

# T U R N I N G

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# THE TIDE

On 27 February 2001, the English Tourism Council published *Sea Changes*, a blueprint for the regeneration of England's traditional seaside resorts. Its findings are based on a year-long examination of the key issues by the ETC's Resort Regeneration Task Force, a group of industry experts who met to take forward a key action point of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's strategy, *Tomorrow's Tourism*. We asked the ETC's **Peter Moore**, who chaired the Task Force, to summarise for *Locum Destination Review* the paper's main findings and strategic points for action.

I was honoured to be asked to chair the Resort Regeneration Task Force and I realised immediately that this would be an intriguing and challenging assignment. Resorts face a complex and difficult set of issues, and I knew that the task of looking at how to overcome these would present a unique set of challenges and opportunities. My job was made much easier, however, by the Task Force members, who between them brought together a strong set of skills and expertise. It was my privilege to preside over a fascinating series of meetings, during which the issues identified in *Sea Changes* were discussed at length and in detail.

At the very beginning of the process in March 2000, Locum Destination Consulting was appointed to contribute a think piece on the issue to identify key themes for consideration by the Task Force. Their paper, 'English Resorts Regeneration: Trends, Problems and Solutions' was a provocative and useful document, which provided a sound basis for Task Force discussion.

In essence, what the Task Force found is that many of the problems facing resorts stem from the fact that they were developed more than a century ago, and have suffered, particularly in recent decades, from a failure to reinvest in their product. As a consequence, they have decay-

ing infrastructure, designed for one era and not evolving, or not physically able to evolve, to accommodate the demands of another. Another important part of the equation is that there was, until very recently, no awareness of the need to change, either to counter the appeal of newer, fresher overseas destinations or to meet the needs of a marketplace that has slowly been changing in its expectations.

The situation is, however, by no means irretrievable. Domestic resorts still have many strengths. There are new opportunities arising which, providing there is a renewed spirit of entrepreneurship, they are well placed to take advantage of. There are also good examples of seaside and inland resorts overseas that have turned a corner of decline and rediscovered themselves. I am thinking of resorts such as Calvia in Mallorca, Le Touquet in France, Divonne Les Bains on the French / Swiss border near Geneva, and Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario, all of which have demonstrated the principles for successful regeneration highlighted in the report.

The English resort determined to similarly reinvent itself and evolve into a competitive modern business will need to combine the original strengths that made it appealing and originally differentiated it (the sea, the beach, promenades, the sea air), along with new or evolved products. The successful resort will need to differentiate itself not only from its peer resorts but from the spectrum of other leisure and tourism experiences with which it is competing both domestically and abroad.

One thing is certain, however: procrastination and continued inactivity will, in the Task Force's view, mean the demise of almost all resorts as they currently stand. Success will depend on recognition of the problem, inspiration and vision, agreement to act, a unified approach to the solution, determination and, of course, money – which will only come if future return on the investment can be demonstrated.

## The rise and fall of resorts

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The Task Force began its investigation by looking into the history of the English resort. Resorts began

to be developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, in the main, flourished well into the twentieth century. They were able to capitalise on changes in society, such as the growing amount of leisure time, increasing discretionary income and greater mobility, provided first by the railways and then the car.

In the 1970s, however, the situation began to change. Packaged holidays to overseas destinations with a more reliable climate and a growth in the number of domestic destinations meant that resorts faced increasing competition both at home and abroad. Coupled with this, particularly over the last three decades, has been an inability or refusal to change due to a lack of vision, information or pertinent investment. Many resorts have failed to evolve into a product that meets modern expectations of quality in entertainment, accommodation and service delivery.

## Recent trends

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Over the last ten years there has been a move away from long-stay holidays in seaside resorts in favour of short breaks and day visits. A number of key market opportunities for resorts have been identified, such as business tourism, visits to friends and family, a resurgent interest in heritage, and the increasing use of the internet. Headline results from consumer research commissioned by the ETC reveal that there is still a demand for trips to the seaside, but that most resorts are falling short of consumer expectations of quality in a number of key areas, such as accommodation, beach facilities, retail opportunities and overall ambience.

## The speed of decline and the need for regeneration

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The decline in resorts has been slow and subtle and, therefore, difficult to detect. Nonetheless, the overall result of changes over the last 30 years has seen the share of domestic holidays taken at the seaside decrease dramatically.

The seriousness of this situation should not be underestimated. If no action is taken, the decline in some resorts will be terminal. Inactivity will also have a wider social cost. The Government

has recently announced substantial funding for the renewal of our most deprived neighbourhoods. Continuing decline will, for many of our resorts, create the major regeneration problems of tomorrow, with the attendant costs and social implications that entails.

## The role of tourism in regeneration

Whilst the strategy is fundamentally about tourism, it also recognises the need for a sustainable and diversified economy in resorts. The market for resort holidays is unlikely to return to its heyday. Tourism alone cannot, therefore, be a regeneration solution for all our resorts. Most will need to diversify their economy to some extent; indeed, some will be unable to compete and may need to move away from tourism altogether.

Nevertheless, resorts still make up a significant component of the domestic tourism industry. Many still have a viable future, but with tourism providing a major component of a more mixed economic base. Some have responded to the challenge and have begun to revitalise themselves and be rediscovered by visitors.

## Principles for success

Regeneration will need concerted and sustained action by all concerned. This requires a two-pronged approach, involving action by the resorts themselves to improve their product offer, as well as action by local, regional and national organisations working together to assist resorts.

Looking at overseas tourism destinations that have to redress similar problems has led to the identification of a set of principles for resort regeneration. These principles cover three basic phases in the regeneration process:

- **Creating a vision, planning and leadership** – recognising the scale of the problem, securing leadership, developing a unified approach and drawing up a masterplan.
- **Taking a holistic approach to the tourism experience** – identifying a catalyst to act as a major draw, putting in place the support facilities, quality accommodation, infrastructure, ambience, beach, seafront and town centre management needed to make a resort appealing to visitors.
- **Securing the tools needed to achieve delivery of the masterplan** – bringing in external expertise, securing the necessary funding, undertaking research,

improving marketing and using information and communications technology (ICT).

## Key partners

A wide range of organisations at local, regional, national and international level have a significant impact on resorts. These organisations need to consider their activities and take positive, coordinated action to assist resorts.

The ETC strategy recommends a set of actions for the key partners. The recommendations are grouped under ten areas and form the second element of the ETC's suggested two-pronged approach. Some of the actions identified are most appropriate for the ETC, which is committed to making progress on these issues.

## Funding for regeneration

1. The Government and the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) should ensure that the needs of resorts are taken into account in the implementation of both the Urban and Rural White Papers, and that resorts benefit proportionately from the incentives provided by the White Papers. This might include, among other things, setting up a separate unit to coordinate the case for resorts within Government and/or ring-fencing some of the new funds announced in the White Papers for use in resorts.
2. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should produce guidance for funding agencies to ensure that coordination and take-up of funding for resorts is improved.
3. The Lottery distributors should assess the levels of take-up in resorts, promote the availability of Lottery grants to resorts and offer appropriate advice on applications to help resorts develop projects which better meet the distributors' funding priorities.

**Action 1** The ETC will work with the Local Government Association and the British Resorts Association to better quantify the scale of the regeneration task facing resorts.

4. Each RDA should nominate a Board member to act as resort champion for that region. Each RDA should develop resort regeneration plans in agreement with the Regional Tourist Board (RTB) and local authorities.
5. The Government and the RDAs should

examine opportunities for setting up Urban Regeneration Companies (URCs) or similar vehicles to stimulate partnerships for resort regeneration.

**Action 2** The ETC will provide advice for resorts on funding opportunities to help resorts maximise the opportunities provided by current funding mechanisms.

## The profile of resorts within government

6. Ministers should report at the 2001 Tourism Summit on actions that have been taken to support resort regeneration and agree coordinated action to address outstanding priorities.
7. Each of the government departments whose activities have an impact on resorts should nominate a senior official as a resort champion whose task is to ensure that all departmental policy takes account of resorts' special needs.

## The role of local authorities

8. The Local Government Association should examine ways in which authorities can maximise their regeneration activity and, within the context of the current Green Paper on local authority finance, make the case for any necessary fiscal or other incentives.
9. Local authorities in resort areas identified by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions as eligible to pilot new neighbourhood management schemes should maximise the opportunity this provides.
10. The Compulsory Purchase Order system should be improved to enable local authorities to address regeneration problems in resorts more effectively.
11. Local authorities should draw up more representative Asset Management Plans.
12. Local authorities should make the most of Local Strategic Partnerships.
13. Local authority planning officers should demonstrate a more positive and innovative approach to tourism development, and developers should seek to adopt design principles that enhance the visual quality of a resort.



Resorts must invest to avoid a bleak future

## Improving quality in resorts

**Action 3** The ETC will continue to pursue a wide range of activity to spread quality.

14. Local authorities should give greater recognition to the fundamental role they have to play in contributing to the overall quality of their resort by drawing up plans to deliver and maintain such quality within the context of an agreed masterplan.

15. Local authorities should ensure the promotion of 'Inspected First' policies when promoting accommodation and work with the ETC and RTBs on ensuring greater uptake of the National Quality Assurance Standards.

## Product development and diversification

16. The Government should consider the most appropriate way of funding a national product development strategy for resorts, once the required preparatory work has been undertaken by the ETC.

**Action 4** The ETC will work with the BTA and other partners to produce a specification detailing the scope of a product development strategy and the costs involved.

## Research and intelligence

**Action 5** The ETC will examine ways in which statistical information on resorts can be improved at a national level. This is likely to include additional data on day visitors and greater insights into the economic impact of tourism.

**Action 6** The ETC will conduct further research into the health and family markets.

## Transport links

17. Local authorities should take better account of the peripheral nature of resorts and their inbound visitor traffic requirements when drawing up local transport strategies. The Highways Agency should pay similar attention to the needs of resorts when making decisions about the development of the trunk road system.

## Use of information and communications technology

18. The Government should implement the recommendations of the E-Tourism Advisory Group on the development of an e-business framework for English tourism.

**Action 7** The ETC will undertake a wide range of activities to facilitate e-business.

## Support from the Regional Tourist Boards

**Action 8** The ETC will continue to identify resort regeneration as a strategic priority for RTB support.

## Small business and entrepreneurship

19. The Small Business Service should consider how it can best provide specific assistance for micro tourism businesses in resorts given their very special circumstances and how it can best advocate changes in policy to assist small resort-based businesses.

In summary, the ETC is convinced that the market for resort-based tourism still exists, provided that vision, determination, coordination and investment create a quality experience that can compete with the best. It is our firm belief that a combination of strength of will and vision on the part of resorts to enact the principles identified, coupled with a full implementation of the recommendations by key partners, will reverse the decline experienced in our seaside and inland resorts.

Copies of the full strategy report, *Sea Changes: Creating world-class resorts in England*, is available at £17.50 plus £3.50 postage and handling, from ETC Fulfilment Centre, PO Box 22489, London W6 9FR. Orders can also be placed by calling 0870 606 7204 or via the ETC website: [www.english-tourism.org.uk](http://www.english-tourism.org.uk).