

Going it alone



The Selsey peninsula

Melissa Boyd highlights the cost in both financial and emotional terms to communities threatened by coastal realignment

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businesses and infrastructure. The coast is also used for recreational enjoyment and as a key feature for a holiday destination.

Our complex relationship with the coast has been matched by our efforts to protect coastal communities from the damaging effects of coastal erosion and flooding. Approximately a third of the UK's coastline is protected by man-made defences designed to reduce risk to people and properties. Unfortunately the process of defence through a traditional construct and build approach, referred to as 'holding the line',

is unlikely to be sustainable into the future.

Managed realignment is an approach viewed increasingly as a more sustainable strategy. It involves allowing the coastline to move backwards, yet with control of that movement. Unfortunately, the implementation of this approach has not been met with a great deal of public support, as it has resulted in communities facing the prospect of having their properties and businesses abandoned to the sea. In addition to this, there is no legal provision for compensatory payment for any losses as a

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result of coastal erosion and flooding.

Small coastal communities are likely to be susceptible to proposals for managed realignment, as the cost to the taxpayer of constructing defences often outweighs the benefits of protecting a smaller number of properties and businesses. Along the West Sussex coastline, this prospect has been a reality for one such landowner. Bunn Leisure owns and manages a 300 acre holiday village located directly behind a shingle beach in Selsey. The holiday village is a family-owned business which has been in operation for more than 50 years and caters for static caravan holidays. The holiday village doubles the population of the local village of Selsey during the summer months and contributes approximately £50million per year to the local economy.

Historically, Bunn Leisure was defended by a series of timber groynes. However, following the removal of these in 2007, due to their degraded state, the shingle beach now acts as a natural defence which is maintained to a 'hold the line' approach by the Environment Agency, which recycles and renourishes the beach with imported shingle. However, this approach is not protecting Bunn Leisure from the increasing risk of storm damage from overtopping waves and breaching. In March 2008, the holiday village was closed for three weeks following flood damage and many caravans were damaged beyond repair.

Despite the threat of flooding to the holiday village and its importance to the local economy, it has been included in the Environment Agency's Pagham to East Head Coast Defence Strategy as an area for managed realignment on the grounds that there is no cost-benefit to justify government aid to continue holding the line. The outcome of this decision for Bunn Leisure would not only mean the loss of their business and livelihood, but also the loss of jobs and its economic contributions to Selsey.

Over the last two years Bunn Leisure has been

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negotiating with regulating authorities to present a case against its inclusion in the managed realignment area. The company's efforts have resulted in the Environment Agency including an alternative alignment in the strategy document, excluding the leisure park from the managed realignment area should Bunn Leisure construct its own private defences.

The company has consequently appointed Atkins to design a coastal protection scheme comprising two offshore breakwaters and beach recharge to protect the holiday village. The scheme has recently been awarded planning permission and construction is planned for 2012. Although the company has successfully presented a case against its inclusion in the realignment area, this has come at a significant cost to the business, with the scheme construction costs estimated to be upwards of £10million.

But Bunn Leisure is not alone in having to face and adapt to the pressures of coastal change. Communities in Suffolk, north Norfolk, East Riding and Lincolnshire are also tackling these problems and many more will face similar situations in the near future. Managed realignment in many cases is the only sustainable option to address the pressures of climate change. But it is clear from case studies that there is an urgent need to improve the way in which we help coastal communities adapt to managed realignment in response to our changing coastline.

The government has started taking steps towards such an approach through the devel-

opment of a new coastal change policy. *Consultation on Coastal Change Policy*, published by Defra in June 2009, discusses the need for community adaptation planning and engagement; a process through which coastal communities should plan for coastal change so that they can adapt and become better adjusted to new conditions. In particular, the draft policy suggests the consideration of the following methods:

- a coastal erosion assistance package to cover the immediate practical costs incurred when a residential property is lost as a result of coastal erosion
- a coastal change fund to help local authorities better engage and support communities as they adjust to the impacts of coastal change and to help them plan for such change

Linked to this is the proposal for Coastal Change Management Areas (CCMAs), to be included in the Government's statutory Planning Policy Guidance 20: Coastal Planning. This new policy aims to avoid inappropriate development, such as houses, in areas vulnerable to coastal change, but recognises that activities that require a coastal location, such as recreation and tourism, which may provide economic benefits to communities, should still be allowed.

Government recognition of the need to help coastal communities adapt to coastal change is a significant step forward. Case studies like Bunn Leisure stress the importance of the need for planning for coastal change so that communities and landowners are not only more aware of the changes taking place along their coastline, but are supported both financially and emotionally to deal with them. With the effects of climate change predicted to increase the risk of coastal erosion and flooding, adaptation to managed realignment policies in many cases will be the only sustainable way forward. ■

Melissa Boyd is from Atkins Global



The damaging effects from the costal flooding and erosion in Selsey

