



A short report for East Riding County Council

Successful Festivals and Events in small coastal towns

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CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

East Riding County Council commissioned this short research report to explore the ingredients of successful festivals and events programmes in small seaside towns that are in relative isolation from major urban centres of population.

The study highlights issues faced by some coastal towns and the innovative approaches taken to solve them recently. It then goes on to provide short case studies of successful festivals and events with elements that are relevant to Newbiggin-by-the-Sea and Withernsea.

Methodology

A limited amount of time was available to conduct the research. The research method has included a series of semi-structured interviews with leaders of organisations who have successful festival programmes that bring inward investment and stimulate the local economy. These are:

- Magna Vitae
- Visit Isle of Wight.

In addition, a series of case studies on successful festivals has been produced, with guidance kindly provided by the Coastal Communities Alliance: the Coastal Cultural Network: and the Coastal Tourism Academy.

Key issues

In 2007 the Communities and Local Government Select Committee recognised that although many British coastal towns have their own unique communities and characteristics, many face similar barriers in encouraging tourists and visitors outside of the main summer season, such as physical isolation: high or significant levels of deprivation; ageing populations; and the nature of the housing market, which is generally low-cost, attracting low-income families. The nature of the local economy also tends to be seasonal, low-skilled, and low-waged.

Most of the literature on the theme recognises that the decline in Britain's coastal towns has happened over decades since their heyday in the 1930s to 1950s. Social change in the 1960s to 80s, through advances in technology and access to cheap travel abroad, meant people had far more choice over their leisure time. Harking back to the heyday of British coastal towns is not a solution to decades of decline. A new approach is required.

Some seaside towns are now using imaginative programmes of festivals and events to breathe new life into their communities and attract new audiences.

Particularly in the shoulder months (spring and autumn), the aim is to see increased:

- Economic Impact (income generated by tourists or visitors)
- Economic Activity (income generated by local people spending more in the local economy).

Both inject much-needed funds into the local economy.

Models for a new approach

Both Magna Vitae and Visit Isle of Wight Ltd. are models created out of public spending cuts.

Magna Vitae is a leisure and culture charitable trust set up to take over the running of East Lindsey District Council's leisure and culture services. It aims to:

- Promote tourism and engagement with arts and culture.
- Encourage investment and support for local seaside towns.
- Attract revenue.

The trust aims to improve people's lives by:

- Promoting and maximising community participation in healthy recreational activity.
- Providing or assisting in the provision of facilities for recreation or leisure.
- Promoting education and wellbeing of people through performing arts.

To attract some of its revenue, the trust works across the country and abroad, putting on events and providing consultancy services. Examples include its international work, taking the SO Festival to Scandinavia, South West Sweden and Denmark.

Visit Isle of Wight Ltd. had a plan in place to take over the marketing of the Island's events from the local council gradually, over a number of years. Very quickly into the contract, the council withdrew funding and the company assumed total responsibility. Visit Isle of Wight Ltd. is a not-for-profit limited company with 24 board members.

Magna Vitae receives support or funding from:

- Arts Council (it is a National Portfolio Organisation with funding now secured to 2022).
- Coastal Communities Alliance.
- Local businesses.
- European Funding.

It plans apply to Lincolnshire Coastal Destination Business Improvement District for funding. There is in-kind support in the form of volunteers who help run events. This is a way of increasing employability skills and helps in areas of deprivation.

The founding CEO of Visit Isle of Wight Ltd. explained that slightly less than half of the company's income comes from the local Business Improvement District. The company attracts a similar amount through sponsorship and advertising. It also receives a grant from the Sustainable Transport Access Fund. The company operates on a budget of less than £850,000 which is a sharp contrast with Isle of Wight Council who previously devoted a budget of £2 million to attract visitors to the island.

The company works on an 18:1 investment ratio, so for every £1 the company invests in an event or festival, it must attract £18 to the island.



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Magna Vitae's model

The Deputy Chief Executive of Magna Vitae describes part of his role as developing unique, bespoke, site-specific events to increase and promote tourism. Magna Vitae's initial focus was on Lincolnshire's coastal towns. Now they deliver projects all over the country, including Ramsgate and Weston-Super-Mare. Their work is about regeneration, working with local communities to provide an offer that is tailored to their needs but which will also be attractive to audiences within a certain radius who will be prepared to travel to take part.

The company works with Coastal Communities Alliance (based in Lincolnshire); their audience is hard-to-reach groups who do not usually engage with cultural events. The company also seeks to attract new audiences. They operate as an events or festivals business but bring in arts practitioners or other contractors to deliver the project. They also provide a consultancy service.

Magna Vitae's events

The events are both traditional and innovative, based on a theme such as 'Light' or 'Water.' The themes tend to be quite flexible with a lot of potential to develop ideas.

For example, with 'Water,' they took neglected 1950/60s boating lakes and had a team of artists create a huge Hook-a-Duck.

With the theme of 'Light' they looked at fairground lighting from the early 1920s and 30s, based on the premise that colourful lights always attract people.

Magna Vitae runs the SO Festival in the summer. This festival is promoted as East Lincolnshire's leading arts and culture festival and is a key family event in the summer. It runs from 27th June to 2nd July across four towns Spilsby, Horncastle, Alford and Mablethorpe, all of which are small or medium-sized towns off the beaten track.

The festival offers circus workshops, dance, music, community dance performances, storytelling, family creative spaces and a seafront theatre. Working with the Amateur Motor Cross Association, they run an annual Beach Race in Skegness. This runs in November and is one of the largest off-road events in the UK attracting hundreds of competitors and spectators. They have three classes of events: clubman class (including youths): quads and sidecars: and adult solo (including veterans). In November 2017 the event attracted 30,000 people.

Expanding the Trust's business

Magna Vitae won a national contract for England and Wales Cricket Board: Play at the seaside with the ECB. This involves Beach cricket. Magna Vitae engage others who are unlikely to play cricket by providing fun cultural activity alongside entry-level cricket. There are beach rangers accompanied by volunteers, and traditional fairground-style entertainment including ball games, art and craft activities and a tin can alley. This event brings people to the coast and engages them in both sport and cultural activity differently.

The company is constantly looking at different ways to engage audiences. They are also using festivals to engage with people in hospices and those suffering from Dementia. They are working with Leicester Comedy Festival in this project.

What works?

When asked what works when delivering successful events, the Deputy Chief Executive Officer said:

“ Simple ideas with a great theme... and dramatic, often involving pyrotechnics. ”

He also warned:

“ If art is used it has to be in a way that is not intimidating or irrelevant. It must be linked to the community and involve them. ”

Keys to success

When Magna Vitae are commissioned to work on a festival they:

- Speak to the commissioners and work very closely with them.
- Speak to local people to find out what they want.
- Conduct historical demographic research.
- Look at who visits now and who could visit within a defined radius.

When they have done all of this, then they develop ideas for events.

In terms of good practice in providing festivals and events, the Deputy Chief Executive of Magna Vitae stated the keys to success are:

- Knowing your audience.
- Talking to your audience.
- Understanding the area where you are working.
- Not just extending the summer offer for longer.
- Thinking differently.
- Being prepared to take risks and fail.
- Providing opportunities for local people to take part as audience but also as festival ambassadors or volunteers.

- Working with experts who can deliver creative solutions.
- Making sure everything is evaluated.

Great advice

The overarching message from Magna Vitae is you can use culture to develop tourism but you have to be brave, willing to take risks and even fail. The biggest mistake coastal communities can make in aiming to extend their season is offering the same thing for longer. The audience in the shoulder months is different from the usual summer tourist and so the offer has to be much more engaging.

The offer has to change to ensure it meets the expectations of new, contemporary audiences.

Visit Isle of Wight Ltd.'s model

The founding CEO explained that the Isle of Wight is a Festival Island, joking that there is now only one week where there isn't a Festival and they are thinking of marketing this as the Non-Festival, Festival Week.

Visit Isle of Wight Ltd. works with local businesses to attract visitors to its programme of festivals. It is not an events company; it facilitates festivals by parcelling up events, marketing them and creating an offer that is greater than the sum of its parts. The population on the island is 140,000. Around 50,000 are employed directly in tourism and a further 50,000 in jobs that rely on the tourism industry. The community is aware of the importance of tourism to the island so all work together to improve the offer.

Isle of Wight's summer economy is robust; Visit Isle of Wight's focus is attracting visitors out of the main season, running spring and autumn campaigns. With local businesses, they look at programming, timing, events and themes.

The Island has three models of festivals:

- Attractor events
- Making something out of almost nothing
- Established festivals that bring their own audiences.

Attractor events

Attractor events are designed to benefit locals where 50% of the audience is made up of tourists and visitors from 'off the island.' These events include the Walking Festival and the Cycling Festival. The Cycling Festival links with health agendas and benefits local people. The purpose of a cycling event is to flag up that the island is a great place for cycling all year round. The festival is an opportunity to focus on one aspect of the island's offer to tourists and locals, amplifying the message that the Isle of Wight is a great place for cyclists.

Making something out of almost nothing

This model involves parcelling up local events to make something greater than the sum of its parts. For example, many pubs and bars employ local musicians generally throughout the year, but in February this is parcelled up as the Acoustic Festival, with 100 artists in 100 venues over ten days-type marketing. Individually these musicians will attract a local audience but by parcelling them up as a festival, the Isle of Wight can get national publicity and all of the venues benefit by being part of something larger. The hotel and catering industry also benefits by attracting additional visitors to the island.

Another example is the Festival of the Sea. There is a Round the Island Yacht Race that happens annually. It attracts around 1,400 boats and 15,000 sailors. The Festival of the Sea takes place

at the same time as the race. Local businesses are encouraged to embrace the 'Sea' theme: restaurants feature local seafood or pubs might invite shanty singers, for example, so again small things can combine to make something much bigger.

Carnivals are another example; the island has over 20 carnivals so these are packaged as the Carnival Festival.

Creating festivals out of local events means Visit Isle of Wight Ltd. can leverage sponsorship from local and national businesses such as supermarket chains or a guitar company for example, depending on the theme.

Festivals that bring their own audiences

Comic Con is an example of a festival that will bring its own followers to the island. These festivals are already established, perhaps run by private individuals. Visit Isle of Wight Ltd. provides support by making introductions to the ferry companies, for example, so visitors get a good deal, or they can help with finding venues but in return they will expect to see a comprehensive marketing strategy and financial return.

The Ventnor Fringe is another example of this model. This festival is well established and this year added an extra day and introduced an international element, all of which is good for the island in terms of profile and income.

With this type of festival, the founding CEO explained that because the Isle of Wight has a hard barrier in the form of the sea, it has to have a point of difference and provide a reason for people to make the effort to visit. An example of this is other resorts along the south coast run Pride events, but this year the island ran the first Pride Festival on a beach.

Keys to success

The CEO believes being able to pull together all the strands to make an offer that is bigger than the sum of its parts is key to success for Visit Isle of Wight.

The secret is to get everything parcelled up in one box to market. Look for ways to leverage income and add value. We wouldn't be able to do this on one-off events. A local carnival isn't much to shout about but a Festival of Carnivals is. Pool the resources of 25 carnivals and it becomes something else.

Know your audience. Visit Isle of Wight Ltd. knows a lot about the people who visit and how much they spend. They also now use digital technology to widen their reach.

Visit Isle of Wight Ltd. provides support in marketing and promoting festivals. They also use local knowledge to make introductions that will benefit festival organisers and local businesses. Any festival that takes place on the island has to have a well thought through business plan. The company will not support proposals for festivals that have not been properly considered.

Great Advice

The CEO believes that festivals take three years to become sustainable.

He said a big mistake people often make is assuming, 'If you build it, they will come.' If you don't know your audience and how to reach them, they won't!

Visit Isle of Wight's strategy is about working with and supporting businesses to generate inward investment. The festivals they support have to have robust business plans in order to get the company's support.

Summary

These two models are interesting because they are so different but the success of both relies on the same key premises:

- Understanding audiences and gathering intelligence in order to do so.
- Being very familiar with the local community, the business community and the geographical area in which you are operating.
- Thinking differently, being innovative.
- Being prepared to risk failure.
- Accepting it takes time (three years) to create a successful sustainable offer.
- Engaging local businesses with a vested interest in success.
- Engaging national businesses for sponsorship and promotion.
- Engaging local people in conversations about what they want.
- Engaging local people as festival ambassadors or volunteers to welcome visitors and to develop skills, confidence and a sense of ownership.
- Work with experts who can deliver creative solutions that meet the needs of the local community and visitors.
- Art and culture can make a difference but it has to be accessible and not intimidating.
- Make sure everything is measured and evaluated and learn from the evaluation.

Successful festivals and events

This section offers short case studies of festivals and events programmes that are successful (or beginning to be successful) in extending the summer season, bringing visitors to seaside towns throughout the year.

The Coasters Touring Network: Partnerships for success

SeaChange Arts is the lead organisation in The Coasters Touring Network consortium. The network includes:

- Activate Performing Arts, Dorset
- Freedom Festival, Hull
- Hastings Borough Council
- Leftcoast, Blackpool
- Mouth of the Tyne Festival
- Worthing Theatres
- Dreamland Margate
- SO Festival (East Lincolnshire)
- Theatre Orchard
- SeaChange Arts, Great Yarmouth.

The Coasters Network is an important group, whose partners were repeatedly mentioned as examples of good practice in providing festivals and events in coastal towns outside the main summer season. This network appears to have its origins in local authority services, that, when facing cuts, have remodelled the structure of leisure and culture services to make them eligible for funding from organisations like the Arts Council or Heritage Lottery Fund, rather than local government. These organisations have been

successful. It is not unreasonable to assume that to be they will have to move away from these one-off project funding models to generate long-term sustainable business models.

Visit Isle of Wight Ltd. has achieved sustainability for its festivals programme by working very closely with the business community and focusing on marketing and promotion. Magna Vitae's SO Festival is part of the network. This shows the importance of sharing good practice and partnership working.

SeaChange Arts: Using the "Wow" factor to engage both local audiences and visitors

SeaChange Arts is the arts development and promotion agency for Great Yarmouth. Its aims are to:

- Strengthen relations with internationally diverse communities.
- Support artists and performers to develop work of the highest calibre.
- Develop collaborative, ambitious partnerships to deliver new events and productions.
- Build a creative workforce to support the development of street arts and circus.
- Engage and support creative collaboration between local communities and professional artists to develop new work of the highest quality.

It is an independent arts development charity based in Great Yarmouth. Its funders include: Heritage Lottery Fund, Arts Council England and Great Yarmouth Borough Council.

The focus of their business is high quality circus, street art projects and events that they programme into festivals around the coast of England. For example, they run the Out There Festival in Great Yarmouth. This festival is marketed as:

Weird and wonderful, outrageous and outstanding – the Out There Festival brings you some of the world’s finest circus and street arts performers... and almost all for free!

This type of marketing is great for attracting families: if it is almost all free then they needn’t worry about cost. The marketing further mentions ‘family fun, hands on things to do and community participation.’

This event now attracts more than 50,000 people to Great Yarmouth, with a knock-on effect to local businesses.

This is a dramatic, high quality, festival that is equally engaging to the local community and visitors. It is innovative, dramatic and different with spectacular sights to see and lots of ways to get involved and enjoy without spending too much (if any) money.

Arts by the Sea Bournemouth: Another reason to visit

Arts By the Sea runs annually in the Autumn (14th to 21st October). It has over 60 events which it describes as:

Intriguing, spectacular, and sometimes downright curious... A spirited mix of some of the best regional, national and international arts across dance film, music, visual art, literature, theatre comedy and more.



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It is funded by Bournemouth Borough Council, Arts Council England, Wessex Water, Yellow Buses and Hadland Care Group showing that sponsorship is offered to companies with a local vested interest so the festival links to community engagement strategies

Refill Dorset aims to reduce litter by asking friendly cafes, shops, hotels and businesses to refill water bottles for free. There’s an eye-catching logo showing where this scheme is operating. This shows wider community engagement benefits. The festival offers opportunities for ambassadors. These are unpaid.

Arts By the Sea has a [website](#) with some great features. The What’s On tab allows potential visitors to choose:

- A specific date (Today, Tomorrow, Next 3 Days, Show All)
- Price point (Free, £10 or less, More than £10, all)
- Type of event (Dance, Music, Outdoor, Interactive, Film, Workshop).

This festival offers very different arts events opportunities for community engagement and hands-on experiences. It embraces all art forms so there should truly be something for everyone. This type of festival will enhance Bournemouth’s reputation as a cultural destination to visit outside the main summer season

Dreamland Margate: if you build it...

Although not strictly a festival, [Dreamland Margate](#) is an interesting study. The initial concept of a Retro Theme Park failed. The main reason it failed was lack of investment in the initial concept. Hemingway Design was commissioned to create the Theme Park but in an article in the [Guardian in May 2017](#) explained the total investment was the equivalent of the marketing budget for Blackpool Tower and Alton Towers for two years.

The financial model was an entry fee which meant that for a family of four the entrance fee was easily more than £50. There was a small discount for local residents but it was out of the reach of most local people and made them feel unwelcome.

Visitor figures in the first year were 50% lower than anticipated and the park was soon in administration. In June 2016, the entrance fee was dropped and visitors paid per ride. This was still not enough. The park has now received a cash injection of £25 million from a hedge-fund investor.

It is now marketed not as a retro experience but something entirely different with the capacity to run events for 15,000 people. It also has new rides including an original, restored 1940s Brooklands Speedway, a Waltzer and a Big Wheel. The site has a much better catering offer which includes both street food and a tree-top bar. The venue now attracts music festivals and this shows that festival organisers have confidence in the venue. The venue now has the potential to attract bands and festivals year round to Margate and so capitalise on the London market.

The initial project made compromises due to lack of funding. The offer was not affordable for the local audience and was not of sufficient quality to attract new audiences. To be successful the project has largely had to go back to the drawing board and invest seriously in creating an innovative, imaginative and high quality venue that is free to enter and so affordable to all.

Pommery Seafood Festival, Weymouth: Local flavour

The [Pommery Seafood Festival](#) is a free event held in Weymouth that runs in July, so it's not an out of season event but it is included here because of its relevance to the sustainable shellfish industry in Witherensea.

The [Pommery Seafood Festival](#) is well established, in its tenth year. This year its features included:

- Celebrity chefs on the main stage (Fisher and Paykel stage).
- Other chefs with a high profile demonstrating interesting takes on seafood (Seafish stage, for example Indian food, easy and tasty dishes, barbecue boys).
- The Badger Zone is about local beers.
- Fishy tales with celebrity guests including screen writers and best-selling authors.
- A food and drink pavilion.
- Social kitchen which features the products of one of the main sponsors (Fisher and Paykel).
- HMS Severn welcomed visitors aboard in Weymouth Harbour.
- Entertainment was provided by local business, Rock the Boat, with upcycled boats made into stages for acoustic sets. There were also acrobats and circus acts.
- Coastal Crafts for children.

The festival has the support of local volunteers and local business. It is designed to attract families, local people and visitors. It raises money for good causes, for example every stall has a collecting tin for the Fishermen's Mission.

The festival is free. It celebrates the passion for seafood generated by people who work in the industry. There is definitely something for everyone: a nice day out, great new cooking ideas. Visitors can buy cockles and whelks or oysters and locally made Champagne, so it is marketed as catering to every taste.

The festival also highlights the work of fishermen.

Staithes Festival of Arts: A welcoming community

Staithes, a very small coastal town in North Yorkshire, now has a [Festival of Arts and Heritage](#). This is quite a young festival which began in 2012. This year (2017) it runs over the weekend of 9th/10th September. The theme stems from Staithes having a long and celebrated history of art from the 19th century Staithes Group of Artists to the present day. In 2016 the festival hosted 130 artists in 87 venues. Their work included painting, printmaking, textiles ceramics, jewellery and crafts.

The festival 'galleries' are people's homes and holiday cottages that have been opened up especially. This is a great way to showcase holiday homes to potential visitors. Local pubs and cafes provide food and drink. There are also pop-up cafes on the quayside. The festival includes art and crafts around the town, with light shows, films from the Yorkshire Film archive and oral histories projected on to the side buildings on the main street, art installations and children's entertainers. The atmosphere, both at night and day, is welcoming and family-friendly.

The festival draws attention to Staithes as a great place to visit, highlighting its year round offer.



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Conclusions and recommendations

This report is a very brief look at how well considered, inventive and inclusive festivals can breathe life into neglected coastal towns. [The key ingredients appear to be very similar with every festival.](#)

Festivals have to evolve and meet the needs of new audiences. The festival programmes explored in this report are innovative and new at the moment. They mix seaside tradition with edgy but accessible arts.

Consider local people, communities and businesses

Festivals must have clear benefits for local people. The support of the local community is essential. All of the successful festivals involve local people and businesses in consultation, planning, supporting and delivery.

Engage local businesses with a vested interest in success. Offer sponsorship and promotion opportunities to local and national businesses who can strengthen their brand through association with a local festival.

Offer opportunities for local people to act as festival ambassadors. This will boost confidence, develop skills and foster a sense of ownership and pride. However, in areas of deprivation, consider offering paid opportunities. Not everyone can afford transport costs or to lose pay.

Be family friendly

There must be a variety of options for families. There must also be a recognition that families come in all shapes and sizes with a range of ages across generations and within children.

The local community must feel welcome to attend its own festivals. High prices, particularly paid-for entry to events are an enormous barrier for some local audiences.

Design events around simple and effective themes

Look at local themes: what can be parcelled up in the area to create something bigger than the sum of its parts?

Engage local people in conversations about what they want.

Themes have to be simple to allow for imaginative programming.

Think differently, be innovative.

If a town is in decline, it is generally because it doesn't understand its audience and it isn't offering anything new. Appreciate what is unique about the area, share the heritage but in ways that attract modern audiences. Be very aware of community and the geographical area in which you are operating.

Some festivals are very imaginative and quirky. This is new territory so it is important to risk, and learn from, failure.

Art and culture can make a difference but it has to be accessible and not intimidating.

Access expert knowledge and expertise
Most festivals take three years to become successful and sustainable. Accept it takes time to create a successful, sustainable offer.

Work with experts who can deliver creative solutions that meet the needs of the local community and visitors. Towns may need to look outside the area to gather inspiration for festivals.

Consider festivals that have their own following as quick wins in and amongst a more localised offer.

Make sure everything is measured and evaluated and learn from the evaluation. This is an iterative process.

Great Advice for Withernsea

Withernsea's shellfish industry is one of its best-kept secrets. It is enjoyed on the continent but rarely eaten in Yorkshire. The story of the fishing industry in Withernsea could take a festival in many directions: great local produce, street food, holiday nostalgia, storytelling (Moby Dick association), drama (link with Hollywood), environmental considerations, with the fishermen working with Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

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