

BRENCHLEY AND MATFIELD NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

REPORT ON BUSINESS AND EMPLOYMENT SURVEY

Introduction

The Business and Employment Survey was undertaken to provide evidence on the views of business to inform the Brenchley and Matfield Neighbourhood Plan. It was undertaken in August-September 2020. Questionnaires were delivered or sent to around 100 local businesses, as many as possible being delivered by hand to speak to local businesses and encourage them to complete the survey.

35 responses were received by the final deadline. These were analysed by the Steering Group. The sectoral breakdown of questionnaires was approximately:

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Questionnaires</u>
Services	9	27
Farming	6	17
Hospitality	5	15
Retail	4	12
Prof.Services	5	10
Manuftrg	1	7
Other	4	11

Summary of Key Points

The main points arising from the Survey are:

- Only 22% of employees live in the parish
- 90% go to work by car
- Only a quarter of businesses expect to expand
- 79% report mobile reception problems and 61% broadband problems but only 15% are dissatisfied with post/parcels services
- There is very little support for greenfield development; support for other options mainly reflects general views rather than their business needs
- As with the wider community, transport issues include speed, congestion, HGVs and the state of the roads
- 85% think the environment very important or important for business but very few have invested in renewable energy and fewer than 20% have an active strategy
- Three-quarters of businesses have been affected by Covid, all but 2 negatively through fall in demand, Covid controls or supply difficulties.

Business and Employment Survey Results

In more detail, the Survey returns show:

- 12 businesses were located in farms/smallholdings, with 11 in village centres and 9 at home (Q1).
- 21 had part- or full-time employees, with 148 staff and a further 40 seasonal workers for harvesting. Only 33 permanent employees live in the parish; of these over one-third were

with one business; only 5 employees work from home (NB These figures exclude the business owners and possibly their families) (Q2-3).

- Of the 15 responses on local recruitment, 6 said this was very easy or quite easy, while 9 said it was difficult or very difficult; lack of required skills/experience was the main cause of difficulty cited (10), followed by lack of affordable housing (4) (Q4-5).
- 12 businesses said they were quite or very likely to change staff levels in the next 3-5 years while 10 were unlikely or definitely not planning to change (NB This does not say whether the change would be up or down) (Q6)
- Nearly 90% of employees travel to work by car, while only one each cycle or use public transport (Q7)
- 18 businesses reported a need for parking, with a total of 58 spaces (NB It was not asked whether additional spaces were needed, so these might all already exist) (Q8).
- 13 businesses had been in the parish for over 20 years while none were less than a year (Q9).
- 10 businesses were in agriculture; the next most common were retail (4) and car repairs, hospitality and tourism (3 each) (Q10).
- Of seven listed factors that make the parish attractive for business (more than one could be cited), the most common, with 13, was the rural setting, followed by being close to home, with 11, and the availability of suitable premises (9) (Q11).
- There was an even balance, on ease of finding premises, between saying it was very or quite easy and very or quite difficult (Q12).
- Only 9 respondents thought it very or quite likely that they would need more accommodation in the coming 3-5 years, while 24 said it was unlikely or definitely not needed (Q13).
- 11 of the respondents are home-based workers (Q14).
- Of the menu of possible elements of a home-working support hub, the most attractive was access to high bandwidth internet (10), with 3 citations each of co-working and collaborative space and business meeting space; only 6 out of 20 thought they might need more space in the future (NB this question appears to have been answered by some who are not home workers) (Q15-16).
- 20 out of 33 (61%) of respondents reported problems with broadband, while this rose to 79% (27 out of 34) having problem with mobile signal; but only 13% (5 out of 33) had problems with post/parcels (Q17-19).
- In 25 replies to the question asking whether more land should be made available for businesses and where, 17 said redundant farm buildings, 13 existing buildings and 12 brownfield sites, while only 2 supported greenfield sites; only one response said land should not be provided in the parish (NB the question did not offer a 'no development' option). Note that many of these answers are general views rather than relating to the requirements of the businesses themselves (Q20).
- In 28 replies on transport concerns, 16 cited speeding traffic, 14 local congestion, 13 HGVs using narrow roads and 12 the state of the road network; the next most common issue (7) was parking. One respondent pointed out that HGVs were needed for their business (Q21).
- 74% of respondents had not been affected by crime or anti-social behaviour in the past 5 years; 24% (not necessarily the same businesses) thought the police ineffective but most respondents said they had no opinion; 13 had installed specific security measures, while a further 14 said that such measures were a matter of course (Q22-24).

- The most common sources of local information are word of mouth (26), Roundabout (25) and social media (21); other sources referred to by at least a quarter of respondents were the community website and the internet (Q25).
- 67% of respondents thought the countryside and environment very important for business and another 18% said it was important, but only 5 use any of the renewable energy sources listed; only 6 said they had a policy and strategy on carbon footprint that they actively pursue, while 22 either are passive and do what they can or do what regulations require (Q26-28).
- On Covid, 75% of 28 respondents said they had been affected, mostly through having to comply with Covid restrictions but also experiencing a fall in demand or being unable to access supplies. 2 respondents said business had increased (Q29).

A table consolidating replies to the Survey is at Annex 1.

Additional Comments or Suggestions

Respondents were invited to add comments or suggestions at the end of the survey. Only 5 did so, though some others made points when answering questions. There was no overall theme to the comments, which mainly underlined points about issues in the Survey such as on the internet and transport. Other individual points included on: the importance of retaining Brenchley Post Office; the potential to reduce carbon footprint by extending gas supplies to the parish; and the desirability of flexibility in planning to encourage home working.