



The geographic area of the Southwold and Waveney Valley Regeneration Society Ltd (SouthGen) is the Waveney Valley. This area takes in the market towns of Southwold, Lowestoft, Bungay, Beccles, and Halesworth and their surrounding settlements. The local authority for most of the area is Waveney District Council (“Waveney”) in Suffolk although some parishes to the south of Southwold (i.e., Blythburgh, Walberswick and Westleton) fall within Suffolk Coastal District Council.¹

Southwold and Reydon are a ward in Waveney. (Reydon is separated from Southwold by a small river and is, in effect, a suburb of Southwold.) Up until the 1980’s, Southwold was a bustling market town of around 1800 people with a diverse economy that included fishing and the marine industry, retail, trades, manufacture and an element of tourism. Set in the AONB, with large areas of open space within its boundaries, the town was a significant centre of employment for surrounding communities and also provided services, facilities, recreation and public amenities. The most important public amenity was the Southwold and District hospital, opened in 1903, built entirely through community subscriptions, and substantially financed by the community until it was decommissioned by the NHS in 2016.

Although Suffolk appears to be a prosperous, the county, in fact, has some of the most deprived wards in England, and even within affluent areas, advantage and disadvantage exist side by side.² One consequence is that Suffolk has a higher proportion of NEETS (young people not in education, employment or training who are at extreme risk of disadvantage as they enter adulthood) than the East of England and England overall.

Within Suffolk, Waveney has some of the worst social and economic deprivation scores.

¹In January, 2017, it was agreed that the two Councils would merge and become East Suffolk District Council with the merger to be completed in January 2019,

² Fenton, Markkanen and Monk, University of Cambridge, “Hidden Deprivation and Community Need in Suffolk A report to The Suffolk Foundation,” 2011; Smith and Dogaru, University of Suffolk, “Hidden Needs, Hidden Needs in Suffolk Five Years On (2011 - 2016), A report to Suffolk Community Foundation.

- Waveney has the highest percentage of children in income deprived households in Suffolk – 22.7%.
- Waveney’s unemployment rate, at nearly 9%, is substantially greater than regional and national trends.
- Between 2004 and 2014, population growth in Waveney, a measure of rising prosperity, was 1% compared to 4% for England and 9% for the region (East of England).
- In Lowestoft, Kessingland and Beccles, there is a high rate of benefit claimants.
- In 2014, Waveney had the highest percentage of working age adults with disabilities – 25.7%.
- Waveney has had the lowest average wages regionally and nationally for more than the last decade – 477.1 median (gross£/week) compared to 551 for the East of England and 532.6 for England.
- Much of Waveney is rural. Research suggests that people living in rural villages and hamlets need to be able to spend between 15-25% more than their urban counterparts in order to be able to afford the same, minimum socially acceptable standard
- Of the 30 neighbourhoods in Suffolk which dropped by 3 deciles or more in the IMD ranking for health, 13 were in Waveney.
- Waveney is in the bottom 10% of districts in England for social mobility.
- Waveney showed an increase in educational deprivation between 2010 and 2015.
- In Waveney, only 33% of children eligible for free school meals attained five good GCSEs compared with 60% of pupils overall. Rates of achievement in Waveney are substantially below rates for the East and England generally for GCSE results.
- Areas where less than a quarter of students progress to higher education include Halesworth, Lowestoft, and Wrentham.³

Within Waveney, Southwold is a microcosm of the Suffolk paradox. A popular seaside resort, Southwold’s population has shrunk from 1599 in 1991 to only 808 electors as at 31 December 2016. The town’s population is very elderly. According to the Office of National Statistics⁴, which analysed the age composition of 274 coastal communities, Southwold has both the highest proportion of population aged over 65 years (50%) and the highest average age (65) in the whole of England and Wales.

³ The above data is sourced from Hidden Needs, 2016

⁴ ONS (2014) “2011 Census: Coastal Communities”

Areas within Southwold and Reydon score in the top 20% of East Suffolk communities (identified by post code research) whose populations are most at risk of disadvantage based on a basket of indicators such as lone parents, alcohol and drug dependency, childhood deprivation, wide barriers to housing and services, income deprivation facing older people, older people living alone, and population over 65 with limiting illness and no access to a car/van.⁵ The Southwold and Reydon ward is in the 2nd bottom quintile (24-32%) of young people participating in higher education.

Nearly 60% of Southwold's jobs are directly linked to tourism, the highest percentage in East Suffolk; as a result, the majority of jobs are low paid, part time or seasonal. Many of the people working in the town are young; they live with family in lower cost communities on the coast or inland. The public transport infrastructure is not up to the task of delivering employees to the town quickly and at hours converging with employment. The cost of running a car reduces the value of already low wages. Yet living in Southwold is not an option. Southwold has become a second home mecca -- 60% of its 1400 odd dwellings are occupied as second homes or holiday lets, and vacant much of the year. The town's house price/earnings ratio in 2015 was 21.01, triple the house price/earnings ratio in Suffolk (7.03).⁶ There is an acute shortage of rental property outside the holiday let market. Because of the limited supply of housing (Southwold is effectively an island by the North Sea), second home buyers are pushing into the adjoining parishes, raising house prices inland and pricing local people on lower wages out of the housing market.

As a Borough Corporation, Southwold had a progressive track record for building social housing – more than 170 homes were built or scheduled to be built between 1903 and 1974 when local government was reorganised and the Borough's powers were ceded to Waveney District Council. That number has been nearly halved through the "Right to Buy," with many former council houses now converted to second homes. Southwold has also lost space for community facilities and businesses through the conversion of community and employment space to second home residential use, depriving the surrounding communities of employment opportunities and facilities on which they had relied.

⁵ Suffolk County Council, Public Health Suffolk, Knowledge and Intelligence Team

⁶ Southwold Neighbourhood Plan (Draft Version, 2017)

The long term trend in Southwold, the Waveney Valley and Suffolk is one of growing economic and social inequality. Between 2007 and 2011, there was an increase in the experience of deprivation in Suffolk relative to rates in England as a whole. *“More than three times as many areas within Suffolk saw their relative deprivation ranking worsen substantially as saw it improve.”*⁷ In 2016, researchers revisiting the same data concluded, *“Deprivation in disadvantaged neighbourhoods has not improved, more advantaged neighbourhoods have become less advantaged, wages are low, educational achievement is lagging behind the region, opportunities for progression for young people are hampered, and the county’s progressively aging population may have serious long term implications.”*⁸

The Southwold and Waveney Valley Regeneration Society seeks to contribute to reversing this downward trend through the purchase of land and buildings to deliver affordable housing, especially for young people employed in Southwold and Reydon, and to provide facilities and services that will promote education, training, health and social wellbeing, and create new employment opportunities for people, especially the unemployed and working poor who living in the Waveney Valley.

The Society has made a successful bid to the NHS to buy back the former Southwold Hospital and convert it into: 1) affordable housing, especially for young people working locally; 2) affordable business space for start-up companies to generate new higher paying, higher skilled employment to create job opportunities in the Waveney Valley; and 3) space to deliver community services such as child care for working parents (many single and/or on low wages); health promotion programmes; remedial education programmes for children and adults; services for elderly people and single parent families; and training opportunities for young people whose educational needs are not being met in the academically focused curriculum of high schools. The redevelopment plans calls for restoration of the old hospital, a locally listed building of historic and architectural significance that embodies the ethos of “community,” to instil a sense of hope in a demoralised community. Once this project has been completed, the Community Benefit Society will be seeking other opportunities to buy or rent buildings and land for similar purposes.

⁷ Op Cit, Hidden Needs, 2011, Foreword

⁸ Op Cit, Hidden Needs, 2016, P. 10