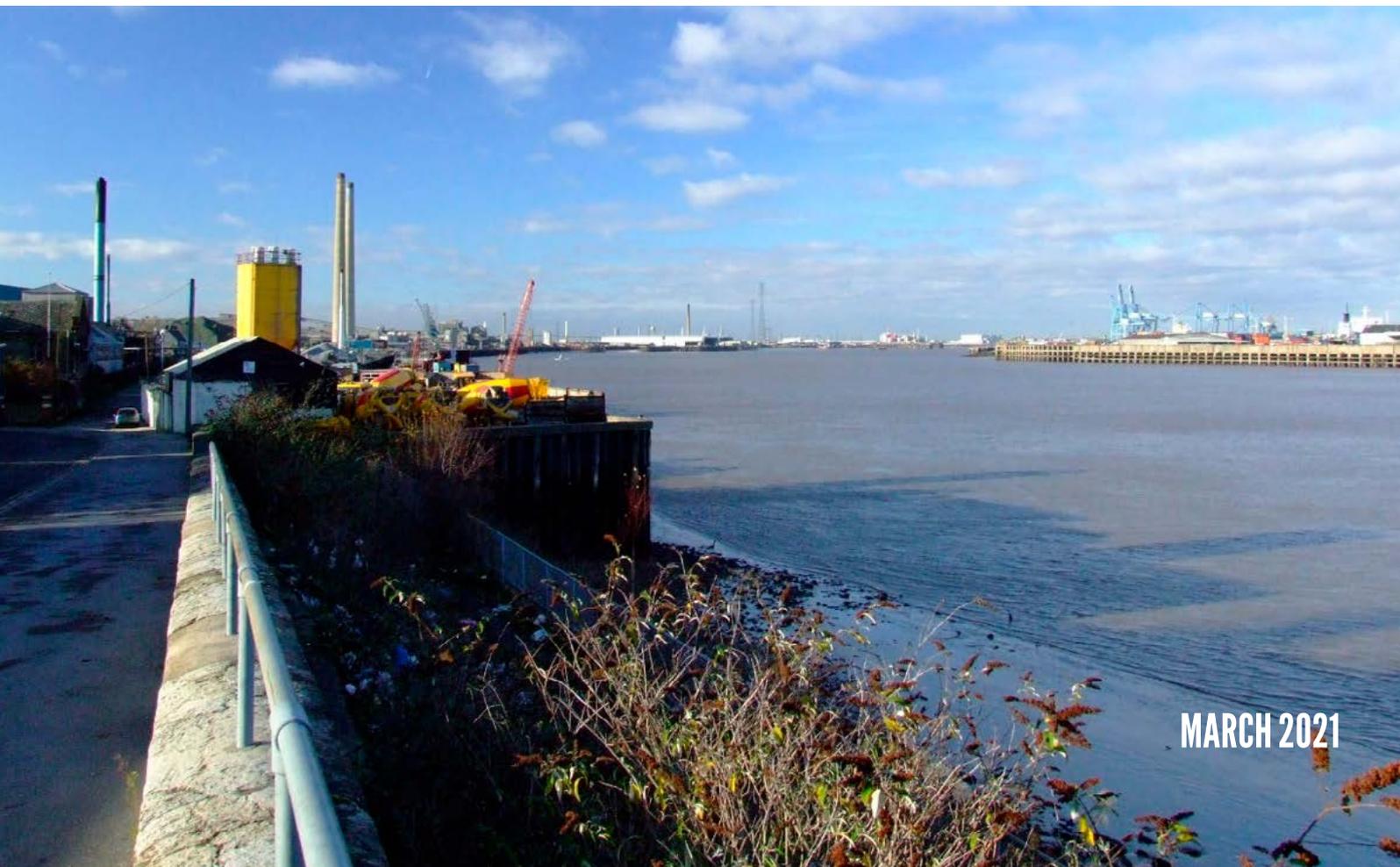


HOPEFUL TOWNS LOCAL REPORTS

GRAVESEND & NORTHFLEET



MARCH 2021



This report has been published as part of HOPE not hate Charitable Trust's Hopeful Towns project.

The project aims to better understand what makes a place confident, optimistic and open, and to help towns across England and Wales to fulfil their potential.

We want to address the root causes of hate, to stop divisive narratives from taking hold in the first place. And we want to promote policies which champion the value of towns, and stress that every town matters.

As well as producing research to understand risk and resilience in our towns, we're working with local partners in towns to develop local solutions and will be building a Towns Leadership Network to push for positive change across Britain.

Email us via towns@hopenothate.org.uk to get involved or find out more



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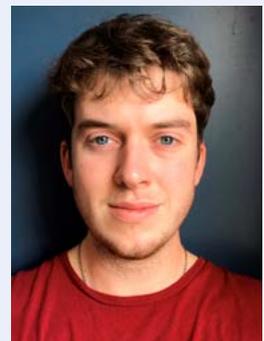
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1. INTRODUCTION

As part of our wider Hopeful Towns project, we have been working with community leaders and local decision-makers in two pilot areas – Port Talbot in South Wales and the Gravesend/ Northfleet urban area in Kent. Through exploring underlying challenges and potential solutions in these places, we hope to better understand the policy context in different types of town.

1.1 ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report looks at the Gravesend/ Northfleet urban area. It is based on detailed meetings and conversations with community leaders and key stakeholders – both from within Gravesham Borough Council and from the private and third sectors. The aim is to understand the themes and challenges for local decision-makers and stakeholders.

The report feeds into a wider HOPE not hate project, Hopeful Towns. This project relates directly to HOPE not hate's work tackling racism and the far right – many of our most challenging communities in terms of far right activity or hostility to migration being smaller settlements away from the big cities.

Our 2018 report *Fear, Hope and Loss* underscored this, highlighting the relationship between economic decline and low social resilience. And our 2020 analysis, *Understanding Community Resilience in Our Towns*, drilled down to different types of town community. The latter looked in detail at the range of factors which can amplify or dampen resilience to change and difference.

Our two local reports (here and in Port Talbot) accompany the above documents and feed into the Towns Leadership Network, which we are now seeking to develop. The aim with both is to examine, through talking to those who really know the respective town communities, the different themes and challenges at the local level. By doing this we hope to understand both the national policies that are needed and the local initiatives and interventions which are successful in building resilience.

1.2 THE GRAVESEND AND NORTHFLEET CONTEXT

Gravesend and Northfleet are two neighbouring towns on the southern bank of the Thames Estuary. Formed around the river, their histories have been defined by trade and immigration. Pocahontas' final resting place is there, having been brought ashore in 1617, and the Rosherville district was once a Victorian resort attracting thousands of Londoners. Meanwhile, Gravesend has had a long tradition as a market town for the wider area.

The towns' economies have traditionally centred on the Thames, with employment being found in the port-related industries of paper, cement and heavy engineering. Decline in manufacturing from the 1980s has seen a broadening of the towns' economic base, with growth in small businesses and more dependence on commuting out of the borough for work. But the area retains its important operational role on the river, as the base for the Port of London's Vessel Traffic Services control room.

Today, High Speed train services connect Gravesend to London St Pancras in only 25 minutes, and the area is experiencing regeneration in town centre and riverside sites. Some of these are part of the Government-backed Ebbsfleet Garden City, which is accommodating new housing growth on the western edge of Northfleet.

Unlike some nearby towns, Gravesend and Northfleet are already very diverse. A large Sikh population is a fundamental part of the social fabric there. The spectacular Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara stands testament to the community's importance, and a statue of RAF fighter pilot Squadron Leader Mohinder Singh Pujji Sikh – commemorating those from around the world who served alongside Britain in all conflicts 1914-2014 – has pride of place in St Andrew's Gardens.

This may explain why the political histories of both towns are relatively free from authoritarian politics. No far right or hard right candidate has won council seats in Gravesend and Northfleet, despite the 2000s BNP push and 2010s UKIP surge, each of which that affected many other communities around the Thames Estuary.

There is a strong local identity in the wider Gravesend area, with neither Gravesend nor Northfleet seeing themselves as part of the

‘London sprawl’. Reconciling the more established population with newer groups commuting to or migrating from the capital is a challenge. With the area likely to become both more diverse and more cosmopolitan in the coming years, there are long-term implications for cohesion.

Gravesend and Northfleet exemplify the challenges and opportunities ahead for many ‘rapid change’ areas, especially those in the ‘halo’ of big cities. Competition for resources and significant migration in the community require a fine balance, so that the area retains a centre-of-gravity of its own.

WHAT IS A ‘HOPEFUL TOWN’?

We use ‘Hopeful Towns’ to describe places which are ‘resilient’ in a number of ways, when it comes to the issues HOPE not hate is looking to address. This definition of ‘resilience’ or ‘hopefulness’ is based on the following things:

- the extent to which a place is confident, open and optimistic
- how much the community there is able to **adapt to change or absorb shocks**
- how much agency residents feel, and how much trust there is likely to be for decision-makers, outsiders and each other;
- how **positive** residents are about **racial and cultural difference**
- how able the community is to **withstand abrupt demographic shifts or one-off flashpoints**, without these events escalating
- and, correspondingly, **how predisposed a place is to welcome migrants, refugees or other new groups**

In our primary engagement work we break this down further, to the following potted definition: *“A Hopeful Town is a place with a confident, welcoming and optimistic local identity – which does not represent fertile territory for the far right or those promoting anti-inclusive narratives.”*

2. METHODOLOGY

This report has been compiled thanks to two rounds of engagement with community stakeholders from across the Gravesend and Northfleet urban area. The first of these was a summit with a number of attendees, held in February. The second was a series of subsequent one-on-one interviews with the same group of attendees, drilling down on the topics discussed.

This format was necessarily different from that which was initially envisaged, thanks to COVID-19 and the lockdown that followed. This prevented us from carrying out further face-to-face summit meetings, and means that doing so will remain a challenge in the future. However, it also allowed much more one-on-one engagement around the issues at play, in a way that a continuation of the group format might not have done.

The attendees for the steering group were identified based on an initial phase of desk research by HOPE not hate, at which we developed a long-list of potential attendees. Gravesham Borough Council then supported the recruitment group, adding their own contacts and reaching out to the potential participants.

The table below shows more detail about these two phases of engagement.

Phase	Format	Contributors	Timescale
Initial summit meeting	Group discussions, exercises in pairs	15	2.5 hour morning event,
13th February 2020	Remote interviews, via Zoom or phone	12	April-June 2020, 45-60 minute conversations
Subsequent depth interviews	Remote interviews, via Zoom or phone	10	April-June 2020, 45-60 minute conversations

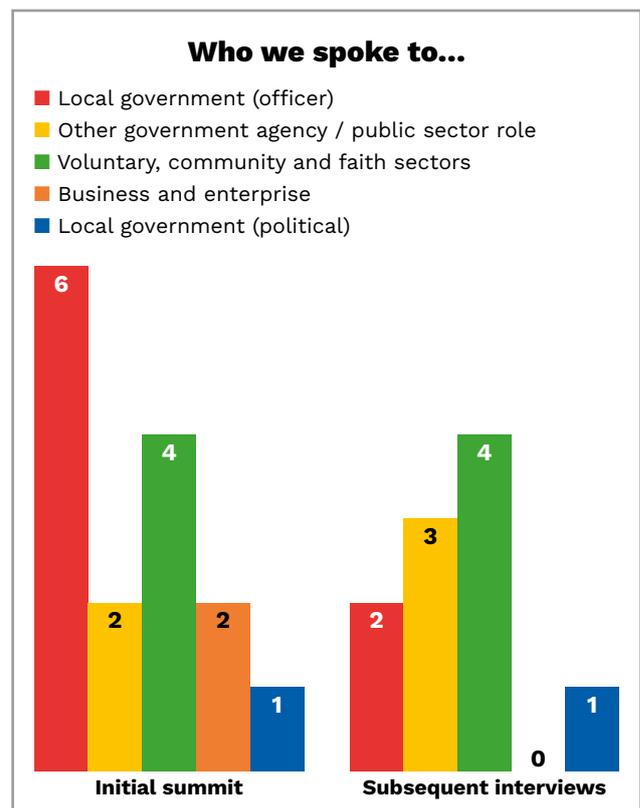
The summit session was split into: a) an icebreaker, b) an overview of the project background, c) a challenges and opportunities voting exercise followed by a discussion, d) a review of our attitudinal data, e) a narrative exercise around the towns' identities and f) a brainstorming session about big picture visions.

The subsequent depth interviews, meanwhile,

followed a topic guide, although they remained fairly open-ended – allowing participants to lead the conversation as much as possible. The discussion guide was broken into the following loose themes: a) key info about the stakeholder, b) discussion of the area in the 'hopeful towns' context, c) local challenges in being a hopeful town, d) where solutions might be found, within the town and beyond, e) challenges in contributors' individual roles.

Many of the stakeholders took part in both the group session and the interviews. However, the pressures of COVID-19 meant that this was not possible with everyone – especially those in local government officer roles, who were dealing with the direct impact of the pandemic on services. In all, we spoke to 18 different people at least once as part of the process.

Attendees ranged from community police officers to religious figures or those working in the arts sector. The chart below shows the breakdown, by sector of work, of those who participated in the respective phases.



WHAT OUR RESILIENCE ANALYSIS TOLD US ABOUT GRAVESEND AND NORTHFLEET

	Gra- vesend	North- fleet
a. Traditional demographics		
b. Visible decline		
c. Shrinking and ageing		
d. Uncertain industrial futures		
e. Cross-cutting deprivation		
f. Competition for resources		
g. Rapid change		
h. Migration in the community		
i. Authoritarian footprint		
j. Strong national identity		
k. Fewer cultural opportunities		
l. Fewer heritage assets		
m. Less connected		
n. Coastal challenges		

HOPE not hate's 2020 report, *Understanding Community Resilience in our Towns*, looks at 862 towns across England and Wales.¹ The report uses an index of data for every type of place, to identify 14 different types of challenges which can enflame hostility to change and difference in a town. These range from 'Visible decline' to 'Rapid change' to 'Strong national identity', and can feed into problems in different ways.

The table to the right shows the clusters which Gravesend and Northfleet fit into, respectively. (Dark yellow indicates that a town *fully* meets the criteria for a characteristic; pale yellow shows that a town meets *most* of the criteria).

Some UK towns fit into none of the clusters, meaning there are few challenges for resilience, whereas the most vulnerable towns fit into 6, 7 or even 8. The average town fits into 3.17 clusters, and Gravesend and Northfleet fit into 3.25 and 4.00 clusters respectively.

The profile of the two towns is fairly similar, with both fully fulfilling the 'Rapid change' characteristic. This describes places on the edge of big cities, which are above the towns

average for population growth, city 'overspill' and rapid non-white British migration. Tensions here often relate to fears of 'absorption' by larger settlements and to potential frictions between new and existing residents. These things can give rise to issues about how you manage change in an inclusive way.

Both Gravesend and Northfleet fulfil most of the traits for 'Competition for the resources' and 'Migration in the community' groupings as well – reflecting economic pressures on jobs and services, combined with more visible types of migration and diversity. Despite being some way up the estuary, the two towns are also in the cluster we refer to as 'Coastal challenges', due to the large private sector housing economies and above average high pensioner poverty which is often found in towns build around port or resort economies.

Lastly, Northfleet partially fits into the 'Few heritage assets' grouping. This characteristic describes towns with fewer of the 'assets' which are sometimes used to confer status on a place (i.e. city status, a university or a medieval history), as well as with fewer pubs and with house prices below the regional average. This reflects the fact that Northfleet grew up more recently, and generally has a less well known identity and history than Gravesend.

1. <https://www.hopefultowns.co.uk/the-report>

3. THEMES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

When it comes to resilience there were a number of clear themes that repeatedly came up during our conversations with community leaders and local stakeholders. These are distinct from one another, although there are areas of significant overlap. Each comes with a set of challenges (some of which have already arisen) as well as a set of opportunities (some of which had already been seized).

3.1 PROXIMITY TO LONDON, LOCAL PRIDE AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Gravesend and Northfleet's proximity to the capital was a central factor for cohesion and resilience. The town's High Speed Rail link means you can now get to London in under 30 minutes, and comparatively affordable housing has led to a growing commuter population.

Our own prior research has found that 'halo' towns – that is, places on the edge of large cities – often have higher hostility to migration and multiculturalism, tending to see it at a stage removed. On the other hand, these places also have big advantages over the UK's more remote settlements, when it comes to connectedness, interactions with change and difference, and opportunities for growth and prosperity.

You definitely get a different clientele for some of the events in the market...who work in [London] in the week and we'll see them out at the weekend.

There's a large part of the community that does commute into London, so [Gravesend] has probably got a much more cosmopolitan viewpoint that you probably don't get so much further east in Kent.

Our stakeholder research suggested that Gravesend's closeness to London represents something of a 'double-edged sword' for the town. It creates challenges for how you manage change, but also opens up new opportunities.

One respondent pointed out that *"The fast-track train that we get is an incredible asset to life in Gravesend...now, instead of it taking an hour, you can get up to London in 20 minutes. It's an accessible train...and has improved the quality of life to no end."*

We have so many people working in London [and] their social life is in London. They're just coming here to sleep...[new] luxury flats were not designed for normal living at all, [people] weren't expected to be living in them as homes. They were coming back from work and sleeping there, maybe getting a takeaway... That is possibly a problem for us, getting those people who work in London to become part of our community.

Another described friends of theirs moving to Gravesend, having *"seen the potential."* While these friends *"want the place to thrive,"* the stakeholder acknowledged that there was a *"worry for people who are of and from Gravesend who...see that prices are going up, and that people are coming out of London. There's a high speed train now and it's very expensive. They can see that gentrification, or potential gentrification, as a threat."*

This trade-off was present in the ways in which many talked about the area's economic prospects. Whether ultimately seen as positive or negative, the expansion of London and the area's closer ties to the capital were acknowledged by most to represent a fundamental pivot, which must be managed carefully.

I look at places like Margate [and there are] tensions between people who were born and bred in Margate and 'outsiders' - gentrification because it's up and coming... at the moment we're not really seeing it [here], but you've got Ebbsfleet, next to Gravesend, Ebbsfleet Garden City. Because of that you're going to see people from London coming down...at that point there could be some issues developing.

This sort of mixed sentiment occurred across the board. Some said it was a boost for the area to be better connected, but others noted rising property prices for more longstanding communities.

In particular, some of the stakeholders we spoke to described concerns from residents about Gravesend or Northfleet losing their identity thanks to 'London overspill'. One pointed out that the area remained proud of its distinction from London, compared to nearby communities where



“your Oyster card will work.” This was reflected elsewhere, with most agreeing that the people of Gravesend see themselves as being distinct from London, and are proud of that fact.

While you’ve got a core band of ‘Gravesendians’ [who were] born here... [The question asked is] ‘Are you from Gravesend?’ And I say ‘yes I am’. But so is anybody else, in my opinion, that has the postcodes of DA11 and DA12.

Several of those we spoke to pointed out that the area was historically “working-class” – and that an element of economic inclusion is vital in how change was managed. It was generally felt that the council and other agencies managing the changes afoot were trying to do this, although wider issues remained.

These often related to job opportunities, with it being pointed out that young people often have to leave the town for work. With this said, a counter-argument made by one was that better transport links in fact made it *easier* for young people to stay in Gravesend/ Northfleet and commute – rather than having to leave the families and communities.

For young people who haven’t got much academic qualifications, job opportunities

are pretty small and poorly paid. If you can get a qualification then London is very close, and you can get a good well paid-job in London. But...there isn’t much around here, especially for the young lads, as there used to be...there’s a bit of a problem in the authority about how to provide meaningful work for these young blokes without them all fleeing off to London.

Drug addiction is a major problem when you’re talking about London spilling over - one effect of that has been the crime rates, alcohol and drug abuse. There are about 300 heroin addictions in Gravesend registered with CLG, in the middle of the town centre...they have about four to five deaths a month.

‘County lines’ drug gangs were mentioned by a few of our stakeholders, as frontline problems caused by being more networked. One or two suggested that things like this could be seen as totemic, representing an overspill of ‘inner city issues’.

However, most described the challenges of being close to the capital in terms of how you strike a good economic and cultural balancing act – rather than as a case of London ‘problems’ spilling over.

3.2 THE TOWN CENTRE AND THE RIVER

The questions about being situated on the edge of a big city fed directly into another prominent theme – Gravesend’s town centre and relationship with the Thames.

Gravesend’s historic status as a market town and Northfleet’s river economy mean that these factors relate directly to the issue of whether the area ultimately has a centre of gravity of its own.

One stakeholder explained that being close to London “brings business, trade - but they don’t tend to use the little shops. They tend to use Bluewater or go back to London...[Bluewater] has taken away a lot of the surrounding areas’ business and trade, quite big shops have gone - and that has resulted in a slow draining away of a youthful population from the town centre.”

Bluewater has had an impact on the town centre - when we were growing up the town centre was thriving. Businesses in Gravesend are being squeezed from two angles. They’re being squeezed from Amazon and all the online stuff, and then you’re getting the squeeze on the other end from Bluewater. [Now] you’ve got Sports Direct, the rest are pound shops, charity shops and bookies.

A lot of the history and everything used to revolve around the river, so with that gone [Gravesend’s] identity as a river town no longer exists.

A number of respondents at our initial group talked about opportunities for the arts – particularly in Gravesend. There were already felt to be a lot of very positive things going on, and many of those who took part in this project

worked in or around the creative industries. One stakeholder talked about the area’s potential to develop itself as a cultural centre. “Places like Folkestone and Margate, they’ve got that that cultural quarter... It’s really great. Initially they’ve been run down areas,” they explained, adding “I think Gravesend, geographically, is placed rather well [for that].”

Again, there were questions here about how you made sure these solutions stemmed organically from the local community and were not parachuted in’.

The town centre and the borough’s maritime history were also valued as assets that required continued emphasis, to tackle unfair perceptions about the town. Negative perceptions were felt by some to undermine resilience to change and difference, making the town less confident in itself and more vulnerable to narratives of decline.

Generally, respondents were positive about the work already being done to mitigate this. One pointed out the level of money put into redevelopment of the local market. They said that the council had done “a lot of work with small local businesses” when it came to ideas like creating public spaces.

There’s a lot on focus within the council on the town centre, to increase footfall... one of the thing that helps is boots on the ground. We’ve had town centre wardens now...and they make quite a positive impact on the town...they’re a community focal point.

This extended to some of the public realm and community work being done alongside infrastructure projects such as Ebbsfleet Garden City.





3.3 HISTORIC DIVERSITY AND THE SIKH COMMUNITY

There was a general view within the groups that Gravesend and Northfleet’s historically large south Asian population is a major asset in making the town resilient to hostile and divisive narratives.

In particular the Sikh heritage population is large – accounting for perhaps 10% of the resident base – and integration is felt to be strong. The large Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara has been central to this, driving community outreach – whether through football, dance groups, or the annual Vaisakhi festival.

We are a diverse community and certainly our local council is ethnically diverse. I like being welcomed by our Asian mayor... That wouldn’t have happened years back... Our people who are running the town are from a mixture of backgrounds, and I’m proud of that.

There is a real community spirit...we still get some cases when it comes to overt racial harassment and stuff...but I’d like to think there are more pockets of good than there are bad.

Many others commented on the same thing, describing well-established networks and an institutional memory of integration. *“The ripples of change have spread out [to the part of Gravesend where I grew up] – I’d like to say people have received a warm welcome,”* said one stakeholder. She pointed out that things for her parents’ generation were *“starkly different.”*

Migration and multiculturalism are therefore regarded as part of the area’s collective story, helping to explain why the two towns have – especially compared to other settlements along the Thames Estuary – tended to experience fewer cohesion problems and less far right attention.

I think we’ve got a track record [of integrating communities]. I think with any change...there will be a period of resistance. So it’s that change cycle isn’t it... But actually [in Gravesend] it doesn’t take too long.

With this said, there was an acknowledgement among many that this had not happened immediately and had had to develop organically. *“It takes a long time,”* explained one stakeholder. *“When I moved into the area you never ever saw Indian people and white people walking on the street together, and now you do”.*

As a service provide, when I was working I used to see three generations of Sikhs. The first generation were quite isolated in the older age group, the second generation were quite well-to-do business people, and the third generation are no different [to anyone else]...They are a wonderful example of how generations get along.

Despite all of those who we spoke to being proud of the area’s multicultural history, meanwhile, there was a sense among a couple of stakeholders that, while residents were *“comfortable within own groups,”* with newer groups to themselves there was *“plenty of work to be done”.*

We take a long time to welcome people. Nowadays we do boast about how well we get on with the Sikh community...but when they first came to Gravesend we weren't welcoming to them... It's taken all those years since the 60s before we've become a cohesive community. I'm not sure that we are still fully cohesive.

The sense here was that, while relations between the white British and the Sikh and south Asian populations are now extremely good, the community is not always as good at welcoming newer waves of migration.

This was particularly mentioned with regards to East European populations, many of whom worked long hours and were not as plugged into the area's faith networks as other minority communities. Hence, while there is clearly a strong, proud history of diversity in the town, there was an awareness that the experiences of the Sikh population cannot be seen as a template that every group will follow.

3.4 SERVICE PRESSURE, MIGRATION AND CHANGE

Like many towns in the South East and East of England, Gravesend and Northfleet have growing populations. Both saw their overall populations expand by around 13-14% between 2002 and 2018. And both saw the proportions that are not of white British heritage rise by over 4 percentage points in the period since 2011.

These changes have come against a backdrop of significant budget reductions thanks to austerity, meaning very stretched resources and infrastructure, combined with rising demand. One respondent talked of disputes among residents over access to public services – especially education – reporting that “people come to my

office saying we need help with schools and we can't get in...we're under pressure.”

Many impacts of austerity were seen as having had a particular impact on community assets and the public realm – meaning cuts to the third sector support organisations who had previously championed integration.

Everything you cut has an impact. And a lot of the things which were cut...over the past decade were the things which [tackle] community cohesion, anti-social behaviour and crime.

Respondents were quick to point out positive examples of integration, in spite of this – using the example of a Nigerian population moving into newer, more affordable accommodation.

And – while acknowledging that the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic could put the social fabric under further duress – some also said that the virus had made people more positive about migration and multiculturalism.

However, there was certainly a sense that narratives about there not being ‘enough to go round’ had the capacity to gain traction, in an environment where migration was in ascent and funding was in decline.

You always got this thing, ‘they’re taking our jobs, they’re taking our houses’ and whatever. And now [with COVID-19] you look at the people in the hospitals, the care workers, they’re all from ethnic minorities. We need them, we desperately need them.

One person we spoke to described the public realm as a site for tensions, with more visible east European communities becoming a focal point or even a scapegoat. They felt that Polish, Romanian and East European migrants tended to be those



blamed in the town, to a far greater extent than with other minority groups. “You do hear people speaking about the [eastern European] folk in the town centre in a pretty negative way, and that’s not the way they’ll be speaking about the Sikhs or black African people.” The stakeholder suggested that this remained very much a minority opinion, but said that these groups were more likely to be accused of ‘exploiting’ services than anyone else.

Maybe between the established Sikh community and the newer arrivals there are still challenges.... The Sikh community often move up into nicer properties and rent out their properties to our newer arrivals. You then get people saying ‘this area’s deteriorated’.

Our road was predominantly white when I was growing up...but now the landscape has changed somewhat. More Asian families moved in [because of proximity to the Gurdwara], but also there are properties that are all rent now, and they are majority people of European descent. It’s vastly changed...I think most communities received quite a warm welcome.

Housing was seen as a central challenge here – especially given the towns’ large private rented sector. One respondent reported “challenges where people don’t stay very long in an area,” explaining that this can lead to decline narratives about the public realm.

3.5 THE POLITICAL HISTORY AND IDENTITY OF THE AREA

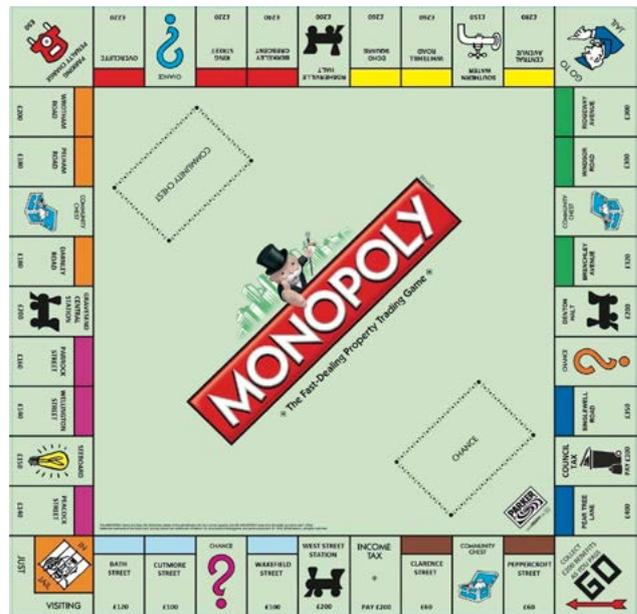
The Gravesham area had a Leave vote of 65% in 2016 – some way above the national average. While strong support for Brexit correlates, in some places, with higher levels of nativism and hostility to migration, it is notable how little traction the radical right have gained in either Gravesend or Northfleet.

Unlike some other places on the north Kent coast, Gravesham did not see UKIP candidates score electoral wins, for example. And far right groups like the National Front were never prominent in the past. This is a source of real pride for many local stakeholders.

We have a large older white population and there’s a narrative of resources going elsewhere. But [we’ve] never had UKIP candidates.

The local population. 30 years ago there was the National Front in Gravesend, and a lot of local people – the whole community – came out and said ‘no, we don’t want this’.

In describing this element of the area’s politics, several interesting factors arose. One stakeholder pointed out, for example, that the nature of the industries in the town mean that there is not a huge trade union base or a history of militancy. The respondent explained that “Gravesend



politically is quite docile...nobody’s really interested in protest movements.” While they did not regard this as particularly positive for the town, they also felt that it potentially meant there was “not much of a market for extremist groups” from the right.

Perhaps the town’s varied economic past – it has been a port, a resort, a market town, a military base and a commuter stronghold, often at the same time – feeds into this.

Up until Brexit the response was quite welcoming. But that when you looked at hate crime stats in the lead up to Brexit and post-Brexit they’re telling a different story.

Others talked of the area’s history as a political ‘bellwether’. This means a local democracy which is usually competitive and a political ethos which is generally constructive.

One respondent, meanwhile, suggested that high levels of political integration are an important factor in both towns. Gravesend Borough Council, for example, has a diverse and comparatively representative Councillor cohort

In terms of the different identities within the area, meanwhile, subtle differences between Northfleet and Gravesend were described. One pointed out that the two used to sit within separate councils, and that Northfleet’s history tended to be more industrial.

Working class people lived in Northfleet, they worked in the cement factories, the paper mills, the rubber factories. The people in Gravesend, there might have been more [white] collar workers, commuters to London.

These questions are interesting in that they help to understand many of the underlying identity questions, which can affect how resilient a place is.

4. ASSETS AND ANSWERS

The circumstances above point to positive things going on, but also to certain challenges for future resilience. While many of these occur at a macro-economic level – or stem from wider demographic and population shifts – there are certain local steps which can and do bring about positive change in both towns.

These are clearly not ‘silver bullet’ answers to problems other towns face, but they are areas of real strength in Gravesend and Northfleet.

4.1 A CONCERTED FOCUS ON EVENTS AND INTERFAITH INITIATIVES

Gravesend and Northfleet both have strong sets of networks and structures when it comes to community events and interfaith work. These perhaps stemmed, in the first instance, from very strong outreach programmes by the Sikh communities and the Gurdwaras. This was described to us, by one stakeholder, as the result of a conscious push by Sikh community leaders several years beforehand.

The annual Sikh Vaisakhi festival, in particular, was mentioned by almost every one of those we spoke to, as a highly inclusive faith-driven event, which is now a key date in the local calendar. *“The big Vaisakhi festival, which is arranged by the Sikh temple, over the years that’s become a celebration not just by the Sikh community but of integration. It’s the same with our St George’s Day”* explained one stakeholder. *“All communities come together... it’s not about doing separate stuff for separate communities...it’s about everyone coming together. It’s about this idea of ‘We Are Gravesham’.”*

We’re big on events. There’s a large multi-cultural programme. We’ve done food, dance, parades etc. They work reasonably well.

However, the area’s focus on interfaith initiatives and large scale events goes beyond the Sikh community, and has become part of the towns’ identity. Almost every type of group celebration – including some which were not faith-based, from St George’s Day to Black History Month – seemed to take a relatively public form within the town.

They have been trying very hard in Gravesend with putting on things in the market, which is really struggling. [They have been] putting on events with different

cultures – we have an event recently which was deserts from around the world.

One of our stakeholders, a faith leader, described the emphasis on religious ‘pluralism’ over ‘particularism’ as a means by which this was achieved. They described the underpinnings of a successful interfaith agenda as working on the basis of giving groups and faiths a licence to express themselves in an inclusive way – rather than focusing too much on shared multi-faith forums.

Generally speaking it’s this [approach of] ‘let’s celebrate each-others differences’.

What’s really important is it isn’t about faith, necessarily. It is about community cohesion, and that includes the indigenous ‘Gravesendians’.

In terms of how events like this become a reality, the council and government agencies have clearly played a significant role as enablers, by encouraging ideas to come from within different communities. There had also been a clear emphasis on events celebrating the host population as well as those celebrating more recently arrived minority groups.

One stakeholder from the council explained that the authority facilitate events through providing small budgets, alongside administrative support. The key emphasis, they said, was on everyone being welcome to get involved. They described a small Community Events Budget of £500 which is distributed to a broad range of bidders, to help get ideas off the ground. These budgets came with a fairly open brief, and did not need to be spent on a faith-based or a minority community event. Amounts could go up to £2,000, and the authority provided coordination, advice and expertise – i.e. by helping with risk assessments.

We celebrate the Chinese New Year, and we have a celebration in Community Square for Eid, but it tends to be [BME people] who attend those, and not white people who go and share in it. The only one we all seem to share in is Vaisakhi, which is going back to the Sikhs having been here so long.

There was acknowledgement from some stakeholders that not all of these events were well attended by white British communities – although a great many were. And there were also



small criticisms of events getting too watered down – i.e. being named a ‘festival of winter’ rather than a Christmas festival.

But for the most part interfaith celebrations seemed to be a wholly positive part of the Gravesend and Northfleet’s ‘USP’, and an area of real strength for both towns.

4.2 AUSTERITY, COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND LOCAL CHOICES

The sorts of community events described above occur in many towns. However, it was pointed out by more than one of our stakeholders that Gravesend and Northfleet were more prolific than other settlements which are geographically near or demographically comparable.

Community events were felt to therefore be a particular locus for the town, and those who had worked in other parts of the UK suggested it was easier for ideas to take off in Gravesend than elsewhere. This applied to ideas like an over-60s forum, as well as to the larger set-piece events described in the previous section.

Our fireworks display just brings everyone out, absolutely everyone is at the river...it transcends all differences, it’s great.

Further conversations revealed that this was not an accident. A combination of local government spending choices – and the existence of strong local advocates for cohesion – meant that certain services had not been cut and that certain staff had remained in place.

This included the continued existence of Kent Equality Cohesion Council/ Cohesion Plus – the type of agency which was once ubiquitous, but which has now, in many parts of the UK, been lost to austerity.

The one thing that has been really good is having Cohesion Plus [and the KECC]. They’ve really managed to have a hub and spoke with other minority groups.

One example cited within the council was the creation and funding of ‘coordinating roles’ for community events. One respondent pointed out, that, because resilience obligations are not statutory it was unusual for community coordinating roles to be resourced.

Indeed, one or two (from outside the local authority) mentioned by name the individuals in these roles as having been instrumental.

There’s not an equivalent of [name of Community Involvement Officer] in Medway or Dartford... Austerity has taken its toll.

It'd be really helpful if there was an equivalent of [Gravesend's Community Involvement Officer] in nearby councils, but I don't think there is... If there is I've never met them and never heard of them.

These things went beyond local government choices, however, and also reflected the presence of strong leaders from within the community, who had kept integration and social resilience high on the agenda.

Indeed, the words 'leaders' and 'leadership' came up again and again. *"Community leadership is a big factor,"* said one respondent. *"Leadership in terms of the arts and culture is important,"* agreed another, noting other parts of the country where *"they've got strategic arts leaders in place that can really lead the community forward...that can see the value in truly democratic arts and cultural activity."*

Strong community leaders are essential. Ideas like school twinning and partnerships are important. But there isn't a force that is harnessing it.

The impression was that good things in the area had partly happened because of local individuals lobbying for change – rather than through a coherent or streamlined policy programme from national government. Hence the good things occurring were often piecemeal and ad hoc – the result of local government finding funding against the odds, or of specific individuals taking things by the scruff of the neck.

The response below, which is worth quoting in full, describes this need for a coordinated national approach, to get the best out of local initiatives:

The problem is that a lot of this stuff is driven locally. National governments needs to recognise and fund some of the local leadership... And they need to do a better job of highlighting best practice. I would like to go and share what we do with others and to learn from them. We need platforms to go out and talk about what we're doing. Talking to people on the ground really helps.

Similarly, there were some calls for national government to take steps which made the good things going on more uniform. One person suggested cohesion becoming a statutory requirement, and another described – using the example of access requirements – the role that national legislation can play: "The big difference for the access group, for instance, was when we had the 1996 Disability Discrimination Act. That's when it got easier to get things in place... Legislation like that definitely led to improvements."

5. CONCLUSIONS

Gravesend and Northfleet can be regarded as towns which have built strong resilience against a challenging backdrop. They have experienced rapid recent migration and gentrification, alongside post-industrial decline and austerity, but – unlike some places along the Thames Estuary – both have resisted the overtures of the far right and of the authoritarian hard right.

This is partly thanks to the presence of the Sikh population, and a longer history of diversity. The towns' variety of jobs and sectors means there is a history of transience and change. The proximity to the capital, meanwhile, brings growth and prosperity, and both towns have a historically quite fluid population, compared to many parts of the UK.

Gravesend and Northfleet's longstanding emphasis on community events and interfaith initiatives has also served it well. This has come from strong leadership within the community – including the arts, faith, cohesion and third sectors. It also stems from the council's refusal to cut key community projects and engagement roles in the face of austerity.

Challenges for both towns in the coming years are likely to relate to how well they adapt to the overspill from London, and to the rapid change that this is likely to bring with it. This feeds into questions about the economic and cultural balancing act the area strikes, and how assets like the town centre and the riverfront are used to help Gravesend and Northfleet retain centres of gravity of their own.

The recent context has seen new and different forms of migration and population growth – alongside immense pressure on services. The economic fallout from COVID-19 means that this is likely to become more acute – and that managing population change in a progressive and inclusive way will be important.

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