



CO-OPERATIVES UK

FRESH IDEAS 5

People's piers

Co-operative and community solutions for heritage assets

Jess Steele

“Flat, free and open to everyone, piers are the epitome of accessible open space.”

Survey research

Opinion survey research for this report was carried out by Survation
- National Opinion Poll for Co-operatives UK, 1,006 adults, Great
Britain, research conducted 11th - 12th July 2013.

Foreword

The story of Britain's piers is a story of challenge, crisis and renewal. So, I welcome this report that looks at the co-operative model and the promise of community ownership. It tells the inspiring story of Hastings Pier, with community leadership against the odds that has found cross-party support from Councillors and Hastings MP, Amber Rudd.

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The UK has an outstanding endowment of heritage architecture, buildings and landscapes. But without committed ownership and effective maintenance, heritage assets can quickly become liabilities. For piers across the country, exposed at all times to sea and weather, there is a real challenge in meeting the high financial costs of upkeep and insurance.

Community ownership of assets is a promising model. The framework of support that exists in the Localism Act gives a permission slip for action. The use of the co-operative 'society' model, as in the Hastings story, to raise pledges of financial support, in the form of 'community shares' is an exemplar for localism in action.

As a seaside MP, with two piers in my constituency, I applaud the search for new solutions to our national assets that can harness the passion and commitment that comes with co-operative and community models.

John Penrose MP

MP for Weston-Super-Mare

Minister for Tourism and Heritage, 2010 - 2012

Oh we do like to be beside the seaside!

More people in Britain live by the seaside than live in Wales, yet the political and economic power of seaside towns lags far behind that of the UK's third largest country.

The seaside is key to our national identity, with over ten per cent of all our designated heritage assets to be found within one mile of the coast. And yet, seventy five per cent of people say that they find that seaside towns are shabby and run-down and in economic terms, business is challenging and unemployment is high.

The seaside has become not just an escape, but somehow a dilemma. The iconic structures of Britain's piers – so resonant of holidays and coastal life - are exemplars for just this. If they can find a positive future, in straitened times, then perhaps the same can be true for coastal communities across the UK more widely.

People and piers

From new national polling data for Co-operatives UK, we estimate that over six million people a year visit a pier. Over two thirds of people in Britain (69%) say that they have visited a pier in recent years.

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This is across all ages. Far from an older person's leisure pursuit, the younger you are the more likely you are to have visited a pier. In some areas like the East of England - home of Southend, Southwold, Cromer, and the Great Yarmouth Golden Mile – four in every five people (79%) have visited a pier.

In Wales, seventy two per cent of the population has visited a pier in recent years. It is perhaps not surprising that in Scotland, where there are less piers to begin with, with a number closed, only one in two of the population (52%) report that that have visited a pier in the last five years.

Piers are an enduring attraction. More people would like to visit a pier than have done in recent years. Only 3% of the UK population say that they would stay away from seaside piers, while 70% of people say they would like to visit a pier in future.

The challenges

Put together there are nearly eleven miles of pier across the country. There are fifty eight piers that are recognised by the National Piers Society.

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The piers are run by a mix of local authority and private sector enterprises, with a wide range of community associations and support groups, and a couple already in full community ownership.

But there are challenges:

1. Upkeep. The combined age of the piers is 7,197 years. You have to spend far more on maintenance with structures that are exposed to the sea.
2. Insurance. There has been something like one fire a year for piers, sometimes in controversial circumstances. Southend Pier, the longest in the world, has suffered three fires in the last forty years. Insurance costs are now sky high – with a bill for insuring Britain’s piers estimated at around £6.6 million per annum.
3. Purpose. If a pier is used for arcades, gaming and gambling, then there is a risk that its benefit as a heritage asset is lost and the maintenance required for that downgraded.

4. Ownership. Private sector ambition often focuses on large-scale redevelopments – hotels, housing, casinos. When these don't come to fruition owners often lose interest. The public sector, in terms of ownership, is risk averse and, more than ever, budget constrained.
5. Environment. Over time, scientists warn us that we should prepare for rising sea levels and more extreme weather conditions that bring higher and more frequent tidal surges and exacerbate coastal erosion.

These challenges create for all piers a cycle of restoration and neglect. As Professor Steve Fothergill, the UK's leading researcher on the seaside economy, puts it: "the maintenance bill for piers is higher than can be covered in every year by local rates or by income generation, meaning that piers lurch from crisis to successive crisis."

Crisis and Solution: a community view

Hastings Pier was owned by Ravenclaw – an absentee owner registered in Panama. The company took a £1.8m mortgage from an Irish bank, made plenty of cash on the top but failed to put it back in underneath.

In 2006 the Council's engineer was doing his regular inspection and a great big piece of metal came off in his hands! He returned to the town hall and as a result the pier was closed on safety grounds. And so it began...

A range of court cases got underway, but they had far less long-term effect than a public meeting held in November 2006 where 200 people crammed in, with more waiting outside, and it was clear that there was the community will to save the pier. It was obvious that the local authority was not ready to use their compulsory purchase powers to solve the problem and we rapidly realised that there was also no chance of a private sector solution. The only option was entrepreneurial community ownership.

Sadly it took several years for the council to catch up – as they appeared to be waiting for a wealthy benefactor to step in.

So from that first public meeting in 2006 until deep into 2009 we felt we were not being listened to by the council and not taken seriously. We learned that however good your arguments, it is not enough to be right. That summer we decided to 'up the ante'. It was time to focus on what we needed – a compulsory purchase – and get political in order to win.

The Battle for Hastings Pier began when 2,000 people marched from the pier to the town hall to present a massive, gift-wrapped copy of the Manual for Compulsory Purchase. A crucial by-election saw us lead a 'Vote Pier' campaign, including systematic listening to local people about their concerns and a carefully-prepared candidates question time event. This took place in the local primary school. Schoolchildren, including my daughter, stood up to tell the candidates what the pier meant to them... and used science and drama to show that it was so structurally strong that the cost of demolition would be £4m to be paid by the taxpayer. By the end, all three candidates leaped up to sign the Pier Pledge.

As the votes came in, this safe (Conservative) seat suddenly wasn't safe anymore, and with the election of May 2010 on the horizon, Hastings Pier had at last become an issue that politicians could not ignore. Within days we were meeting with councillors in the town hall and, after a little face-saving, the council became an 'active partner' in January 2010. Since then every single pier vote in the council chamber has been unanimously agreed across all parties.

On the evening of 4th October 2010 I was driving down the seafront, admiring the pier as the sun set beautifully behind it, on my way to a meeting at which we agreed to go out to EU-wide tender for our architects. Our lottery bid – to restore the structure closest to the land and use the buildings there to make money that would slowly restore the rest – was well underway and things were looking good.

By 2am I was back, watching with horror as a small fire at the pier head spread inexorably towards the land, with the Fire Service impotently spraying from the sidelines because of the dangerous condition of the pier after the years of neglect. We watched all night as our plans turned to smoke. With 90% of the buildings gone there was no chance of 'progressive commercialisation'. But – like St Paul's in the Blitz – the "YOU CAN SAVE ME" banner survived and by the dawn of that tearful, grey, burnt-asbestos morning we had decided on a new strategy.

Seven weeks later we submitted a completely revised Heritage Lottery Fund bid. It's been a long slog since, but we now have a total of £14 million lined up and the ownership is about to transfer from Ravenclaw, via the Council, to the Hastings Pier Charity. We will be using the co-operative model of a 'society for the benefit of the community' to raise 'community shares' for the project and to embed democratic local ownership. The Hastings Pier and White Rock Trust has played its midwife role – sorted the politics, sorted the money, sorted the ownership – and is about to start on a new project – the second most challenging building in town!

Hastings is a mixed income town, but probably the poorest in the South East. The two wards that meet at the pier are significantly deprived. The impact of the pier closure on local businesses was terrible – after all, there was no longer any footfall. This area – known as the White Rock – had been ignored in the council's strategic planning over many years. After the fire there was an outpouring of emotion – both sadness and anger. In turn, though, this raised the profile and fed our 'Everyone loves the Pier' campaign. That was echoed through our social media reach – on twitter with [#justsayyes](#) and [@thepeoplespier](#) - along with celebrity letters and a massive Party on the Prom. When Heritage Lottery Fund trustees came on an assessment visit, the town was plastered with 'Just Say Yes' posters.

The 'clearing of the decks' that the fire enabled made our long-held aspiration for a 21st century pleasure pier less complex. But it was not the fire that made the rescue possible. If it had been that would be a depressing lesson for other challenges and other communities. Instead it was the dogged persistence of local people who refused to give up but were always willing to adapt. As a crisis, the fire was a challenge, but what was critical was how the community responded. The fire fed a narrative in local media of the Phoenix rising from the ashes – optimism, above all, is oxygen for community action.

As Samuel Johnson wrote in 1759, "great works are performed not by strength but by perseverance; yonder palace was raised by single stones, yet you see its height and spaciousness."

How Hastings offers a model that could be a solution for many or all

When we were investigating solutions for our pier we visited many others. We found that those in public ownership tended to be unimaginative and dull; those in private ownership were more dynamic in their management but often failed to reinvest profits into the maintenance of the substructure, creating an inevitable downward spiral.

Our solution was for dedicated, transparent charitable ownership - in perpetuity - coupled with local, co-operative-style membership and a strongly commercial and entrepreneurial management approach. The energy, passion and ambition has come from local people. Once we had funds to do so, we recruited a highly-skilled chief executive with a commercial leisure background, a professional team led by architects who are committed to the community as client and engineers who know the pier inside out. We will use money from the Lottery and other public and charitable funds to restore the pier. We are managing the construction side directly by bringing together a team with the necessary skills, so keeping control of the costs and margins in the restoration work.

So why are piers important?

Piers are totemic assets. A totem brings people together, it symbolises their kinship, the things they have in common. Flat, free and open to everyone, piers are the epitome of accessible open space – a public park stretching out over the silver sea.

Yet they are an asset-type that has never been fully municipalised, nor fully privatised. Council owners must usually negotiate with private operators and for those piers in private ownership the safety buck always lands with the local authority. That means that piers retain all the options for ownership and management. Of the 55 surviving piers in England and Wales, 32 are in private ownership, 22 are held in trust by the public sector. Two (Clevedon and Swanage) are in community ownership, with Hastings about to follow. Many of the council-owned piers have associated community trusts or friends groups that contribute to their management and upkeep.

“Increasingly both public and private owners are looking to local communities to drive the rescue plans.”

Increasingly both public and private owners are looking to local communities to drive the rescue plans. In Colwyn Bay the pier was taken from the bankrupted private owner who had bought it on eBay, and Conwy Council

are working closely with social enterprise Shore Thing to develop their Heritage Lottery Fund bid.

In Cleethorpes a group of eight businesspeople have recently bought the pier and are now working to establish a local charity that will end up owning and managing the pier.

Why community solutions?

Piers are a totem in another way. A pier is a barometer of the health of a seaside town. A dead pier is the equivalent of rotting fish in the chimney – it simply cannot be allowed. If we ask 'why communities' then the answer will be 'who else?' Local residents and businesspeople are the only ones that can't walk away. They smell the rotten fish every day and they cannot and must not put up with it. When we look at how piers are managed we find those in public ownership are 'safe but dull' (and actually not that safe anymore given budget pressures); those in private ownership are 'dynamically managed timebombs'. There has to be a better way – something that combines long-term commitment with next season's excitement.

Community ownership and the co-operative model do operate at scale around the world. In Italy, there are 1,500 cultural co-operatives (and a further 1,500 tourism co-operatives), which play an essential role in a nation with no less heritage than the UK.

Why now?

This is the perfect time for people's piers. It is the right time for community solutions to a lot of problems. Communities will come to the fore not because global financial crisis and the slaughter of local government has forced us but because the absence of unfair and incompetent competition leaves some room at last to say there is no-one better to manage the most precious of local assets than the local community.

If you think that a pier just needs to make money, and that a private individual or corporation has the absolute right to do that and no responsibility to the future, we will see a spate of failures. When the Victorians passed legislation to create their piers, like their railways – they were very careful. Parliamentary Pier Acts usually included clauses forbidding any disposal of the pier. But the 20th century was focused on other imperatives and all kinds of dreadful and illegal things were allowed – including, for example, the liquidation of the Hastings Pier Company against statute law. Under the radar, no-one noticed; we live with the consequences.

This is not just a matter of piers. We live with the consequences of irresponsible private ownership all around us. This should not be seen as 'a fact of life', condoned in order to protect property rights in general. The majority of private owners play their role well; a minority drag the market down and make other solutions inevitable. As a society we do not let people drive dangerous, uninsured cars. We force them to buy insurance and take MOTs. Responsible drivers don't feel bad about this. We should do something similar for buildings. At the very least we need a fast-track compulsory transfer process to rescue assets of importance from owners who have given up or are behaving so badly they are putting the asset at risk.

There should be a presumption in favour of local communities taking over assets of such importance. There are only 55 piers left, that's less than one for every million people in the country. They need very careful looking after and many need a complete rescue package. A community that has had to fight for its pier will come up with the right mix of solutions – long-term secure ownership, public and charitable grants for restoration, community involvement and engaged commercial management to make it work.

The People's Piers UK has recently been established as a peer network of communities working to save their local piers. For more information contact jess@jerichoroad.co.uk.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jess Steele is Director of Jericho Road Solutions. Jess is also Associate Director for Community Organising for national charity Locality. Jess lives in Hastings and has been directly involved since 2006 in the community efforts and activism around the Hastings Pier described in this report.

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In *People's Piers* Jess Steele describes the challenges faced by Britain's seaside piers, and the periodic crises caused by an ownership model based on cash-strapped, risk-averse local authorities or profit-hungry, fleet-footed private enterprises. The story of Hastings Pier points to a new model of community ownership that could serve these 'totemic assets' better right now and in the long term.



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