

**FABIAN
SOCIETY**

BREACHING THE SEA WALL

POLLING LABOUR'S SUPPORT IN
COASTAL TOWNS

Ben Cooper

December 2022

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Luke Raikes, Emma Burnell, and Kate Murray for their support and advice. The author is grateful for Eloise Sacares' contribution to this briefing, and Hywel Lloyd's expertise on all things coast and country.

Special thanks to Patrick English and Frazer Knowles at YouGov for their extensive and highly valued advice and work on the polling.

About the author

Ben Cooper is a senior researcher at the Fabian Society.

About the briefing

This report looks at the 108 coastal town constituencies in England and Wales. It provides new evidence on voting intention and attitudes towards key issues. This is the first time that this crossbreak has been used.

About the polling

The Fabian Society commissioned YouGov Plc to survey 3,333 adults across Great Britain. The survey was carried out online. Fieldwork was undertaken between 21st and 23rd November 2022. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

In the weighted sample, 631 respondents were from coastal town constituencies and 284 from coastal Labour and target seats.

Data on voting intention has been rebased by the author to exclude those who responded 'don't know' or 'wouldn't vote'.

About the coastal town constituencies crossbreak

We have identified 108 'coastal town' constituencies in England and Wales. These are based on the current electoral boundaries, not those that the next election is likely to be fought on.

Every constituency contains at least one – or part of one – of the 169 English and Welsh coastal towns identified by the ONS, with the exception of Dwyfor Meirionnydd.

To qualify for inclusion in the ONS list of 169 towns, the population of a town must have been below 225,000 in 2011. This excluded the largest coastal cities in England and Wales, including Brighton, Hull and Liverpool.

However, some constituencies representing parts of the largest coastal cities have been included in this list (for example Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle or Brighton Kempston). This is because coastal towns also make up a significant proportion of these constituencies.

While Dwyfor Meirionnydd does not include any coastal town identified by the ONS, the constituency was included in this list. Many of the communities in the constituency are too small to be classified by the ONS, but they would be popularly considered to be Welsh coastal towns, including places like Porthmadog.

For the coastal Labour and target seats, we combined coastal town seats Labour held in 2019 (including Hartlepool) with seats that have previously

been identified by the Fabian Society as one of the 125 constituencies in England and Wales that Labour should consider targeting at the next election, where the swing required is less than 13 points.¹

We were unable to find a similar dataset of Scottish coastal towns.

Introduction

Coastal towns are a vital and distinctive group of places. By definition, they have a specific geography: being on the coast has a particular effect on the identity, economy and demography of a place. Many of these places have labour markets and transport connections that are shaped by the sea. Their economic base is often seasonal and insecure, skewed toward tourism or industries that rely on the sea. Like any group of places, there are also many differences between coastal towns – with each place having its own, often unique, characteristics. But they have a great deal in common, and can be meaningfully analysed as a group.

Not enough attention has been paid towards coastal towns, the opportunities and challenges they face, and what people in these places want from politicians. This briefing aims to change that by developing a new constituency grouping based on coastal and town geography: the ‘Sea Wall’.

We have defined this group of constituencies as those which have at least one – or part of one – of the coastal towns in England and Wales identified by the Office for National Statistics in 2020. We have largely not included constituencies covering coastal **cities** such as Liverpool or Hull because they are different from coastal **towns**. However, some constituencies representing parts of the largest coastal cities have been included in this list because they represent coastal towns as well (see appendix 1 for the full list). Unlike other seat groupings, such as the ‘Red Wall’ and ‘Blue Wall’, the definition is based purely by on geography, not on their politics or demographics.

However, the demographics of the ‘Sea Wall’ are distinctive, in a way which is likely to affect its politics. Compared to seats that Labour won in 2019, Sea Wall constituencies have:

- A larger proportion of over-55s, with 38 per cent aged 55 and over compared to 25 per cent in Labour-held seats in 2019
- A larger proportion of homeowners, with 68 per cent owning their own home compared to 54 per cent in Labour-held seats in 2019
- A lower proportion of 16- to 64-year-olds educated to degree level and above, with 36 per cent educated to that level compared to 45 per cent in Labour-held seats in 2019

As the Labour party prepares for the next general election, the Sea Wall is a large group of seats that it cannot afford to ignore. To deliver its agenda, Labour needs a broad mandate to govern – and no part of the country can be left out. Labour must find common ground, and address the distinctive challenges of these places, as part of an inclusive one-nation coalition.

FIGURE 1: THERE ARE 108 CONSTITUENCIES IN ENGLAND AND WALES THAT MAKE UP THE 'SEA WALL'



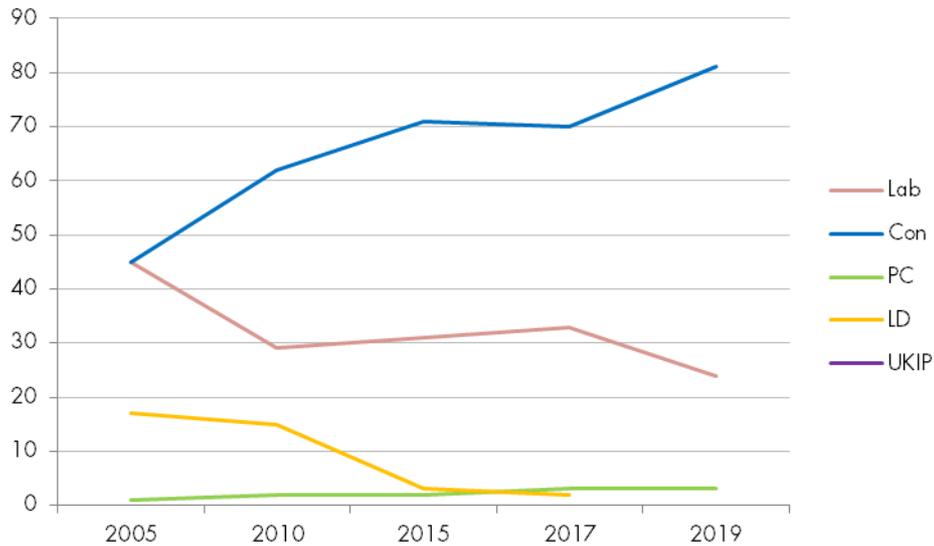
1. The Sea Wall strongly supported the Conservatives at the last election – and it will help decide the next one

In recent elections the Sea Wall has favoured the Conservatives. In 2019, a majority of voters (51 per cent) supported the Conservatives – compared to just 29 per cent for Labour. In every election since 2005, the Conservatives have increased their vote share in these seats collectively. And Labour has never been less than 5 points behind the Conservatives in these seats under the current boundaries (31 per cent to 36 per cent in 2005).¹

Labour won just 24 Sea Wall constituencies in 2019 (including Hartlepool, which voted Conservative in the 2021 by-election) – and the Conservatives won 81. In 2005, Labour and the Conservatives won 45 constituencies each.

¹ Between 2005 and 2010, constituency boundaries changed – and the notional 2005 result is on 2010 boundaries. It is possible that Labour was ahead of the Conservatives under previous boundaries.

FIGURE 2: IN 2019 LABOUR WON THE SMALLEST NUMBER OF SEA WALL SEATS IN ANY ELECTION ON THE CURRENT BOUNDARIES



The number of coastal town constituencies voting for different political parties at every general election

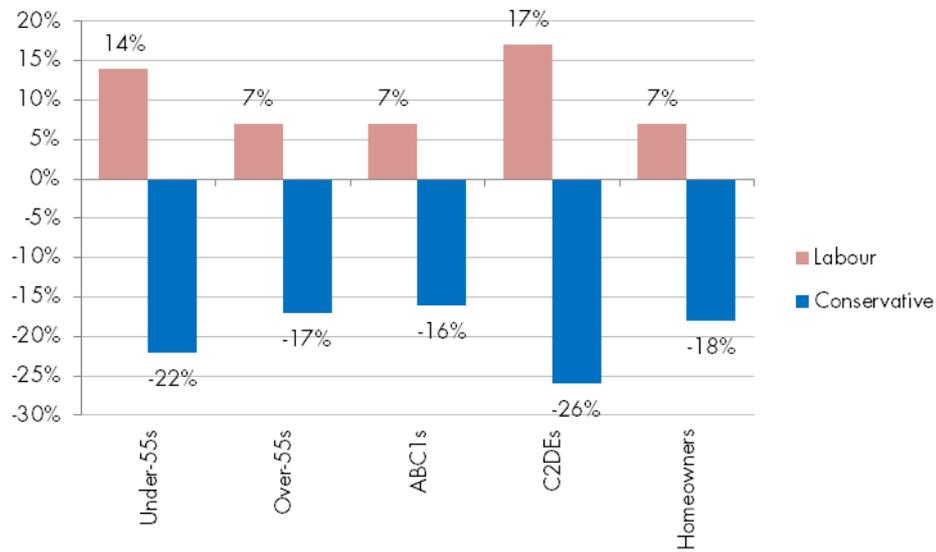
At least 54 of these seats will be crucial to determining whether Labour enters government after the next election. At the next election, Labour should first try to hold the 24 Sea Wall constituencies that Labour won in 2019, including Hartlepool that was lost in the 2021 by-election. There are a further 30 that Labour should consider targeting. These were previously identified by the Fabian Society as among the 125 most marginal seats in England and Wales.²

2. Labour is now beating the Conservatives in the Sea Wall

Our Fabian-YouGov survey found Labour leading the Conservatives in the 'Sea Wall' (38 per cent to 32 per cent). This is equivalent to a 14 percentage point swing compared to 2019 general election. If repeated at a general election, it would be Labour's best performance ever in these seats on current boundaries – and in a group of constituencies where nearly half the seats could be considered Conservative 'heartlands'. Labour's vote share improvement is fairly broad in the Sea Wall. Compared to 2019 and YouGov's post-election survey, Labour has increased its vote share by:

- 14 points amongst under-55s and 7 percentage points amongst over-55s
- 7 points amongst ABC1s and 17 points amongst C2DEs
- 7 points amongst homeowners

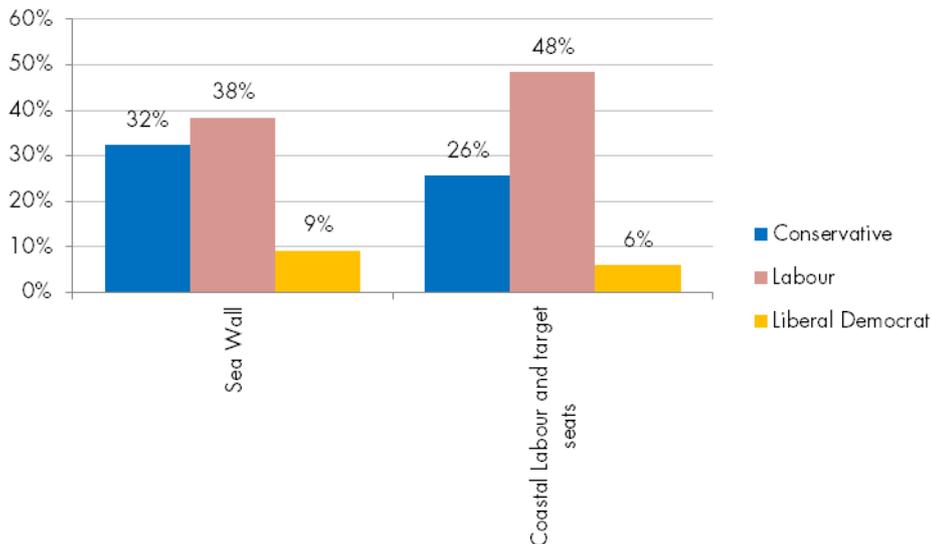
FIGURE 3: LABOUR IS INCREASING ITS VOTE SHARE ACROSS DIFFERENT DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS



Net change in vote share for Labour and Conservative between 2019 YouGov post-election survey and the Fabian Society-YouGov poll across different demographics

In the 54 coastal Labour-held and target seats at the next election, Labour has a 22-percentage point lead over the Conservatives (48 per cent to 26 per cent). This is equivalent to a 16-point swing compared to the last election.

FIGURE 4: LABOUR IS LEADING THE CONSERVATIVES IN COASTAL TOWN CONSTITUENCIES ACROSS ENGLAND AND WALES



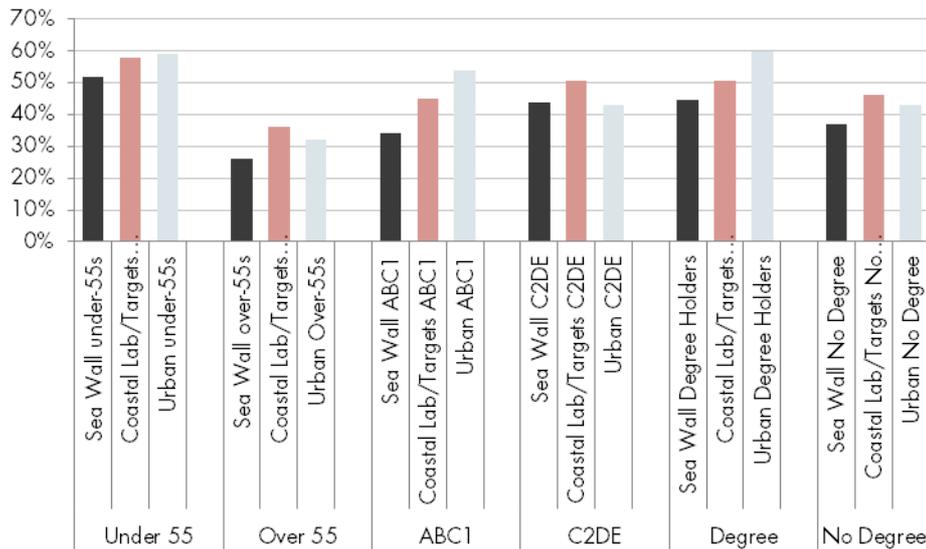
Voting intention in 108 coastal town constituencies that make up the Sea Wall and the 54 seats identified by the Fabians as coastal Labour and target seats

3. Labour lags behind in the Sea Wall compared other areas – even with Labour-friendly demographic groups

Labour's lead in the Sea Wall is smaller than that in Great Britain overall. Across Great Britain, Labour leads the Conservatives by 22 percentage points (47 per cent to 25 per cent). The Party underperforms in Sea Wall constituencies even among demographic groups that favour Labour nationally. The polling shows Labour on:

- 52 per cent of the vote among *coastal* under-55s would vote Labour, compared to 59 per cent in urban Britain, a seven-point gap
- 44 per cent of the vote among *coastal* degree holders would vote Labour, compared to 60 per cent in urban Britain, a 16-point gap
- 34 per cent of the vote among *coastal* managers and professionals (so-called ABC1s) would vote Labour, compared to 54 per cent in urban Britain, a 20-point gap

FIGURE 5: THERE MAY BE A 'COASTAL EFFECT' ON VOTING INTENTION AMONG DEMOGRAPHICS THAT MAKE UP LABOUR'S CORE VOTE



Voting intention by different demographic groups and different groups of coastal town constituencies. All crossbreaks have at least 100 respondents

4. Many in the Sea Wall have yet to be convinced by Labour

But Labour's current lead in the Sea Wall may not be replicated when the actual votes are counted. Our survey indicates that Labour has work to do to convince voters in coastal town constituencies.

Labour's brand is not strong in Sea Wall constituencies. More respondents said the party **does not** understand people in their local area than said it **does** understand (39 per cent to 35 per cent) – with 25 per cent saying 'don't know'. Similarly, more respondents said Labour **does not** share their values than said the party **does** (43 per cent to 35 per cent) – with 22 per cent saying 'don't know'.

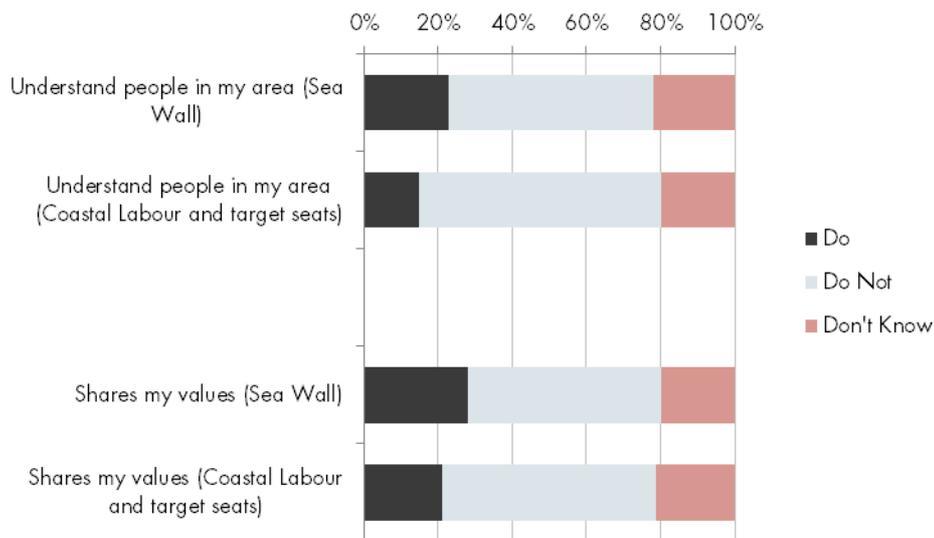
In the Sea Wall seats that are Labour-held or target seats, Labour is seen more favourably, but there is still work to do. A plurality of respondents (43 per cent) believe Labour **does** understand people in their local area – compared to 36 per cent who think Labour **does not** understand and 22 per cent who said 'don't know'. But fewer respondents think Labour **does** share their values (37 per cent) than think Labour **does not** share their values (42 per cent) – with 22 per cent saying 'don't know'.

5. The Conservative 'brand' is under water in the Sea Wall

The Conservative party is seen as out of touch by people in coastal town constituencies. Most respondents (55 per cent) said the Conservative party **does not** understand people in their area – compared to 23 per cent who said the party **does** understand and 22 per cent who said 'don't know'. In coastal Labour and target seats, 65 per cent said the Conservatives **do not** understand people in their area – compared to 15 per cent who said they **do** understand and 20 per cent for 'don't know'.

Similarly, half of respondents (52 per cent) in coastal town constituencies overall believe that the Conservative party **does not** share their values – compared to 28 per cent who thought the party **does** and 20 per cent who said 'don't know'. In coastal Labour and target seats, 57 per cent said the Conservative party **does not** share their values – compared to 21 per cent saying it **does** and 21 per cent also saying 'don't know'.

FIGURE 6: HALF OF RESPONDENTS DO NOT THINK THE CONSERVATIVES UNDERSTAND PEOPLE IN THEIR AREA OR SHARE THEIR VALUES



Percentage of respondents by different responses to whether the Conservative party understands 'people in my area' or 'shares my values'

Just 32 per cent of respondents in Sea Wall constituencies would consider voting Conservative, compared to 41 per cent for Labour.¹ In the coastal Labour and target seats, it is even lower: just 28 per cent of respondents said they would consider voting Conservative – compared to 48 per cent considering Labour.

¹ Defined as people stating their likelihood of voting Conservative or Labour is between 6 and 10, out of 10

6. Labour should include the Sea Wall in a ‘one-nation’ strategy

Labour needs to win across the country, and coastal town constituencies will be part of that coalition. We do not suggest the Sea Wall should be Labour’s top priority, but it is an important group of seats that the party will need to win in order to form a majority. Our polling shows that Labour can win these seats. Moreover, it can do so without losing ground elsewhere, with some relatively simple, uncontroversial measures.

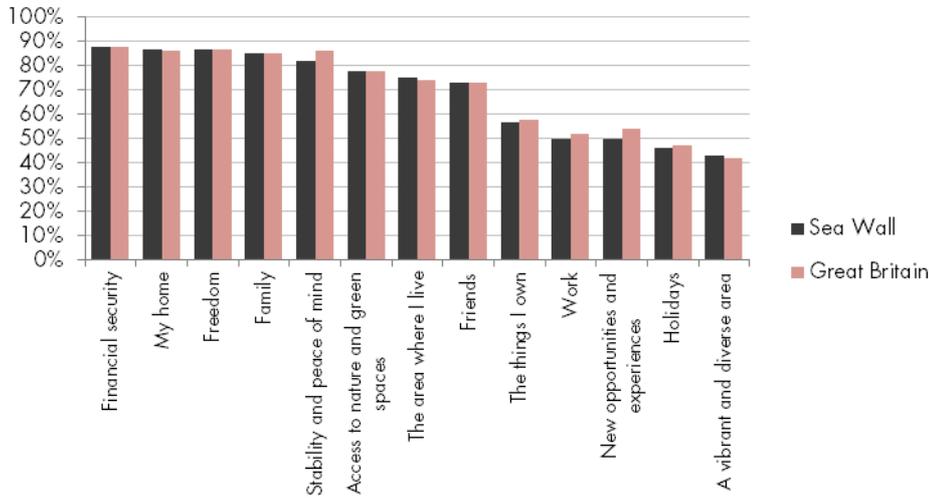
To win both the coast and the country, Labour should appeal to shared values, develop a unifying policy agenda, and address specific coastal challenges.

Appeal to shared values

People value similar things, regardless of where they live. When asked in our survey, the things valued by Sea Wall voters the most were: ‘financial security’ (88 per cent), ‘my home’ (87 per cent), and ‘freedom’ (87 per cent). These things are highly valued by voters across Great Britain.

Labour should root its national campaign in values that people in all parts of the country share: security, home, stability, and family. Against a Conservative government content to pitch different groups against each other, focusing on the large common ground between places and people can build trust in Labour to govern in the interests of coastal communities – as well as those of towns and cities across the country.

FIGURE 7: THE SEA WALL VALUES THE SAME THINGS AS OTHER AREAS

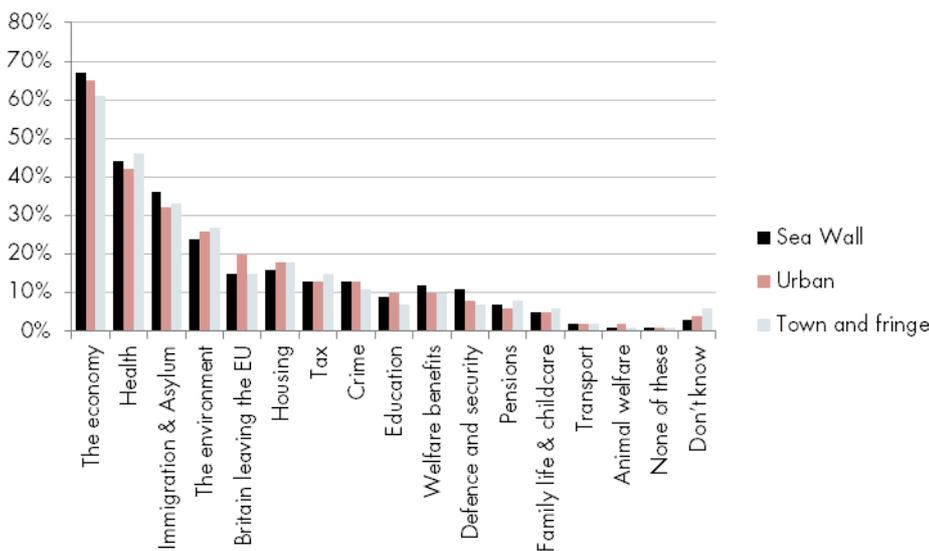


Percentage of respondents responding between 5 and 7, out of 7, when asked how valuable each of the things are to their lives

Develop a unifying policy agenda

Many of the policy challenges facing our country are shared by coastal communities, towns, and our biggest cities. The priorities of those who live by the coast are the same as those who do not. When asked to select the top three most important issues facing the country, ‘the economy’, ‘health’ and ‘immigration and asylum’ came top in the Sea Wall, urban areas and towns.

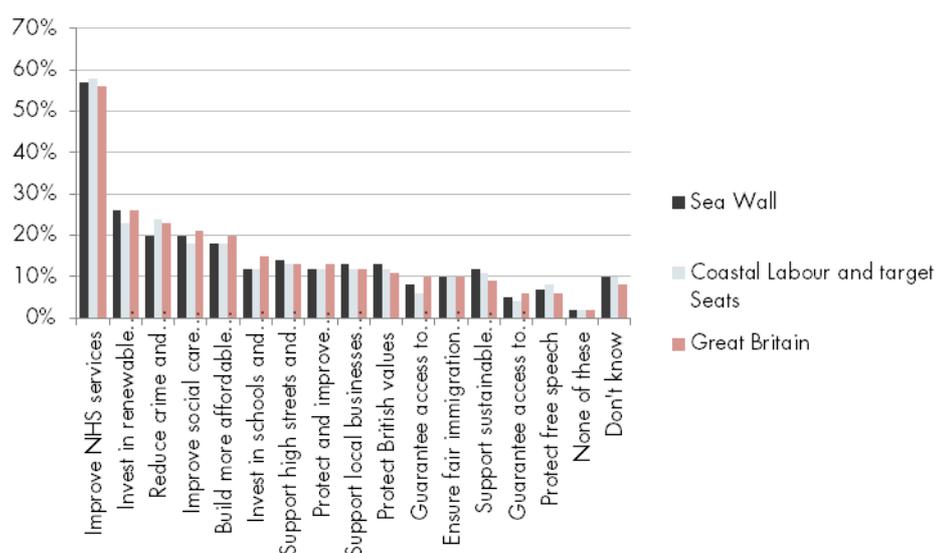
FIGURE 8: THE SEA WALL IS CONCERNED ABOUT THE SAME POLICY ISSUES AS TOWNS AND CITIES



Percentage of respondents choosing each issue as one of the top three most important issues facing the country at this time

When asked the top three policies that the next Labour government should promise to improve their local area, respondents in Sea Wall constituencies chose: improving NHS services (57 per cent), investment in renewable energy such as wind and solar (26 per cent), reducing crime and increasing police numbers (20 per cent), and improving social care services (20 per cent). Respondents in coastal Labour and target seats also chose these four policies as top priorities for the next Labour government – as did Great Britain overall.

FIGURE 9: RESPONDENTS IN THE SEA WALL WANT THE SAME THINGS FROM A LABOUR GOVERNMENT AS GREAT BRITAIN OVERALL



Percentage of respondents choosing each policy as one of the top three that they would like to see the Labour government promise to improve their local area

The environment is a shared concern across the country. The Sea Wall perceives their local area as not being supported by the government on this issue. More respondents in coastal town constituencies (36 per cent) feel that their local area is not supported ‘by the government to reduce emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change’ than who do (22 per cent) – with 26 per cent saying they do not know.

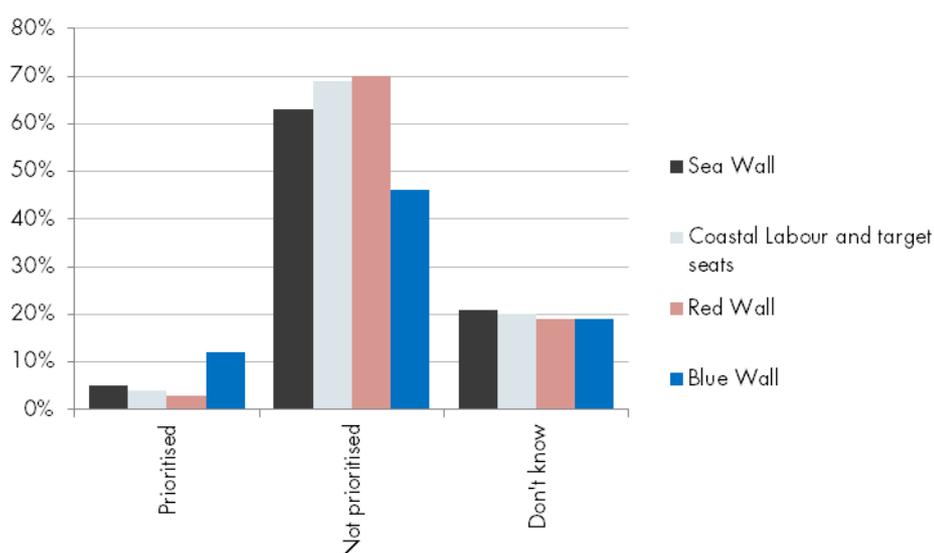
Labour should appeal to the common ground on this issue, rather than utilising overblown rhetoric that fails to connect with most voters – and can be divisive. This common ground includes ‘stronger regulation to protect and restore nature, wildlife and the environment’, with 66 per cent of the Sea Wall supporting such a policy – exactly the same as Great Britain overall.

Address specific coastal challenges

But a one-nation approach to values and policy doesn’t mean ignoring specific challenges in different parts of the country. Labour must also recognise that there are specific coastal challenges to be addressed by the next Labour government.

The Sea Wall feels ignored by Westminster and left behind compared to other areas. A majority of the Sea Wall (63 per cent) and two-thirds of those in coastal Labour and target seats (69 per cent) do not believe that their area is prioritised by politicians in Westminster when decisions are made about the future of the country – compared to 5 per cent and 4 per cent respectively who believe it is. This is similar to Great Britain, and Red Wall seats, but different to Blue Wall seats, as figure 10 below shows.

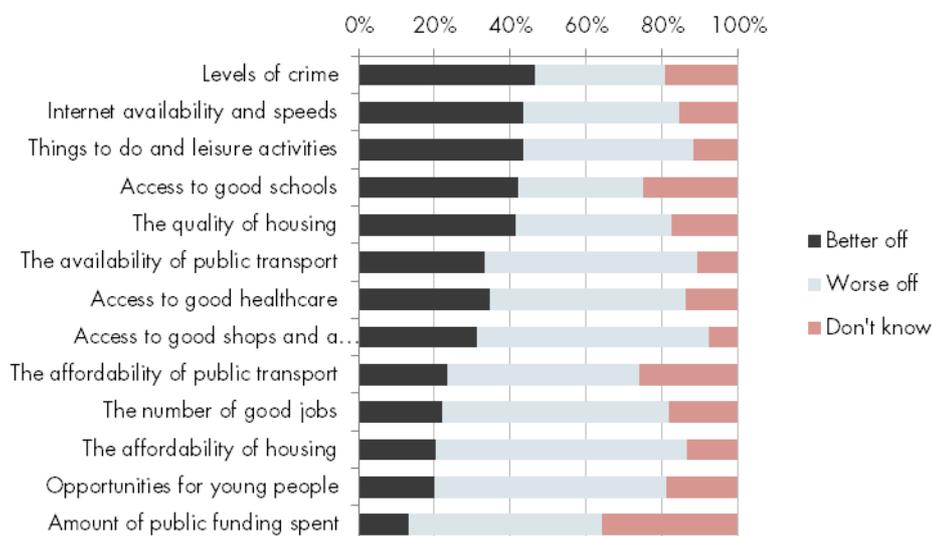
FIGURE 10: A CLEAR MAJORITY OF RESPONDENTS IN THE SEA WALL FEEL THEIR AREA IS NOT PRIORITISED BY WESTMINSTER



Percentage of respondents by different responses to their area is prioritised by Westminster when decisions are made about the future of the country.

This reflects a strong belief in coastal town constituencies that their area is worse off, compared to other places. Our survey asked respondents if their area was better or worse off than most other areas on 13 different issues. Only on 2 issues did more respondents in the Sea Wall say they were better off: 'access to good schools' and 'levels of crime'. On the 'quality of housing', 'internet availability and speeds', and 'things to do and leisure activities', respondents were fairly evenly split on whether their area was better or worse off. On the other eight issues, more respondents in the Sea Wall said their local area was worse off. A majority said they were 'worse off' compared to other areas for 'the affordability of housing' (55 per cent) and half said the same for 'opportunities for young people' (52 per cent).

FIGURE 11: ON NINE OUT OF 13 ISSUES, MORE PEOPLE IN THE SEA WALL THOUGHT THEIR AREA WAS WORSE OFF COMPARED TO OTHERS



Percentage of respondents in coastal town constituencies saying that their local area was better or worse off compared to other areas on a range of different issues

Conclusion

To secure a majority at the next election, Labour will have to pick up votes and seats right across the country. The Sea Wall will be an integral part of this project.

The party is currently beating the Conservatives in coastal town constituencies, and the Conservatives are seen as out of touch. But Labour has not yet 'sealed the deal': many in the Sea Wall have yet to be fully convinced by the party.

To secure the votes of people living in coastal towns and the country as a whole, Labour should: appeal to shared values, develop a unifying policy agenda, and address specific coastal challenges.

Appendix 1 – List of Sea Wall constituencies

Constituency

Southport	Target seat
Vale of Clwyd	Target seat
Redcar	Target seat
Dover	Target seat
Blackpool North and Cleveleys	Target seat
Aberconwy	Target seat
Blyth Valley	Target seat
South Thanet	Target seat
Ynys Mon	Target seat
Scarborough and Whitby	Target seat
Blackpool South	Target seat
Truro and Falmouth	Target seat
Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire	Target seat
Hastings and Rye	Target seat
Preseli Pembrokeshire	Target seat
Vale of Glamorgan	Target seat
Copeland	Target seat
Barrow and Furness	Target seat
Bridgend	Target seat
Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland	Target seat
East Worthing and Shoreham	Target seat
Workington	Target seat
Great Grimsby	Target seat
Morecambe and Lunesdale	Target seat
Ceredigion	Target seat
Bournemouth West	Target seat
Bournemouth East	Target seat
Clwyd West	Target seat
Arfon	Target seat
Camborne and Redruth	Target seat
Swansea West	Labour won in 2019
Birkenhead	Labour won in 2019
Sunderland Central	Labour won in 2019
South Shields	Labour won in 2019
Lancaster and Fleetwood	Labour won in 2019
Aberavon	Labour won in 2019
Llanelli	Labour won in 2019
Hartlepool	Labour won in 2019 (but lost in 2021 by-election)
Easington	Labour won in 2019

THE SEA WALL

Wirral West	Labour won in 2019
Wallasey	Labour won in 2019
Houghton and Sunderland South	Labour won in 2019
Kingston Upon Hull West and Hessle	Labour won in 2019
Sefton Central	Labour won in 2019
Brighton, Kemptown	Labour won in 2019
Washington and Sunderland West	Labour won in 2019
Tynemouth	Labour won in 2019
Bootle	Labour won in 2019
Cardiff South and Penarth	Labour won in 2019
Swansea East	Labour won in 2019
Hove	Labour won in 2019
Wansbeck	Labour won in 2019
Canterbury	Labour won in 2019
Gower	Labour won in 2019
Clacton	
St Ives	
Louth and Horncastle	
New Forest West	
Tiverton and Honiton	
West Dorset	
Isle of Wight	
Boston and Skegness	
North Norfolk	
Totnes	
Chichester	
Gosport	
North West Norfolk	
Berwick-upon-Tweed	
South Dorset	
Waveney	
Torbay	
Great Yarmouth	
Havant	
Southend West	
Bridgwater and West Somerset	
East Yorkshire	
Torridge and West Devon	
North Thanet	
North Cornwall	
Fylde	
Christchurch	
Worthing West	
South East Cornwall	
Folkestone and Hythe	

THE SEA WALL

North Devon
Newton Abbot
St Austell and Newquay
Suffolk Coastal
Thirsk and Malton
Weston-super-Mare
Bexhill and Battle
Poole
Wells
Sittingbourne and Sheppey
Beverley and Holderness
Eastbourne
Cleethorpes
Bognor Regis and Littlehampton
Eastleigh
Lewes
Rochford and Southend East
South West Devon
New Forest East
Mid Dorset and North Poole
North Somerset
East Devon
Harwich and North Essex
Dwyfor Meirionnydd

Endnotes

¹ Another mountain to climb, Andrew Harrop. Fabian Society, 2019.

² Another mountain to climb, Andrew Harrop. Fabian Society, 2019.