

# Business & Landowners' survey analysis



This note summarises results from the Neighbourhood Plan survey of Resident-owned Businesses conducted November 8<sup>th</sup> - December, 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Relevant findings from a small targeted Landowner businesses' survey are also included where appropriate<sup>1</sup>.

Over the next few weeks, we will also try to canvas the views of non-resident Businesses and Landowners. This information will be used to draft a Neighbourhood Plan Community Vision and Objectives.



If you would like to would like further details on the survey findings or the Neighbourhood Plan in general, please email us at [fnwpteam@gmail.com](mailto:fnwpteam@gmail.com) or look at our website [www.fnw-np.org](http://www.fnw-np.org) or follow our page on Facebook.

<sup>1</sup> Our business survey was a random survey distributed to all Finchingfield and Wethersfield households in November, 2023. It was designed to include business owners who lived in the parishes (irrespective of where their business was located) but then focus on the needs of businesses currently located inside the parishes. However, it excluded local businesses owned by non-parish residents. These will be consulted by other means. An alternative sampling strategy would have been to use the local Business rate register but this has the disadvantage of presuming that all local businesses pay rates or are registered. It would also exclude parish residents who own a business elsewhere but may have valuable insights as to how the Neighbourhood Plan may facilitate growth of the local rural economy. Our Landowners survey used a convenience sample to target known resident landowners by email in November and December, 2023.

# Background

A Neighbourhood Plan (NP) is a planning, not an economic strategy document. However, there are areas where a NP may directly and indirectly impact the Rural economy:

- Allocation of land
- Provision for (and design limitations on) new premises or change of use restrictions
- Digital and physical connectivity issues relating to new development
- Measures to protect and enhance natural and built environments

Although most of them have very few employees, Braintree district's micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs) are a key part of its economy. This is also true of Braintree's rural areas, which generate 45% of district wide employment<sup>2</sup>.

Understanding the specific needs of rural MSMEs, is therefore essential.

This is especially true in the parishes of Finchingfield and Wethersfield where the incidence of self-employment is nearly 1 in 5, compared to a district average of 1 in 8 and national average of 1 in 10<sup>3</sup>.

A survey conducted by Braintree District Council (BDC) in 2022 identified access to finance and labour as the primary obstacles to MSME growth<sup>4</sup> but this may not be true in the parishes.

- The BDC survey had less representation from hospitality or agriculture sectors compared with wholesale, retail, and manufacturing.
- Many new rural businesses are home-based with limited need for capital or large premises.
- Our parishes are relatively prosperous in terms of median incomes, skills, and levels of unemployment. However, like many rural areas, our physical and digital connectivity is poor; and over 50% of us are aged over 50 (national average is 39%).

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<sup>2</sup> Economic Plan – Research Project, Evidence report to Braintree District Council, August, 2022, <https://www.braintree.gov.uk/downloads/file/3621/economic-plan-research-project>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census>

<sup>4</sup> North Essex's Economic Baseline, North Essex Economic Board, [www.neeb.org.uk](http://www.neeb.org.uk)

# Who filled out our survey?

79 respondents to our Residents survey (21%) said they were self-employed. We also received 57 responses to the Resident Business owners' survey supplement.

From the Residents' survey we found that two-thirds of resident Business owners live outside the centres of Finchingfield and Wethersfield and two-thirds were over 56 years old. However, the latter may reflect the age skew of respondents. The incidence of self-employment in our Residents' survey was in fact highest in the 36-45 age group.

Resident business owners were more likely to be male (58%) but not in Wethersfield (outskirts) and Rotten End.

Most respondents to the Business survey owned local businesses. 84% were in our parishes and a further 11% elsewhere in the Braintree district (Figure 1)

Although agriculture, equestrian and hospitality businesses accounted for over a third of respondents, the high number of home-based businesses (35%) and industrial units and offices is evidence that our rural economy is becoming increasingly diverse (Figure 2).

54% were sole traders and 32% have between 1 and 5 employees. Larger employers tend to be Industrial units or offices (of which there are very few) and to a lesser extent in the Hospitality and Tourist sector. 50% of businesses with more than one employee said that more than half of their workforce lived within the parishes.

Figure 1 Business location

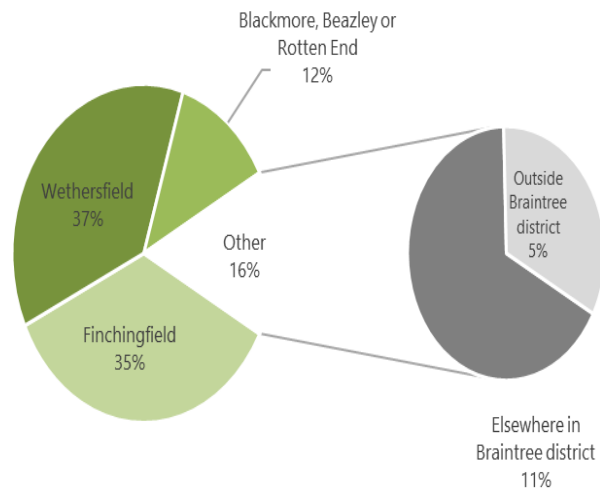
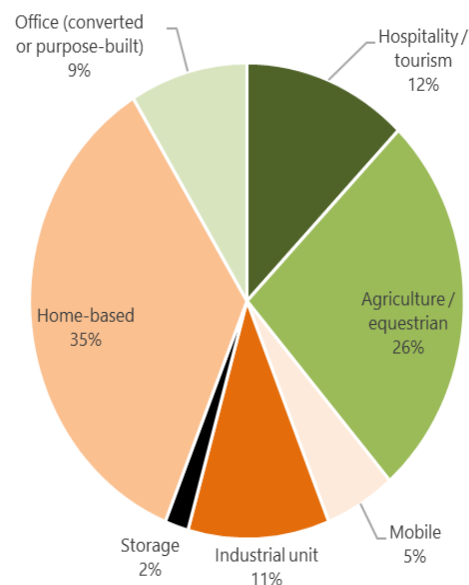


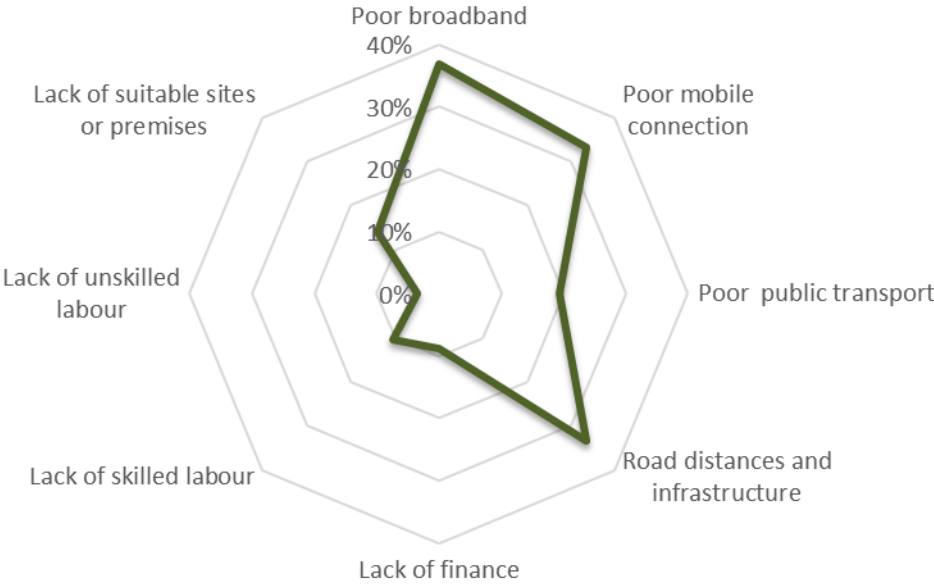
Figure 2 Business type



# The priorities of business

Resident Business owners cited numerous personal reasons for locating in our parishes - 'peace and quiet', 'no stressful commuting', 'no cost of travel to work', and 'pretty surroundings'. These suggested that self-employment was to some extent an explicit lifestyle choice. What made this choice easier was the fact that personal benefits were complimented by location specific business advantages such as - 'a loyal local staff and customer base'; the attraction of the area for tourists; and the area's obvious suitability for agri-businesses.

However, our remote location also presents several disadvantages to local businesses. As shown in Figure 3, the most frequently cited were poor **digital connectivity** (broadband or mobile) and **physical connectivity** (mainly road infrastructure). Issues mentioned in BDC's survey, such as access to other resources (finance or labour), were less evident.



**Figure 3: Percentage of businesses who mentioned a specific issue (all sectors)**

Although most premises in the Braintree district now have access to Superfast broadband, less than half have Ultrafast<sup>5</sup>. Whilst digital connectivity was important to all businesses (especially home-based), the sector specific picture regarding other issues is slightly more nuanced.

<sup>5</sup> North Essex's Economic Baseline, North Essex Economic Board, [www.neeb.org.uk](http://www.neeb.org.uk)

Figure 4 shows that road infrastructure is a problem mainly in the agricultural sector but access to **public transport** and to **labour** are more pressing problems in hospitality. Some agricultural businesses also noted skilled labour issues but office-based employers did not.

Problems accessing workers may therefore be sector specific (skills or pay-related). BDC has already highlighted that measures may be needed to address the predicted high demand over the next two decades for skilled Agricultural trades (as well as Caring and Health)<sup>6</sup>.

Though addressing skills is beyond its scope, a Neighbourhood Plan can discuss an appropriate housing mix so that skilled labour could live locally. It can also discuss provision of sustainable public transport for any new developments and ideas such as a 'business hub' to share knowledge, skills, and ideas.



**Figure 4: Percentage of businesses who mentioned a specific issue (by sector)**

A lack of suitable **business premises** was highlighted by only 14% of respondents but several also noted the need for a *shared* business premises in the form of a local micro start-up business centre to facilitate the growing popularity of working from home. This may or may not include wider use of our community centres.

<sup>6</sup> North Essex's Economic Baseline, North Essex Economic Board, [www.neeb.org.uk](http://www.neeb.org.uk)

There were also differences across sectors. Hospitality and tourist businesses highlighted that a shortage of properties in Finchingfield village centre was being exacerbated by high rents and the number of properties undergoing change of use to residential under relaxed Planning laws.

By contrast, some landowners mentioned that Planning restrictions were inhibiting their efforts to repurpose redundant farm buildings (as business, storage, or residential units) as part of a business diversification strategy.

This diversification forms part of a rapidly changing relationship between business and our **natural environment**. Local business owners of all types recognised that their business models (and lifestyles) often directly depend upon respect for, and preservation and enhancement of, our natural surroundings.

Land-based businesses often commented on the need for an appropriate balance between economic sustainability, food security and environmental conservation. Many had engaged with new environmental schemes but continued to face regulatory uncertainty. Whilst a NP can add little to this debate, it is important for the team to understand the pressures that parish landowners are encountering.

What is also self-evident is that our NP must understand that the over-riding issue of climate change is *already* affecting our natural environment. This is most frequently witnessed in terms of changes in weather patterns (prolonged wet and dry periods); higher and more volatile temperatures; and higher incidence of both flooding and drought.

Resident businesses also appeared to be keen on a more co-ordinated approach to collective marketing and a more stream-lined way through which local businesses could communicate. Although several businesses are members of existing associations (such as the Finchingfield Guild), these are often national or under-resourced. This is perhaps a matter for the Parish Councils or The Fields association to pursue.

# The Neighbourhood Plan

The most frequently cited suggestion to enhance the rural economy was unsurprisingly improved broadband and mobile connectivity (Figure 5). This was seen as beneficial to residents and businesses alike and could provide a platform for a local 'Green economy', development of a rural training and shared workspace hub, and enhancement of local skills and incomes.

This reflected a consensus that the parishes should build upon their comparative *strengths* (rather than focus on their *weaknesses*) through promotion of the area's natural beauty and heritage assets, such as the Guildhall and small retail and hospitality businesses.



**Figure 5: What type of investments would you like to see in our community?**

Several issues mentioned (such as fiscal, regulatory or highways) are beyond the scope of a NP. Policies that involve change of use of premises may be covered explicitly or otherwise in BDC's Local Plan but there is no specific planning policy necessary to facilitate home-based working. Inside of village development boundaries, policy LPP1 supports new development for residential or commercial development provided it meets with design and other grounds. The popularity of home working has encouraged a strategic policy focus on improved digital connectivity and facilitation of shared temporary work spaces for micro-enterprises. BDC's Plan also allows for change of use of rural and farm buildings but our survey suggested some problems in this area.

Our NP could add granularity to these policies (through policies on design and style, for example) but cannot contradict or duplicate. One rural NP in the district of Epping<sup>7</sup> contained policies encouraging homeworking (on the proviso that it did not impact residents unduly) and farm diversification (on the proviso that this did involve energy saving measures, did not involve any high-grade agricultural land being taken out of production and did not lead to any adverse impacts on biodiversity or traffic).

Subject to a demonstration of Housing need, a NP can also try to help to address the availability of low rent accommodation for employees through alteration of the housing mix over time.

BDC's local plan protects rural commercial sites but none of these are in Wethersfield or Finchingfield. When asked about where new business premises could be sited, our respondents most frequently mentioned the Airbase. Business owners echoed residents' calls for the Airbase to be returned to the community, to allow the renovation of base buildings as small workshops, storage units or flexible offices and establish renewable energy generation. The emphasis here was on small scale and that any such development should complement conversion of existing farm buildings to other business uses and reflect the remote natural setting.

Our Neighbourhood Plan can specify policies, such as design codes, for all development sites, including the airbase. It could suggest actions to protect heritage assets and considerations regarding traffic that apply to all sites, including the airbase.

The Neighbourhood Plan can also outline alternative proposals for how the airbase should be used in the future but if we want to make specific proposals for the base, we would need strong evidence and (ideally) the agreement of the landowner.

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<sup>7</sup> Moreton, Bobbingworth and the Lavers Parish Council Neighbourhood Plan, <https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/planning-and-building/planning-policy/neighbourhood-planning/moreton-bobbingworth-and-the-lavers-parish-council-neighbourhood-plan/>