Business Consultation 2008

Report of Research

November 2008

Report prepared for:

Stroud District Council
Ebley Mill
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Contents

1. Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

In September 2008, Stroud District Council commissioned The Research Box to undertake public consultation with the business community in the District. This is the third year the survey has been conducted and results are shown in this report, where applicable, for all three years.

The consultation was undertaken this year with a stratified random selection of businesses in the District by means of a telephone and online interview survey.

1.2 Views of the District Council

When presented with a series of attitude statements, 40% of businesses agreed or agreed strongly that they were satisfied with the way that the Council runs things. The same number agreed that the District Council is businesslike and efficient and that services have improved. Slightly more (45%) agreed that SDC is improving the local environment.

All statements attracted a fair degree of dissent, but one in particular – I think we get value for money from SDC – had just over 40% businesses disagreeing (only a quarter agreed). Compared to last year, respondents were less positive about all the statements presented to them this year.

When respondents were asked to score their *perceived* performance of the Council, a handful of services achieve quite high ratings: ‘refuse collection’, ‘recycling and composting’ and to a lesser extent ‘sport & leisure services’ were all seen to be good or very good by 40% or more of Stroud businesses. However, views were split on the top two services (‘refuse collection’ and ‘recycling and composting’) with a third of businesses rating them as poor or very poor. Other services that had quite high levels of dissatisfaction were: ‘economic development’, ‘town centre improvements’, ‘crime prevention’, ‘car parks’, ‘planning & building control’ and ‘neighbourhood wardens’.

Comparing these results with the business surveys of the last two years, it is clear that businesses are less positive about most services, especially refuse collection, waste & recycling, planning & building control and street cleaning. However, they are slightly more positive this year about crime prevention than they were in 2007.

1.3 District Council Policy Priorities

When businesses were given the Council’s five broad policy areas (economic regeneration, environment, affordable housing, community safety and healthy living) and asked how high a priority they should be given, the principle priority area was ‘the environment’ (73% gave this area a high or very high priority rating). After the environment came ‘economic regeneration’ (68%), community safety (62%) and affordable housing (61%), with the lowest priority given to ‘healthy living’ (46%). Compared to last year, all areas are seen to be less of a priority, but the order remains the same.

Next, respondents were asked to prioritise the five areas of the Corporate Delivery Plan. The main priority was to send as little waste to landfill as possible (80% high or very high), with the second priority being to help local people find local solutions to long-term problems (79%). The least important of the five was creating public building and spaces (57%).

1.4 Planning Policies

Opinion was quite split this year as to whether the Council's planning policies help or hinder businesses. In fact, most organisations thought that the Council neither restricted nor assisted organisations through its planning policies.

There has been a big shift since last year on whether there is sufficient business accommodation in the region, with far fewer businesses feeling that there is a shortage this year (40%) compared to last year (66%).

Of those businesses who feel there is a shortage, there is a belief 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 office based businesses and light industrial units.

1.5 The Environment

Whilst addressing climate-change issues and action to improve energy efficiency were seen to be a high priority for about **75%** of businesses, only a small majority (49%) seem willing to invest in practical solutions to combat climate change (down significantly since last year).

Awareness of their responsibilities regarding waste and local systems for recycling is growing, with nearly all businesses aware of the duty of care responsibilities regarding waste and the local commercial companies that recycle waste. However, fewer seem interested in finding out more about improving environmental performance and this interest has declined quite strongly since last year.

The majority of businesses (87%) already recycle some of their business waste and this has increased very slightly since 2007. Paper and card were the two main items recycled.

1.6 Business Support

Approximately a third of businesses were currently a member of a business support network or organisation.

When presented with a list of organisations that provide business advice and support, including local sources such as Gloucestershire First and the District Council, awareness was highest for Business Link, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Chamber of Commerce.

Usage of business advice providers was very low, with the Federation of Small Businesses having the highest usage overall – a just over half of all businesses said they had ever used their services. However, despite this, there is quite a high level of interest in receiving information about support services, especially the Gloucestershire Development Loan Fund.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background

In September 2008, Stroud District Council commissioned The Research Box to undertake public consultation with the business community in the District by means of a telephone and online survey. The survey followed similar lines to those undertaken in 2006 and 2007.

2.2 Method

The consultation was undertaken with a stratified random selection of businesses in the District who were initially contacted by phone. Target 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'.

During the initial phone contact, the purpose of the interview was explained and permission for interview agreed. Then respondents were offered the alternative of taking part on the telephone or on-line. If respondents chose the online survey then a web link was sent to them via email. The profile of the organisations that took part is described in Appendix A.

The interview took, on average, just less than 10 minutes to conduct and fieldwork took place between 29th September and 30th October, 2008. A total of 150 businesses[1] responded to the survey:

- 104 interviews with companies or organisation with five or more employees (at that site)
- 46 interviews with companies or organisation with less than five employees[2].

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 performance
- specific questions covering the Authority's principal policies, such as planning and the environment
- views on the Council's future strategies and plans (what should the priorities be?)
- various other issues that, this year, included
  - awareness and use of the various support schemes that exist for local businesses
  - attitudes to investment in climate-change solutions
  - behaviour and attitudes towards waste and recycling.

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

2.3 Structure of the Report

[1] The original target was 100, but a faulty list of businesses meant that additional interviews had to be carried out later in GL5 and GL6 areas of Stroud.
[2] A quota was set for small businesses (30% of all interviews) and for larger ones (70%).

This report summarises the principal 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 – principally those relating to the various support schemes that exist for local businesses.

More detail from the 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

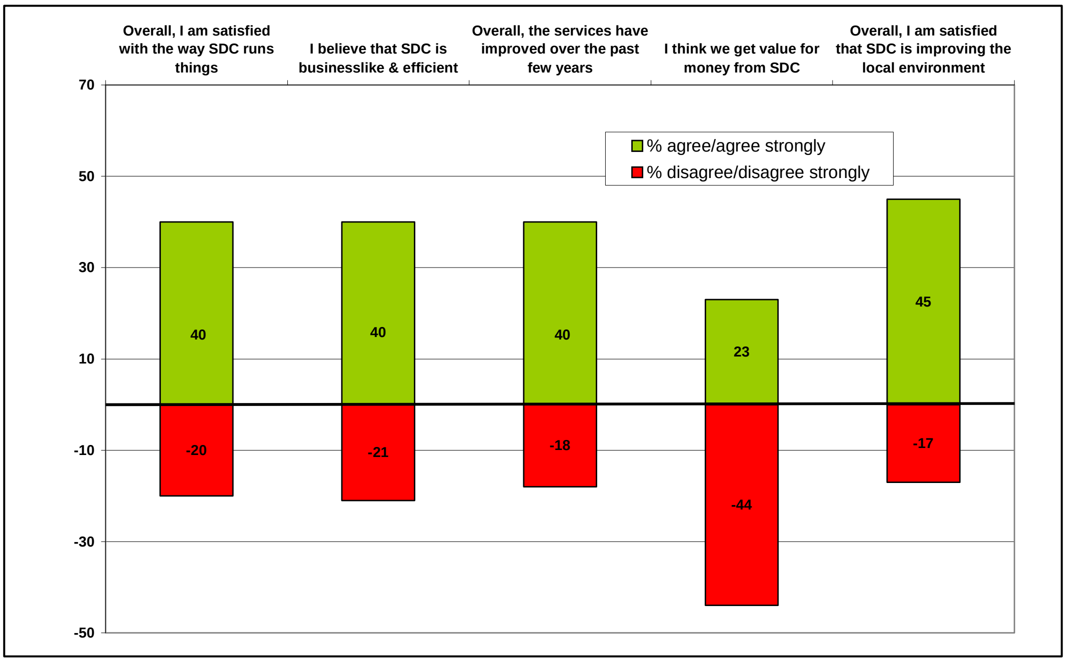
The survey questionnaire included several questions that examined views of the District Council and its services.

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

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

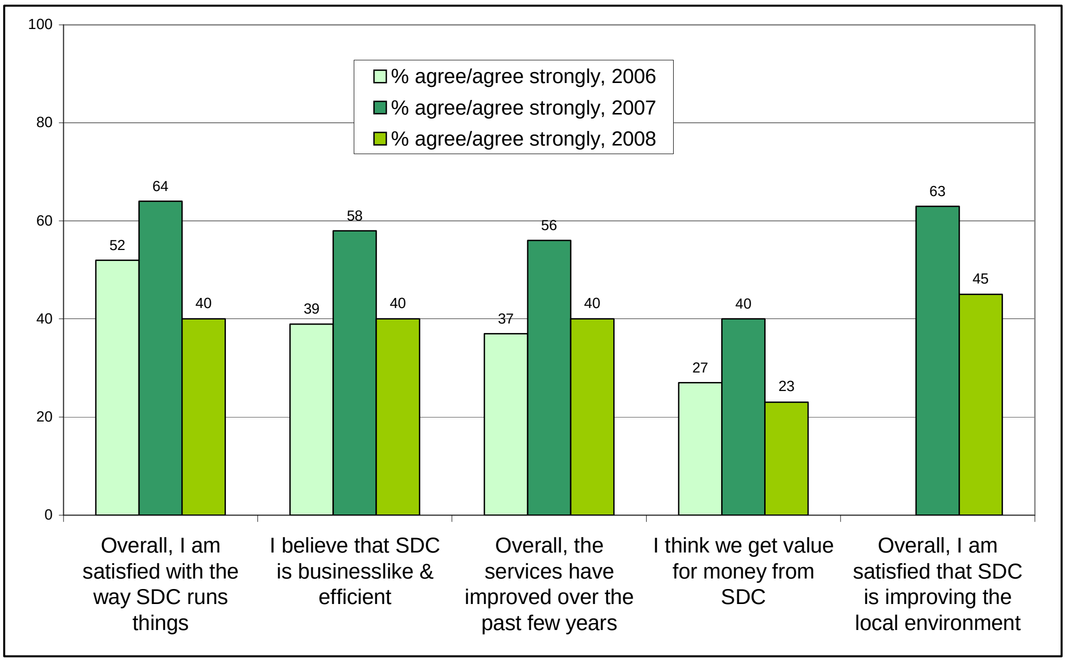
The responses to these five statements are generally more positive than negative, with the strongest factor being overall satisfaction "that the council is improving the local environment" and the weakest area being "value for money". In the chart below (and all similar charts in this report) the agree/agree strongly responses have been grouped together. So too have the disagree/disagree strongly responses. Furthermore, people who said 'neither' or 'don't know' have been omitted for the sake of simplifying the chart.

Figure 1a: Attitudes towards the District Council, Businesses



There are clear signs this year of less positive attitudes compared to last year on all five statements. Also, some of the results (overall satisfaction with the way SDC runs things and value for money) are below what they were in 2006.

Figure 1b: Comparison of Attitudes towards the District Council over the last three years

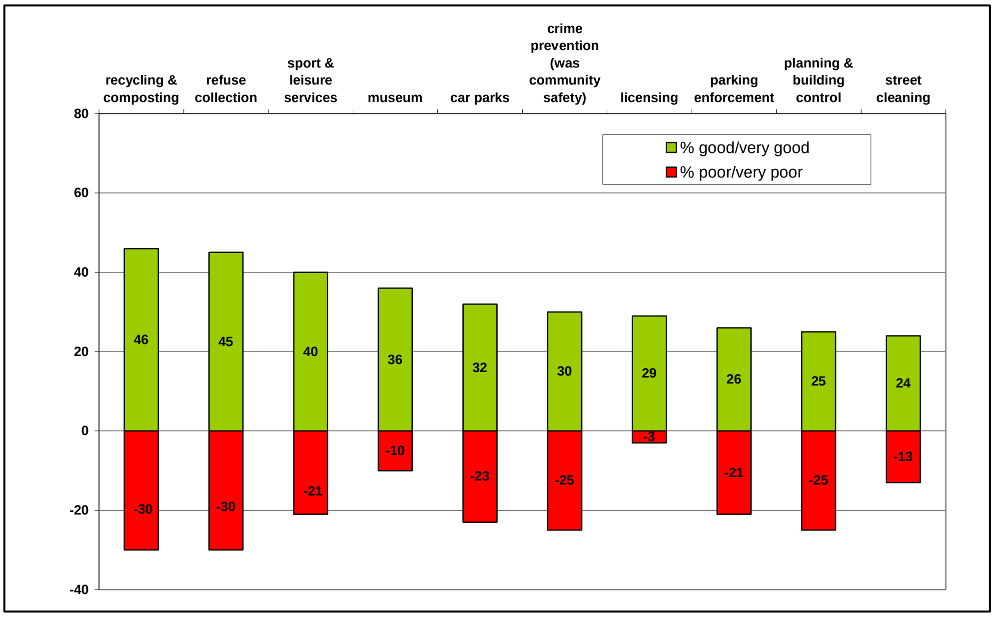


3.3 Perceived Performance

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 total of twenty-six Council services were appraised in this way. The 26 services are separated into three groups in the charts that follow.

A handful of services in the first (top) group of services achieved quite high ratings: 'recycling and composting', 'refuse collection' and 'sport & leisure services' – these were all seen to be good or very good by 40% or more of Stroud businesses. However, views were split on 'recycling and composting' and 'refuse collection' with a third rating these services as poor or very poor. Other aspects that had quite high levels of dissatisfaction in this top group of services were 'crime prevention', 'planning & building control', and 'car parks'.

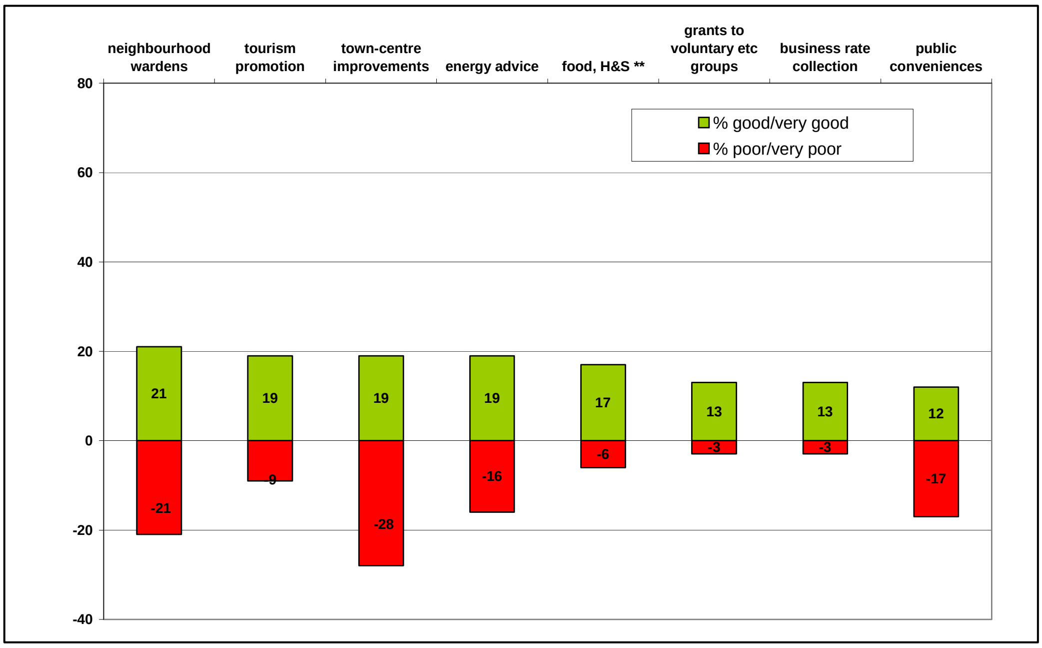
Figure 2a: Ratings of Council Services (top-rated services)



Note: This chart excludes those who said 'don't know' and 'neither good nor poor'

On the next group of services, there were quite high levels of dissatisfaction for town-centre improvements and for neighbourhood wardens (where there were equal numbers rating them good and poor).

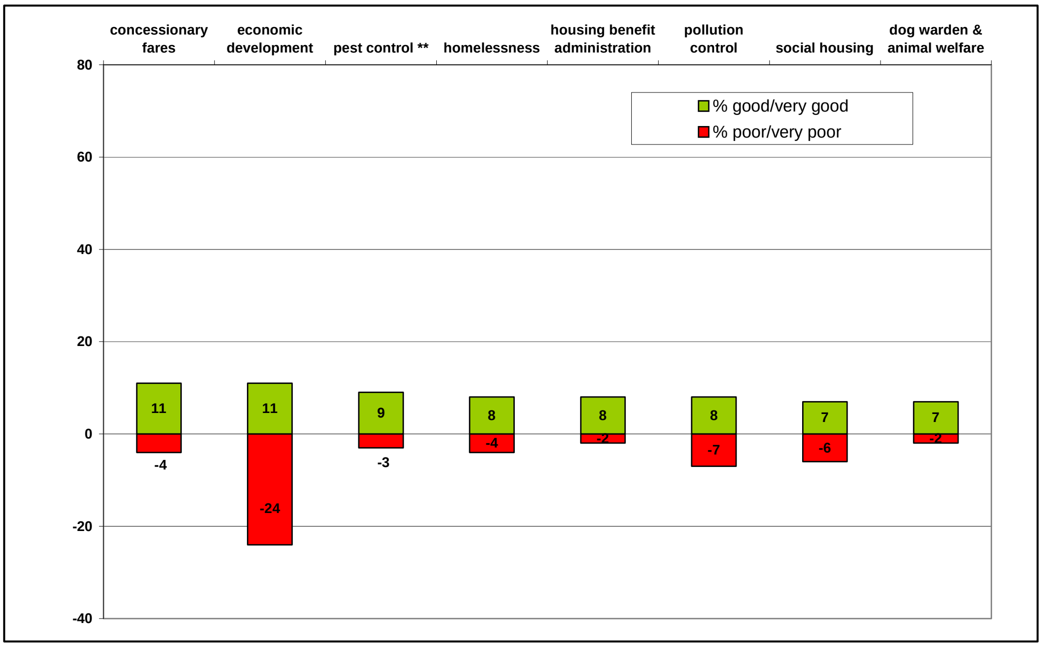
Figure 2b: Ratings of Council Services (middle-rated services)



Note: This chart excludes those who said 'don't know' and 'neither good nor poor'

There were also quite low ratings for economic development, with a quarter of businesses rating this service as poor or very poor.

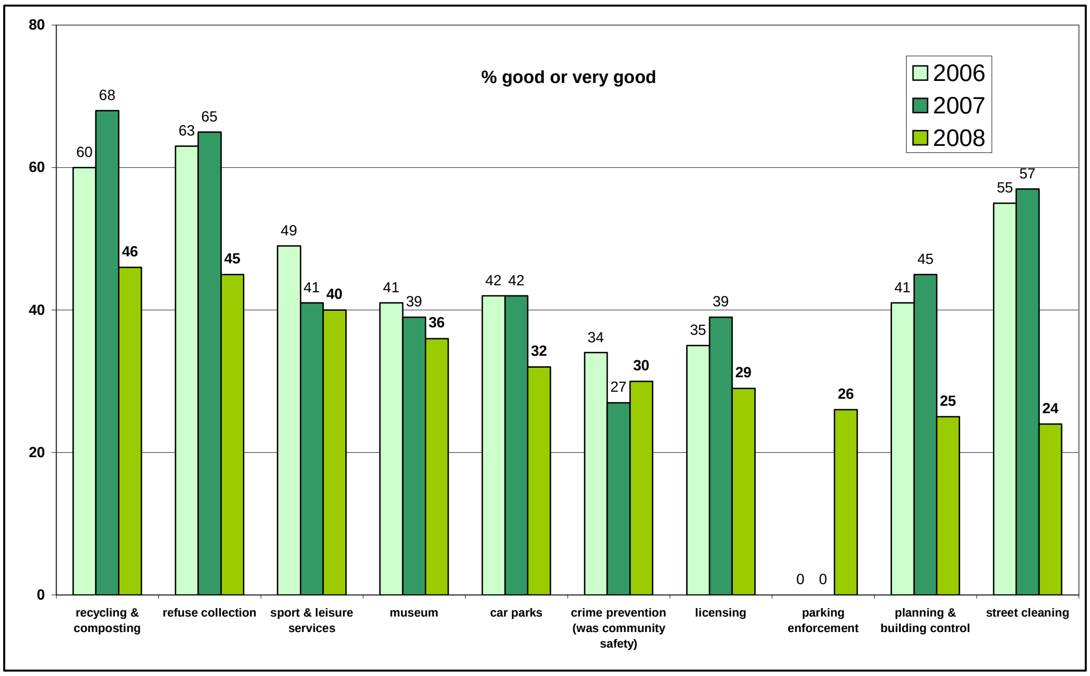
Figure 2c: Ratings of Council Services (lowest-rated services)



Note: This chart excludes those who said ‘don’t know’ and ‘neither good nor poor’

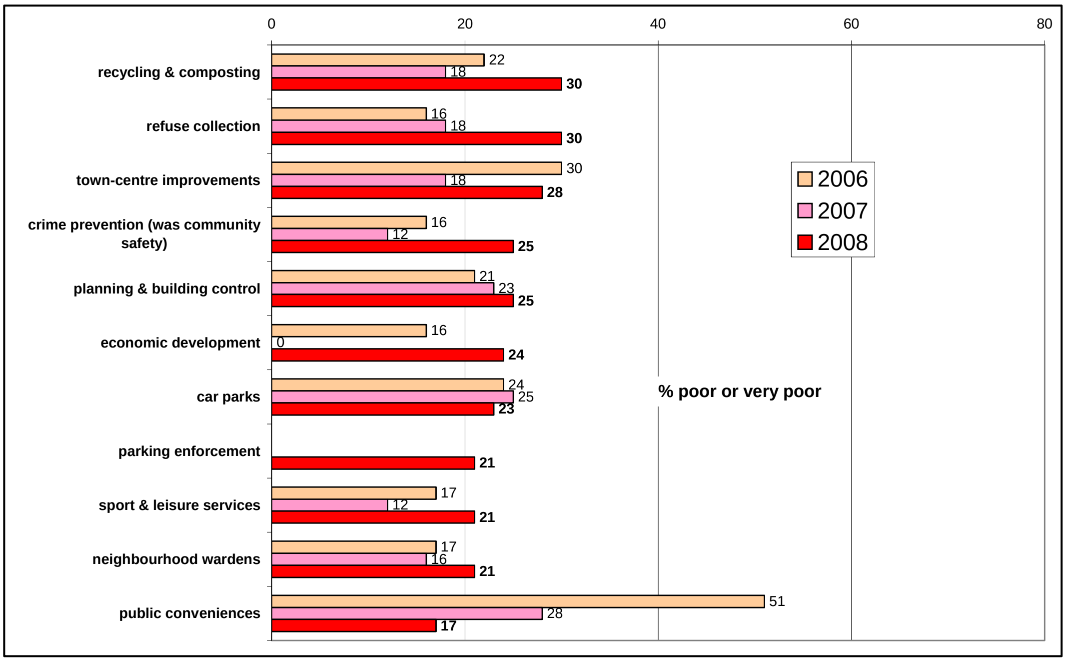
Comparing these results with the business surveys of the last two years, we can see that businesses are less positive about most service aspects. This is especially true of refuse collection, waste & recycling, planning & building control and street cleaning. Nevertheless, businesses were slightly more positive about crime prevention than last year.

Figure 2d: Comparisons of Council Service rated good/very good



Businesses were generally far more negative about most services compared to the last year except public conveniences and, to a lesser extent, car parks.

Figure 2e: Comparisons of Council Service rated poor/very poor



4. District Council Policies

4.1 Introduction

This chapter contains the findings relating to the strategic 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

As in previous years, 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**.

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

Table 1: Candidates for More or Less Spending

Principal Areas for More Spending	Principal Areas for Less Spending
• recycling • town centre improvements • refuse collection • car parking	• Council offices • Council expenses, pensions and salaries

Example quotes included:

- **more spending**

  Better networking facilities for local businesses

  Money can be spent on supporting local businesses that are feeling the effect of the national economic slow down

  They should invest in refuse collection and provide better recycling facilities for businesses

  Business parks and assistance measures to revive/ encourage small business community. When infrastructure projects are carried out they need to be to an excellent standard and maintained that way after

  More parking facilities in Wotton-under-Edge & more regular visits by parking wardens to reduce illegal parking

  Take a greater interest in the improvement to town centres and be more selective and through allowing planning as there are lots of failed and empty business

More money should be put into flood relief for the area

More advertisement in local newspapers to raise awareness of conferences and events

- **less spending**

  The priority should be to reduce all spending as much as possible - consistent with regulation and common sense. There seems to be an excessive concern for the welfare of retailers, yet they are no more or less deserving that any other business

  Expensive silly environmental issues that go nowhere

  Do not spend on things that you yourselves would not fork out money. Always remember that money is generally hard to earn and easy to spend. I remember the 'pink cow' marketing nonsense. The medical adage 'do no harm' applies

  Leaflets saying what it is doing, use of consultants

  Spend less money on supporting minority groups.

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

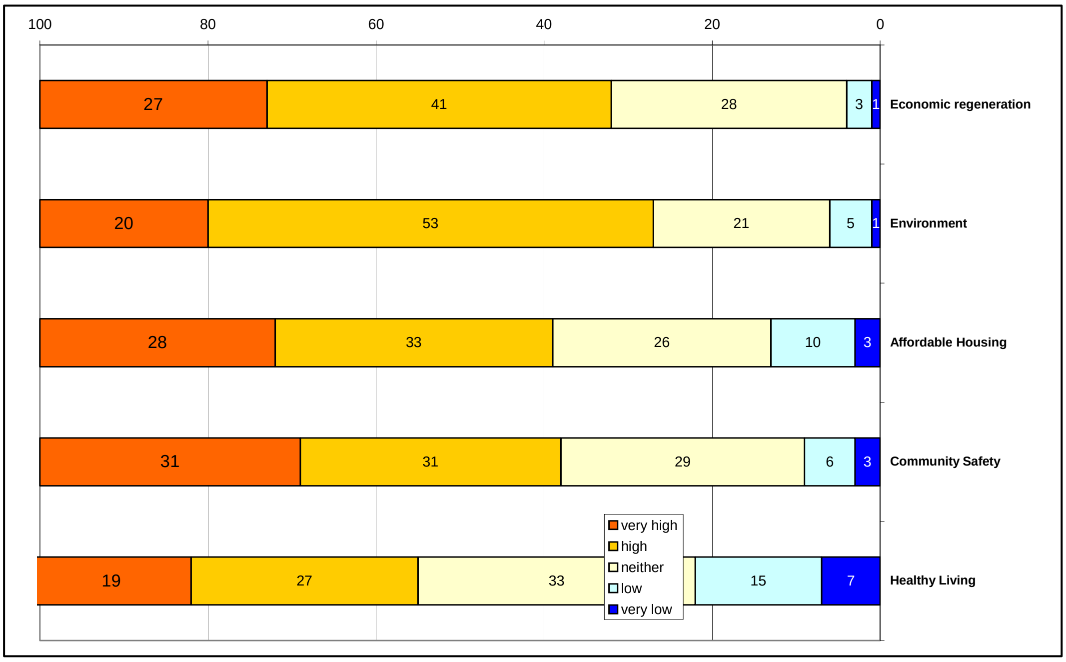
4.3 Policy Area Priorities

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 broad areas were:

- economic regeneration
- environment
- affordable housing
- community safety; and
- healthy living.

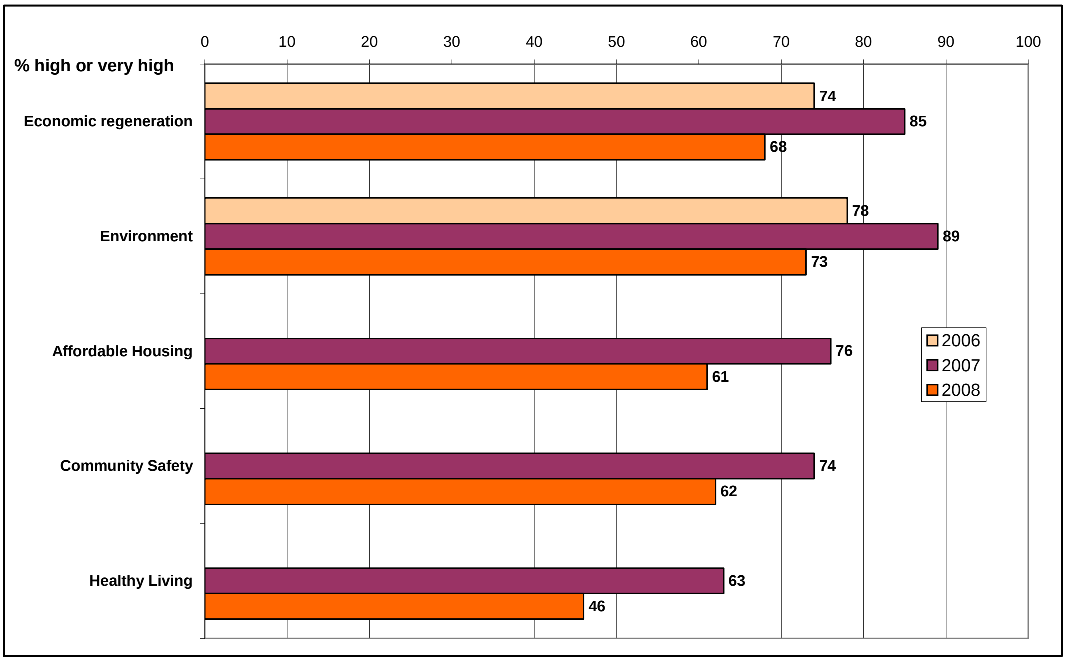
The principal priority area was 'the environment' – nearly three quarters of the respondents in this year's survey gave this a high or very high priority. Next in order of priority was 'regeneration', which achieved a high or very high priority score of 68%. The lowest priority was 'healthy living' with fewer than a half of businesses giving this very high or high priority.

Figure 4a: Policy Priorities for the District Council



Compared with last year, all areas are seen to be less of a priority, but the order of the five areas remains the same.

Figure 4b: Policy Priorities for the District Council over the last 3 years



4.4 Economic regeneration

Respondents were then given the opportunity to say how 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:

> *Speak to businesses in the area and determine what there needs are then act. Businesses know what there barriers to success are but a lot of the issues cannot be addressed by business alone. A coordinated strategy is required*
>
> *Using local suppliers wherever possible. Encouraging larger local businesses to source goods and services locally. Encouraging mixed development (i.e. business and residential co-location.)*
>
> *Helping town centres to regenerate from a business, social and environmental point of view*
>
> *They should promote the empty buildings available in the area*
>
> *Trying to help small businesses and try to promote smaller businesses. Also help new businesses to become established in the area and give them support*
>
> *Direct Action - Reduce business rates*
>
> *By not allowing old industrial sites to be turned into housing estates*
>
> *Low rent workshops so people can create businesses and rent rebates.*

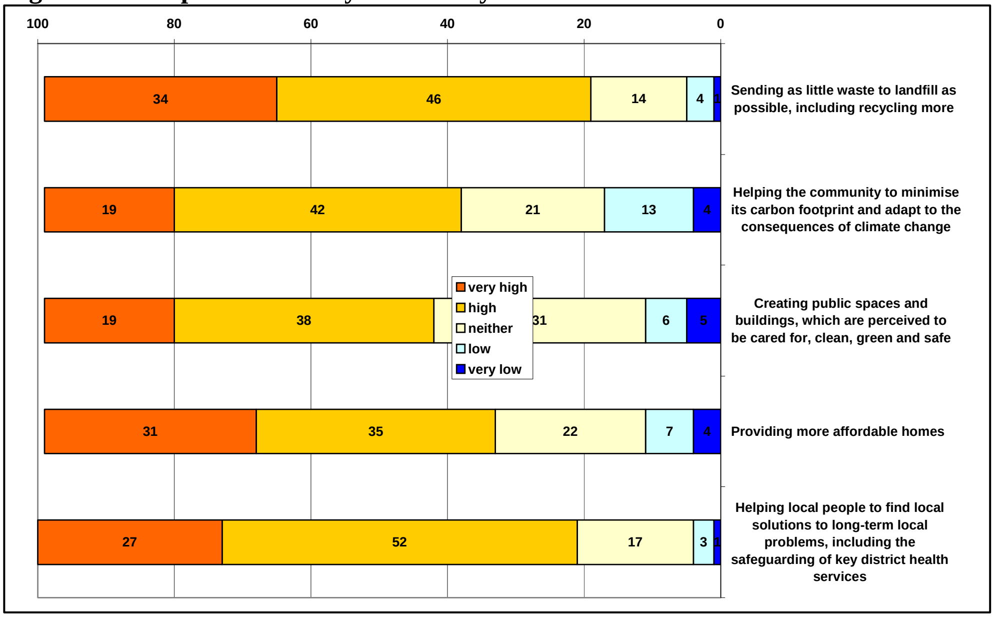
4.5 Corporate Delivery Plan

In its Corporate Delivery Plan, the Council has said that it will focus on five areas for 2008-12. Respondents were given a list of the five areas and asked whether each should be given a low or high priority for the Council's attention. The five areas were:

- sending as little waste to landfill as possible, including recycling more
- helping the community to minimise its carbon footprint and adapt to the consequences of climate change
- creating public spaces and buildings, which are perceived to be cared for, clean, green and safe
- providing more affordable housing
- helping local people to find local solutions to long-term local problems, including the safeguarding of key district health services.

As may be seen in the chart overleaf, the two main priorities were seen to be 'sending as little waste to landfill as possible, including recycling more' and 'helping local people to find local solutions to long-term local problems, including the safeguarding of key district health services'.

Figure 5a: Corporate Delivery Plan Policy Priorities

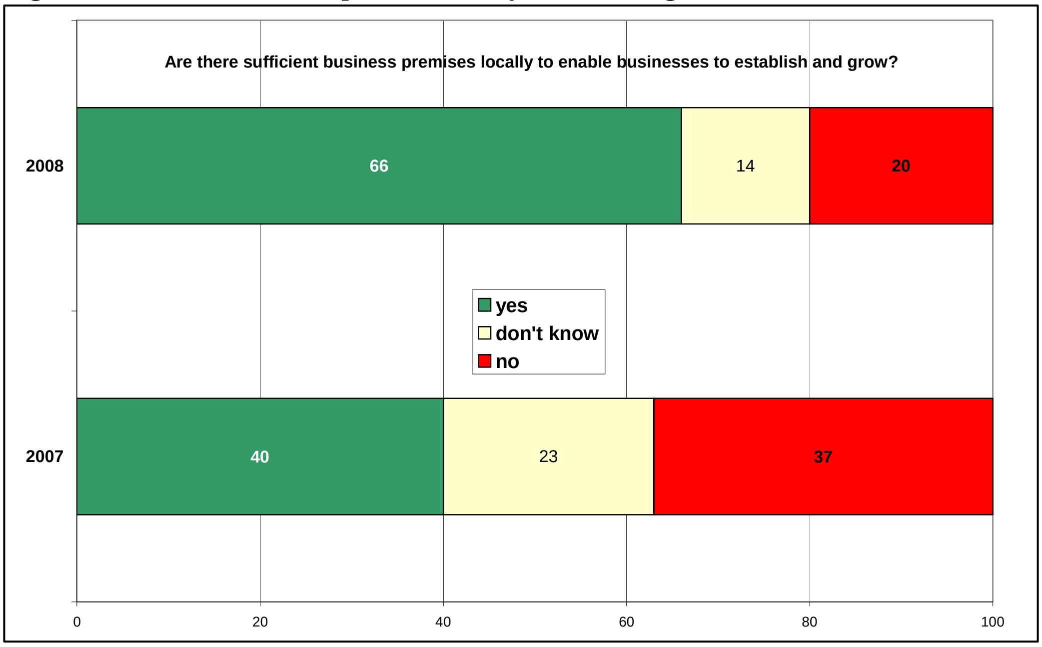


4.6 Planning Policies

By way of introduction to the section on the Council's planning policies, there was a question about the sufficiency of business premises locally to enable businesses to establish and grow.

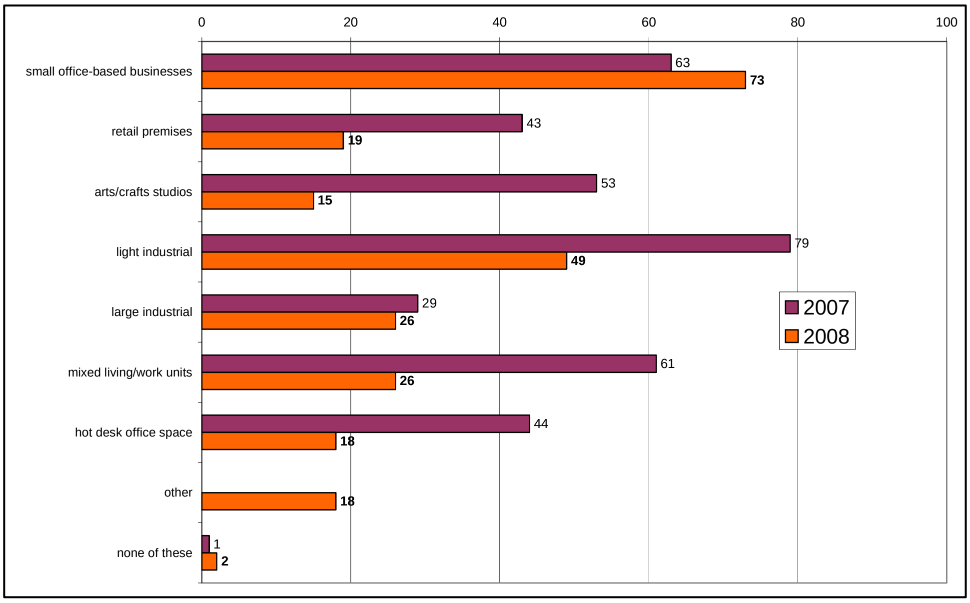
There has been quite a shift since last year on the subject of sufficient business accommodation; this year, two-thirds of businesses believe there is enough local business accommodation and far fewer feel there is a shortage locally – perhaps reflecting economic fears currently.

Figure 6: Sufficient business premises locally to establish growth



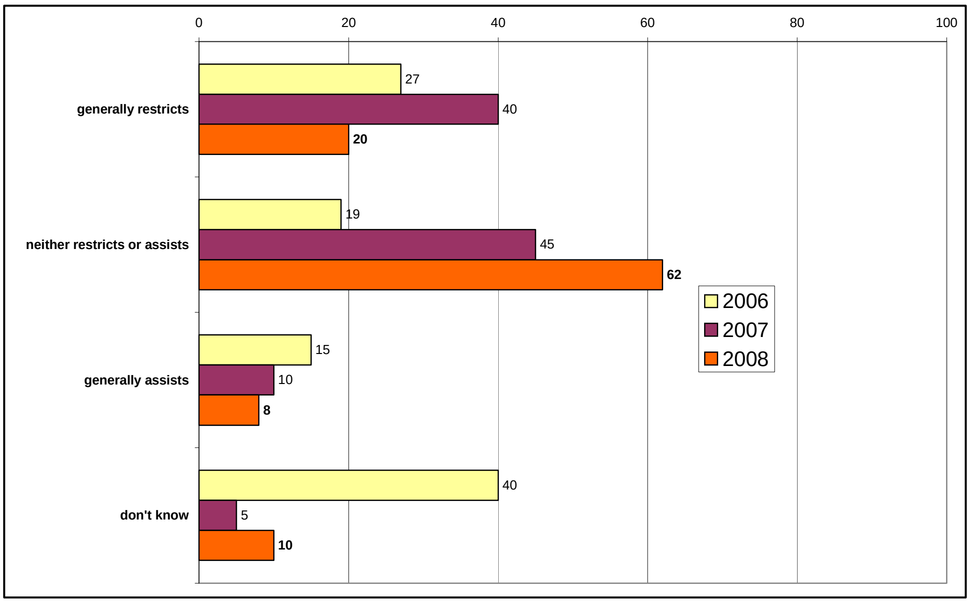
Those people who did think there was insufficient accommodation locally were subsequently asked what types of accommodation they thought should be provided. The priorities this year focus on office-based businesses and small-scale light industrial units. Mixed living/work units, retail premises, arts/crafts studios, light industrial units and hot-desk office space are all a lower priority this year than they were in 2007.

Figure 7: Types of business accommodation the Council should be helping to provide



There are fewer people this year who believe that the Council (through its planning policies) restricts local businesses, but also fewer who believe it assists. Nearly two thirds said it neither restricts nor assists local businesses through planning.

Figure 8: Council restrict or assist local businesses and organizations through its planning policies



Respondents were then given the opportunity to say in what ways they thought the Council restricts or assists local businesses and organisations through its planning policies. This open-ended question generated many responses, covering a wide range of ideas, with some example quotes being as follows:

They take great care when planning applications are made and publish it well

The local plan and the zoning of employment areas

They built units and extended units next to me

Always very helpful and accessible when needing advice and help with issues

They're unhelpful, they feel like they're self important and are a total waste of time. I went down there 5 times and got conflicting information. I regret ever talking to them

Probably not understanding the requirements and the speed at which something has to happen. After all, if you have made a business decision to invest in new plant and machinery, maybe new buildings too you want to get on asap and enable business to grow

lengthy and complicated systems to obtain planning permission and poorly informed and unhelpful environmental officers

More focused on residential than business development

Too many restrictions and guidelines and not enough support

Not allowing businesses to extend, no good appeal procedures. Not helpful at all

Difficult and long winded process. Restrictions on listed buildings can be taken to the extreme.

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

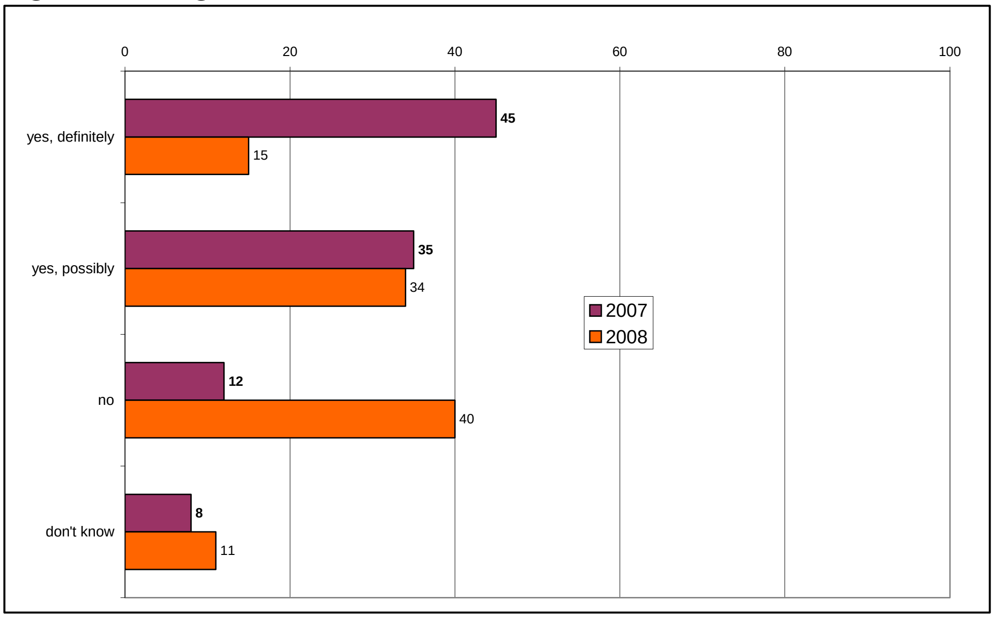
4.7 The Environment

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”.

Businesses were asked if their organisation would be willing to invest in practical solutions to combat climate change, which might initially require investment but would save money in the long term.

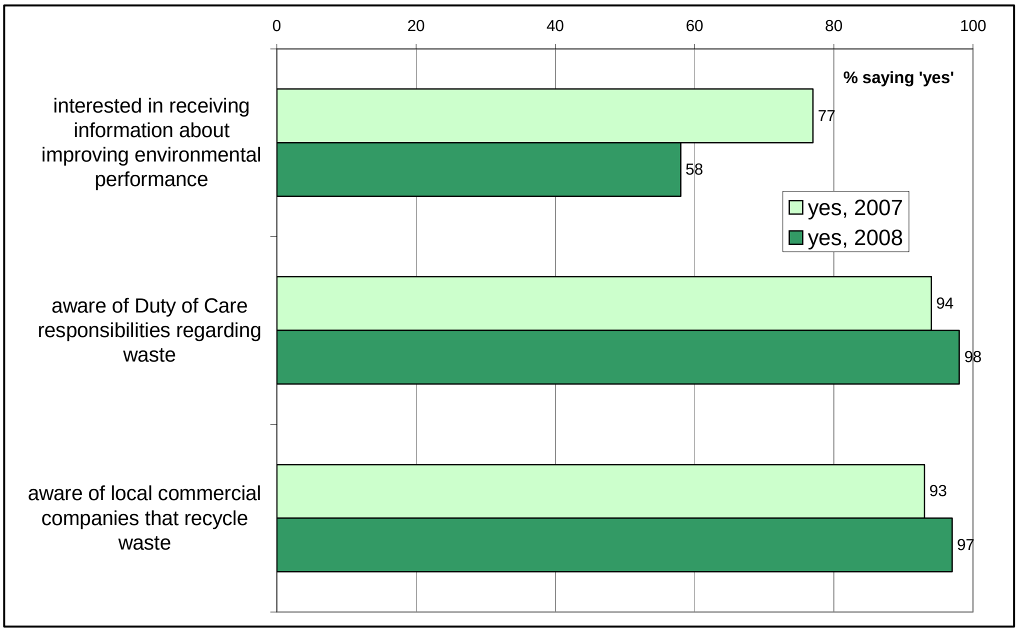
We have already seen (Figure 4a) that addressing the environment is a high priority for about three-quarters of businesses, but only a small majority (49%) seem willing currently to invest in practical solutions to combat climate change. This level of willingness to invest was significantly lowered this year than last year.

Figure 9: Willingness to Invest in Environmental Solutions



Awareness of their responsibilities regarding waste and local systems for recycling is growing, with nearly all businesses aware of their duty of care responsibilities regarding waste and of the local commercial companies that recycle waste. However, fewer seem interested in finding out more about improving environmental performance and this has declined quite strongly since last year.

Figure 10: Interest in Information & Assistance on Environmental Solutions

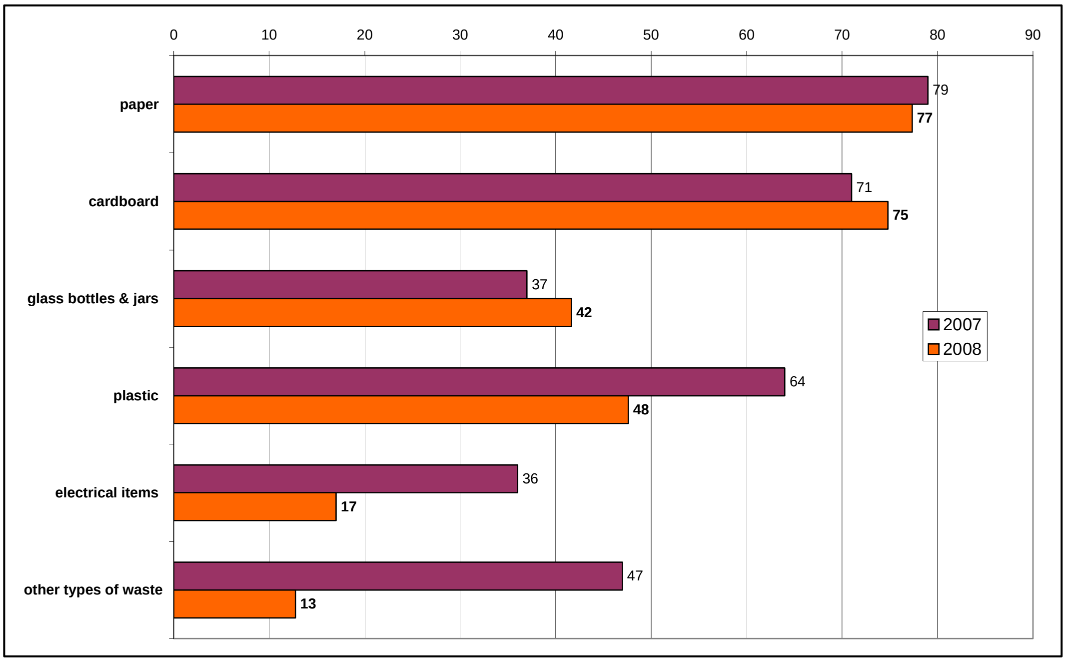


4.8 Waste & Recycling

Eighty-seven percent of businesses already recycle some of their business waste, a figure that is up slightly – but not statistically significantly – compared to last year (when it was 85%).

The main products that businesses said they recycled were paper and cardboard. Plastic, electrical items and other types of waste showed a decline in levels of recycling since 2007 (but this might just be an outcome of sampling fewer companies that use these products in their processes).

Figure 11: Recycled Waste Products, Year on Year Comparisons



5. Business Support

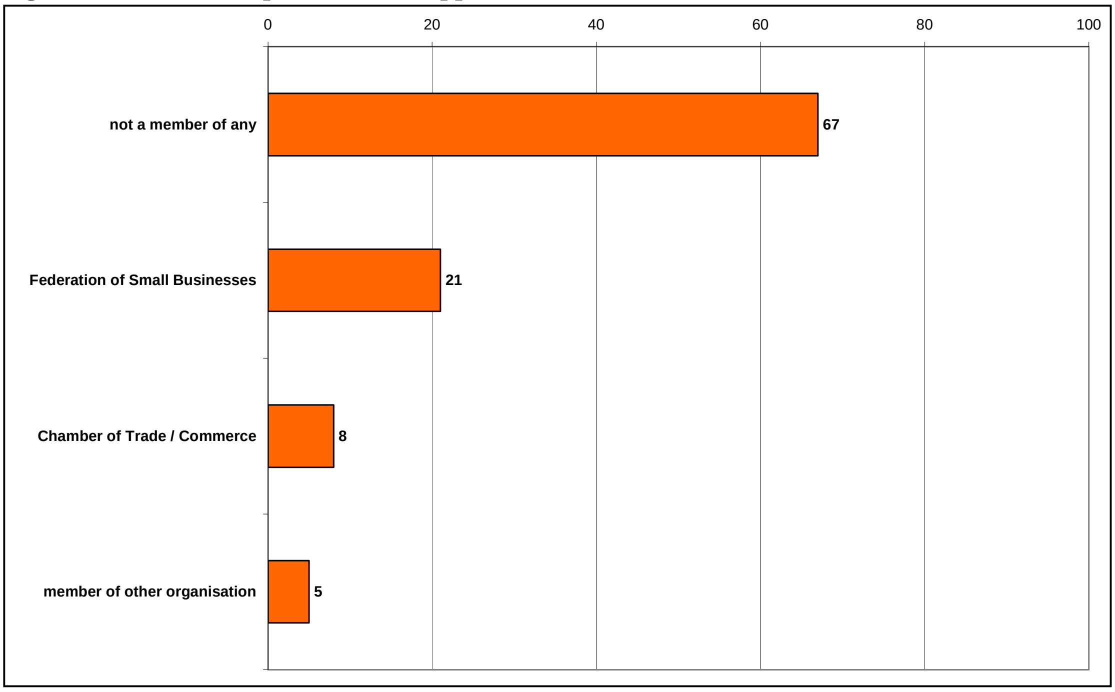
5.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the general question of business support. It examines awareness and use of the various support schemes that the District Council and its partners offer to local businesses and organisations, as well as the interest shown by local businesses in receiving more information about those schemes.

5.2 Support Network & Organisations

About a third of businesses were currently members of a business support network or organisation, the most popular organisation being the Federation of Small Businesses one in five were members).

Figure 12: Membership of business support networks

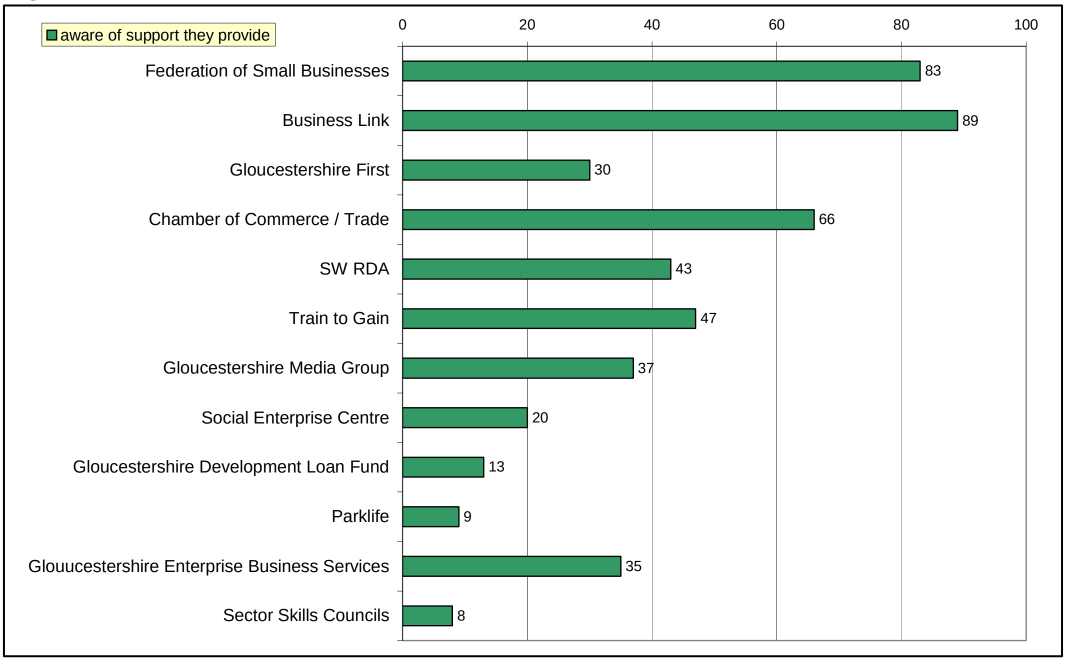


5.3 Information Sources

Respondents were presented with a list of 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. They were first asked whether they were aware of these organisations, then whether they had ever used their services and, finally, whether they would be interested in learning more about them.

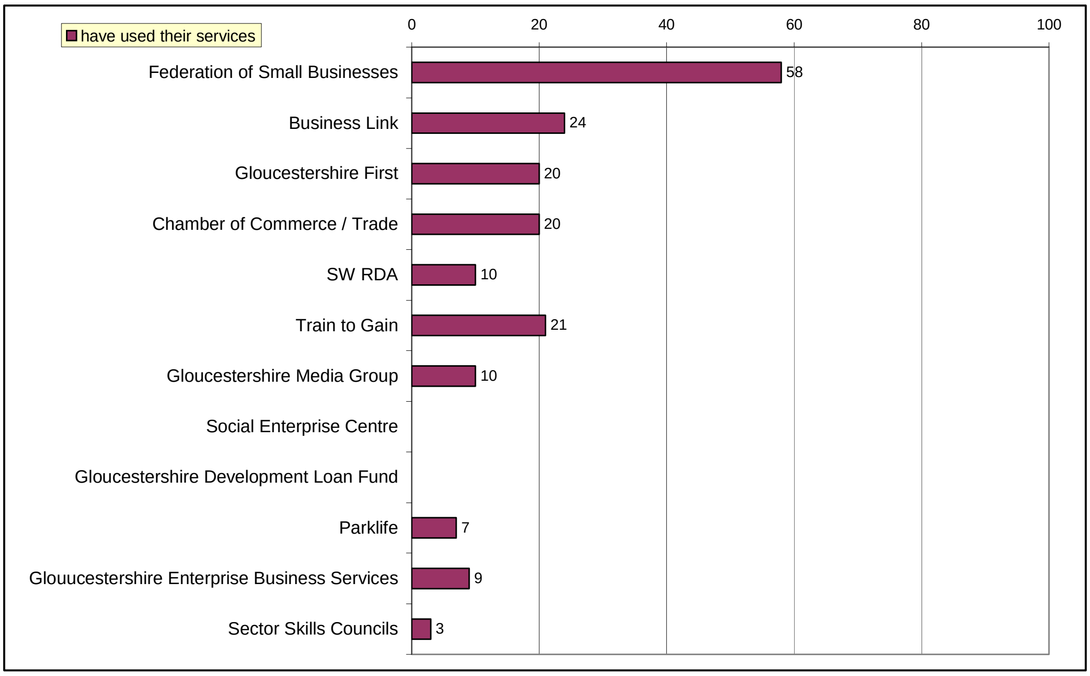
Awareness was highest for Business link, Federation of Small Businesses and the Chamber of Commerce.

Figure 13: Awareness of Business Advice Providers



Usage of business support providers was very low, with the Federation of Small Businesses having the highest usage overall, with just over half of all businesses saying they had ever used their services.

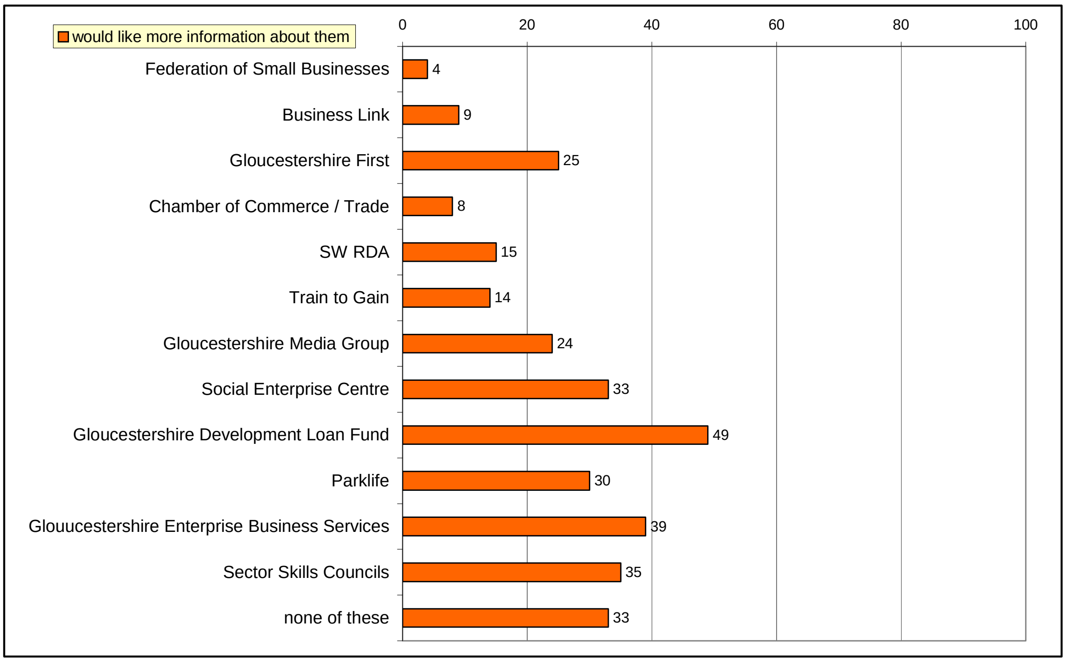
Figure 14: Usage of Business Support Providers



5.4 Further Information on Support Sources

Despite the low levels of usage of business support services, there was quite significant interest in receiving information about them, especially the Gloucestershire Development Loan Fund.

Figure 15: Further information on Business Support Sources



5.5 Further Comments

Respondents were then given the opportunity asked if they had any final comments they would like to make. This open-ended question generated many responses, covering a wide range of ideas, with some example quotes being as follows:

> *Make processes simpler with competent staff*

> *Act on the results of these surveys and make note of individual comments*

> *On the whole I am fairly satisfied with how Stroud council represents itself*

> *Please spend LABGI cash on supporting businesses in tough times not on domestic energy efficiency projects*

> *Stop thinking that Stroud can do something major on big issues like climate change. Yes, positive steps can be made, but more important is to run everything well and manage well the things you can really influence or you are entrusted to carry out*

> *More resources must be applied to encourage the establishment of local green businesses & the greening of existing businesses. It's time sustainability was a part of planning approvals in both business & house building*

Last year, I had a rate reduction on business rates. I had to pay someone to sort it out. I didn't get the money back for 3-4 years and was struggling. They don't tell you what you're entitled to. It's disgusting

Build another nuclear power plant; give advice to businesses when they start up

Stroud DC does its best in most circumstances but needs to argue more strongly for a more appropriate budget contribution from the county and regional and national government

I believe low cost housing for the young people of Stroud should be an absolute priority. Green issues raised by councillors just cloud the real issue of the problems associated with young people and lack of low cost housing.

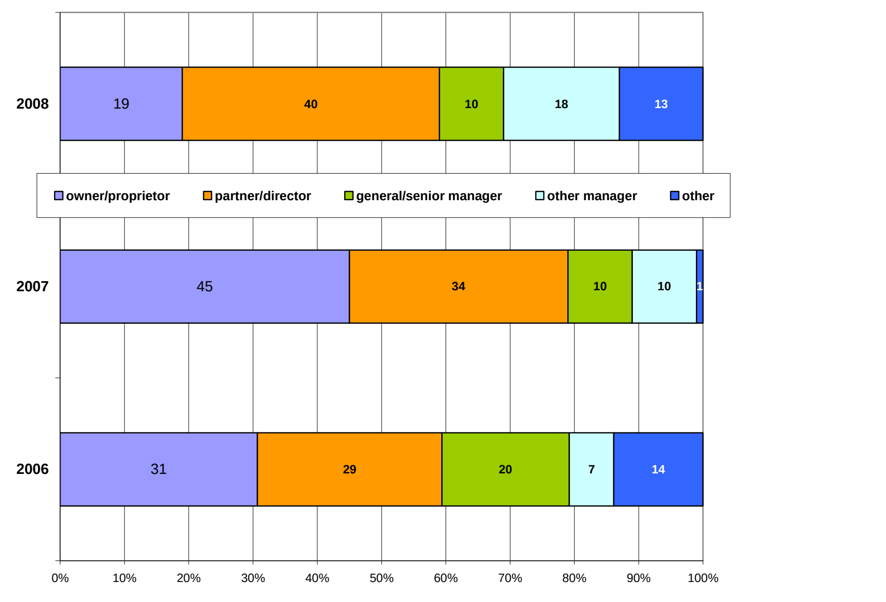
The full list of verbatim answers may be found in the Tabulations Annexe that supports this report.

Appendix A : Survey Demographics

A1. Respondent Position

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

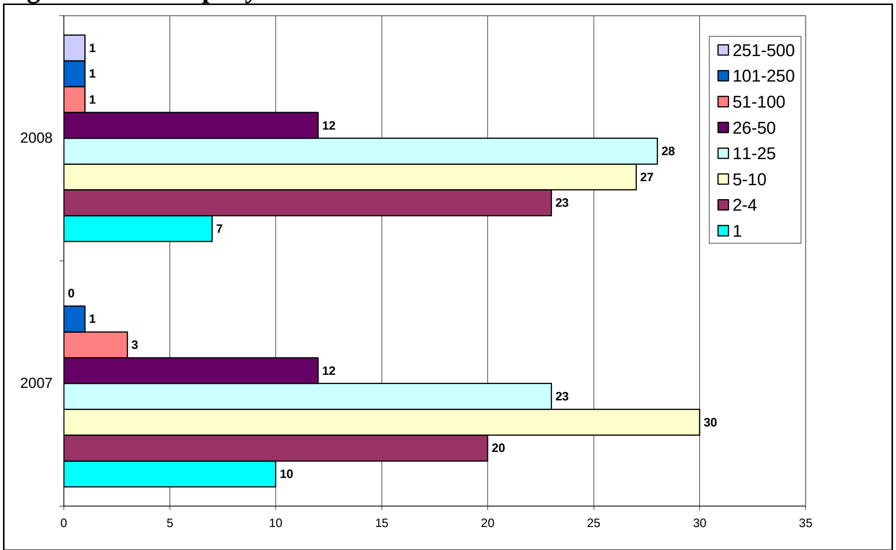
Figure A.1: Respondent Position



A2. Company Size

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

Figure A.2: Company Size

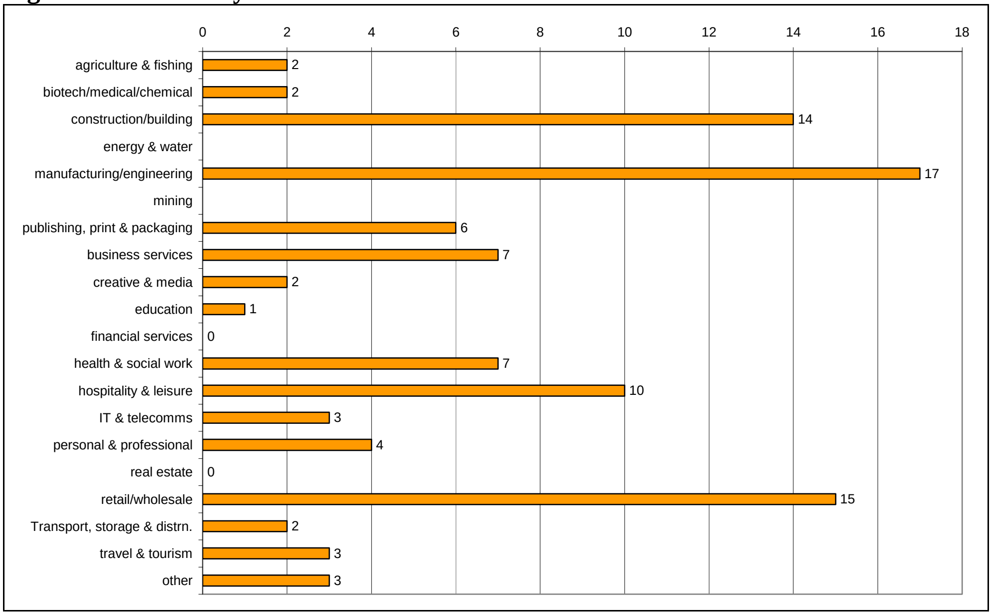


Note: a specific quota of 30% of all interviews was set for small businesses

A3. Industry Sector

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

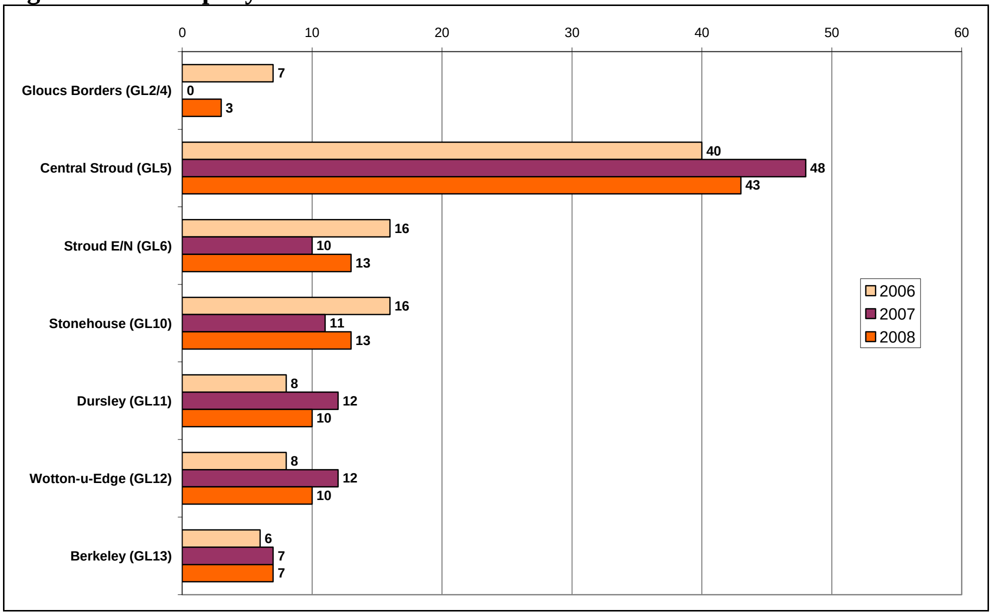
Figure A.3: Industry Sector



A4. Location

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

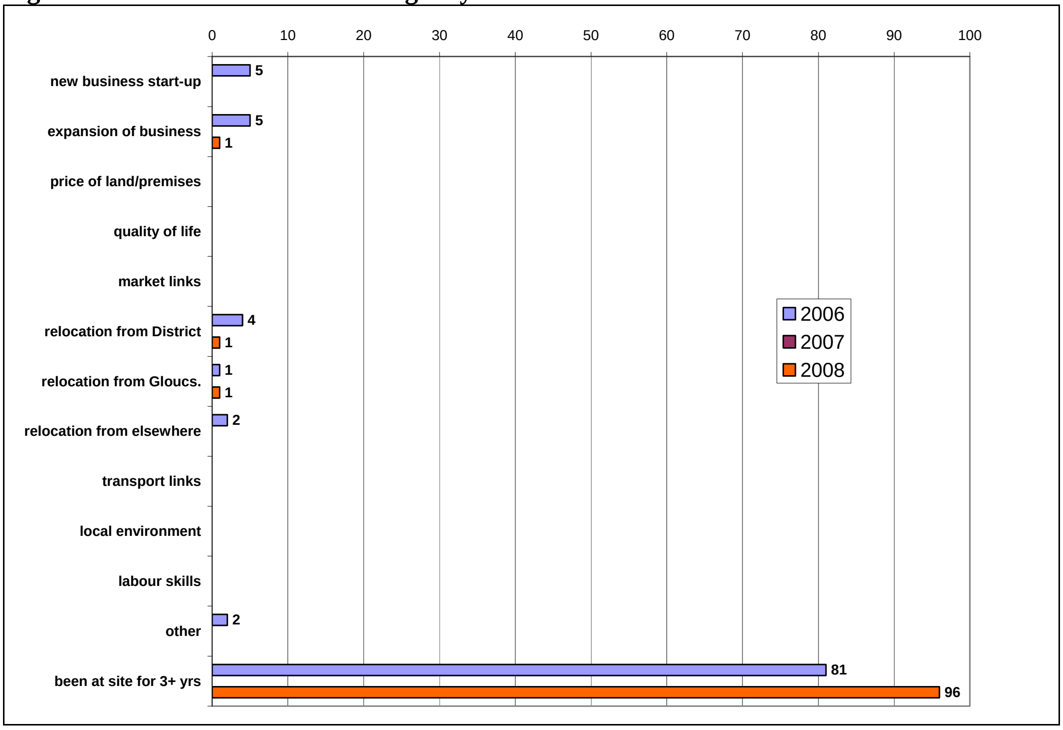
Figure A.4: Company Location



A5. Business Longevity

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

Figure A.5: Business Location Longevity



Appendix B : Survey Questionnaire