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Sea level rise, claims-making and managed retreat in Fairbourne, North Wales

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ABSTRACT

Climate change and sea-level rise mean that managed retreat of populations away from coastal areas will be increasingly necessary in coming decades. However, decisions involving managed retreat are often a source of conflict between local communities and public authorities. Law and society literature on naming, blaming and claiming provides important insights into how conflicts emerge and end in litigation. This paper applies this literature to examine claims-making beyond just the courts. Drawing on media stories about Fairbourne, a coastal village in North Wales, it explores how residents have mobilized against managed retreat. Data from these stories is analysed using the above naming, blaming and claiming framework. This reveals eight distinct claims, including three stemming from a naming of climate risk and five concerning economic harms. Paying attention to the claims-making process using this tripartite framework aids understanding and may help avoid conflict around managed retreat caused by sea-level rise.

Key policy insights
- Sea-level rise as a result of climate change is a key issue for many small, low-income coastal communities that are unlikely to receive significant investments in sea defences over the medium to long term.
- Adapting to sea-level rise through managed retreat involves the decommissioning of housing and infrastructure and relocation inland. However, managed retreat often produces conflict with local populations and gives rise to claims-making by them.
- Being able to unpick community claims-making, by disaggregating it into naming, blaming and claiming, can help policy makers to understand community standpoints and establish how relevant conflicts might be resolved.

1 Introduction

Low-income coastal communities can be seen as victims of climate injustice. Such communities face a disproportionate share of the increasing harms arising from climate change, including sea-level rise (SLR) and population displacement. Fairbourne, a low-lying village on the North Wales coast, fits squarely within that category, having been designated in 2014 by Gwynedd Council for 'managed retreat' including decommissioning by 2054. This policy decision produced immediate negative economic and social effects, depressing the values of people's homes and raising levels of anxiety. Villagers argued that their situation was considerably worsened

by the lack of any concrete plans for managing retreat, with little information provided about how, when and where residents would be relocated.

Fairbourne's predicament, while extensively publicized in national and international media, is not unique. Coastal communities globally are facing increasing pressure to relocate due to worsening sea flooding and erosion (Bragg et al., 2021). And yet, for reasons including emotional place attachment (Adger et al., 2011; Agyeman et al., 2009; Crate, 2011), the managed retreat literature demonstrates that most communities would prefer to stay where they are and for authorities to continue a policy of 'holding the line' by maintaining or upgrading existing sea defences. Not surprisingly then, decisions to retreat, which involve abandoning coastal places, often give rise to conflict with local communities (Anderson, 2022). This conflict is likely to be exacerbated where the process is mishandled by public authorities or perceived as such. Law and society work on naming, blaming and claiming (Felstiner et al., 1980) provides important insights into the ways in which conflicts or disputes emerge and result in formal institutional claims being made in courts via litigation. Our contention is that claims-making is an important mobilization reaction to the potential injustice facing communities like Fairbourne. We also contend that scholars need to look past formal institutional claims in venues like courts to examine claims-making in a broader sense, including how claims are made both around the necessity of retreat and how it is managed. This is important in order to fully understand how conflicts emerge and, crucially, how they can be resolved in a manner that meets local needs and aspirations while adequately responding to climate risks.

This paper explores claims-making by the Fairbourne community in response to managed retreat in this broader way. Claims-making includes, for example, questioning the naming of SLR and associated flooding as an unacceptable climate risk, the blaming of relevant authorities, and finally claims in the form of political demands. The paper argues that public authorities involved in the process of managed retreat need to engage closely with local communities because this can help to focus on those demands that are most likely to be feasible and effective. In the absence of such engagement, there is likely to be a wide range of different claims put forward, some of which are never likely to gain traction, and which have opportunity costs in deliberations with public authorities. Paying attention to bottom-up claims-making by communities is important therefore if the effects of climate change and SLR on coastal populations are to be addressed in an effective and just manner (Arnall et al., 2019).

The paper begins with a discussion of managed retreat as a policy, along with an explanation of how this has been applied to Fairbourne, followed by a methods section. Section 4 provides a literature review on claims-making, including its place in the sociology of social problems, social movements, and the law and society naming, blaming and claiming framework. Next, in Section 5, the paper analyses and discusses the data using the latter framework (Arnall et al., 2019). Our findings suggest that, if managed retreat is to be successfully implemented in conjunction with local communities, then much more work is required to understand how claims in relation to managed retreat emerge and take shape. This will be increasingly important as the impacts of climate change become more pervasive in coming decades. By drawing attention to the social processes via which claims originate and develop into full scale disputes, most often outside of the formal legal institutional framework, the paper concludes that the naming, blaming and claiming framework adopted here has much to offer as a tool in helping to resolve conflicts caused by managed retreat policies.

2 Managed retreat and its Fairbourne context

Managed retreat is a key climate adaptation policy option for dealing with a range of physical climate risks including coastal flooding and erosion and SLR. While the term was initially developed with reference to eco-system protection (Agyeman et al., 2009; Koslov, 2016), it has in recent years become increasingly associated with the planned relocation of human communities away from coastlines. However, as Koslov (2016, pp. 362–363) observes, retreat 'is distinct from other kinds of climate-related migration in that it entails not just relocating a group of people but also unbuilding land and returning it to nature'. This demolition or decommissioning stage, involving removal of the built environment, is itself often the source of fears and conflict (Koslov, 2016).

Academic interest in managed retreat has increased considerably in recent years across a range of disciplines including political science, sociology, geography, anthropology, and law (Anderson, 2023; O'Donnell 2022). Several studies focus on institutional and political barriers to the implementation of managed retreat programmes at national or local level and then typically recommend policy approaches for overcoming those barriers (Dyckman et al., 2014; Gibbs, 2016; Göransson et al., 2021; Rocle et al., 2021; Siders, 2019a). Given the polarizing nature of much of the policy and planning around managed retreat (O'Donnell 2022), it is no surprise to find that conflict is central to much of the literature. While also a core concern of our paper, it is important to note studies – often looking at longer historical timeframes (Anderson, 2023) – which draw attention to uncontested examples. Managed 'retreat' may be an unfortunate term, suggestive of defeat and surrender to a top-down command, but Koslov (2016) cites examples like Big Lagoon in Humboldt County California where bottom-up retreat of communities took place successfully without conflict. Griggs (2017) points to a similar history of accepted retreat in North Yorkshire in the UK, with numerous villages lost to the sea and people moving inland over centuries of coastal erosion. He also discusses a more recent history of uncontroversial retreat from that coastline, with caravan holiday parks easily moved away from encroaching danger (Griggs, 2017).

Conflict may arise either because communities are facing managed retreat and do not want to move, or because they want to move away from coastal risks but are unable do so. The first category includes Fairbourne, where previous studies have examined the way in which externally imposed SLR imaginaries prompted political contestation and resistance (Arnall & Hilson, 2023). In the second category, a number of authors have looked at how Indigenous Alaskan populations affected by climate change-induced coastal erosion have sought relocation to alternative locations (Agyeman et al., 2009; Bronen & Chapin, 2013; Marino, 2015). The *Kivalina* case (Johnson, 2013) famously involved community-led legal mobilization via the courts to try to make ExxonMobil pay for the relocation of their village (albeit without success). As Marino's (2015) study of Shishmaref illustrates, conflict in managed retreat often arises from a distrust of government and a lack of meaningful participation.

Whether managed retreat is wanted but denied, or unwanted but applied, place attachment typically plays a key role in conflict around it. Coastlines are important sources of natural resources for many communities and provide access to the ocean for fishing. Coasts are also desirable places to live due to their aesthetic characteristics and associations with recreation and a healthy lifestyle (O'Donnell, 2022; Roy et al., 2023), especially areas with exposed sandy coasts (Nordstrom et al., 2015). These psychological, symbolic and emotional attachments mean that relocation away from the coastline can be strongly resisted (Agyeman et al., 2009). In Shismaref for example, although the majority wanted to move, place attachment to the previous village, with its fishing and hunting opportunities, made agreeing on a suitable replacement location difficult (Marino, 2015). For communities like Fairbourne who do not want to move, place attachment is likely to make them resist managed retreat.

Even if the need for retreat is generally accepted, it can be difficult to implement due to the inherent complexities of the process (Ajibade et al., 2022). Often, residents will have conflicting views on the viability and desirability of managed retreat (Myatt-Bell et al., 2002) depending on their perceptions of the risks from SLR (Alexander et al., 2011) and of the long-term advantages and disadvantages of retreat (Rulleau and Rey-Valette, 2017). These differences can significantly complicate programme operation. There is also commonly a lack of financial resources available. This might be due to failure to make a strong economic case for managed retreat or because the populations being moved are seen as marginal and therefore not worth investment. Taken together, these factors mean that what is normally referred to as 'managed retreat' more often than not resembles a process that is unmanaged.

Questions have also been raised about the underlying political implications of managed retreat programmes. As emphasized by Siders et al. (2021, p. 272), 'retreat – as both a concept and practice – has potential to change societal perceptions of climate risk, challenge techno-optimistic in situ adaptations, and foreground issues of equity as a primary concern in adaptation.' However, despite this potential, dominant planning approaches tend to take a transactional neoliberal approach, emphasizing individual property rights and the use of financial mechanisms via the market including compensation and buy out schemes (O'Donnell, 2022). The gradual withdrawal of the state from settlements that it once supported but now deems 'unviable' becomes an important part of the planner's analytical toolkit (Grealy, 2022). Such decisions might form a process of 'roll-back neoliberalism' whereby the state withdraws from the provision of services (sea defences here) to which residents would once have regarded themselves as entitled. Managed retreat may also function

as a means for states to individualize responsibility for managing environmental hazards by unsupported relocation (Tubridy & Lennon, 2021). In these ways, managed retreat programmes risk reproducing past injustices, with neoliberal management processes forming a historical and political 'decontextualisation' of coastal communities threatened by flooding, erosion and SLR (Jessee, 2022). Such approaches can trigger or exacerbate long-running mistrust of public authorities and a feeling that local communities have been abandoned (Roca & Villares, 2012).

Climate justice is thus also a feature of the managed retreat literature in anthropology and beyond (Arnall et al., 2019; Crate, 2011; Marino, 2015). Justice issues arise in relation to many of the points raised above, including lack of community inclusion in decisions, and decision-making tools like cost–benefit analysis that deprioritize sea

Figure 1. Fairbourne UK map (DataMapWales).

defences for communities with less valuable housing and infrastructure (Siders, 2019b). Justice and place are also connected in the literature. Gray (2023) uses the term 'placekeeping' to describe the justice struggles over what deserves keeping. Anthropologists (Crate, 2011; Crockford, 2023; Fiske, 2016; Lazrus, 2016) have also explored place-based local knowledge on climate, both in 'more expected' Indigenous and Global South communities and in 'ordinary' places in the Global North. Others have explored the extent to which this local knowledge is considered, or more often ignored, in decisions on managed retreat (Agyeman et al., 2009).

These issues concerning managed retreat are particularly relevant to the UK, which has around 3000 kilometres of coastline vulnerable to erosion and flooding. In these zones, some half a million homes are directly exposed to coastal flooding and a further 9000 properties are threatened by erosion (Committee on Climate Change, 2018). SLR, which is widely expected to reach one metre in the UK within the next 100 years, is exacerbating these risks. In England and Wales, governance of the coastline occurs via 22 Shoreline Management Plans (SMPs). While non-statutory, SMPs are the main policy mechanisms local authorities have to manage their coastal areas. Each area in the SMP is assigned one of four management approaches: 'Hold the Line'; 'Advance the Line'; 'Managed Realignment'; or 'No Active Intervention'. 'Managed realignment' is an alternative term that avoids the negative connotations of 'managed retreat' (Rupp-Armstrong & Nicholls, 2007). While this paper uses the latter because it is more common in the academic literature, the two are synonymous.

Fairbourne (Figure 1) falls within West of Wales SMP. The village has around 500 properties and 700 permanent residents. It was established in the 1860s on a low area of saltmarsh facing the Irish Sea and is flanked by the Mawddach Estuary. Fairbourne is protected from sea flooding today by a natural shingle bank topped by a seawall, and estuarine flooding by an embankment. While the village is typically 2.5 m above sea-level, it can be up to 1.5 m below during spring tides and extreme weather events. These have led to occasional breaches in Fairbourne's defences, requiring repair and reinforcement. Nevertheless, apart from minor localized flooding at one end, the village itself has never suffered major sea flooding (Arnall & Hilson, 2023). Official coastal policy for Fairbourne was long one of Hold the Line. However, in 2014, this was changed to a Managed Realignment policy, with existing defences no longer maintained after 2055. This meant that, from 2054, the village would need 'decommissioning' and its residents moved. Unsurprisingly, this policy shift, which came as shock to locals, has been fiercely contested, with many residents arguing that sea defences should be maintained into the future. Despite these protestations, managed retreat, including village decommissioning, remains the Council's approach to managing climate risks posed by SLR to the village. Maintaining sea defences over the long term, the Council argues, is too costly and leaves Fairbourne at an unacceptably high risk of a catastrophic flooding incident.

3 Methods

We examined claims-making by Fairbourne's residents using two different sources. First, as part of fieldwork in 2022, four formal interviews were conducted, three with community leaders and one with the MP (Member of Parliament) for the area. In addition, six more informal discussions with local residents were undertaken, three of which were local business owners, two community leaders, and a temporary resident who owned a holiday caravan. These enabled us to make a first pass at establishing the shape and content of community mobilization in terms of naming, blaming and claiming in response to the public authority decisions on managed retreat. The findings based on interview data and using a different theoretical approach are reported in Arnall and Hilson (2023).

Second, for this paper, we then searched, using Google's search engine, for online stories in newspapers and other news outlets that referenced the plight of Fairbourne's residents. To do this, village name and prompts such as 'climate', 'sea-level rise', 'erosion', 'retreat', 'decommission', and 'refugee' were used. These media sources included local, Welsh, UK and international print media as well as TV news interviews that were produced between February 2014 and June 2023. From these results, 64 stories that had some bearing on community claims-making were selected and quotes from these stories were manually coded into relevant naming, blaming, and claiming columns that formed the basis of our analytical framework. Manual data analysis was manageable because, despite the highly mediatized nature of Fairbourne's predicament, it is a small village with a relatively limited number of news stories on this topic.

With more than one person typically quoted in each story, the 64 online sources produced a total of 141 quotations. The data presented and analysed in this paper are principally from these media sources rather than our earlier interviews. While this reliance on media sources carries some risk of selection bias, we were able to triangulate with our own interviews, which helped to confirm that the media stories both accurately reflected and involved a reasonable cross-section of village views. A key advantage of relying on existing media interviews is that it avoids causing research fatigue in communities that often feel over-visited, which is a real concern in research on communities facing SLR.

4 Claims-making literature

The claims-making literature can be divided into three different categories. First, claims-making is explored in the sociology of social problems. This is rooted in social constructionism and sees social problems, not as material and objective facts on the ground, but rather as the products of collective interpretive claims made about them by different groups (Schneider 1985). With environmental or climate problems for example, these do not just automatically appear as issues on the public agenda; like other social problems such as crime or drug-abuse, 'they need to be identified and defined as such, and made visible in the public sphere … before they can acquire the status of 'social problems' that the public should be concerned about and towards which politicians and other decision-makers should direct attention, legislation and resources' (Hansen, 2000, p. 55). Claims-making by relevant groups is a key part of this construction of social problems.

Claims in this literature are rhetorical arguments in a broad sense. With the environment or climate, researchers are raising questions 'about who makes claims for the existence of environmental problems' (Hannigan, 2006, p. 33) and about the substance and framing of these claims; they are not necessarily discussing entitlement claims or political demands by those suffering environmental or climate problems. Many of the examples of this first category rely on analysis of the media as a site for claims-making, whether by 'primary' (citizens and NGOs) or 'secondary' claims-makers (journalists) (O'Neal, 1997). Given that claims-making, on this model, is about trying to shape public discourse in terms of how a social problem is seen, then a methodological focus on the media – one of the key sites for public discourse – makes sense.

The second category, grounded in social movement studies, also typically draws on media sources. Claims-making here has been defined as 'the strategic demands made by collective actors within a specific contested issue field' (Koopmans & Statham, 1999, p. 206). This idea of a political demand differentiates this second category from the first: the first is interested in how a social problem is constructed, which may not always involve a political demand as such; for the second category, a political demand for social change is typically integral to the social movement's existence. As Lindekilde (2013, p. 1) observes, 'political claims-making entails both the formulation of a political demand with a specific content (the claim), and the public staging of this demand (claims-*making*).' This political claims-making can 'take on many forms and be performed in many different arenas' and may include physical claims-making such as demonstrations, as well as political lobbying, litigation, and media interviews and press releases (Lindekilde 2013, p. 1).

The third category consists of law and society scholarship on claiming which examines the precursor stages to legal disputes. Prior scholarship focused on the court dispute stage without analysing the earlier phases involved in the emergence and transformation of disputes (Olesen & Hammerslev, 2021). In establishing their naming, blaming and claiming framework, Felstiner et al. (1980) studied the processes by which previously unperceived injurious experiences become perceived as injurious or not (naming), and whether they go on to become grievances against other identifiable parties (blaming), before potentially ending up as a dispute in which they then seek a remedy from those parties (claiming). Naming and blaming therefore constitute the earlier stages of conflicts or disputes. This law and society work thus unpacks the different stages or elements of claims-making, while foregrounding eventual entitlement claims and demands. Despite the original focus on courts, as outlined above, the idea of naming, blaming and claiming need not be restricted to a study of litigation-based claims-making.

This third category is particularly useful for understanding the nature of conflict around managed retreat. Some scholars have pointed to similarities between the law and society naming, blaming and claiming approach and the social movements literature on framing (Levitsky, 2008), including the unpacking of

stages of the framing process in the latter literature into diagnostic and prognostic framing (Jones, 1999). Diagnostic framing involves the identification of or *naming* of the problem and attributing blame for it; prognostic framing then involves *claims* about what should be done about the problem (Snow and Benford, 1988). Frames therefore often involve 'a package of ideas that includes at least implicitly an account of the causes and consequences of some circumstances that are deemed undesirable, and a theory about how a problem may be alleviated' (Weiss, 1989, p. 97).

However, while framing forms part of our analysis, this paper contends that there is additional value to the naming, blaming and claiming framework. It not only pays greater attention to the detail of blaming and the political demands involved at the claiming stage, but also allows the throughput of a conflict to be traced from naming, through blaming, to the demands claimed. Without an analytical framework like this, community claims can appear all of a piece. The threefold disaggregation and throughput-tracing of the claims-making process is our key contribution. Separating claims-making into 'naming, blaming, and claiming' helps clarify the debate about the politics of managed retreat.

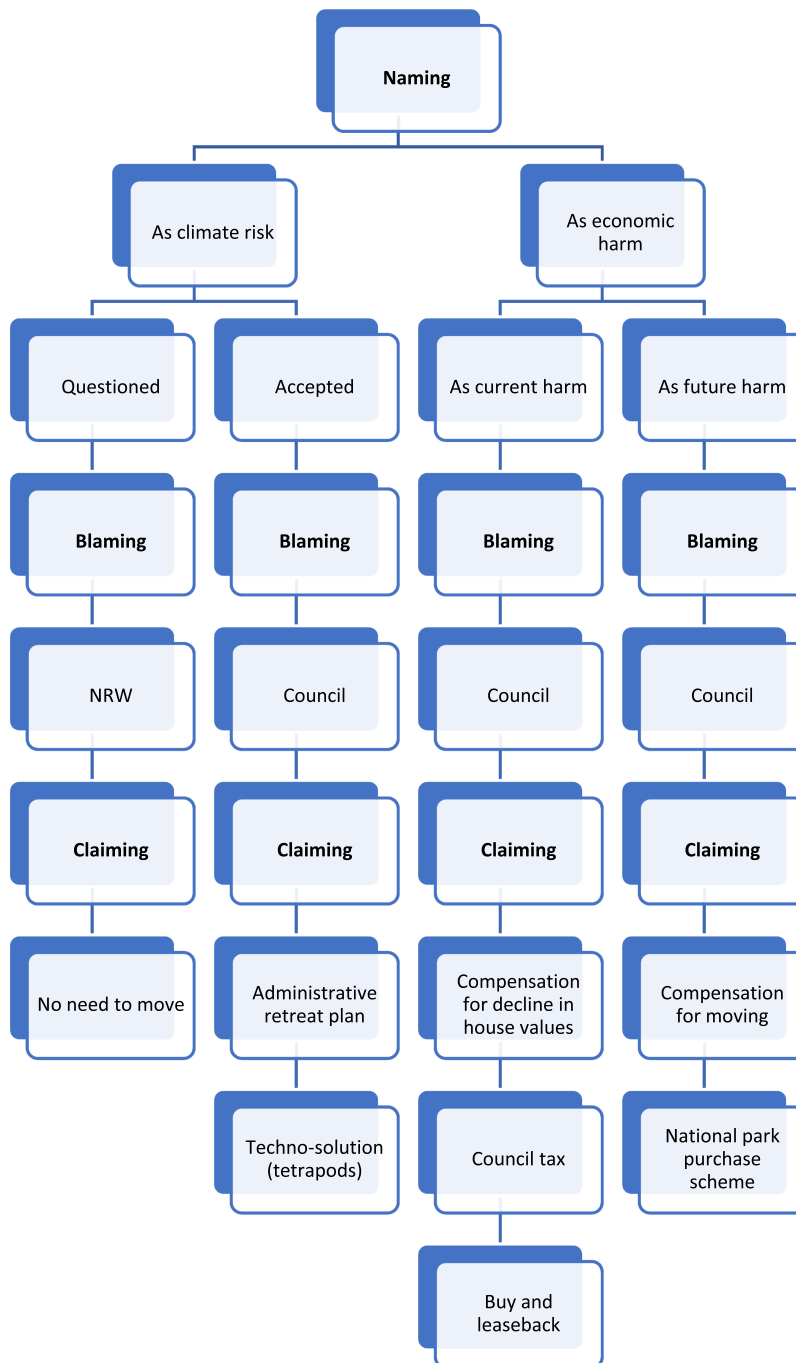## 5 Naming, blaming and claiming in Fairbourne

In approaching naming, blaming, claiming and framing around managed retreat, it is important to be clear at the outset on how each of those terms is used. For Felstiner et al. (1980), naming is about a party in a legal dispute recognizing an experience as injurious. In a work dispute context, that might involve an employee seeing their situation as a breach of a legal right (like non-discrimination) and naming it as such. Blaming is then about identifying the adversary. However, in a climate change context, Chaudhuri (2021) notes that naming has been used both to name climate change as a problem (Arnall et al., 2019) and to name the fossil fuel industry as the adversary responsible for it (Gunningham, 2017).

In our Fairbourne managed retreat context, Figure 2 makes clear that there are two different types of naming happening, reflecting different diagnostic frames. First, there is a scientific diagnostic framing or naming by the public authorities of SLR as a major *climate risk*, with retreat and decommissioning as their prognostic solution. Second, and in response to the retreat announcement that produced immediate impacts on house values, many villagers name managed retreat as the problem, diagnostically framing it as an unfair *economic harm*. Different community blaming and claiming throughputs or paths then follow from each of these different namings.

We start with the first, which involved public authorities naming SLR and associated flooding risk as the problem and recommending managed retreat as the appropriate solution. These official claims are set out in detail in two main policy documents (FMF, 2018; FMF, 2019). There are also two scientific reports produced by engineering firm Haskoning (Guthrie & Phernambucq, 2018; Jones and Guthrie, 2017) and one published by the University of Wales (Phillips et al., 2017) concerning the coastal processes in Fairbourne and the potential defence options available to manage them. Together, these documents and reports make up a body of evidence that has been employed by Gwynedd Council to justify its decision to decommission the village, which it claims is the only viable solution. This evidence is reinforced by the observations of flooding experts who commonly visit the village to advise on sea defences and speak with local and national media. Many have emphasized the risks of a local flooding disaster resulting from a sudden breach of the seawall. In a newspaper article, Gareth Evans, a flood defence engineer with Natural Resources Wales (NRW), described Fairbourne as particularly vulnerable to flooding during high tides. He pointed out that few other UK locations face such a unique threat: at high tide, the houses on the other side of the defences are almost below sea-level, meaning a breach would immediately place the community at catastrophic risk (Wall, 2019).

As Figure 2 shows, community members have questioned this risk framing. One way in which residents mobilized against the decommissioning policy was in media interviews, in which they resisted the naming of SLR as a problem. By questioning this, they were inevitably also challenging the necessity of the consequent 'retreat' prognosis of managed retreat.

Our fieldwork interviews and informal discussions revealed not outright climate denialism (everyone believed that climate change is real), but climate scepticism. For example, all eight permanent residents that we spoke with questioned whether the official SLR projections and associated coastal flooding predictions

Figure 2. Fairbourne naming, blaming and blaming process.

can be trusted. This was mirrored in eleven resident quotations in five of the media stories, where residents clearly mobilized against the official figures. As Wall (2019) put it:

> Elsewhere in the village there is a mixture of sadness, denial and confusion about the long-term threat. Standing at the bow of his boat, Barmouth's former harbourmaster, Julian Kirkham, is adamant that he will not leave his home and says even

scientists can't agree on sea-level rises. "It is just panic," he says. "There has been so much waffle that nobody knows what will happen".

Some, like Alan Jones the chip shop owner, made connections between an alleged lack of certainty in short-range weather forecasts and the uncertainty of climate modelling of SLR: 'How can they predict what'll happen in 40 or 50 years' time? They can't get the weather right for next week' (Hope, 2019). Others revealed a detailed knowledge of the SLR figures in the SMP underlying the management retreat decision:

> Campaigner Pete Cole says the village has been written off due to an 'aggressive model' used by planners, which was not used for other areas of the coastline. He says another forecast concluded that sea levels could be expected to rise around 50 cm rather than one metre in the next 100 years and with only a modest 20 to 30 cm rise in the next 50 years. (Spillett, 2016)

Similarly, another resident, Mike Thrussell, stated that:

> There's no denial about rising sea levels, but some of the statements about how quickly it's rising don't add up … Over last 100 years global sea levels have risen 20 cm, yet we're being told over the next 80-100 years we could see a metre to two metres. It's not logical, is it? (Hope, 2019)

Echoing the literature discussed earlier on the role of place-based local knowledge, all eleven media-based villager statements, expressing scepticism about scientific sea-level rise data, implicitly involved appeals to embedded community lay knowledge and lived experience of the local geography, in contrast to the official science. In Crockford's (2023) terms, they are examples of 'radical empiricism', involving a cultural disconnect between scientific knowledge and lived, embedded climate awareness. This is reinforced by one story describing Mike Thrussell above as someone who has been linked with Fairbourne for 61 years and who has monitored the weather daily for his job as an angling journalist (Hope, 2019). He is quoted as saying, '[p]eople born and bred in the village have never seen the sea over the top' (Hope, 2019). In these examples, residents are willing to name climate change and SLR as a common problem for coastal regions in the UK and further afield. However, they are unwilling or unable to reconcile this global understanding of the climate science with their own sensory perception of Fairbourne's physical environment.

As Figure 2 illustrates, the villagers who question the scientific SLR risk-naming typically blame NRW as the environmental agency responsible for applying the data on SLR. This was expressed by villagers in three of our interviews and in two of the media stories. Finally, the claim or political demand advanced by these actors, which again follows logically in the throughput process, is that the village should not be made to move because the risks have been exaggerated and do not match their experience of the sea at Fairbourne.

Other villagers were willing to accept the official naming of climate SLR risk in Fairbourne and that this would require them to move. In total, this sentiment was expressed six times in the media stories, making it less prominent than the view that the sea-level rise data was unreliable. In this case, the blame shifted primarily to the Council as the body responsible for funding sea defences and deciding to withdraw it. There were two claims or demands made, one administrative and the other technological. The administrative demand – that a proper plan of action be put in place – can also be seen in terms of *what* they were blaming the authorities for, demonstrating that the lines between naming, blaming and claiming are not always watertight. Three of the residents that we interviewed and fifteen villagers in the media stories blamed the Council (as well as the Welsh and UK governments) for announcing the decision to withdraw support for sea defences in 2054 without having a proper plan in place for how this supposedly 'managed' retreat would be governed and administered. Critical questions, which they argued had not been addressed, included when, between the present day and 2054, relocation would need to begin, how it would be carried out in practice, where villagers would be moved to, and whether they would have any say in this. As Stuart Eves, a local community leader put it, 'They've [the council] put this bombshell 30 years in front of us and there's no answer to it' (BBC News, 2020). Another resident, Mike Thrussell claimed that 'the council has abandoned the villagers without any solutions … How the authorities can sit there and push this forward with no solutions beggars belief' (Wall, 2019).

Like Thrussell, many framed the decision as having been 'abandoned' by the Council. This was a term that came up five times in different media reports and was also commonly repeated by the five community leaders in our set of initial interviews. Alan Wilde, a villager for 35 years, saw it in everyday place-removing council decisions and withdrawal of state support that had already started:

> We feel the county council has abandoned us … First, they closed the toilets. They also took away the concrete ramp down to the beach two years ago so there's no safe access to our beach. The notice boards, which are essential to any holiday village, have been taken away and there's no sign of them being replaced. They're killing tourism and we feel abandoned. We're totally in the dark. (Harries, 2020)

That feeling of being 'left in the dark' speaks to a lack of communication both about the original managed retreat decision (which many only heard about via a BBC television programme), but also about the lack of communication of any plans about how the retreat would be managed in practice (Channel 4 News, 2019).

As Figure 2 shows, another community claim or demand that followed on from the official climate risk-naming was for technological solutions that looked beyond simply maintaining the existing sea defences. In framing terms, this reaction to the diagnostic climate risk frame was not a prognostic retreat frame but, rather, a techno-optimism frame. In 2022, community spokesperson Stuart Eaves and others put forward a proposal to Gwynedd Council for 100 concrete tetrapods to be constructed offshore to dissipate incoming waves (Gerretsen, 2022). They were also pinning their hopes on work by an independent, professional geologist from the North Wales area who provided new models of the Fairbourne coastline challenging the official science relied on by the Council. The geologist recommended an artificial concrete reef, as well as an additional embankment to protect the village from estuarine flooding on its flank, the renewal of local drainage ditches, and a new storage pond (Forgrave, 2023; Hall, 2021). However, while much hope rested on this alternative techno-scientific imaginary, under which relocation could yet be avoided, the authorities dismissed it in June 2023 for being too expensive and not sustainable over time (Nobes, 2023).

Another key naming, that can be seen from Figure 2, was one involving an injurious experience of economic harm. This fell into two categories – present and future. Regarding the former, there was a naming of present economic harm or fallout from the sudden 2054 decommissioning announcement, which caused local property blight. This issue was raised by all respondents that we spoke with and was the most commonly cited impact of managed retreat in the media stories, 'blight' being mentioned five times and 'house prices' six times. Koslov's (2016) definition of managed retreat, discussed earlier, rightly highlights this decommissioning element as a key source of conflict. A community might be willing to risk a withdrawal of funding for sea defence maintenance in the future – after all, that at least leaves the possibility of remaining and living with the risk. But an accompanying decision to decommission and unbuild the village in the future is altogether different. Having named the problem created by the decision as one of present economic damage due to property values, the blame was placed both on the national and international media and on the Council. The latter was blamed for making the announcement which caused the blight. The former were blamed by some villagers for exaggerated reporting, which was thought to have exacerbated house price falls.

Moving to the claiming stage, there were three demands made. First, there was a demand for compensation in the present to reflect the drop in house prices caused by the decommissioning decision. This was mentioned ten times in the media stories, making it the most popular demand. The claims-making venue for this claim was set to be the courts, via litigation against the Council. Local media reported that residents had voted to sue for £100 million in compensation for dramatic declines in property values (Shaw, 2016).

Another report noted that, after the vote, £20,000 was raised to pay for a leading lawyer (Cambrian News, 2016). According to interviewees, although a barrister was employed by local community action group Fairbourne Facing Change (FFC), the legal action was dropped due to high costs.

Secondly, the FFC group was also at one stage demanding a 'buy and lease back' or rent back scheme. This type of scheme had been actively considered by several projects under Defra's 2009 Coastal Change Pathfinder Programme – a pilot funding project designed to test out approaches to managed retreat (which Fairbourne was not part of). Buy and leaseback involves the present purchase of at risk properties, which are subsequently leased by the former owner, a wholly new tenant, or become holiday lets (Defra, 2012). However, no buy and leaseback arrangements were implemented under Pathfinder in the end due to cost issues or opposition from residents (Defra, 2012; Defra, 2015). In Fairbourne, the idea put forward was similarly that houses could be bought up by housing associations, private landlords or a community interest company (Weymouth, 2016). While this was looked into by Fairbourne Moving Forward, a multi-agency project which included FFC on its working group (YGC, 2015), a formal scheme of this kind did not proceed. As with Pathfinder, this outcome

was primarily due to the costs of making such purchases and bringing homes up to relevant Welsh rental housing standards (YGC, 2016).

Thirdly, a demand or claim was made in relation to council tax, which was covered in two of the media stories. The argument was that since council tax in the UK is based on property price bands, and the prices of houses in Fairbourne had significantly decreased due to blight, then residents deserved a reduction in their annual tax bills. A local councillor made such a claim in a council meeting on the local authority budget (Williams, 2020). A local home owner also had a letter published in a local newspaper asking Gwynedd Council to consider a reduction in council tax for Fairbourne home owners (Cambrian News, 2021). The idea was also raised by the MP that we interviewed as a potential recompense for affected villagers.

As Figure 2 shows, the 'economic harm' naming not only referenced present harm, but also economic harm expected in the future. The Council was the focus of the blame here. The claims were of two types. First, there was, again, a compensation claim, expressed in a future-facing way, for homeowners whose houses would eventually need demolishing and who would require relocation. The following quote by Bev, a resident, is typical of this first type: 'If we do get to this magic decommissioning year, and they have been wrong about the sea breach, while I probably won't be here, I want the council to compensate residents' (Farhoud, 2020). Secondly and self-described as 'left-field', or unconventional, by proponent Stuart Eves, there was a demand for the public purchase of farmland in the national park behind the coast to allow for resettlement of the whole village. As Eves states, the idea would be 'for councils to buy up some of the large farms which come on to the market in Wales … It might cost £2 m but it will be cheaper in the long run – they could run them as campsites for 20 years, until coastal communities are evacuated, then plough the proceeds into building new villages' (Forgrave, 2020).

6 Conclusion

The current paper's key theoretical contribution involved taking the naming, blaming and claiming framework developed in the court-centred law and society literature and applying it outside a purely legal dispute context (with 'purely' important there because a legal claim via the courts was canvassed by residents). By disaggregating the process of claims-making into those three separate categories, the framework helps to clarify the processes through which disputes emerge and evolve, including conflicts around managed retreat.

Deploying the above framework is, we argue, likely to be practically useful for both academics and policymakers in understanding community responses to decisions on managed retreat and other forms of climate adaptation policy, and in trying to find workable solutions. This is especially so in highly politicized disputes where communities and public authorities are engaged in a series of claims and counter claims. The managed retreat of coastal towns and villages is set to be an increasingly challenging issue in the decades to come in the context of accelerating climate change and limited financial resources. In this way, the naming, blaming and claiming framework is potentially widely applicable to other countries experiencing similar problems, including those covered in the existing literature such as India (Jennath and Paul, 2024), the US (Bragg et al., 2021), France (Rocle et al., 2021), Italy (Nordstrom et al., 2015), Ireland (Tubridy and Lennon, 2021), and Sweden (Göransson et al., 2021).

In Wales, the wide variety of demands by villagers in Fairbourne is notable. Some are highly ambitious or unconventional; others require significant expenditure, which makes them unlikely to be met by a resource-constrained local authority with limited national or UK government support. Some demands are rooted in neoliberal property entitlements and therefore adopt an individualist frame; others are more concerned to adopt a whole community approach or collectivist framing – whether in permanently moving away from the coastline or in deploying coastal defence technology to remain in place. Several of them are incompatible: one cannot, for example, have a compensation scheme for moving and a buy-and-lease-back scheme at the same time.

A lack of planning of managed retreat is likely to give rise to a wide range of demands like this, many of which would be costly and complex to implement. Managed retreat requires management, including meaningful engagement with communities from the outset. With unmanaged retreat, claims can be expected to multiply, which has opportunity costs. Authorities will then find themselves faced with not only having to manage the costs and logistics of the proposed retreat but, in addition, community expectations as expressed in their

claims. Unmanaged retreat is likely to lead to conflict. Where those expectations are also left unmanaged, that conflict is likely to be exacerbated. Clearly setting out community understandings and expectations using a naming, blaming and claiming framework can help as part of the process of resolving that conflict.

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Ethics statement

The original study (Arnall and Hilson, 2023) received ethics approval from the University of Reading.
The additional analysis of published conventional media sources did not require further approval.

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