by their sense that “the town was going places”.

The circumstances of different towns may vary, and each needs to find an appropriate regeneration strategy reflecting its particular needs and opportunities, but **successful regeneration always starts with the recognition of the need for change** and a calm and dispassionate appraisal of the town’s assets and liabilities.

There is no magic formula for success, but this review – based on our direct experience of small town regeneration, as well as research studies by CABE, English Heritage and others – shows that small towns can turn themselves around and make themselves attractive and useful places in the 21st century. We believe that Dawlish has the ability to make this

transition, not least because of the **passionate commitment of local people to their town**. This is reflected in the work of the Town Council, Dawlish Community Trust, the Carnival Committee, Dawlish Repertory Company and many others. It was confirmed by the impressive attendance – more than 500 people during the course of the day – at the *Dawlish Tomorrow* event, and the huge volume of ideas and observations that were offered.

SWRDA’s Market and Coastal Towns Initiative, which provided financial support for the work of the Dawlish Regeneration Group (now the Community Trust) as well as for this study, has a national reputation programme. This is an acknowledgement of the special place of small towns in the life of the South West, and Devon in particular. SWRDA’s experience, documented in a 2006 report on the initiative, is that the key to success lies in involving the people who live and work in small towns in “redrawing the economic map at a local level”: In this respect, Dawlish is already an exemplar: the challenge now is to translate the commitment of the community into a **programme for transformational change**.