

Business Consultation 2006

Report of Research

November 2006

Report prepared for:

**Stroud District Council
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Appendix A: Profile of the Survey Sample

Appendix B: Copy of the Telephone Survey Questionnaire



1. Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

In September 2006, Stroud District Council commissioned The Research Box to undertake public consultation with the business community in the District.

In previous years, the Authority has carried out consultation with the local business community by means of two annual public meetings. These have not been well attended, however, with as few as 40 people attending from the 3,000 or so business rate payers in the District. In view of this, it was decided that the statutory requirement to consult would be satisfied with a survey.

This report contains the principle findings arising from this consultation. The consultation was undertaken with a stratified random selection of businesses in the District by means of a telephone interview survey.

1.2 Summary of Key Findings

Business Views of the District Council

When presented with a series of attitude statements, just over a half of businesses said that they were satisfied with the way that the Council runs things. Around 40% agreed or agreed strongly that the District Council is businesslike and efficient, with a similar number agreeing or agreeing strongly that services have improved. All statements attracted a fair degree of dissent, but one in particular – the one about value for money – had two in five businesses disagreeing.

When respondents were asked to score their *perceived* performance of the Council, on a five-point scale from very poor to very good, a handful of services achieve quite high ratings: ‘refuse collection’, ‘recycling and composting’ and ‘street cleaning & abandoned vehicles’ were all seen to be good or very good by a half or more of Stroud businesses. However, none of the other services scored well and, indeed, there were quite a few where the poor or very poor scores were quite substantial; these were ‘public conveniences’, ‘town-centre improvements’ and ‘car parks’. All these were perceived to be poor or very poor by around a quarter or more of businesses.

There were some notable differences between the perceptions of small and larger organisations. Larger companies were more positive about several services – notably refuse collection, street cleaning and abandoned vehicles, town centre improvements, community projects and tourism promotion – but were otherwise generally slightly less positive in their views.

District Council Policies

Businesses were given the opportunity in two open-ended questions to say whether there were any areas where they believed the Council should be spending **more** money (“in order to achieve improvements for local businesses and residents”), or if there were any areas where spending should be **less**. Principal areas for more spending included recycling, car parking, policing and public conveniences. The main areas for less spending focused on Council offices, Council expenses, pensions and salaries.



When respondents were given a list of five broad policy areas (business support, regeneration healthy living, the environment; and planning) and were asked whether each should be given a low or high priority for the Council's attention, the principle priority area was 'the environment'. Nearly 80% of respondents gave this area a high or very high priority. Next in order of importance was 'regeneration', which achieved a high or very high priority score of nearly 75%. The lowest priority was 'healthy living', at 57%.

Opinion was quite split as to whether planning policies help or hinder businesses. Generally speaking, most organisations don't know one way or the other – although there is a balance just in favour of the view that planning policies are a hindrance.

The provision of adequate business accommodation is seen to be a high priority for three-quarters of those surveyed, with a slightly stronger emphasis amongst the smaller companies in the District. The local business community believes that the Council should be focusing on a mix of accommodation types, but with a predominant view that the focus should be on small-scale light industrial units.

The Environment

Addressing climate-change issues and action to improve energy efficiency are seen to be a high priority for about **90%** of businesses, with smaller organisations tending to be stronger in their views.

In view of this finding, it's perhaps not surprising that about 80% of local businesses said they would be willing to invest in practical solutions, which might require them to make investment now, but which would save money in the long term.

There was considerable interest in receiving help and information about the various options that might be available, including the availability of grants.

Over 40% of organisations said that they would definitely be prepared to pay for recyclable materials to be collected from their premises, with a further 32% saying 'yes, possibly'.

Business Support

Local businesses turn most to their local Business Link or to the Federation of Small Businesses for business advice and support. Just over a quarter said they had contacted the District Council, but a further quarter of businesses had not contacted any of the organisations that were listed.

Satisfaction ratings, amongst those using each organisation, were about 80% on average, although slightly higher for the South West RDA and lowest of all for the Dti. The business advice services that Stroud District Council provides to the local business community were rated about average.

Awareness of the support and information schemes that the Council provides for local businesses is very low, for example about one in eight businesses had heard of the database of workplaces and available accommodation that the District Council runs. The exception to this low level aware of awareness is the website directory of local businesses, where about a half or so of organisations contacted in this survey had heard of this facility.



The level of use (or application to use) each of the Schemes is even lower, although rather more businesses would like more information about these schemes. The level of interest is not substantial, but – for each scheme – about 10% of larger businesses and about 20% of smaller businesses would like to hear more.

Just one half of small businesses and a slightly more than a third of larger ones were aware of the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme, although rather fewer thought that they might qualify; amongst the target smaller businesses this latter figure was nearly 40%. Just over a third of smaller businesses said that they had applied (or reapplied) this year; about one in eight larger businesses said they had too. There was a level of interest in the scheme from about 15% of small businesses and a third of larger ones.



2. Introduction

2.1 Background

In September 2005, Stroud District Council commissioned The Research Box to undertake public consultation with the business community in the District.

In previous years, the Authority has carried out consultation with the local business community by means of two annual public meetings. These have not been well attended, however, with as few as 40 people attending from the 3,000 or so business rate payers in the District. In view of this, it was decided that, this year, the statutory requirement to consult would be satisfied with a survey.

2.2 Method

The consultation was undertaken with businesses and other organisations in the District by means of a telephone interview survey.

A stratified random selection of businesses in the District was initially contacted by phone. Respondents were the person in the organisation who 'would represent the company on the matter of Business Rates and the provision of local services by the District Council'. The profile of the organisations that took part is described in Appendix A.

During the initial phone contact, the purpose of the interview was explained and permission for interview agreed. Then some background material, plus a covering letter, was sent to the respondent, using e-mail or fax (whichever was most suitable and convenient). Afterwards, a follow-up call was made and the interview conducted. The interview took, on average, just over 15½ minutes to conduct and fieldwork took place between 4th and 18th October, 2006.

A total of 101 businesses responded to the survey¹:

- 70 interviews with companies or organisation with five or more employees (at that site)
- 31 interviews with companies or organisation with less than five employees.

The questionnaire had the following structure:

- profile details (such as respondent title and level of responsibility, company size etc)
- satisfaction with the District Council's services
- specific questions covering the Authority's principal policies, such as planning and the environment
- questions concerning general business support schemes
 - what sources were used, satisfaction with the advice received etc
- the small business rate relief scheme
 - including awareness and whether they had applied for the scheme.

A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix B to this report.

¹ A quota was set for small businesses (30 interviews) and for larger ones (70 interviews).



2.3 Structure of the Report

This report summarises the principle findings arising from the consultation. It has three further chapters.

- Chapter Three examines some background attitudes, looking at business' perceptions of the District Council and the performance of the Council
- Chapter Four contains the findings pertaining to the Council's future strategies and plans
- The final Chapter Five summarises the other findings from the research – those relating to the various support schemes that exist for local businesses.

More detail from the telephone survey may be found in the full tabulations of the survey results, issued as an annex to this report.



3. Background Attitudes

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides background information about the attitudes of businesses to the services provided by Stroud District Council.

3.2 Business Views of the District Council

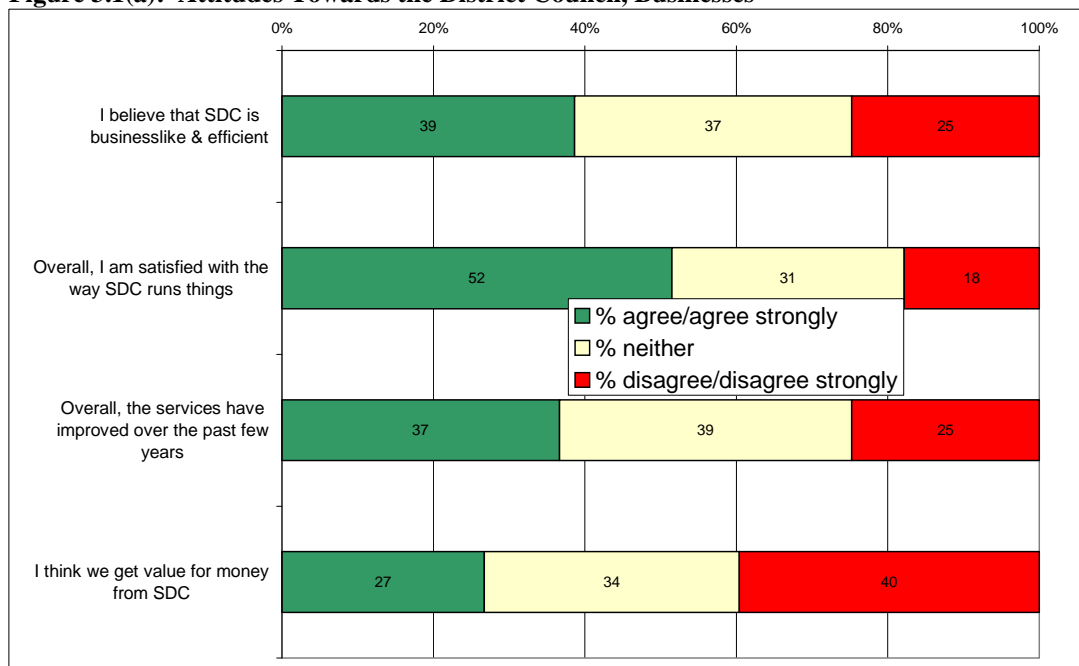
The business consultation survey questionnaire included several questions that examined views of the District Council and its services, using similar wording to the Resident’s survey of 2005.

Respondents were asked to examine four statements and say whether they agreed or disagreed with them. The statements were:

- I believe that Stroud District Council is businesslike and efficient
- Generally, I am satisfied with the way that Stroud District Council runs things
- Overall, the services provided by Stroud District Council have improved over the past few years
- I believe we get value for money from Stroud District Council.

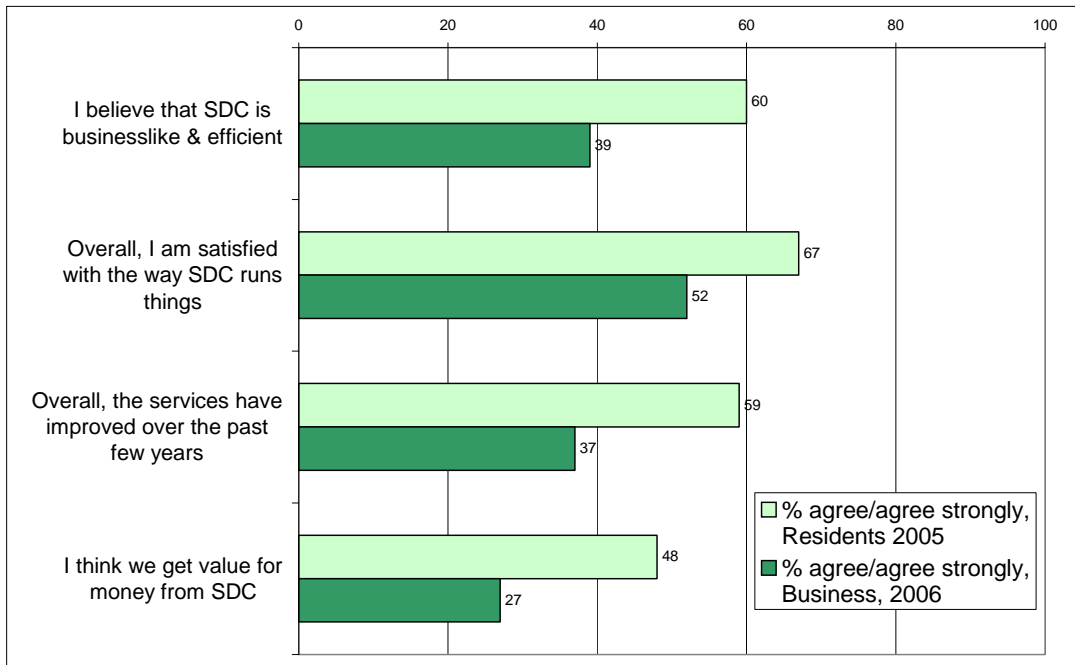
The responses to the statements are generally quite positive, although not as positive as Residents were last year. As can be seen below, just over a half of businesses were satisfied with the way that the Council runs things. Around 40% agreed or agreed strongly that the DC is businesslike and efficient, with a similar number agreeing or agreeing strongly that services have improved. All statements attracted a fair degree of dissent, but one in particular – the one about value for money – had two in five businesses disagreeing.

Figure 3.1(a): Attitudes Towards the District Council, Businesses



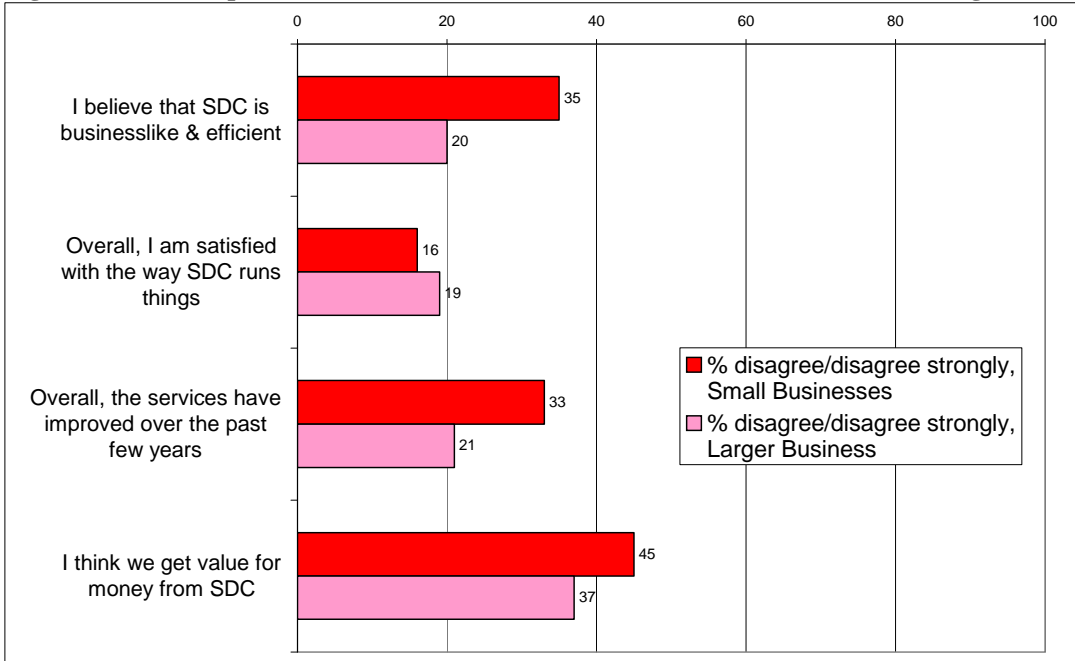
Comparison with the Residents' Survey of 2005 suggests that the Council is less highly thought of amongst the business community. As can be seen below, although about two-thirds of residents were satisfied with the way that the Council runs things, far fewer businesses (52%) thought likewise – and there is a similar pattern for all the attitude statements.

Figure 3.1(b): Comparison of Attitudes Towards the District Council, Businesses and Residents



Not all businesses have equal views. For example, there is a clear tendency for the smaller organisations (those with fewer than five employees) to be more negative about the Council. This tendency is graphically illustrated in the following chart, which shows the percentage that disagreed with each statement.

Figure 3.1(c): Comparison of Attitudes Towards the District Council, Small and Larger Businesses

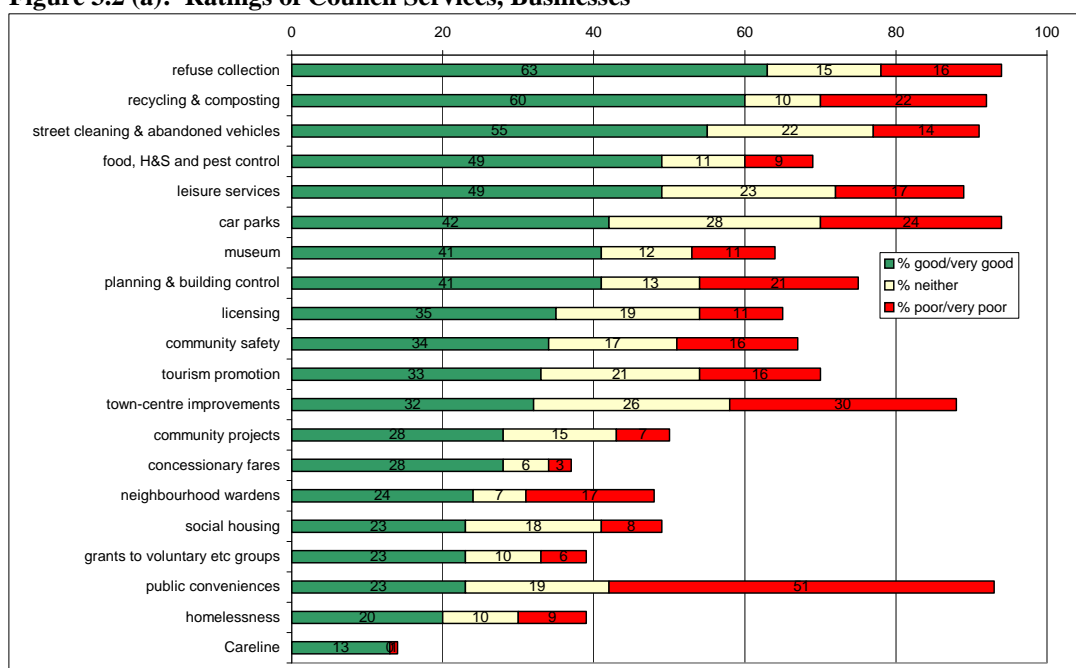


3.3 Perceived Performance

Earlier in the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate the Council’s services. Whether they used the service or not, they were asked to score performance (more accurately, their *perceived* performance) of the Council, on a five-point scale from very poor to very good.

A handful of services achieve quite high ratings: ‘refuse collection’, ‘recycling and composting’ and ‘street cleaning & abandoned vehicles’ – these were all seen to be good or very good by a half or more of Stroud businesses. However, none of the other services scored well and, indeed, there were quite a few where the poor or very poor scores were quite substantial; these were ‘public conveniences’, ‘town-centre improvements’ and ‘car parks’. All these were perceived to be poor or very poor by around a quarter or more of businesses.

Figure 3.2 (a): Ratings of Council Services, Businesses



Note: This chart excludes those Businesses who said ‘don’t know’, so the percentages shown do not necessarily sum to 100

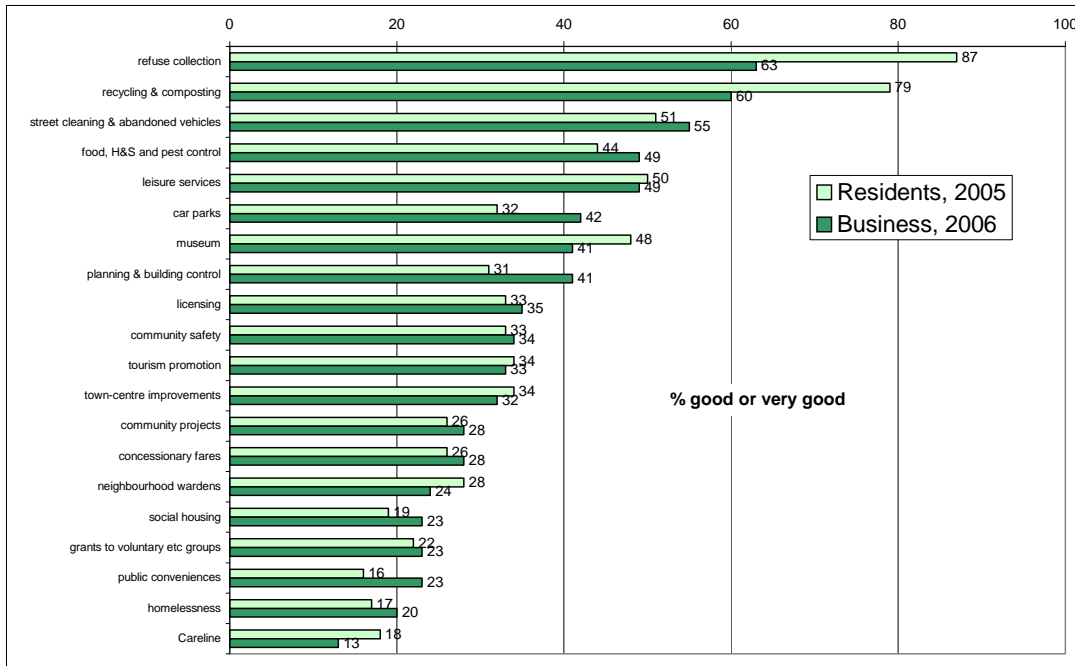
Comparing these results with the Residents’ Survey of last year, we can see that businesses have quite similar views, although they are less positive about refuse collection and waste & recycling. On the other hand, they are slightly more positive about a few services: ‘car parks’ and ‘planning and building control’ are the two notable services here.

Figure 3.3 (b), overleaf, shows these results.

It is also worth noting (although not illustrated) that businesses were less *negative* about most services, except (notably) recycling & composting.

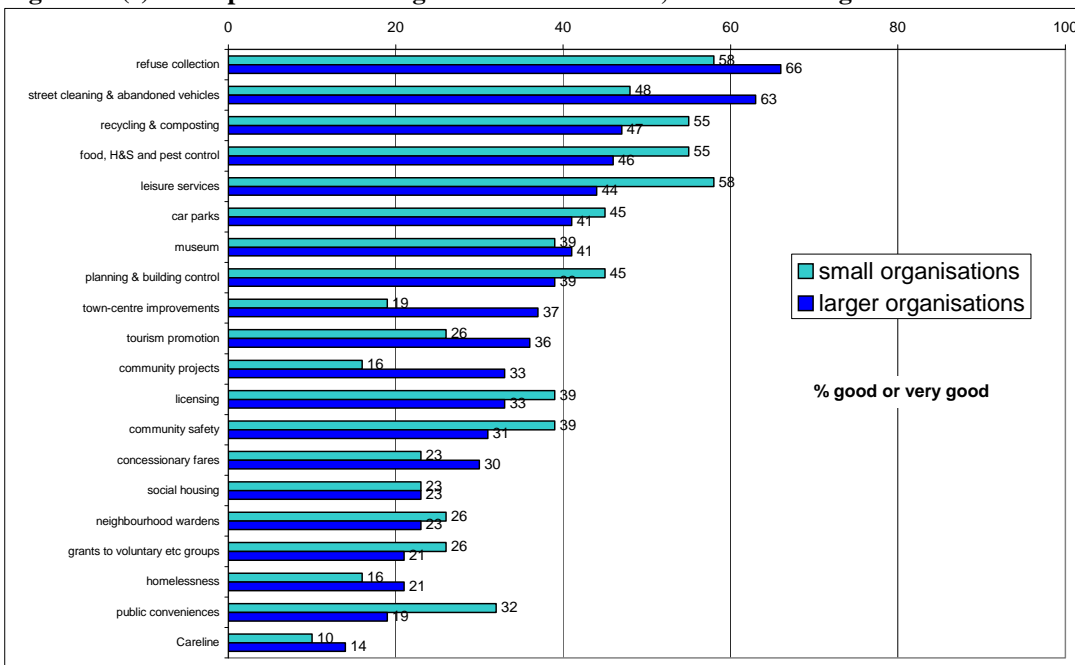


Figure 3.2 (b): Comparison of Ratings of Council Services, Businesses and Residents



Again, there were some notable differences between the perceptions of small and larger organisations. As the next chart shows, larger companies were more positive about several services – notably refuse collection, street cleaning and abandoned vehicles, town centre improvements, community projects and tourism promotion – but were otherwise generally slightly less positive in their views.

Figure 3.2(c): Comparison of Ratings of Council Services, Small and Larger Businesses



4. District Council Policies

4.1 Introduction

This chapter contains the findings relating to the policies that the Council is considering for the next few years. It answers such questions as: how high or low a priority the Council should be putting in its chosen areas, what sort of business accommodation the Council should be focusing on and whether the Council is generally thought to restrict or assist local businesses and organisations through its planning policies.

4.2 Spending Priorities

Although businesses were not given a list of Council services and asked to indicate whether they thought the Council should be spending more, the same, or less on each service, they were given the opportunity in two open-ended questions to say whether there were any areas where they believed the Council should be spending **more** money (“in order to achieve improvements for local businesses and residents”), or if there were any areas where spending should be **less**.

The responses to these two questions are summarised in the following table.

Table 4.1: Candidates for More or Less Spending, Businesses

Principal Areas for More Spending	Principal Areas for Less Spending
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recycling • car parking • policing • public conveniences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council offices • Council expenses, pensions and salaries

Example quotes included:

- **more spending**

Public conveniences are appalling, Cheltenham is a good example to judge against

The biggest issue is car parking for businesses and residents. Council should provide more car parks for everyone

Policing is thin on the ground. This sends the wrong message to young people and sows the seeds of future problems

More help for small business start up - more in the initial year for companies moving into the area, eg with rents & rates. If I had the first six months rent free & ½ the rates I could employ 2 or 3 more people, as we do have the work

Recycling for business

Standards of excellence awarded to businesses and trades, a reason to compete and improve



Transport infrastructure, engineers who understand disablement problems

Elderly peoples services, accommodation for foreign workers

- **less spending**

The Council could be more efficient on expenditure on road repairs. A46 into Stroud is constantly worked upon, it could be done all in one go, not constantly

Supporting ethnic & generally non-English community projects. People should get out what they put in

Leisure and tourism is poorly focused and probably not as effective as it should be

We put far too much money into schools, schooling & bureaucracy, and not enough emphasis on the parents. Refurbishment of Council buildings

Political correctness; if any money is spent on it, it shouldn't be

Their own expense account

Ebley Mill

Street lighting - low energy bulbs.

The full list of verbatim answers may be found in the Tabulations Annexe that supports this report.

4.3 Policy Area Priorities

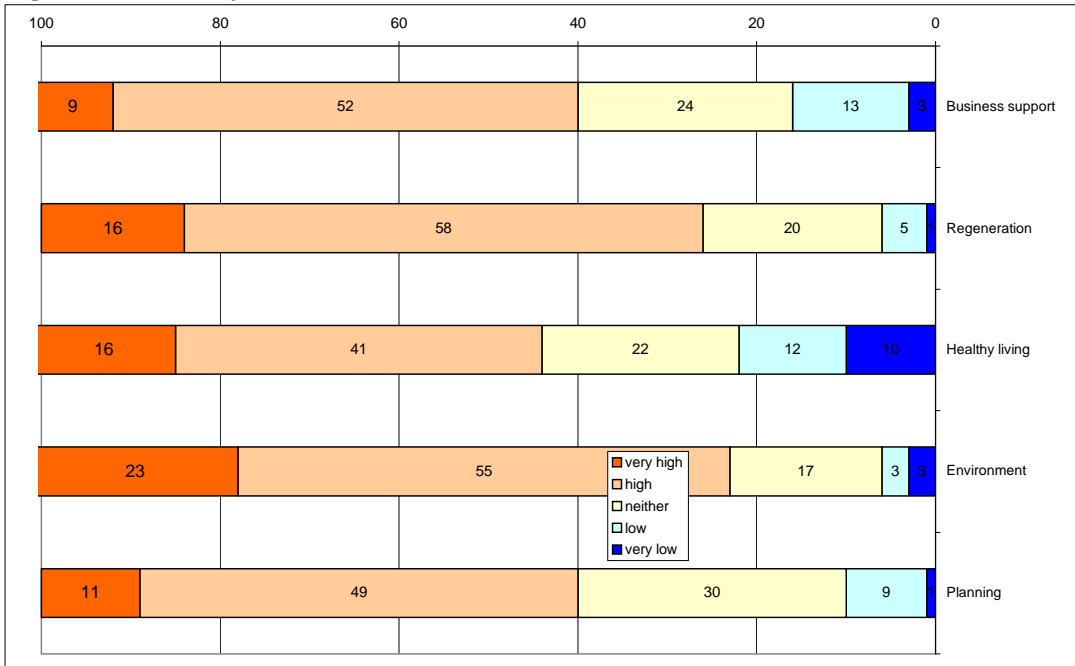
Respondents were given a list of five broad policy areas and were asked whether each should be given a low or high priority for the Council's attention. The five headings were:

- business support
- regeneration
- healthy living
- the environment; and
- planning.

As may be seen overleaf, the principle priority area was 'the environment'; nearly 80% of the respondents in the survey gave this a high or very high priority. Next in order of preference was 'regeneration', which achieved a high or very high priority score of nearly 75%. The lowest priority was 'healthy living'.

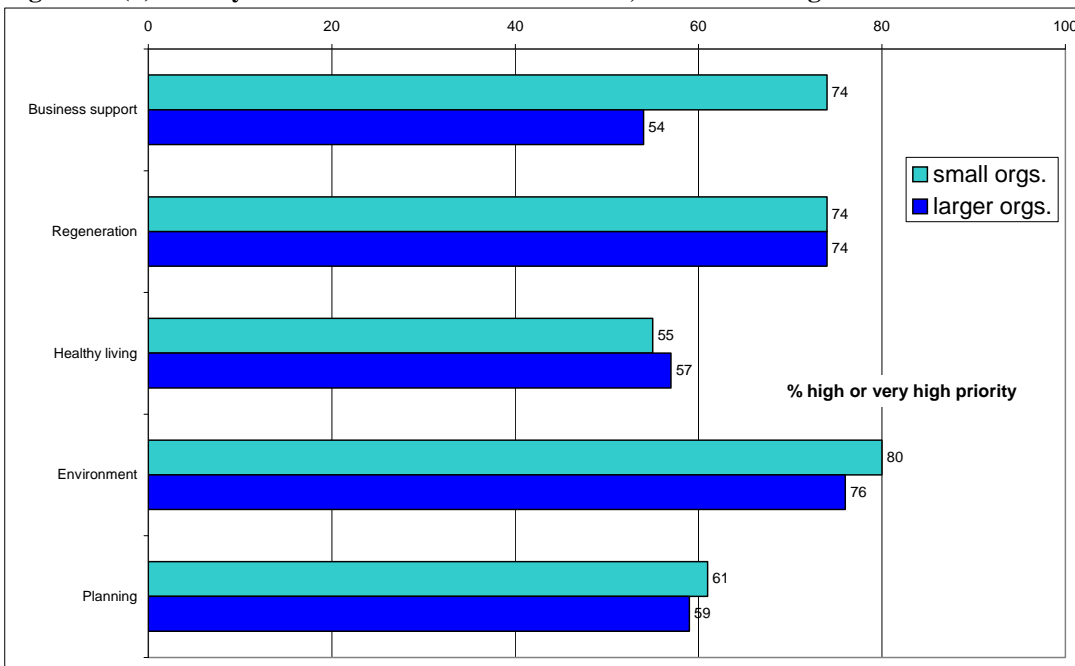


Figure 4.1(a): Policy Priorities for the District Council, All Businesses



Priorities were generally similar regardless of company size, but smaller organisations tended to put a higher priority on business support, as the following chart shows.

Figure 4.1(b): Policy Priorities for the District Council, Small and Larger Businesses

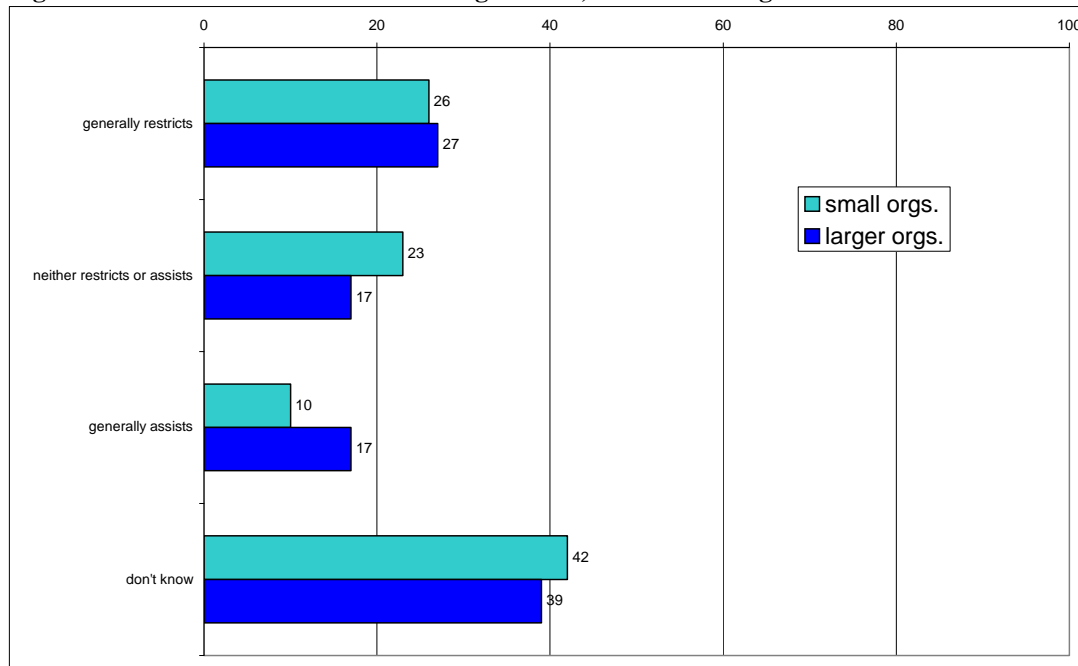


4.4 Planning Policies

By way of introduction to this section, there was a question as to whether planning policies were thought to help or hinder businesses. Generally speaking, as can be seen below, most organisations don't know one way or the other and, otherwise, opinion is quite split – although there is a balance just in favour of planning policies being a hindrance.

Opinion is similar regardless of company size, although the bigger businesses tend to think more that planning generally assists.

Figure 4.2: General Attitudes to Planning Policies, Small and Larger Businesses



How high a priority do businesses think the Council should be putting on ensuring that there is sufficient business accommodation locally so that businesses can establish or grow? Overall, the provision of adequate business accommodation is seen to be a high priority for three-quarters of those surveyed, with a slightly stronger emphasis amongst the smaller companies in the District.

The local business community believes that the Council should be focusing on a mix of accommodation types, but with a predominant view that the focus should be on small-scale light industrial units.

Other types of accommodation that people discussed were:

- a good mixture
- dispersed location - not centralised accommodation
- start-up accommodation with minimal cost
- all of these
- redevelopment of derelict accommodation.

The results for these two questions are shown overleaf.



Figure 4.3: Planning Priorities for Business Accommodation, Small and Larger Businesses

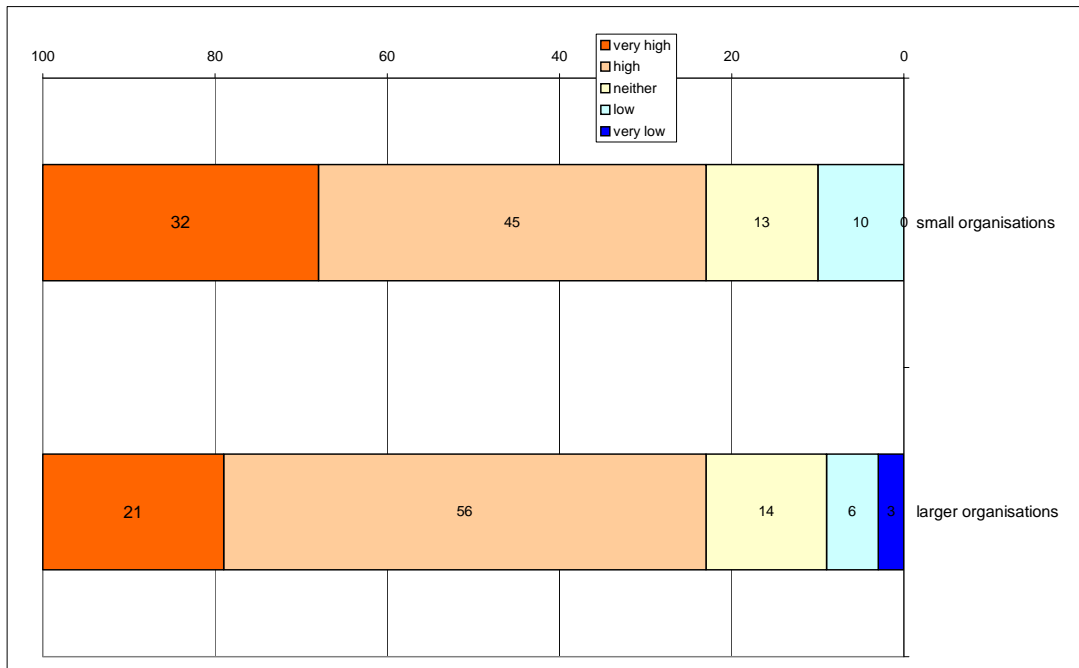
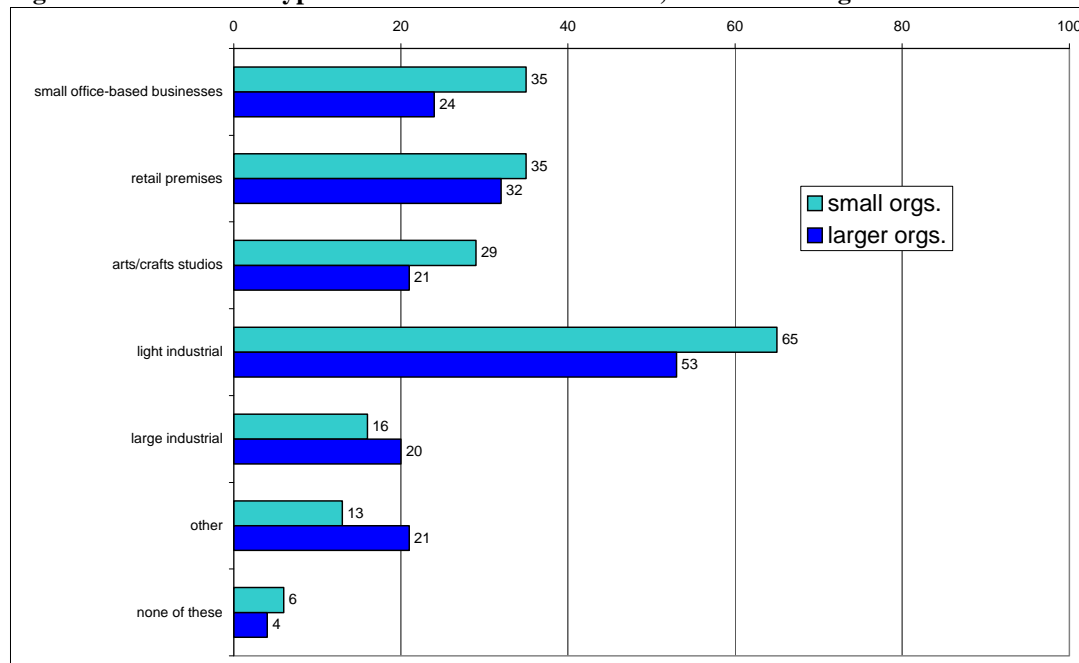


Figure 4.4: Preferred Types of Business Accommodation, Small and Larger Businesses



Respondents were then given the opportunity to say in what ways they thought the District Council should be promoting economic regeneration. This open-ended question generated many responses, covering a wide range of ideas, with some example quotes being as follows:

Start-ups, grants for young entrepreneurs

Canal renovation would re-vitalise the district, empty ex-Council offices should be redeveloped



Reliable young people are very hard to find, a better labour pool would be helpful

They should ensure that owners of premises keep up the property to a good standard

Build a road from central Stroud to the M5

There should be wider advertising of premises available, such as retail units for sale. There is a lost opportunity that the Council does not sell the town, to entice other businesses to come here. It seems a waste to not advertise business opportunities

The cinema is a great addition but otherwise in the evening Stroud is very unappealing. Try better restaurants and nightspots. It needs a change of culture

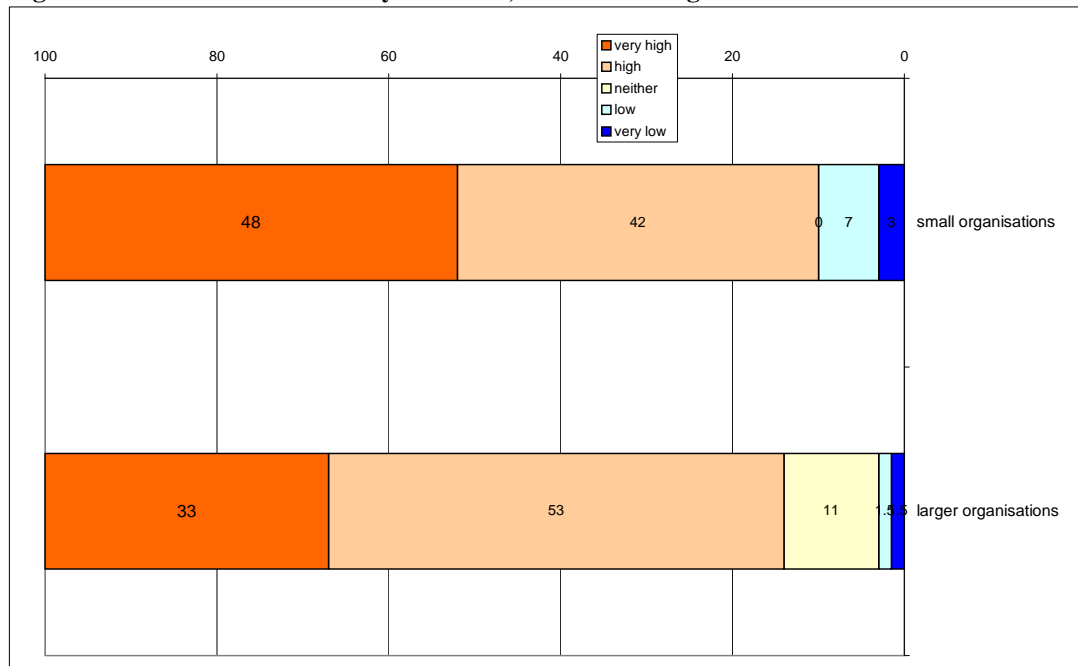
Action on drug use.

4.5 The Environment

The section of the survey that examined the environment started with an explanation that the Council is “currently examining ways to address climate change issues. Improving energy efficiency, increasing the amount of renewable energy produced (such as solar, wind and water power) and reducing dependency on fossil fuels are all key objectives”.

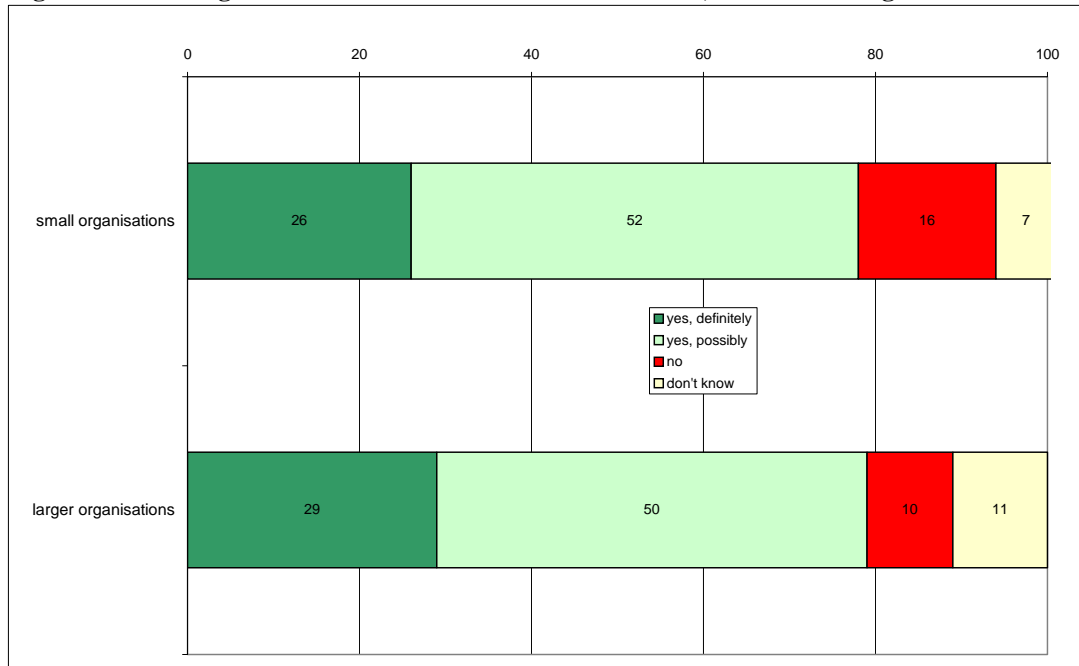
The first question in this area began by asking whether they thought that action here should be a low or high priority for the Council. As may be seen, addressing climate-change issues and action to improve energy efficiency are seen to be a high priority for about **90%** of businesses. Smaller organisations tend to be stronger in their views.

Figure 4.5: Environmental Policy Priorities, Small and Larger Businesses



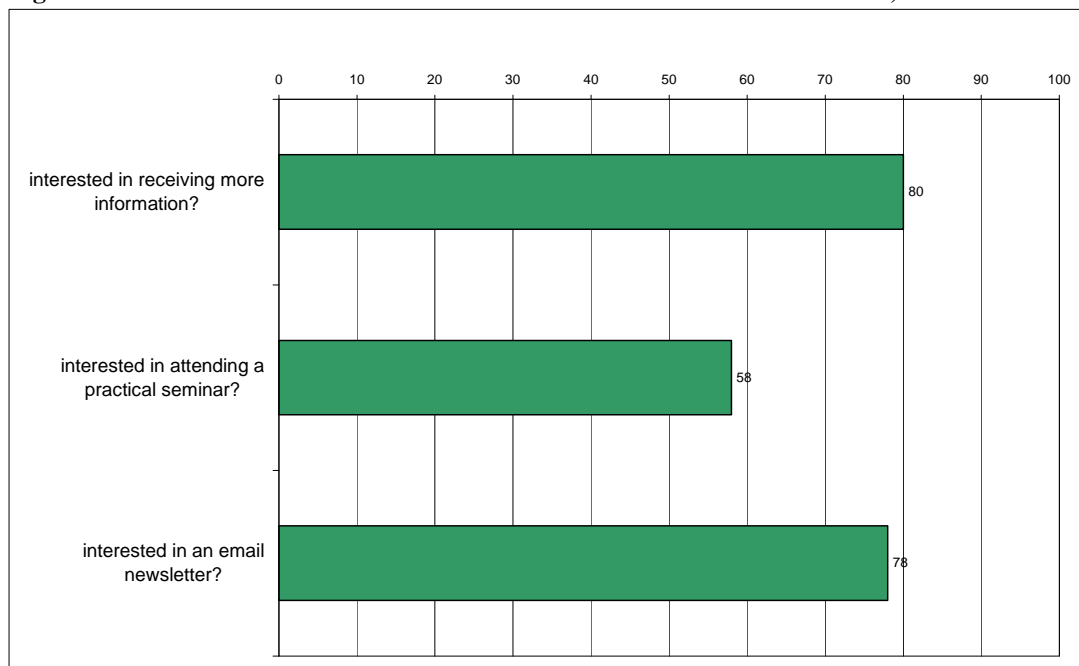
In view of this finding, it's perhaps not surprising that about 80% of local businesses said they would be willing to invest in practical solutions, which might cost them now, but would save money in the long term.

Figure 4.6: Willingness to Invest in Environmental Solutions, Small and Larger Businesses



There was considerable interest in receiving help and information about the various options that might be available, including the availability of grants. Eight in ten businesses were interested in receiving more information, nearly the same number were interested in receiving an e-mail newsletter to keep them updated on environmental issues, and nearly 60% were interested in attending a practical seminar on energy saving alternatives.

Figure 4.7: Interest in Information & Assistance on Environmental Solutions, All Businesses

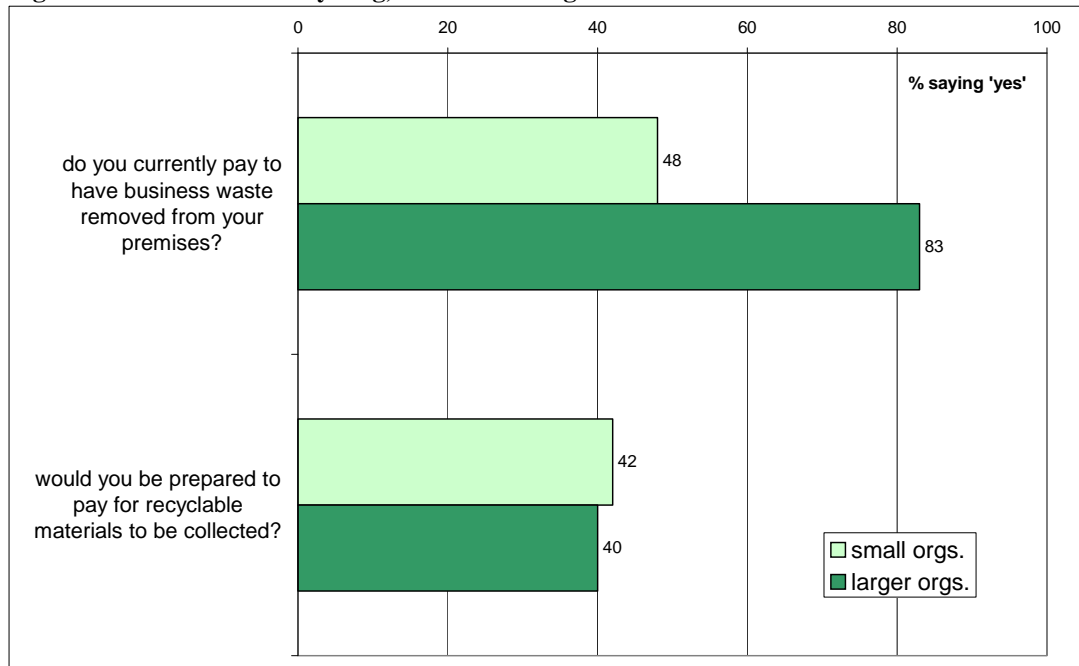


4.6 Waste & Recycling

Nearly three-quarters of businesses already pay for the removal of their business waste, with considerable differences according to the size of the business (83% of larger organisations do, in contrast to 48% of smaller ones).

Just over four in ten organisations said that they would definitely be prepared to pay for recyclable materials to be collected from their premises, with a further 32% saying ‘yes, possibly’. On this question there is no difference by company size.

Figure 4.8: Waste and Recycling, Small and Larger Businesses



5. Business Support

5.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the general question of business support. It presents the findings relating to the sources of information that businesses use for advice, and their satisfaction with those sources of information.

It also examines awareness and use of the various support schemes that the District Council offers to local businesses and organisations, as well as their interest in receiving more information on those schemes. A general question about what the District Council could be doing to help local businesses and organisations is also reported upon.

The final section in this chapter examines the small business rate relief scheme; including such issues as awareness and usage of the scheme.

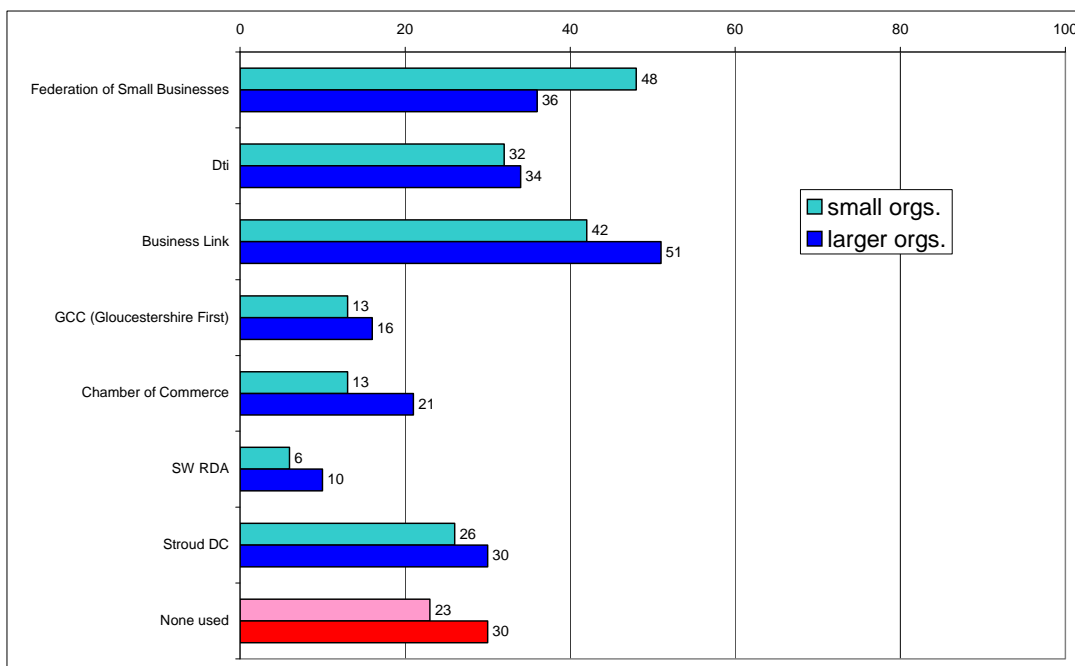
5.2 Information Sources

Respondents were presented with a list of seven organisations that provide business advice and support, including local sources such as Gloucestershire First and the District Council, as well as national and regional sources such as the RDA and the Federation of Small Businesses.

It would seem that local businesses turn most to their local Business Link or to the Federation of Small Businesses. Just over a quarter said they had contacted the District Council.

About a quarter of businesses had not contacted any of the organisations that were listed.

Figure 5.1: Use Made of Business Advice Providers, Small and Larger Businesses



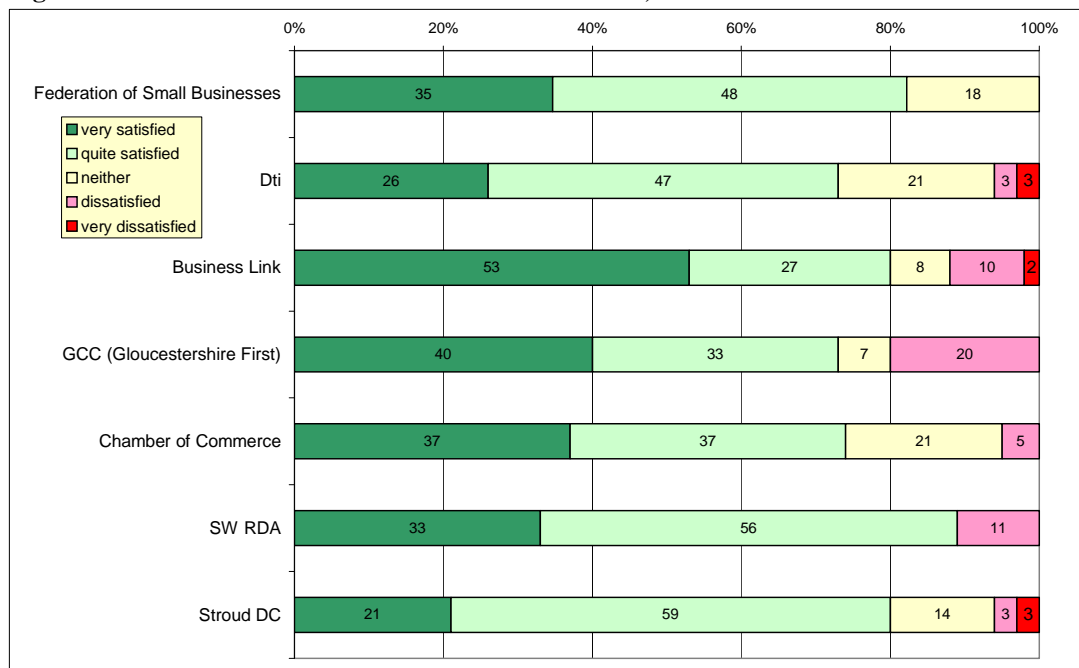
5.3 Satisfaction with Support Sources

Those organisations that had used any of these sources of support were then asked how satisfied they were with the business advice they had received (the question was asked only if they had used the particular supplier in question).

Satisfaction ratings, as may be seen below, are about 80% on average, although slightly higher for the South West RDA and lowest of all for the Dti.

The business advice services that Stroud District Council provides to the local business community are rated about average.

Figure 5.2: Satisfaction with Business Advice Providers, All Businesses



Note: the satisfaction scores only relate to those organisations that had used the supplier concerned

5.4 Awareness and Use of SDC Support Schemes

The interview then asked about five Council schemes designed to assist local businesses and organisations. They were:

- the retail support programme
- the shop-front improvement scheme
- the database of workplaces and available accommodation
- the business directory (the website of local businesses and advice)
- general support and guidance for start-up and small enterprises.

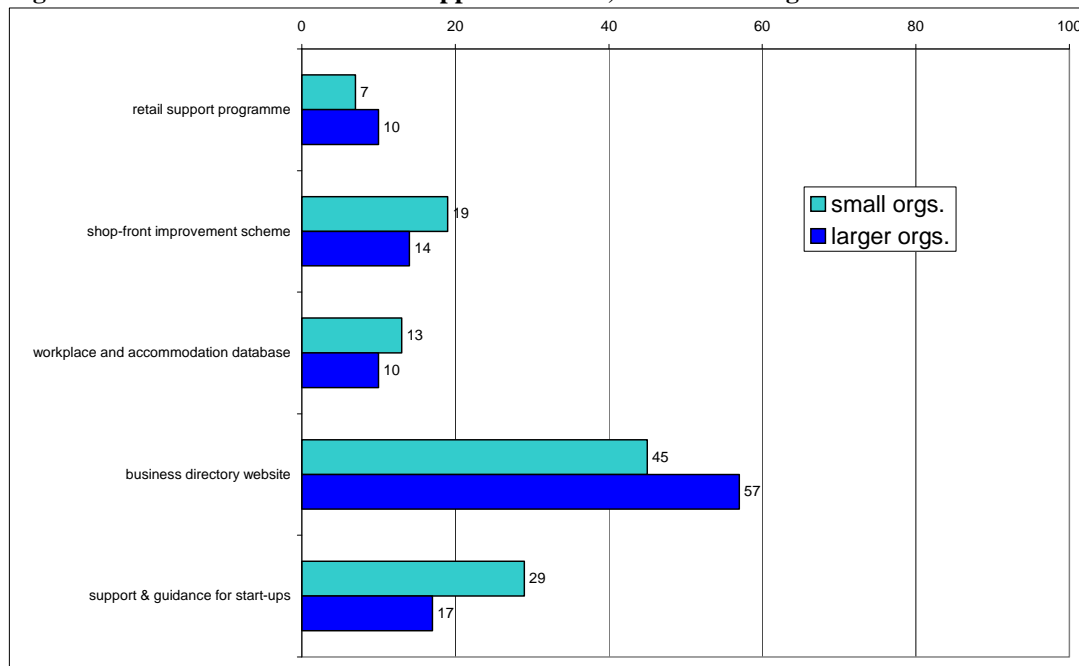
For each one, businesses were asked: had they heard of the scheme, had they ever applied to or used the scheme, and would they like more information about the scheme?



Awareness of the support and information schemes that the Council provides for local businesses is very low, for example about one in eight businesses had heard of the database of workplaces and available accommodation that the District Council runs. The exception to this low level aware of awareness is the website directory of local businesses, where about a half or so of organisations contacted in this survey had heard of this facility.

The very low levels of awareness of retail support schemes include, of course, organisations that are not retailers. However, when awareness is examined for retailers and wholesalers as a group, awareness is still quite low: 17% of this group were aware of the retail support programme and 39% were aware of shop-front improvement scheme.

Figure 5.3: Awareness of Business Support Schemes, Small and Larger Businesses



If awareness of these schemes is low, then the level of use (or application to use) is even lower. Across the whole sample, use of each scheme was barely negligible – the only exception being the website of local businesses and services, where about 10% had a used or applied to use this facility. Amongst retailers and wholesalers, nobody had used the retail support programme and just 11% had applied for the shopfront improvement scheme.

Rather more businesses would like more information about these schemes. The level of interest is not substantial, but – for each scheme – about 10% of larger businesses and about 20% of smaller businesses would like to hear more. Amongst retailers and wholesalers 17% would like more information about the retail support programme, with 6% interested in the shopfront improvement scheme.

The two charts overleaf present these findings.



Figure 5.4: Use of Business Support Schemes, Small and Larger Businesses

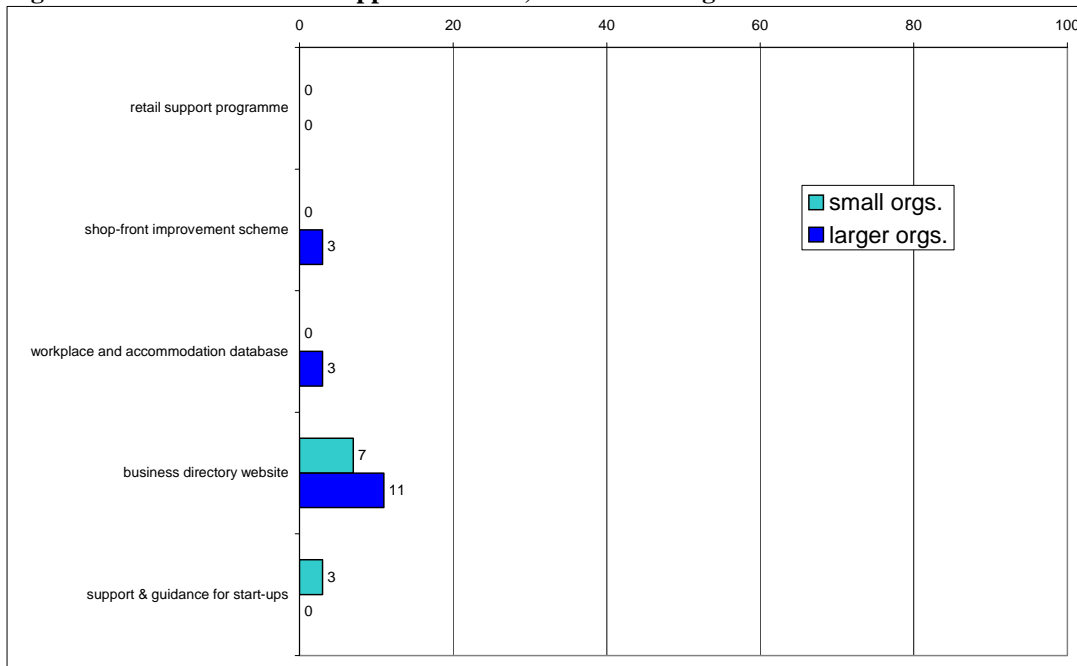
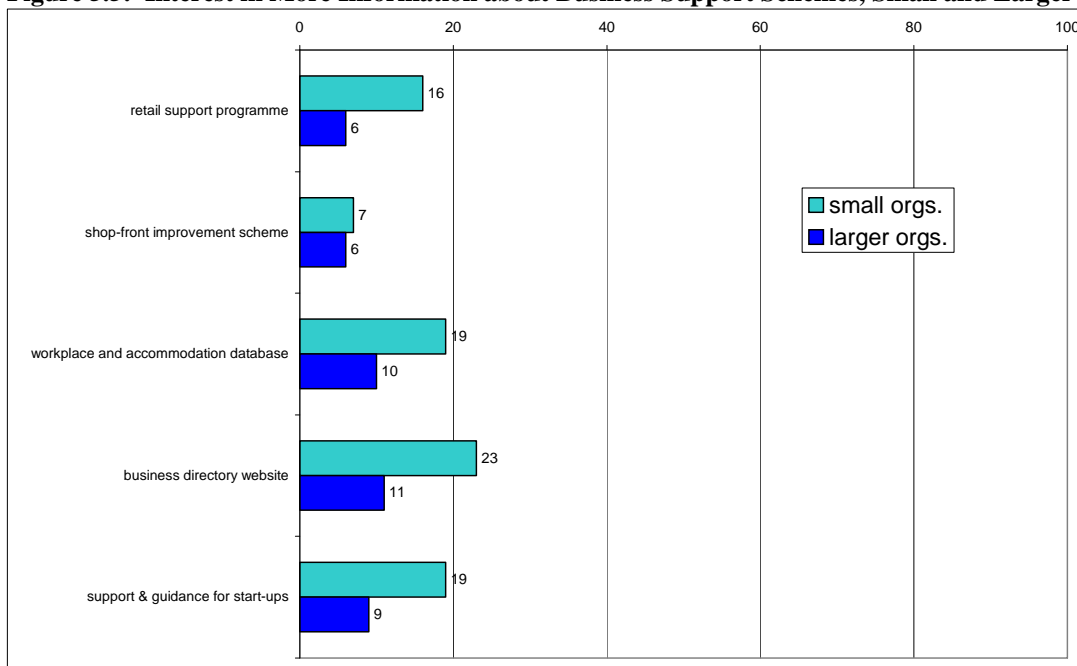


Figure 5.5: Interest in More Information about Business Support Schemes, Small and Larger Businesses



All respondents were then given the opportunity of saying what they thought the District Council could be doing to help local businesses and organisations. About four in ten companies said ‘nothing’ and one in eight didn’t know. Amongst the remaining 50%, a wide range of suggestions were made, and the following verbatim quotes illustrate the ideas that they put forward:

There should be better information provided about where small businesses could go for help, new infrastructures & development and so on. The lack of information for businesses is a huge problem. If we had no unemployment, it wouldn't be an issue



Manufacturing requires attention. Help manufacturers to network among themselves and support each other. Help incoming manufacturers

Better communications when building works or roadworks happen, so business can plan to deal with access issues

The Council should be more open minded and more flexible with planning permission

Make themselves more prominent, I have no idea what they do. Contact small businesses and let us know what they do

The provision of small industrial unit accommodation is the most pressing issue. It's difficult to find. If they were placed in redundant farm parks they would be more dispersed; better for the environment. Provision of car parking

Recycling for businesses. We already pay to dispose of waste paper. Use some central waste ground to provide a recycling centre we can take it to

They don't do a bad job - keep it up

5.5 Small Business Rate Relief

One issue that the Council wished to examine through this survey was the reason behind the very low levels of take-up of the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme. Depending upon the size of the organisation concerned (and their property circumstances), this scheme provides relief for up to one half of the business rates that would otherwise be payable each year.

Just one half of small businesses and a slightly more than a third of larger ones were aware of the Scheme, and rather fewer thought that they might qualify; amongst the target smaller businesses this latter figure was nearly 40%.

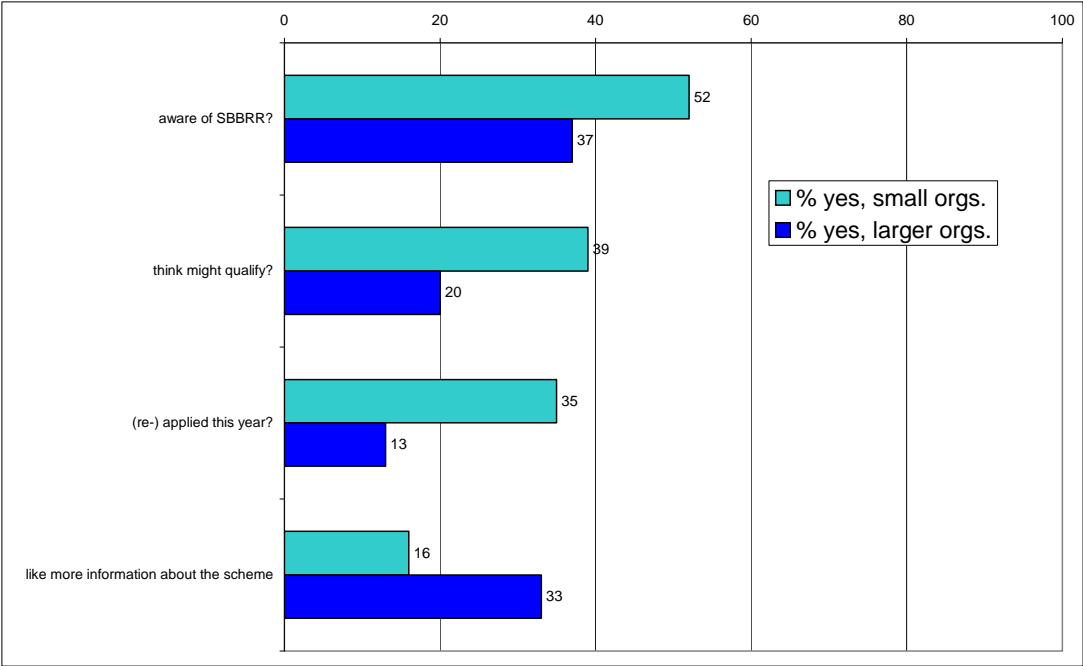
Just over a third of smaller businesses said that they had applied (or reapplied) this year; about one in eight larger businesses said they had too.

A level of interest in the scheme (would they like more information about it?) was evident from about 15% of small businesses and a third of larger ones.

Figure 5.6 overleaf presents a summary of the four questions concerned.



Figure 5.6: Small Business Rate Relief Scheme, Small and Larger Businesses



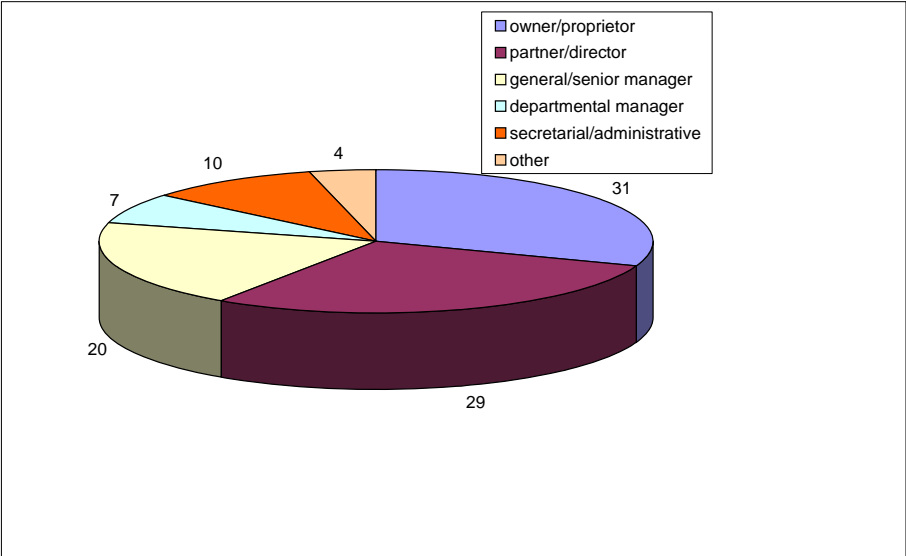
Appendix A : Profile of Survey Sample



A1. Respondent Position

Which of the following best describes your position in the company?

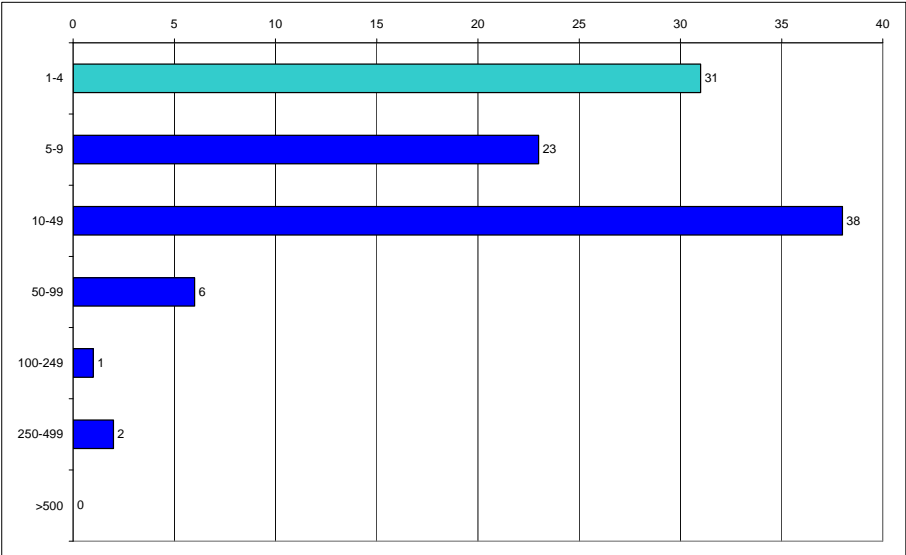
Figure A.1: Respondent Position, All Businesses



A2. Company Size

How many employees does your company or organisation have at this site?

Figure A.2: Company Size, All Businesses



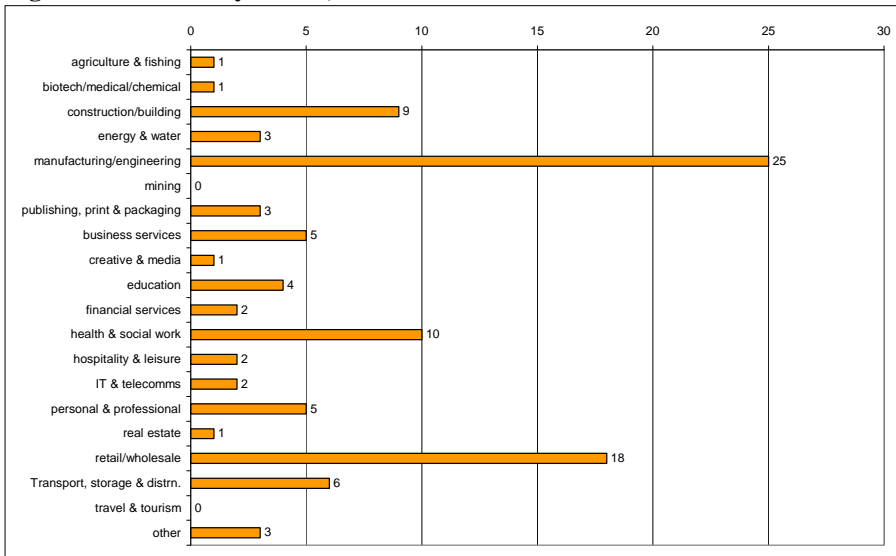
Note: a specific quota of 30 interviews was set for small businesses



A3. Industry Sector

Which industry or service sector does your company or organisation operate in?

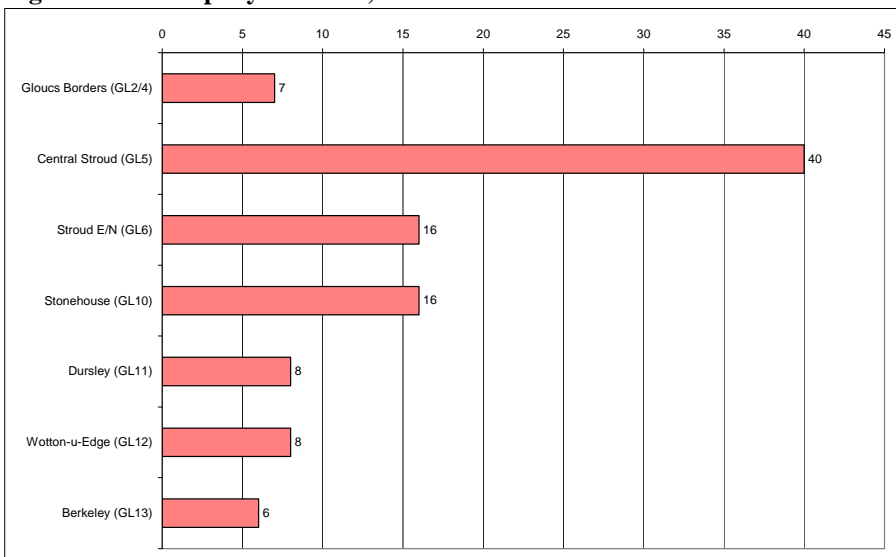
Figure A.3: Industry Sector, All Businesses



A4. Location

What (is) the postcode where your business or organisation is located?

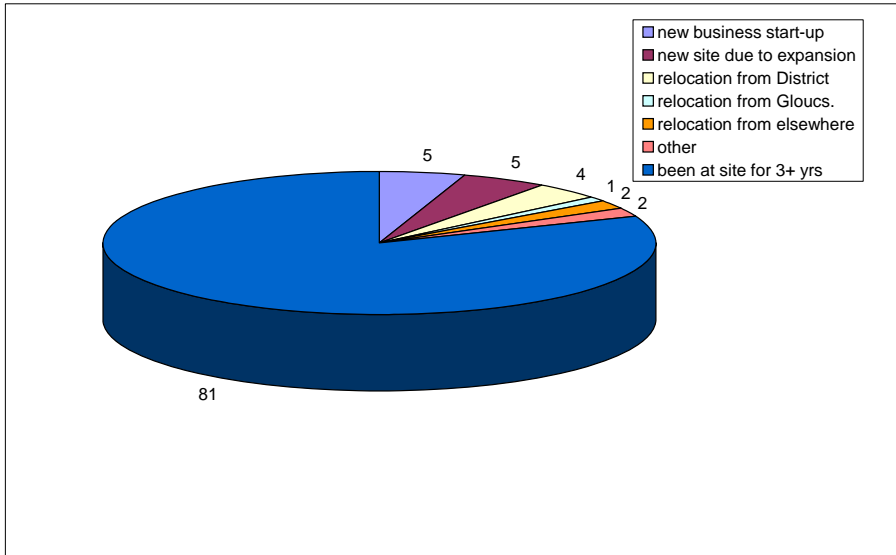
Figure A.4: Company Location, All Businesses



A5. Business Longevity

Has your business or organisation been at this site for less than three years? If so, what was the reason for locating at this site?

Figure A.5: Company Longevity, All Businesses



Appendix B : Survey Questionnaire

