

Feeling Towns: Visions of Sandown

Partner Report for Isle of Wight Council

Executive Summary

The *Feeling Towns* project, in collaboration with officers at the Isle of Wight Council, explored the meaning and value of place, regeneration and the economy in Sandown. Research was undertaken in spring 2023, when different visions for Sandown were under discussion. We spoke with approximately 50 people using a variety of methods, including interviews and a facilitated creative workshop.

We found that Sandown has a strong sense of place and identity: it is proud of its natural and built heritage, its community, and its place within the Island. However, all of these feelings are also characterised by a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty. The natural environment and coastline are a source of deep pride but their sustainability, in the face of both climate change and the need for economic regeneration, are felt to be uncertain. Sandown residents are fiercely proud of the community – ‘*Sandown is its people*’ – but opportunities for positive community building, in person and online, are experienced as fractured and uneven. The sense that Sandown is peripheral, and has suffered economically at the cost of prosperity elsewhere on the Island, is strong and needs addressing. Its residents feel that the potential of its community and natural resources are not being fully realised but that the appetite for radical change, which it was felt would further threaten these assets, was muted.

Our central recommendations

- That future consultations explore an inclusive approach to the dynamics of place-shaping: an attention to *how* and *where* and *who* is co-creating the Sandown vision is important. These factors are complex and include: online discussions, town signage, the voices included in newsletters, the organisation and shape of meetings, and the ownership and control of both green and blue spaces.
- That future consultation includes an analysis of what successful practice established elsewhere might mean for Sandown: the community were aware of what has worked elsewhere and expressed the desire for a Sandown-specific business association, a creative industries hub, and a volunteering association that reflects the particular character of the area. Exploring and connecting with models from within, but also beyond, the Island might be a way of opening new kinds of conversations while respecting the specific needs of Sandown as a place.
- That Sandown needs strong cultural place-shaping leadership that engages directly with the complexities and ambivalences of its identities and economic needs: its sense of community created by a peripheral location, its histories and its natural resources are all experienced as both a threat and an untapped resource. There is much potential in being attentive to both characterisations.

Introduction

[*Feeling Towns*](#) is an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded knowledge exchange project led by the University of Southampton. It explores the role of place and identity in governance and local policy, paying close attention to the government’s [Levelling](#)

[Up](#) agenda, which identified ‘restoring pride in place’ as one of its 12 guiding missions. We have brought together a community of practice from a range of sectors, communities and geographies to share knowledge and expertise to better understand the correlation between pride and place attachment—understood as the emotional bonds developed between people and place—and the health of local cultural ecologies. With our partners, we developed a co-produced case study approach to address the specific needs of each organisation and place. We have conducted fieldwork and developed our creative methodologies with the communities who live, work and volunteer in these places. This report presents the key findings and recommendations that emerged from our community engagement day in Sandown.

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Challenges for Sandown

Sandown faces several challenges relating to the complexity of its local identity; the dereliction of key assets in its built environment; the feelings that these derelict assets have generated; and the shifts in its tourist economy. As noted in recent strategic reports, these challenges require consultation methods that enable stakeholders to visualise new futures for Sandown and to articulate their ambitions for the communities who live and work there.

A 2022 [High Streets Task Force](#) (HSTF) report identifies ‘a lack of a strong vision as the main barrier to transformation in Sandown’. The report cites the mismatch between ‘clear signs that Sandown has an active and engaged community’ and the limits to how ‘that community is empowered to help develop and deliver the vision for the town’. This claim echoes the 2013 ‘Destination Sandown!’ report, which drew on creative map-making to imagine an ideal future for Sandown’s tourist economy, concluding that the town lacks ‘a compelling vision that knits together the best of the past and the present and looks to a bright and exciting future’. ‘Destination Sandown!’ sought to address this challenge but, as the HSTF report shows, **a lack of distinctive vision continues to be a barrier to regeneration in Sandown.**

Our research builds on the precedent for using creative methods in stakeholder events in Sandown. It also responds to the Isle of Wight Council’s immediate challenges relating to vision and local identity. Discussions with Council regeneration officers demonstrated that recent consultations had been dominated by local politicians, and that there was a need for **more integrated spaces to enable local business-owners, hoteliers and representatives from the creative industries, as well as councillors, to share their visions for Sandown’s future.** This need is reaffirmed in the 2021 [Iris Manifesto](#), which locates a successful future for Sandown in ‘its businesses, students and civic society’, and highlights the importance of a sustained business association for the town.

The Council’s imminent shift in focus to the development of the [Bay Area Place Plan](#) will involve a series of consultations with Sandown’s resident communities. The Place Plan aims to use quantitative and qualitative data to establish ‘a thorough understanding of the linkages between the socio-economic and cultural components of different communities in the area’ and to offer ‘holistic solutions’. Similarly, the 2023 [Sandown Conservation Area Management Plan](#) repeatedly emphasises the importance of appreciating place attachment across Sandown’s communities, which supports its recommendations about preserving Sandown’s cultural heritage. It recommends bringing ‘pride to the town by showing the best of what is

being done by establishing a town annual award scheme for building projects and environmental improvements'. The *Feeling Towns* research on pride and place attachment is well-positioned to contribute to this policy context: where competitive place-making relies on subjective government metrics, and where pride is a key indicator for understanding the social fabric of hyper-local communities.

Responding to these place-specific challenges, we asked the following research questions:

1. **What are the community needs for Sandown's town centre?**
2. **Which assets and services are valuable to business owners in Sandown?**
3. **How do key stakeholders in Sandown imagine the future of their communities?**

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Research Methods

Methods included desk research and informal online discussions with senior regeneration officers from across the Council. We facilitated a creative consultation session during a business stakeholder event (20/04/2023) at the Trouville Hotel in Sandown. The session opened with a presentation on culture-led regeneration, followed by a two-part creative consultation. In **part one**, participants were asked to imagine what Sandown would be like in 2223 and record their responses on a slip of paper. In **part two**, participants were invited to respond to a series of creative prompts about Sandown, pride and place. Participants worked in groups to combine responses into a series of collage poems while facilitators noted down thoughts and ideas from the corresponding discussions.

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Key Themes and Findings

Place and Identity

- **Isolation.** There was a clearly-articulated sense that Sandown was isolated, underserved and cut off from the rest of the Island.
 - Isolation was experienced physically, and the lack of reliable and sustainable transport options was raised (e.g. connected cycle routes).
 - Isolation was expressed in terms of culture. Participants working elsewhere on the Island (in sectors including health, housing and the creative industries) indicated that Sandown was difficult to access, and the perception was that attempts to bring their businesses, ideas and interventions to the area had been met with resistance by local gatekeepers. Those from outside Sandown want to be part of these conversations as well.
 - The complexities of this sense of isolation were apparent in the resistance to mooted construction projects connecting the Isle of Wight to the mainland (particularly via Sandown). These responses indicate the impulse to protect what is felt as the specificity and distinctiveness of place, although one participant imagined a future tunnel in more positive terms, as stretching: 'to the mainland from an underwater oasis where nature has taken back most of the populated areas – a high end tourist destination where people come to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life'.

- **Bay Area geography.** In line with previous consultations on Sandown's shopfront and tourism industry, there was active discussion about the implications of uniting Sandown, Lake and Shanklin as a single entity, both to leverage funding and for less-pragmatic reasons.
 - Participants focused on the beach and the bay as having the potential to unite local identities: the beach was a specific source of pride, as was a recent history in which the Bay Area offered a continuity of place and this seemed a meaningful way to create a single identity.
 - There was some anxiety that Sandown would be overlooked or squeezed out in a collaborative funding context that was constituted by the Bay Area more generally.
- **Social media.** Facebook and specifically the Sandown Hub group were discussed ambivalently as ways of mediating people's relationship to place. Participants valued social media as a space that promotes opportunities for the community, such as events and days out, but also expressed frustration that it often becomes an outlet for negativity, resistance and complaints. The question of *where* a sense of community can be articulated and seen was also raised. Social media was understood to be an ineffective place for this conversation to be articulated but there was a recognised challenge regarding how to promote and sustain inclusive in-person meetings.

Nature and the Environment

- **Climate change.** A third of responses to the future of Sandown exercise included references to climate change and its effects, including concerns about coastal erosion, sea level rise and rising temperatures. Multiple participants anticipated sea level rise flooding the beach near Sandown, the High Street or the wider Bay Area. A shared sense of climate anxiety underpins the community vision for Sandown across a range of different demographics.
 - One participant illustrated their response with stick figures standing on a small rock in the middle of the ocean, accompanied by the line: 'It's crowded on the sandbar'.
 - Some participants responded to the prompt with an ideal vision of Sandown's engagement with the climate crisis through references to sustainability, green thinking, nature reclaiming green and blue spaces, and clean air protections. The climate crisis is also producing a willingness to think in more radical ways.
- **Waste.** Both creative activities yielded responses that addressed water and waste as ongoing issues. Some participants imagined Sandown in 2223 as a 'wasteland' with a sea full of human waste and a lack of fresh water supply to the Island.
 - One participant introduced an image of Sandown as a 'sea slug moving very slowly. It would eat human waste. Meeting it would give a feeling of revulsion'.
- **Green spaces.** Both activities elicited references to specific and generic green spaces, described both as wild and as manicured. The prompt to imagine

Sandown as a garden became a space for participants to voice tensions between community volunteers and the local authority.

- Several participants imagined Sandown as a beautiful, sustainable garden, tended by themselves or by a group of volunteers, whereas another participant imagined their sustainable garden 'being sprayed by a passing IW Council vehicle with some weed killer'. Participants also demonstrated a keenness to show their pride in natural green spaces. Residents were particularly proud of the volunteers that maintain these local spaces, with references to: 'The community garden [...] tended by volunteers, growing food for the locals and flowers to cheer', and 'hanging baskets in the street, Green Town volunteers create this treat'.

Community and Diversity

- **Young people.** In discussions, old and young people were often treated as discrete groups. One participant wrote: 'Sandown's an old guard, fixed-minded, defensive; Sandown's a young bunch, vaping'.
 - Participants repeatedly described a diverse place, filled with 'all sorts of people', arguing that community and the people were what 'made Sandown'.
 - There was anxiety about stasis for older populations and their reliance on Island resources. At the same time, participants reflected on the lack of provision for the next generation, which connected to the group's broader concerns about climate change and economic regeneration.
 - In the Sandown 2223 exercise, participants imagined 'an inspiring bright place full of young people', and a 'thriving cultural haven full of exciting young people who disrupt, perform, create and celebrate', emphasising motion and progress as opposed to conservatism and stasis. This view chimed with discussions that addressed young people leaving the island due to lack of opportunities and aspirations.
 - Some participants suggested specific projects within the cultural and creative industries that might encourage young people to stay. The model of the Festival being used to develop skills for young musicians was mentioned as a successful one that could be emulated elsewhere on the Island.
- **Politics.** Participants spoke about politics very specifically and with self-awareness. Complaints (often delivered humorously) about Bob Seely, the Island's Conservative MP, brought together groups of participants. There is a perception that Seely is more concerned with international relations than with local issues.
 - One participant, who writes comment pieces, noted that 'it's easy to write when you start with [the words] "Our MP..."'. Another included multiple references to 'the Tories' in their poem, but later excised some of these in favour of more generic language. Participants interrogated their own political thinking as they edited lines, which evidenced careful reflection on the relationship between personal politics and the specificities of place.

Economic Regeneration

- **Derelict buildings.** Discussions revealed a perception that Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) are being ‘dumped’ in Sandown, as well as concerns that landlords are leaving properties derelict to the detriment of the entire community. Dereliction was also linked to young offenders, crime and drugs as wider problems in the Sandown community, and participants cited examples of young people entering derelict properties illegally. The perception that dereliction limits the number of opportunities for young people to live and work in Sandown was a common theme.
 - One participant imagined a future for Sandown in which ‘the town looks derelict. Buildings are burnt out and the place is deserted. Half-finished council projects lie empty’.
 - In other versions of the narrative, participants imagined derelict buildings transformed into heritage attractions or current housing replaced by ‘resorts/complexes at [the] sea front – uniform in look – no real individual character’.
 - Following its extensive press coverage, several participants mentioned the Ocean Hotel as an eyesore, a source of local shame rather than pride, and as a symbol of the loss of the local seafront.
 - There was a resistance across some of the Sandown 2223 prompts to luxury commercial investment, which was understood to detract from the area’s local identity.
 - The question of how to develop sustainable businesses when so many goods are brought onto the Island, at additional cost, was also raised. Participants also discussed their desire to develop industries (e.g., farming) that could be self-sustaining.

- **Meaningful Cultural Spaces.** Participants expressed a desire for meaningful creative and cultural spaces that would help to combat dereliction, bring vibrancy to the area and provide opportunities for young people.
 - In both the creative workshop and discussions with council officers, Ryde became a significant point of comparison. The spaces opened up for young people as a result of the carnival and the town’s new creative co-working space, Department, were discussed favourably.
 - Participants also discussed physical spaces and often compared the historical and current functions of Sandown’s buildings. For example, some participants were saddened by the loss of the Pavillion Theatre on Sandown Pier, which is now an amusement arcade. These discussions moved beyond nostalgia, as the theatre represented the kind of creative, multifunctional space, capable of serving both resident and tourist communities and boosting Sandown’s evening economy. There was a specific interest in preserving the range of historical buildings that characterised Sandown: that the history itself is part of its attractiveness.

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Analysis and Recommendations

There exist often difficult and sometimes competing questions about Sandown's identity, culture, topography, economy, and social disparities. For example, participants in this study shared experiences about Sandown's lack of connection to other Isle of Wight communities, with residents in the area **expressing fears of being left behind in funding contexts and other socio-cultural opportunities**. Many viewed uniting Sandown with other Bay Area geographies as a solution to this problem. Yet many also stressed Sandown's character and the uniqueness of the wider Island, emphasising its separation from the mainland.

The Sandown 2223 responses assertively predicted how Sandown's character might be lost or maintained in the future. Young people were viewed as sources of creativity and hope, with participants arguing for creative employability options to retain younger demographics on the Island. Held in tension with this view, young people were also associated with crime, anti-social behaviour, and controversial derelict buildings.

The creative activities elicited a complex, often overlapping collage of positive and negative responses to Sandown, as well as optimistic and pessimistic visions for its future. Some participants even produced parallel predictions because they were unable to decide which best fitted their present relationship with Sandown's potential. One example stated:

A beautiful beach surrounded by traditional and beautiful buildings. Well loved and blessed with a thriving & caring community!

OR

A disgusting wasteland! Abandoned many years ago!!

Participants were eager and quick to share their visions for Sandown in 2223, and those visions often mirrored comments where participants expressed their hope (or lack of hope) for change in their own lifetime. However, this analysis must be understood through the context of scale. While many responses referred to places and communities specific to Sandown, at times participants' concerns – particularly when those concerns related to climate change – appeared bigger than the town, the Island or even the UK.

For example, one group turned to thinking about the Isle of Wight in relation to other world islands – particularly sinking islands in the Pacific – and there was a clear sense of solidarity with these places as fellow small island dwellers. In contrast, another participant, when reflecting on international coastal holidays, remarked that the beaches in these places were not the same, because they had few convenient amenities close to the shore. They referred proudly to their community as 'our little Sandown'.

These examples show that visionary work should bear in mind **the process of imagining beyond one's lifetime**, which can lead to **more abstract and planetary thinking**. At the same time, this thinking can indirectly tease out very specific feelings of pride in hyper-local places such as Sandown. It is also worth noting that **some of the more dystopian visions for Sandown's future were not attributed to failures on the island itself** but to the global and national forces beyond the Island that bear down on its community.

This complex relationship with scale had an impact on how participants used the language of pride to explain Sandown's unique identity and public-facing shopfronts. Participants talked about Sandown having 'the best beach in Britain' as opposed to the best beach on the Isle of Wight. This perspective again situated the town in a broader context, but nonetheless enabled participants to express a deeply-felt and specific local pride for Sandown.

Our research shows that pride is often complex and difficult to pin down. Stakeholders in Sandown articulated this complexity in textured and creative ways, because **where the language of pride felt insufficient or even uncomfortable, participants were quick to suggest alternatives**. One participant interrogated the term proud/pride and wrote a list of alternative words they valued more in terms of their vision for Sandown: 'inspired, motivated, safe, loved, loving, stimulated, willing to share, access to everything, grateful'.

Sandown's places featured in many of the written responses, but participants were careful to locate their feelings of pride in the people and communities that contributed to, lived in and experienced those places. The need to enable community agency, outlined in the HSTF's findings, reappeared in our discussions, with participants keen **to equate people with potential**. One group went so far as to suggest that the specifics of place were less significant to their feelings of pride, framing place as a *product of* a strong community with the agency to affect positive change, rather than as an entity capable of *producing* this agency itself.

One participant argued that community is about working together with our differences, and for this reason pride could never be uniform, or ever solely about place. In the creative artefacts, however, ideas of pride, place and communities were often inextricable from one another. Nonetheless, it is clear that the **participants strongly associated pride in Sandown as being about and heavily influenced by people, who in turn shape their place in thoughtful, reflective and often hyper-local ways**.

In response to these findings, we make the following **recommendations**:

- 1. Adopting an integrated approach to consultation**

Recent consultations have been stymied by a perception of a lack of cross-sector representation and planning. A specific concern is when local politicians are seen to outnumber business owners, hoteliers and creative freelancers. This consultation brought together groups from these previously underrepresented sectors (see Appendix), and the creative artefacts reveal remarkable continuities of thought – as well as differences of opinion – about pride, place and Sandown's identity across these groups. The responses remained influenced, however, by participants choosing to work with familiar colleagues from the same sector, and there was still concern about who was in the room and what the purpose of the event was. We recommend that **the planning and advertising of future consultations be very carefully sequenced and that the membership of the group be explicitly addressed**. We also recommend **strategic seating plans that can promote a more integrated discussion between stakeholders from different sectors** to better compare the community visions of these distinct groups.

2. Supporting business communities

The consultation emphasised the need for more communication between the existing community enthusiasm for volunteering and mechanisms that can support local, place-based community action in Sandown. To facilitate this work, we recommend **mapping the demand for a business association in Sandown and offering consultations to key business stakeholders to identify the roles played by existing informal communities**. During the workshop, participants cited Ryde as a more accessible and attractive site for business development, referring to its business association. While Sandown would face specific challenges establishing and sustaining a business association, this action would provide a valuable mechanism for business owners to advocate and apply for funding. This process would in turn support a more integrated approach to community consultation (Recommendation 1).

3. Further opportunities for place-based research

We recommend **more place-based research** in Sandown and the Bay Area that could draw on best practice from elsewhere. We suggest specific attention to island communities, as well as the ongoing development of new approaches to creative place-shaping, with a particular focus on young people and the cultural, creative and business sectors. This approach aligns with the Isle of Wight's developing [cultural strategy](#), which aims to 'build place-based "cultural clusters", partnerships [and] infrastructure with capacities, skills and networks'. This work would also chime with the Conservation Area Management Plan, which suggests pop-up shops and creative startups could improve Sandown's cultural offer. Our research into other coastal towns has shown that effective community spaces often have various functions. In this respect, more place-based research could help to inspire and orientate ideas for new multi-functional spaces in ways that support the participation of Sandown's young people and underrepresented resident communities.

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APPENDIX

The *Feeling Towns* team would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this report, including officers and members from the Isle of Wight Council:

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Arc Consulting

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Instep

IWC

Ladies Realm Ltd

MJ Consulting

NHS Locality Team

Raise Global

Sandown Carnival

Sandown Community Association

Sandown Green Town Volunteers

Sandown HUB Community Facebook Group

Sandown Town Council

Shademakers/Hullabaloo

Shoreside IOW

Southern Housing

Trouville Hotel

Turn the Tide Solutions

Viv's Cooking

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