



RESEARCH NOTE

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Introduction

This is the fifth and final interim report from Onward's research into Levelling Up in Practice.

Our first interim report¹ set out the purpose of this programme. In summary, we are working to develop a prototype methodology for levelling up, rooted in evidence and informed by the views of local communities. By taking the insights from the Levelling Up White Paper and applying them to specific places across the country, we want to generate an actionable toolkit for local leaders to improve their areas.

We believe this methodology for Levelling Up needs to be different from past attempts at regeneration. It needs to make places great to live in as well as making them wealthier, prioritise the social fabric alongside economic fundamentals, and bring opportunities to where people live already - rather than expecting them to move. And our methodology needs to marry consistency and flexibility: clear and replicable enough as a playbook that different communities can adopt it, but not so rigid that it ignores the nuances of local context.

Our approach combines three steps:

- *Data Diagnostics* - understanding the economic and social characteristics of an area through a range of quantitative datasets and building a typology of places so that local leaders can identify relevant comparators;
- *Field Visits* - conducting qualitative research in a series of places across the UK, including focus groups with members of the public and discussions with businesses, community groups, local and regional government, schools, colleges, and universities;
- *Levelling Up Playbook* - identifying shared challenges to form the building blocks for a set of replicable and scalable interventions. These will primarily be low-cost, fast-acting, evidence-based interventions, within the gift of local leaders without recourse to central government.

In the spirit of sharing and learning, we will regularly publish interim research which summarises what we have learnt in each place and offer initial thoughts and recommendations. These will serve to prompt discussion and unearth common themes, and improve the robustness of the prototype once all the research has been concluded.

Our first four reports shared our learnings from Oldham, South Tyneside, Walsall, and Barry, bringing together a range of data with views from members of the public and leaders from the public, private, and charitable sectors.

Our research in Clacton

The fifth place we have focused on is Clacton-on-Sea, which we visited in July 2022.

We are extremely grateful to the individuals and organisations who gave their time to speak to us - including David Lees at Clacton Coastal Academy, Philippa Holliday from the Tendring Education Strategic Board, Sue Bardetti at Holland Haven, Gavin Bradley and Ellie Eames at White Hall Academy, Lynn Right at Stigma, Andrew Smith at Learning Pathways, Samantha Torr at Alpha Teaching Hub, Barbara Pole, Anastasia Simpson and Mike Carran from Tendring District Council, Irvine Wright at Bioline AgroSciences, Stuart Burns and Charmaine Steele at Dura Composites, David Edwards at Smith Farms, Billy Ball at the Clacton Pier Company Ltd, Andy Mullis at Hart Wilcox, Billy Peak at Clacton Pavilion, Zoe from Un-Sealed, Steve Evison, Richard Puleston, Jodi Thompson, and Lucy Wightman from Essex County Council, Joanne Besant at the North East Essex CCG, Tom Booth at the East Suffolk and North Essex NHA Foundation Trust, Eric Payne at Clacton and Harwich DWP, Sharon Alexander and Annalisa Andrews at CVS Tendring, Gaynor Jarrett at Summit Services, Sarah Hanness at Inclusion Ventures, Sarah Right at Open Road Ventures, Rosie Roella Kevlin at Essex Pedal Power, Melanie Hammond at Citizens Advice Tendring, and Christopher Wetton at Essex Carers Support. While these conversations were highly valuable, the authors hold full responsibility for the contents of this interim research note.

Clacton-on-Sea

“If that’s what levelling up means, putting extra resources in to help people improve their skills and improve their lives, then Clacton is in need of that.”

Emma, 37, Resident

Some have characterised levelling up as being about the North and the South. Participants in focus groups in Oldham and South Tyneside told us that the phrase means “closing the North/South divide” and bringing prosperity to deindustrialised towns. The Levelling Up White Paper opened with data on widening regional gaps in productivity, health, and welfare. Onward’s own research has highlighted the diverging fortunes of different parts of the country, underpinned by governments directing growth-enhancing spending disproportionately to the Greater South East. The fall of the ‘red wall’ of traditionally Labour-held constituencies in the North to the Conservatives in 2019 reinforced this narrative, directing political attention.

But this picture of Levelling Up is incomplete. Across the South, relatively richer regions disguise towns and neighbourhoods with long-standing challenges. The lack of opportunity in these areas looks different from the Midlands and the North. Rural poverty and struggling coastal communities are more common than medium-sized towns that once hosted factories, shipyards, or mines. But what all these places have in common is untapped potential. And the core focus of Levelling Up is unlocking this potential, to the benefit of the whole of the UK.

Clacton serves as an ideal case study of this blend of challenge and potential. The seaside town in the Tendring District of Essex, with a population of around 60,000, sits just under 20km southeast of Colchester (granted city status earlier this year) and 75km northeast of London - about 30 or 90 minutes on the train respectively.

Clacton has enormous promise. Freeport East in nearby Harwich is forecast to generate hundreds of jobs and support new businesses in logistics, building on the existing success of the Port of Felixstowe. The Clacton Air Show attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, and the Clacton Pier has long been a staple for domestic tourism. Manufacturing businesses that export internationally are tucked away in industrial estates on the fringes of the town centre.

But the symptoms of decline in Clacton are immediately visible. The high street hosts almost no major brands or chains, raised regularly by interviewees who lamented the recent loss of Marks and Spencer. Focus group participants also told us that the centre of the town is a site of regular anti-social behaviour. Darren, an engineer, aged 52, said “the focal point of our town centre is five people drinking Tennent’s extra, and our fountains were the only ones that were switched off”. Another, Georgette, a carer, aged 47, told us “you’ve got drunks on most corners, especially during the summer time, they take up the whole of the middle bit where the fountain is...it’s so off putting, especially when you’ve got kids”.

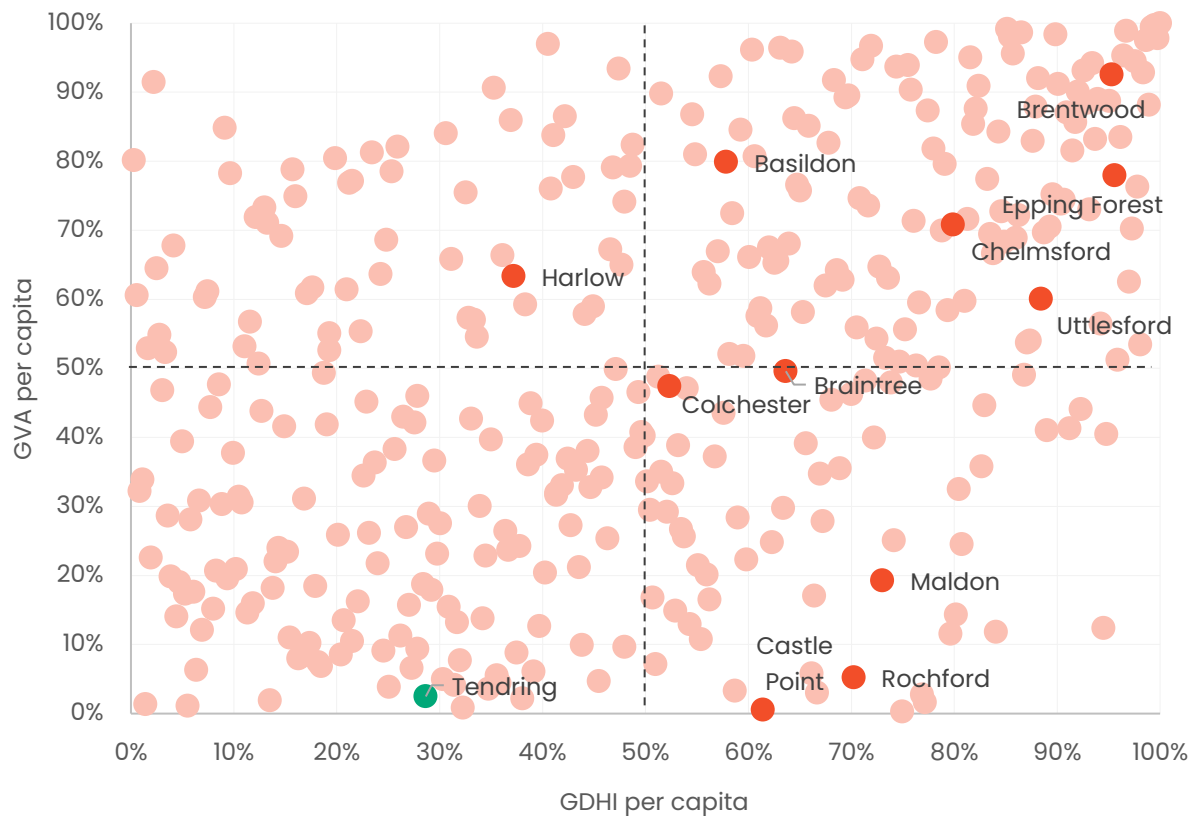
The highest levels of poverty can be found further along the coast, hidden from those visiting the seafront and the pier. Jaywick Sands, a part of Clacton just over 3 kilometres to the West, was originally built in the 1930s as holiday homes for the working classes which became permanent residences after World War Two. Today, it contains the most deprived neighbourhood in the country according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation - number 1 of 32,844 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs).² 40% of the population are economically inactive, against approximately 25% nationally. This is partly driven by a high number of retirees (12.4% vs 4.9% national average) but more so by people who are long-term sick or disabled at a rate over three times the national average (15% vs 4.6%).³

Our initial data diagnostic highlights how these challenges manifest in the economy and society of Clacton, Jaywick Sands, and the broader Tendring district.

Tendring is the only local authority in Essex with both productivity and material welfare lower than the national average. The area has particularly low productivity, with a GVA per capita of around £13,500, almost £10,000 lower than the UK average. This places it among the 2% of least productive local authorities in the country, comparable to areas like Redcar & Cleveland or Gedling. Material welfare performs relatively better than productivity in Tendring, with household income per capita around £18,500, almost £3,000 less than the national average

Figure 1: GVA per capita vs GDHI per capita, in percentile ranks

Source: Onward Analysis of ONS Regional Accounts, 2019



On social indicators, Tendring is also significantly below national averages. Onward’s social fabric index, which combines data on local issues such as volunteering, group membership, physical infrastructure like shops and green spaces, trust in civic institutions, crime rates and family formation, places Tendring in the 10th percentile, similar to areas like Halton in the North West and Redcar in the North East. Understanding Society’s ‘belonging’ scores, which measure the extent to which people feel that they belong to their neighbourhood, ranks four districts in Essex (Castle Point, Rochford, Basildon and Harlow) in the bottom 20% of places nationally. Tendring still sits below the national average, at the 31st percentile, although this is notably higher than the city of Chelmsford (at the 27th percentile).

Figure 2: Social Fabric and Belonging Scores, in percentile ranks

Source: Onward Social Fabric data, Understanding Society Belonging scores



So what drives these high levels of deprivation in a county that otherwise has fairly high levels of economic output and welfare? And what steps might local leaders take to tackle some of these problems? The remainder of this report considers the challenges faced by Clacton, Jaywick Sands, and Tendring against the four headings of the Levelling Up White Paper.

1) Boost productivity, pay, jobs, and living standards by growing the private sector

“If you were looking for a decent job, say you were fresh out of university, you need to be able to travel, you’re looking at Colchester, Chelmsford, or commuting into London. If you live in Clacton, you would not have anything that I would consider to be a career. You could be a carer, or a school assistant, but you wouldn’t get the same money as you would in London.”

Kay, Administrator, 33

Clacton-On-Sea was once a successful seaside town that thrived on high levels of domestic tourism. The area hosted a Butlin’s from 1938 to 1983, and during the 1970s Clacton Pier featured live shows with dolphins and killer whales.

There are now only remnants of this economic peak. Clacton Pier remains popular for day trippers, with approximately 1 million visiting in 2019, and the Clacton Air Show attracts around 250,000 people each year.⁴ In focus groups, participants mentioned both of these features as something that makes Clacton stand out. But these assets are not the economic foundations they once were. In 2019 the area was voted the worst seaside in the country out of a longlist of 106 sites.⁵ Residents also recognised this decline, but were quick to emphasise that Clacton wasn’t unique - Louise, 50, an administrator, told us that “Blackpool, Margate - they’re all the same...Clacton isn’t alone!”.

Tendring’s economy today is dominated by retail, health and care, tourism, and education - making up nearly 55% of all jobs in the district.⁶ This mix contributes to the low level of productivity in the district - with Tendring ranking among the least productive 10% of authorities in the country. Business growth is also anaemic, with only 6.6% increase in the number of firms over the past 5 years, compared to similar low growth rates of 6.6% in Essex and 7% in the United Kingdom. And the share of businesses in the area that are “high growth” has more than halved (-66%) in the same period.⁷

Figure 3: Industry composition in Tendring, South East Local Enterprise Partnership, and Great Britain

Source: Business Register and Employment Survey, 2021

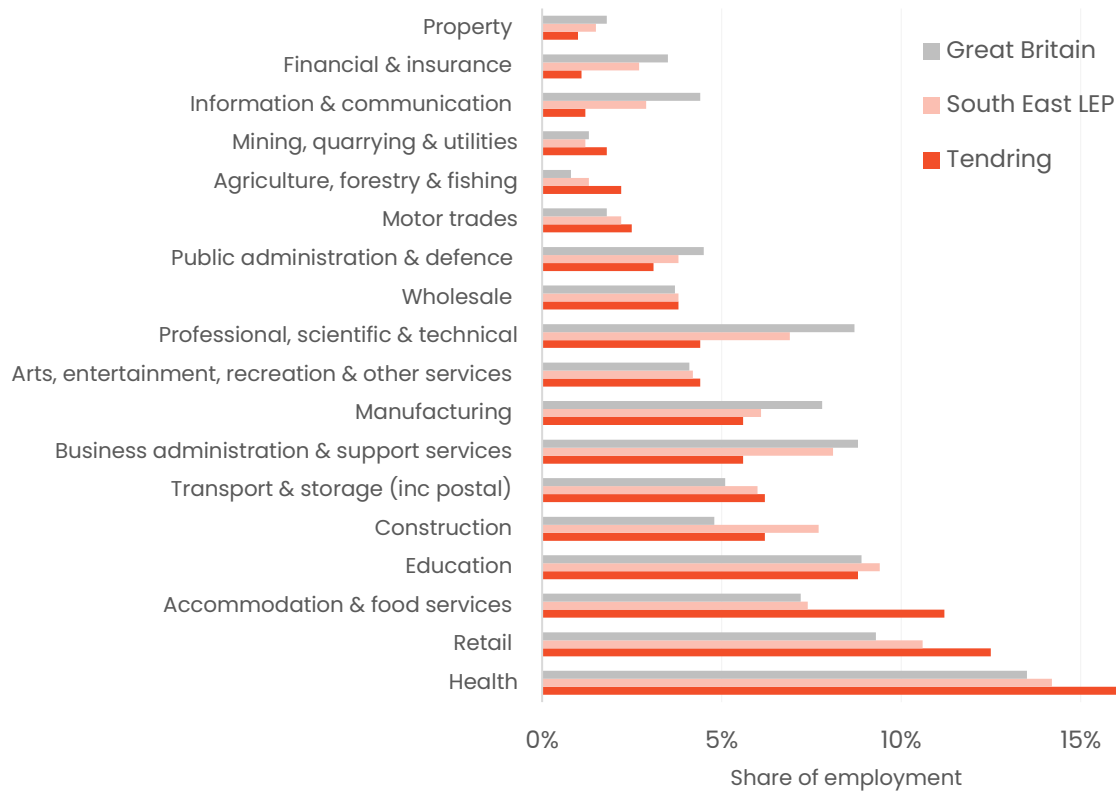
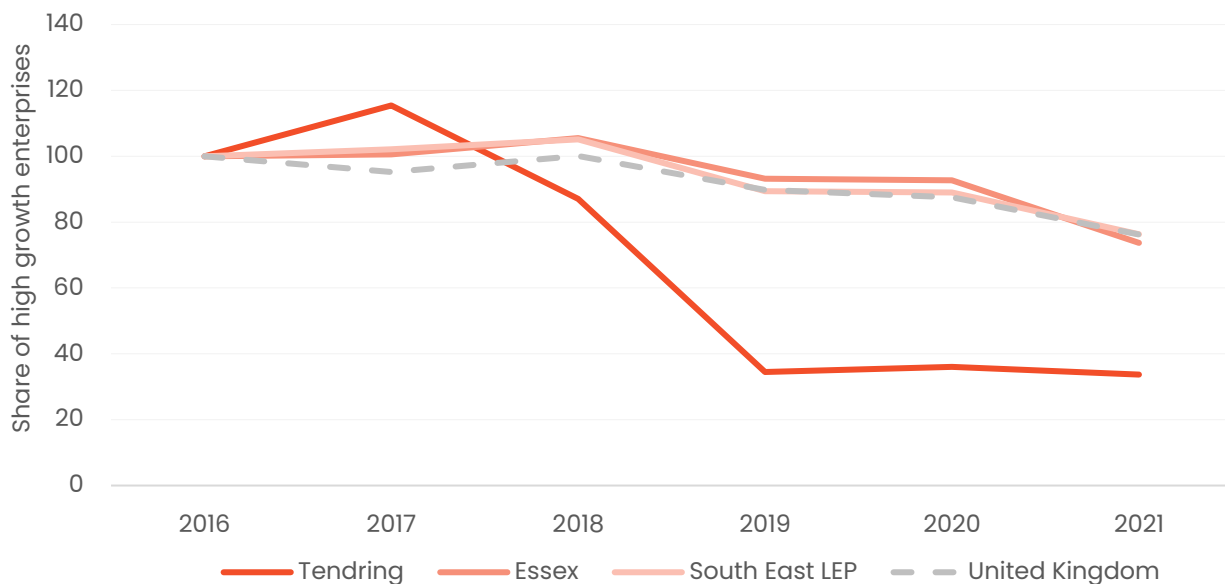


Figure 4: Share of high growth enterprises, 2016–21 (Index 2016 = 100)

Source: Business Register and Employment Survey



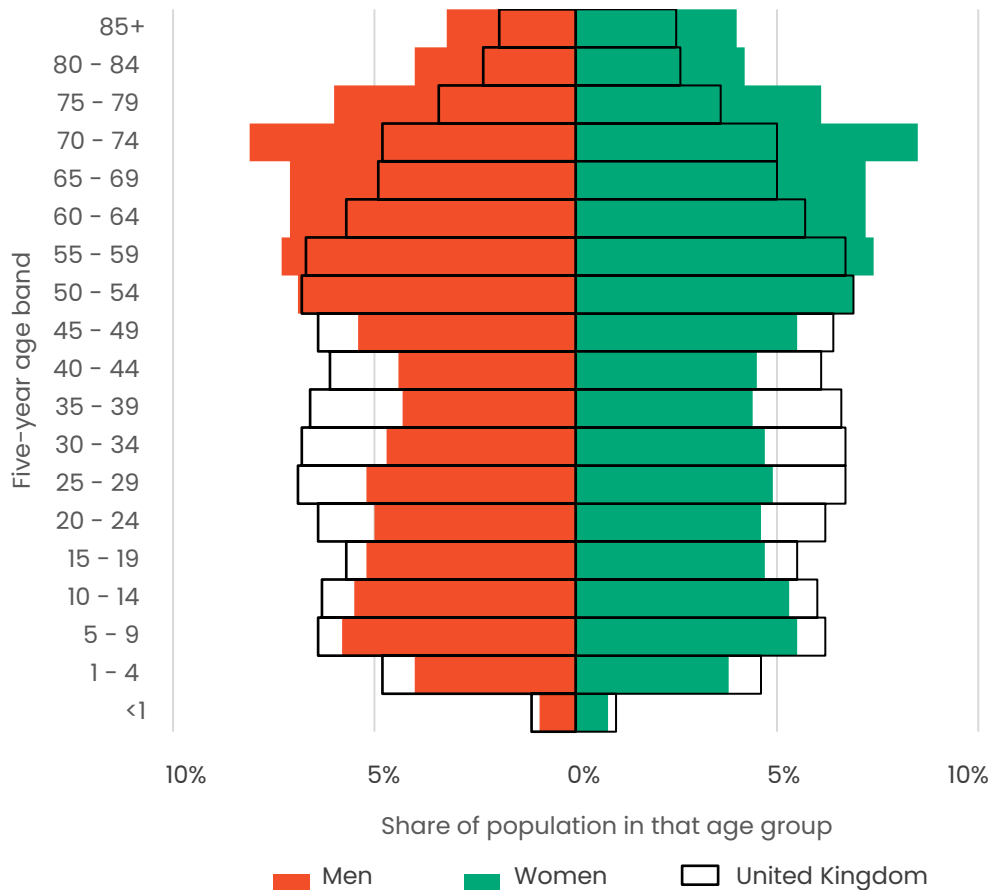
*Note: High growth enterprises are those that have an average annualised growth rate greater than 20% per annum, over a three-year period, as measured by employment

A study undertaken by the council in 2019 identified three areas where the wider Tendring area has relative economic specialisms: ports and logistics, tourism, and health and care.⁸ But none of these seem likely to benefit Clacton or Jaywick Sands:

- Jobs density in ports and logistics is 1.5 times greater than the national average. But these jobs are primarily clustered around the new freeport in Harwich, directly connected to Colchester via the A120 - the jobs density ratio for Harwich itself is 4.0 times the national average, compared to only 0.6 in Clacton and 0.5 in Jaywick Sands. Local leaders in Clacton referred to the new freeport with frustration - it wasn't clear to them how young people from the area were going to access any new jobs or opportunities, which they said would more likely go to Harwich residents or commuters from Colchester.
- Tendring's strength in tourism is unsurprising given the area's national assets. But again, any economic advantage the area has in this sub-sector is unlikely to benefit Clacton. Although tourism is 1.3 times more concentrated in Tendring compared to national averages, this is driven primarily by Frinton On Sea with a density 2.1 times the national average, compared to Clacton at 1.0 (in line with national averages). While the Jaywick Sands density appears high at 2.9 times the national average, the absolute number of jobs is extremely low at 80.
- Health and care is one area where Clacton has a higher concentration of jobs than Tendring overall - with densities of 1.5 times and 1.3 times the national average respectively. This specialism is driven by demographics. Figure 5 highlights that Tendring has a population significantly older than the national average, with differences being largest for the 70-80 age group. Just over a third of the jobs in health and care are in residential care, a sector characterised by low wages and productivity, and the area's economic review found "limited evidence of higher value health and care activities."

Figure 5: Demographic pyramid for Tendring, by five-year age band

Source: ONS annual population projections by five-year age band, 2021



So what are the factors holding back the growth of the private sector in Clacton? One possible contributor is poor transport links. Clacton itself has regular transport to London and Colchester from its central train station, but a number of local leaders pointed to two problems with connectivity on public transport. The first was very limited connectivity between Clacton and surrounding towns - residents in Jaywick Sands in particular found it challenging to get into Clacton to work or study, and Clacton residents themselves would struggle to get to employment centres like Harwich. The other challenge was the lack of connectivity within Clacton itself, with a limited and unreliable bus network. Given that almost a third of residents (28.8%) have no access to a car or a van, this significantly limits the effective size of the labour market.⁹

Digital infrastructure is also lacking. Many residents are unable to afford broadband or the technology to access the internet and even for those who can, approximately 64% of Tendring falls within the worst 10% nationally for download speeds, with all areas falling within the worst 30%.¹⁰ And for businesses in Clacton or the wider Tendring area that need faster connections, the lack of digital infrastructure is a particular barrier - with only 7% of Clacton covered by an ultrafast broadband connection compared to 57.7% of the UK.

Table 1: Availability of broadband at different spatial levels, 2021*Source: Ofcom Connected Nations 2021, data on performance and coverage*

Area	Superfast broadband (\geq 30Mbps)	Ultrafast broadband capacity (\geq 300 Mbps)	Gigabit availability (upto 1000 Mbps)
Clacton-on-Sea	98.3%	6.9%	6.9%
Tendring	97.6%	12.1%	12.1%
Essex County Council	96.1%	50.1%	28.4%
East of England	96%	57.7%	24.4%
United Kingdom	94.3%	57.7%	38.2%

Note: Clacton here refers to the parliamentary constituency, not the built-up area of Clacton-on-Sea

Some local businesses we spoke to suggested a barrier to growth could be the lack of available employment land - although a 2019 study seems to indicate this is not a challenge, finding that “at a district level, there is more than sufficient supply of land to meet future needs even if the most optimistic scenario is adopted.”¹¹

So infrastructure is clearly part of the challenge. But overall, the primary barrier to growth and productivity in Clacton and Jaywick Sands seems to rest not in the shape of the local economy, but in the levels of deprivation that weaken the labour market and the area’s fraying social fabric. We turn to these issues in more detail in sections two and three below.

What might this mean for the levelling up playbook?

As highlighted above, Tendring Council has developed a local economic strategy which includes hyper-local elements focused on Clacton and Jaywick Sands. Essex County Council are also focussed on boosting growth in Clacton, and have made it a core part of their work on levelling up. Initiatives include the ‘Essex IAG Connect’ which was supported by the Community Renewal Fund and will give information and guidance to adults to connect them to growing sectors of industry. The ‘Pathways to Diagnostics Trailblazer’ delivered by a local college and NHS Trust aims to provide residents of Tendring with skills to access jobs in the new Community Diagnostics Hub at Clacton Hospital.

The council have also rightly recognised that areas like Clacton and Jaywick Sands will need bespoke approaches. Their aim is to make Clacton a “Strong Service Centre”, combining a strong visitor experience with more high-value service jobs in quality office space. For Jaywick Sands, they are aiming to build community capacity as part of a bottom-up approach to economic growth, with schemes like the “Commercial Workspace Project” which creates affordable space for new businesses as well as a covered market to expand the area’s retail offer.

These initiatives hold promise, and represent the sort of hyper-local approach to growth that is needed when there are limited industrial opportunities. But the council should also consider measures to help people in Clacton access growth in other parts of the area. Stronger transport links to Harwich could open new opportunities in logistics, and links to Frinton could open jobs in retail or hospitality. A recent Levelling Up Fund bid supported by Essex County Council set out an £18 transport infrastructure package to address some of the area’s connectivity challenges.

Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) offers an alternative to either costly large-scale infrastructure projects or bus networks that may require significant public subsidy. DRT is scheduled and operated based on the real-time demand of passengers, rather than following a fixed route or schedule. For individuals, this could include ride sharing apps like Uber and Lyft. But for whole communities, examples include shuttles or buses that respond in real time to the specific needs of residents.

In Bristol, a “Big Local” community group called Ambition Lawrence Weston engaged with local employers to set up a community shuttle bus that helped residents access jobs.¹² The community members used evidence of demand to advocate for a permanent bus service, which was then introduced by a private provider. An academic study of barriers to employment in Bristol found that transport factors had led to 19% of local jobseekers having left a job and 26% having missed a job interview, and argued for the adoption of DRT.¹³ In many areas, councils themselves have launched DRT offers. In Hertfordshire almost 18,000 passengers have used a service called HertsLynx: a service with three 16-seater vans that has no fixed routes, operates within a 150 square mile zone, and creates routes via an algorithm.¹⁴ Essex County Council has already introduced a DRT scheme across North Essex, and could consider extending its operation to Clacton.

2) Spread opportunities and improve public services

“People from Jaywick Sands are discriminated against as soon as they give their name and address.”

Community Leader

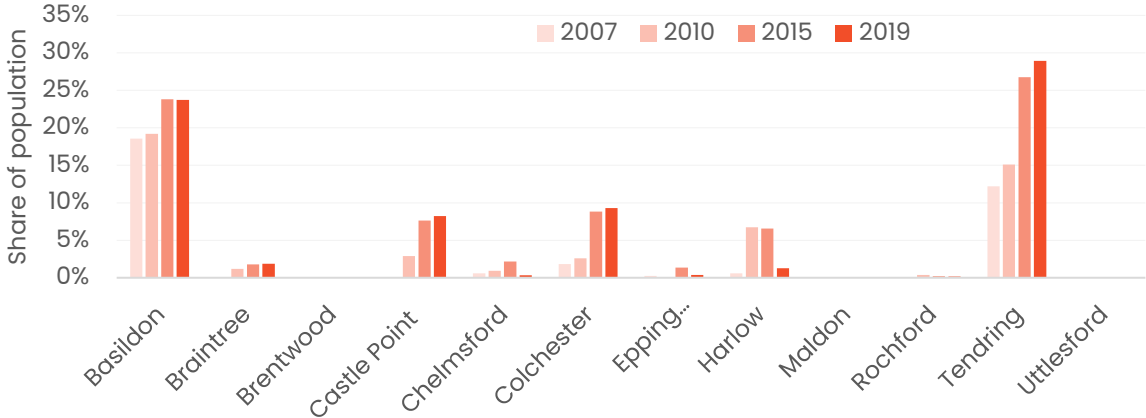
Local leaders and residents at times disagree on what limits opportunity in Clacton. Some told us that there was a problem with attitude. They pointed to families with multigenerational unemployment and argued that they were content to receive benefits, and didn’t support their children in engaging with education and enrichment opportunities. Employers told us that “the working class mentality was gone” and that when one had hired fifty new members of staff, thirty didn’t turn up on the first day.

Others told us that there was a problem with trauma. They argued that a long legacy of deprivation had taken its toll, combining ill health, criminality, poor housing stock, and fragmented families. One local leader spoke of a generation who grew up thinking they would work in Butlins, who didn’t get the support they needed when hospitality dried up in the 1980s and 1990s and ended up unskilled, unemployed, and often destitute. They pointed to the fact that, until recently, Tendring had the second highest suicide rate in the country.

These narratives differ in focus - one emphasising the individual and the other centering background conditions. But neither denies the scale of the challenge in the area. As the figure below highlights, over a third of the population in Tendring fall within the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods in England - a figure that has doubled in the past 15 years.

Figure 6: Proportion of population in the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods over time

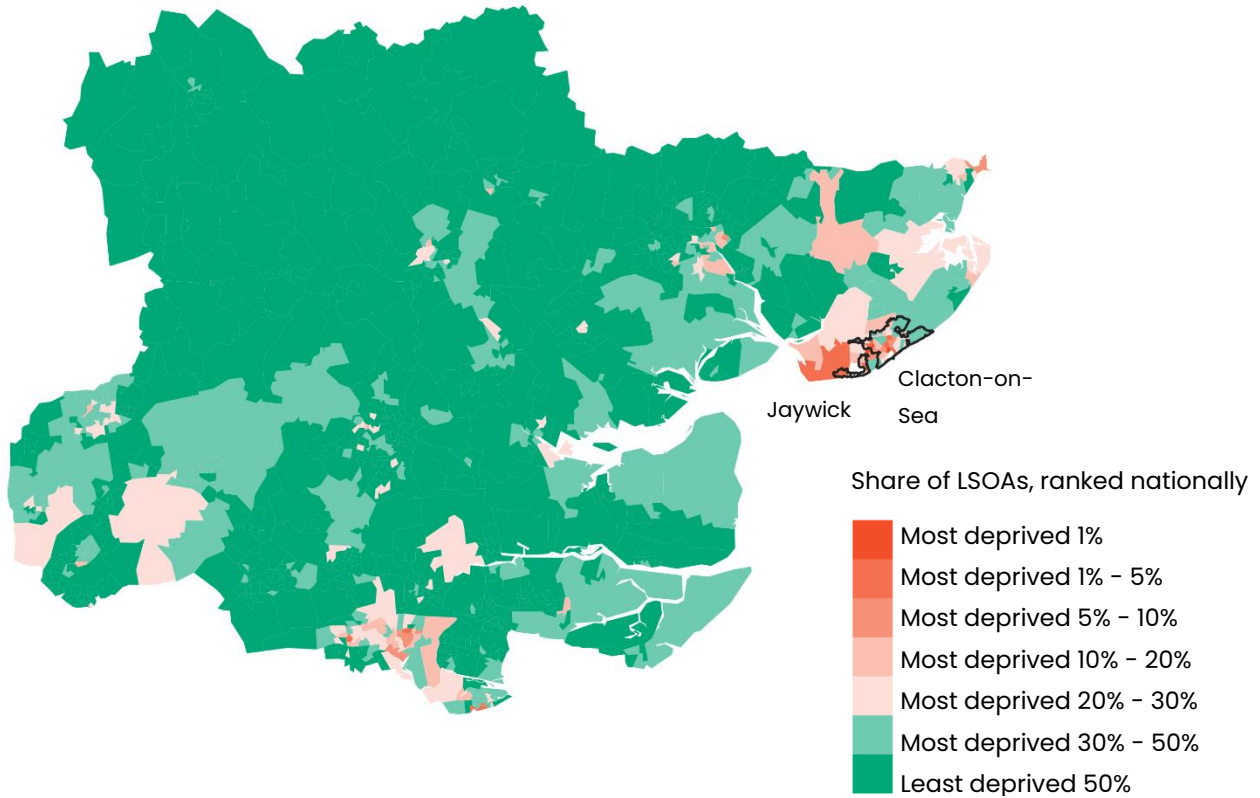
Source: Essex County Council, 2019 Indices of Deprivation



Even within Tendring, this deprivation is particularly acute in Clacton and Jaywick Sands, with an area in the east of Jaywick Sands ranked as the most deprived neighbourhood in England according to the 2019 English Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

Figure 7: Deprivation by Lower-layer Super Output Area (LSOA) in Tendring

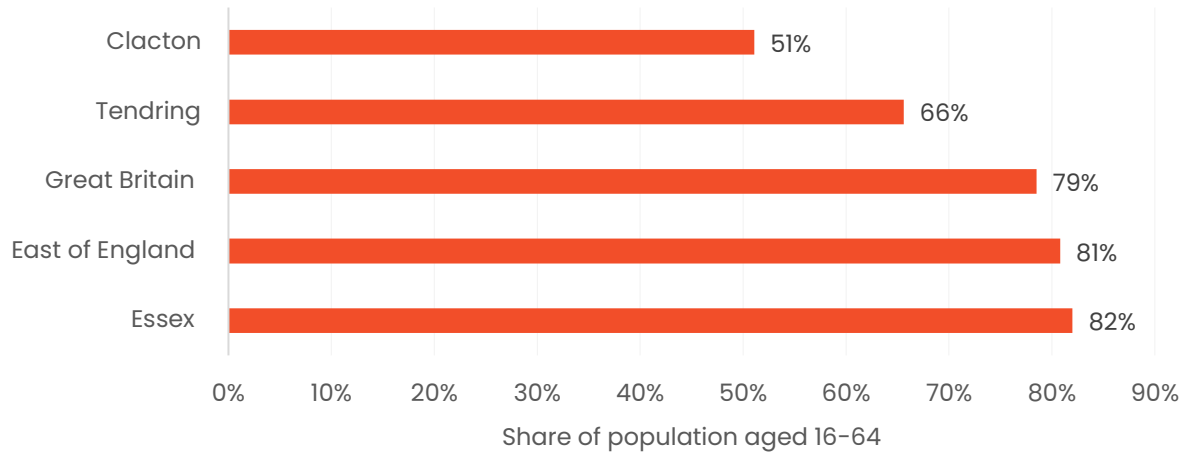
Source: English Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019, Onward analysis



Low levels of economically active adults are one of the clearest symptoms of deprivation. In the Parliamentary constituency of Clacton, economic activity is currently at 60%, compared to an Essex average of 81% and 78% for the UK. These high levels of economic inactivity are underpinned by poor public health. 90% of neighbourhoods in Tendring rank in the bottom half of areas in England for health deprivation, and 41% rank in the poorest fifth. This is partly driven by unhealthy behaviours - Tendring is significantly above both regional and national averages for levels of obesity, alcohol consumption, and smoking.

Figure 8: Economic activity rate, April 2021 – March 2022

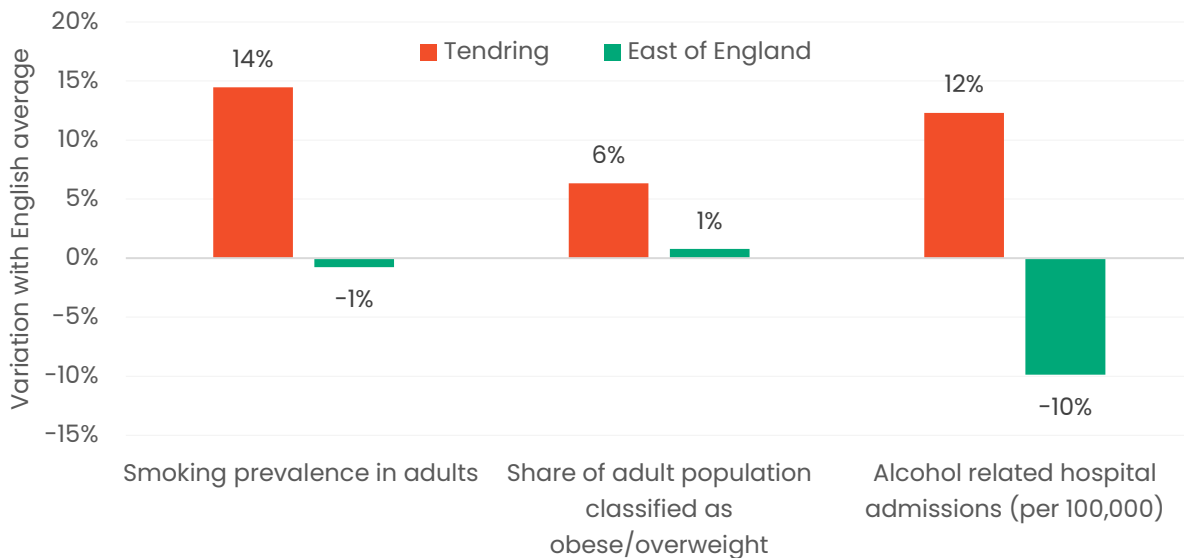
Source: ONS Annual Population Survey



*Note: Clacton here refers to the parliamentary constituency of Clacton, not the built-up area of Clacton-on-Sea

Figure 9: Prevalence of obesity, smoking, and alcohol-related hospital admissions, 2020-21

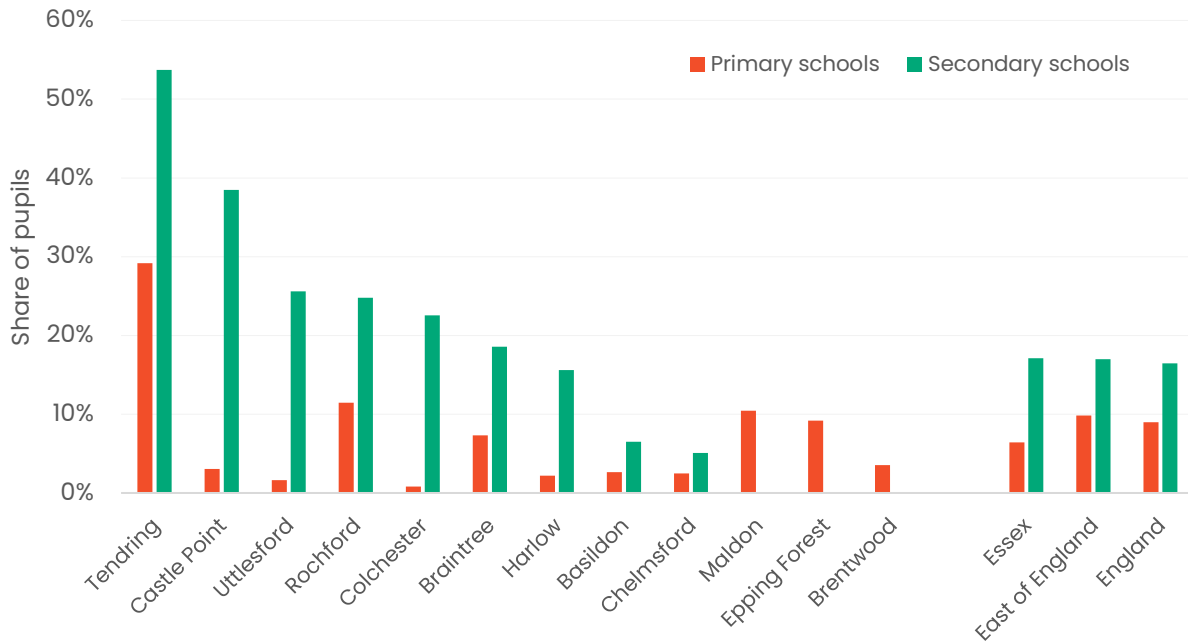
Source: Local authority health profiles, Public Health data



Poor levels of educational attainment also limit the opportunities of young people. Most recent Ofsted inspection outcomes for 2022 reveal the extent of school performance gaps in the area. In Tendring, no primary school and only two secondary schools received an ‘Outstanding’ inspection ranking. Analysis in Onward’s report on school performance ‘Lost Learning’ classifies schools that receive a ‘Requires Improvement’ and ‘Inadequate’ rank from Ofsted inspections as underperforming, and identifies the share of pupils attending these schools.¹⁵ Updated for 2022 inspections, this positions Tendring as having the highest share of pupils attending underperforming primary and secondary schools in Essex, and higher than the Essex, East of England, and English averages.

Figure 10: Share of pupils in underperforming primary and secondary schools, 2022

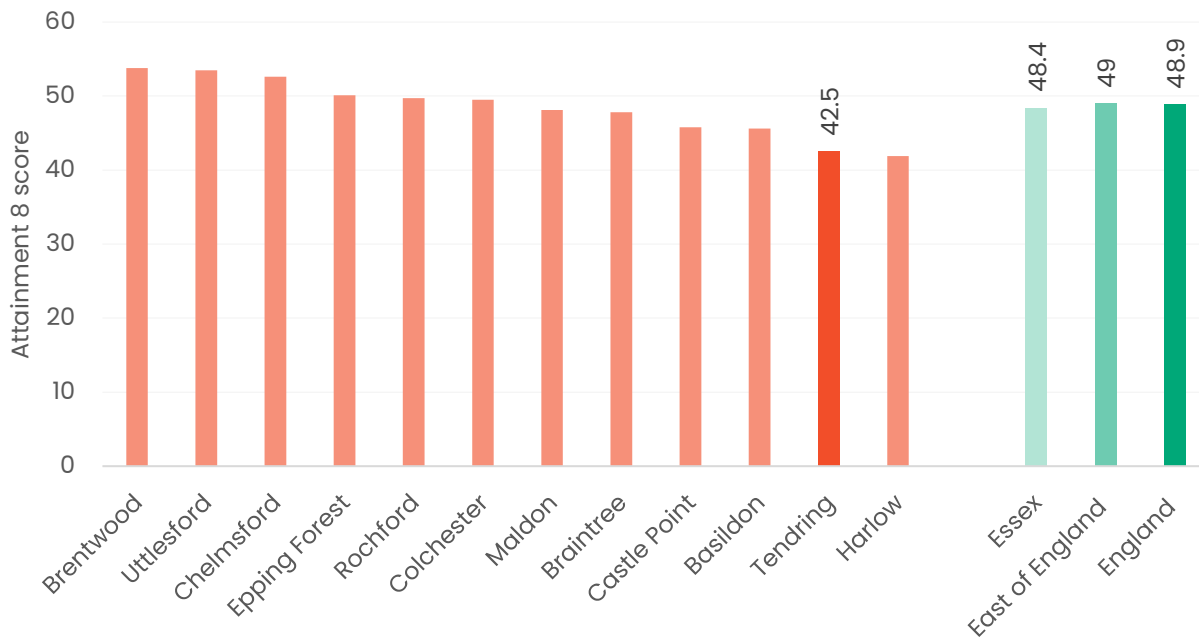
Source: Ofsted inspection outcomes 2022, Onward analysis¹⁶



*Note: Underperforming schools here refer to those schools that received a 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' rating at the 2022 Ofsted inspections

Figure 11: Average Attainment 8 scores, 2022

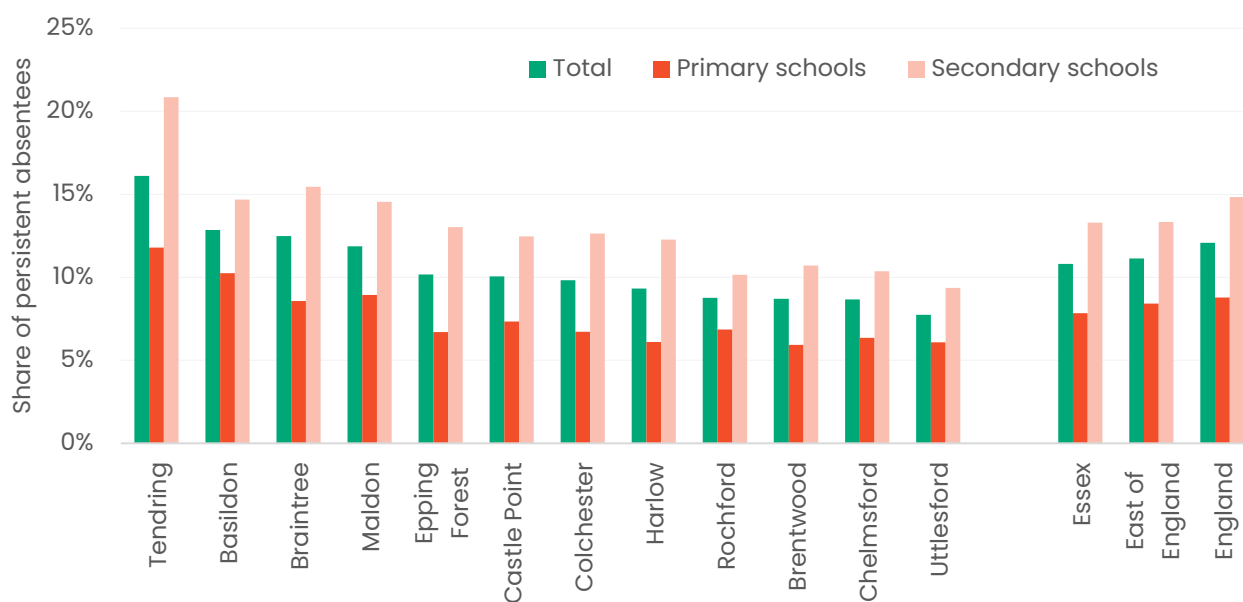
Source: DfE Education statistics, 2021-22



Educational leaders argue that the challenges facing the area’s schools and the low level of attainment are driven by the long-term impacts of deprivation. Even though the area receives a high level of Pupil Premium funding and National Tutoring Programme support, it is difficult to get students to engage. One teacher told us that a remedial programme over the Easter Holidays aimed to provide support to 60 students, but only 10 turned up. As Figure 12 shows, Tendring sees persistent student absenteeism significantly higher than its county, regional, and national comparators. Despite these challenges, Tendring has not been designated as an Educational Investment Area by the Government – partly because the high level of need is lost in the wider Essex County Council area.

Figure 12: Student absenteeism rates in primary and secondary schools, 2020–21

Source: Pupil absence in schools in England, Gov.uk Education statistics 2020–21



*Note: A pupil is identified as a persistent absentee if they miss 10% or more of their possible sessions.

One issue consistently raised by local leaders was the quality and availability of affordable housing stock. This does not appear to be a challenge across Tendring more widely: data from the 2019 English Indices of Multiple Deprivation on household overcrowding, homelessness, and housing affordability places the majority of the neighbourhoods in the area among the 50% least deprived nationally. Within Tendring however, the neighbourhoods with the most acute housing needs are heavily concentrated in Clacton and Jaywick Sands.¹⁷

This challenge has gotten more acute since the pandemic - as of 1st May 2020, there were 1958 households on the Tendring District Council housing register (up from 608 in 2017).¹⁸ We were told that housing challenges were made more acute by schemes operated by London boroughs which resettled older social renters from more expensive housing in the capital to less expensive housing in and around Clacton.¹⁹ A report by the council on ‘renting in later life’ found that Tendring had the highest number of older private and social renters in Essex, and that they were more likely to live in small and poorly insulated homes compared to owner occupiers in the area.²⁰

What might this mean for the local playbook?

The council and leaders across health, education, and housing are taking steps to address these deep-rooted challenges. As well as launching individual programmes, they have also introduced forums to coordinate their work and ensure they adopt a system-wide perspective - through both the joint Tendring Council and Essex Council Regeneration Board and the more focussed Tendring Education Strategic Board. Both were raised by local leaders we interviewed as important forums to make progress and get value for money from public investments - with the education board particularly focussed on pressing issues like the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers. As highlighted above, securing designation as an Educational Investment Area should be a key priority for local leaders in their engagement with Government.

A number of schemes operate locally that are looking to improve aspiration for young people. One that was highlighted as promising, and could be expanded, was the Clacton 'IntoUniversity' programme - a partnership with Anglia Ruskin University that created links at both primary and secondary level to provide both mentoring and academic support.

Initiatives to improve public health have also been launched, including the 'Pedal Power' programme being piloted in Jaywick Sands and Clacton. The programme is delivered through Active Essex, and gives adults in the area access to a free bike, both improving their health and giving them the ability to access employment opportunities and public services. The scheme aims to give away over 5,000 bikes by 2025, and is based on the 'Big Birmingham Bikes' programme which has given away over 9,000 bikes in deprived parts of the city since 2016.²¹

The council could go further in tackling the root causes of this deprivation. Engagement with parents and support for children during early years will be particularly key. We heard that organisations like "Extra" had been delivering an important advisory service in places like Jaywick Sands.²² The council could go further in supporting these efforts by consolidating and co-locating parts of the public sector that interact with parents. Although Essex was not pre-selected as one of the areas for Family Hub funding, local leaders worked with the Family Hub Network to develop one the St James Family Hub which serves Clacton. Family hubs offer the opportunity to consolidate services to parents and direct them to the support they need, including services like Children Centres. The Council could align registry offices and birth registrations with such hubs to drive footfall and inform parents and soon to be parents of the support they are eligible for.

A holistic approach to supporting families suffering the highest levels of deprivation will also be central. Family Hubs could sit within a wider 'Cradle to Career' framework which consolidates funding and operations across third sector organisations and delivers highly targeted support to vulnerable families.²³

3) Restore a sense of community, pride, and local belonging

“That community feeling, like everyone together kind of thing, makes a good town. You walk into Clacton, you don’t get that. You’re lucky if someone says hello to you walking down the street.”

– Rachael, Police Officer, 33

The decline in economic fortunes and pressures on public services in Clacton have been paired with a fraying of the area’s social fabric. Breaking down the different strands of Onward’s Social Fabric Index highlights that Tendring is particularly lagging in “economic value” (as discussed above) but also for positive social norms - things like health and education levels, crime in the area, and family relations, where it ranks in the 15th percentile.

Essex County Council commissioned a “Community Needs Index” from Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion which ranks the 7,190 wards in England using connectivity, engagement, and civic asset parameters, with rank 1 indicating the highest community need.²⁴ Two wards in Clacton-on-Sea, Bluehouse and Cann Hall ranked 1st and 8th respectively on this index, with a further 15 wards from Tendring ranking in the top 100 in England with the highest community need.

Figure 13: Breakdown of the Social Fabric Index

Source: Onward Social Fabric Index data, 2020



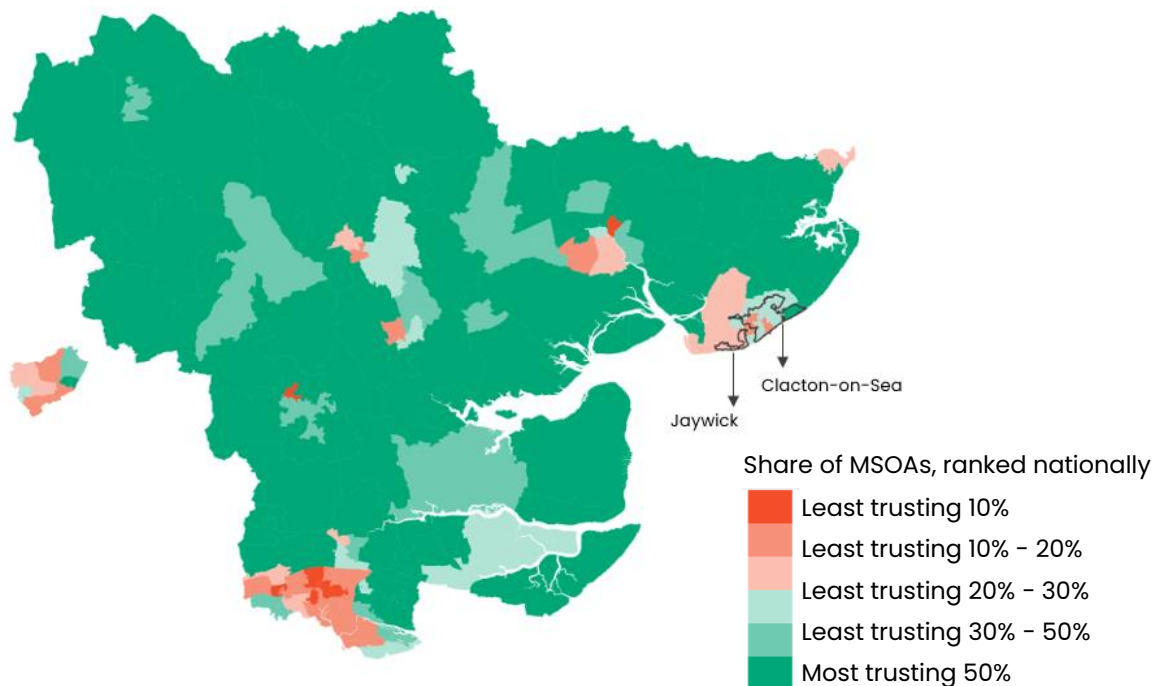
Local leaders and participants in our focus group gave several explanations for this - many of which are difficult to test with the data. Some told us that many people who moved to retire to the area had once visited on holiday and wanted to recapture positive memories. But upon arrival they saw the area’s challenges and experienced its decline, and were by that point distant from family members and more reliant on public services for care and support. Lawrence, 64, told us “I don’t know anyone three doors along from where I live now...when you’ve got a quick turnover of people it’s a lot harder to have some sort of community spirit.”

One contrasting narrative was an argument that there were pockets of hyper-local community resilience. In particular, local community leaders pointed to the strength of relationships in Jaywick Sands. They argued that strong bonds had been formed in adversity, and that given reasonably low levels of churn in the population people knew and relied on their neighbours.

Onward data on social trust at a hyperlocal level, produced through an exclusive poll of over 42,000 people across the country suggests a different picture. While Essex at large is home to highly trusting neighbourhoods, Jaywick and Clacton both host neighbourhoods ranked among the 40% of least trusting in England, shown in Figure 14 below.

Figure 14: Net trust in Essex, by Middle-layer Super Output Area (MSOA)

Source: Onward report 'Good Neighbours,' 2023



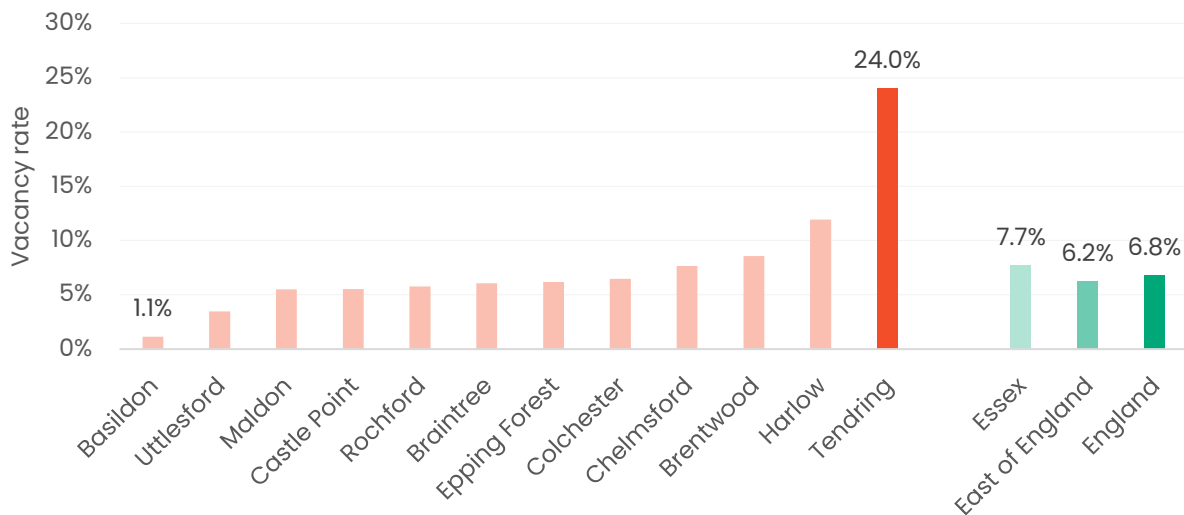
Two issues were repeatedly raised when we asked people how they felt about their local area's fortunes - the state of the town centre, and rising levels of crime. This echoes our findings in Oldham, South Tyneside, and Walsall, where both issues were symbolic of the area's fortunes.

When asked for one word to describe Clacton, most of our focus group participants opted instead for two: "run down". This referred to the state of the high street and the broader public realm, which participants said looked "scruffy", "rough", "lost" and "tired". Georgette, 47, a carer told us "it's just getting worse, the streets are dirty, the shops are empty, you've got drunks on most corners...it's

just not nice”. Onward’s research on the number of retail and leisure unit vacancies indicates the scale of the challenge. Tendring has the 4th highest vacancy rate in England and Wales (24%), lower than only Neath Port Talbot (66%), Stockport (57.9%), and Trafford (34.9%), making it almost 5 times higher than the regional and national average.

Figure 15: Vacancy rates for retail and leisure units

Source: Whythawk data on vacancy, 2021



Discussions of crime in Clacton often came back to illegal drugs and the difficulties with “county lines”: drug dealing that originates in London but spreads to suburban areas. Local leaders spoke of concerns that young people were part of “county lines” networks and that individuals suffering from addiction in deprived areas were a reliable source of funds. One headteacher spoke of a field near their school where they knew low-level drug dealing was taking place, but felt that police didn’t have the resources to take action. This lack of resource to deal with lower level crimes was highlighted regularly by participants in our focus groups - Callum, 21, a supermarket worker, said “policing must be massively underfunded because there doesn’t seem to be much of an effect” and Georgette, 47, a carer, said “they don’t get them off the streets anyway when there are police walking about they just move them to the next corner”.

This narrative is broadly supported by the data. Public order offences in Tendring have more than tripled since 2010, and there has also been a large increase in cases of violence without injury. Death rates from drug misuse in Tendring currently stand at 7.3 per 100,000 people, 2.6 times the rate in 2008-10, which is almost double the increase seen in England and Essex.

Figure 16: Reported cases of crime in Tendring, 2003–22, by category of crime

Source: Home Office police reported crime 2003–22, Onward analysis

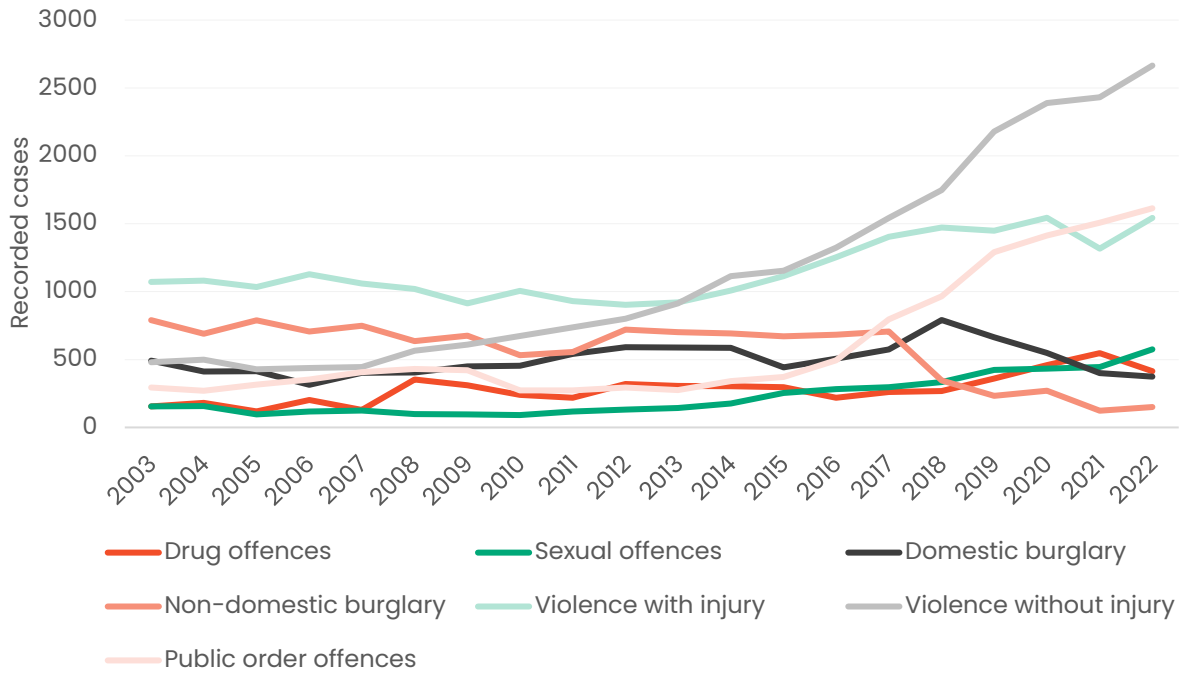


Figure 17: Deaths from drug misuse, 2008–10 to 2019–21

Source: ONS data on drug-related deaths



*Note: Death rate from drug misuse refers to the number of deaths per 100,000 people, standardised for age to allow for comparison over time

What might this mean for the local playbook?

Restoring a sense of belonging and pride to Clacton is central to levelling up the area. Today, the frayed social fabric means that many people are leaving, few are moving in, and those that stay have weak connections that limit town centre footfall and hold back the local economy.

Building confidence in local policing and tackling low-level crime will be key. Essex Police have been national trailblazers in adopting hotspot policing to tackle violent crime. Neighbourhood police forces could extend this approach to antisocial behaviour in the area, focussing patrols on small geographic areas that generate a disproportionate number of police reports. This could be paired with the Designated Public Place Order (DPPO) in place in Clacton town centre which gives police and the local Antisocial Behaviour Officer greater powers to disperse groups and reduce problematic behaviour. Our research in Barry found that the designation of the Barry Island tourist area as an alcohol-free zone reduced the number of day trippers that came to the area under the influence of alcohol and increased the number of visiting families.

Improving the state of the public realm will also be essential. As we have recommended in other reports, local leaders could explore steps to tackle eyesore derelict buildings through the better use of Section 215 notices. Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act (1990) provides a local authority with the power to require land to be cleaned up when its condition adversely affects the amenity of an area. The notice sets out what action needs to be taken and the period of time that it needs to be addressed in. Section 215 notices have been used by councils across the country. In 2015 Brighton and Hove Council issued 54 notices to commercial and residential properties to improve the look of their waterfront area, with only 16 needing to be formally triggered.²⁵ In 2000 Hastings Borough Council launched 'Grotbusters', an initiative to aggressively and proactively use Section 215 notices to turnaround the appearance of their town. By 2017, they had secured remediation of over 830 buildings and now provide advice and guidance to other local authorities on using Section 215.²⁶

Where strong community bonds exist, the council should do more to leverage them. Essex County Council have already launched the Community Challenge Fund – a £500,000 pot that individuals and small community groups can bid into for projects costing between £300-£2,000 that will improve their neighbourhoods and build pride in place. The council could go further, focussing these initiatives on symbolic eyesores in part of Clacton and Jaywick Sands and potential transferring assets to local community groups to support upkeep.

4) Empower local leaders and communities

“Too often we can't prevent because we have to firefight.”

Community Leader

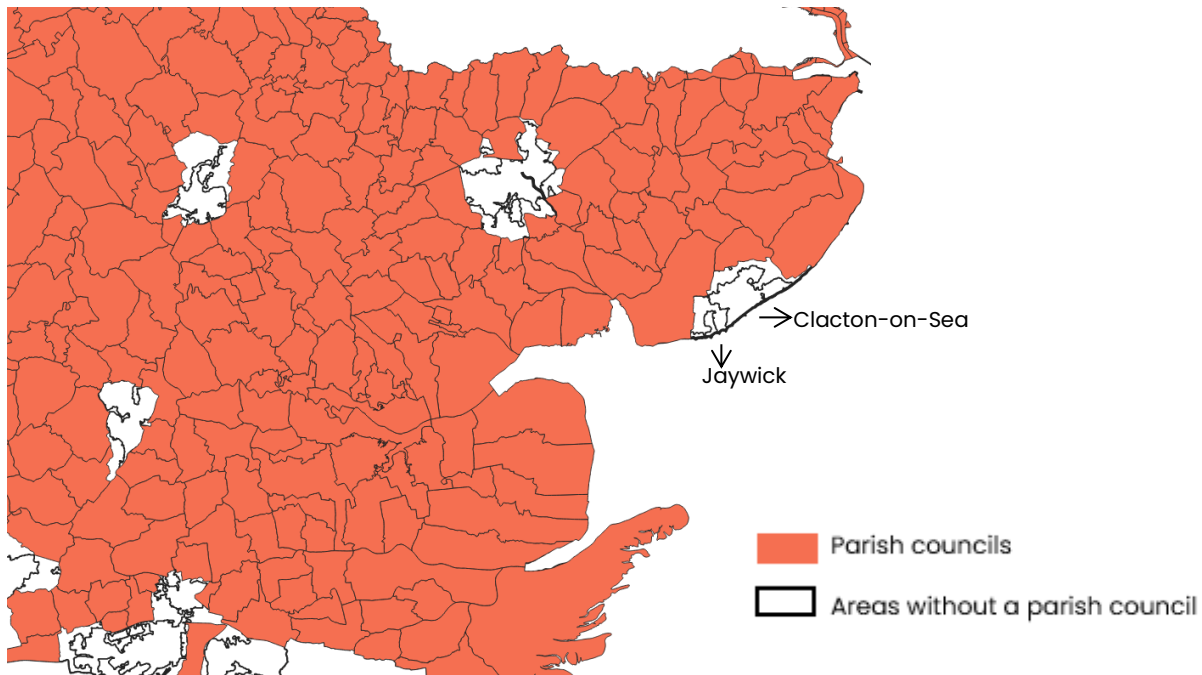
There are a range of institutions and groups who play a role in Levelling Up Clacton covering local government, public services, businesses and the community. But too many of them have limited powers or informal governance, limiting their ability to have a transformative impact.

In terms of local government, Clacton is covered by both Essex County Council and Tendring District Council. While Essex County Council has named Clacton as one of its focus areas for levelling up activity, we still heard from several local leaders that the area is overlooked for support and investment. In particular, residents and leaders argue that Colchester gets a disproportionate focus - the recent relocation of a local college from Clacton to Colchester was regularly provided as an example. The County Council also has limited formal powers and funding, and to date has not been selected by the Government as one of the areas in consideration for a devolution deal. Tendring District Council singles out Clacton for focus in a number of strategic documents, but holds limited levers to make change and has a limited budget

There are over 300 town and parish councils covering almost the entirety of Essex county council. But Clacton and Jaywick Sands have no parish council, limiting the ability to prioritise the issues that matter to local residents like improving the public realm.

Figure 18: Map of parished areas in Essex

Source: *Onward analysis*



Business also struggled to organise. The recently launched Town Centre working group was highlighted as a good example of business leaders coming together. But this group lacks the formal powers or resources of an organisation like a Business Improvement District or a local Chamber of Commerce. There are some natural collections of businesses, including those based at the Gorse Lane Industrial Estate, but again cooperation is limited, partly as the business park isn't based around a particular industrial cluster.

There is a higher degree of coordination among civil society groups. Local leaders highlighted the way that charities stepped up during the pandemic, delivering key services and supporting vulnerable groups. But there are too few of these organisations, and they struggle to attract sufficient funding. Tendring is below the national average for density of third sector groups, at just 207 organisations per 100,000 people, compared to an average of 353 in England and 330 for the broader Essex area. On funding, Tendring performs better than most of Essex, receiving on average grant funding per head of £17.9, but this is still around half of the national average.²⁷

Figure 19: Density of third sector groups

Source: Essex Community Need Index, 2020

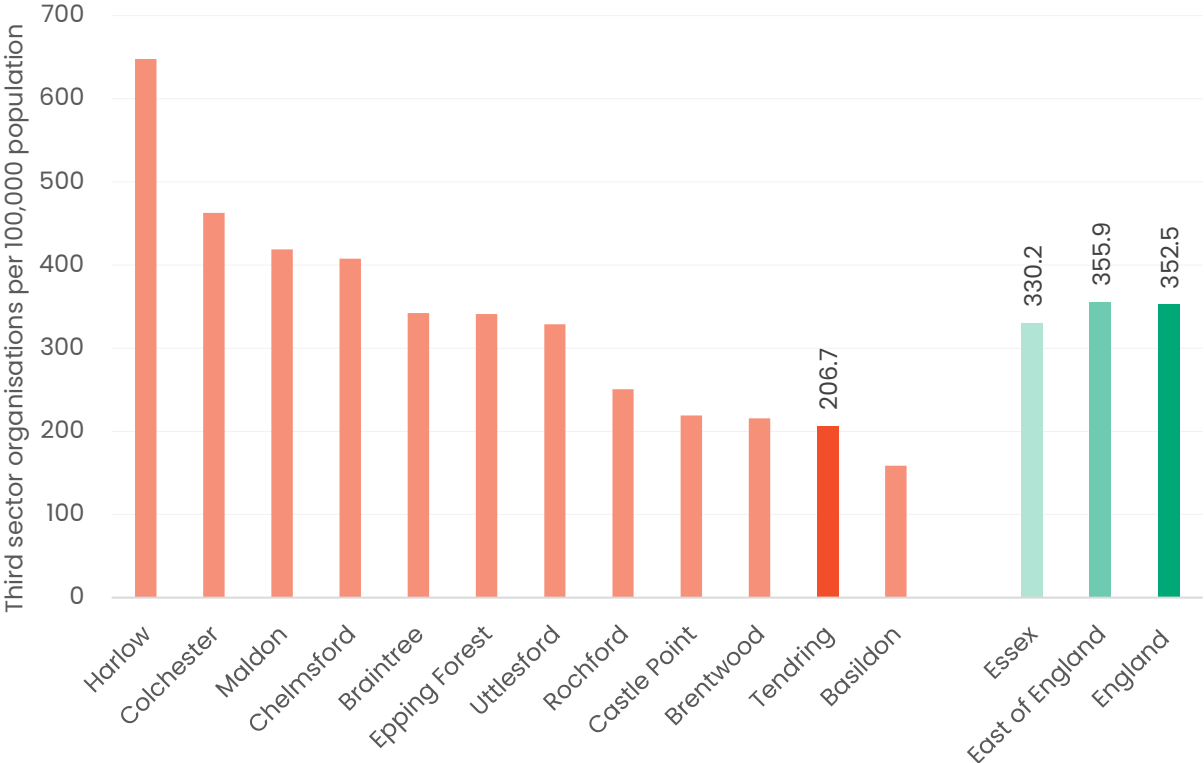
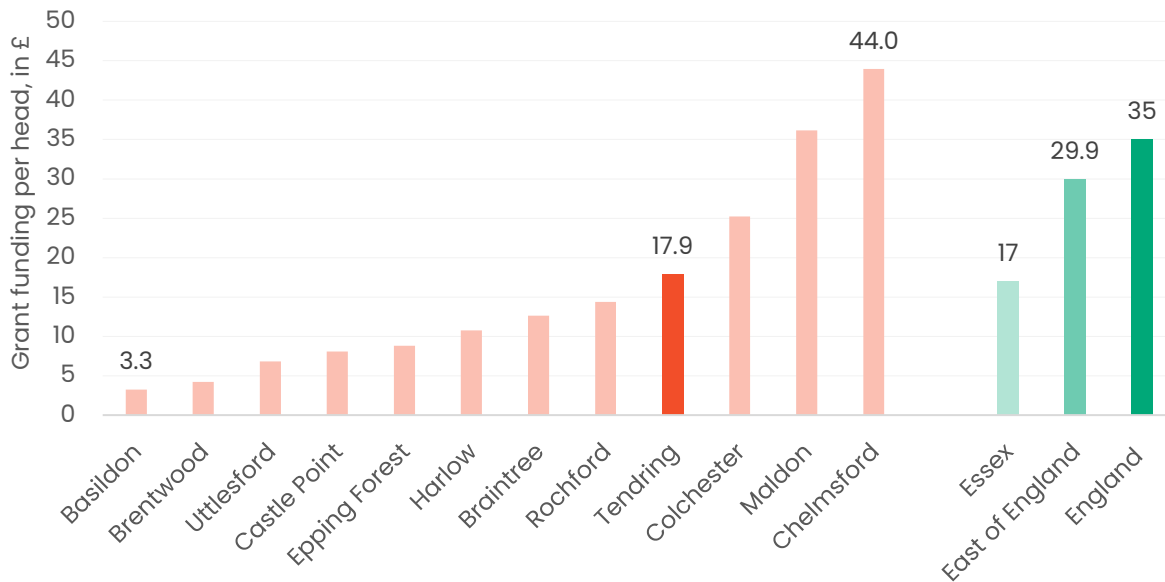


Figure 20: Grant funding per head from major grant funders, 2020

Source: Essex Community Need Index, 2020



What might this mean for the local playbook?

Securing more power at multiple spatial levels should be a major priority for Clacton.

At a regional level, the County Council could develop proposals for a devolution deal with central government in order to secure higher levels of investment and greater powers over skills, transport, and housing. A devolution deal could also grant powers and funds over challenges that are particularly acute in places like Tendring, like limited digital infrastructure and high levels of economic inactivity. In January 2023, a draft Expression of Interest document regarding a Greater Essex devolution deal was reviewed by council Leaders across Southend, Essex and Thurrock - a crucial first step.

At a local level, Tendring could build on its work pulling together different public service leaders and support the creation of business leadership forums. This could be achieved by subsidising the creation of a Business Improvement District, or providing a grant to seed fund a new local chapter of the Chambers of Commerce.

At a hyper-local level, the council could support the creation of a parish by holding an automatic ballot in the area without waiting for a petition from residents. At present a community seeking to set up a local town or parish council has to organise a local petition to trigger a Community Governance Review that will consider the case for establishing a new parish, which can take over a year. As discussed in Onward's *Double Devo* report, this process is convoluted and costly, acting as an unnecessary barrier to setting up a parish. An automatic ballot on setting up a parish in Clacton could be held alongside next year's local elections to Tendring District Council. This direct

mechanism has a precedent, with a recent vote on whether to retain a mayoral system or revert to a Cabinet system of government in Tower Hamlets held alongside the 2021 council election.²⁸ Should the people of Clacton vote for a parish council to be set up, the Tendring District Council could then go about facilitating this, and run a public consultation on what powers the new parish should have.

Conclusion

“‘Levelling Up’ are two words that you will have been hearing a lot about over the last few months from a wide range of different organisations and individuals... The reason you keep hearing about it is because it matters. It matters now more than ever to our residents, it matters to our businesses, and it matters to our communities.”

Cllr Louise Mckinlay, Deputy Leader, Essex County Council

Clacton is an area where levelling up will be particularly hard. There are few obvious routes to promote high growth jobs and business, real strains on public services that have built over generations, and a limited capacity among institutions to make change. Our research in the area has made clear, if it was ever in doubt, that the levelling up agenda isn't just about the Midlands and the North.

But that doesn't mean levelling up is not possible. It will need to combine two complementary and parallel interventions. The first is to try and extend the area's economic frontiers: improving connectivity to higher productivity parts of the borough, increasing the skill level of the population, and bringing more people of all ages into the workforce. The second is to repair the area's social foundations: tackling low-level crimes, improving the look and feel of the high street, and improving public health problems like obesity and inactivity. These steps will require both empowered leadership and targeted investment.

Clacton was once a proud part of the British economy, creating memories for the children of working class families across the country. To find such a role again it will need to undergo a period of challenging and disruptive change, supported by leaders at a local and national level who are willing to be both bold and patient. But it will be worth it - unlocking the potential of thousands of people and contributing to a stronger Essex and East of England. If levelling up is to be realised, it must succeed in places like this.

Acknowledgements

This research note is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Appendix 1 – Focus Groups

This is a short overview of two focus groups run online by Onward on the event of the 13th of September, 2022.

Focus Group Participants					
Group 1			Group 2		
Name	Age	Occupation	Name	Age	Occupation
Rachel	33	Police Officer	Lawrence	64	Groundsman
Darren	52	Engineer	June	53	Retired
Emma	37	Behaviourist	Louise	50	Admin
John	70	Property	Georgette	47	Carer
Lorraine	67	Retired business owner	Kayleigh	33	Admin
			Callum	21	Retail
			Amy	35	Retail

1. How do people define levelling up?

- Only a couple of participants in each group were immediately familiar with the term 'levelling up'. John from group 1 and Lawrence from group 2 spoke directly about levelling up in a political sense, of “the government trying to spread money around” and “move civil service offices around to create jobs and opportunities”. Lorraine recognised the socioeconomic relevance of the phrase, describing it as “upgrading people’s skills”, “bringing people to the same standard” so that they can “perform better”, while Kay interpreted it as “levelling up the playing field, so making everything fair to everyone”
- The rest of the groups did not recognise the phrase at all to start with, although tended to agree with those dominant voices that it was about “making everything equal for everyone” and “making sure everyone is on the same kind of pay”. Others thought of levelling up in different contexts, as a “hierarchy” like at work, or a game, moving up the levels.
- The participants who were familiar with levelling up as a political scheme were sceptical. John voiced that “it’s never gonna happen”, whilst others resented its disproportionate focus on the North-South divide. June felt that the South had been “overlooked”, and Lawrence felt they were being actively undermined by this agenda as relocating jobs to the North means “someone loses their job here... so why not use that money to create new jobs instead

of just moving jobs around?”. The North was seen by some not to be in as much need, as “everything is cheaper” there anyway. June said “[the Government] play this game where everything’s got to be level, but ... their properties, for example, are a lot cheaper than down here.”

- However, when asked what places are seen to be in need of levelling up, the North was mentioned first (specifically Bradford and St Helens), particularly by people who had previously lived there. Darren described Northern towns as a “dead man’s dump”, although Amy disagreed, saying that she had heard from friends who had moved to West Yorkshire that it was a pleasant place to live.
- There was also recognition that other coastal towns suffer similar symptoms to Clacton, with Louise commenting: “In a previous job I had, there was a lot of comparison between seaside towns like Blackpool, Margate, Clacton, and the infrastructure within those towns as they’re all quite poor. You have the seafront where someone would put a certain amount of money in, then you go two roads back and its bedsit land, drug land, probation land... we’ve got too many towns like that within the UK.” Other participants agreed that “Clacton isn’t alone” and “seaside towns are all in the same boat”.
- Participants quickly identified that Clacton was an example of an area in need of levelling up, with Louise immediately jumping in with “Clacton!” when asked. Emma agreed that, “If that’s what levelling up means, putting extra resources in to help people improve their skills and improve their lives, then definitely Clacton is in need of that”. Lawrence described Clacton as “levelling down really, isn’t it, they’re sending people to places where it’s cheaper to keep them”, and others agreed that people “on a downer” are often moved into seaside towns where accommodation is cheaper, into bedsits which Georgette described as “crapholes”.
- When talking about what levelling up could mean for Clacton, the focus turned to the state of the high street, which participants described as “a disgrace”, “dirty”, with nothing to do, no focal point, “empty shops” and “drunks on most corners”. Participants saw nothing being done to level up Clacton.

2. How do people feel about how their place could be improved?

- Across both groups, common characteristics of what makes a ‘good place’ came up:
 - **Appearance and feel of the physical environment:** Participants mentioned Wivenhoe for its cleanliness and “nice open spaces... you feel safe there”. By comparison, the recurring word people used to describe Clacton was “run-down” (two participants said this at exactly the same time, and others followed), as well as “scruffy”, “rough”, “lost” and “tired”. Lorraine explained that to be a pleasant place, “it needs to be a little bit clean and tidy. I mean, it’s got a seating area but I wouldn’t want to sit on it! And the shops need to look a little bit more desirable... pound shops [don’t] always attract the better image of the high street”.
 - **Community:** people in Clacton were seen as quite antisocial and “insular”, keeping to themselves and avoiding engagement with others: “you’re lucky if someone says hello to you walking down the street.” Lawrence went as far as to say “people walking around not interacting” was a defining feature of Clacton, and he even saw

London as less hostile than Clacton, as he compared neighbourliness there with its relative absence here.

- **High streets:** Chelmsford was cited as a place where there is more going on, “a big high street, everything together, shops, cafes, good markets... you get that community feeling, everyone together sort of thing” and “more cultural”. Darren wanted to see a more traditional highstreet, with things like “butchers, bakers, candlestick makers”.
- **Events:** Overall, it was felt that “there’s nothing to do” in Clacton. Weekend markets and the switching on of Christmas lights were events that people wanted to see, and one participant emphasised events that “don’t cost the earth”, giving Clacton’s weekly park run as an example. Clacton pier was said to offer decent entertainment for children, but parking times didn’t allow adequate time to be spent there.
- **Safety:** residents on Clacton saying they felt unsafe in the town, particularly those with children. The presence of drug users, street-drinkers and “teenagers causing trouble” were “off putting”, deterring people from frequenting the town centre.
- We also asked participants what they thought Clacton did well:
 - **Pier and the beach:** Some participants spoke of the sunshine, holiday-making, annual airshow and “marvellous” beaches. They also spoke about Clacton’s proud history, particularly in the times when Butlins brought holidaymakers, jobs and money into the town. Darren spoke about “boats off the end of the pier, like we used to have”. Lorraine valued the yearly pass that offers discounts for the entertainment there.
 - **Public Services:** Some said that Clacton’s hospital served them well and quickly, although others stressed that doctors were overburdened, working hours cut down, and that the lack of an A&E in Clacton meant long waiting times and inability to support the ageing demographic. Others said the police “do the best with what they’ve got”, but are also under-resourced. Louise, a former community police officer, explained that she and many others were sacked a few years back.

2. Who is responsible for Clacton’s fortunes?

- Generally, participants were discontent with the council, in some cases blaming them for the decline of the town. Georgette suggested that “we wouldn’t be in such a mess here if we had a decent council”, with Louise referencing their role in Butlins departure and turning seafront Georgian bed-and-breakfast houses into what she described as “bedsits... ruining the structure of the town”. Amy too felt that “all they care about is money... build more houses, get more money, they don’t care about policing, the schools, the hospital...they need to care more about what people actually need in this community”. There was clearly long-term distrust in the local council with Louise saying, “I don’t actually think it matters what party the council are either, whether they’re Liberal, Labour, Conservative, Green Party, they’re all the same.” Throughout the focus group there was little discussion about the levers actually held by local government - given areas such as policing and hospitals are more the purview of regional or national bodies.

- People were dissatisfied with the councils' service provision. Major issues included long waiting times for simple appointments, increasing council tax, and potholed, poorly maintained roads that meant Callum had to replace his tyres multiple times a year at cost. They felt that the "council have let themselves down", as "they're supposed to be the experts".
- Inequality was mentioned briefly, with the recognition that there are "two camps" of people in Clacton, with one half well-off, middle-class and white, and the other half on benefits and struggling with drugs and alcohol.
- People generally did not feel that there were enough job opportunities in Clacton, with Kay noting that if you wanted a decent career, you would have to be able to travel to Colchester, Chelmsford, London even. However, Georgette disagreed, arguing that "people just don't want to work. At the end of the day, there's enough care jobs, enough cleaning jobs, if you're not fussy about what you do". Louise also made the observation that her law firm had been trying to recruit a recent graduate student for months with no applications. Rachael said that big chain employers were setting up "out of town" - M&S, Costa and Subway drive throughs - again deterring people from using the high street.

3. What would people do to level up Clacton?

- **Raise young peoples' aspirations.** Both groups suggested investment in young people, through providing sports clubs, youth clubs and other activities to tackle boredom, encouraging "role models to come in to show youngsters [stories like] I used to take drugs but now I'm a footballer, so they have inspiration... so you don't have to sit around in Clacton smoking weed and whatever to feel you are part of a group". Emma agreed that work needed to be done to break families out of this cycle: "You've gotta raise children to believe that they're worth more than what they think they are based on how the adults in the environment are living their lives. So, you know, you don't have to have a baby at sixteen, you don't have to start smoking cigarettes, you don't have to eat the junk food, you can get a good job, you can go to uni... adding a few boutique coffee shops ain't gonna help".
- **Incentivise businesses to invest in the town.** One group thought that the council should subsidise businesses that people actually want to see in the town, and another group echoed this by calling for lower rates for both existing and new shops. Lawrence felt that the council should "put money on the line" in order to achieve this, for "what incentive is there for someone to move to Clacton unless there's a financial incentive?". Darren urged "let's subsidise some businesses in the town centre, let's get some bars and shops open. The Government is wasting our buildings by having an empty building there, that's no good to us, let's at least get some people in there and start to get it moving".
- **Improve the environment.** Calls for more open, green spaces, a town clean-up and litter-picking squad as well as "cleaning crew, painting crew, fixing crew" came up in all sub-groups.
- **Improve transport networks.** The groups felt strongly that people should be encouraged to come into Clacton from surrounding holiday parks "in the middle of nowhere" and the new housing estates out-of-town, but there was not currently adequate public transportation to do so.

- **Increase policing capacity and power.** Community policing scheme a few years back was seen as successful in keeping order in the town and it was felt that policing would get on top of the antisocial behaviour on the high street.
- **Make publicly available council spending figures and give people a say.** June wanted to see where council tax is actually being spent, and “for local people to then make decisions, a ballot, on what they propose they’re gonna spend the money on and we can see where that money is going”.
- **Investment.** Participants were optimistic about levelling up, as “nothing anything of us said couldn’t not be done with money” (Louise). They felt that with a “massive injection of cash” (Emma), “anything is possible” (Lorraine), but that “small steps” would make a big difference. However, they were less optimistic about the current state of Government, seeing politicians as “backstabbing”, “scapegoating” and “squabbling” who do not get things done.

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