

Ideal Futures for Halstead

Report of Town Appraisal
March 2000 to August 2001

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Halstead – a snapshot

Halstead (a healthy place) has its origins way back in time as a market town. The market still operates in the High Street every Friday and Saturday.

The town is situated in the Colne Valley, in North Essex close to the Suffolk border, surrounded by beautiful rolling countryside. The major routes passing through are the A131 linking Chelmsford to Sudbury and the A1124 Colchester to Haverhill and Cambridge. There are public transport links to the local towns including Braintree, Bury St. Edmunds and Chelmsford.

The current population is approximately 11,000 of which about 2,500 are aged under 18. Halstead has a secondary school, three primary schools and a number of pre-schools; it also has a Youth Centre, based at Priory Hall (temporarily at the time of writing this report).

The local planning authority is Braintree District Council (BDC). Prior to 1974, local affairs were managed by Halstead UDC, and that local government reorganisation was a major political adjustment for the town. The parish of Halstead (combining the two wards – Halstead St.Andrews and Halstead Trinity) is managed by Halstead Town Council which at present shares a site in the town with the BDC Area Office. Essex County Council, formed in 1888, has remained the provider of county services.

The Courtauld family have played an important role on the growth and development of the town. Apart from being a major employer until recent times, they also provided many community facilities for the benefit and enjoyment of local people. There are now two major industrial sites at Bluebridge and Broton, plus a sliver of industrial development running through the town which has grown up around the former railway line. At one stage, Halstead was served by the Colne Valley Railway linking Colchester with Cambridge, but this line was closed in the 1960s.

The main shopping areas are the High Street and Weavers Court, and the majority of offices and commercial activity are also concentrated centrally. The distinctive feature of the High Street is its hill, rising steeply away from the River Colne, with many fine buildings of architectural interest. Public houses have gradually declined in number but the town offers a good selection of restaurants and eating facilities. The town also has a number of other attractions - Townsford Mill, Public Memorial Gardens, the River Walk and the Empire Cinema and Theatre, which is managed by a trust.

On the face of it, Halstead appears well provided for in terms of leisure facilities having the Courtauld Sports Ground for various clubs and activities, a sports centre in Colne Road and a swimming pool in Parsonage Street. However these are now showing signs of their age and are in need of upgrading to meet the demands of the modern world. Some of community buildings in the town are in need of investment

to comply with new regulations and meet the needs of all potential user groups. However the Queens Hall has been renovated and provides good facilities, the new United Reformed Church Hall is available for hire and the library has been refurbished in recent years.

Car ownership has increased over the years, but the town has suffered a decline in car parking availability which has added to the on street parking congestion. Remaining car parks are at Chapel Street, Butler Road, Hedingham Road (season tickets) and at Solar, off Kings Road, and a survey is being undertaken to assess future needs.

The town has a Community Hospital and a new doctors surgery and is also the centre of an innovative health care pilot project, Infolink. The project uses broadband and internet technology to provide information on older people's services to health care professionals and the general public. A "kiosk" is located in the GP surgery and the hospital now has a high speed internet connection as a result of the project.

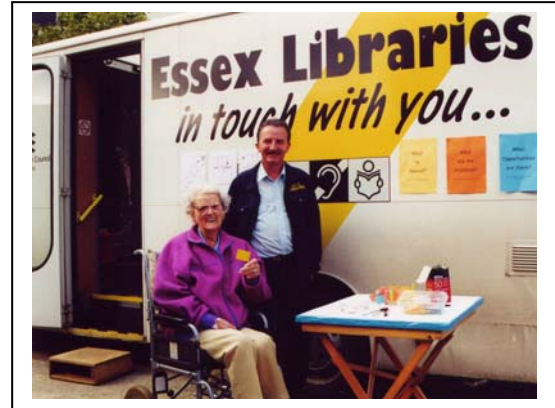
In terms of housing Halstead is designated low growth in the first draft of the new local development plan for the district, currently on deposit. In recent years there have been some sizeable developments at Colne road (220+), Nether Court (100+) and Highfields (150+) which have added to the demands on local facilities and services.

There are a number of active partnership groups including the Halstead Youth Initiative, the Town Centre Strategy Group, Crime Prevention Panel, etc, which are working to improve the town. This report from the Ideal Futures Group, outlining the views of Halstead residents, will be an important aid to these partnership groups in examining the needs of the town and promoting action.

Finally, whilst many facilities and services are operated by the various agencies, many others only function or are supported with the aid of volunteers. There are dozens of non-profit making community groups in Halstead, all contributing to the social well being of local people. A good community spirit exists and long may it continue, as it could be vital to the future of Halstead as it sets about achieving things for the benefit of the town.



Mobile Library
visiting sheltered accommodation



Forecourt of
Halstead Post Office

Initial workshop
at Queens Hall



Why a Town Appraisal?

Background

Why this report and how did it come about? It all started with the arrival of the millennium when a Halstead resident contacted the Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE) to try to establish the needs of local people and visitors.

The focus of local government was changing and it was recognised that a method should be found to involve local people in decisions about the future of Halstead. After much discussion, it was decided to use the participatory appraisal method, pioneered by the University of Essex and The Guinness Trust for the Jaywick Community Assessment. The project commenced with an “Ideal Futures Workshop” at Queens Hall in March 2000 to provide first hand experience of the method and form a working group to proceed with the town appraisal. The workshop was facilitated by Professor Jules Pretty, Centre of Environment and Society, University of Essex, and funded by Halstead Town Council, RCCE, Braintree District Council, Essex Police and Halstead Town Centre Strategy Group.

Community Involvement

RCCE worked with a group of volunteers from the community to plan the town appraisal. The appraisal was launched at the Halstead Hospital fete in August 2000 and a cross section of views and opinions were obtained from the community over subsequent months at various locations in Halstead. In this way we involved young people, the elderly, parents and a random mixture of people with special needs or problems.

Individuals were invited to express comments in their own words in what became known as the praises, grumbles and ideas survey by answering three key questions:

- What is special about Halstead?
- What are the problems?
- What changes can be made to improve things?

So, What have local people said?

The volunteers gathered approximately 2000 responses – sometimes only one word, sometimes very detailed comments, and have now assembled and summarised them under various headings (see next section). The appendices to this report give details of the methods and numbers taking part in the survey, every individual comment, the location of every issue, and the source where information was recorded.

Interpretation

It should be noted that this report is a summary of opinion and perception rather than facts, and these may not accurately reflect the services actually being provided. Differences between perception and fact could imply a problem with access to information or access to services rather than with the facilities themselves indicating a need to strengthen communication and transport links in the town.

Survey Results

Halstead is Special

The country town character of Halstead is highly valued. It remains relatively compact with many services within walking distance, easy access to open countryside and beautiful views across the Colne valley, treasured by residents. The River Colne is a great asset, easily missed by driving through the town but enjoyed by river walks. Halstead's thriving commercial past is evidenced by fine buildings in the High Street and punctuated by two magnificent churches. People are proud of their town and its heritage.

But a community is about more than buildings and open spaces. It is about people. Halstead's strong sense of community and the friendliness of local people shine through. Local people consider it to be a good place for families; a safe place for children. And there is a wealth of clubs and voluntary organisations offering leisure activities and opportunities to get involved in the community, particularly for active older residents – over fifty individual groups were named.

But there are some problems

The comments about problems and opportunities have been summarised under issue headings.

TRANSPORT AND HIGHWAYS

All age groups expressed concern about traffic and congestion. Most of the comments from the younger age groups related to safety and difficulty crossing the roads whilst adults' comments related more to parking and traffic flow problems. There were many suggestions about changes to the road systems. Opinion was split on the subject of a by pass with strong views on both sides. Attention was drawn to the need for road maintenance and dropped kerbs at various locations. There is also recognition that public transport in all its forms needs to meet the wishes of people to be effective.

The problems and opportunities residents mentioned were as follows:

- Traffic congestion/too much traffic/ narrow roads/parking on yellow lines
- Need a crossing at the Head Street end of town
- Lack of public transport to villages/towns etc. Expensive and inadequate in the evening. Late bus service needed.
- Lack of acceptance of traffic increase
- Lack of cohesive planning/lack of cohesive system – people/freight
- Insufficient free parking for cars and lorries
- Parking congestion in residential streets
- Re-instate railway/re-open a rail connection
- Establish Cycle Track/Cycle ways
- Traffic calming measures – residential areas
- Proper bus station/office/shelters

COMMUNITY SAFETY AND CRIME

People expressed concern about their personal safety and those aspects of crime, which lead to attacks on the individual or their property, or that of others. Teenagers and adults commented on particular problems at the Town Park. Adults comment on a link between anti social behaviour and lack of activities for young people. To enable things to happen, residents see a need for more effective and high profile policing aided by the modern techniques of CCTV and the ability to call for immediate help when problems occur. Residents referred to:

- Need for Police Station (or new Police Station) to be open 24 hours with permanent policing (including town centre foot patrols).
- Need and support for CCTV to deter town centre vandalism/crime and support for funding by Government.
- In the absence of CCTV, to be more effective in dealing with vandalism and late night nuisance and behaviour.
- Better lighting for alleyways and dark paths

ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION

Residents are concerned about their surroundings both in terms of appearances and pollution. The most frequently made comments, by all age groups, relate to litter and general maintenance, particularly in the town centre but also residential streets, garage areas and the river walk. It was felt that the river is a big asset to the town and the associated walks in need of improvement. There were various suggestions about the use of the old railway line for walking and cycling. Young people in particular commented on nature conservation and wildlife. All age groups referred to the need for better recycling services – kerbside collection, composting and civic amenity site.

Some of the issues identified by local people were:

- Improve cleanliness of roads and footpaths, litter and untidiness
- Not enough litter and dog bins – outer town
- Traffic congestion and pollution
- Clean river
- Improved river seats
- Improve river walk but retain wildlife areas
- Town should have a nature park
- Tackle derelict buildings/derelict sites
- Extend recycling facilities
- Better footpaths and cycleways throughout area needed
- Tree planting
- Pollution levels at Head Street between St.Andrews Church and Hedingham Road
- Park keeper needed to keep safer and cleaner

HEALTH

The comments about health (below) arose mainly at the initial workshop where health professionals were represented. Young people themselves made no direct reference to primary care but commented on wider quality of life issues. Older residents commented on the costs of transport to and from hospital. There was also concern about parking and access at the new surgery and fears that safety was an issue.

- Prevent closure of midwifery unit at Halstead Hospital
- Not enough support for new/young parents with children with emotional/behavioural problems
- More volunteers for First Aid work
- No A & E at Hospital
- No family planning services for young people
- Substance and alcohol education

HOUSING

The majority of comments on housing concerned fears of further development and loss of countryside and open spaces. Whilst residents felt there was a need for some low cost housing (rented or otherwise) there was a wish by all for minimum growth so as to retain the rural character. It was felt that infrastructure development had not kept pace with increases in housing and the access road to the developments at Nether Court was inadequate. Residents in sheltered accommodation felt that the loss of resident wardens had resulted in a reduced service.

- Availability of low cost housing required
- Properties for rent reduced by sale of council house stock
- Housing and Population increases not reflected in real infrastructure development
- No more large development for housing
- Redevelopment opportunity – with open space land east of High Street
- Under used garage sites should be redeveloped
- Resident wardens should be reinstated in homes for the elderly

CULTURE AND HERITAGE

The Town Centre forms a designated Conservation Area but it is recognised that it is not all about buildings as many views were expressed about the need to retain a record of the town's history and its archives. The Arts was also recognised as having local importance and residents wished to see improved facilities having made the following observations:-

- Need to provide a Museum/Heritage & Arts Centre open to the public
- Make more effective use of Holy Trinity Church
- Improve Conservation Area (Halstead North)
- Create Green Open Space – The Centre/Symonds Close

LEISURE AND RECREATION

For the purposes of this report, comments on leisure and recreation facilities aimed specifically at young people have been included in the section on education and youth.

All age groups appear to seek either enhanced or new facilities for a multitude of sport and leisure interests ranging from simple things to larger facilities involving expensive capital costs. The majority of comments, from all age groups, highlighted the need for new or improved swimming pool facilities, with lots of detailed comments from young people about the types of leisure pool activities they would enjoy. Teenagers had aspirations for “large town” facilities in Halstead eg bowling, rollerworld and cinema, with residents of all ages supporting enhancements to the services of the Empire Theatre. There were comments about improvements to halls and concern about the loss of community halls (e.g. St. James and Ronald Road) and the lack of affordable meeting venues for community groups. There were differing opinions about the merits of a multi use community centre or a variety of specialist venues for different purposes. There were also suggestions to promote events that would put Halstead on the map and provide spectator opportunities (e.g. Food Fayre/Essex Grand Prix Cycle Race). The recreational value of the river, walking and cycling have been mentioned elsewhere.

Details of the comments received are set out below:

- Support plan for new swimming pool/lottery bid
- Better cinema, bigger, more than one screen
- Sports ground – improve entrance and exit
- Need good public tennis courts (e.g. Kings Road)
- Provide new and better sports facilities
- Provide more public open spaces with informal play facilities
- No affordable meeting places/community centre/poor facilities for small group meetings at reasonable cost
- Improve Queen’s Hall stage lighting and bar facilities for all occasions
- Community events
- More not fewer cheap allotments
- Night Club
- Cyber café
- Improve riverside facilities – walks/restaurants
- Improve circular walk and riverside access
- Need for cycle ways

EDUCATION AND YOUTH

It was generally felt by residents of all ages that there was a lack of facilities and activities for children and young people. Primary school children commented in detail about the play areas and equipment/apparatus in the parks. Teenagers commented on the need for somewhere to “hang out”. The most popular suggestions were for an under 18s night club or a meeting place that was “cheap, warm and fun”. Some youth groups in the town also have difficulty in finding affordable meeting places. There were comments from all age groups about the need for activities in the school holidays, weekends and evenings and the development/enhancement of youth centre facilities. Whilst expressed in different ways young people often feel that their views are overlooked in provision and location of facilities.

Parents commented on the lack of adventure play facilities for young children and also expressed concern about the need for additional primary school classes to cater for increased numbers, and lack of post 16 education.

The following issues were raised:

- Children’s play areas not well kept
- Too many dogs in children’s play areas
- More entertainment for under 5’s e.g. Go Bananas
- Set up Skateboard area
- Provide drop-in internet/cyber-cafe or like meeting place for youth
- Lack of informal meeting place for anyone, including “youth”
- Community facility for all youth groups to use/establish community centre/new centre for cubs, guides, ATC etc
- Night club for people aged 12-16/18 or regular discos
- Need youth centre open at weekends
- More activities in school holidays
- Better use of Priory Hall and school buildings
- Permanent home for Youth Club
- Support for Halstead Youth Initiative/Youth Festival
- Greater consultation with young people
- Improve local schools to cater for increased numbers
- No 16+ further education in the town
- Secondary school and sports centre at one end of town – distance from other end

LOCAL ECONOMY (EMPLOYMENT, SHOPS AND SERVICES)

Local people of all ages feel that there are a number of problems and concerns associated with the provision or loss of shops and services in the town. For teenagers, shopping is a popular leisure activity and they are keen to see more fashion shops, sport and entertainment related shops and fast food outlets. Older residents referred to the need for specialist shops and greater variety of food shops. In addition to the provision of retail and other services, there was concern about the appearance of the town centre, that in places it looked run down and shabby. All age groups commented on the public toilets. There were also comments about special needs of the disabled and people with babies and young children.

The business representation at the initial workshop commented particularly on local job opportunities and the lack of services for those seeking employment. It was felt that the town did not market itself very well and more could be done to create local jobs and also provide services for visitors.

The specific views are:

- More specialist shops, not enough variety of shops
- Closed down shops, shabby and boarded up
- Help for local shopkeepers
- High business rates
- Improve market and establish farmers market
- Limited disabled access/ shops need to be more user friendly i.e. pushchairs, prams, wheelchairs
- Need facilities for babies and breast feeding
- No Job Centre, no benefits office
- More local jobs for local people
- Better marketing for town
- Website
- Tourist information facilities
- Public toilets need refurbishing
- Perception of “Braintree first” approach by BDC
- New Council Community Offices
- One Stop Shop for services (council and other e.g. CAB/Tourist Information)

Main Areas for Action

The most frequently mentioned problems were presented to the community at the Halstead Hospital Fete in August 2001, one year after the official launch of the appraisal, with an opportunity to indicate which problems should be tackled first. The votes showed a very similar result to that recorded at the initial workshop in March 2000. The priorities for action were recorded as follows:

Vandalism and a Cleaner Town

Looking shabby and uncared for. Make it a place to be proud of. Improve the image of the town. Policing. CCTV

Activities for young people

Need for meeting places; both for informal and for organised activities. Affordable room hire. Night life. Activities in the evenings, at weekends, in school holidays. Build on success of skate park and youth initiative.

Shops and Services

Re energise the heart of Halstead. Improve variety of shops. Make it attractive to shop in Halstead (impact on parking). Market Town identity. Focus for surrounding villages. Services and facilities for visitors.

Traffic and parking

Congestion. Major route. Distribution networks. Improvements to minor roads. An integrated approach. Public transport.

(NOTE: There was also the opportunity at the 2001 Hospital fete to vote on the controversial bypass issue - 158 supported a bypass and 102 opposed a bypass)

Note re Flooding

The Ideal Futures consultation was carried out before the major flooding of October 2001. It is reasonable to assume that flood defences and measures to avoid a repeat of the devastation is also a high priority for the town.

The Residents Attitude Survey undertaken in November 2001 by MORI on behalf of Braintree District Council recorded similar priorities:

- The worst thing about living in Halstead was rubbish / litter / dirt, followed by traffic congestion.
- The thing most in needs of improving in Halstead was the amount of traffic, followed by things for young people to do.

This Ideal Futures Report provides the essential local detail behind these issue headings to enable action planning.

Gathering views
at Halstead Hospital Fete 2000



Prioritising at
Halstead Hospital Fete 2001



Starting to Achieve Things

The town has a life of its own, independent of the town appraisal. Since commencing this Ideal Futures Project, progress has been made in a number of areas:

- Lottery funding has been secured for a new swimming pool
- The Public Gardens restoration has been completed
- The tourist office has been relocated to the Town Council Office
- Renovation of Kings Road toilets has been completed
- Youth Club has moved temporarily to Priory Hall
- Skate Park is completed
- Parsonage Street has been resurfaced
- A street sweeping machine has been purchased
- There is a new zebra crossing in Colchester Road
- St. Andrews church wall improvement is completed
- Clearance work on the River Walk has commenced but has been affected by the October 2001 floods
- A Food Fair has been held in 2001 and a Community Festival in 2002
- CO9 held club nights for under 18s but ceased due to lack of support
- Halstead Sports Development Group has been formed
- Plans to move the Town Council Office and Tourist Information Office and develop a Heritage and Arts Centre on the same site are well advanced

A lot of projects are underway.....but more can be done!

Where do we go from here?

The town appraisal has gathered hundreds of ideas for improvements, some of which are already underway. Many of the ideas require action from a number of organisations working together, calling for planning and organisation – An action plan for Halstead.

The action plan will need to include a list of projects, each with a named organisation (or organisations working in partnership) prepared to seek funding and take it forward. Not all the projects will be started at once and some may take years to achieve. But getting them discussed, agreed and into the action plan puts Halstead on the start line and under starters orders.

Halstead Town Council is taking the lead in proceeding with a Town Plan and has secured funding in principal from the Countryside Agency as part of its Vital Villages Scheme. The Town Plan will draw on the findings of this Ideal Futures report and other surveys undertaken in Halstead, including the recent Retail Services Survey and the Traffic Survey.

The Town Plan will include short term actions and also longer term projects to achieve the vision of Halstead as a better place to live, work and visit.

At the initial Ideal Futures Workshop, groups were asked to present a vision for Halstead for the year 2020. Common to all four visions were:

Citizenship	Market Town identity
Reduction in town centre traffic	River as a town asset

Full details of the Visions appear in Appendix 3.

Summary

Now is an important time to have recorded what local people feel about the town in which they live, work or visit. This report on behalf of residents aims to help all concerned to address the various issues and needs as we enter the early part of the 21st century.

Whilst there has been consultation with a cross section of individuals of all age groups who have either resided in Halstead for a long time, or recently moved to the town, it has not been possible to speak to all 10,000 plus residents. Nevertheless, the views are representative of the opinions expressed and the next step must involve seeking support from local authorities and other agencies to address the issues. Some of the views represent opinions that need closer examination to form a base for future action and in some cases ultimate provision of resources to achieve the objectives.