On shifting sands

It's the most deprived place in England and Wales, its residents routinely mocked by the tabloid press. Yet Jaywick is a resilient community that defies improvement efforts that would take away its uniqueness. A new place plan might just stick, however, as Simon Wicks discovers

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It's one of the most deprived settlements in England. Parts were ranked as the *most* deprived in the 2010, 2015 and 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation. It's also become a tabloid go-to for peddling a 'broken Britain' narrative, an excuse for derisive ogling at poverty.

Viewed from one perspective, Jaywick Sands in Essex is a distillation of England's social challenges: in housing, health, employment, services, transport and resilience to climate change, it's well below national averages.

Were it proposed today, it simply wouldn't be allowed. Similar 1930s 'plotlands' developments are long gone, yet Jaywick has survived, demonstrating extraordinary community resilience in the face of insensitive officialdom and remaining one of the most idiosyncratic places in Britain.

It is simply unlike anywhere else: its older parts – Brooklands, Grasslands and the Village – characterised by 1,800 tightly packed, individually unique, chalet-style houses on tiny plots. Originally built in the 1920s and 30s as holiday homes for working class Londoners, they became permanently occupied over time.

Never (officially) intended for such occupation, these 'beach huts' have serious drawbacks. Many are built on salt marsh, below sea level on a part of the east coast vulnerable to flooding and the effects of climate change.

Indeed, in 1953, high tides and winds combined to push the sea through the defensive wall, submerging Brooklands; 35 people died. Seventy years on, none of these homes are flood resilient, just a handful have an upstairs refuge, there are scant evacuation routes, many residents have mobility issues and the sea wall has almost been overtopped twice in the last decade. It's a disaster waiting to happen.

Each of the chalet-style houses is a little different from its neighbour

"Should we be continuing to defend communities like Jaywick in flood prone areas?"

Flood risk is also the reason why the public realm and many homes in Jaywick have been allowed to fall into decay and disrepair: who would invest in a place that could be ruined by the sea at any time?

"There's no natural defence option here," explains Hana Loftus, director of HAT Projects, commissioned to produce a 'place plan' for Jaywick. "The bigger existential question is: should we be continuing to defend communities like Jaywick and people who live in flood prone areas? The basis of the Jaywick Place Plan is obviously the answer is yes."

Various improvement suggestions have been submitted over the years, the community fighting the prospect of eviction more than once. For all that there is an air of dereliction in parts, there's also unexpected beauty; homes adorned with bespoke features and quirky decorations that speak to a strong feeling of community pride.

"I love the community spirit. People working together. The beaches are amazing," says Bradley Thomspon, an independent councillor for West Clacton and Jaywick Sands who also runs the Jaywick Sands Community Forum. "I chose to move here from Clacton because it's a much better area [than I was living in]. For the money we bought our house at, you couldn't get anywhere else in the country that's a nicer place. I know there are burnt-out buildings but it's getting better. Big changes are coming."

Flood risk

Quite apart from the challenge of producing a plan that addresses multiple social challenges, the sea, in Loftus' view, presents a huge obstacle. Flooding is an obvious risk, but the Environment Agency (EA) doesn't see it as so serious yet that it merits additional work on the sea wall. This won't happen until 2038, although funding of £24 million will be available to improve defences from 2033.

Increasing the height of the sea wall is the EA's preferred option, but this will block light to homes separated from the barrier only by a narrow road; and it will likely make accessibility to the beach – Jaywick's major selling point – more difficult. Then there is the issue of housing. Though flooding was a concern even when Jaywick was first mooted, none of the 'beach huts' are built to withstand flood.

To make Jaywick an attractive place to invest in, these two issues need to be tackled first, says Loftus, and they're at the heart of the Place Plan.

A complete reworking of the seafront is envisaged, with better defences and access to the beach, and improved public realm: a raised sea wall moved 10-15 metres further from the seafront homes and integrated into the beach itself; an accessible walkway atop it; a boardwalk on the beach.

As for public realm, the freed up space would provide room for walking and cycling. With visual improvements, amenity gains and a focus on the beach, new flood defences could become "a driver of economic opportunity", says Loftus. "There is a lot of spend not happening here for no other reason than lack of facilities, lack of infrastructure and the reputational challenge of Jaywick as a place. But making the flood defence infrastructure part of the story of change physically can have a really major impact."

This solution will cost £84 million – considerably more than the £50 million the EA scheme would cost and £60 million more than the 2033 funding. Delivering the entire Place Plan will cost £120 million. The investment case is contingent on satisfactory flood resilience work. Loftus sees investment from multiple sources: the council, government agencies, homeowners – and also commercial investors.

"Commercial developers in general run a mile from Jaywick, right?" she stresses. "It's a low value area, it has very low viability at the moment, it costs you about twice as much to actually build a house here as you probably get for it.

Jaywick: A (very) brief history

1928-1930 Resort developer Frank Stedman buys land at Jaywick and begins building chalets. By 1930 there are 800 homes, described as 'beach huts' in Brooklands and Grasslands.

1930-34 Construction extended to the Village on larger plots with homes advertised as seasonal homes or beach huts – though many were occupied for long periods.

1935-39 Tudor Estate built north of the Village.

1945 on Post-war, erstwhile holidaymakers return to their chalets as retirees. Sea defences improved.

1953 Major flooding event takes 35 lives in Jaywick.

1954-70 More retirees move in, Brooklands and Grasslands remain without basic services.

1971-79 Attempt by council to compulsorily purchase and demolish most of Brooklands and Grasslands fails in face of community resistance.

1980-89 Basic utilities, including drainage, finally installed in Brooklands and Grasslands.

2007 Tendring District Council proposal to demolish 500 Brooklands homes abandoned in face of community protest.

2017 Improvements to streets in Brooklands and Grasslands streets.

2018-present Sunspot business centre designed and constructed. Development of Jaywick Sands Place Plan.

Alamy

Hence why it's not already regenerated.

"There's market failure, and there are two reasons for that. Firstly, the reputational and visual blight of the area in terms of some of the dereliction. Secondly, the flood risk. Get rid of the flood risk but not the blight and people are going to go 'Well, I may be safe but the values are still going to be basically rock bottom'.

"But if you address both, you start creating an environment where values will start to rise and commercial investment, or less subsidised investment, will look like a good bet."

Loftus notes that the long-term cost to the public of supporting Jaywick in its current form is already very high. The cost-benefit analysis is enormously complex but, in brief, investment in creating a healthier, more prosperous environment will generate income for Jaywick while reducing spend on public support for its residents.

Home improvement

HAT Projects and the council have developed a strategy for improving homes without decanting people. This involves the council acquiring plots and building model homes that are flood resilient and which meet a new design code, giving existing homeowners support to improve their properties, enforcing against 'rogue' landlords and offering to buy substandard homes. Essentially, it's taking substandard homes out of circulation while improving the overall quality of the stock.

The Place Plan concedes that new homes on vacant plots will likely have to come from the council funds; but it also envisages a role for 'patient capital', particularly via institutional investors.

Loftus is adamant that the only way to make a lasting difference is through a multi-agency approach that addresses the village's issues in the round. The plan is thus built around the Tendring District Council's local plan's five aims for Jaywick: transform housing quality and the built environment; ensure long-term flood resilience; create greater connectivity to neighbouring areas; attract commerce and new economic opportunities; improve people's life chances, access to public services and health and wellbeing.

Some improvements are already under way. Early Place Plan work identified a need for business space. This led to construction of the Sunspot, an indoor market and business centre offering low-cost space to local businesses in a smart new building on the seafront. All its units were quickly let.

"Most of the residents were saying 'Yeah, housing is a bit of a problem', but really, they were saying 'No-one can get a job here. There's no local services. No shops'," says Loftus.

Meanwhile, the NHS Healthy Homes team is working in the village; a new wheeling route along the beach between Jaywick and Clacton makes the latter more accessible; a free bike scheme has been enormously successful; and a community clean-up, jointly organised with the council, got rid of 80 tonnes of fly-tipped refuse from the streets of Brooklands, Grasslands and the Village.

"If just the Environment Agency did their thing, that's still not going to tie in with everything else that needs to be delivered," says Eleanor Storey, a strategic planner with Tendring Borough Council. "That's why the Place Plan is a holistic approach that homogenises all those streams into one direction."

Thompson is broadly supportive of the plan and praises the work that has already taken place – albeit he has reservations around costs and Jaywick's history of being presetned with false dawns. "How are you going to deliver it?" he asks. "They've made these promises to people but they've got no money."

Clockwise from top: commercial strip, sea wall, Sunspot

Alamy / Getty / HAT Projects/Maddie Persent

On the same page

Loftus and Storey appear confident that the plan will receive formal backing from the council in July. Thompson, too, accepts that it's likely to be approved. Loftus concedes that there are considerable challenges ahead, notably around funding but also carrying the community with them over what will be a long and difficult journey. Yet she sees what she's proposing as essential to lasting regeneration.

"You can't expect the community to help itself if the infrastructure isn't there for them to build on. But also the reality is, looking at the flood defences, that's going to be a many years project to fund and deliver. What we need is a plan now to try and get everybody lined up and on the same page [...] This is a community that will absolutely defend their own place. We have to have something that has got to work for them."

Even Thompson is happy to set aside his scepticism when discussing the general trajectory of Jaywick, plan or no plan. "It'll be a lovely place in ten years's time," he remarks.

SIMON WICKS
is deputy editor of The Planner

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Read the Interim Report Jaywick Sands Place Plan on the Tendring District Council website: Bit.ly/0506-Tendring

IN NUMBERS

Down and out in Jaywick Sands?

Indicators of deprivation

Brooklands, Grasslands and parts of the Village (also known as LSOA 018A) was ranked as **the most deprived area in England and Wales** on the Index of Multiple Deprivation in **2010, 2015 and 2019.**

33%

33% of housing in this area does not meet the Decent Homes Standard

20%

More than **20%** of Jaywick residents are in 'bad health' or 'very bad health'. More than **40%** are affected by long-term illness or disability.

JOB
325

There are only **325** jobs in Jaywick, representing a density of **1 job to every 16** residents

Approximately **60%** of the population is classed as economically inactive. **41%** of residents are retired

60%

50%

Fewer than **50%** of homes in Brooklands, Grasslands and the Village are owner-occupied. Vacancy rates in these areas run at **12%**, double the national average

There is **not a single supermarket in Jaywick.** The nearest are in Clacton, **two or three miles away** by car or bus.

50% of Jaywick households don't have access to a car

50%

SOURCES: JAYWICK SANDS PLACE PLAN, INDEX OF MULTIPLE DEPRIVATION FOR ENGLAND AND WALES, TENDRING ECONOMIC STRATEGY EVIDENCE BASE, 2021 CENSUS