

STOCKPORT NOW AND NEXT

Why the surging town is becoming a 'conscious choice' for businesses

"It's a hefty programme of construction and we've actually suggested to Deloitte that a Stockport Crane Survey may be in order."

Tongue in cheek or not, the words of Stockport Council deputy chief executive Caroline Simpson symbolise potentially unrivalled intent from a town to 'level up'.

And it seems the ongoing £1bn regeneration of Stockport town centre is leaving no stone – or brick – unturned. For among the major multiple multimillion-pound projects – some done, more to come – is a £1m upkeep pot for the long-time focal point of the town's skyline, Stockport Viaduct.

Soon enough, according to Simpson, multiple cranes will join the 11 million bricks and 11,300 cubic metres of stone that make up the viaduct; and bring forth a new skyline – Stockport's future skyline.

Simpson says 2022 will be "huge" for Stockport, and will see it realise long-held ambitions. "Many of our projects will be starting on site including Weir Mill, Interchange, Phase 4 of Stockport Exchange, St Thomas's Gardens, and Royal George Village."

Alluding to the 'Deloitte Stockport Crane Survey' line, Simpson goes on to say: "The

extent of the town centre programme will be very visible at that stage."

Stockport is the first place in the country to have a Mayoral Development Corporation (MDC) focused on the town centre. Some 3,500 residential units are planned for the 30-acre MDC. They will be delivered across the town centre west area over the next 15 years in tandem with a billion square feet of new employment floor-space, social infrastructure, greenspace and public realm. Simpson adds: "We'll have 958 residential units, across the Interchange, Weir Mill, Royal George Village and St Thomas's going on site during 2022 and 152,000 sq ft of commercial in Weir Mill, Stockport Exchange and Stok."

Like Mark Cueto after sprinting half the length of Edgeley Park to score a try in Sale Sharks' Premiership-winning season of 05/06, taking a breath is important. Especially during a project as bold and ambitious as Stockport's – a town seven miles south-east of Manchester city centre.

Consumer habits

The pivotal and changing face of high streets can't and isn't ignored by Stockport stakeholders. Pre-pandemic its main shopping street, Merseyway, attracted around

8.5 million visits per year. Debenhams, Topshop, Thorntons and Mothercare were familiar heavyweights. But they are no more and Stockport's high street future is unfolding.

"The Future High Streets Fund [£14.5m] work at Stockroom around the [council-owned] Merseyway shopping centre will begin next year," says Simpson, following results of a public consultation which is expected before the end of 2021.

Stockroom – developed in response to the changing nature of retail – is the working title for a project to create a new 21st century, universal learning and discovery space at the heart of Merseyway. It will transform 70,000 sq ft of vacant retail space around Adlington Walk.

Simpson adds: "Stockroom will provide an exciting, well located and accessible range of uses for the whole community to enjoy. It's going to provide the people of Stockport with a space where they can learn new skills, practise arts and crafts, enjoy live music and access free services and cutting-edge learning and IT facilities."

Another scheme on the brink of completion is Glenbrook's Stok, the 58,000 sq ft four-floor office scheme located on the site of the old Marks & Spencer building on

Weir Mill



Stockport Exchange



Princes Street. Interest is also growing in two retail outlets currently being converted in the former BHS department store. All the signs, despite making waves when pulling out of the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework in late 2020, are that Stockport is surging.

Sticking with commercial offices, one particularly busy man is Orbit Developments' Rhys Owens. Orbit's regional leasing director let over 26,000 sq ft – 5,765 sq ft at 1 St Peters Square, 3,400 sq ft at Beckwith House, 3,200 sq ft at Kingsgate and 12,000 sq ft at Park Square – across Stockport during October alone.

Owens says high-quality value for money space, a shorter and usually easier commute for staff and a rise in independent retailers are driving businesses to "consciously choose" Stockport over Manchester.

"The reputation of Stockport has changed," says Owens, "from once being an immediately discounted location to now being a place that makes you ask questions. Quite often business leaders when looking at space in Stockport say to me, 'so tell me more about these changes, I've seen this article or that article'."

"It's a location that works for all kinds of business; no longer just the home of call centres but a thriving tech sector and suitable for every kind of business you can think of."

Another major developer operating in Stockport is Muse Developments, which in partnership with the council, is delivering the £145m Stockport Exchange, a 375,000 sq ft office-led, mixed-use scheme. And the redevelopment of the former Grand

Central area is well under way; 1 Stockport Exchange is fully let and houses Stagecoach, musicMaggie, Holiday Inn Express, Sainsbury's and Cafelito Stockport.

Further grade-A office space, 61,502 sq ft of it, sits inside 2 Stockport Exchange with BASF having already taken the top two floors. Phase four is set to include a 400-capacity multi-storey car park and will sit by the 1,000-space multi-storey delivered during phase 1.

Meanwhile, a £60m vision to create a vibrant community at Weir Mill has just been given the green light. The site, in the town centre west regeneration zone, is backed by £7m of Housing Infrastructure funding from Homes England. It will include 253 apartments across the existing mill, two new design-led buildings, 24,000 sq ft of commercial space and 60,000 sq ft of public realm.

Social impact developer Capital & Centric says construction will start in early 2022. Co-founder Adam Higgins believes town centres can become urban communities rather than the retail hubs they once were.

"In the same way that Manchester is becoming a residential city," says Higgins, "with the number of people living in the centre set to rocket, bringing housing into town centres like Stockport could be transformational".

At the heart of Weir Mill is Weavers Square where the old cast iron columns of Weavers Shed are being retained to create an outdoor space for riverside street markets and live events. Higgins adds: "It's heritage buildings like Weir Mill that make towns like Stockport unique and interesting but often they've been left to crumble."

So, will there be a Stockport Crane Survey? Probably not. "Balance" will be the key, according to Simpson, particularly when it comes to building sustainable, affordable and viable homes for the future.

"This is not easy and we are trying to find the right route to do this," he says. "We will need strong collaboration with government and industry to find the balance." ■

STOCKPORT NEXT

Over 7,000: Jobs expected to be created in business, financial and professional services

Before: 2035

1,500: Digital

2,300: Construction

By 2025: Potential extension of the line from East Didsbury to Stockport's new transport interchange

70-bed dementia facility: To be delivered at St Thomas's Gardens (80% shared ownership; 20% social rent)

Royal George Village: 3 acres between Greek Street and Wellington Road South

That: Takes in the Grade-II listed former Metropolitan Girls' School

Which: Is being converted into coworking space

By: Investar which is providing 442 apartments and new offices too

Redrock complex: Set to house a new boutique bowling offer

156-bedroom Hampton by Hilton hotel: To be brought forward following exchange of contracts this summer

Interchange Park: A new town centre green space that will sit on top of the new bus interchange

550 homes: Build-to-rent scheme at the former Sainsbury's site on Warren Street

By: Amstone, with construction due in early 2022

REGEN OF LATE

Homegrown corporates: musicMaggie, Stagecoach and BASF housed at Stockport Exchange

The Profolk coworking space: Now open at Bank Chambers

Grade-II listed: White Lion pub converted into 11 apartments by Trafford Housing Trust

The Mailbox: A recent conversion of the former Royal Mail sorting office into 117 private rent apartments by RISE Homes and with flexible and startup workspace included

STOCKPORT NOW

290,557: Stockport population (2016 figures)

11,660: Businesses and counting in Stockport

3rd: Largest workforce within Greater Manchester

124,000: People employed

In: 13,000 businesses

8,800: In digital and creative

10,000: Manufacturing

26,000: Employed in business, financial and professional services

Students: 99,000

3 trains: An hour direct to London Euston from Stockport station (less than a two-hour journey)

Every 5 minutes: Trains to Manchester city centre

99%: Of properties have access to superfast broadband