**NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN ECONOMY WORKING GROUP**

**BRIDPORT TOWN CENTRE SHOPS SURVEY**

**Context**

A priority for the Bridport Area Neighbourhood Plan (Vision 2030) is to ensure that the town centre continues to thrive and flourish. Evidence from earlier surveys clearly demonstrates that among the things residents most like about the area are its mix of independent shops and its twice weekly street market. Without doubt, these are elements which make Bridport the unique and popular place that it is.

The West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland Local Plan contains a definition for the town centre area (a line on a map), which also shows the primary and secondary shop frontages. These can be summed up as covering most of the shopping areas within East Street, West Street and South Street.



Key: Dark blue solid line = town centre; dark blue dashed line = Local Plan proposed extension; mid tone blue = primary shop frontages; and light blue = secondary shop frontages.

The Local Plan takes the view that, “there is likely to be a need for more comparison retail space than can be accommodated in the town centre by the end of the plan period”. This statement is based upon a Retail Study which the District Council had previously commissioned and which stated that Bridport had few comparison shopping outlets for a market town of its size.

This view, however, sits uneasily with the widely expressed views of Bridport area residents. What they say they particularly value is the range of independent shops, which give the town its character, as well as keeping more money circulating within the local economy. Residents typically like the fact that Bridport is not dominated by the chains and shop brands to be found in most other town centres. To coin an often quoted phrase, they do not want it to become another “clone town”.

The Economy Working Group therefore decided to gather some evidence to see whether an alternative approach to the town centre could be justified through the Neighbourhood Plan.

**The Survey**

In April 2016 members of the Working Group conducted a survey of the primary and secondary frontages within the defined town centre. They collected data about each of its retail outlets or other facilities. The survey was undertaken by walking the three relevant streets in the town centre and logging information about the premises on a form.

There were 183 premises logged by this survey and 175 of these were judged to be retail outlets for the purposes of this survey. The other 8 premises included churches, private residences, a library and a Citizens Advice bureau.

The information that was gathered about each premises covered:

* The postal address (street and number);
* The outlet’s trading name;
* The type of outlet e.g. food retailer, take-away, estate agent, hairdresser;
* Whether the outlet was an independent or part of a national/chain;
* Whether the premises was currently vacant.

Notes were added in some cases, based on local knowledge, to aid interpretation.

It should be noted that this survey only covered permanent outlets and did not cover temporary or street stalls associated with the market.

This work has enabled analysis that provides a solid and up-to-date understanding of the town centre and its retail offer.

**Findings**

*Retail mix*: there were 171 retail outlets in the town centre which were trading at the time of the survey and these could be classified as follows:

* 31 eat-in or take-away (restaurants, bars, pubs, take-aways, etc);
* 23 clothing (new clothes, second hand, shoe shops, shoe repairs, etc);
* 14 homeware shops (hardware stores, electrical, carpets, etc);
* 13 estate agents;
* 11 hair and beauty (hairdressers, nail salon, etc);
* 11 charity shops;
* 10 health and medical (pharmacies, dentists, opticians, etc);
* 10 food (butchers, bakers, greengrocers, convenience, supermarket, etc);
* 9 arts and music;
* 7 miscellaneous outlets;
* 7 gifts and florists;
* 7 banks and building societies;
* 7 book sellers;
* 4 solicitors and insurers;
* 3 computer repairs and accessories;
* 2 travel agents; and
* 2 bookmakers.

This is illustrated as a bar chart at the end of this document.

*Vacancies*: the survey found that there were also 4 vacant premises among the primary and secondary frontages of the town centre. This gives a vacancy rate of 2.3% or 4 out of 175 premises.

It should be added that 3 of the 4 vacant premises were known to be in the process of refurbishment or reopening in April (and 1 of these has since reopened, although another shop has since closed).

*Charity shops*: charity shops provide a valued service. However, where there are a lot of them, it can indicate that a shopping area is finding it hard to let retail space on a fully commercial basis[[1]](#footnote-1). The survey found that there were 11 charity shops among the 175 retail outlets. This means that 6.3% of the retail outlets are charity shops.

*Independents*: classifying the 171 trading retail outlets in this way shows that:

* 121 of them (70.8%) are locally run or managed independents; and
* 50 of them (29.2%) are a part of national or regional retail chains. In some cases they may be operated as franchises.

**National Figures**

For comparison, there are national vacancy rate figures for March 2016 available from the Local Data Company. They show:

* That the overall vacancy rate for retail premises in the UK was 12.5%;
* That 6.3% of all UK retail premises had been vacant for two or more years;
* That in town centres (only) the vacancy rate for retail premises was 10.9%;
* That in the South West region the vacancy rate for retail premises was 9.6%.

The Local Data Company also released some figures about independents. In July 2015 it classified 65% of all retail outlets in the UK as independents.

**Views of Commercial Agents**

This paper can also draw upon information gathered through some recent interviews conducted with three commercial (estate) agents, all of whom have some experience of the town. Their views could be summarised as follows:

* Agents receive quite a few enquiries from those on the lookout for available retail premises in the town (though demand should not be over-stated);
* These enquiries come from both local independents and from chain stores;
* Key issues for enquirers are the quality/state of the building and the size of the premises;
* Where retail units sit vacant for any length of time there is usually a problem with one of these issues or the freeholder is asking an unrealistic price;
* Independent retailers typically look for smaller premises and are less likely to want space over the shop;
* Chain retailers typically look for larger premises and are more likely to want space over the shop for storage;
* Compared with other town centres, a lot of the premises in Bridport are smaller premises;
* Compared with towns like Dorchester, rents for retail space in Bridport are low;
* Both the above factors (smaller premises and lower rents) favour independent retailers. If larger premises were available or built this would likely attract more chains;
* It could be said that Bridport is under-provided for in terms of retail premises. However, given the stiff and growing competition from online retailing this is a healthier position than having over-provision.

**Conclusions**

The following can therefore be concluded:

* The town centre contains a good range of types of retail outlets;
* The town centre has a particularly low vacancy rate i.e. few empty premises;
* Charity shops make up a fairly modest share of town centre retail outlets;
* The town centre has a high number of independent retail outlets;
* Consequently, the town centre has a low number of chain retail outlets;
* The mix of available retail premises is one that favours independent retailers.

The evidence shows that Bridport town centre is vibrant and fairing well. It compares well when compared with national averages. It appears to have built a distinctive offer based upon having a good range of shops, many of which are independents that cannot be found elsewhere. By bucking the trend that is seeing so many town centres dominated by chains, it appears to have carved out a successful and popular niche. It would seem prudent to design Neighbourhood Plan policies that maintain and enhance that trading position. This may also prove more sustainable in the long term, as chains conduct an ever larger share of their transactions online.

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1. Charity shops gain from some lower costs. For example, they receive 80% relief on business rates. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)