

Pier pressure: Best practice in the rehabilitation of British seaside piers

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ABSTRACT: Victorian seaside piers are icons of British national identity and a fundamental component of seaside resorts. Nevertheless, these important markers of British heritage are under threat: in the early 20th century nearly 100 piers graced the UK coastline, but almost half have now gone. Piers face an uncertain future: 20% of piers are currently deemed 'at risk'. Seaside piers are vital to coastal communities in terms of resort identity, heritage, employment, community pride, and tourism. Research into the sustainability of these iconic structures is a matter of urgency. This paper examines best practice in pier regeneration projects that are successful and self-sustaining. The paper draws on four case studies of British seaside piers that have recently undergone, or are currently being, regenerated: Weston Super-Mare Grand pier; Hastings pier; Southport pier; and Penarth pier. This study identifies critical success factors in pier regeneration and examines the socio-economic sustainability of seaside piers.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on British seaside piers. Seaside pleasure piers are a uniquely British phenomena, being developed from the early 19th century onwards as landing jetties for the holidaymakers arriving at the resorts via paddle steamers. As seaside resorts developed, so too did their piers, transforming by the late 19th century into places for middle-class tourists to promenade, and by the 20th century as hubs of popular entertainment: the pleasure pier. However, by the late 20th century seaside piers had fallen on hard times - many were neglected through lack of funds and investment, changing leisure and tourism tastes, or damaged by storms or fire. By the start of the 21st century just over half of Britain's piers survived, with many of these in a perilous state. The fortunes of the seaside pier must be considered in the wider context of the decline of British seaside resorts since the 1970s - piers are metaphors or symbols of this decline. The decaying and derelict pier stands for the rundown seaside resort without a future.

However, Britain's seaside resorts refuse to give up on their piers. They are increasingly being valued as heritage structures, symbols of resort identity, and the focus of civic pride. Consequently there is a growing interest in reviving and regenerating piers - restoring these icons of the British seaside to their former glory. This is taking place within a changing wider context - the revival of the British seaside resort. This situation can be explained by a number of recent developments: the global economic crisis of the late 2000s depressed demand for foreign holidays which resulted in a rediscovery of British seaside resorts (Wallop 2009). Furthermore, the tourism policy launched by the coalition government in 2011 encouraged domestic tourism, with the subsequent introduction of the annual 'English Tourism Week' and the development of the 'Holidays at Home' campaign. There has also been a growing nostalgia for the British

seaside holiday, with Visit England launching a domestic tourism campaign in 2013 focussing on England's 'iconic seaside destinations', and the publication of a series of English Heritage books celebrating seaside heritage in specific resorts (Barker et al, 2007; Brodie et al, 2008; Brodie and Whitfield, 2014). However, whilst the Government, heritage-bodies, and policy-makers have recognised the enduring appeal of the British seaside resort, the regeneration of their piers has proved to be more problematic.

This paper examines current efforts to revive and rehabilitate Britain's seaside piers. It starts by briefly reviewing the rise and fall of the seaside pier. It then examines the wider context of seaside resort regeneration, with particular attention to the critical success factors that can contribute to successful regeneration. It then moves on to look at what is necessary for a pier to be revived and regenerated - focussing both on the wider 'resort' factors that need to be in place, and on the specific 'pier factors' that are necessary if a pier is to be revived. This is achieved through the consideration of four case studies of seaside pier regeneration which represent different models (based on different strategies and local contexts) for the sustainable future of the seaside pier. The paper ends by identifying the critical success factors which need to be in place if piers are to be successfully restored to their role as iconic centrepieces of seaside resorts.

2 THE RISE AND FALL OF BRITISH SEASIDE PIERS

British seaside resorts can be considered as the first sites of mass tourism. Many of the UK's seaside resorts developed from spa towns and the fashion for the purported health-giving properties of sea water and sea air. Both Margate and Scarborough vie for the title of 'first British seaside resort', developing from the mid 18th century onwards. It should be noted that the majority of visitors to these burgeoning coastal resorts arrived by sea (it would be another 100 years until the railways reached the resorts), and so a means of getting people ashore was required. Landing stages were quickly built for the increasing number of patrons at seaside resorts, but these are not recognised as 'pleasure piers' by the UK's leading authority on seaside piers, the National Piers Society. Wills and Phillips (2014) state that 'pleasure piers' not only acted as landing stages, but were also designed to incorporate some element of entertainment or pleasure for resort visitors, which could range from simple promenading, to bandstands, pavilions and refreshment rooms. As such, the UK's first seaside pleasure pier is considered to be Ryde in the Isle of Wight, which opened in 1814 as both a landing stage and a promenading pier.

Although the majority of the UK's coastal resorts had railway connections from the mid 19th century onwards, the 1860s to early 1900s are considered by many (Fischer and Walton, 1987; Gray, 2006; Mickleburgh, 1999; Pearson, 2002) to be the 'golden years' of the pleasure pier. Between 1860 and 1914 over 100 piers opened, including Southport pier (1860), Hastings pier (1872), Penarth pier (1895), and Weston-Super-Mare Grand pier (1904). Many resorts (such as Blackpool, Brighton, and Great Yarmouth) had more than one pier in order to cater to the tastes of different social classes visiting the resorts by the end of the 19th century (Fischer and Walton, 1987). As the 20th century dawned mass tourism to Britain's seaside resorts was at its peak, largely thanks to Wakes weeks and the Bank Holiday Act of 1871 (Walton, 2000), and seaside piers reached their zenith. However, the piers' popularity and proliferation could not last.

Whilst the seaside resorts remained popular during the inter-war years, investment in resort infrastructure, such as piers, was kept to a minimum. During World War II many of the piers on Britain's southern and eastern coasts were 'sectioned' - a piece of the pier was demolished in order to prevent them from being used as landing stages by enemy troops. In the 1950s and 1960s, although many seaside piers reopened, investment and maintenance was minimal in an age of post-war austerity. The final seaside pleasure pier to be built in the UK was Deal in 1957 (a new pier was built to replace the resort's previous pier which had been demolished due to war damage). By the 1960s and 1970s the seaside resorts in which piers were located faced increased competition from the rise in demand for the Mediterranean package holiday amongst British tourists, and increasing car ownership which enabled holidaymakers to visit a wider range of domestic tourism destinations (Agarwal, 1997; Gale, 2007). The decline in demand for

British seaside resorts inevitably led to reduced investment in tourism infrastructure combined with a lack of intervention by local authorities (Williams and Shaw, 1997).

In the wider context of resort decline, Britain's seaside piers began to close and be demolished from the 1970s onwards. The number of pleasure piers on the UK coast has dwindled to just 58 remaining in 2015, with over 40 piers either demolished or destroyed by storms or fire over the last 50 years. As many piers are now over 150 years old some might argue that they are reaching the end of their lifespan. A cast iron structure that is built into the sea, topped by aging wooden buildings, is bound to be susceptible to damage and fire. With increasing investment, maintenance, insurance premiums, and sea defence measures (due to rising sea levels) can seaside piers be viable, or indeed desirable, in the 21st century?

3 COASTAL RESORT REGENERATION

As Britain's seaside resorts declined in popularity from the 1970s onwards, the symptoms of this decline became apparent: deteriorating accommodation; the loss of tourism jobs and rising unemployment; deteriorating resort townscapes and infrastructure; and increased social deprivation and exclusion (Agarwal, 2002; Agarwal and Brunt, 2006; Cooper, 1997). However, over the course of the last decade there has been increased focus on the regeneration of the British seaside resort (Walton and Browne, 2010). In terms of mature tourism destinations there are a number of crucial elements required to ensure the success of any regeneration strategy. These are summarised in Table 1.

The resurgence in popularity of British seaside resorts can, in part, be attributed to a range of funding initiatives in recent years, such as the Sea Change funding project which awarded £45 million from 2008-2010, and the Coastal Communities Fund which runs from 2012 to 2017 and will award £116 million to coastal towns. In addition many seaside resorts have benefitted from Heritage Lottery Funding. Seaside resorts have witnessed arts and culture-led regeneration (such as the Jerwood Gallery in Hastings), heritage-led regeneration (such as Margate's Dreamland amusement park and Blackpool's iconic Tower and trams), and events-led regeneration (for example Whitby's Goth-Weekend).

Private developers have also been investing in Britain's resorts, with luxury boutique and chain hotels opening (such as Morecambe's Midland Hotel, or Hilton developing both Hilton and Hampton Hotels in Bournemouth) alongside boutique retail and art galleries opening in places such as Brighton's Lanes, Margate Old Town and Hastings Old Town. In 2008 the seaside accounted for 26% of domestic holidays and 31% of bed-nights in the UK. By 2013 these figures had risen to 29% and 38% respectively (TNS Travel and Tourism 2009, 2014). Employment in seaside towns also increased by 2.4% between 2008 and 2012 (Beatty et al 2014).

Table 1: Mature destination regeneration critical success factors

Inputs	Outputs
Clear ownership of assets	Creation of quarters or clusters
Legislation and public administration	Extending the season/reducing seasonality
State incentives	Improving destination infrastructure
Transport links/accessibility	Enhancing public space
Place marketing/branding/rebranding	Civic and Community pride
Planning regulations	Entrepreneurship
Partnership and cooperativeness between all stakeholders	Social cohesion
Balance between public/private interests	Increased visitor numbers/spend/extended stays
Participation and consultation of local communities	Market diversification
Product development	Job creation
Overarching strategic vision or goal specific to locality	Stimulation of new economic activity

Source: Adapted from Petric & Mikulic (2009); Saxena(2014); Kennel (2011); Chapman and Speake (2011); Smith (2006); Walton and Brown (2010)

4 PIER REGENERATION BEST-PRACTICE CASE STUDIES

Whilst many of the UK's coastal towns have witnessed reviving fortunes over the last decade, the future for a number of seaside piers remains uncertain. The National Piers Society estimate that 20% of piers are currently 'at risk' of being lost. It is significant that many of the coastal towns that lost their piers during recent decades have struggled to maintain their identity as seaside resorts (for example New Brighton, Morecambe), or have significantly declined as destinations and consequently suffer serious social and economic deprivation (such as Minehead and Rhyl). Moreover, Fothergill (cited in Steele 2013: 6) predicts that seaside piers are set to "lurch from crisis to successive crisis".

Nevertheless, there is increasing recognition that seaside piers are vital to coastal communities in terms of resort identity, heritage, employment, community pride, and tourism. Chapman (cited in Birch 2013) states that "piers have a wider social and economic benefit in attracting footfall and acting as an anchor on the seafront". Moreover, a number of high-profile pier rehabilitation and regeneration projects have recently been undertaken. The following sections of this paper will focus on four of pier rehabilitation projects (shown in Figure 1) and identify key elements of best practice.

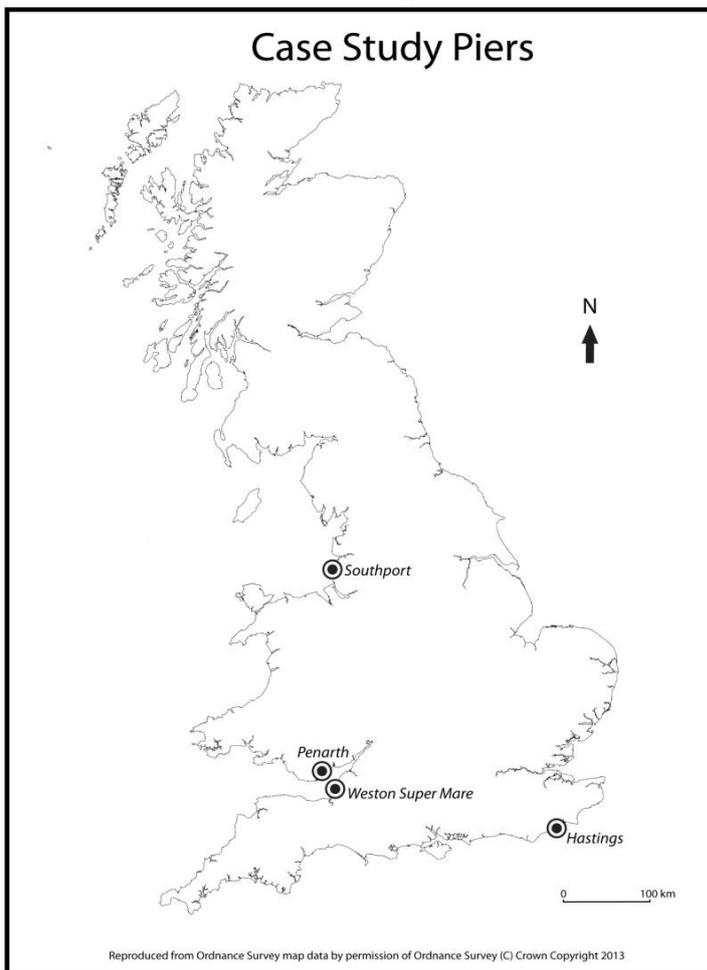


Figure 1: Location of case study piers

4.1 Penarth pier: Community culture-led regeneration

Penarth pier, opened in 1895, is located on the South Wales coast near Cardiff. The pier, owned by Vale of Glamorgan Council, had been in decline since the early 1980s when paddle steamers and cruises stopped calling at Penarth. By the mid 1990s the pier was declared unsafe,

and a programme of repairs costing the Council £2.3 million, was undertaken to repair the pier's substructure, and a further £1.1 million was awarded from the Heritage Lottery Fund in 1998 to restore the pier's buildings. Nevertheless, the pier remained under-utilised, and this was especially evident in its Art-Deco pavilion. The pavilion had functioned as a concert venue, a cinema, a dance hall, a gym, and a snooker club during its history, but by the mid 2000s the building was derelict (Easdown and Thomas, 2010).

In 2008 Penarth Arts & Crafts Ltd, a social enterprise charitable organisation, launched a public funded initiative to restore Penarth pavilion (shown in Figure 2) for use as a multi-purpose community centre which would include a cinema, restaurant, bar, exhibition spaces, and observatory. After many years of campaigning and gaining public support, the pavilion project was granted planning permission in 2011 and gained almost £4 million funding from a range of public bodies (including the Welsh Government, Vale of Glamorgan Council, Heritage Lottery, Coastal Communities Fund, CADW, and Community Asset Transfer Programme).



Figure 2: Penarth pier pavilion undergoing rehabilitation in 2012. Picture: Chris Wyatt

Work began on the rehabilitation of the pier pavilion in October 2012, with the vision that the building would 'educate, inform and entertain' the local community. The Pavilion eventually reopened in December 2013 and during its first year attracted over 100,000 visitors. The Pavilion has received numerous awards, including 'Pier of the Year' 2014; voted as the National Trust's 'most special place' in 2014; and RICS (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors) 'Project of the Year'. Furthermore, Penarth pier pavilion has gained over 700 annual members and is staffed by approximately 100 volunteers from the local community. The pavilion's Fundraising Manager, Alice Turner, states that "members and volunteers are so vital to our operation. They drive everything we do. They have taken it to their heart and want to see it work" (Seal, 2015).

As such, the pier pavilion has successfully increased community participation in cultural projects, hosted a range of educational events and workshops for a variety of community groups (from local schools to armed forces), and held exhibitions featuring local arts and crafts. Penarth pier pavilion is now recognised, respected, and cherished as a much needed hub for this coastal community. In this respect, the Penarth community has really taken 'ownership' of this rehabilitated pier.

4.2 *Southport pier: A rebuilt anchor for resort regeneration*

Southport pier, the UK's oldest cast iron pleasure pier, opened in 1860. The pier stretches out almost a mile from north-west England's coastline. By the early 1990s the pier, owned by Sefton Council, was in need of an estimated £900,000 worth of repairs, and a further £250,000 required every five years for a rolling maintenance programme. Demolition of the pier was proposed, but eventually rejected, by the Council and instead 'Southport 2000', a charitable trust was developed to save the pier. The pier required over £3.5 million for complete restoration and the building of a new pier-head pavilion, which was gained from Heritage Lottery Funding, fundraising activities by the trust, Sefton Council, and EU Objective One funding. The old pier was dismantled in 1999 and the new pier reopened in 2002.

The new pier acted as the focal-point for the 'A Vision for Southport Seafront' strategy that was developed by Sefton Council in 2004. Alongside the rebuilding of the pier, Southport's seafront had been transformed by the development of new flood defences at the end of the 1990s. The new 'Vision for Southport Seafront' provided a strategic plan for the regeneration of the land surrounding the pier, including the rehabilitation of Victorian parks and gardens (as shown in Figure 3), the development of new retail and leisure outlets, and the building of new hotels. The 'Vision' was further developed in 2006 when Southport was repositioned and rebranded as 'England's Classic Resort' with the brand values of 'resort heritage', 'style' and 'sophistication'. The pier featured prominently in the Classic Resort vision for Southport, with the regeneration and development of the pier being considered as a 'strength' within the development of the brand.

Southport pier has acted as an 'anchor' for the regeneration of the resort's seafront. Southport's seafront regeneration has followed a similar pattern to retail-led re(development) schemes where 'anchor' stores have attracted 'flagship' and other retail outlets (Lowe, 2005). With the pier as its anchor, Southport's seafront has subsequently acquired other flagship attractions in-keeping with its brand values of 'heritage', 'style' and 'sophistication': the art-deco Ramada Plaza hotel (opened in 2008); the 'Ocean Plaza' retail and leisure park; and the rehabilitated Marine Lake and King's Gardens (opened in 2014). As such, the pier is now the key access point to a fully regenerated Southport seafront and at the centre of the resort's brand identity.



Figure 3: Southport pier from the regenerated King's Gardens, 2014. Picture: Southport Yesteryear

4.3 *Weston-Super-Mare Grand pier: A thoroughly modern pier*

Weston-Super-Mare's Grand pier was opened in 1904, and was the second pier to be developed in the resort situated on England's south-west coast. The pier had been in private ownership of the Brenner family since 1946, and as such was a well-maintained and commercially successful pier (unlike the resort's other pier which had closed in 1992). In 2008 the pier was sold to the Michael family, but in July 2008 the pier and its substantial pavilion was badly damaged by fire. The Michaels (who had insured the pier) decided to fully rebuild and redesign the pier pavilion as an entertainment centre and tourist attraction for the 21st century (shown in Figure 4).

Grand pier and its new pavilion opened in October 2010 after £39 million investment. The rehabilitated pier featured a covered walkway along its deck to enable visitors to walk along the pier whatever the weather, but the centrepiece of the new pier was its pavilion, which featured a host of thrill rides, a suspended go-kart track, a 4-D cinema, restaurants, shops, and a wedding venue. Since it reopened, Grand pier has won many prestigious tourism awards, its owners have been awarded MBEs, and it plays a vital role in Weston-Super-Mare's economy as one of the resort's major employers.

Nevertheless, the (re)development of privately-owned piers has received much criticism, with Steele (2013:12) claiming that piers in "private ownership are dynamically managed time bombs". Furthermore, Steele states that piers within the commercial sector either suffer from a lack of investment, or are constantly having to adapt to, or be ahead of, commercial leisure trends which ultimately make these piers unsustainable. However, the redevelopment and rehabilitation of Grand pier has successfully managed to circumvent sustainability issues as the new pavilion building has been designed as a multifunctional and highly-adaptable space, thus ensuring its longevity and future-proofing it against changing leisure trends. As such, the pier's owners can continuously develop their product offering within the pavilion to cater for the ever-changing demands and tastes of their customers, without the need for major capital investment in the pier.



Figure 4: Grand pier pavilion featuring 'robocoaster' and suspended go-kart track, 2012.

4.4 *Hastings pier: The funding battle of Hastings*

Hastings pier, located on England's south coast, is perhaps the most prolific example of pier regeneration in the UK. Often referred to as 'The People's Pier', Hastings pier's 'battle' for regeneration began in 2007 when the pier was closed on safety grounds. At the time, the pier was owned by a private company, Ravenclaw, who were based in Panama. As such Ravenclaw was an absentee owner, which Hastings Borough Council had little jurisdiction over. As the pier remained closed the Hastings Pier and White Rock Trust (HPWRT) was formed in 2008 in

order to raise funds for the rehabilitation of the pier. However, with the absentee owners refusing to communicate with the Trust, nor comply with the Council's demands for repairs to the pier, there seemed to be little that could be done for the rapidly deteriorating derelict pier.

Hastings pier remained closed for the next two years, with HPWRT making demands for the Council to issue a compulsory purchase order. In October 2010 the pier was severely damaged by fire, with over 90% of the pier's buildings and deck destroyed. Rather than give up, the Trust was galvanised into action to save the pier. HPWRT had considerable support from the local community and developed an action plan to gain ownership of the remains of the pier. The Council successfully issued a compulsory purchase order in 2012 and the Trust gained ownership of the pier and submitted a successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for £14 million for the restoration of the pier, with additional funding from the Coastal Communities Fund, Hastings Borough Council, and Community Assets Fund.



Figure 5: Plans for Hastings pier, due to reopen in 2016. Picture: HPWRT

In addition to public funding, HPWRT issued a community share sale in the pier, with shares available for purchase at £100 each. The share sale was successfully completed in 2014 with over £500,000 raised towards the pier's rehabilitation, making Hastings pier truly a 'People's Pier'. The Trust not only aims for transparent charitable ownership coupled with co-operative style shareholders, but also has a commercial-entrepreneurial management approach to the restoration and operation of the pier. As such, HPWRT do not plan for the pier to be a conservation or heritage-led project, but instead a vibrant and dynamic facility. The pier will feature a visitor and education centre, a multi-functional event space capable of holding music festivals, an outdoor cinema, funfair, alongside retail and catering outlets. It is planned for the pier to reopen at the start of 2016 as an inclusive and accessible space (see Figure 5) for the local community and the resort's visitors alike.

5 PIER REGENERATION CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

The four case studies showcase a range of seaside pier rehabilitation strategies from a variety of different ownership models. Weston-Super-Mare's Grand pier demonstrates best-practice pier regeneration from the commercial sector, creating a significant and sustainable tourist attraction for the resort. Out of all the case studies featured within this paper, Grand pier had the most substantial capital investment (£39 million), alongside ongoing annual maintenance costs, and annual investment (approximately £250,000 per year) in order to continually update its product offering. However, many pier owners within the private sector cannot afford significant capital outlay in order to rehabilitate their piers, and the National Piers Society are currently campaigning for public-sector funding to be made available to support private ownership of these structures.

In the case of Penarth pier a viable model of public and third-sector partnership has been demonstrated. The Vale of Glamorgan Council own and maintain the pier, but the operation and

ownership of the pier pavilion is led by a social enterprise charitable organisation. The rehabilitation of Penarth pier pavilion under the ownership of Penarth Arts & Crafts Ltd has generated substantial community interest and involvement in the project and the pavilion is now a valuable community hub that 'educates, informs and entertains' Penarth's residents and visitors.

Southport pier, which is owned by the public sector, featured as part of Sefton Council's strategic vision for the regeneration of the resort's seafront and branding of Southport as a 'Classic Resort'. As such, the pier's rehabilitation cannot be studied in isolation, but instead can be considered as an 'anchor' in the wider regeneration of this resort.

The final case study, featuring the 'People's Pier' at Hastings, is increasingly being recognised as a best-practice model of community-led regeneration for seaside piers. Although the pier has yet to open, community-led regeneration of other British seaside piers (such as Bognor-Regis pier, Colwyn Bay pier, and Herne Bay pier) is underway. Enabling coastal communities to take ownership of the rehabilitation and operation of their piers ensures their future sustainability as tourist attractions and as vital community assets.

The case studies featured in this paper have enabled the identification of a number of critical success factors for pier regeneration, which are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Critical success factors for the regeneration of seaside piers

Penarth pier	Southport pier	WSM Grand pier	Hastings pier
Social enterprise	Range of funding sources	Entrepreneurship	Clear ownership
Community participation	Strategic vision	Product development	Community participation
Culture-led	Seafront cluster/quarter	Job creation	Public/third sector partnership
Strategic vision	Place branding		Range of funding sources
Planning regulations	Product development		Community pride
Range of funding sources	Enhancing public space		Social cohesion

6 CONCLUSION

Until recently the future for Britain's seaside piers looked bleak. They were a type of resource which were constructed in a specific context and when that context changed piers no longer appeared to have a role or purpose in many coastal communities. As many succumbed to decay, storm damage and fires, most resorts showed little interest in preserving or maintaining their piers. However in recent years the situation has changed. Piers are increasingly valued as seaside heritage assets, tourist attractions and symbols of resort identity, resulting in coastal communities having renewed interest in their piers.

The case studies in this paper illustrate a range of approaches to pier rehabilitation. Regardless of ownership (whether it be public, private, third-sector or partnership), a number of critical success factors can be identified for the sustainable regeneration of seaside piers. Firstly, any pier regeneration project must have a strategic plan or vision, either specific to the pier or as part of a wider resort regeneration strategy. This vision must be based upon, and be adapted to, the local context: specific community needs, environmental factors, and the resort's identity. Following on from this, the pier must have clear target markets - will the pier be used predominantly by the local community or as a tourist attraction, or both? Secondly, there should be some form of community engagement with the pier's rehabilitation. This can range from outright community ownership through to employment opportunities. The pier should be viewed as a community asset, as without the engagement and involvement of local residents piers become highly seasonal tourist attractions, and as such are unsustainable. Lastly, as highlighted by the majority of the case studies, there must be a range of funding opportunities available to all seaside piers wishing to undertake sustainable rehabilitation. As the value of these iconic structures is increasingly being recognised, more resorts will undoubtedly choose to make their piers the focal point of their coastal community.

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