

Recovering from crisis

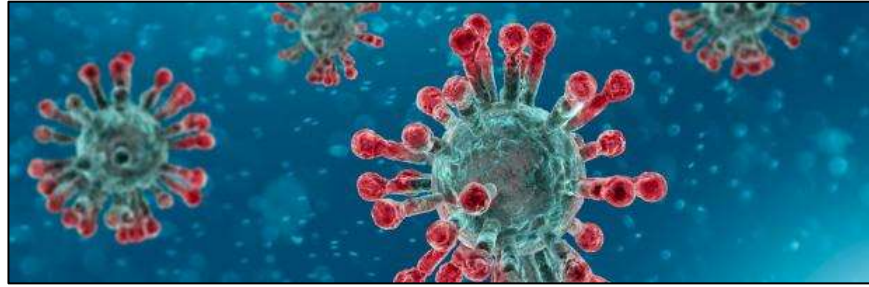


Towards a
recovery plan for
Hastings & St. Leonards
following the
Coronavirus pandemic

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Executive Summary

- The impact of the Coronavirus crisis is likely to hit deprived communities such as Hastings harder in the short, medium and longer term.
- The response by the general public to the crisis has been profound, proactive and early, and needs to be built on and supported going forward.
- The co-ordination of the immediate response to the crisis has highlighted the need for partnership working to tackle the complex problems it has presented. A specific body to co-ordinate a combined local response must be identified and agreement made as to its responsibility. The pre-existing Local Strategic Partnership should be considered for this.
- Configuring solutions for towns and districts should not have a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, and will vary greatly according to their specific characteristics. This will need to be recognised by those leading the responses, and by Government.
- A new national appetite for doing things differently cannot be underestimated. This has been shown into sharp relief, now and with pre-existing crises such as climate change. Combined programmes must be innovative, and accommodate both.
- The follow-on impact of the current crisis will be felt across a wide range of aspects of daily life in the town. Work will need to be undertaken to look at each of these in greater depth and proposals brought for their accommodation to decision-makers.
- A bold plan needs to be developed swiftly and opened widely for discussion by the community to create a united vision for the future.
- New ways of working, shopping and communication have been established which are unlikely to change post Covid-19. These also present opportunities.
- Certain economic sectors will be hit harder than others, but others offer significant opportunities for growth, if identified and supported correctly.
- Proposals need to directly address the significant differences in deprivation experienced by neighbourhoods within the town.
- The immediate health crisis is likely to be followed by an economic crisis which, in turn, may lead to further health crises in the community.
- The impact of the present and future crises needs to focus on the specific issues impacting children, young people and education.
- Skills development proposals need to be directed by new economic opportunities, and be developed in partnership with employers.
- New uses may need to be found for empty offices and retail outlets, and a new, innovative plan developed for the future regeneration of our town centre.
- Regeneration support should identify optimum needs required by other organisations to deliver results, and structured accordingly.
- Small businesses will be an important strand in the town's recovery and a programme of intensive, tailored support must be researched and developed according.



1 Background

The current Coronavirus crisis has sent a shockwave to the health and economic wellbeing of communities throughout the UK. Potentially devastating in its impact, it threatens not only people's lives but also, in the medium to longer term, their emotional, mental and economic wellbeing as the impacts of lockdown(s) quake the foundations of our society.

Certain communities are at higher risk than others. At present, major conurbations such as London have seen a higher incidence of coronavirus cases. Research is suggesting that areas supporting high densities of black and minority ethnic communities may also be experiencing similar issues. Towns where there are high concentrations of elderly residents – Eastbourne, for example – are also becoming 'hot-spots'.

However, as the nation emerges from the immediate first stages of the crisis, a different picture is forming. Of the need to adapt current social practices. Of the need to accommodate different behaviours. And of the need to rebuild communities in ways and extents previously unknown in our lifetimes.

Communities already hard-hit by deprivation will, almost certainly, find it harder to recover. This paper seeks to examine where those pressures may be felt, and how our local community may not only be able to adapt and accommodate the new 'normal', but potentially thrive by being smart and doing things differently than before.

2 The 'Renaissance' of Hastings

While jobs growth has not matched that experienced elsewhere, and income and skills levels remain stubbornly lower, Hastings has enjoyed a distinct 'renaissance' in the past decade.

Through attraction of investment, its town centre(s) have been spruced up, its retail offer has improved and diversified, its housing stock and seafront improved, and many (if not all) of its major eyesores restored to their former glory.

The town's cultural sector has played an important part, both in terms of attracting new investment, developing employment and new businesses, attracting visitors and new residents, and re-positioning the town as a place where bohemia and culture (often noisily) thrive.

This has, in turn, promoted community satisfaction with the town as a place to live (and work), offering a quality of life, access to culture and recreation, and a relatively low cost of living all having an impact. However, other aspects remain resistant to change, including access to decent jobs, skills attainment at schools and average earnings all limiting factors.

3 Trends established during the pandemic are unlikely to go away

Never before in global history has the world's economy experienced anything quite like the Covid-19 pandemic. Only during war-time have countries seen such restrictions placed on human liberties, and yet the development of new communications mechanisms has meant its socio-economic impact has been entirely mixed, with the internet replacing both social contact, a means of purchasing goods, business communications and information, product and service distribution.

Almost overnight, entire communities have found new ways to achieve the following:

- ✓ Home working
- ✓ E-learning
- ✓ Online shopping
- ✓ Internet payments & banking
- ✓ Home food delivery
- ✓ Home product delivery
- ✓ Home exercise
- ✓ Neighbourhood connectivity
- ✓ Revaluing of the benefits of access to the countryside/ outdoors

Many of these developments, once discovered, are unlikely to disappear once people are more able to return to 'normal' daily life.

At the same time, lockdown has spurred other, more negative trends which will require work to accommodate and will be equally resistant to change:

- ✗ Large-scale morbidity throughout the nation fuelling grief and fear, and particularly impacting the elderly and more vulnerable
- ✗ The impact of school closures on educational attainment and wellbeing
- ✗ Mental health issues relating to stress and anxiety
- ✗ Unemployment & large-scale business cessation
- ✗ Increases in alcohol consumption
- ✗ Reductions in general fitness, health and wellbeing
- ✗ Family break-up and domestic violence

4 The Resilience of Economies – it's not all bad

Sectors differ in their ability to respond flexibly to supply, disruptions and falls in demand. Some sectors have positively thrived as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (see growth economies below), while some further businesses have been able to continue (almost) as normal through home working (such as business services) if operatives can log on and work from home. This is not an option for most other sectors. Certain costs can be reduced through furlough or staff support schemes, but these only represent a proportion of total business costs.

Once a global/national recovery gets under way, industrial production and wholesale trade may be able to make up some lost ground (the 3rd and 2nd largest employers in Hastings). Retail, too, may also be able to achieve some catch up as shoppers finally make purchases postponed during lockdown. Consumer confidence, however, will take time to recover, and certain industries – such as tourism and hospitality – may continue to experience opening and/or attendance restrictions.

	Ability to work from home	Scope for rebound	Use of temporary employment contracts
Agriculture	-	-	
Construction	-	-	+
Retail	-	+	+
Wholesale	+	+	+
Tourism & hospitality	-	-	+
Manufacturing	-	+	
Transportation	-	+	+
Business services	+	+	
Health	-	-	

- = Little/no adjustment possible

+ = Adjustment possible

Source: ING Economic & Financial Analysis March 2020

5 The potential for growth – some losers, some winners

If your business happened to be involved in healthcare equipment manufacture, the healthcare agency recruitment sector, be a major supermarket chain or local food and alcohol retailer (or be called Amazon) the Covid-19 pandemic has been a roaring success. For almost every other, it has either meant an almost total revolution in working practices or, quite simply, closure, either temporary or permanent.

Hastings post Covid-19 will be a very different place to what it was formerly.

Its Town Centre will be much changed. Major retailers such as Debenhams and Peacocks have closed. Huge windows will be required to be boarded up. Many retailers in its Priory Meadow Shopping Centre will be struggling, and a number of smaller retailers will never re-open. Pubs will have closed, as will restaurants lacking the cash to see themselves over the crisis, particularly as plans remain uncertain as to any period for their reopening.

Other companies located elsewhere in the town will also have either gone out of business or be struggling to operate with reduced staff and product supplies. Many self-employed contractors will have been unable to wait for the introduction of support schemes and been forced to apply for Universal credit, leading to shortages of semi-skilled and skilled workers. Other industries; travel agents, airlines, farmers, as well as the town's considerable creative sector will have seen their business and work opportunities disappear overnight.

Having said that, the trends outlined above highlight that there may be a number of fields in which growth could reasonably be expected in both the short and medium-term. These include:

- ✓ Scientific & Technical instrumentation
- ✓ Wellbeing & fitness
- ✓ Healthcare & health research
- ✓ Social care
- ✓ E-commerce
- ✓ Software technology & apps
- ✓ Delivery & logistics services
- ✓ Online education & e-learning
- ✓ Arts & Entertainment
- ✓ Environmental services & facilities
- ✓ Hairdressing

It is also worth noting that, while international travel will continue to be severely impacted until national differences remain in viral incidence worldwide, domestic tourism is likely to increase.

Once services resume, a number of even quite large airlines and travel companies will have gone bust, reducing competition and – most likely – increasing prices. The net impact of travel restrictions and increasing prices will almost certainly promote a new wave of domestic tourism, as Britons stay at home to explore their own country rather than venture abroad.

While this trend is likely to also see significant reductions in international visitors coming to the UK, Hastings, as a seaside resort with plenty to offer may be able to take advantage of this important influx of visitors and consumer spending, albeit with some restrictions still in place.

Recommendation

These trends in potential growth economies will become clearer as the impacts of the pandemic are realised, and lockdown restrictions eased. However, they could be an important lexicon worthy of further research to identify where Hastings could best position itself to capture the positive impacts of such growth in its own redevelopment.

A Recovery Team should be established as soon as possible, using the brightest minds in the town (and elsewhere) to research a range of socio-economic trends likely to shape the future of the UK, European and global economies as it emerges from the coronavirus crisis worldwide.

6 Hastings before Coronavirus – and what we might now do

A Deprivation

The Index of Multiple Deprivation uses a range of measures, including unemployment, child poverty, income, health, housing conditions and education to give an overall 'score'. The scores are calculated according to neighbourhoods (lower super output area LSOA), with 34,000 LSOA's nationally, and 53 in Hastings. The index is not a measure of deprivation *per se* but, more, levels of deprivation in comparison to other neighbourhoods in the country.

Latest figures for 2019 show that Hastings has slightly improved its relative position in terms of deprivation UK-wide, moving from the 13th most deprived local authority district in the UK to the 20th. However, despite this overall improvement, many LSOA's within the town have actually become more deprived in relation to the rest of the UK, highlighting that any overall improvement has not been shared equally throughout the community.

In fact, 70% of our neighbourhoods have become relatively more deprived than they were in 2015, with 16 of them in the most 10% deprived in the country. While the gap between the most deprived and the least deprived in the town has narrowed slightly, the worsening of relative positions amongst such a large proportion of the town's neighbourhoods indicate that much of the economic recovery experienced elsewhere in both the UK – and the town – has passed many of our neighbourhoods by completely.

Recommendation

It was Madonna who famously coined the phrase "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got". Successive measures to pull Hastings out of the bottom tier of deprivation, while well-intentioned, have failed to have the desired impact.

Hastings now has an opportunity – indeed, a need – to think 'out of the box' with its regeneration measures, with a commitment from the top to refocus its activities for the good of the population, get the community pulling behind (and developing) jointly agreed objectives, and work *together* on solutions which are, by definition, different to those tried before.

B Population

Hastings' population stood at 92,800 at 2017, having grown just 2.8% in the previous 5 years. This was a slightly lower rate than the rest of the region (3.8%)

By and large, the town's age profile reflects national trends, with the largest age bracket being 50-54 year olds, the last of the baby boomer generation, at 7.5% of the population, although it has a larger cohort of 19-24 years old (7%) than is seen on average across the UK.

<u>Age Bracket</u>	<u>Local %</u>	<u>South East %</u>
0-16	18.5	19.2
16 – State pension age	61.5	61.4
State pension age	20	19.4

Some commenters have predicted a 'baby boom' to follow as a result of lockdown, as people forced to stay at home find themselves closer together with more time on their hands. In fact, experience of deadly epidemics elsewhere finds the opposite trend, with birth rates seeing sharp declines 9months after the start of epidemics in Hong Kong after SARS 2002 (-18%), Brazil after Zika 2015 (-22%), and West Africa after Ebola 2016 (-9%).*Source: Institute for Family Studies*

Recommendation

Hastings' relatively higher proportion of people of a pensionable age, and lower proportion in the younger under 16 age bracket suggest an overall trend toward an ageing population. This means its productive workforce will find it increasingly difficult to support its community in the longer-term.

The town needs to adopt specific measures to address this imbalance, and consider ways to offer incentives to people of working age to the town to promote economic activity and rebalance the ratios. Some of these measure are considered in 'radical ideas', below.

C Health

Hastings' population endures a consistently poor record in terms of overall health in comparison to the rest of the UK. Indeed, against a total of 32 parameters, Hastings only performs better than the UK average in 4, and in those not by a significant amount. At a super-local level, there also remain considerable health inequalities between neighbourhoods, figures which clearly negatively impact overall records.

The borough records significantly worse health rates in comparison to the rest of the UK in the following fields:

- Life expectancy
- Under 75 mortality rates for both cardiovascular disease and cancer
- Road injuries and deaths
- Hospital stays for self-harm
- Pregnant women still smoking at time of delivery

Other, wider determinators of health also see the town perform badly, with significantly worse records in terms of :

- Children in low-income families
- GCSE's achieved
- Violent crime

Most significant, Hastings' record for alcohol-related hospital stays for under 18s is in the worst 5% nationally.

The impact of these trends is felt even more harshly at a super-local level. When comparing life expectancy in the least and most deprived neighbourhoods in the borough, the town's poor health sees men live 10.2 years less in its deprived neighbourhoods and women, 6.4 years less.

All sources: www.eastsussexjnsa.org.uk

At time of writing (28/04/20), East Sussex had recorded a significantly lower incidence of coronavirus cases than the rest of the UK, with only 521 cases against a UK total of 157,149. This places the region in the lowest quintile of prevalence of confirmed cases country-wide.

However, the economic shock likely to follow the current health crisis is expected to have further impacts on the town's general health performance in other fields, particularly in terms of mortality rates in cardiovascular disease and cancer, due to the suspension of these NHS services for a period, self-harm and mental health, smoking prevalence and use of alcohol to cope with stress, employment, GCSEs achieved due to the suspension of schools, and children living in poverty as the economic impact is felt over time.

Recommendation 1

The town needs to adopt an integrated approach towards healthcare promotion to address the multiplicity of factors impacting health in its most deprived communities. This will require investment by a partnership of organisations to provide single points of access for residents to a wide array of health, and health promotion services, specifically – and deliberately – where they are needed.

In fact this is not a new idea, but one which saw its genesis in the roots of the National Health Service and has more recently seen a resurgence in the concept of 'whole person' medical care, but is regarded as particularly important to address the broad range of factors experienced within deprived communities.

Instead of requiring people to attend a GP surgery for ailments, referral to hospital for tests, A&E or operative care, and a free for all with other health services depending on need, a clinic could offer a range of services in a one-stop format. This could see a practice become more of a 'health and wellbeing' clinic, incorporating:

- GP surgery
- On-site visiting specialists in key areas such as cancer/ cardio-vascular
- Nutritionist
- Greengrocer
- Walk-in mental health clinic
- Drug & alcohol services
- Community gymnasium & keep-fit classes
- Adult social care advisors
- Access to support volunteers to sustain well-being programmes at home.

Recommendation 2

A 'Fit for life' programme offering free gymn membership to anyone over 40 to reduce cardiovascular disease, matched with skills development for personal training qualification at the College. This could initially include free outdoor exercise programmes for anyone over 40 enabling exercise while still remaining socially-distanced.

D Education & Skills

The performance of Hastings' schools and colleges has improved in recent years following considerable investment during the past decade. Key indicators are as follows:

- 14 of 26 primary schools in Hastings & Rye now record pupils exceeding UK national average standards (no data for 4 schools, including 2 independents)
- 3 of 11 secondary schools performing above UK average (no data for 3 schools) but 4 performing below, or well below average
- 1 school performing well above average for 16-18year olds, (Ark Academy) with three more performing at an average level and 1 no data supplied.
- Ofsted now rates 4 schools in Hastings & Rye as 'Outstanding', a further 24 as 'Good', 3 'Requiring improvement' and only 2 (in Rye) as 'Inadequate'. (no data supplied for 5 schools.

All information source: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=default&table=schools&parliamentary=Hastings%20and%20Rye&geographic=parliamentary&for=primary>

Higher education in Hastings took a hit with the closure of Brighton University's Hastings campus which had seen some 680 students taking a range of courses. However, criticism had been levelled at the University for some mis-matching of course provision with local needs.

Following its closure, a new University Centre for Hastings was established under the aegis of the existing Sussex Coast College, subsequently renamed East Sussex College Hastings. This now forms one of four campuses for East Sussex College, which also operates a number of further sport or music academies across the county.

The Hastings campus is split across three locations now providing a diverse – and some may say more appropriate – range of skills programmes better suited to its local economy.

Recommendation 1

While schools' performance is improving, progress is slow, and the medium to longer-term impact of lockdown on pupil attainment is difficult to estimate. Concerns are now being raised over the impact of extended periods out of school on pupils' ability to return to 'normal' education provision for a period, however these impacts are not only reserved to local provision.

Consideration could be given to ways to diversify the pupil experience with additional, more 'fun' ways of learning to re-engage pupils already used to prolonged periods away from study, engaging programmes such as outdoor study in nature reserves, e-learning periods, outward-bound skills development, site visits to employers and increased visits by inspirational industry speakers.

Recommendation 2

The sensitivity to local needs and opportunities for skills development should also be developed yet further as part of an overall economic development programme for the town (see Employment below).

E Employment

The economic contractions resulting from the global financial crisis of 2007-8 caused a sharp recession followed by years of austerity measures, brought in by Government, aimed at restoring the economy's finances to promote healthier growth. Although the immediate national rise in unemployment was less than expected, it was still substantial and felt hardest by those at the margins, including Hastings.

By the same token, the post-financial crisis economic boom in employment has largely passed Hastings (and other communities like it) by. While the UK as a whole has seen the number of jobs grow some 11.4% in years from 2011-17, Hastings – at just 2.4% growth in jobs – has constantly performed worse than both the rest of the UK and local SE region (at 10.2%). (*Hastings Economy Overview SELEP 2018*)

The origins of this are not solely due to the immediate economic impact of the crisis alone, and owe much to longer-term weaknesses within the local economy itself. These include a decline in local youth employment, rising underemployment in terms of skills, and a higher concentration of low-paid seasonal work.

This is reflected in Hastings' weak performance against national wage levels, averaging at just 92% of the national average. This, in turn, is linked to the town's industry mix, with relatively low representation in terms of jobs in the higher-paid financial services or professional, scientific and technical industries, and higher representation in the lower paid motor repair, education, construction and health and social care industries.

Evidence through recession continues to show that those with higher skills or qualifications are more likely to stay employed and have substantially higher earnings prospects. (*UK Commission for Employment & Skills: The Labour Market Story: The UK Following Recession 2014*)

To address this, local policy focused on helping shape education, training and employment institutions to ensure they adapted to changing market and business needs. While this model enjoyed some success locally, the concept of 'pushing' skills to employers has not been successful. More successful policies have seen employers participating in designing, implementing and engaging with the solutions.

Recommendation

The establishment in 2016 of the Sussex Skills Solutions Employers Board means a mechanism has been established to address some of the issues identified above and engage employers in the skills development & training process, together with a supported apprenticeship scheme & (free) distance learning programmes. This programme should be widened out to incorporate a new skills programme for the town, based on the proposals for optimum sector growth identified in the new economic development strategy, post covid-19.

F Business activity

The vast majority of businesses operating in the town are so-called 'micro-businesses', employing no more than 4 employees. In 2017, 82% of all businesses in the town employed less than 10 employees. (*Hastings Economy Overview SELEP 2018*)

Indeed, the town is characterised by a distinct lack of large employers, outside the NHS or state sector. This offers both plusses and minuses when considering the town's economic resilience. Larger concerns have greater reserves to draw on and are more robust to economic shocks. However, where a larger concern moves or closes the impact is more significant. By contrast, while the resilience of smaller concerns to economic uncertainty is weaker and any loss to the town economy smaller, they can be more flexible in what they do, and adapt to change more easily.

An interesting illustration of this was seen in the retail sector during the last financial crisis of 2008, which saw a number of outlets of national chains disappear from the town's principal shopping centre at Priory Meadow leaving large gaps which took long periods to replace. By contrast, the Old Town's shops were near full occupancy throughout, while the streets of St.Leonards saw a renaissance in independent retail, supported by externally-funded urban environment improvement programmes.

Other schemes designed to promote employment by attracting inward investment by larger concerns have proved significantly less successful, with many of the town's new office structures remaining either empty, or only part-let, and its proposed industrial park sites on the town's outskirts failing to attract the commercial investment expected.

Post (or even during the prolonged impact of) Covid-19, economic confidence is guaranteed to be weak and unstable. Inward investment to the town by large concerns is therefore unlikely to take place even in the medium term. However, this does not mean the concept should be thrown out altogether.

Companies whose businesses may have suffered due to the pandemic will all be looking for ways to reduce costs and outgoings, with or without Government support for furloughed staff. Spending by consumers will take time to recover and unemployment will increase, further reducing money circulating in the system. In addition, new ways of working remotely or at home have, for certain industries, questioned the logic of having large, expensive office facilities with scores of employees attending daily.

The net impact of these forces, therefore, could see companies downsizing from their existing office bases (where leases and/or ownership provides) and seeking smaller facilities for core operations supporting larger networks of home workers throughout the UK. Such facilities could be based out of major cities, thereby reducing costs further, but would need to be supported by otherwise good infrastructure of appropriate facility provision, parking (or access to good public transport), broadband and other telecoms connectivity, plus a ready supply of a skilled labour force, willing to work at competitive rates.

Recommendation 1

Hastings needs to analyse its current stock of suitable office accommodation & establish a specific programme to a) develop the appropriate infrastructure required to support such enterprises, b) work with skills agencies to develop skills programmes required, and c) market the hell out of the town as a place for companies to relocate and downsize to reduce costs and improve profitability through remote working.

Recommendation 2

Although controversial at the time, the establishment of Enterprise Zones by the Thatcher Government in the 1980s, ultimately, proved highly successful at regenerating a series of deprived urban communities across the UK. Such zones provided – *inter alia* – a period of freedom from business rates, exemption from development land tax, 100% capital allowances and a more liberal approach to planning rules.

A number of new EZs have been created recently with support being provided for them through the Local Enterprise Partnerships. Government policy in January 2020 was for more to be created. (Source - *Enterprise Zones: House of Commons Briefing Paper No.5942*)

While no new policy has yet been announced, it appears likely that this policy to stimulate new jobs growth through encouragement of enterprise in such zones will form an important plank of the Government's post Covid-19 economic response.

Hastings should establish a Group to prepare proposals for an Enterprise Zone to be created in Hastings, either centrally or on its proposed (currently pretty vacant) industrial sites (or combined) to capture some of this opportunity to promote business growth.

Recommendation 3

Given the prevalence of micro-businesses in the town, (and the failure of previous initiatives for big business) no economic recovery will be sustainable without introducing measures to support smaller enterprises. This will go beyond the current provision of survival loans or the existing, 'reactive' range of business support advisory services.

Indeed, the opportunities for a town like Hastings to create new small businesses is now considerable, as more and more people seek new ways to support their income, post Covid-19. The environment to promote the growth of this sector, therefore, needs careful preparation.

A number of critical factors impact the growth of small businesses. These can be summarised as follows:

- ✓ Offering what people want to buy, not just what you want to sell
- ✓ Cash flow
- ✓ Finding ways to reduce costs
- ✓ Realism in income/expenditure estimates
- ✓ Prioritisation of marketing
- ✓ Finding efficient ways to increase profits
- ✓ Tracking & monitoring performance
- ✓ Learning before earning
- ✓ Holding price points and increasing margins by adding value
- ✓ Accessing the right business advice or mentor

A proactive SME Enterprise development programme could therefore be developed in the town to directly promote the establishment of new or small enterprises locally in the following ways:

- Establishment of a dedicated Group to research the town's initial economic development proposals for SME's, particularly with reference to the growth economy

projections post Covid-19. This research would then be promoted widely in the town through CoC's, social media and direct mail.

- Extension of the national loan guarantee scheme to include new SME's, or establishment of a local solution to overcome initial cash flow issues.
- Start-up & SME business grants scheme based on business or employee growth, like the current SECCADS scheme (or previous LEGI Initiatives) but for all businesses, not just creative ones.
- Provision of free business advisory services, in conjunction with major banks, twinned with a business mentor-matching programme.
- Business rate reductions/ holidays for start-up/SME's taking up commercial rental space
- Business skills development programme run in conjunction with East Sussex College
- Establishment of programme to create teams of 'super-consultants' to call on in key fields to promote economic growth locally. This could see pools of expertise built up locally to provide businesses/ individuals with advice – and a programme of direct and/or subsidised support – in fields, including:
 - Access to export markets – particularly post-Brexit
 - Selling & distributing products online – accessing new, bigger markets for goods
 - Online payment systems – trading economically
 - Setting up online web-based shops & services – even as an adjunct to existing
 - Social media marketing – how to use the new tools to your advantage
 - Web design & photography – with advice on platforms & making products fly out the door
 - How to access grant funding – to assist people in applying, often for the first time

7 Bold, yes – but we need bold, now

A A local spending programme

The once-depressed town of Preston, Lancs., developed a community wealth building programme, keeping much of the local economy in the hands of inhabitants and preventing 'leakage' of money elsewhere.

The Cambridge model demonstrates that, for every £1 spent locally, that £1 is then spent 7 times locally before it leaves the local economy. The Preston model required 'anchor institutions' – bodies with large budgets like local authorities, hospitals and colleges – to use local businesses when procuring goods and services.

The local council led the way. Between 2012/13 and 16/17 procurement spent locally rose by £74m, softening the blow of austerity. In 2018, Preston was ranked 'most improved city' in a PriceWaterhouseCoopers study, and unemployment fell from 6.5% in 2014 to 3.1% in 2017. Some critics have complained this has seen an increase in prices by reducing the number of firms able to bid for contracts, and that it actually does nothing to the overall economy since money would otherwise still have been spent elsewhere.

However, for Preston at least, it is widely seen as an effective mechanism for 'levelling up' a depressed regional economy, and could well provide a useful opportunity for a town such as Hastings which has suffered more than most of its neighbours as a result of austerity measures.

B A Green 'new deal'

The need for a radical economic reboot after Covid-19 is becoming increasingly certain. At the same time, the world is undergoing a climate crisis which potentially dwarves the impact of the current pandemic.

The impact of lockdown has been a shot in the arm for the nation's environment, with reduced pollution levels not seen for 50 years, huge reductions in airline and car travel, factory output suspended and food production slowed. The return to economic activity is also not expected to see things return to previous norms, with increased home working leading to reduced domestic travel, airline travel slow to re-grow, and many local economies having a re-think about former business models.

This, together with the need to – still – achieve significant reductions in CO2 production present an opportunity to focus on green technologies as a major opportunity for any economy looking for growth post Covid-19.

Through packages of re-training programmes, business and enterprise support, and establishment of marketing and support infrastructure for existing developments, the town could seek to build strength in green technologies to support achievement of the region's – and UK-wide – need for climate reduction enterprise.

This could include:

- Training & re-training plumbers/ heating engineers in green boiler installation, including hydrogen/ air/ground source heat pumps/ solar panel installation etc.
- Support for any new business developing green central heating solutions (such as an extension of current EU-funded LoCase support programme)

- Introduce a supported programme for coppicing woodland to promote carbon mitigation, tied to a local timber production programme for housing
- Supported programme to promote the use of timber construction solutions for local housing programmes to reduce production miles & create a ready, value-added market for timber produced locally.
- Installation of town-wide pavement scheme for resident's electric vehicle charging points, with ancillary support for purchase of electric vehicles.
- Establishment of a town-wide programme to promote/support installation of solar panels on all industrial/light industrial/ retail buildings
- Establishment of a town-wide electricity generation scheme with people feeding in supply to the local supply.
- Programme of marketing support to promote access by visitors and residents of the town's outstanding asset of surrounding countryside and nature reserves.
- Establishment, with the private sector, of a scheme of electric/standard bicycle pick-up and drop-off to promote sustainable travel locally.

C Food, Food Poverty & Food Security

While some impacts of Covid-19 could have been predicted (such as its implications for the airline or hospitality industries) one of the biggest impacts for which the country was least prepared was in terms of its food supply. Almost unbelievably for a developed nation, large numbers people in the UK were going hungry.

While some of the initial impacts in terms of food distribution have now been resolved (after an initial shock), the numbers of individuals and families now depending on food parcels distributed by Foodbanks in the UK have skyrocketed. Food security is once again on the agenda, a position which must be addressed in both the short, medium and long term lest any future 'wobble' and it happen again.

A growing number of initiatives around the UK (and Hastings is no different) are now in development, both to promote food production and growing, and to find new ways in which food can be distributed to those in need. Local growers are teaming up with gardening groups, Foodbanks are accessing huge numbers of volunteers, new bridges are being built with retailers to access excess supply: in short, a mass of initiatives are being developed in response to Covid-19, but which are, necessarily, widespread and unlinked.

A programme to capture this energy is now needed and co-ordinate an integrated response to address the underlying issues of food security. This could involve:

- ✓ Development of the current Community Hub 'food sub-group' into an initiative for local food production and security and co-ordinate smaller programmes in an integrated way
- ✓ Online & user-led research into the barriers to food & nutrition experienced within the local communities experiencing problems to identify key indicators (ie. 'it's not just about money')
- ✓ Identification of local opportunities for local medium-scale food production & creation of specific, funded initiatives to grow food output.
- ✓ Identification of potential food production sites from unused land & matching them with local food production initiatives
- ✓ Support for commercial and/or community growers
- ✓ Establishment of food delivery box schemes for those in needs
- ✓ Support for schemes to promote domestic food preparation & cooking

D Don't buy the town centre – help revision it

For the past decade, town centres across the UK have been in decline, with some 50,000 fewer shops on our High Streets than just ten years ago. This affects not only shops and shoppers: as shops close, it can make entire areas less welcoming. During the recent lockdown, visiting Hastings & St.Leonard's town centres can actually be a scary experience.

This trend has been the result of a cycle of factors coming to play. The rise in online retail is only a part, accounting for only 20% of retail sales in 2019. But experts believe retail only plays part of the story: indeed, the fixation by town centre planners on retail has been part of the reason why so many centres have lost their character, dominated by major chains found everywhere. At the same time, many found it easier to visit out-of-town shopping centres, forcing a further drop in people visiting the High Street, and so the cycle continues.

In bids to halt the cycle, many UK authorities have taken the drastic action of actually acquiring large swathes of retail property and shopping centres themselves. Only last year, councils spent some £232m acquiring struggling shopping centres accounting for a third of all such deals in the UK in 2019.

However, with the impact of Coronavirus on retailers, this trend will potentially have disastrous consequences, leaving councils with empty properties in a market set to suffer an almost total collapse in demand.

To survive and thrive, our High Streets must adapt, and Hastings is no different.

To entice people to return to the town centre, new reasons for them to visit must be provided. Retail will continue to be part of the mix, but it will clearly require more innovation than that. To plan this, the Council should establish a private/community/statutory partnership to develop new plans for the revisioning of the town centre in support of a new 'modus operandi'.

Acquisition may yet play a part, housing also. Schemes such as the conversion of the Observer Building into a multi-purpose creative centre with a mix of residential, workspace and leisure facilities are also an illustration of a potential way forward.

Instead of large stores offering single product ranges, potential redevelopment could also look at support packages to landlords to secure rents through more mixed-use facilities, with designer-makers adding character and industry to the retail mix. Business rate relief for smaller retailers could be used to match similar schemes for charities.

Many such examples have been developed in centres throughout the UK, including Manchester, Diss in Norfolk, Staffordshire University and the Truman Brewery in London. These facilities can involve any one of the following features:

- ✓ Live/work units for smaller local producers or outlets.
- ✓ Covered markets for independent street traders
- ✓ Designer/maker outlets for craft-working industries, including silversmithing, stained glass, clothing, ceramics, jewellery, artists etc .with shared facilities and central social meeting places/ cafes etc.

E Attract Britain's brightest

The disparity between inner city property prices and outlying districts such as Hastings has brought an influx of some of the UK's most talented individuals to live and – in many cases – work here. Whatever the feelings of local residents, this has without doubt added considerably to the town's character, profile, and commercial activity.

The concentration of Coronavirus cases in Central London, twinned with poor access to outdoor space, apartment living and the discovery that home working is a realistic option for many is likely to see this trend increase, with a new influx of people wanting to live and work outside cities. This presents an opportunity for towns such as Hastings.

An increasing number of locations around the UK and Europe have directly targeted this cohort of individuals by developing strategies to become 'Smart Cities'. Connectivity, high speed broadband, the presence of other 'bright' people to work and socialise with, a vibrant social scene and a clear identification with environmental and other policies of importance to a younger generation are critical factors in establishing these success stories.

They are also marketed as such.

If the correct steps are taken now to revision Hastings along these lines it has all the attributes ready to capture this outflow of some of the UK's brightest young people to live and work here, bringing new life to the town, creating employment opportunities, and attracting new spending locally from people often earning high salaries in some of the fastest-growing sectors worldwide.

F Supporting good ideas

For many years, the community in Hastings has struggled to achieve real change in Hastings & St.Leonards due to a disconnect between statutory authority and local activism. Where progress has been made – and in many cases it has been significant – it has often been due more to the determination of a community cohort to 'find a way' than bold leadership from the authorities.

The duality of the statutory authorities in the town, led by parties of often opposing political persuasions, has in certain instances impeded progress, with a local borough responsible for planning, and a county authority responsible for social care, education, highways and much else.

Despite this, success stories are increasing, and highly visible. The restoration of Hastings Pier was led by a community-led charity. The redevelopment of the ice rink by a dynamic local company. The proposed redevelopment of the Observer Building, again, is a community-led project. Working together with the authorities, these organisations have found a middle way to bring about change by capturing the goodwill of their communities, accessing funding, and being smart in making sure what results is led by need and opportunity, rather than top-down 'regeneration'.

There remain some big projects yet to be realised. The restoration of Hastings Castle. The restoration of its Country Park. The redevelopment of the former St.Leonards bathing pool site.

If the town is to build on the progress already being made in the regeneration of Hastings it must learn from these success stories, and find ways to support them directly in achieving objectives, rather than presenting obstacles to them. However, many such organisations may require support themselves to achieve their goals, successfully and sustainably.

The local authority could play an important role in this process, therefore. Working with the voluntary sector services, a regeneration team could re-focus activities on supporting a raft of community-led programmes, rather than trying to deliver its own in isolation. Such a service could provide support with:

- ✓ fundraising
- ✓ organisational development
- ✓ business planning
- ✓ planning applications,
- ✓ corporate governance
- ✓ legal and environmental advice

In short, all the learning a grassroots organisation will need to acquire if it is to succeed in achieving real change. Regeneration would be by the community, and for the community; it would be sustainable and driven by clearly-identified community objectives.

8 Conclusion

The outpouring of support for the NHS across the nation, and the immediate coming together of large swathes of the population to offer their services as volunteers to help those needing support in our communities has been an inspiration at a time of severe worry and hardship.

In addition to Government initiatives, millions of pounds have been raised to support frontline NHS staff, 750,000 people signed up to become NHS volunteers, while over 4000 volunteer Mutual Aid groups have now been established throughout the nation to help distribute food parcels, befriend vulnerable citizens, collect medications and ferry key workers around. HastingsHEART was one of the first of these to be established (no.321) and, with over 1000 volunteers now registered, one of the largest of any town in the UK.

This momentum of public co-operation, support and willingness to be called on at a time of crisis cannot be underestimated, and needs to be recognised and rewarded in a new deal of partnership in configuring solutions as we move forward.

We are, quite literally, all in this together.

As towns across the UK emerge from the immediate impacts of a pandemic the like of which has never been experienced before in our lifetimes, there is a clear need for an integrated approach to developing solutions. It will need to engage all parties in its resolution, and yet it will also need to be bold.

The role of statutory authorities cannot be underestimated in this process. However, if the past few months are anything to go by, a new mood is building that the old ways of working are simply not up to the task.

Partnership is no longer a myth but a very real aspect of dealing with this crisis. Recovering from its impact will require very real changes to be made at the highest – and lowest – levels in order to rebuild our country, our towns, and our communities.

9 About the author

Alastair Fairley is an independent fundraiser, consultant and strategic planner.

A qualified economist, he moved to Hastings in 1991, having formerly worked as a Fleet Street journalist, and is author of nine books on architecture, history, and socio-economic planning.

A volunteer since he was 15, he was swiftly engaged in helping in the successful restoration of the De la Warr Pavilion, established the Hastings Arts Forum, the Rainbow Alliance, the Baird Film Initiative and worked as an active member of the Hastings Community Network. In 2006 he was elected co-chair of the Hastings & St. Leonards Strategic Partnership, representing that body on the SEEDA Area Investment Framework to direct funding towards regeneration and the achievement of the community plan.

In 2010 he was appointed a member of the SE Regional Committee of the Heritage Lottery Fund, becoming its deputy chair, and overseeing the investment of over £300m to heritage projects in the South East over six-year tenure.

In 2009 he founded the Fairley Archive of Space Exploration, an independent company managing an important archive of original NASA photography inherited from his father. Since then he has developed the company by holding exhibitions nationally and internationally, as well as delivering lectures to universities, astronomy groups and schools and colleges.

In 2017 he was appointed by Sussex Wildlife Trust as Chairman of the Appeal Board for the development of a new Discovery Centre for Rye Harbour Nature Reserve, overseeing the raising of £4.3m towards its construction due for completion in Autumn 2020.

In the same year he also established, with other members of his family, the Stonelynk Valley Nature Reserve, a new nature reserve of approximately 190 acres running between Hastings and Fairlight, East Sussex. Through this he is now involved in further initiatives to develop new economic models for woodland owners, and wider programmes to promote the region as a major destination for green tourism.

In response to the Coronavirus, he founded, with colleague Kim Batty, the Hastings Emergency Action Response Team – HEART – to corral support from the local community to support vulnerable people in need in the town. Within six weeks the organisation has attracted over 3000 members to its facebook group, established an information-rich website – www.hastingsheart.com – and signed up over 1000 active volunteers to support people in the town.

The views in this report are his own.