

EMPLOYMENT SPACE OPPORTUNITIES IN SOUTHWOLD

Organisations and business leaders encouraging future growth for Suffolk have endorsed the new flexible workspace development planned for Southwold.

The redevelopment of Station Yard is designed to future-proof the town, creating a continuing legacy to attract new visitors and residents to the town with affordable employment space, fresh job opportunities and support for young people.

The new Enterprise Hub will be open to all from freelancers, start-up businesses, entrepreneurs and expanding companies to share space, network and collaborate.

It is designed to bring a new dimension to the town, preserving what is known and loved, while welcoming and embracing the new to make Southwold the place for people to live, work and stay all year round.

The project, spearheaded by Southwold Town Council, has been made possible by a grant from The Coastal Communities Fund, supported by partners East Suffolk Council.

In the district council's latest Economic Growth Plan, the council shared the need to ensure market and coastal towns have appropriate levels and types of small business provision and grow-on space.

It also emphasised the importance of a positive approach to enterprise provision.

Alex Till, CEO of Menta, which supports small and medium size businesses (SMEs) across Norfolk and Suffolk with help, support, advice and training, said a similar development in Bury St Edmunds had been a great success, with its members gaining a positive work/life balance post-Covid.

"Our @inc co-working centre in Bury St Edmunds isn't dissimilar demographically in its tone to Southwold. One of its positive outcomes for its members is that some are reducing their carbon footprint by up to 40pc as they don't have to catch the train to London for work anymore.

"Working closer to home means people do their food shopping in the town, pop into the independent cafes for lunch and they invite clients in for meetings.

"How nice to be able to work in a town like Southwold. If anything, Covid has asked us to reassess how we choose to work. Co-working and collaboration are key - it benefits young people, start-ups and remedies the isolation of so many who had to work at home and no longer have to."

Marcelle Castle, Director of Property at NWES, a business growth and advice service supporting the project, said it would encourage job creation by attracting year-round business, providing opportunities for local people.

"The re-development of the site will bring economic benefit to Southwold businesses and the town as a whole.

"We expect the hub to act as a catalyst for local business growth as the facility will provide business support to both tenant and local businesses to enable their growth and development."

Research undertaken in 2017 by the Coastal Communities Team's Economic Plan showed that while tourism was vital to the Southwold's economy, it also has significant negative consequences.

As a result of the seasonality of the tourism trade, local independent services struggle to maintain businesses in the off-peak months due to the drop off in visitor footfall, which increases reliance on the dwindling permanent resident population.

The recent Town Centre Strategy showed that 35pc of businesses reported that securing potential local customers was a problem, compared to just 3pc in small towns nationally.

Around 78pc of jobs in the town are tourist-based, so employment can be seasonal, with almost half of the visitors staying between May and September.

And for non-tourism, non-retail businesses there is a lack of suitable premises, particularly away from the High Street. In a previous study 84pc of residents thought it important to have 'small, flexible use premises' provided for small and start-up businesses.

Since that study in 2013, no new capacity has been delivered aside from three small employment spaces.

The Suffolk Chamber of Commerce, which works to promote interest in local business possibilities, has thrown its support behind the venture, with a spokesman highlighting how it would build on the town's existing strengths.

"It's great to see the development of an Enterprise Hub in Southwold, offering new facilities and infrastructure to a new audience and providing opportunities for start-ups and existing small and medium sized businesses.

"This kind of offer will future-proof Southwold and help it build on its existing strengths in leisure and hospitality. New facilities such as these are vital to keeping young people in Suffolk and preventing the brain-drain effect to places such as London."

A spokesman from East Suffolk Council added: "East Suffolk Council has supported the town council's vision of an Enterprise Hub, including enabling access to funding through the Coastal Communities Fund, and will continue to support it as the project is moved forward."