

Waveney District Council – gathering town centre evidence with Southwold Coastal Community Team

Waveney District Council has supported the Southwold Coastal Community Team in developing an evidence-base to underpin its work revitalising the town centre.

Economic growth | 01 Nov 2018



Local authority: **Waveney District Council**

Submitted by: The People & Places Partnership

Case study synopsis

Waveney District Council has supported the Southwold Coastal Community Team in developing an evidence-base to underpin its work revitalising the town centre. This involved gathering key performance data and surveying stakeholder perceptions about the town centre. The findings helped in understanding concerns about long-term business confidence and customer satisfaction. This has had the bonus of boosting community engagement and cementing local partnership working. The survey evidence has informed strategy development, project planning and funding bids. The Coastal Community Team now has clear targets for guiding long-term delivery and monitoring success.

The challenge

Southwold is a seemingly prosperous place with a high dependency on the visitor economy. Anecdotal evidence has, however, suggested that independent businesses are vulnerable to rising costs. These businesses are perceived as an essential element of the town centre's distinctiveness. There have also been concerns about the changing experiences and expectations of customers and how these will exacerbate such pressures.

As part of its work to support the Southwold Coastal Community Team, Waveney District Council needed objective evidence to back-up such perceptions of the pressures facing the town centre. The Council and Coastal Community Team wanted to achieve this in a way that under-pinned long-term community engagement; took account of existing strategies; strengthened partnership working; informed objectives; shaped solutions; supported external funding bids; and provided measures to monitor impact.

The solution

The Council and Coastal team commissioned a comprehensive town centre survey comprising of the following elements:

- A desk-top review of existing strategies and data including: Waveney District Council Core Strategy; Waveney District Council Local Plan; the Towns Council's Strategy for the Future of Southwold; Southwold Draft Neighbourhood Plan; Reydon Village Plan; Waveney Retail and Leisure Needs Assessment; Southwold Coastal Community Team Economic Plan.
- An assessment of quantitative key performance indicators including footfall, vacancy rates, parking occupancy, rental levels, business mix, customer origins and purpose of visits. These were compared against national trends to identify issues particular to Southwold.
- Qualitative stakeholder surveys including customers' perceptions, sentiments about place branding, business confidence and priorities.

The work revealed the following headline issues:

- Southwold businesses are markedly more pessimistic than in comparable towns nationally with nearly a third of them (32 per cent) projecting a further decline in turnover compared to just 19 per cent nationally.
- The presence of national chains was jointly ranked as the most negative perception by customers (58 per cent) and stopping the decline of independent businesses was amongst their top priorities for the future.
- Existing concerns about rising retail property costs were reinforced through recognition as a top issue in both business and customer surveys.
- Concerns that parking may limit the use of the town centre at peak times were backed by the fact that it is perceived as the most negative current aspect of the town centre by both customers and businesses.
- Customers were more positive than businesses about Southwold town centre and valued the quality of the environment, its shops and services. Ease of walking around, cleanliness, convenience (all 93 per cent), physical appearance (91 per cent), safety (90 per cent) and customer service (92 per cent) were particularly highly rated compared to national averages.
- 24 per cent of customers thought the town centre had worsened in recent years; 35 per cent considered it had changed in good and bad ways. Only 9 per cent thought Southwold had improved.
- There are strongly positive perceptions of the 'brand' Southwold linked to the culture, heritage and quality of its environment. These need to be used in promoting its distinctiveness through new activities and innovative marketing that extends the visitor season.

The impact

It is still early days in the development and delivery of a forward framework for Southwold town centre. This framework comprises of both an outline approach for partnership development and an action plan with defined projects, partners and budgets.

Through the leadership provided through the Southwold Coastal Community Team, there is an opportunity to bring different interests together in a strong and lasting partnership. The Coastal Community Team aims to help provide extra resources to coordinate the activities of task-focused working groups.

The survey work has strengthened the shared objectives and partnership working of the District and Town Councils, Chamber of Trade, community groups and other agencies to enable them to all play to their strengths and passions to collectively improve the town centre. The forward framework formalises this thinking.

Southwold received confirmation from the Government in January 2017 that its bid to become a Coastal Community Team had been accepted. By producing a locally-tailored economic plan backed by evidence from the additional survey work, the Team aims to access additional funds to help improve the town centre and wider community.

How is the new approach being sustained?

Delivering successful town centre change is a long-term venture involving vision, ambition, a broad approach and coordinated delivery amongst local champions with the commitment, skills and resources to play their part. The aim is to sustain successful delivery of a forward framework for Southwold town centre through effective partnership working and joined-up solutions. The identified building blocks of this joined-up approach and its measurable impacts include:

- Business diversification: maintain or increase the proportion of independent traders; improve business confidence recorded in follow-up surveys; ensure the distinctiveness of the retail offer is valued by visitors and residents
- Parking provision: achieve parking availability of 15 per cent at peak times; improve business, local customer and visitor perceptions about parking provision recorded in follow-up business & customer surveys.
- Marketing & events: improve business performance in follow-up surveys; continued positive perceptions of Southwold 'brand'; and increased footfall during events, out-of season and monitored as repeat visits.
- Housing & demographics: opportunities to influence new house building and the changing demographics will be pursued through liaison with the Neighbourhood Planning Group and Waveney District Council.

Lessons learned

Putting the ground work in to gathering performance measures and perceptions provides a factual basis for engaging stakeholders, jointly agreeing objectives and creating a shared action plan for revitalizing the town. By maintaining a constant focus on agreed indicators and routinely monitoring changes, delivery can be kept on-track with clearly identifiable impacts.

Contact

Marie Webster-Fitch, Economic Development Programme Manager, Suffolk Coastal and Waveney District Council

Tel: 01502 523395

Email: marie.websterfitch@eastssuffolk.gov.uk

Links to relevant documents

Southwold Town Centre; a Forward Framework