



Credit: Lauren De Boise

Branding that gets beneath the skin of a place

A good practice guide featuring Lowestoft case study

*This good practice case guide has been prepared by
the People & Places Partnership
in consultation with East Suffolk Council*

Tote bags and bright logos are fine. We just feel that place branding should go much deeper and broader to get beneath the skin as part of the wider revitalisation of a town or city.

Here we look at the role of place branding as part of the wider revitalisation of town and city centres. This includes examining the links to the Government's Levelling Up focus on boosting pride in place by simultaneously making local people feel good about where they live and extending the appeal to new audiences. We will draw on our knowledge of Lowestoft and the ongoing regeneration and branding work there to illustrate this.

Branding as a boost to pride in place

Place Branding is authoritatively defined in the [Place Brand Observer](#) as “building competitive identity to influence perceived images in relevant markets”. Specifically, it can be considered as bridging gaps between the local identity or sense of place; its current product offering (e.g., business mix, attractions, environment); the actual experience that visitors get when they visit (e.g., travel, orientation, customer service); and the evolving image / perception that different people have of a place.

In our experience at the People & Places Partnership, place branding is most appropriate where there are differences between these elements; especially where negative images are lagging behind the positive realities of a place. In such situations place branding can readily be part of the transformation of a place and how it is perceived. This can help attract new audiences and, more fundamentally, contribute to a lasting boost in local pride in place. To achieve this the branding needs to ‘get beneath the skin’ of the place.

The role of place branding in Lowestoft

Lowestoft falls into the key category where there is an opportunity for a clear brand to reflect the existing qualities and current progress across different areas of the town in a way that can boost pride in place and attract new audiences. There is an intrinsic value in the quality of its built heritage and natural surroundings. It is also actively addressing challenges in renewing its role and identity in the face of changes to the local economy, the use of town centres, and evolving tourism trends.

When in 2019, we at the People & Places Partnership undertook a baseline survey of Lowestoft town centre and the adjoining secondary centres along the coast, we identified two issues that were particularly pertinent to the opportunities offered by place branding. We have been impressed by the efforts since led by East Suffolk Council and partners to use place branding as part of wide-ranging approach to the coastal town's revitalisation: strengthening civic pride and communicating progress.

East Suffolk Council and partners took a proactive approach to use place branding as a part of wide-ranging approach to the coastal town's revitalisation. The council appointed a consultant, Thinkingplace to lead on the work to develop a unique Lowestoft place brand.

Strengthening civic pride

In Lowestoft's case, branding can have a role in providing clarity to help boost local civic pride across the town that stretches for 2 miles along the coast. Back in 2019, we found a mixed level of existing civic pride, with negative sentiments expressed especially for the town centre where the most prominent words used to describe it were negative and included rundown, tired,



outdated and depressing. There was more of a balance in the most prominent words used for the Old High Street, spanning from between positive points such as quaint, historic and good, and negative perceptions such as rundown. For the adjoining Kirkley 'village' which fronts on to Lowestoft's main beach, the most prominent words were positive and included improved, improving, good, quaint and friendly.

Similarly, when we asked users how their experience of Lowestoft had changed in recent years, there were contrasting answers for the different parts of town. When asked how the town centre had changed in recent years, 60% of regular users said it had worsened. Half of respondents considered that the Old High Street had worsened (50%) compared to only 13% who thought it had improved. In contrast, over half of on-street respondents in Kirkley thought it had improved (57%) and only 11% thought it had worsened.

Place branding can have a role in unifying Lowestoft's identity as three places in one and emphasising its strengths to boost civic pride and increasing its wider appeal.

Presenting joined-up progress

The other, related issue was the confusing mix of overlapping regeneration themes and programmes working in different zones across the wider town. We mapped a series of overlapping economic, cultural and community-based regeneration programmes covering different zones across the town centre, Old High Street and Kirkley. We recognised that this presented opportunities in terms of resources for delivering different priorities. It also presented challenges in terms of communication, coordination and governance.

Place branding can have a positive role in binding together how these different aspects operate alongside each other and are presented publicly in a unified show of progress. Change does not happen overnight and often cause temporary disruption. Place branding in a town like Lowestoft can create a narrative of positive progress where improvements are seen to have a value in their own right and also as pieces in a revitalisation wider jig-saw that is being assembled.

The three elements of place branding

Place branding theory points to the ways that its different elements can be part of the solution in a town such as Lowestoft. These begin with clear communication of the message about the past, present and future of the town. Arguably more important to place branding where a town is 'evolving', is the 'construction' element that demonstrates a commitment to ongoing improvement or 'product development'. The third element of place branding is 'cooperation' necessary between the relevant parts and partners in a place - otherwise known as 'placemaking' or leadership.

A. Communicating the story

At the People & Places Partnership, we would always advocate that communication is a central part of wider regeneration good practice to engage different audiences. This includes bridging some of the gaps between the perceptions and realities of a place and sharing an evolving story.

A clear narrative is provided by the [Lowestoft Story](#) commissioned by East Suffolk Council, that sets out the overarching place ambition for the Suffolk seaside town. This new narrative seeks to provide a blueprint for communicating the town's ambitions and what sets Lowestoft apart from other places. In doing so, it 'gets beneath the skin of the place' by identifying two broad



contributory themes that combine facets of the town's identity. These are authentically already important in the place alongside new ingredients for the Lowestoft experience. Such a story can be pitched at different audiences, including residents, in the appropriate ways. Everybody needs to be able to recognise it as authentic

The first theme for the Lowestoft story, not surprisingly acknowledges the town's historic maritime links as "harnessing and celebrating the energy of the sea". Importantly it provides a progressive message that incorporates a focus on the growing off-shore energy industry that is fuelling the economy, and the changing face of tourism that has come to be about the ability to interact with the elements.

"Exploring the eastscape" is a second unifying, and arguably a more orchestrated, theme. It reflects the proximity of the town's expansive beaches, historic town centre and surrounding rural environment through to the Broads National Park. It makes a big play on celebrating Lowestoft's status and symbolism of being the most easterly point in the UK where the sun rises first. As the story goes, "this allows us to be morning people, up first with the sun and encourages a healthier lifestyle of walking, cycling and being active."

Alongside this 'story', East Suffolk Council commissioned the Lowestoft Toolkit which provide guidelines that we would more usually expect as part of place branding. These cover in detail the Font, visual identity, visual language and the photography elements of Lowestoft's fresh branding. And yes, they could inform the design of an on-message tote bag, and other linking visual elements.

Examples of this place branding work can already be seen in application across multiple platforms in Lowestoft from hoardings, the town investment plan, the ThinkLowestoft website, new beach hut colour schemes, marketing material and social media channels.

B. 'Constructing' an improved place

Construction is defined as product development or real actions / policy initiatives that support the brand claims (e.g., development of infrastructure, events and the ready creation of icons or other symbolic actions).

Within the wider revitalisation of Lowestoft there are already several initiatives that can capture the imagination and represent the realisation of the new narrative and brand.

- First Light Festival is a new multi arts event which take place on the South Beach for 24 hours over the summer solstice, and includes music, dance, science, well-being and sports.
- 72 contemporary beach huts, known as Eastern Edge, have been installed as a replacement for 58 concrete beach chalets that were closed in the summer of 2016 due to safety concerns.
- 166 beach huts have been repainted using the Lowestoft place branding colour scheme.
- The iconic and unused East Point Pavilion has been extensively refurbished to create an open, light and modern space for residents and visitors to enjoy.
- A high-quality landscaped park has been created that celebrates Ness Point's location as the most easterly point in England, including new play facilities, space for cultural events, and improved pedestrian and cycle links to the High Street and town centre.



- Plans are progressing to renovate and re-open the historic Town Hall as innovative heritage hub, gallery space, wedding venue, co-working space, café and additional community event space.

In August 2022 a £24.9m programme to transform Lowestoft received final Government approval of its Town Deal, enabling work to progress on five major regeneration projects. The five projects are:

- The Station Quarter, involving the restoration and re-use of the former Post Office and front of the railway station
- The Cultural Quarter, involving improvements to the theatre and the creation of a new cultural facility with associated eatery, and the redevelopment of a former multi-storey car park to provide a new leisure offer.
- The Historic Quarter which will focus on the redevelopment and refurbishment of the Town Hall along with enhancing the historic passageways known as ‘scores’.
- The Seafront Vision involving redevelopment of fountains, greenspace and public realm to complement the recently refurbished East Point Pavilion.
- The Port Gateway project which will support the development of the Lowestoft Eastern Energy Facility (LEEF) as a hub for the offshore renewables sector.

C. Cooperating for the common good

Cooperation is about finding common ground between stakeholders, community, private and public sectors to determine what makes a place unique and attractive and to make sure that institutions, companies, and residents, “live the brand”.

As part of the People & Places’ follow-up work to the baseline survey, we worked with local stakeholders to understand the needs and opportunities for greater cooperation across different organisations, programmes and areas of Lowestoft. We created a recovery and revitalisation checklist as a self-assessment process for key partners charged with turning-around Lowestoft town centre and the adjoining areas of the Old High Street and Kirkley. It uses the checklist template provided in the Local Government Association’s revised [Revitalising Town Centres Toolkit](#).

In terms of partnership working and governance, the creation of the Lowestoft Place Board created the opportunity to provide a strategic oversight of the whole of Lowestoft including the three centres, surrounding business and residential areas. The Board has representation from key partners including public, private and the third sector. The Place Board’s governance structure provides opportunities for increased strategic influence. It also provides coordinating mechanisms for project delivery of regeneration projects across the town, including town centre and culture/heritage-led strands. Such cooperation needs to be worked at as much as the reconstruction of the town, to create a unified approach that is kept under constant review. Having a Place Board has allowed for the creation of the Town Investment Plan as a collective submission to government. This enabled Lowestoft to be successfully awarded Town Deal funding and confirmed the pivotal role of the Place Board in pulling everything together.

Alongside such strategic-level coordination, the [Lowestoft Ambassador Programme](#) has been launched as part of the grassroots communication and coordination of the town brand. The Ambassadors are stakeholders in the town who are passionate about what Lowestoft has to offer as a place to live and do business in. The programme covers the public, private and third sectors, with members charged with “selling” Lowestoft as a place to invest and live in. The



Ambassadors' role involves challenging outdated perceptions and misinformation about the town. They serve as a positive voice within the community to articulate a more vibrant and optimistic narrative. The Ambassador programme holds events that promote the work going on within Lowestoft. This raises awareness of what is happening as well as identifying opportunities for involvement and collaboration. It helps ensure that key stakeholders “live the brand” and cascade down the communications and spirit of cooperation.

Think ‘local first’ in brand development

Discussions about place branding often overly focus on reaching potential new visitor audiences. Our approach uses five widely accepted principles of place branding and applies them to understand the identity and develop a brand that can be pitched to a wide variety of audiences. Often there will sections of the local demographic -such as families or younger residents- who are not using a town or city centre. It is important to use the opportunity to understand their perceptions and needs before pitching a place more widely.

We believe that the starting point for brand development is working with key local stakeholders including businesses and residents. This ‘local first’ approach to applying place branding principles can help underpin a boost in residents’ pride in place as a necessary forerunner to appealing to wider audiences.

Applying five brand development principles

Here we outline five accepted development principles that are apparent in the Lowestoft approach and that the People and Places Partnership apply in joint place branding work with our associates at [Line and Dot Creative](#). These five principles help place leaders to consider how they improve a place’s brand in a way that is rooted in the local community and leads to a boost in pride in place. The five principles can then be used to honestly communicate and improve a wider audiences’ knowledge and opinions of the place.

1. Distinctiveness

Place branding for us is above all about understanding the distinctiveness of place. It involves first identifying the distinctive qualities of a place that residents can identify with, regardless initially of any perceived marketing advantages. From this it is possible to distil what is special or possibly unique about a town or city when compared to other places in the eyes of different target markets. In brand development terms, it helps identify the core qualities/values of the place and its brand. It begins to identify what is the brand offer or promise to different types of customers

2. Authenticity

A broad basis for a strengthened place brand is established by involving stakeholders. This combines with the understanding of distinctiveness to establish an identity that is authentic and resonates with stakeholders. This stakeholder involvement should include the identification of the town’s identity or sense of place that can inspire the key characteristics of the place brand; find the link between existing perceived and projected images in relevant markets (i.e., what do people currently think and say about a place and how can this honestly evolve); and the design of authentic customised and co-created place experiences in practice.



In other words, authenticity in place branding is about people co-creating things that matter to them. In this way the created brand reflects the perceptions and potential of a place in a way that resonates with stakeholders and that can be applied with little or no involvement of the 'brand police'. These first two principles are akin to writing down the Lowestoft Story.

3. Memorable

When a place has a unique and distinctive sense of place, it becomes memorable. Memorable means that the enjoyable experience of that certain place, conquered the heart as well as the head. So that existing users and new visitors might think of lingering longer; returning more often; or even living or investing there. The New Light Festival, East Point Pavilion and Ness Point Park are part of creating such memorable experiences in Lowestoft that are authentically part of the town's re-asserted identity.

4. Co-Creation

Place branding should not be a top-down exercise and will only produce the best results when it is created and maintained through a strong coalition between the public, business and community sectors. This co-creation will create a town-wide understanding of pitching the place to target markets (different demographics within the local population, day visitors, investors, tourists, travel media, press). The Lowestoft Ambassadors programme represents an ongoing commitment to such co-creation.

5. Grounded

Place branding is not simply about a good slogan, logo and cheery promotional campaigns. In the experience economy an integrative place branding strategy is needed to capture the hearts and attention of local users and visitors. This means that the place brand should be supported by policies, innovations, events, structures, symbolic actions and long-term investments. Residents and visitors should experience the brand in physical changes and activities that add to their pride in place and create enjoyable memories. In Lowestoft this is represented by the opportunities and challenges facing the Place Board.

Tracking place branding progress

At the People & Places Partnership we are great believers in tracking progress. It's how the revitalising town centres toolkit works. We conduct a baseline survey; identify issues and solutions with stakeholders; assist in coordinating, constructing and communicating change; and follow-up by monitoring changes in perceptions and the use of the town centre. It would be revealing to revisit Lowestoft as the revitalisation of the town progresses to track changes in perceptions of place and joined-up partnership working - both of which contribute to a boost in pride of place. For the time being it is good to pick-up on indicators of a changing place branding sentiment such as a Daily Telegraph travel feature headline that compares Lowestoft to its neighbouring and well-regarded neighbour: "Move over Southwold – there's a new jewel in Suffolk's coastal crown visitor destination".

From our experience at the People & Places Partnership, we know informally when the place brand has progressed positively when we pick-up on sentiments such as "things like this don't normally happen in Ballinasloe", or "have you been to Whitley Bay recently, it's definitely on the up"!

