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Southwold Town Centre; *a Forward Framework*

Research Partners

The People & Places Partnership has been commissioned by Waveney District Council to develop a 'Forward Framework' for Southwold town centre on behalf of the Coastal Community Team and key local stakeholders.



Understanding our town centres is about people & place.
 About the customers and the businesses based there.
 About the built fabric and sense of community created.



Local perceptions & priorities



Customers questioned about their use of Southwold town centre told us that they are concerned that premises costs are pushing out independent retailers whilst the availability and convenience of parking are problems at peak times.



Businesses based in Southwold shared concerns about business rate and rent rises and were particularly concerned about proposed increases in parking costs and the immediate impacts on staff.

The evidence

To try and improve a town centre without properly understanding the issues, is like baking a cake without knowing the ingredients. We always use the same process of bringing together existing local research, surveying local stakeholders and collecting our own suite of key performance indicators. In Southwold we turned first to a wide range of existing studies and strategies and found a consensus in the understanding of issues and solutions proposed.

Driving Investment

This Forward Framework seeks to help understand the drivers for private investment and potential public funding to underpin necessary interventions. Potentially this includes the expansion of Adnams' business activities, proposals for developing community assets and planned new housing in Reydon.

Sustaining Services

Opportunities for the re-use of redundant properties offer potential for income, some affordable housing and businesses premises for diversification. Current proposals to develop such community-owned assets include sites on Station Road, the old hospital site, the Harbour and the Reydon Business Park.

The 'heart' of the issues

Existing studies such as the Town Council's Strategy for the Future of Southwold; the emerging Southwold Neighbourhood Plan; and the Southwold Coastal Community Team Economic Plan, provide an extensive understanding of issues. This Forward Framework builds on them by focusing on the role of the town centre at the heart of the community and with a pivotal role in providing solutions.

Second
Homes &
Holiday
Lets

Affordable
Housing &
Business
Premises

Diversify
Population



Rising retail property costs

Ownership of property, greater visitor and local spend plus rates discounts seem the main options to help sustain existing businesses.



Parking pressure & traffic

This provides a barrier that may limit the use of the town centre at peak times, restrict business profitability and damage the Southwold 'brand'.



Reliance on visitor economy

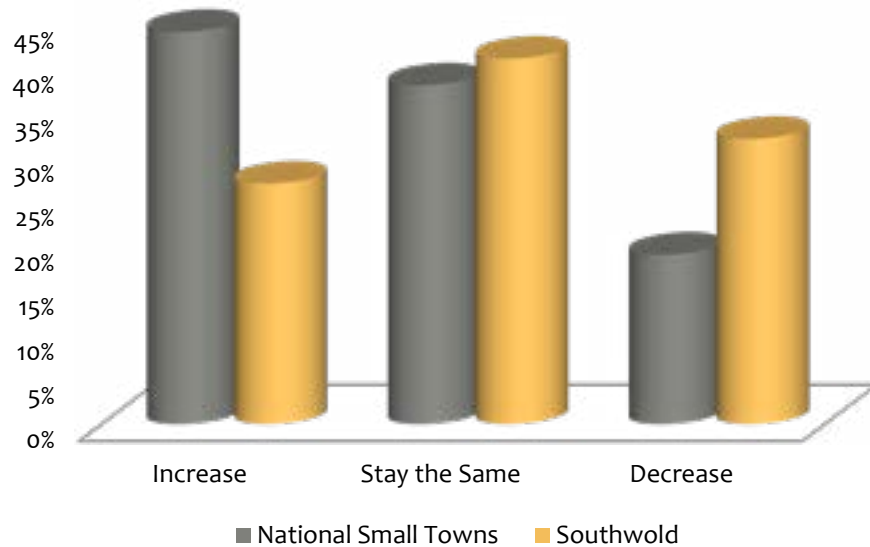
Future marketing needs to extend the visitor season and increase the cultural activities and business mix in a way that also adds to the local quality of life.



Challenging housing trends

Realism is needed about the ability to create affordable homes through influencing the format of new house developments proposed in Reydon.

Projected Turnover for next 12 months



BUSINESS PERFORMANCE

A high proportion of businesses reported a negative performance over the last year: 35% said that turnover had decreased compared to 31% nationally.

BUSINESS CONFIDENCE

Southwold businesses are markedly more pessimistic than in comparable towns nationally with nearly a third of them (32%) projecting a further decline in turnover compared to just 19% nationally.

BUSINESS MIX

The presence of national chains was jointly ranked as the most negative perception by customers (58%) and stopping the decline of independent businesses was amongst their top priorities for the future.

“We love it; just a little bit less!”

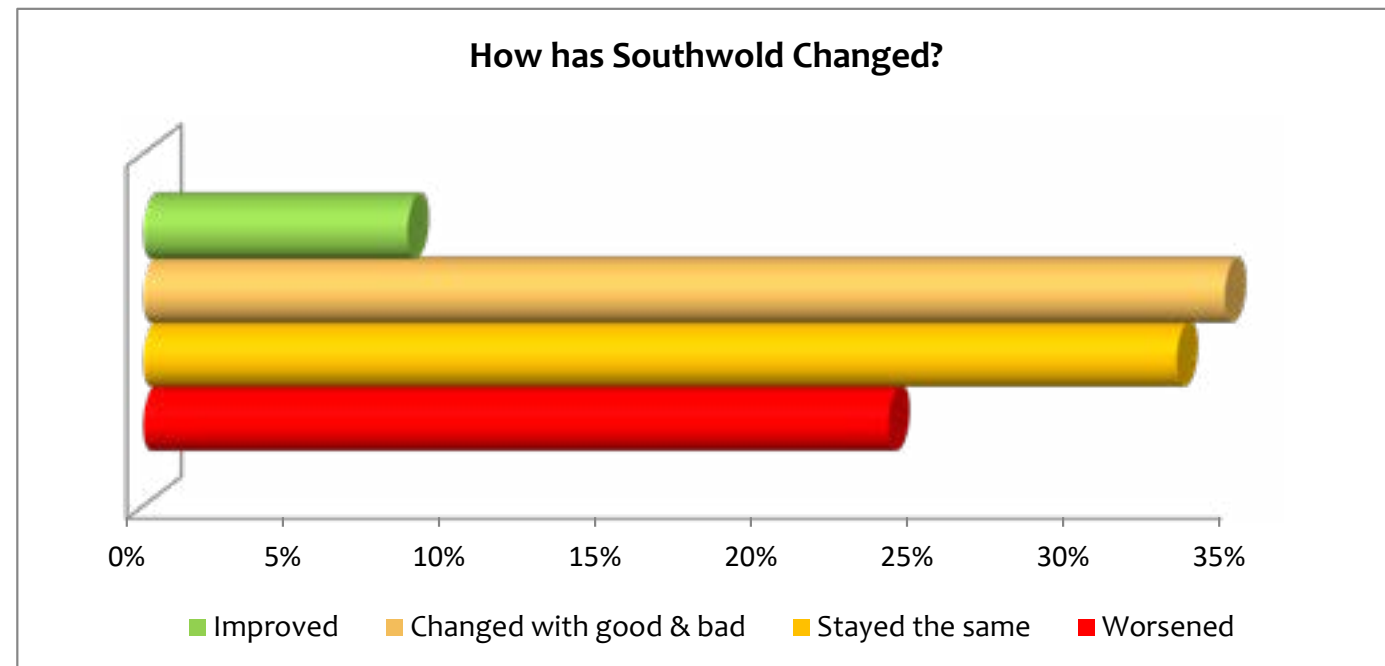
Customers were more positive than businesses about Southwold town centre and valued the quality of the environment, its shops and services. Ease of walking around, cleanliness, convenience (all 93%), physical appearance (91%), safety (90%) and customer service (92%) were particularly highly rated.

When asked if they would recommend a visit to Southwold town centre, a very high proportion of customers (99%) said ‘yes’ compared to small towns nationally.

Despite such seeming satisfaction, when asked how they thought Southwold is changing, there was a strong sense that it was not necessarily for the better!

24% of customers thought the town centre had worsened in recent years; 35% considered it had changed in good and bad ways.

Only 9% thought Southwold had improved.



Sustaining success

Southwold is a very attractive town with many successful businesses. This study does not question this or its status as a ‘jewel in the crown’ of the Suffolk coast. It does though highlight real concerns shared by businesses and customers about how Southwold’s success might be better sustained in future by addressing two issues.

Premises costs

Existing concerns about rising retail property costs are reinforced through recognition as a top issue in both business and customer surveys. The relatively high number of multiples shown in the business audit and low business confidence amongst independents, suggests justified concern about the continued impact on the town’s retail distinctiveness.

Peak parking

Concerns that parking may limit the use of the town centre at peak times are backed by the fact that it is perceived as the most negative current aspect of the town centre by both customers and businesses. Customer responses also called for parking availability to be the top, future priority for improving their experience of the town centre.





Business mix

There is a need to counter the impact of rising retail property costs and other pressures on business confidence to maintain the High Street's distinctiveness, diversify the business mix and create new attractions that complement the existing identity of Southwold for residents and visitors alike.



Parking provision

It is important to ensure that town centre parking provision best serves customers in terms of quantity, quality and cost. This will involve understanding the different needs of workers, residents, 'pop-and-shop' users and visitors to ensure their expectations are met at peak times.



Focused marketing

The strongly positive perceptions of the 'brand' Southwold linked to the culture, heritage and quality of its environment need to be used in promoting its distinctiveness through new activities and innovative marketing that extends the visitor season and increases the amount of spend locally.

Turning the tide

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 in this study, the Team aims to access additional funds to help improve the town centre and wider community.



Putting the partnership in place

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.

Such partnership working isn't effective unless effort is put in to get it right. That way, the District and Town Councils, Chamber of Trade, community groups and other agencies can all play to their strengths and passions to collectively improve the town centre. A 'Forward Framework' formalises this thinking.

At the centre of wider changes

Work to improve Southwold's town centre economy will be part of wider changes to improve well-being, assets and enterprise across the community. It is vital to maintain this spirit by involving locally-based businesses, community groups and public services in crafting solutions. Communicating and coordinating progress will be key.

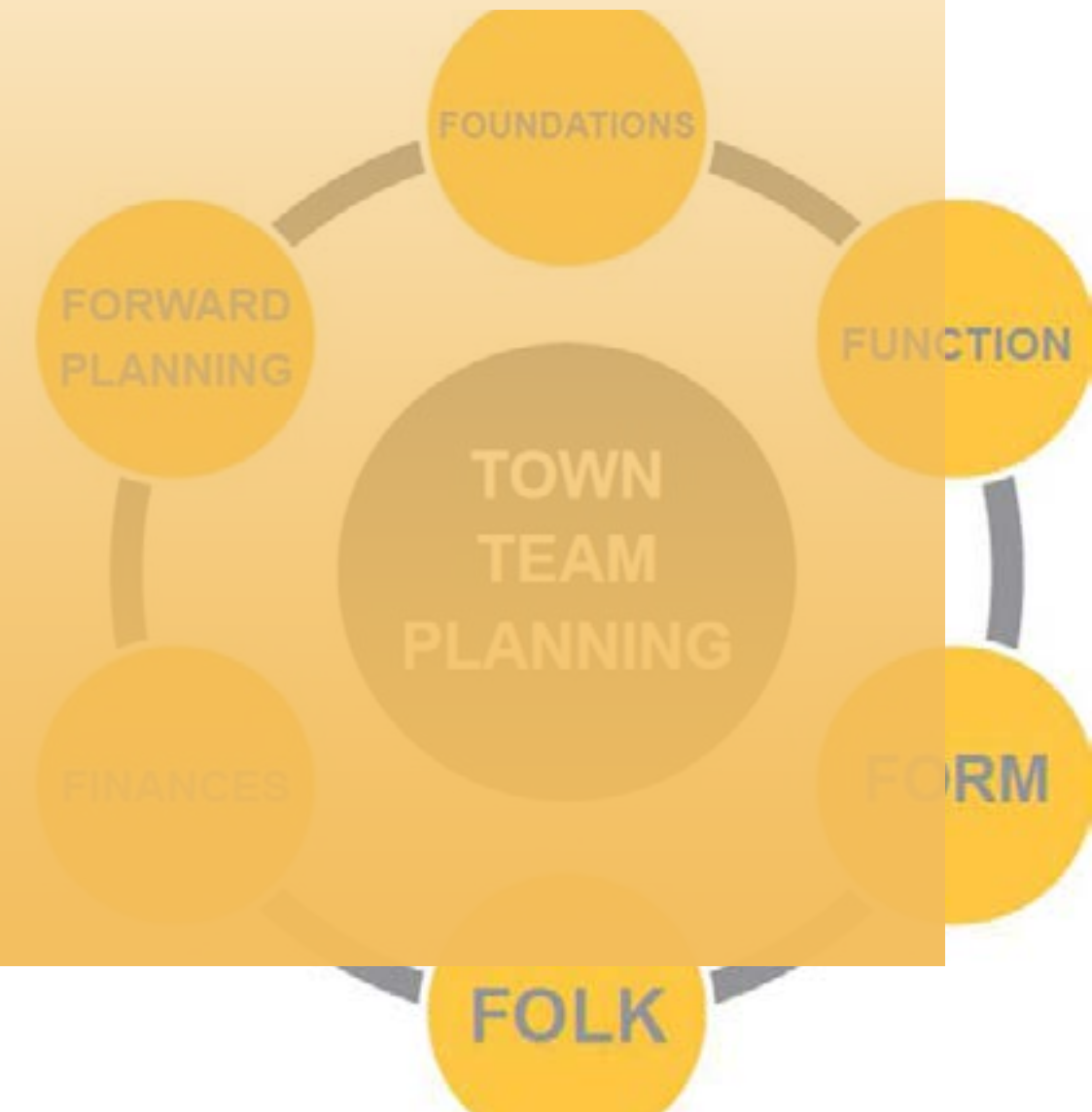


Communicating

Effective communication between partners, projects and ordinary people will be essential in driving forward changes successfully, creating pride of place and strengthening the 'brand'.

Coordinating

With a lot of activity led by different partners, it is vital to get everyone 'rowing in the same direction'. The Coastal Team can help achieve this through action planning and regular reviews.



A Forward Framework

Tackling town centre issues can be achieved in different ways. In Southwold the partnership working forged through the Coastal Community Team and the extra resources it aims to attract, present powerful possibilities. A 'Forward Framework' helps as a way of defining the 'how' and the 'what' of future activity.

Getting organised

Successful delivery of a town centre strategy depends on 'how' this is organised by understanding the

foundations that bring stakeholders together; the appropriate organisational form; finances; the commitment, communication and coordination of partners and the wider community.

Coordinating delivery

Delivery of a successful town centre strategy involves the coordination of a range of functions including 'place-shaping'; planning and property; business support; community and culture; marketing and events. A Forward Framework help deliver this.



Next Steps

Evidence-led

1

A Southwold town centre strategy needs to continue to follow an evidence-led approach through gathering data, monitoring impacts, understanding business performance and consulting customers.

Engaging partners

2

The Coastal Community Team can play an important leadership role by engaging with partners, agreeing priorities, coordinating activity, securing new resources and communicating progress.

Effective actions

3

Delivering successful town centre change involves developing solutions to address identified needs, clarifying roles, coordinating activity and monitoring impacts through routine surveys.

Delivering joined-up solutions

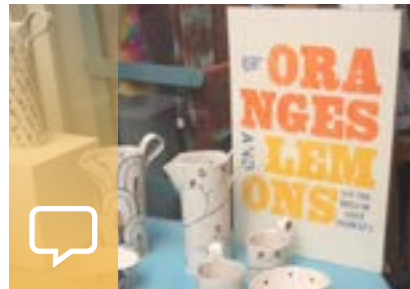
Creating a 'can-do' attitude with local 'champions'

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. Here are some essential building blocks of a successful strategy with long-term targets for delivering joined-up solutions.

It can be done!

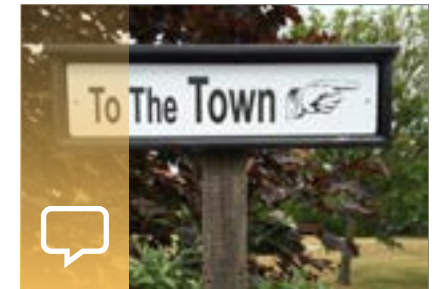
Business diversification

Targets: Maintain or increase proportion of independent traders; improve business confidence recorded in follow-up surveys; ensure the distinctiveness of retail offer valued by visitors and residents.



Parking provision

Targets: Achieve parking availability of 15% at peak times; improved business, local customer and visitor perceptions about parking provision recorded in follow-up business & customer surveys.



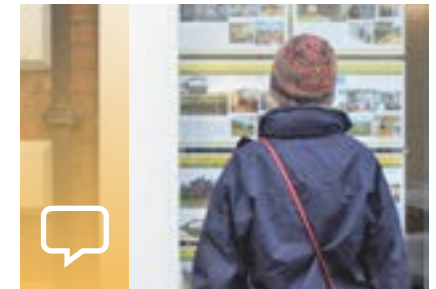
Marketing & events

Targets: Improved business performance in business surveys; continued positive perceptions of Southwold 'brand'; and increased footfall during events, out-of-season and monitored as repeat visits.



Housing & demographics

Target: Opportunities to influence new house building and the changing demographics will be pursued through liaison with the Neighbourhood Planning Group and Waveney District Council.



Attracting funds

Adding value by attracting, allocating and accounting for new funds will be all the more successful where proposals can demonstrate evidence of need, link to wider proposals for the town centre and demonstrate success through measurable impacts. Here are two examples of what is being achieved through such an approach in Southwold.



Community assets

Southwold's community assets are being extended by a proposed Business and Enterprise Hub in Station Road and the transformation of the former hospital into an energy efficient community and business space.

Coastal Fund bid

Following successful designation in 2017, a bid is being submitted to Coastal Communities Fund for an innovative programme to boost future economic prosperity for the town centre and wider community.



Prepared for the Southwold Coastal Community Team

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