

Supporting regional settlements

Three smaller South Island towns are under the microscope in a project examining the successful regeneration of regional settlements.

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A NATIONAL CONVERSATION is in progress about the strength and integrity of regional settlements in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is influenced by characterisations of small settlements as zombie towns and is framed by questions about how to reboot struggling regions.

Driving the conversation is a set of mainly economic and demographic issues linked to quantitative evidence of declining and ageing populations and challenging economic circumstances.

In response, National Science Challenge: *Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities* has the objective of building a better understanding of the lived experience of regional and small town New Zealand. Its mission is to also support local efforts to make these places more attractive to live, visit, work and do business in.

Regeneration initiatives that work

One of the Challenge's research teams is working in the South Island on a project called *Regenerating for success*, examining the situation facing three east coast



Ashburton, one of three smaller towns that are part of the regeneration project.

settlements - Ashburton, Timaru and Oamaru.

It is focusing on ways the residents are defining their current situation and engaging in initiatives to improve economically, socially, culturally and environmentally.

The objective is to examine what initiatives work best as tools for regeneration and create a community of practice - sharing approaches to settlement development - incorporating private, public and third-sector practitioners.

Attractive, prosperous, liveable and sustainable settlements

Identifying practical solutions for settlement regeneration success is a central goal so communities can continually innovate and improve regeneration practice as they work towards building settlements that are:

- attractive and prosperous across a range of dimensions
- liveable for a diverse population
- environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.

Why these three towns?

Ashburton, Timaru and Oamaru are all at the smaller end of the spectrum of New Zealand's second-tier settlements, those with population bases of between 10,000 and 400,000.

Around half of our population lives in places of this size, where opportunities and challenges differ from those facing our largest cities, such as Auckland and Wellington, and our smallest rural towns.

The three towns, with population bases ranging between 10,000 and 45,000 residents, share characteristics and experience similar issues.

Special characteristics

Typically, towns of this size have populations with fewer formal qualifications, are less productive per worker than larger urban areas and offer lower wages. They tend to have more specialised economic bases offering, for example, services to agriculture and fewer start-up firms.

Often, they have fewer urban amenities or other benefits of agglomeration than larger cities. These settlements also differ considerably in industrial structure, population characteristics and performance.

Some are located near larger settlements and share their major transport links, but most have a more peripheral location. Some are home to large Māori communities and other cultural institutions of great importance to Māori cultural identity.

Ashburton, Timaru and Oamaru share many of these characteristics, but because of their varied economic histories and geographical contexts, they are also somewhat different from each other.

Four elements of regeneration

The research team is working with the communities of Ashburton, Timaru and Oamaru to produce an inventory and typology of second-tier settlement regeneration initiatives. Initially, the researchers are adopting a broad definition of regeneration encompassing four main elements.



Oamaru is home to warehouses built from locally quarried Oamaru limestone.

Property development

The first element is property development including initiatives associated with:

- rehabilitating former industrial spaces or public facilities for reuse
- constructing new private and public facilities and spaces for interaction such as cycleways, farmers' markets, offices, business parks, factories and conference centres
- providing new technologies and infrastructure to advance connectivity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

Good examples are Oamaru's Victorian Harbour/Tyne Historic Precinct and Timaru's redevelopment of the Landing Service building. The latter was built between 1870 and 1876 and is now a prominent hospitality facility.

In all three research project towns, there are also very good examples of business and industrial park developments.

Heritage conservation

The second element of regeneration of interest is cultural and environmental heritage conservation, leveraging both natural and built amenities in and around the settlement.

The enhancement of Caroline Bay Park and surrounds and the restoration by a community trust of the Otupua Wetlands in Timaru are excellent examples of this kind of regeneration activity.

Community development and planning

The third element is community development and planning including the creation of new

urban and regional spaces, programmes and institutional arrangements to:

- mitigate climate change
- advance an enviro-town agenda
- defend existing resources from threats of closure or diminution
- provide services to local groups.

Good examples are the redevelopment of Ashburton Hospital supported partly by philanthropic financial investment and Hakatere Marae's youth programmes in Ashburton.

Economic development

The final element of regeneration being considered is economic development initiatives such as:

- building on underexploited local resources and skill sets
- supporting business incubators
- place branding and marketing
- tourism events to attract new visitors and raise place profile
- developing regional Māori economic development strategies.

In Ashburton, Timaru and Oamaru, a strategic push is under way to put these towns on the tourist map and increase the size of the visitor economy.

Oamaru is particularly fortunate in this regard. It is located at the end of the relatively new Alps to Ocean national cycle trail and home to the little blue penguin. It is also the site of many attractive warehouses built and carved from locally quarried Oamaru limestone. ◀