

High Streets Task Force Case Study: Felixstowe



5 October 2020

Felixstowe Re-Opening Safely

Felixstowe is an Edwardian seaside town on the east coast of England. It has a traditional town centre and is a seaside destination, with a mix of attractions and activities based around the popular promenade and seafront.

The town centre is made up of approximately 233 units around the primary shopping area of Hamilton Road Shared Space where most of the national retailers and financial services are located. The secondary area has a vibrant mix of independents shops, cafes, and restaurants. Despite the challenges facing the retail sector Felixstowe has been performing relatively well with vacancy rates significantly below the national average.

Felixstowe has become a more desirable town in recent years reflected in the growing diversity of independent shops and cafes and increase in visitor numbers.

The coastline of Felixstowe extends to 5 miles from Landguard Peninsula and the Orwell estuary in the South to Felixstowe Ferry, the Deben estuary, and an area of AONB in the North.

Felixstowe has significant Heritage assets including the Grade II Listed Felixstowe Seafront Gardens, Grade I listed Landguard Fort, and Landguard Nature Reserve, a SSSI site.

Felixstowe is home to the Port of Felixstowe, one of the UK's busiest Ports which supports local employment opportunities. The associated Port operations and logistics is a key economic sector in the East of England.

The town is well connected being less than 2 hours to London and only 10 miles from Ipswich, its closest major town.

Key opportunities/challenges

Felixstowe has undergone significant change over recent years with exciting developments, including the restoration of the historic Felixstowe Seafront gardens, the redevelopment of Felixstowe Pier, and the creation of an events area. Felixstowe has benefited from over £20 million investment since 2010 and is now in a growth phase with further investment planned for the south seafront, plans for a state-of-the-art leisure centre and a garden neighbourhood scheme, which will add to Felixstowe's existing strengths.

Felixstowe Town Centre faces particular challenges. The town has insufficient large retail spaces to attract National retailers which make up about 32% of the town units. In 2019 Marks and Spencer, a key anchor store closed leaving a prime site vacant. The town businesses recognise the need to build a new identity for the town, and to celebrate the increasing number of independent shops, cafes and restaurants which now make up approximately 61% of the units including local chains such as East of England Co-Op. It also recognises the need for better connections between the town centre and seafront and to embrace SMART towns technology to promote and market Felixstowe to visitors.

Businesses have recently developed a detailed business plan with plans to ballot for a Business Improvement District (BID).

The Primary Retail area is centred around a Shared Space scheme. Surveys conducted in 2016-2017 showed a desire by residents and businesses to make the area more fully pedestrianised.

Felixstowe faces seasonal challenges and weather is the biggest determinant in visitor numbers. The visitor economy was estimated to be worth £55.1m in 2017, an increase of 13% and this upward trend of popularity is set to continue as Felixstowe competes with other popular resorts to attract customers and visitors increasing spend and dwell time.

Felixstowe has a population of circa 24,900. The population demographic is - 16% aged 0-15, 55% aged 16.64, and 29% are aged 65 and over. The over 65's is higher than the UK national average for this age group and reflects Felixstowe's ageing population and its popularity as a retirement resort. However, with planned housing infrastructure and employment opportunities Felixstowe is becoming more desirable to working professionals and young families. This further highlights a need to adapt the Town Centre and Seafront.

Goals/objectives

East Suffolk Council is in the process of creating an overall Felixstowe vision document outlining key outcomes for the town and a timeline of projects and developments. This is due to be launched in November 2020. The future outcomes include:

- Continue to work with businesses to enhance the vitality and viability of Felixstowe town centre.
- Address the impact of COVID-19 and assist in the recovery.
- Create connections between seafront and town centre and enhance the night-time economy.
- Improve the south seafront area.
- Enhance and extend the visitor offer of Felixstowe and the peninsula.
- Enhance the historic, environmental, and natural quality of the area.
- Deliver new housing in an accessible location.
- Improve health and wellbeing outcomes.
- Support the Port of Felixstowe and the wider ports and logistics sector.

The Vision document looks at the areas where there are significant opportunities for growth and/or the greatest potential for transformation. These are:

Town Centre – To focus on building business confidence and with it, both the capacity and ambition of our businesses to invest and grow in a post COVID-19 climate.

Seafront – To further develop an appealing seafront destination with a contrasting range of activities, attractions, and events for all demographics.

Landguard Peninsula & the Port of Felixstowe - Promote the Landguard Peninsula as a key contributor to Felixstowe's tourism offer and to support the Port of Felixstowe with its key economic activities.

North Felixstowe Garden Neighbourhood (NFGN) - create the North Felixstowe Garden Neighbourhood (143ha site) providing housing, employment, leisure, education, and community facilities, integrating with the town and the surrounding countryside

Description of the project/initiative

Post COVID Recovery

Felixstowe Town Centre Shared Space

As part of the Re-Opening Safely response to COVID-19 Felixstowe temporarily pedestrianised Felixstowe Town Centre 'Shared Space'. This has since become an Experimental order for 18 months. A public survey with over 650 responses confirmed 85% of people wanted to see the experimental order extended for 18 months,

In addition, improvements to the street furniture has been made with attractive planters, new seating and cycle hoops with further improvements planned.

A business survey confirmed that the changes has been positive and a significant boost to support recovery in the Town centre.

Felixstowe Seafront Spill Out

East Suffolk Council adopted a permissive approach to support Seafront businesses – cafes and restaurants – as they reopened for business, acknowledging the continued challenges faced by the hospitality sector in social distancing and need to cater for the increased influx of visitors as lockdown restrictions were relaxed. Cafes and restaurants have been permitted to 'spill out' on to public green spaces along the seafront and Promenade. Whilst the objective was to support a COVID recovery it has injected a very different feel to the Seafront. A survey with over 1,000 responses confirmed that the 97% were in favour of the change, and businesses have reported the permissive approach had an immediate and positive impact on their recovery.

Felixstowe Business Improvement District

Felixstowe businesses had been preparing to go to ballot to introduce a Felixstowe Business Improvement District when COVID19 halted plans. Like many towns of this size and make up Felixstowe faces some traditional challenges: Competing against other places who are trying to attract more customers and visitors; increasing spend and dwell time; presenting a clean, safe, and enjoyable environment; and attracting investment. This has been exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic, but businesses feel strongly that Felixstowe can emerge stronger. The Town's businesses recognise the need for a plan to boost the place, for the benefit of all those who live, work, and visit the town. The Felixstowe BID offers a business led, business managed and business governed model of intervention whereby business can develop strength by working together. The BID will invest in the priorities that matter locally.

Felixstowe BID is currently preparing for ballot.

Outcome expected November 11th 2020.

The team involved in the project/initiative

Local Government Stakeholders

Cllr Steve Gallant, Leader of East Suffolk Council took an early permissive stance to encourage the 'Spill Out' initiative in Felixstowe. Suffolk County Council, Cllr Steve Wiles provided the vital link with Suffolk Highways to enable the pedestrianisation of Hamilton Road Shared Space and improvements to street furniture. The Mayor of Felixstowe, Cllr Mark Jepson conducted over 60 zoom interviews with businesses shared via social media channels encouraging Felixstowe to stay safe, shop local, #loveindependent. Felixstowe Town Councillors continue to be great advocates for businesses and the local community.

Felixstowe Forward

All three tiers of local Government invested in the Place Based initiative Felixstowe Forward in 2015. The Felixstowe Forward team responded quickly to gather business opinion and feedback on the Pedestrianisation and 'Spill Out' initiative and has worked on behalf of business to conduct the BID feasibility study.

Felixstowe Business Community

Felixstowe businesses have been involved in setting the Felixstowe BID priorities and the BID task group have worked tirelessly to bring the initiative to ballot under the guidance of Mosaic Partnership. Namely:

- Richard Ashford, COES
- Paul Armbruster and David Wyard, Underwood's
- Nick Barber, Barber Auctions
- Jessie Fotherby and Una Packwood, The little Ice Cream Co
- Charlie Manning, Mannings Amusements
- Bryony Graham, Hamilton MAS
- Roger Abbott, Chair, Felixstowe Chamber of Trade and Commerce.
- Richard Moffat, Poor Richards Books

Felixstowe Community

The Community organisations and people who help make Felixstowe a great place to live, work and visit – volunteer litter pickers and Litter Free Felixstowe, volunteer Visit Felixstowe ambassadors who welcome visitors at the promenade beach hut tourist information point, Friends of the Felixstowe Seafront Gardens who work alongside the lead gardeners to keep them looking their best and the many volunteers who support Felixstowe community organisations.

Impact or outcomes

Short-term outputs/achievements

Town Centre Pedestrianisation

- Positive change in behaviour in dwell time
- Positive change in ambiance with reports of people feeling safer and more relaxed
- Anecdotal evidence from businesses and observation of a busier High Street
- Improved cleanliness and attraction of primary shopping area with planters, seating, and cycle hoops

Survey results: 75% of people reported they feel safer when out and about in the town, and 72% reported they would like to see these measures made permanent. Respondents repeatedly commented on how much safer they feel that they were enjoying the new ambiance of the Town centre and dwelling longer in the more relaxed environment. Respondents were keen to see more of a café culture develop.

Seafront Spill Out

- Positive changes in behaviour in dwell time
- Positive increase in customers visiting cafes / restaurants
- Anecdotal evidence from businesses of a change in customer/ clientele base
- Visual attractiveness

Survey results: 79% felt safer as a result reference social distancing measures and 94% would like to see it as a permanent feature. Responses commented on the ambiance, the change of pace, and the pleasure of being able to eat and drink with uninhibited views of the sea.

Felixstowe BID Business Plan

Felixstowe BID Business plan identifies the priorities important to businesses in the Town and Seafront

The business plan has been crafted by the BID Task Group which is made up of volunteers from the business community. It captures the essence and addresses the issues that businesses say need attention. As things recover from COVID, Felixstowe has a plan that identified the need to drive footfall into shops, restaurants, bars, and attractions.

Long-term outputs/achievements

Town Centre Pedestrianisation

Permanent pedestrianisation will offer the long-term opportunity for businesses to thrive in Felixstowe and underpins the goal for East Suffolk Council to continue to work with businesses to enhance the vitality and viability of Felixstowe Town Centre. Long term outcomes include:

- permanent pedestrianisation enabling a café culture and improved night-time offer.
- re-purposing of Felixstowe Town centre encouraging more housing and mixed-use space
- vacancy rates that are below the national average
- more events and activities within the town centre encouraging footfall and spend
- improved marketing of Felixstowe town centre independents

Felixstowe Seafront Spill Out

The surveys suggest this has been a successful intervention to boost recovery and has been welcomed by visitors. East Suffolk Council continue to work to improve the seafront area, enhance and extend the visitor offer and enhance the natural quality of the area which will include the following outcomes

- continued contribution to a thriving visitor economy
- long term continued improvements to South Seafront including iconic café build, accessible beach hut site and Phase 3 redevelopment of a central seafront site.

Felixstowe BID

If successful a Felixstowe BID represents over £700k investment over 5 years and a Business Led, Business Managed and Business Governed model of intervention within the town and seafront. This would support a long-term marketing of Felixstowe as a town that is a great place to live, work and visit and a town in which businesses can survive and thrive. Most importantly Felixstowe BID will pave the way for attracting further investment in the town centre and seafront.

Advice for High Streets Task Force users

As Felixstowe re-opened following COVID19 it became a real opportunity to engage with the business community and to find ways in which all three tiers of council could support the High Street. This is likely to have long term outcomes as to how the High Street in Felixstowe needs to adapt and change to overcome the challenges that the retail sector faces. There are opportunities to extend the pedestrianisation further and to improve the link between the town centre and the seafront. Both will require significant funding in the future. A successful BID ballot will strengthen the role of businesses as stakeholders in any future developments.

Contact for Task Force queries

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Further details

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Felixstowe Town Council <https://www.felixstowe.gov.uk/>

Suffolk County Council <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/>

Visit Felixstowe <http://www.visitfelixstowe.org.uk/>

Felixstowe BID <https://felixstowebid.co.uk/>

Photos:



