**BRIDPORT AREA NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN: ECONOMY WORKING GROUP**

**SURVEY OF TRADING ESTATES AND MAIN EMPLOYMENT SITES**

**Introduction**

Gaining a better understanding of the area’s trading estates is considered important, to inform and to evidence Neighbourhood Plan policies. In particular, whether there are vacant premises or units, what demand there is for business units and how well the existing premises suit that demand.

It was therefore decided to undertake a quick survey of trading estates and main employment sites in the local area, supplemented by contacting a few commercial (estate) agents. The aim was to gather some hard data, for example about vacant units, plus some qualitative information about the state of the commercial market. The opportunity was also taken to ask about staff recruitment.

All of the trading estates and employment sites covered by this paper lie within the Neighbourhood Plan area, which consists of the five civil parishes of Allington, Bradpole, Bridport, Bothenhampton & Walditch, and Symondsbury.

The method consisted of visiting each estate to create a record of the units and conducting a set of short interviews, either face-to-face or by phone. At least one interview (often two) took place about each estate. The estates vary, in that:

* Some have a single estate owner-manager and tenant businesses;
* Some house businesses each of which own their own freehold; and
* Some have businesses renting premises from different freehold owners.

For this reason the interviews were with a mix of trading estate owners and individual businesses (both freeholders and renters). Interviews were conducted, too, with three commercial (estate) agents who are familiar with the locality. This work took place in late July and early August 2016. Most of those approached were happy to be interviewed, with only two not responding.

The survey work generated a set of interview notes and some sketch maps of the employment sites. This paper is a summary of the main findings.

The organisations interviewed are acknowledged at the end of this paper. However, no individual’s views have been identified, since the interviews were (deliberately) not held ‘on the record’.

**Local Plan context**

Some information about trading estates was gathered three years ago as part of the evidence base compiled to support the Local Plan. This can be found in the Western Area appendix from the *Employment and Land Review for West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland* (2013).

That work looked at 10 existing trading estates or employment land sites in the Neighbourhood Plan area. In total these sites provided 27.59 hectares of employment land. Much the largest of the sites is Gore Cross, whose land area comprises roughly a third of the total. That Local Plan information is summarised in the table below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Site name** | **Site size (hectares)** | **Report comments** |
| Amsafe Buildings | 2.28 ha | Operated by one occupier. No vacant units and little development opportunity. |
| St Michael’s | 3.36 ha | Site has many start-up businesses. Some larger premises suitable as stepping stones for growing businesses. |
| St Andrew’s | 3.18 ha | No comments. |
| Gore Cross | 8.93 ha | High quality trading estate. Some potential to grow. |
| North Mills | 2.29 ha | Some vacant/underused land at the margins. But limited by traffic access. |
| Dreadnought | 1.29 ha | Limited capacity for extensions. |
| Old Laundry (Sea Road North) | 0.54 ha | Limited redevelopment potential. |
| East Road (roundabout) | 1.36 ha | Limited potential for intensification of development. |
| Crepe Farm (Symondsbury) | 1.67 ha | Some buildings in poor condition, though many still in use. Important for small, marginal and start-up businesses. Potential for development. |
| Pymore Mills | 2.69 ha | Traffic access limits its development potential. |

Only 7 of these 10 sites are designated as “key employment sites” under policy ECON2 of the Local Plan (a designation which gives them added protection from change of use). The 7 are: Amsafe Buildings; St Andrew’s; Gore Cross; North Mills; Dreadnought; Crepe Farm; and Pymore Mills.

**The 2016 survey**

The new survey for the Neighbourhood Plan gathered information about eleven trading estates and employment sites. They are listed in the table below. The consultant surveyed ten of them and (for practical reasons) information about St Michael’s trading estate was provided by Enterprise St Michael’s. With that addition, it is considered that all of the area’s main employment sites are covered.

**Units or premises**

On the ten sites covered by this paper there are roughly 154 units or separate premises for businesses on these estates. This number should be taken as approximate, since some units are capable of being combined or sub-divided to meet the needs of individual businesses. Furthermore, Crepe Farm has units tucked away behind others making it hard to count and Amsafe (counted here as one premises) could arguably be seen as several units.

Six of these estates are of particular importance numerically, being: St Michael’s Gore Cross; Dreadnought; North Mills; St Andrew’s; and Crepe Farm. Whilst Gore Cross does not have the most units, they are of a good size making it the largest site in terms of hectares. At the other end of the spectrum, the units at Crepe Farm are all small.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Trading estate/ employment site** | **Number of units** | **Vacant units** | **Number of businesses** |
| St Michael’s | 57 | 0 | 118 |
| Dreadnought | 33 | 0 | 26 |
| North Mills | 30 | 8 | 17 |
| Gore Cross | 24 | 1 (taken) | 23 |
| St Andrew’s | 21 | 1 | 20 |
| Crepe Farm | 19 | 4 (taken) | 15 |
| Pymore Mills | 9 | 1 | 4 |
| East Road | 8 | 0 | 7 |
| Old Laundry | 5 | 0 | 4 |
| Westway | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| Amsafe buildings | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Totals | 211 | 15 | 239 |

Footnote: North Mills: 27 units are on the area managed by Fowler Estates and 3 are in a separate freehold area.

**Business numbers and types**

There are believed to be 239 businesses operating on these sites, some of which are using two or more units. On St Michael’s, by contrast, different businesses often share a unit. Unsurprisingly, the largest numbers are to be found on the six employment sites with the most units. However, some of the area’s larger employers can be found at other sites e.g. at Pymore Mills.

Although there is a considerable (and some might say, surprising) mix of business types on the sites, a few sub-sectors are especially important. They are, in order of frequency: a) arts and crafts; b) building trades and builders merchants; c) car repair, spares and garages; d) home wares; e) antiques; f) food and drink; and g) light engineering. Almost two-thirds of all businesses on the sites fall within these seven sub-sectors. Rope/net businesses are another notable feature. It is worth adding that arts, crafts and antique businesses are mostly clustered on St Michael’s trading estate and are generally one person businesses.

**Vacant units**

As the table above shows, 15 vacant units have been identified on these employment sites, giving a vacancy rate of just over 7%. However, 5 of the vacant units are understood to be taken and so not on the market.

According to commercial agents units that become vacant are typically taken up quite quickly. A small number of vacant units can be considered as the usual “churn” that results from business moves and closures. It seems likely, therefore, that having 10 to 15 vacant units indicates the employment sites are close to capacity.

If units sit vacant for any length of time there may well be a specific reason. For example, the vacant unit at Pymore Mills is small and in a poor state of repair. Of course, another reason could be the asking price.

There would appear to be almost no vacancies at the top end of the market (if Gore Cross is taken to represent that) and almost no vacancies at the other end of the market. What vacancies currently exist are largely in the mid-market range and, indeed, are at one site (North Mills). Quite why this should be so is unclear given the otherwise positive state of the commercial market.

It was frequently mentioned that there is little turnover of businesses on these employment sites, with many having been at the same premises for a long time. Some tenants were now on their third or fourth lease. Those businesses which had moved premises typically came from another employment site around Bridport or even from another unit on the same employment site. The development of Gore Cross a few years ago appears to have resulted in some moves from the other sites, presumably freeing up premises at that time. There were no inward investors (arriving from outside the area) among the businesses interviewed.

**Demand and enquiries**

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the commercial market is viewed as healthy by commercial (estate) agents and demand for business premises on the employment sites is said to be strong, if not quite as strong as it has been in recent years. Leases are seen as quite popular and freehold premises even more so, on the rare occasion they come onto the market.

Whilst enquiries about premises are varied in nature, most of them come from small businesses which are looking for small premises. Quite a lot of these are start up companies.

The bulk of the enquiries come from local businesses. The Bridport area is not seen as a location which attracts inward investment, though this is considered no different from most towns of its size and rural location. It was also noted the area does not have the workforce skills that would attract some employers.

**Features sought**

Different businesses have been attracted to their current locations by differing features, making it hard to generalise. Some like being close to the town centre and others prefer being further out with easier access to the road network.

A significant number of enquirers are said to be looking for modern and flexible employment space. This is also more likely to have dedicated car parking and space for deliveries (loading bays, etc). The age of many premises in the area is seen as an issue. Some owners/freeholders have recently improved buildings, but other buildings may be hard or costly to modernise. Moreover, the cost of upgrading them may not be recouped by the increase in rental value. In this regard, there is some concern about new regulations due to come into force between 2018 and 2023, which will enforce higher energy efficiency standards for rented employment space.

Price can also be a key factor, especially for recent start-ups and more marginal businesses. They are prepared to trade quality of premises for a lower rent.

Some businesses said it was not particular features that led them to be located where they were. Rather it was just historic or happenstance. Some had moved into available premises when they set up and remain happy enough with it given the upheaval that a move would involve. Some businesses have invested heavily in plant or machinery at their present location. Others say that staying put means long-term and repeat customers know where to find them.

**Scope to move locally**

Many if not most of the businesses interviewed had never considered moving and consequently had not explored how easy it would be to do so locally.

Views about the likely ease of finding alternative premises varied. Larger businesses (or those in larger premises) noted the lack of realistic alternative options. Some of the smaller businesses equally felt it would be hard for them to move, because relatively few vacant premises come onto the market. Other smaller businesses, though, thought they could probably find somewhere and cited options such as the managed trading estates. Interestingly, one small business which would like to expand had actively looked into moving locally and had not found a vacant premises at a price they could afford.

**Site development potential**

Most of the surveyed employment sites appear to have little if any land on which additional new units could be built. To use the phrase used by the commercial (estate) agents, they are essentially ‘built out’. Indeed, buildings seem to be quite tightly packed onto some of the older estates.

There is known to have been a planning permission for some further development at Pymore Mills (though whether or not it is extant is unknown). It is also known that expanding the small employment site at Westway has been explored. On the face of it, neither of these – were they to happen – seems likely to provide significant amounts of new employment space.

Gore Cross is a spacious site and may have more options. Some of the units have limited scope to expand within their own footprint of land. The survey also heard about the scope for extending one premises upwards to accommodate another floor. There could be some scope to develop at Crepe Farm.

The owners of St Michael’s trading estate are putting together redevelopment proposals for the site. It may well be, however, that this proposes a small decrease in employment land, with part of the estate being developed for housing.

**Staff recruitment**

Many of the businesses interviews referred to difficulties they had experienced recruiting staff. In broad terms these played out in two ways.

Some (essentially the larger businesses) felt that it was generally straightforward to recruit locally to less skilled and administrative posts. However, it could be difficult to recruit into specialist, technical or senior roles. When advertising such posts they will tend to do so over a wider geographic area and may use recruitment agencies to help them do that. As a result some members of staff commute to/from the Bridport area for an hour or so each way. There is also said to be a low turnover of staff in local senior positions: it is a small pool of people filling relatively few posts. This, however, is seen as predictable in a rural location such as West Dorset.

Others (many of the smaller businesses) were more likely to say that recruitment generally could be hard, especially to find motivated staff. They had little confidence in the formal recruitment channels. Instead they relied almost entirely on word of mouth and informal recruitment methods. This variously involved putting out word about a vacancy among their local contacts, interviewing jobseekers known to their existing staff and taking on people who had turned up at the door looking for work. These are seen as more likely to find people with the right skills and work ethic.

One particular issue of note was an apprenticeship post which has been advertised for some months and had not yet generated any applicants. It is no known whether this is in any way typical.

**Concluding comments**

The survey has found few vacant units on the area’s main employment sites and trading estates, and some evidence that businesses find it hard to move premises locally. The commercial market appears to be fairly buoyant. What businesses are seeking varies. On the one hand there is demand for modern flexible business units and on the other hand there is a market from the smallest businesses for affordable units or workshops. The scope to develop additional premises on the main existing employment sites appears to be limited.

The survey has also highlighted certain limitations local businesses face when recruiting staff. Although labour force issues can’t be addressed directly by planning policies in a Neighbourhood Plan, they may be of relevance to other local initiatives.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks are due to three commercial (estate) agents who were approached and agreed to be interviewed, being Goadsby, Humberts and Symonds & Sampson. Thanks are also due to the businesses and estate managers who were interviewed, being A Cask, Acorn Joinery, Amsafe, And So To Bed, Autobitz, Brydion Cards, Chesil Smokery, Fowler Estates Limited, Fowler Tool Hire, Hallmark Windows, Maria’s Pantry and Symondsbury Wood. Andrew Leppard is thanked for providing information about businesses on the St Michael’s trading estate.

Produced by: Brian Wilson Associates

Commissioned by: Bridport Town Council

Produced for: Bridport Area Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group and its Economy Working Group

Date: Revised/final October 2016

**Map of the main trading estates and employment sites**



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Source: Ordnance Survey map base taken from Local Plan PlanVu website

Key to sites:

1 Amsafe buildings 7 Old Laundry

2 Crepe Farm 8 Pymore Mills

3 Dreadnought TE 9 St Andrew’s TE

4 East Road TE 10 St Michael’s TE

5 Gore Cross TE 11 Westway

6 North Mills TE