

North Norfolk Pathfinder project

Summary

Strategies trialled in other country contexts can provide useful examples of how other communities and governments manage climate change risks. A project in the UK explored strategies to manage a rapidly eroding cliff line in the community of Happisburgh. Nine properties at immediate risk were purchased and demolished, the cliff-top car park was rolled back and the lost public toilets were rebuilt. Access to the beach was made safe. The overall effect was to greatly improve the attractiveness of the area, where the local economy is heavily dependent on tourism.

The Pathfinder project in the UK sought to address coastal erosion issues— including decaying coastal defence structures and vulnerable residential housing— and to test adaptation strategies including a rollback scheme.

Background

North Norfolk District Council (Figure 1) was one of five councils in the UK to receive major funding (£3 million) in 2009-10 under the UK governments [UK Coastal Change Pathfinder program](#). Most of the funding went to the cliff-top community of Happisburgh, which faces difficult challenges from coastal erosion.



Figure 1: Location of North Norfolk District Council. Source: Modified from Wikimedia Commons.

Keywords

Coastal erosion, planning, management, rollback

Low-level coastal defences were constructed along the North Norfolk coast through the 1950s to 1970s with a design life of 20-30 years. By 2009 they were in a state of decay and there was no intention by Government to renew them. As a result, erosion of the Happisburgh cliffs is taking place at a rate of several metres per year, depending on storminess (Figure 2). Several buildings have already been lost.

At the start of the Pathfinder project in 2009, a number of Happisburgh residences were blighted because of proximity to the cliff edge. The risk that their house

might become uninhabitable meant owners were unwilling to invest in making repairs or undertaking improvements. There were knock-on effects for the local community – the appearance of these blighted buildings in such a small community was depressing, and tended to keep away tourists, who are a mainstay of the economy. Local businesses were suffering.

The Pathfinder project was an opportunity to address some of these issues, and to test adaptation strategies. A major activity was the rollback scheme.



Figure 2: Photos taken in 1998 (a) and 2013 (b) at Happisburgh. Cliff erosion has left the property just metres from a sheer drop to the beach. Other houses have been demolished. Photos: © Mike Page 2016 (www.mike-page.co.uk).

Happisburgh rollback project

The Pathfinder project at Happisburgh:

- Explored strategies to relocate an at-risk caravan site – Pathfinder funds supported the development of a relocation plan, paid for planning advice and for negotiations for land to enable a future relocation scheme.
- Established a methodology to demolish at-risk houses in one location (Beach Road) and to re-locate the owners. Nine properties were purchased and demolished, allowing previous owners to move on with their lives.
- Other redundant cliff-top structures were demolished, the car park was rolled back, and the lost public toilets were rebuilt.

Owners of the nine Beach Road houses at immediate risk were paid a market value but of course these values were low. None of the owners were in a position to purchase new properties and so they relocated either to a caravan, to rented accommodation or to public housing.

The project initially planned to explore the strategy of buy-and-lease back to deal with at-risk properties in Beach Road at a later date (post 2025) but ultimately this was not pursued due to lack of sufficient funding and perceived financial risk to the Council.

Intangible benefits from the project included increased understanding of management strategies to address coastal erosion, and improved community relationships and cohesion.

Further reading

All links accessed 15 June 2017:

The Guardian report: This sinking isle: The homeowners battling coastal erosion: www.theguardian.com/news/2015/apr/02/sinking-isle-coastal-erosion-east-anglia-environment.

YouTube video of Beach Road demolition: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVgjXP3-1Rg.

YouTube video of Happisburgh erosion and residents' concerns: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UdBdVpucyY.

This Snapshot was prepared by the NCCARF CoastAdapt Development Team. Please cite as: NCCARF, 2016: North Norfolk Pathfinder project. Snapshot for CoastAdapt, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, Gold Coast.



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