



Revitalising Halesworth Town Centre; *a Forward Framework*

Research Partners

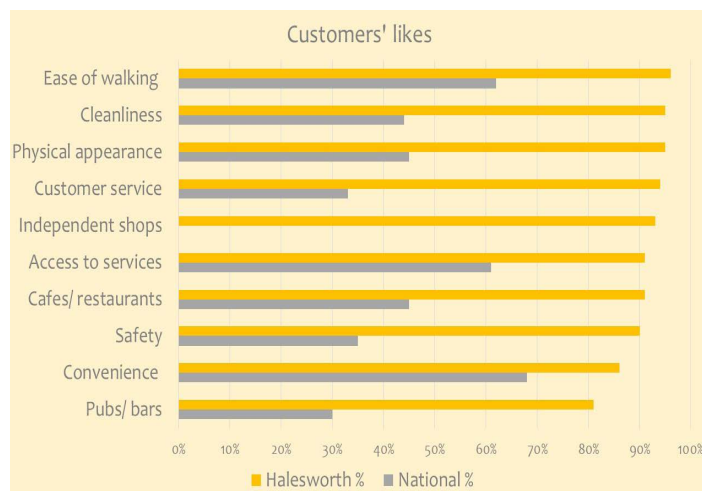
The People & Places Partnership has been commissioned by East Suffolk Council to help develop a 'Forward Framework' for Halesworth town centre together with Halesworth Town Council, Halesworth Town Centre Group, Halesworth Business Connections, Halesworth Tourism Group & Halesworth Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group.



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



Positive local perceptions



When we asked 350 customers about the positive aspects of Halesworth town centre, ease of walking (96%), cleanliness (95%), physical appearance (95%), customer service (94%), independent shops (93%) & cafes/ restaurants (91%), were highly prized compared to towns nationally.



When we surveyed every town centre business, the responses indicated that physical appearance (86%), local customers (86%), tourist customers (81%), cafes, pubs, restaurants (78%), the retail mix (73%) & the town's prosperity (70%), were all considered positives.

The big picture

To get a 'big picture' & understand the wider context of Halesworth town centre, we use a tried & tested process of bringing together existing local research, surveying local stakeholders & collecting a suite of key performance indicators. Our approach has been adopted by the Local Government Association as national good practice for revitalising town centres. In understanding Halesworth, we turned first to analysing existing strategies, population data & indicative performance measures.

Proactive planning

The Waveney Local Plan outlines how an extra 480 new homes might help deliver enhanced health & sports facilities to enhance Halesworth town centre's role. The Halesworth Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group is additionally consulting on & creating a strong local vision & themes.

Changing population

Population data from the Suffolk Observatory shows that although Halesworth has an elderly profile, 35% of residents are under 40 & will become increasingly important in how they use the town. Detailed data on population segments is available to help businesses understand changing needs.

Understanding the evidence

It is vital to develop a response to revitalising Halesworth town centre that is based on an understanding of the evidence of changing performance & opportunity. If this is understood, the various partners can come together to address a common agenda & develop coordinated solutions. By staying focused on the evidence, the partners can monitor progress & clearly demonstrate the impacts of their combined efforts.





Balancing the business mix

It is important to maintain a balance of everyday retail, luxury items, specialist food & hospitality whilst addressing Halesworth's decline in banking services.



Spreading footfall across town

Data indicates that whilst customers are very positive about ease of walking around, footfall is very uneven across the town centre & throughout the week.



Building 'brand Halesworth'

Whilst 90% of users recommend visiting Halesworth & businesses value local & tourist customers, feelings are mixed about the changing experience.



Responding to digital demand

Digital development needs to respond to business & customer priorities for improved infrastructure & serve their more modest demands for new services.



BUSINESS PERFORMANCE

A significant proportion of businesses reported a negative performance over the last year: 31% said that profitability had decreased compared to 34% nationally.

BUSINESS CONFIDENCE

Halesworth businesses are comparably optimistic about future turnover relative to similar towns nationally with nearly 8 out of 10 (79%) projecting stable or increasing turnover in the year ahead.

BUSINESS PRIORITIES

When businesses in Halesworth were asked what two things they thought would improve the town centre, the highest priority was improving parking followed by better banking services & diversifying the retail mix.

Time to boost Halesworth's welcome

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sked if they would recommend a visit to Halesworth town centre, a high proportion of customers (90%) said 'yes'.

Questioned about how their experience of Halesworth town centre had changed recently, 21% of online respondents said it had improved compared to 22% who said it had worsened & 36% who said it had changed for good & bad reasons.

Halesworth summed-up in a word

When asked to give a single word that summed-up Halesworth town centre, customers' responses are mostly positive and paint a picture of an attractive place to visit and an appealing facet of everyday life. There are some prominent words that are more negative, such as outdated and dying.

Customers' priorities for change

Asked what two things would improve the town centre, the main responses from customers related to diversifying the retail mix, the need for access to banks or 24hour cash machines & specific traffic & transport issues.

Loyal without lingering

Whilst 89% of customers come in to town at least once a week, nearly two-thirds of them linger less than an hour.



Broadening the appeal

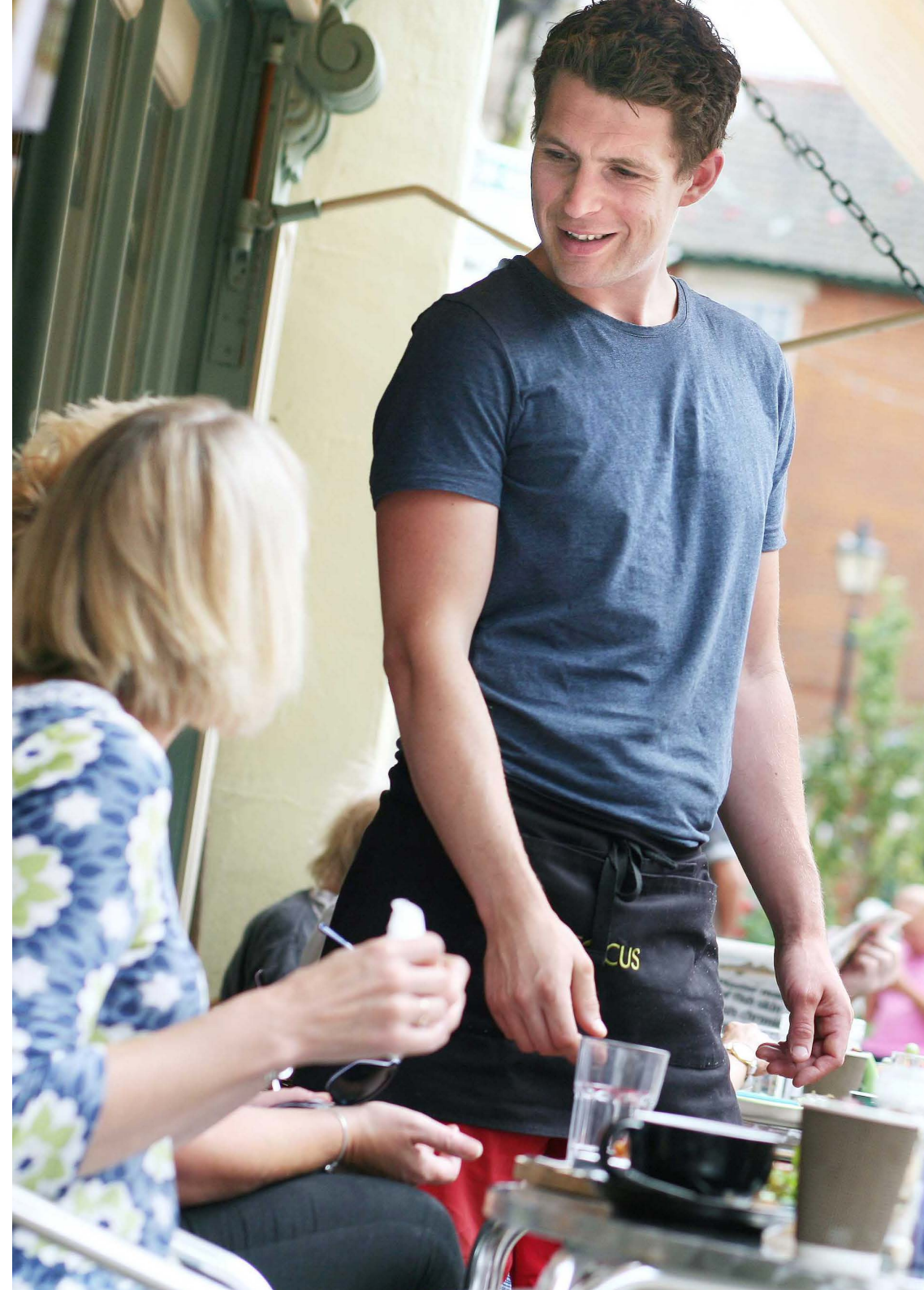
There is a strong sense that Halesworth has many of the right qualities in terms of business mix, attractiveness & accessibility that its appeal can be broadened in ways that will help sustain & add to its offer.

Delivering quick wins

There are opportunities to deliver ‘quick wins’ that make the most of Halesworth’s identified strengths such as its seemingly available parking, ease of walking around, attractive appearance, mix of independent businesses plus well-regarded customer service & hospitality. This can begin by better understanding & serving the needs of younger generations, outlying residents & visitor markets.

Sustaining success

Alongside promoting Halesworth’s obvious appeal, it will be important to understand & address locally-identified concerns to sustain the town’s success. Over a third of on-line respondents say the town is changing for good & bad reasons; access to banking services is rated negatively by 88% of customers; improving the retail mix is customers’ highest future priority; businesses want to see parking improved.





Running events

Festivals, specialist markets, & events can animate the town, attract new users & change perceptions. It's important to help showcase businesses & attractions whilst tracking movements & impacts such as repeat visits. Halesworth can build on its track record of holding successful events to attract new customers & encourage repeat visits.



Enhancing streets

It is vital to maintain an attractive & accessible town centre. This can involve carefully planning new developments, tackling any traffic, increasing the appeal of different areas & conserving the centre's built heritage. Existing users rate Halesworth's appearance highly & this can be used to attract & guide new visitors around town.



Taking town online

New customers will be attracted by the place & its products. Getting businesses working together to promote the town & each online can be a first step in digital development. From the Halesworth business survey we know that 64% see improved promotion through social media updates as a priority.



Three future themes

Work to revitalise Halesworth town centre could be organised as three distinct yet interlinked themes:

1. Marketing, events & digital involving building-on existing town centre activities & promoting the town to attract new audiences.
2. Planning, travel & streetscape focusing on opportunities from long-term growth and quickly improving how customers arrive to & move around the town centre.



Taking the partnership forward

It is important to have a clearly-focused partnership in place to drive things forward. This could focus on key planning, business & events themes with a coordinating 'hub' communicating & engaging with the wider community.

Partnership working is most effective when effort is put in to get it right. In this way the different business groups, District, County and Town Councils & key community groups can all play to their strengths & passions to collectively improve the town centre. A 'Forward Framework' formalises this thinking with a business plan defining how partners will work together & an action plan of agreed projects.

Building on existing activity

Work to improve Halesworth town centre can build on existing success in bringing community groups, businesses and councils together to animate & improve the town. A renewed focus on revitalising the town centre sits within a wider community focus balancing diverse activity from running annual events to shaping long-term physical change.



Running crowd pleasers

There is the chance to learn from the organisers of the weekly market, Halesworth Antiques Street Market & Scarecrow Week with years of experience running crowd-pleasing events.

Shaping sustainability

Halesworth's Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group is shaping the sustainability of new housing in ways that strengthen the town centre's role as an accessible community 'hub'.



Creating a collective Forward Framework

Tackling town centre issues can be organised in different ways. It is important to understand the roles of different partners over the next 10 years.

Getting organised

A 'Forward Framework' helps everyone 'row in the same direction' by defining the 'how' & the 'what' of future activity. Successful delivery of a town centre framework depends on 'how' this is organised by understanding the foundations that bring stakeholders together; the

appropriate organisational form; finances; the commitment, communication & coordination of partners & the wider community. This enables partners to 'play to their strengths'.

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. This is achieved by locally-led action & wider strategic influence.



Next Steps

Evidence-led

1

A Halesworth town centre framework needs to continue to be evidence-led through gathering data, monitoring impacts, understanding business performance & consulting customers.

Engaging partners

2

A coordinating partnership can play an important enabling role in engaging partners, agreeing priorities, coordinating activity, involving stakeholders, securing new resources & communicating progress.

Effective actions

3

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

Delivering joined-up solutions

Creating a 'can-do' attitude with measurable change

Delivering successful town centre change is a long-term venture involving vision, ambition, a broad approach and coordinated delivery amongst local partners. Here are some suggested building blocks of successful action planning focused on measurable targets for tracking change. It is vital for local partners to keep focused on such targets.

It can be done!

Diversifying business

Targets: Maintain or enhance the retail mix; improve business confidence recorded in follow-up surveys; ensure the distinctiveness of the retail offer is better valued by customers & priority reduced.



Building the brand

Targets: Improved business performance & confidence expressed in future surveys; increasingly positive perceptions of the Halesworth 'brand' by locals & visitors that boosts recorded satisfaction.



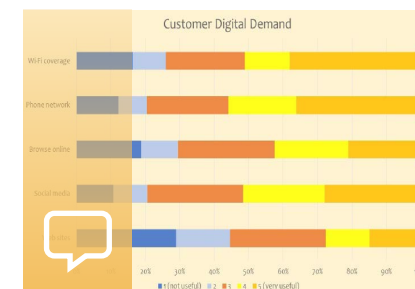
Boosting access & foot-flow

Target: Opportunity to boost measurable repeat visits, dwell times & foot-flow across the town centre plus reduce the demands from businesses & customers for improving parking & traffic.



Delivering digital demand

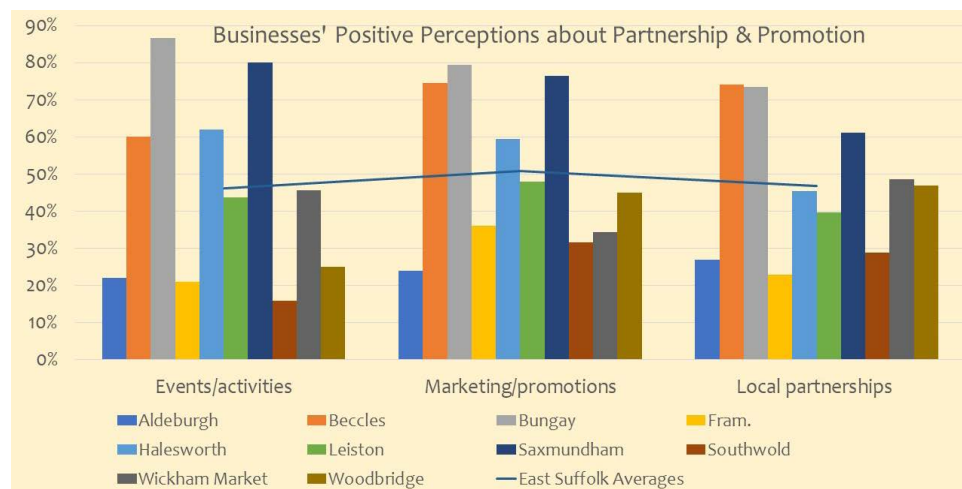
Target: Business & customer priorities for improved infrastructure met with development of digital services providing measures of take-up, impact & town centre foot-flow.



East Suffolk comparisons

One of added benefits of surveying East Suffolk towns simultaneously, is the chance it offers for neighbouring towns to compare & learn from each other.

The detailed town reports that accompany these summaries include an overview of East Suffolk-wide comparisons. As well as giving comparable context, this provides a first step towards towns working together to tackle common issues, share tips on how they operate, see how they might diversify or make the most of distinctive differences that might be jointly marketed.



Working together

Groups can get together from across East Suffolk to share what works, for example, in the way partnerships are organised, their successes in promoting their towns & the lessons learnt from organising successful events.

Identifying appeal

Combining comparable data & local knowledge, offers opportunities to understand the complementary appeal of neighbouring towns. Halesworth, for example, emerges as a potential 'foodie favourite'.



Prepared for East Suffolk Council

by Chris Wade, Director, aka @man_about_towns

The People & Places Partnership Ltd.

The Future Business Centre, Kings Hedges Road, Cambridge, CB4 2HY

chris.wade@people-places.net

www.people-places.net

