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Revitalising
Woodbridge
town centre;
*a forward
framework*



Planning Partners

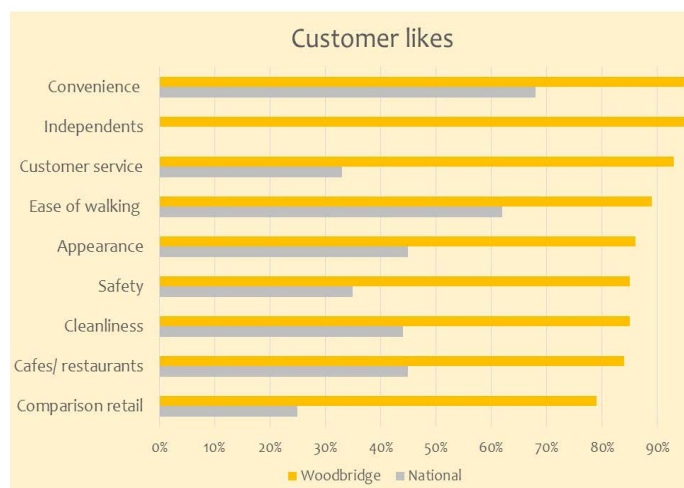
The People & Places Partnership has been commissioned by East Suffolk Council to help develop a 'Forward Framework' for Woodbridge town centre in association with Woodbridge Town Council and Choose Woodbridge.



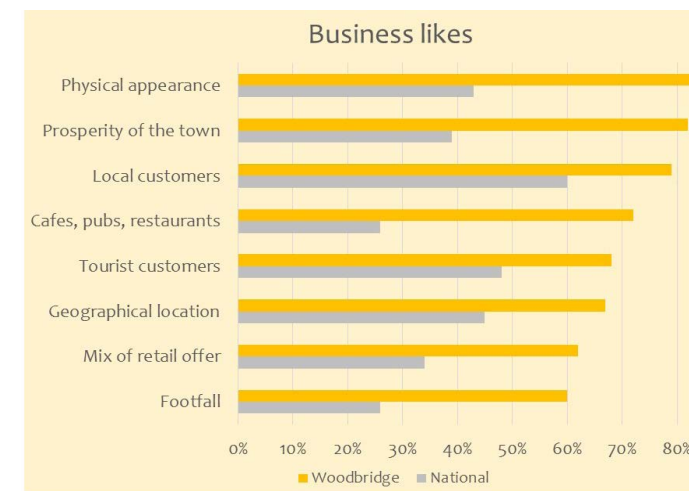
Understanding a town centre is about people & place.
 About the customers & the businesses based there.
 About the built fabric & sense of community created.



Positive local perceptions



When we asked 163 customers about the positive aspects of Woodbridge town centre, convenience (95%), independent shops (95%), customer service (93%), ease of walking (89%), appearance (86%), cleanliness (85%), safety (85%), cafes/restaurants (84%) & comparison retail (79%) were all valued positively compared to towns nationally.



When we surveyed every town centre business, the responses indicated that appearance (85%), prosperity (82%), local customers (79%), café, pubs and restaurants (72%), tourist customers (68%), location (67%), mix of retail offer (62%) & footfall (60%) were all highly valued compared to towns nationally.

The big picture

To get a 'big picture' & understand the wider context of Woodbridge town centre, we used 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 Woodbridge, we turned first to analysing existing strategies, population data & indicative performance measures.

Proactive planning

The Local Plan recognises that maintaining Woodbridge's vitality will involve improving links between the different parts of town; namely the riverside, Thoroughfare and Market Hill. It also acknowledges that car parking & traffic management should be enhanced.

Changing population

Suffolk Observatory data shows that Woodbridge has an elderly profile with 39% over 60 years-old & only 31% under 40 years-old. Whilst future population growth will be limited, there is potential to target 53% of residents with above average wealth & build on the town's recognised visitor appeal.

Understanding the evidence

It is vital to develop a response to revitalising Woodbridge 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 success.





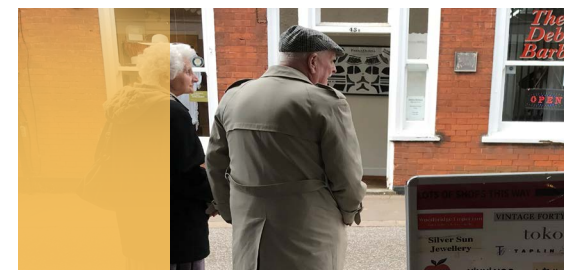
Improving traffic & parking

Data for car parking usage indicates that it is at critical levels, whilst both businesses & customers overwhelmingly rate improving parking as their highest priority.



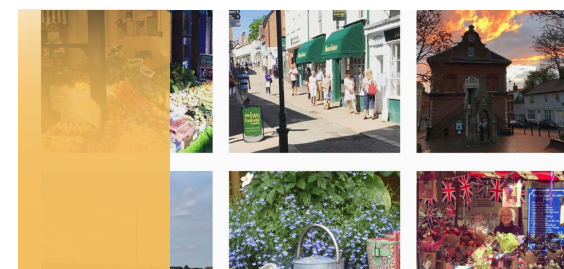
Building the town's brand

Whilst customers' images of Woodbridge are predominantly positive & 98% would recommend visiting the town centre, 14% think their experience is worsening.



Enhancing access & foot-flow

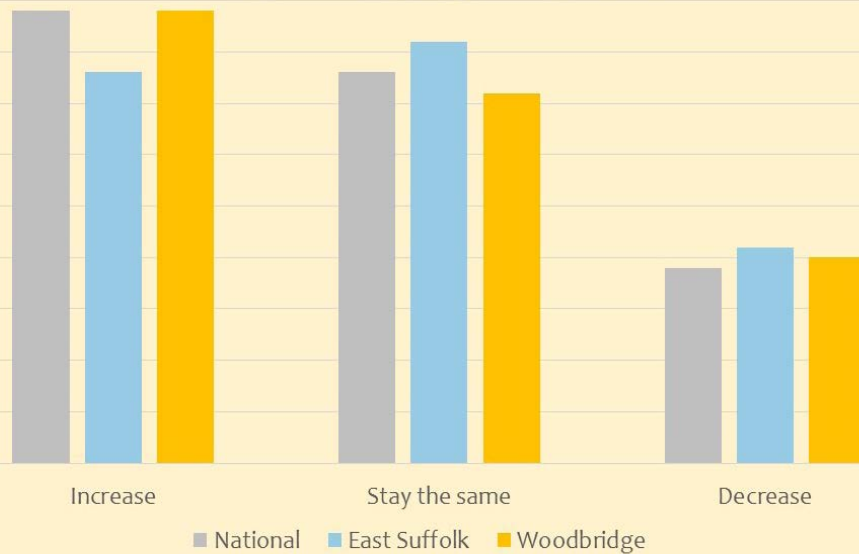
Whilst ease of walking around town (89%) is perceived positively & central footfall is high, customer numbers drop by 50% in adjacent areas.



Taking Woodbridge online

There is a high customer demand for new digital services further promoting the town's businesses, including business web sites (60%) and social media (68%).

Projected change in turnover



BUSINESS PERFORMANCE

In terms of recent business performance in Woodbridge town centre, it is encouraging that 73% said their turnover had stayed the same or increased in the last year compared to 69% nationally.

BUSINESS CONFIDENCE

Looking to the future, it is similarly encouraging that 80% of businesses were confident that turnover would increase or stay the same. It is though, a concern that 20% expect a continued decline.

BUSINESS PRIORITIES

When businesses in Woodbridge were asked what two things would improve the town centre, the top priority for 52% of respondents related to parking, followed by enhancing the retail mix (12%), traffic (10%) & events (9%).

Making the most of Woodbridge's identity

A

sked if they would recommend a visit to Woodbridge town centre, a very high proportion of existing customers (98%) said 'yes' compared to 67% of small towns nationally & 85% across East Suffolk towns.

Woodbridge summed-up in a word

When asked to give a single word that summed-up Woodbridge town centre, all of the most prominent words used were positive words & paint a picture of an attractive place to visit that is an appealing facet of everyday life.

Customers value local hospitality

Woodbridge was the most positively perceived East Suffolk town for the quality of its cafes/restaurants, pubs/bars, leisure facilities & cultural activities.

Customers value local hospitality

When asked how their experience of the town centre had changed in recent years, 25% of on-street respondents said it had improved, whilst over half (55%) said it had stayed the same & 14% said it had worsened.

Customers' priorities for change

Asked what two things would improve the town centre, the main response from customers related to parking, including availability. This was followed by the need for improved traffic management & calls for more diverse shops including independents.



Boosting the social economy

Revitalising Woodbridge's town centre economy is likely to be most readily achieved by boosting awareness & increasing activity across its already positively perceived social economy with an attractive appearance, well-regarded hospitality businesses & growing cultural offer.

Promotional progress

Continued promotional progress can be achieved by expanding the approach championed by Choose Woodbridge to highlight the town's existing offer to encourage foot-flow across the centre & increase dwell times. Tailored events & targeted digital marketing can help attract different local & visitor customers supported by social media monitoring & sophisticated foot-flow measurement.

Easing travel & access

The recent research emphasised recognition in the Local Plan of the need to improve the perceptions & practicalities of improving travel in to town & access across it. The County & District Councils can combine their highways & parking expertise with the Town Council's local knowledge to help understand & overcome perceived & practical barriers preventing people accessing the town at peak times.





Moving around town

We know that footfall is high in the busy parts of Woodbridge but that it dips markedly across the town centre. Early progress can be made by encouraging local & tourism customers to move around the centre by promoting the key links identified in the Local Plan, varied attractions & the diversity of the businesses in the town's different areas.



Taking town online

New customers are attracted by a place & its products. Continued support to assist businesses in collaborating to promote the town & each other online is an important part of digital development. From the surveys we know that 50% of businesses & 60% of customers see improved promotion through social media updates as an early priority.



COVID-19 recovery

The short-term impacts and the long-term behavioural changes caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus need to be understood & factored in to future work. The response to outbreak has boosted community cohesion and increased online activity though services & businesses have suffered.

Two broad themes

Work to revitalise Woodbridge town centre could be organised as two distinct themes linked by effective coordination.

1. Improving travel, parking and access to boost foot-flow.
2. Strengthening town centre identity, marketing and digital development to boost appeal.

Work to address these two themes needs to be connected by effective coordination & clear communications with the wider community.



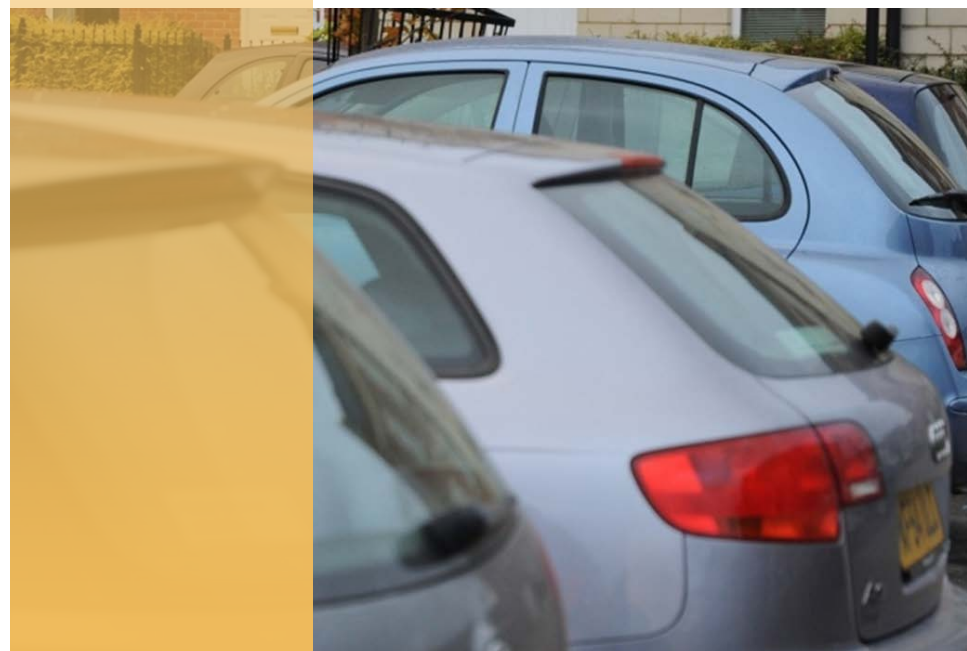
Taking the partnership forward

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

Partnership working is effective when effort is put in to get it right. In this way, District, County & Town Councils, Choose Woodbridge & key community groups & businesses, can all play to their strengths to 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.

Participating in district-wide work

Work to improve Woodbridge town centre will benefit from being part of the wider East Suffolk Towns Initiative (ESTI). As well as providing initial support for planned projects, it could fund cost-saving collaboration with neighbouring towns. It will also enable links to the parallel district-wide parking review and Smart Towns project.



Smart Towns project

After being piloted in Framlingham, the East Suffolk Smart Towns project is being rolled-out to other towns across the district. It offers investment in digital infrastructure & skills.

Town parking review

Roll-out of the district-wide Parking Review will benefit town centre customers & businesses through simplified tariffs, new payment technology & smart monitoring of usage.



Creating a collective Forward Framework

Tackling town centre issues can be organised in different ways. It is important to plan now to build on Woodbridge's track record in partnership working in ways that will serve the town for a decade ahead.

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; and forward planning that defines the commitment, communication & coordination of partners with 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.



Next Steps

Evidence-led

1

A Woodbridge town centre forward 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 & 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 outcomes.

It can
be done!

Improved journey in to town

Targets: Plan with local authorities for improved traffic management & parking provision plus opportunities for increased active travel to town with resultant improved accessibility, stakeholder perceptions & demand for improvement.



Increased foot-flow around town

Target: Measurable increases in foot-flow around town & dwell times amongst local residents & visitors. Such improvements should be mirrored by improved business confidence across Woodbridge town centre.



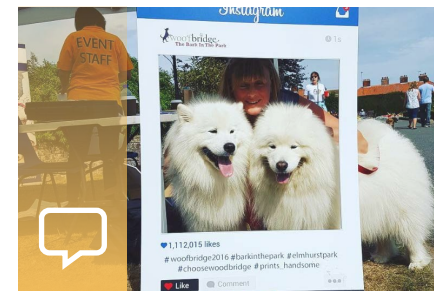
Enhanced identity & experience

Targets: Improved customer perceptions of changing town centre experience reflected in continued positive perceptions about the town centre and increased business confidence.



Positive engagement & impact

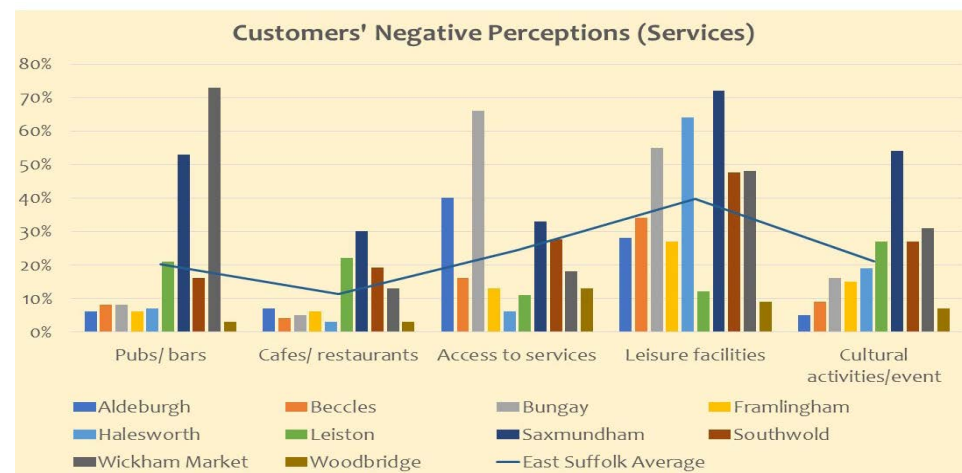
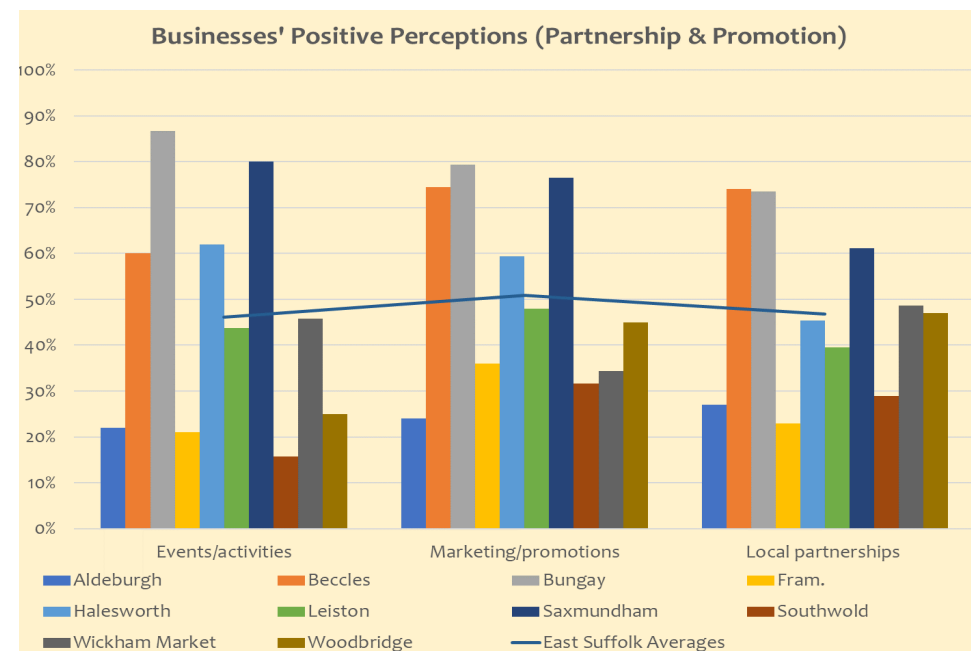
Target: Evidence of increased digital marketing by businesses & community groups; greater customer engagement; improved perceptions of retail & services mix; boosted business confidence.



East Suffolk comparisons

One of the added benefits of surveying East Suffolk towns simultaneously, is the chance 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.



Valuing local services

Groups can get together from across East Suffolk to share what works. Woodbridge, for example, can share how positive perceptions about its hospitality & cultural activities boosts its evening, weekend & visitor economy.

Enhancing appeal

Partnerships facilitating joint working including organising events and town-wide marketing can share their experiences & learn about successes in engaging businesses & reaching new local & visitor markets.



Prepared for East Suffolk Council

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