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Barrow-in-Furness: The Overlooked UK Coastal Town at the Centre of National Defence Strategy

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Barrow-in-Furness, a quiet coastal town in Cumbria, is set to undergo a £220 million transformation as it becomes a key pillar in the United Kingdom's future defence strategy. Once known primarily for its shipbuilding heritage, Barrow is now being developed into a strategic hub for the construction of nuclear submarines, essential to Britain's deterrence

capability. The investment is not only about bolstering national security amid growing global threats, including those posed by Russia, but also about breathing life into a town that has long struggled with economic decline and high street decay.

The regeneration of Barrow is underpinned by its designation as a “strategic national asset.” Defence contractor BAE Systems, headquartered in the town, has been commissioned to build three classes of Royal Navy submarines: the *Astute-class* attack submarines, the *Dreadnought-class* ballistic missile submarines, and 12 *nuclear-powered attack submarines* for the trilateral AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) military alliance. According to Janet Garner, BAE’s Future Workforce Director, fulfilling these orders will require 17,000 highly skilled workers over the next 10 to 15 years.

To meet this demand, the town’s infrastructure is being reimagined. From housing and transport links to education and local amenities, Barrow is undergoing a comprehensive 10-year redevelopment plan led by Team Barrow. Its chief executive, Peter Anstiss, described the town as “absolutely pivotal for UK defence,” being the only place in Britain where nuclear and attack-class submarines can be constructed.

Initial steps include the redevelopment of empty shops in the Portland Walk shopping precinct. BAE Systems has turned the former WHSmith store into a new collaborative workspace called *The Bridge*, followed by a planned training facility in the old Debenhams building. This move is part of a wider strategy to stimulate economic activity by deliberately avoiding internal canteens and instead driving business back to the high street.

The impact has been swift. Eleven new businesses have opened nearby, including cafés and a new branch of the Furness Building Society. Anstiss explained that success lies in diversifying town centre use rather than relying solely on traditional retail occupancy. He stressed that while the town’s immediate purpose is defence production, there must also be a balanced local economy and improved social cohesion.

Another cornerstone of Barrow’s regeneration is education. The University of Cumbria is opening a new campus on Buccleuch Dock Road, adjacent to BAE’s existing skills academy. Brian Webster-Henderson, the university’s Deputy Vice-Chancellor, pointed out that only 22.5% of residents have higher education qualifications compared to 33.8% nationally. The hope is that the campus will not only produce future defence engineers but also uplift life chances in a region that has long depended on a single industry.

However, challenges persist. Approximately 900 new homes are required annually to accommodate the incoming workforce, yet progress has been slow. The Marina Village site, capable of hosting over 800 homes, still lacks a developer. MP for Barrow and Furness, Michelle Scrogham, said the main barrier is not local opposition but a shortage of willing developers and construction labour. Many of the potential housing plots are on brownfield land, requiring extensive decontamination and approval processes.

Transport infrastructure also poses a bottleneck. The A590, the primary access route into Barrow, is already under pressure. Anstiss identified upgrading the road as an obvious priority to support both economic activity and daily commutes.

Despite the scale of the investment and the high-level political support—including praise from Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer—locals remain divided. Long-term resident Angela Stalker expressed doubt that the town centre would ever recover. Others, such as Dale West and Sophie Morris, lamented the lack of variety in shops, with many complaining that the high street is dominated by vape shops or simply deserted.

These sentiments are echoed by Andy Tomkins from nearby Askham, who criticised the temporary nature of the influx of contractors, many of whom take their earnings elsewhere. MP Scrogham noted that a previous downturn in the 1990s, which saw 10,000 jobs lost in the shipyard, devastated the local economy. When recovery began, much of the new work was taken up by people commuting from outside the area, limiting benefits to the town itself.

Yet there are signs of optimism. Mr Anstiss acknowledged the complexity of the project but emphasised the uniqueness of the partnership between government, BAE Systems, and local authorities. He described it as an unparalleled opportunity for long-term, sustainable change.

Ms Scrogham, too, remains hopeful. Calling the nuclear submarine programme a “national endeavour,” she said it was vital that local people—not outsiders—are empowered to carry it forward. “We’re just now starting to see green shoots,” she said. “Barrow is rising... and it will be back to the town it was.”

In the broader context of national defence and levelling up regional economies, Barrow stands as a powerful example of how strategic investment can align with community renewal, if managed wisely.