



Snapshot

The UK Coastal Change Pathfinder Programme

Summary

Parts of the UK coastline, particularly in the East of England, are retreating. Not all the coastline can be protected and some buildings will be lost to the sea. The UK government set up the Coastal Change Pathfinder Programme in 2009 with around £11 million. The goal was to allow local councils to explore new and innovative approaches to planning for and managing coastal change. Fifteen local councils around England were commissioned to carry out projects over a period of around 18 months.

Parts of the UK coastline, particularly in the East of England, are retreating due to a combination of isostatic adjustment (the land is subsiding following the last Ice Age) and sea-level rise. Government accepts that not all the coastline can be protected and that some buildings, particularly in sparsely populated areas, will be lost to the sea. Under the Coast Protection Act 1949, the government may not compensate owners for the loss of buildings.

In order to help local councils to road test approaches to coastal management and planning under coastal retreat, the UK government set up the Coastal Change Pathfinder Programme to run for 18 months from late 2009. With funding of close to £11 million, ten small and five large projects were commissioned.

The ten smaller projects concentrated on adaptation planning and community engagement. They sought to educate communities in the risks associated with coastal retreat, build acceptance that not all the coast can be protected and enter into a positive discussion about management approaches.

As an example, the Jurassic Coast Pathfinder project, in south-west England, set out to achieve seven aims:

- 1 Coastal communities who are knowledgeable about what coastal change is and how it affects them.
- 2 Coastal communities who are able to debate about coastal change.

Keywords

UK, local councils, adaptation projects

- 3 Coastal communities who are able to actively and meaningfully be a part of the decision making process regarding coastal change.
- 4 Coastal communities who are well-prepared and equipped when dealing with coastal emergencies now and in the long term.
- 5 Coastal communities who are supported in the testing and acceptance of practical action to adapt to coastal change.
- 6 Future generations of coastal communities who are aware of the coastal changes facing them, and better prepared to deal with these changes.
- 7 A spatial planning system which is well-equipped to reconcile the potential conflicts between a sustainable approach to coastal change on the one hand, and onshore/offshore development pressures on the other.

Overall, in a comprehensive review of the Pathfinder Programme (see link below), the Jurassic Coast project was judged to have been successful in achieving these outcomes.

The five large projects looked at, and in some cases implemented, management mechanisms. These included:

- **Rollback:** re-location of assets inland away from the risks posed by coastal change.
- **Buy and lease back:** purchase of a property at risk due to coastal change by a local council. The property is then either rented by the previous owner or an unrelated tenant or used as a holiday let.

Whereas rollback schemes were implemented during the programme, buy and lease back could not be tested, largely because of the cost to bring properties up to a standard to enable leasing, the perceived risks to local councils and/or through the lack of interest from private landlords. The North Norfolk Pathfinder project is an example of a large project that was able to successfully trial rollback approaches. This is described in the [North Norfolk Pathfinder project Snapshot](#).



Figure 1: The eroding coast at Happisburgh (Norfolk, UK). Photo: © Mike Page, 2016 (www.mike-page.co.uk).

Outcomes

Each project had its own characteristics, and delivered its own results. Some general findings were:

- Projects clearly demonstrated an increased ability by communities to adapt; in some cases projects successfully managed community expectations that government should provide support to more realistic levels.
- Projects explored the role of planning policy in supporting adaptation and have made recommendations for local planning authorities.
- Rollback was shown to work well for businesses, where they can either fund relocation or obtain a loan. For residential properties, there were elements of good practice that in combination have the potential to deliver workable solutions.
- Buy and lease back did not work in practice due to the costs involved.
- In some cases, the activities that went on under the programme appeared to amount to compensation, which is not permitted under government policy.

The review (see link below) pointed to some shortcomings in the overall programme. These included the lack of a clear monitoring and evaluation framework, lack of ring fencing of the funds, and lack of clarity over aims and objectives. Nevertheless, with only one exception, the fifteen projects were judged in review to have delivered good value for money.

The Pathfinder programme set out to address coastal risks that inevitably will become more widespread and severe under climate change, and therefore illustrates some of the challenges that adaptation to climate change will face. On the one hand, projects within the programme were successful at achieving their aims around community engagement, and clearly demonstrated the need for this activity. On the other, very few if any projects were able to transition from planning to action; it is clear that a barrier exists at this stage that to be overcome will require considerable human and financial resources.

Further reading

Jurassic Coast Pathfinder project: <http://jurassiccoast.org/pathfinder-project/247-coastal-change-pathfinder-project> (accessed 15 June 2017).

Coastal Change Pathfinder Review: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coastal-change-pathfinder-review> (accessed 15 June 2017).

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