



Halesworth – a historic market town in Suffolk



Halesworth is a small market town that straddles a tributary of the River Blyth nine miles inland from the Suffolk Heritage Coast, 20 miles southwest of Lowestoft and midway between Norwich and Ipswich. Its population is just over 5 000, but its services are also used by, and depend upon, the surrounding villages, giving a total catchment of more than 11 000. This overview sets out a vision (**emboldened below**) through a series of sections to be met through a set of strategic aims and aspirations (*italicized below*) in order to maintain Halesworth's position as a home and/or working place of choice for its current and future inhabitants.

Halesworth will prosper as a historic market town, but will become increasingly self-sufficient, meeting the needs of the town and surrounding communities while retaining its distinctive character in providing excellent quality of life for all its inhabitants.

- a) *Key facilities to be retained, enhanced or provided where deficient.*
- b) *Sports, recreational, wellbeing and educational facilities to be maintained and enhanced.*
- c) *Adequate, all-embracing health and care facilities to be maintained and built upon.*
- d) *Housing supply to be adequate to ensure that young people can afford to stay in the area.*
- e) *A range of job opportunities to be available locally.*
- f) *Public transport, commercial and voluntary, to be effective and efficient, providing a viable alternative to car usage; walking and cycling opportunities to be enhanced.*
- g) *Efforts to be made to improve energy efficiency and other initiatives implemented to combat climate change.*
- h) *The historic, wildlife and landscape character of the area to be protected and enhanced.*

The drivers for future town priorities

Halesworth currently has a social imbalance, with a greater proportion of elderly residents and fewer young ones than the national, Suffolk and surrounding market town averages. The trend will likely continue while there is a lack of affordable housing, no secondary education, decreasing adult skills training and insufficient sports and recreational facilities.

Transport concerns include the need to maintain adequate bus (commercial and voluntary) and train services, limited car parking space, and the perceived inadequacy of cycling facilities. Moreover, the long distance from Halesworth to a district general hospital means that early replacement of the Patrick Stead Community Hospital is imperative.

The importance of having a thriving Town Centre is paramount to townsfolk, and Halesworth is committed to ensuring that it remains dynamic, with a broad spread of viable businesses serving the community in addition to the medium-sized supermarket on the edge of town. Halesworth also currently lacks a modern community centre with adequate parking, and this lack needs to be addressed through other initiatives. The town is, however, active in supporting sustainability issues such as adapting to climate change, the use of finite energy resources, increased sustainable energy resource use and biodiversity conservation, and is committed to ensuring that all have access to reliable, superfast broadband.

Halesworth is also committed to taking advantage of the challenges and opportunities provided by continued central government pressure to localise along with Suffolk County Council's policy of "divesting" services. Further, its historic character has led to the town's adoption of a Conservation Area Management Plan. It also has a thriving arts community, specifically but not only through its own Arts Centre at The Cut.

Current challenges include funding and personnel caps within the police force, and although Halesworth is a safe community in general, occasional incidents of burglary, domestic violence and graffiti mean that adequate policing needs to be maintained as a priority for the town in future.

Finally, the interconnectedness of town activities is key, so integration will be maintained as a key driver going forward, and regular updating of local plans will be a given.

Affordable housing

Halesworth, like many towns, needs more affordable housing, defined as dwellings deemed to be within the financial means of those in lower income ranges, here covering homes restricted to local people in perpetuity that cannot be sold or rented on the open market.

Like other towns, Halesworth has a number of households registered as "in need", but few affordable homes have been constructed here in the past decade, certainly many fewer than the government target of some 30% of new homes. The town therefore has set itself a challenging target of improving the situation, at a time when the government has abolished regional housing targets, introduced incentives for local authorities to build more houses and is trying to grant local communities more power to gain planning permission for affordable housing. Incentives for landowners to give up land for affordable housing have been offered, and more flexibility in housing targets and planning may be given in future. A Local Housing Needs Survey is expected to generate realistic plans for future new build in the town, on new land as well as the brownfield sites traditionally used for such development. *Affordable housing in Cherry Close*



Education

The closure of Halesworth Middle School in 2012 was the result of a Schools Reorganisation Review which saw the end of Suffolk's three-tier school system. All children 11 years and older from Halesworth and surrounding areas are now in high schools in other towns (mainly Bungay and Beccles) and all younger schoolchildren attend one of the primary schools in the area. Two of the latter are in Halesworth/Holton, and these two may well have to grow to accommodate more children. The area also has a range of excellent pre-schools, and the idea of a future free school has been mooted.

From September 2007, Halesworth had a dedicated facility (a Skills Centre) on the Middle School site designed to deliver programmes targeted primarily at children aged 14–19. It offered vocational training in such subjects as engineering, hairdressing, motor vehicle, catering and construction, drawing students from many high schools in the region, but it has recently been rebranded as a charitable subsidiary company to Bungay High School with its



own board of directors, and some courses have recently been withdrawn in lieu of courses there. In 2016 news circulated that it was to close permanently in 2017, but offering excellence in vocational training to supplement the education offered at further education colleges in Lowestoft, Ipswich and Norwich, it is considered a key part of the educational establishment in the region. Clarity on its future and on the future of such vocational skills training in Halesworth is therefore crucial.

Edgar Sewter Primary School

The old Middle School site (with the school buildings having been demolished) is now owned on behalf of Halesworth residents by Halesworth Campus Ltd, and is targeted for use soon to enhance the links between education and community activity locally (i.e. through sport, adult education, performing arts and general educational well-being). It is hoped that certain secondary educational courses will be established on the site to attract some students from regional high schools, much as the Skills Centre does currently. Some of these, e.g. in health or social care and the performing arts, could be mainstream courses with Halesworth as their main or principal location.

Sport

There are currently limited sports facilities in Halesworth, although a few sports thrive. The loss since the early 2000s of the swimming pool and squash courts and the long-standing shortage of youth football pitches all contribute towards disenchantment among some townsfolk.

Halesworth does have an excellent 18-hole golf course, and football (adult and youth), tennis, lawn bowls and Kuk Sool Won (a traditional Korean martial art) are reasonably well catered for, with updated facilities for all other than golf planned for on the Campus site. Some badminton is played in the village halls of surrounding villages, but cricket and rugby practitioners (players and followers) and those merely seeking an extensive, well fitted out fitness gym currently have to travel to satisfy their needs.



Halesworth Golf Club

Halesworth Campus Ltd (using the old Middle School site) and the Halesworth Playing Fields Association (which represents the current and recent sports clubs in town) hope within the very near future, however, to have attracted a commercial developer and operator to rectify the current deficiencies in sports provision in town, bringing Halesworth sportspeople (as well as those merely seeking some form of exercise) the facilities they urgently need.

Youth

Facilities for the young of Halesworth and surrounding villages are currently inadequate, mainly in terms of the lack of certain sports facilities mentioned above and the absence of a “drop-in centre”. There are, however, some activities for young people mainly run by an enthusiastic corps of (trained) volunteers, with a senior and junior youth club hosted at the Apollo Centre, guiding and scouting opportunities for a range of ages, specific initiatives for young people in football, lawn bowls, tennis and Kuk Sool Won, and New Cut Arts offering a several opportunities in the arts. The Library also runs regular activities for young children, and Halesworth Young Farmers (which encompasses an area within a radius of 15 miles of

the town) cater for the needs of young rural folk aged 17–30.

There are some good play areas around town for young children plus a skateboard park for teenagers, and the town park now has a state-of-the-art set of play equipment, including for disabled children, funding for which was raised by a dedicated band of volunteers. However, with District and County Councils increasingly outsourcing their services in the face of dwindling budgets, it will almost certainly be the town and its volunteers that will have to keep the current facilities safe and bring new youth activity sites and facilities on stream.



Health and well-being

The task now and for the next few years will be to safeguard and develop Halesworth's health and community services, which are comprehensive and patient-centred, and based around the Cutlers Hill surgery and health practice. Rural isolation and poor transport to facilities across the region cause problems for people of all ages (it takes about an hour to reach any of the three District General Hospitals by car and the best part of a day by public transport to attend a hospital outpatient appointment or to visit a patient). Halesworth has therefore to continue to provide a wide range of services to its communities, with more than half of its 11 000+ patients registered with GPs at the local Cutlers Hill Surgery living in the surrounding villages.



Patrick Stead Community Hospital

A large proportion of registered patients at the Cutlers Hill surgery is elderly, with many requiring multiple needs and responsive local care. In Halesworth, the doctors, nurses and other health and care professionals work closely together, mainly from the same site at Cutlers Hill. Challenges associated with funding and effective rationalisation of services mean that the Campus development, which would be provided at the same time as a new state-of-the-art health facility (to replace the ageing facility at Patrick Stead Community Hospital, which is scheduled to close) provided by a professional health care organisation, assumes massive importance for the area. The latter development is planned for the ground immediately adjacent to the Cutlers Hill site on an area currently occupied by the clubs of the Halesworth Playing Fields Association. A Halesworth Health group, League of Friends of the hospital, Community Nursing Care Fund, *dementia* carers and others all play a role in ensuring that health services in Halesworth remain well catered for.

Minor injuries, phlebotomy and primary health care are all provided professionally, using local and visiting staff, and supplemented by the activities of voluntary groups in providing a host of palliative care, outpatient clinics and visiting outreach services out of the Patrick Stead Community Hospital. A Resource Centre (Rayner Green) abuts the actual hospital. The plan is that the planned new facility will build on rather than water down the current local situation when the hospital closes.

Halesworth is also well served in terms of dental practices, opticians and podiatry/chiropractic facilities, including NHS-funded services, and there are many providers of complementary medicine and alternative therapies, mainly through private practitioners. Social care is available for those that need it, with voluntary groups taking on an increasing proportion of the necessary activities as central government budgets come under pressure.

Transport

In any rural community, transport facilities are crucial, and Halesworth is reasonably well served by buses and trains.

In terms of *rail transport*, Halesworth is on the East Suffolk Line that runs from Lowestoft to Ipswich, where a connection is made to the routes into London, the whole through journey taking a little over two hours, the midlands and the North of England. In the other direction the train goes to Lowestoft (30 min), where there are connections on to Norwich, which is also well served by trains to and from farther afield, including Liverpool via Manchester. Trains on the East Suffolk line run at essentially hourly intervals for six days per week, less frequently on Sundays. The station itself is unmanned and some 400 m from the Town Centre, with limited car parking but with shelters, an electronic ticketing machine and timetables and cycle lockers; there are no public toilets or refreshment facilities.

Some *bus services* synchronise with the rail service and provide transport to Southwold, but different operators do provide a service of variable frequency to Aldeburgh, Harleston, Ipswich, Lowestoft and Norwich, including to some villages and towns en route. Halesworth Area Community Transport (HACT) is a voluntary organisation that runs a small-bus service around town on Mondays, Tuesday, Wednesdays and Fridays. Buses stop at prescribed places around town and on the Saxons Way central Halesworth bypass, and a bus hub just off the bypass is planned. HACT also provides small buses and drivers for hire.



For *car transport*, Halesworth is not well-served by car parks and has very little on-street parking facilities, especially free spaces. However, Waveney District Council operate pay-as-you-park facilities close to the mainly pedestrianised town centre (The Thoroughfare) and in half a dozen official car parks within walking distance of the town centre. Halesworth's supermarket also has free parking for its customers. Traffic flow in and around town is generally good.

Cyclists have about 5000 m of cycle path in four principal routes, all separated from roads, but >90% of the route is over footways shared with pedestrians. All routes feed into The Thoroughfare, which only allows cycling southbound. National Cycle Route 1 passes through the Town, although the routes from north and south are not currently deemed fully satisfactory. There are limited formal bicycle stands around town, no bike hire facility (although there is a bicycle sale and repair shop) and proposals are being actively debated to try to improve the cycling experience generally.

Halesworth Town Centre

Halesworth's main shopping area is centred on The Thoroughfare and continues south into the Market Place, with a few shops also on London Road and of course the supermarket at the edge of the town centre. There are also some shops on the site next to The Thoroughfare and adjacent to the main car park which is on the town's floodplain but earmarked for extensive redevelopment in the near future. The guiding principles for developing the Town Centre and Market Place are:



The Thoroughfare

- to keep The Thoroughfare and Market Place as the heart of the shopping area;
- that any development should reflect and enhance the role of Halesworth as a market town that meets the needs of residents, businesses and visitors through the provision of a range of appropriately scaled services;
- to contribute to an integrated transport system for Halesworth (walk, cycle, bus, train, car);

- to recognise and support the critical role of independent food production and retailing to the economy of Halesworth and surrounding areas in order to maximise sustainability;
- to minimise the town centre's carbon footprint;
- to be inclusive, recognising the needs of different ages and groups in the community;
- to protect and enhance the architecturally and historically important aspects of the town centre.

Enshrined in these principles is a belief that more clothing and furniture outlets are needed; that the role of local food production and consumption should be maintained; that office and residential accommodation, including some affordable flats, need to be adequate in the town centre at least at current levels; that flood alleviation remains high on the priority of future development; that adjacent public transport hubs and car parking need to be provided/retained; that the link between The Thoroughfare and the Market Place be enhanced, perhaps by pedestrianisation; that a new community centre with adequate parking be part of any planning; that signage around town be enhanced.



Halesworth Market place from the air

Sustainability

Man-induced climate change poses worldwide threats to humanity, so Halesworth thinks global and acts local in meeting its own needs without jeopardising the ability of future generations to do the same. What is bought to meet needs and where it comes from plays a key role in energy consumption, so how Halesworth provides for employment, health, transport, the retail network (which particularly revolves around the production and distribution of food) affects the ability of future generations to provide for theirs.

With the above in mind, Halesworth is fully committed to facilitating the use of public transport where feasible, emphasising the value of purchasing local food and manufactured goods locally, subscribing to and supporting waste-management policies of higher government, upcycling (using left-over or cast-off materials to make better quality objects), encouraging property insulation and the installation of renewable energy devices.



Historic Heritage



Halesworth wears its history lightly. It has a swathe of buildings of architectural merit and interest and an environment described as attractive, but with a grittiness imparted by the legacy of its 18th and 19th-century industrial history. The historic environment of the core of the town is a key asset to the town's economy and attracts visitors. The whole old town centre is a single complex of architectural interest, subtle, varied and inviting more knowledge and appreciation of visitor and resident. It has been designated as a single unbroken Conservation Area,

the character or appearance of which needs to be preserved or enhanced under the terms of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act of 1990. Indeed, more than 160 buildings in the area are listed by Historic England as being of special architectural or historical importance, within Grade II designation.

The town has been a retail centre for surrounding rural villages since it gained its market charter in 1223, and today still plays that role as well as attracting visitors to its exceptional range of small independent traders. It has four surviving malting buildings, relics of an industry that dominated the town for a century or more, although none are now in use for that purpose. Linked to the malting trade was the Blyth Navigation, notably the New Reach, created in the 1760s to carry goods to and from the sea at Southwold and thence to London and other ports. The remnants of the quay and locks are well worth a visit.



Some of Halesworth's historical structures

The Halesworth and District Museum, housed in the town's railway station building, is staffed by volunteers and, although constrained by limited space, actively adopts a programme of activities beyond its walls, spearheading local heritage initiatives and providing visible information about the history of specific buildings in the town and surrounding area.

Environment and Wildlife

Halesworth lies in the Blyth Valley about 9 miles from the coast, just 2 miles from the tidal limit at Blyford Bridge. The River Blyth forms the southern boundary of the Town, and one of its tributaries, the Town River, flows through the town centre.



Great changes took place after the 2nd World War when rivers of the area were straightened and the river level lowered by about 1 m. This allowed drainage of some riverside marshes and increased the speed of run-off, reducing water quality but facilitating the local growing of arable crops, particularly in the watershed upstream of the town. Some flood meadows did survive, though, and they perform a flood alleviation function in winter and are grazed by cattle in summer. There, marsh marigold, ragged robin and yellow flag abound along with old pollard willows, alders and other well-established trees. Barn owls, herons and little egrets are often seen, as are smaller kingfishers and grey wagtails. Among mammals, otters leave traces along the rivers, but water voles are rare, being preyed upon by mink.



The Millennium Green is 50 acres of public open space in the flood plain of the Town River and the River Blyth immediately downstream of Halesworth. The New Reach is a now-disused canal built in the 18th century to bring wherries from Southwold Harbour up to Halesworth. It is fed by springs in summer and contains a rich emergent and marginal flora as well as a rich dragonfly fauna. The New Reach and part of the Millennium Green have been designated a County Wildlife Site, mainly for their diversity of flowers.

The Folly is the only site in Town where the sands of the Suffolk Sandlings outcrop at the surface. Part of it belongs to the Millennium Green and the remainder to Railtrack and a private dwelling. It has a series of gravel pits next to the railway containing habitats such as woodland, scrub and acid grassland where grass snakes and slow worms live. Common, but seasonal, birdlife includes garden warbler, whitethroat, green and great-spotted woodpecker and jay. Polypody and hart's-tongue fern are found under trees, gorse and broom in acid soils, and birdsfoot, parsley piert, tormentil and sheep's sorrel in the grassland.



Bird's Folly

Apart from the valley bottom and sides, most of the Halesworth area is draped with Glacial Till left over from the last ice age, but in the northern part of the Cemetery there is a small remnant of the chalky grassland that would have been widespread before the agricultural changes. There, spring's cowslip and primrose are followed into bloom by ox-eye daisy, knapweed, scabious, fairy flax and quaking grass. The hedgerow next to Loam Pit Lane is rich in woody species such as spindle, hazel and hornbeam, and the adjacent cemetery area has been designated a County Wildlife Site.

The skies of the Town abound with swifts in summer, but house martins and their nests are far less common now than historically. Sand martins feed over open water and around the sewage works southeast of town and breed in the sides of sandpits farther down the valley. Hedgehogs seem to be surviving in Town better than in the surrounding countryside, but the Town River has been so affected by attempts to reduce flooding that is almost devoid of wildlife other than mallard ducks, and is of poor amenity value. Redevelopment of the Town Centre will hopefully provide opportunity to redress this situation.

Rights of Way

Halesworth has several well-used, generally well-maintained public footpaths, many interconnected via its Millennium Green and Town Centre. Longer footpaths lead to surrounding villages, although some nearby towns to the south are not currently linked to Halesworth in this manner, but may have been historically. Pavements throughout town are abundant, though unsurprisingly narrow, given the general narrowness of most streets in town, and disability access is good, as generally is lighting. Plans for enhancement of some footpaths and rights of way are irregularly mooted, especially around the Town Centre.



Benches and other seating are available in and around the town centre, including in the Town Park, and more is being provided to facilitate the social interaction the town prides itself upon. An enthusiastic band of volunteers keeps Halesworth attractive botanically, winning many East Anglian awards, and living up to the legacy of two earlier residents of town who became Directors of Kew Gardens.



Millennium Green

