



Consultation

Aims

The consultation stage served two main functions: The first being to engage the local community. This is an essential part of the study as it is the local community that will hopefully embrace the project and develop some or all of the proposals. The process of consulting with the local community acts to further validate the foundations of the proposals as they exploit local knowledge and opinion.

The second function is to gather views, ideas and insights from respondents. In listening to local businesses and residents and using their opinions to help form the proposals, it ensures that the proposals are better placed to answer the needs of the community.

In addition, the consultation stage also served to:

- Articulate and analyse the information gathered
- Test perceptions of various issues and proposals
- Highlight any practical, physical or financial barriers
- Gauge the local appetite for involvement and regeneration

Method

To ensure that a response reflective of Midhurst's community and situation was achieved, the following methods were employed:

- Background research - Familiarisation with past reports, studies, plans, planning issues, specific sites and any relevant proposals for future development.
- Specialist insights – Discussions with members of Chichester District Council, Midhurst Town Council and West Sussex County Council involved with the operational and developmental aspects of Midhurst. Discussions with representatives from Midhurst Community Partnership, Midhurst Chamber of Commerce and Midhurst Town Partnership.
- Stakeholder views – Identifying stakeholders within the community and holding discussions with community leaders to gain insights, opinions and ideas. Building relationships with key stakeholders to provide opinion throughout the study.
- Questionnaires – To gain the views and opinions of Midhurst businesses, residents and the residents of neighbouring wards. The production and distribution of a residents and traders questionnaire.

Respondents

There were 1100 Residents questionnaires printed. Of these, 850 were posted to random addresses throughout Midhurst and adjoining wards. The remaining 250 were distributed via Capron House, Midhurst TIC and The Grange. This further distribution enabled those residents who did not receive a questionnaire through the post to complete one if desired.

A total of 360 resident questionnaire responses were received. This equates to a response rate of 33%

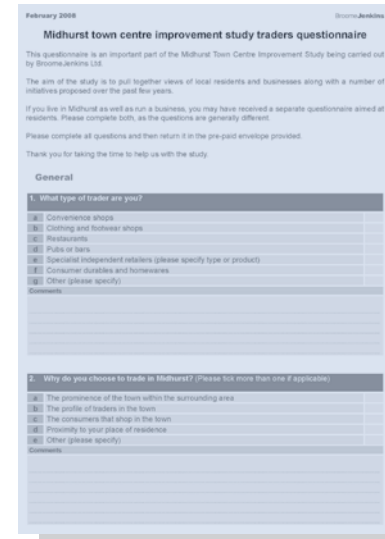
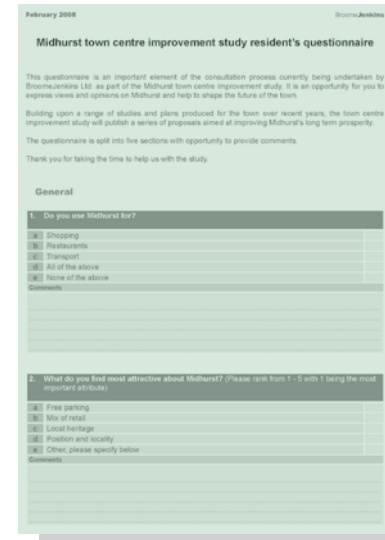
There were 200 Traders questionnaires posted directly to Midhurst business addresses, with help from The Midhurst Chamber of Commerce.

A total of 69 trader questionnaire responses were received. This equates to a response rate of 35%.

In a survey of this type, it is generally accepted that a good response would be around 10% of those contacted. Therefore the response in this case was very good.

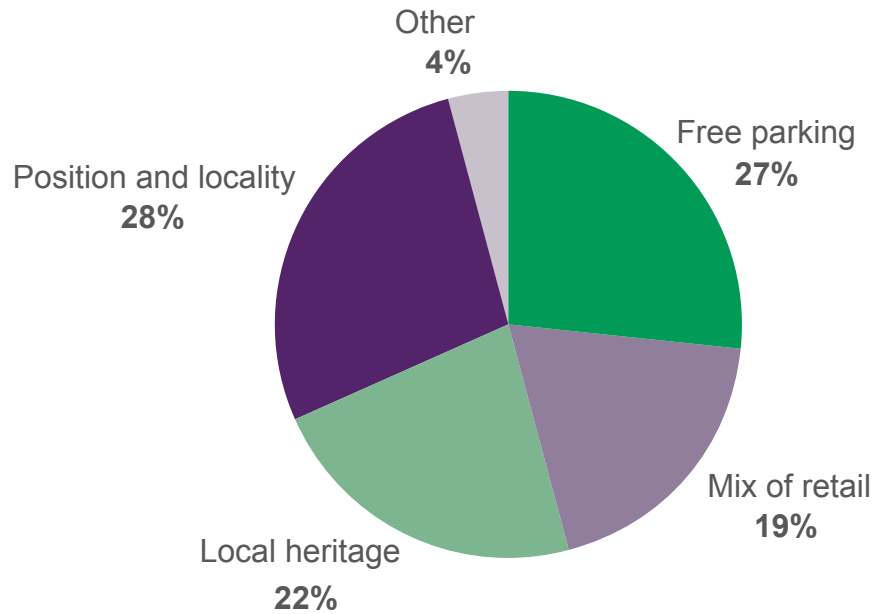
From the high level of response, it can be concluded that there is significant interest in Midhurst's prosperity and how to promote the town.

If you wish to see a copy of either questionnaire, please contact the Chichester District Council Economic Development Service on 01243 534669

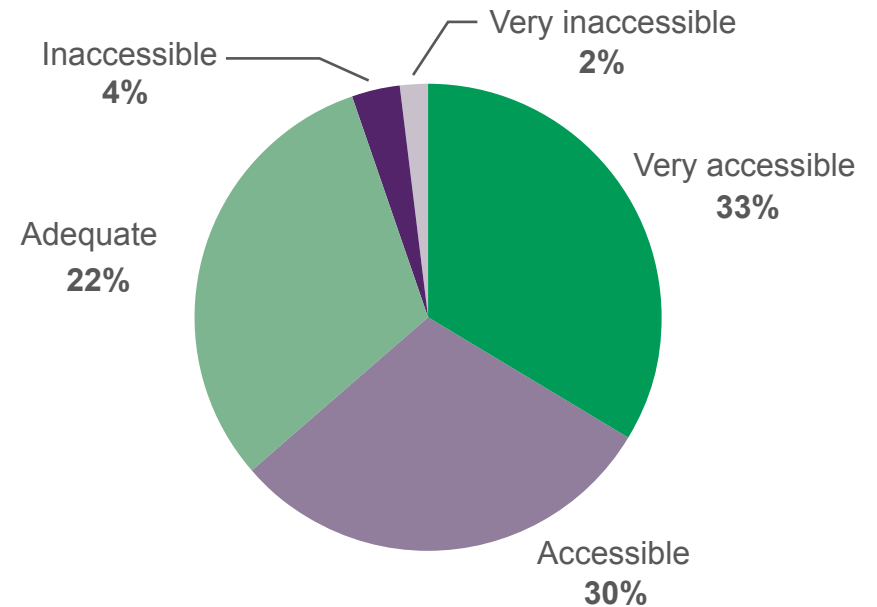


Residents questionnaire findings

What do you find most attractive about Midhurst?



As a pedestrian, how do you find moving around Midhurst town centre?



“Midhurst still has the feel of a small market town. Lets hope it doesn’t get spoilt.”

“It is an interesting and historic town, it should make more of itself.”

“I frequent Chichester regularly but find the free parking encourages me to supplement my Chichester ‘Big Shop’ for groceries with visiting Midhurst town centre for it’s mix of retail.”

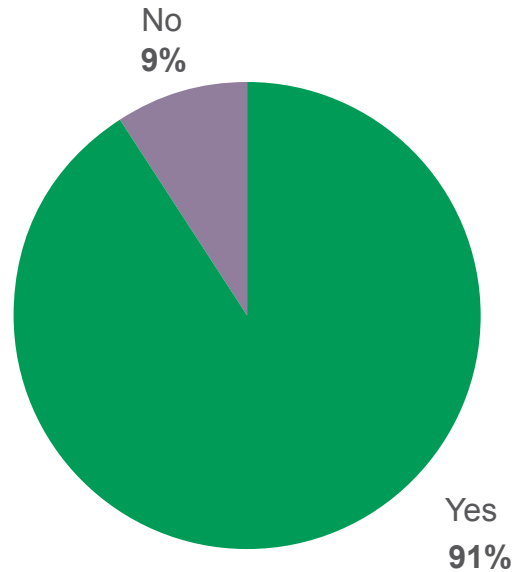
“Sadly the shops near the A272 struggle to survive as they are virtually cut off from the town. You need to be brave to walk along the narrow pavements to access them.”

“Some shops are spread out quite far. New people coming to the town probably think the only shops are the main high street. A clear map may be a good idea.”

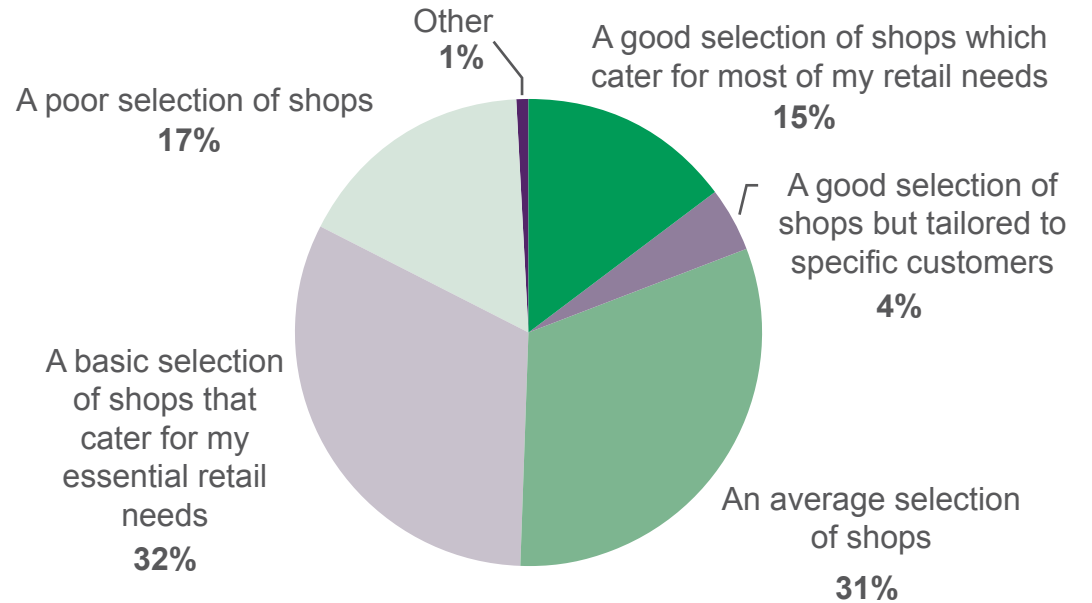
“Volume of traffic destroys the peace and pollutes the atmosphere.”

Residents questionnaire findings

Do you shop in Midhurst?



How would you describe shopping in Midhurst?



“Not often but would do more if better variety of shops.”

“Would like to be able to shop more in town but it needs a better supermarket.”

“We shop in Midhurst but still have to go to bigger towns like Chichester for many items unavailable in Midhurst. This travel makes shopping more expensive.”

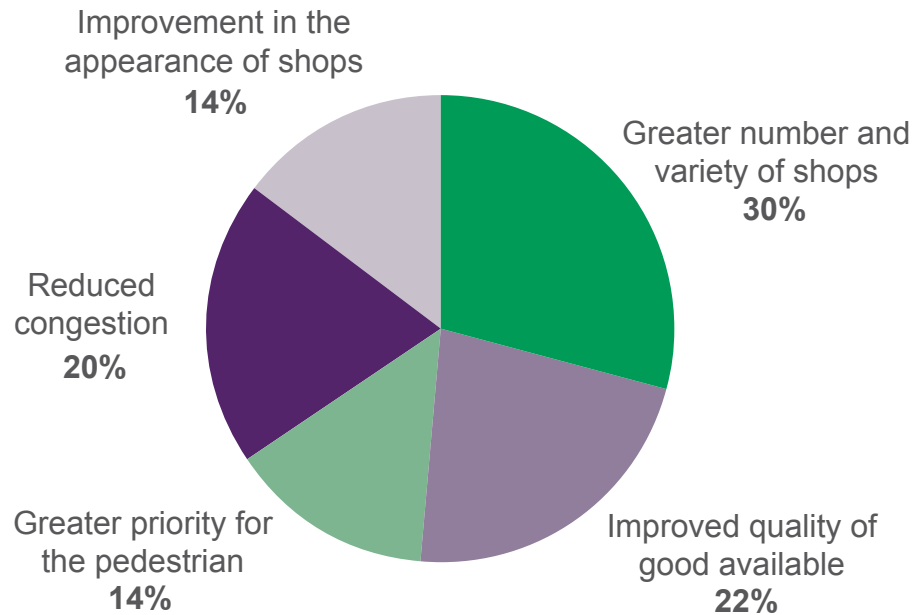
“Midhurst offers basic day to day needs however it will never compete with Chichester and Guildford which we visit regularly to a great selection of shops.”

“Too many estate agents and charity shops in the main road.”

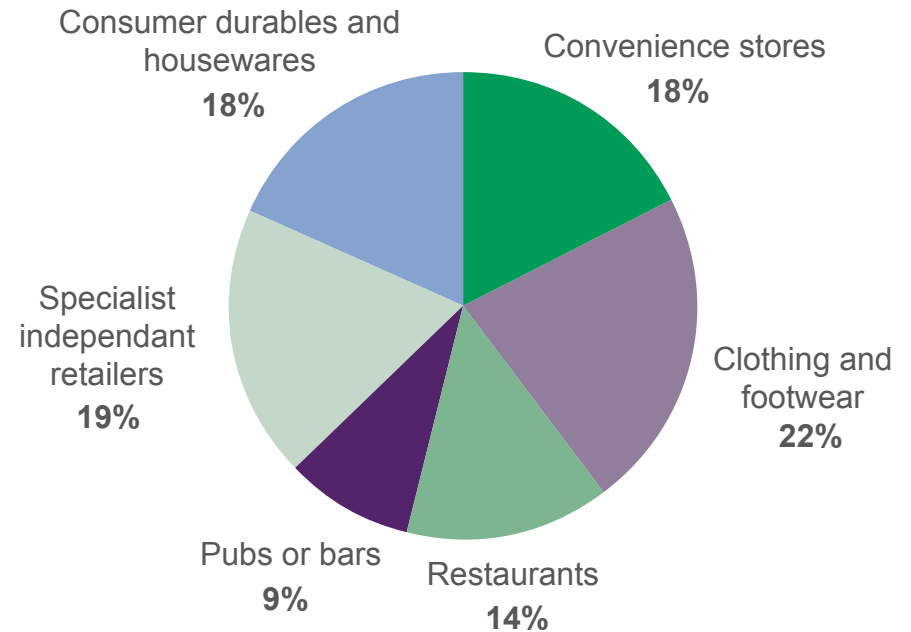
“Clearly for major items sometimes Chichester, Farnham even Petersfield has more choice. How lovely to have a good, if small, department store like the one in Farnham.”

Residents questionnaire findings

What would encourage you to shop in Midhurst more regularly?



What type of retail would you like to see more of in Midhurst?



“Midhurst is well served for all day to day needs. We should restrict major chains with intrusive fascia otherwise we will be like every other town in England!”

“Poor retail outlets, too many estate agents and charity shops make a poor town and discerning customers will go elsewhere i.e. Petersfield.”

“Quite simply if the shops were open later into the evening - perhaps a regular once a week late night shopping.”

“Quality supermarket and a farmers market.”

“Affordable footwear and clothing for children and adults.”

“Better bookshop, card shop, sports retail and children’s clothes.”

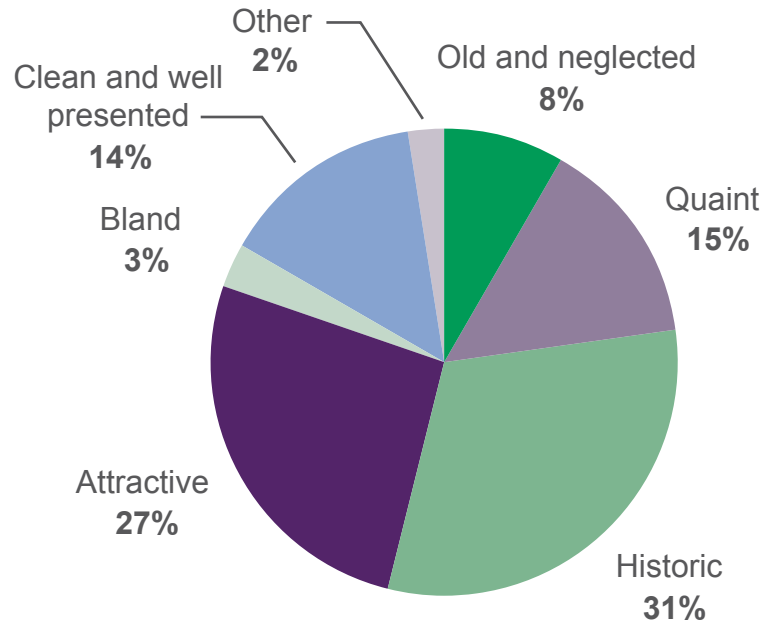
“Tesco Express not enough, we need more choice.”

“Convenience shops like Woolworths, M&S or Smiths might draw more people in. Specialist retailers already in Midhurst do not always stock a wide enough variety of products.”

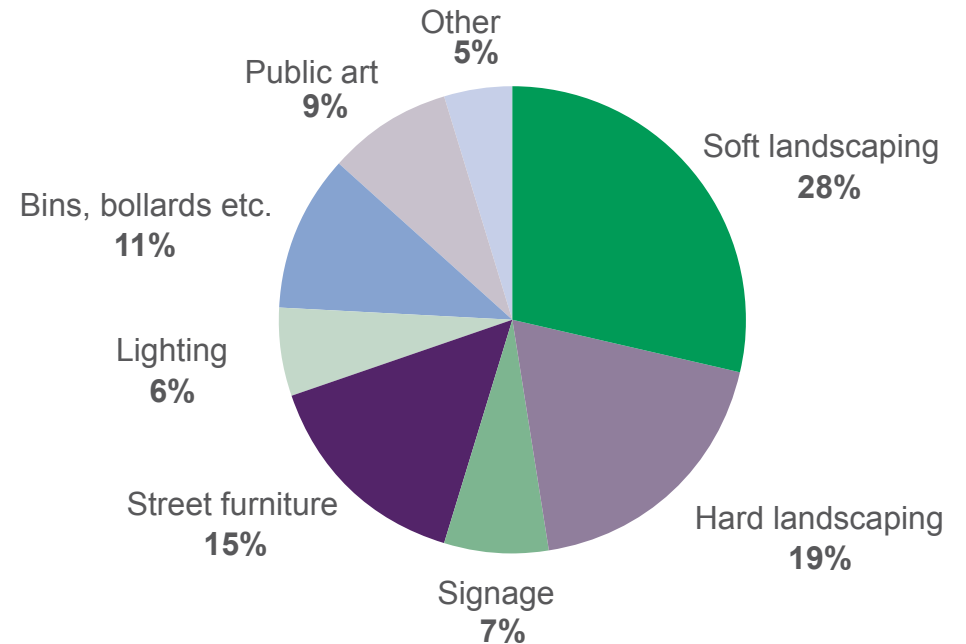


Residents questionnaire findings

How would you describe Midhurst visually?



Which aspects of Midhurst’s town centre need improving?



“Midhurst is a lovely town, but why don’t the shop keepers sweep outside the shops? The pavements are a disgrace and there are too many empty shops.”

“Mainly needs repainting. A new town notice board would be good and it looks best when the bunting is up. More plants would help.”

“South Pond should be an attractive feature of the town as adjacent to main car park – it is dreadfully neglected! i.e. The banks, silting up, debris on corner near road. Regular cleaning would be a big improvement.”

“Proliferation of retailers’ A-boards is an eyesore and a hazard. Have collective, attractive and uniform signage to guide customers to different retail areas.”

“I would not wish to see drastic or modernistic changes that might spoil the character of the town.”

“Midhurst needs to be somewhat brighter and smarter with more individual shops and restaurants (Haslemere has improved by comparison).”

Residents questionnaire findings

It is important to note that the results of the residents questionnaire reflect the demographics of respondents:

- 76% of respondents are over 46 years of age
- 67% of respondents are female
- 98% of respondents are of white ethnicity
- 92% of respondents are not disabled
- 85% of respondents live within 5 miles of Midhurst town centre

What respondents found most attractive about Midhurst, 28% selected position and locality, reflecting an appreciation of Midhurst's geographical location and proximity to larger urban centres. Interestingly, free parking was the second most popular selection at 27%. This highlights the current levels of feeling amongst the community over this issue which is prominent throughout the data and anecdotal comments of both questionnaires. Local heritage was the third most popular selection at 22%, demonstrating that respondents are aware of and value Midhurst's heritage offer.

94% of respondents found that as a pedestrian, moving around Midhurst town centre is adequate to very accessible. Although the data did not reflect any major issues, there are many anecdotal references to poor paving surfaces and the pinch point on Rumbolds Hill. Results for this question from the 8% of respondents that are disabled differ to the overall result, with 83% finding the town centre adequate to very accessible, 13% finding it inaccessible and 4% finding it very inaccessible. The need to consult with disability groups regarding this matter is intended to be addressed during the public consultation events.

Of the 360 respondents, 91% shop in Midhurst. Although the data does not provide details of their average weekly spend, it does indicate that a large proportion of respondents use the town for shopping in some capacity.

Although the town is used for shopping by the majority of respondents, the perception of the retail offer among them is generally a poor one. 80% of respondents described shopping in Midhurst as poor, basic or average. This perception of a poor to average retail offer does not necessarily dissuade them from using Midhurst for shopping in some capacity. Of the respondents that described shopping in the town as 'poor', 95% shop in Midhurst and 65% shop there on average over six days per month. This backs up the summary provided in the CACI report that described Midhurst as being used predominantly for 'top-up shopping'.

Respondents were also asked what would encourage them to shop in Midhurst more regularly and the most popular selection with 30% was 'a greater number and variety of shops'. Second to this with 22% was 'improved quality of goods available'. These answers indicate that it is largely the range and quality of goods available although the question did not allow for opinion on the competitiveness of goods available which may also be a major factor.

The type of retail that respondents would like to see more of in Midhurst was quite evenly spread with 22% selecting clothing and footwear, 19% requesting specialist independent retailers, 18% requesting consumer durables and house wares, 18% requesting convenience stores and 14% selecting restaurants. There were many anecdotal references to major supermarkets and high street chains. Although the community may want these retailers, there are not necessarily the sites or the size of market to attract them. The only type of retail that did not attract an even response was pubs or bars with 9%. This was further communicated with several comments suggesting that there are a sufficient number already present in the town.

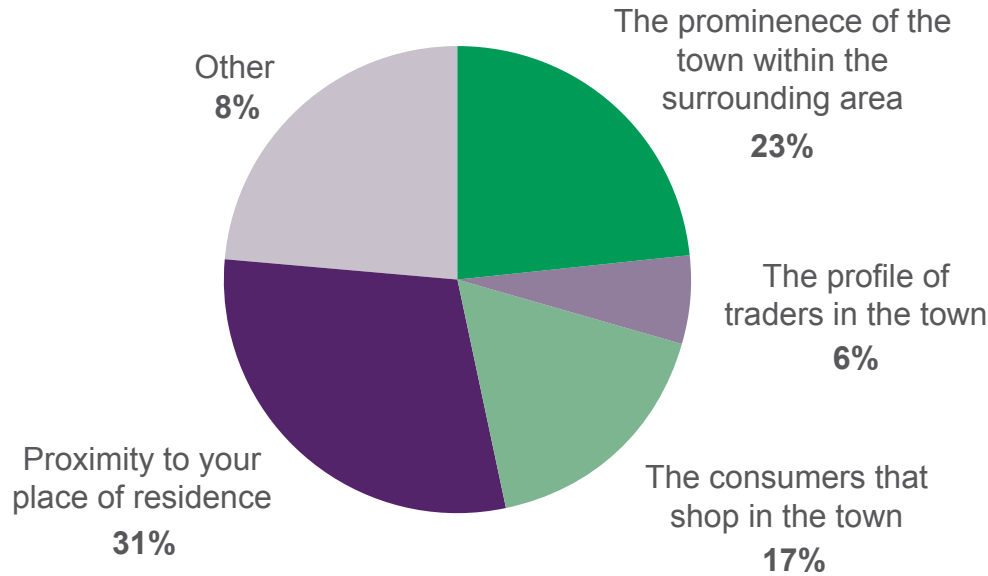
Perceptions of the town's visual appeal were also gauged. The questionnaire asked how respondents would describe Midhurst visually. The response was generally a favourable one with 31% selecting 'historic' and 27% selecting 'attractive'. These answers demonstrate that respondents are aware of the assets present in the town and recognise their value. There were anecdotal answers to this question highlighting specific issues such as street cleaning and shop front maintenance.

The questionnaire also asked which aspects of Midhurst's town centre need improving. This helped establish opinion relating to which improvements are desired. 'Soft landscaping' was the favoured response at 28%, other notable selections were 'hard landscaping' with 19% and 'street furniture' with 15%. The remaining selections were spread thinly across signage, lighting, bins and bollards etc., public art and other. The data aligned with several anecdotal responses asking for minimal and appropriate improvements.

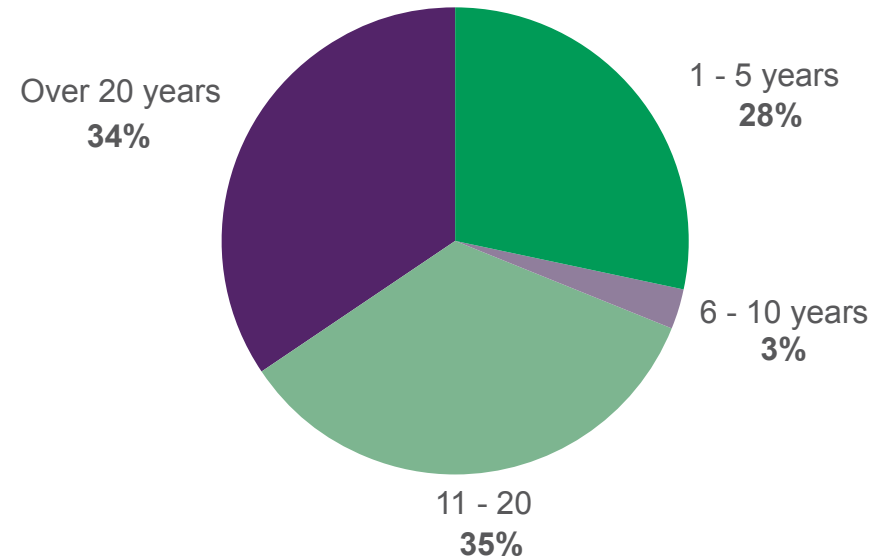
Although the questionnaire received an excellent response, the data is influenced by the demographics of the respondents and the conclusions are affected accordingly. The public consultations will aim to address this bias by attracting a more representative section of the community.

Traders questionnaire findings

Why do you choose to trade in Midhurst?



For how long has your business been established in Midhurst?



“Reasonable rent, good position of shop, quality customers, traffic still runs through town (passing trade) and there is little competition.”

“We could be almost anywhere, but Midhurst is absolutely fine with its central function in the south and easy access for visitors. The free car parking in the Town helps, as does the Town’s appeal generally. The shopping is varied but comprehensive for most people in this age we live in. We are well settled and intend to stay.”

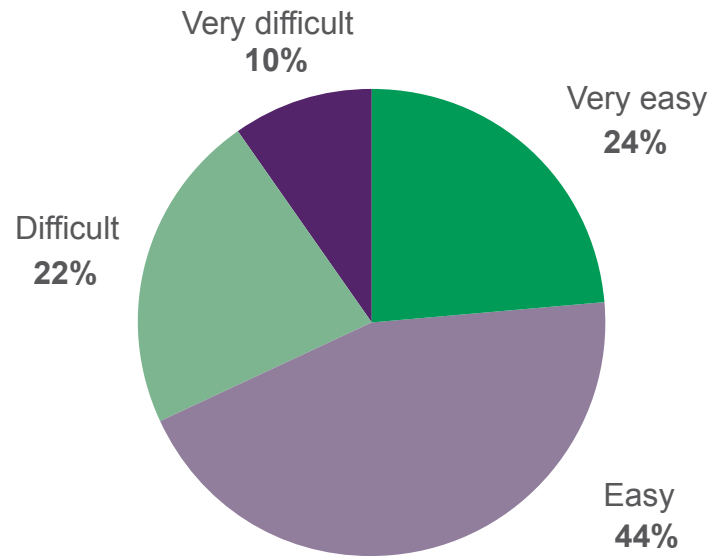
“Opened October 1995 and moved from Knockhundred Row to North Street in Oct 2000. I moved to a larger premises. This does not necessarily mean more shoppers.”

“Five years (previously 7 years in London).”

“Although we are now based in Midhurst, we work for companies/ individuals all around UK & abroad.”

Traders questionnaire findings

How do you find deliveries to and from your business?

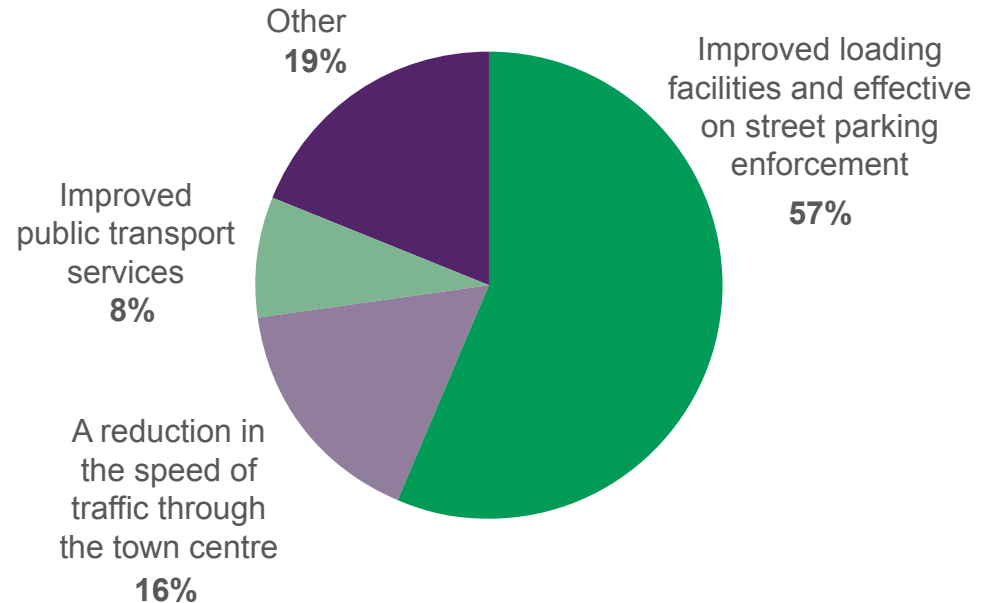


“Easy, so long as North Street kept clear of lorries having to double park due to loading bays being used by car drivers, greater policing of this is required.”

“No rear access. Rely on loading bay which is always full of illegally parked cars.”

“Easy because we try to choose times when the roads are not too busy. However it does depend on the size of vehicle, but again we try to encourage our suppliers to deliver in smaller vehicles.”

Which of the following do you think would be the best way of improving transport in Midhurst town centre?



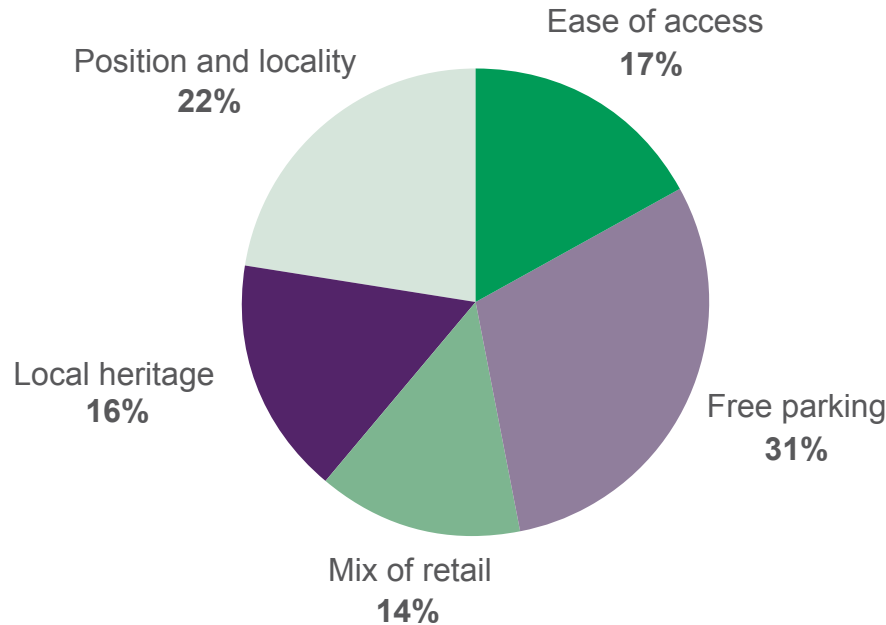
“The blocking of Midhurst streets by delivery lorries is distinctive to trading. Illegal parking causes the problem. Perhaps a protocol could be worked out between shop owners and their suppliers to deliver at certain times.”

“Cycle paths.”

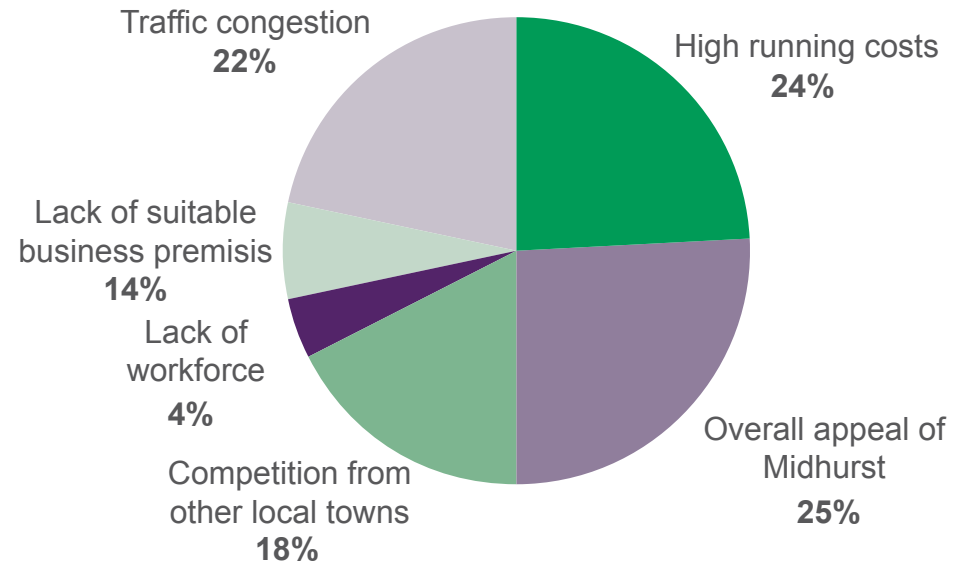
“A combination answer. Effective on street parking enforcement together with turning Knockhundred into a one way (southbound). This would ease up deliveries to the whole of Knockhundred & Church Hill improve pedestrian safety and smooth the traffic flow.”

Traders questionnaire findings

As a business, what do you find most attractive about Midhurst?



Running a business in Midhurst, what are you most concerned by?



“The parking, position and access is a huge benefit to this area however a larger range of shops would benefit hugely and paid parking would destroy the towns trade.”

“Need to keep parking free to compete with large supermarkets and shopping malls with free parking.”

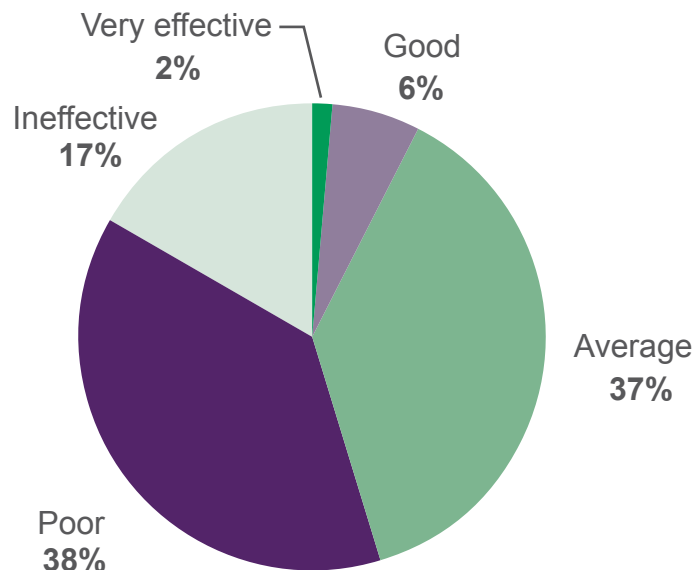
“The retail offer in this attractive, historic town is poor. There is over-provision of charity shops & cafes. Many other shops are woefully shabby & tired-looking. A better balance/diversity of retail is needed.”

“There seems to be a concentration of charity shops, estate agents and cafes/restaurants and the more there are, the less variety there will be. Therefore less attractiveness to shoppers who will go to Chichester and Petersfield to find the variety they are looking for.”

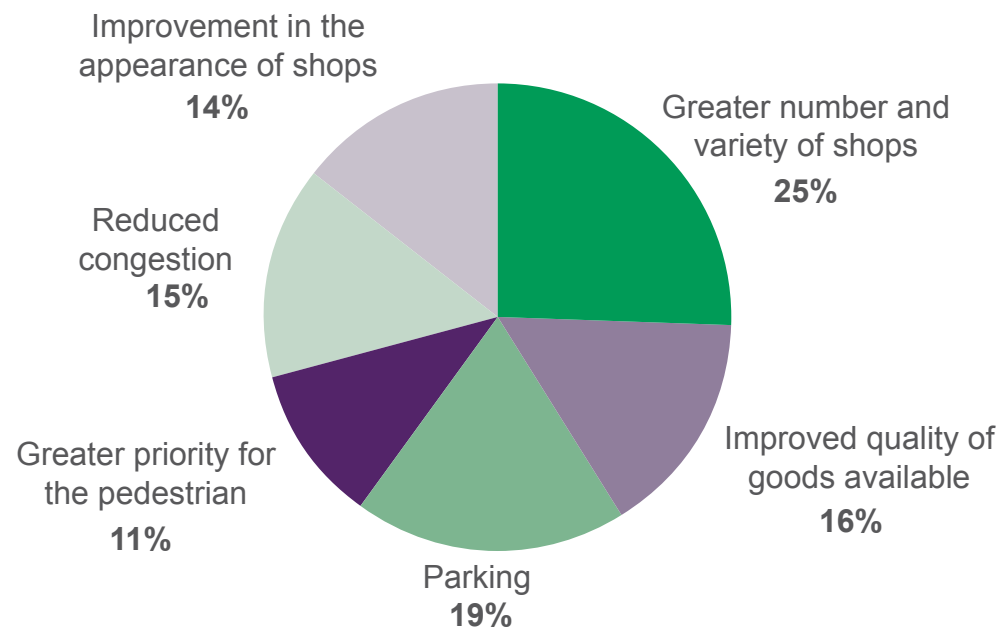
“Our figures over the 15 years to 2007 show a sustained year-by-year decline in customers. 1993-2007 shows a 25% decrease. Lack of passing trade - footfall - is the single most worrying aspect of running a retail business in Midhurst. There are too many times in the middle of the day when no-one can be seen outside.”

Traders questionnaire findings

In your opinion, how effective is the marketing of Midhurst?



What do you think would encourage shoppers to use Midhurst more regularly?



“We have a range of good hotels, pubs, restaurants and tourist attractions in the form of the ruins and the polo matches, more should be done to attract tourists.”

“Very difficult to promote a town of this size on its own - it needs to be linked with other attractions.”

“Just not enough done. Who should do it? Midhurst Town Council, Chichester District Council or Midhurst Chamber of Commerce?”

“Midhurst people don’t use their own shops! They are sometimes surprised when they come in and find a good choice as they don’t know that its available.”

“A couple of ‘larger names’ in the High Street and more shops in West Street.”

“Congestion is not the problem - the ‘offer’ is!”

“Free parking is a major bonus to the town - there is a good and plentiful amount of parking already.”

Traders questionnaire findings

Respondents were asked why they choose to trade in Midhurst, the most popular answer with 31% was 'proximity to place of residence'. This indicates that a choice to live in the town has, for many, led to trading there. This was followed by 'the prominence of the town within the surrounding area' and 'other', both with 23%. The relatively high percentage for prominence of the town suggests that traders are aware of Midhurst's potential catchment. Many of the anecdotal responses to this question explained those who selected 'other' and generally related to specific conditions. These range from a particular local influence such as polo to a particular premises becoming available at the right price.

Respondents were asked 'how long their business had been established in Midhurst?' This revealed some interesting results. 28% of respondents have been established in the town for 1 to 5 years and 69% for over 11 years. But only 3% of the respondents have been established in Midhurst for between 6 and 10 years. The explanation of this anomaly could lie with a specific issue such as lease agreements or could simply be coincidence.

Deliveries to businesses in the town are not an issue for the majority with 68% of respondents finding them easy or very easy. From the remainder, 22% find them difficult and 10% find them very difficult. With access and movement within the town being an issue for almost a third of respondents, it is certainly an area to address.

With regards to improving transport in Midhurst town centre, 57% of respondents felt that this would be best achieved by improving loading facilities and improved on - street parking enforcement. This data provides further confirmation of a well known problem within the town centre. The second highest selection was 'other' at 19% with free parking and the bypass issues expressed anecdotally.

The issue of free parking was once again highlighted in response to the question: 'As a business, what do you find most attractive about Midhurst?' It was the most popular response at 31%. This is obviously seen as an asset by traders in Midhurst. At 22%, position and locality was the second most popular answer demonstrating that traders do value the location of the town and the surrounding area.

In terms of issues that concern traders, the overall appeal of Midhurst was the highest at 25%. This can be attributed to many factors such as the retail offer, the quality of the public realm and convenience. High running costs was a close second at 24% which will be predominantly due to rents which are subject to local market forces. Traffic congestion at 22% and competition from other local towns at 18% were also notable concerns. 7% of respondents selected lack of suitable premises as their biggest concern. Of this 7%, half have been established in the town for 1-5 years.

Traders' views of the marketing of Midhurst were predominantly negative with 38% describing them as poor, 37% describing them as average and 17% describing them as ineffective. An earlier question asked the traders were aware of any efforts to market the town with only 43% selecting yes. There are several leaflets promoting the town and events are often advertised via signage in the town. Interestingly, an anecdotal comment questioned who is responsible for delivering this service which demonstrates that the business community are not all necessarily involved directly with the marketing effort.

When asked what they think would encourage shoppers to use Midhurst more regularly, respondents selected a greater number and variety of shops as the highest answer at 25%, highlighting awareness that the retail offer needs to be improved. Parking was the second most popular answer at 19% which would suggest a perception that current free parking facilities are of insufficient capacity. Improved quality of goods available at 16% and improvement in the appearance of shops at 14% would suggest that respondents are of the opinion that the general quality of retail needs to be addressed.

Of the retail that traders think would benefit Midhurst, the primary choice was specialist independent retailers. Of respondents, 32% are independent retailers and so this is a substantial existing sector of the retail market that traders would like to see expanded. Consumer durables and house wares was the third most popular choice at 19% and none of the respondents fall into this sector, possibly identifying a gap in the market.

Summary

The survey and questionnaire revealed that whilst there is room for improving elements of the public realm, Midhurst does not require a large-scale landmark development (although some would advocate a bypass). Instead it requires a range of simple practical measures, which integrate economic and physical renewal, addressing practical improvements, which would build on Midhurst's heritage, to establish a better sense of place and experience.



Proposals

From the results of the questionnaire we know that approximately 90% of local residents already shop in Midhurst and the CACI report tells us that this is predominately for ‘top up’ shopping.

The challenge is to lift Midhurst to become a market town that effectively services the hinterland by increasing the retail spend through improved quality of retail offer.

Overview

The survey and questionnaire revealed that whilst there is room for improving elements of the public realm, Midhurst does not require a large-scale landmark development (although some would advocate a bye pass). Instead it requires a range of simple practical measures, which integrate economic and physical renewal, addressing practical improvements, which would build on Midhurst's heritage, to establish a better sense of place and experience.

As the aim of this study is to bring about change, it is beneficial to develop some visual aspects of improvement to lead the change and to symbolise the ambition. That ambition is to develop an improved economy and more successful town, without eroding Midhurst's innate historic quality.

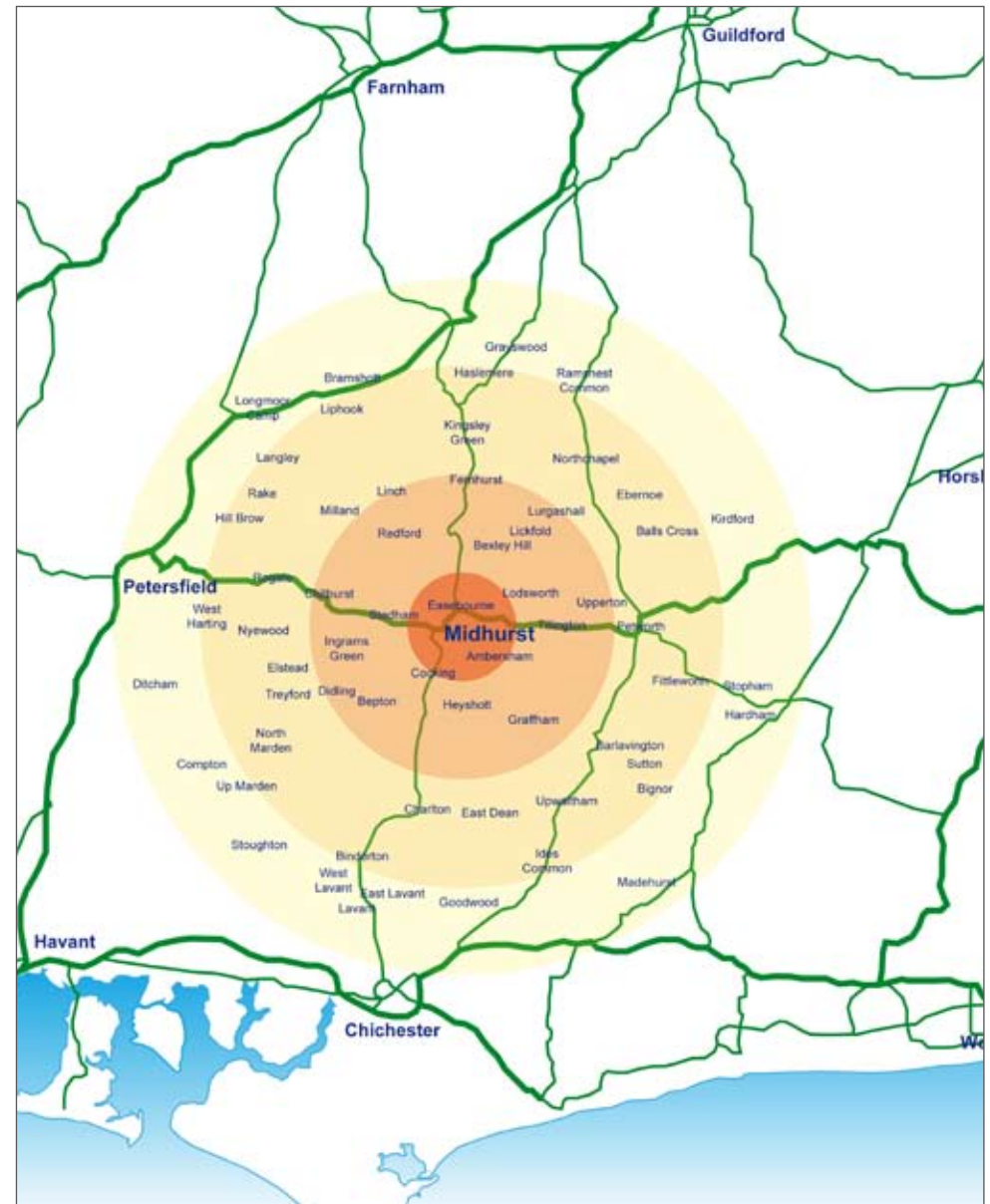
Therefore, a number of proposals have been made. Some which address physical improvements and others to improve the management framework for Midhurst.

Working from the views expressed through the questionnaire as well as reviewing past studies, it is reasonable to conclude that whilst Midhurst has many attractive qualities, some physical improvement is required and better use of its heritage assets would also be beneficial. Although retail has an independent bias, the retail mix was generally felt to be poor.

At present, there are 7 vacant shops in Midhurst and 5 Charity Shops. As concluded by the CACI report (January 2007), Midhurst should serve the local community mainly for convenience and 'top-up' shopping. It is unlikely to become a retail destination as such, but with a basis of premium independent retailers, it could be appealing to locals and visitors alike, if managed correctly.

The retail catchment area contains almost 87,000 residents, but unless an attractive retail mix is maintained, loss of trade to other local towns would be inevitable. So to prevent this we feel there are three key actions:

- 1 Address the retail environment with particular attention to vacant shops on West Street.
- 2 Define a 'sense of place' to give Midhurst a clearer identity which leverages its heritage and historical context.
- 3 Co-ordinate management of all aspects of the Town - encompassing the built environment, heritage, retail, amenities.



Graphic indication of Midhurst's retail catchment area - for precise information, please reference the Midhurst Strategy and Sustainable Opportunities CACI report (2007).

Retail mix and quality

Retail mix and quality was expressed by respondents to the questionnaire as being; 'average to poor'. With today's highly mobile society, the lack of quality and appeal simply means that people will shop elsewhere.

Existing retailers have to be sure they are offering appealing and if possible distinct products. Over 90% of those questioned use Midhurst, but their spend is low – as defined by the CACI report as 'top-up' shopping. Improved range and quality of goods is key. It is essential to maintain an interesting and diverse mix of quality retail, in order for Midhurst to define its own retail character.

Lytham in Lancashire is a very attractive town centre with a good range of independent retailers and restaurants as well as some national retailers. The main street – Clifton Street is an active shopping street, which defines a unique character through a combination of retail mix and local architecture. Whilst the retail mix is good, position also plays a major part in its success, providing a captive audience and buoyant local retail economy to ensure the mix and quality remains high. Local residents have little choice as its nearest large town is Blackpool (ten miles north) which has a very low quality retail offer and considerable social deprivation – supported almost entirely by its declining tourist economy. Manchester and Preston are both more than an hour away and the out-of-town retail parks and supermarkets provide the usual mix of DIY superstore and other nonessential retail.

Unlike Lytham, Midhurst will always have to compete with other towns and as stated in the CACI report is unlikely to attract major national retailers, other than a supermarket/convenience store – (as in the case of recently opened Tesco

Express). The challenge here is to ensure those people currently using Midhurst spend more whilst in town and that the retail offer develops to an extent that it serves the hinterland with a unique mix, thereby attracting new users and converting the less frequent visitors. To that end, the kind of retail appropriate to Midhurst for the future needs to be defined.

Whilst the result we are aiming for is to revitalise the town, Midhurst faces a common problem - that due to greater mobility and the advent of large supermarkets and out-of-town retail parks, small towns and villages have seen their traditional facilities decline.

For towns, which have grown up as a ribbon development in a linear form along a main arterial route, the coming of a bypass brings congestion relief and may improve travel time but it will also remove passing trade.

Tarporley in Cheshire developed along the A49 until it received a bypass in the 1980's. Businesses became inviable with the loss of passing trade and the inevitable decline followed. In 1990's Vale Royal Council created planning measures to encourage the redefinition of the village. This included a carefully considered mixed use development. In this case it was appropriate to introduce some residential use into the old retail area of the village. Due to the attractive environment created, new businesses were attracted in and have helped to sustain village life and improve the local popularity. Today, Tarporley is one of the most desirable residential areas in Cheshire.



Tarporley, Cheshire



Tarporley, Cheshire

Shopfronts and shop signs

The quality of the environment helped to revitalise Tarporley. Well maintained and presented shop fronts will enhance the character of a town and reveal the quality of the retail offer, attracting passers by. Attributing the loss of passing trade to a bypass is a definite event and probable cause. But retailers in a town with potential passing-trade, but reliant on a close captive market can become complacent, fail to be aware of their customers needs and as a result will eventually decline. A retailer needs to know their market and how to succeed against the competition whether it is with another town or just down the street!

Less attractive retail areas will be due to the combination of the poor state of the built environment and the quality of the retail offer. The two are directly linked, along with a range of other socioeconomic issues. In the case of Midhurst, however it cannot be described as 'deprived' and the town centre is generally considered appealing - seen by the respondents as quaint. Although it is inevitable change has occurred in Midhurst over the past ten to twenty years, the state of the shop fronts and overall fabric of the buildings is reasonable. There are few back-illuminated signs used and most retail businesses, where necessary apply signage in a way sensitive to the historic nature of the town. There is however room for improvement, with the impact of vacant shops being the prime concern.

In terms of the physical quality of the shops fronts, business owners and landlords alike need to ensure that the shop front and building façade is in a good state of repair. Given the historic nature of Midhurst, the shop front including the stall riser, window and sign should not destroy the scale and proportions of the original building.

Where a house has been converted to a shop some time ago, it is likely that the shop front will either reflect the original character of the building or will be in a vernacular style popular at the time of the conversion. Both would be appropriate to maintain. But where new shop fronts have been installed, or need to be installed, every effort should be made to reflect true architectural character. One suggestion would be to form a local retail manual to assist with future shop front replacements.

Apart from the physical shop front, the way the space inside and outside the window is used by the retailer is of extreme value to the business in particular and the town in general.

Better standards of visual merchandising and retail presentation, can be undertaken very simply by the retailer and can be carried out immediately. Support and practical advice can also be obtained through Business Links, with training and grants available to independent retailers to help gain the skills required.



Retail presentation - Bill's, Brighton



Shopfronts - Lewes



Vacant shops

Vacant shops are a bad advertisement for other businesses around them. Midhurst currently has seven empty shops. Is this natural churn or the start of a trend? But in truth local high streets all over the UK have moved from supporting a local community almost entirely, to providing convenience shopping and restaurants. This is a natural consequence of the changing retail patterns within the context of a very mobile society.

One issue reported by respondents to the business questionnaire, is the high cost of rents. Is this coupled to the lack of a local commercial letting agent with knowledge of the local market? Or is this relative to poor retail economy. In other words, if turnover increased, would rents be more affordable?

As a result of this study and as an immediate action to take, there needs to be a short-term measure to reduce the visual impact of the vacant shops. But then long-term, there will need to be a way to manage the letting of shops and the rents set. Introducing planning policy, which will limit the type of retail permitted in a given area, could do this. If retail was restricted to A1 in an area, it will have the affect of controlling the rent and preventing non-A1 businesses such as restaurants from taking prime positions or possibly shifting the mix away from shops to other types of walk-in businesses.



Vacant retail premises - West Street, Midhurst

Retail promotion

Major retailers constantly promote their business despite having significant market share and a high profile name. Why? To keep their name 'top of mind' as referred to in marketing parlance and to ensure customers keep coming. In the case of Midhurst, the same requirement exists, albeit on a different scale. Whether in terms of individual businesses or as a whole town, it is key to promote retailing in Midhurst. This can be done through a range of simple measures, which either reach the target audience through some form of direct marketing, or as a feature in town.

One simple device used by a small West Michigan Town – Saugatuck, is to use a bright patchwork flag. When the shops open, they are hung out. Not only does it show that the shop is open but it creates a sense of carnival. Another measure is to form an association of traders to uphold standards and to create a collective responsibility to quality and diversity. This has been tried in Midhurst – Old Midhurst New Experience. This or something like it should be encouraged.

Creating a sense of destination is also very effective. All major cities have a China town, which defines a cultural and retail experience and is always marked by a physical landmark to define arrival. In Midhurst, there is North Street – wide-open thoroughfare and then there is the Old Town – narrow and quaint. Through a range of appropriate measures and the right mix of retail, the Old Town could define Midhurst. But it must deliver quality and entice people to come, enjoy the visit and then return.



Saugatuck, West Michigan



Old Midhurst New Experience logo

Retail promotion



Gateway structure to define the old town - West Street, Midhurst

Public realm improvements

Public Realm improvements will essentially address the quality of the carriageway, footway, signage, street furniture and the overall setting of Midhurst's built environment.

Some thought has already been given to a scheme for Church Hill and Market Square commissioned by the Midhurst Town Council.

From our visual survey, it is clear that whilst the use of cobbles in the Old Town adds to the character and the paving along North Street provides a good contrast, both areas have been subject to remedial works of differing standards. As a result there is room for improvement as well as ensuring the surfaces and ramps are compliant with Department of Transport Inclusive Mobility standards.

However, it is also important to consider the historic context of Midhurst and ensure that good design practice is applied without detracting from the historic setting. To that end, the contemporary thinking in urban design terms is to avoid pastiche developments but respect the past. New developments should be appropriate for the future and that the expression of character is more than aesthetic dressing.

One aspect of the Public Realm where this will be most evident is in the choice of street furniture. There are countless suppliers who offer a range of Victorian, Edwardian and classically inspired ranges. Not all are faithful in design or accurate in detail, but imply a distorted impression of 'traditional'. Throughout the Chichester District, it is likely that the same range of furniture will be used. Developed exclusively for Chichester by Building Design Partnership (BDP), the programme was commissioned by West Sussex County Council and is currently on trial in North Street, Chichester.

In addition to the style of street furniture, it is also important to consider the number of items required and the placement of them. Streets cluttered with extraneous signs, bins and benches can be a nuisance to pedestrians and interfere with the architectural character of a place. In the case of Midhurst it is essential to use street furniture sparingly and to good effect.



Examples of substandard footway remedial works and footway improvements



Tegula block paving - Image reproduced with permission from Marshalls

Movement

One's experience of a place is derived through the way we move around it - by exploring the pattern of established routes. The character of say – Venice with its canals is different to Brighton's North Lanes. As such movement is closely linked to retaining or defining the character of a place. In the case of Midhurst, there are two different experiences, one derived from the Old Town and another in North Street. In both cases traffic is a factor, but with exception of the restriction at Rumbolds Hill, the environment is felt to be safe for pedestrians, with only 4% of respondents to the questionnaire, registering difficulty.

That said, the street plan is simple, having one main road running north/south (North Street) with a loop extending east from West street, through Market Square and Church Hill, returning back to North Street via Knockhundred Row. Therefore an elaborate wayfinding system may not be required although the use of maps at key locations (such as car parks) and some form of interpretation – to make Midhurst more legible through the promotion of amenities (such as the Cowdray

ruin or Market Square) would be appropriate. This approach may also support retailing, using maps or interpretation panels to locate and promote businesses. But for people to move freely the environment has to be accessible and exploration has to be encouraged by making the place look interesting and inviting.

Therefore the type of scheme which would be appropriate to Midhurst, would ensure a clear sense of arrival is created by placing simple yet appropriate gateway structures at the north, south and western points of entry. Exploration would be encouraged through the use of maps placed in the car parks and a few further panels in the town to re-assure and inform the user. Linking movement or wayfinding with heritage interpretation may also be a way to limit the amount of signs used.



Proposed wayfinding system for Chichester District, designed by BDP

Heritage interpretation

Heritage interpretation is a key element in defining the character of a place and in building distinctive identities. In some cases it may involve the presentation of historic landmarks, as in the case of the Cowdray Ruin, or it can be used to reveal and commemorate the life and work of the local population.

Typically heritage interpretation is revealed through the use of information panels, but there is scope to develop imaginative schemes, which builds the sense of place and is revealed in the physical environment.

Like any other asset, heritage can be audited to see how much is known, and what level of interest it may generate if presented and used well. Whether the heritage asset is narrative or physical it can form the basis of events and promotions to increase activity in the town with the resulting benefit of increased retail footfall.

One good example here is the Seven Seas Fish Trail in Hull. Developed as a Public Arts project, the scheme commemorates Hull's diverse catch landed by its fishing fleet. Around the town, three-dimensional representations of fish can be seen on the pavement, entrances to buildings and thresholds to shops etc. Different artists made each piece from different materials. So the shoal of Anchovies is made from stainless steel, whilst the Mackerel are burnt into wooden decking. The public are actively encouraged to follow the trail buying a brass rubbing kit from the Tourist Information Office to capture an impression of each fish whilst exploring the town.

Another benefit of heritage interpretation is that it can engage the community. In Spon End Coventry, local residents have worked for almost ten years to record, capture and reveal the industrial heritage of the area. Until local people initiated the original work, the history of watch making, tanning and lace making was being lost. The area was just a typical Coventry neighbourhood, but today it has a stronger sense of place, a good understanding of its heritage and an improved public realm.



Hull fish trail, various



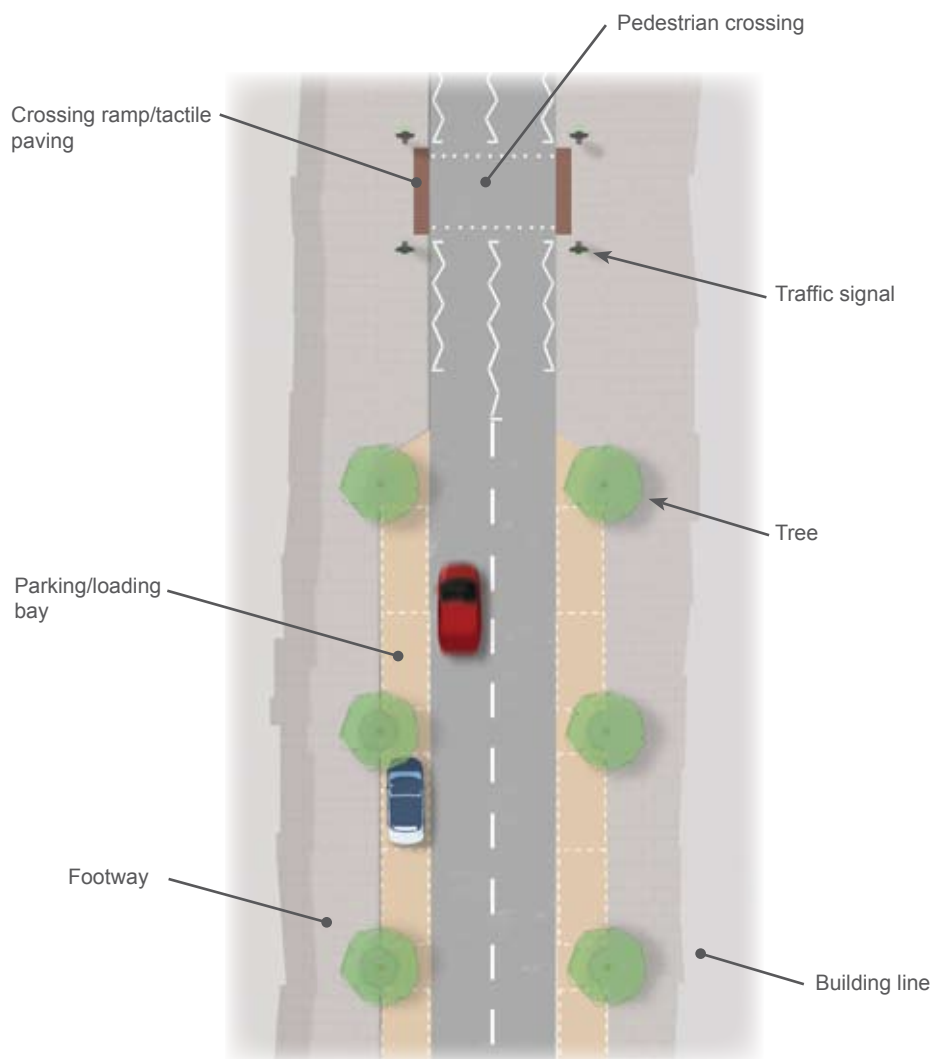
Heritage interpretation device - Spon End, Coventry

Planting and soft landscape

Planting and landscaping received a lot of support in the questionnaire. The impact of hanging baskets along many high streets throughout the UK is always rewarding at relatively little cost – although possibly a touch ‘municipal’ in execution. In past years, there has been concern about upkeep and watering, but considering other forms of planting, hanging baskets are relatively easy to achieve and good value. Opportunities for other forms of more formal landscaping are rare in the study area although trees forming an avenue (of an appropriate species) may be a way to introduce greenery and add another dimension to the public realm.

Introducing trees would mean that the positions would have to be checked for services buried below ground. On-going maintenance and other liabilities would also have to be assessed. However, the decision should not be taken simply on the basis of possible liability. We should also consider the impact in terms of form and character. The visualisation shown on page 44 - looks very appealing, but contextually, the avenue of trees in the main street is more familiar in continental Europe than in England.

Pictures of Midhurst in 1900 show some trees, but as isolated large species – possibly Oak. Therefore there is no precedent that needs to be followed on the grounds of being historically accurate. Planting of any kind would be a new intervention and should be treated accordingly. To that end, it suffices to say that species should be considered which do not have an invasive or thuggish habit. They should also not present a hazard to the pavement or highway. Therefore medium size non-fruit bearing ornamental species should be considered. Provision would also be required for appropriate planting – using a root cage and grille for trees and planters if other shrubs are used.



Indicative plan section of planting scheme - North Street, Midhurst

Planting and soft landscape



Proposed planting - North Street, Midhurst



Planting and soft landscape



Proposed container planting - North Street, Midhurst

As stated in the English Partnership’s Urban Design Compendium 2 - ‘Successful places are safe, well maintained and managed’. Midhurst is still regarded to be a safe place as supported by responses to the questionnaire. So the issue really is to explore whether there is scope to improve the management and maintenance of Midhurst, and how it will lead to a successful town.

Administration of Midhurst is complex with a Town, District and County Council each with their own roles and responsibility. There is also the Economic Partnership and other organisations including the Midhurst Town Trust, the Midhurst Society and Chamber of Commerce. All want Midhurst to be a safe prosperous town and a good place to live and work. But in any complex structure, good communication and open co-operation is essential.

One of the most pressing outcomes of this study (and the subsequent public meetings and formation of a steering group), will be to establish clear and effective lines of communication and an agreed action plan. Beyond that, it will then be down to establishing a series of tactical and strategic measures to move the town forward.

To that end it may be agreed to appoint a Town Centre Manager. Whether this would be a full or part-time appointment, their role would be to ensure the town is managed correctly on a day-to-day basis, addressing street cleaning and the use of ‘A’ boards for instance. They would also need to link all of the interested groups to maximise partnerships.

Another issue is the mix of retail and the growing number of restaurants. Setting up a planning framework, as described earlier, could control this and other matters of building use. This would be a pre-emptive measure and it should be understood, that in some cases allowing market forces to prevail might be in the town’s best interest. Midhurst is currently attracting the better quality restaurant groups like Loch Fyne and Pizza Express. Why is this? Should it continue and what does it reveal about the emerging demographics? Whatever the reason, it is a question of balance and diversity.

Most developments will require funding either from the County or District Councils or other bodies like SEEDA (South East England Development Agency). But raising funds can also be done directly from local businesses through a Business Improvement District (BIDs). There are currently around 60 BIDs existing around the UK. They work by raising money through an additional levy on the non-domestic rate of up to 5%. The scheme works by defining an area. The businesses in the area, agree what they would like to fund and then cast their vote. A system ensures that larger companies do not overwhelm the desires of small businesses. If successful, the levy is set and collected but unlike regular business rates, the levy is retained locally and used to fund the agreed programme as voted for by the businesses.



A boards - North Street, Midhurst



Parked vehicles - North Street, Midhurst

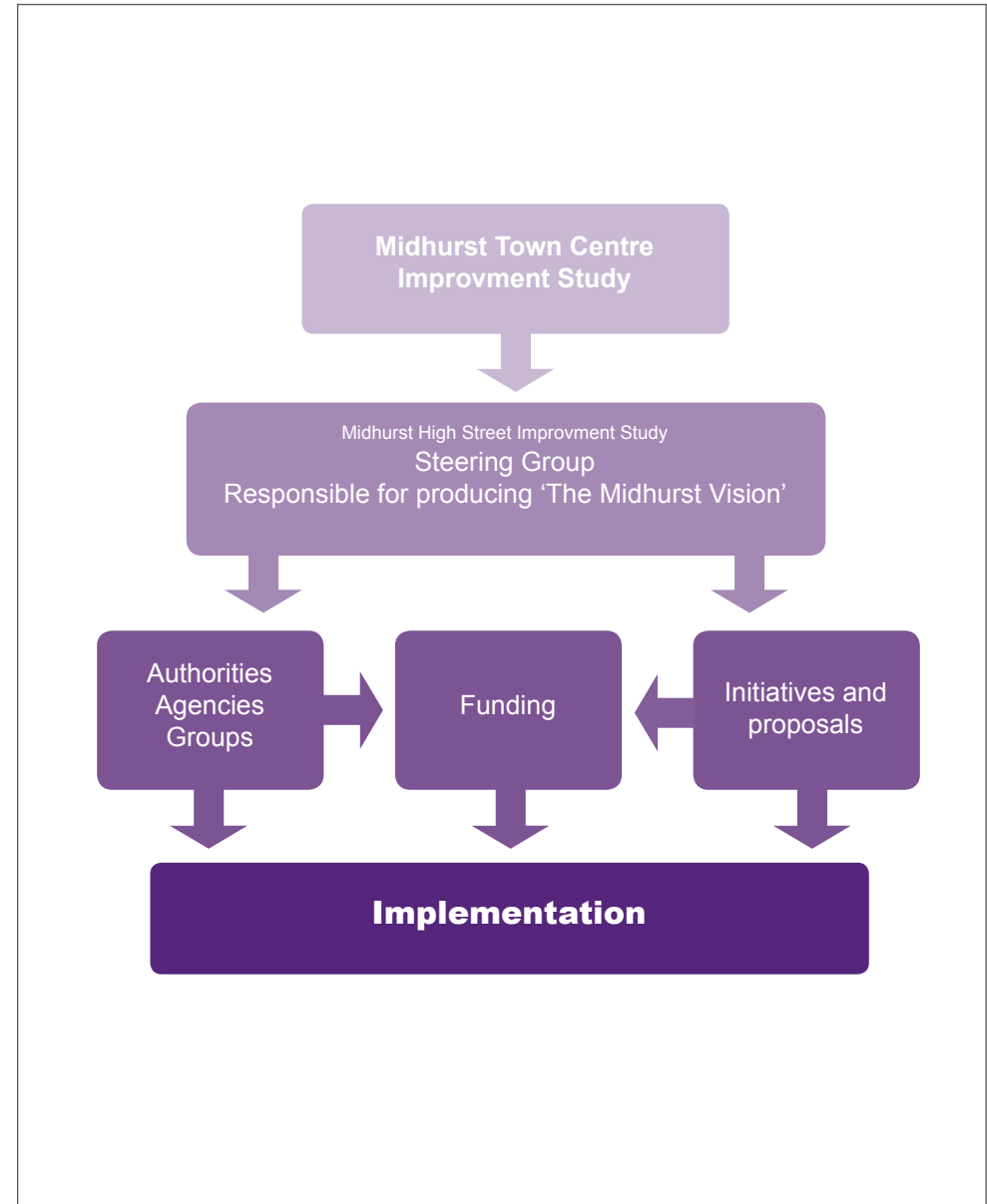
One of the worrying results of the questionnaire, was that of those businesses who responded, the majority had either been in Midhurst for less than five years or more than 20 years. The lack of businesses that have been trading in the town for between five and twenty years could be due to a range of factors. But high commercial rent is one perceived issue.

To ensure the right mix of retailers are attracted, an imaginative and closely managed approach to retail letting is needed. This is not currently possible as there are no local commercial letting agents. A long-term approach would accept that a successful retail area with no empty shops has to be beneficial and preferable to setting high rent but have the premises remaining empty for any period. As from 1 April 2008 rates will be due on empty property. This is a measure aimed at addressing the situation where Landlords prefer to leave premises empty rather than take a lower rent.

If North Street is to become a more interesting and attractive shopping street, it is vital that the parking and traffic strategies are developed to support the social and economic development of Midhurst. The forthcoming law change in 2009 will switch the responsibility to enforce on-street parking from the Police to the District Council. As a result, more effective enforcement will help to reduce congestion and address the current situation of a street constantly full of parked cars.

This study is aimed at gathering ideas and helping to set an ambition. In terms of managing that vision, a list of tactical operational improvements and other physical enhancements is easy to establish. However, it is of vital strategic value to ensure that the skill, knowledge and commitment of the many groups and partnerships already established are maximised. It is also vital that through community engagement a broad representation of local people are involved so that the agreed action plan reflects the true desires of Midhurst people. It must also ensure Midhurst has a future, servicing the need of a contemporary and mixed audience, whilst respecting its historical context.

The diagram to the right demonstrates the implementation process once the study has been published and the public consultations held. The formation of the Steering Group is key to establishing a co-ordinated and consolidated approach bringing together representatives from the relevant authorities, agencies and groups. As such the steering group will be responsible for developing and supporting the Midhurst Vision.



Retail Matrix

No.	Proposal	Description
1	Create identity for 'old town' retail area.	Will help to define the different retail offer between North Street and West Street. Will also provide the basis of further marketing of Midhurst and connects with heritage context.
2	Install physical gateway structures at each entry to the 'old town' retail area.	Will define the 'Old Town' as a destination within Midhurst and set the context for the mix and quality of retail in this area.
3	Incorporate retailer/store directory as part of pedestrian signage scheme.	Helps to promote retail offer and removes the need for 'A' boards.
4	Shopfronts - establish quality/standards manual.	Set out clear guidelines to ensure the architectural character of the shops is not eroded through insensitive signs, shopfronts and other external decorations.
5	Shopfronts - develop a programme to support the renovation with possible match funding or other financial incentives.	Encourages all retailers and shop landlords to implement standards manual thereby preserving the character and quality of the town.
6	Shopfronts - renovate and redecorate to minimum standards.	Improves the quality and appearance of the built environment and retail presentation.
7	Mail/radio advertising campaigns to promote Midhurst as a retail destination.	Develop a co-ordinated effort to advertise all retail in Midhurst.
8	Extension of the Cowdray Ruins voucher scheme.	Build upon existing scheme to draw Cowdray Ruins visitors into Midhurst town centre with discount vouchers for shops/cafes/restaurants.
9	Implement business support via Business Link.	Organise and promote the provision of a 'Business improvement review' service. To be undertaken with assistance from the Business Link service.
10	Implement direct retail skills training.	As a result of 9, organise retail skills training with support from Business Link.
11	Utilise the inward investments database.	Identify potential retail businesses from other towns who would be keen to open a second shop in Midhurst.
12	Loyalty card scheme.	In conjunction with or alternate to Cowdray Ruins voucher scheme, develop a loyalty card to encourage regular visits to Midhurst.
13	Develop local retail events programme.	Assess current retail events provision with a view to expanding the programme of specialist markets and fairs.

Sense of Place Matrix

No.	Proposal	Description
1	Gateways - at key entry points: North, South and West.	Helps to define a sense of arrival and establishes clear boundaries for the town.
2	Audit of heritage assets.	Establishes the breadth and depth of historic context and provides the basis for any further heritage led development e.g. Heritage trail.
4	Develop new/existing heritage trail and interpretation.	Ensures a clear and accessible interpretation of Midhurst's heritage and applies it to the physical environment.
5	Carriageway and footway surface scheme improvement.	Improves the quality and appearance of the built environment. Improves access and subject to development can address issues of on-street parking enforcement, loading etc.
6	Implement pedestrian signage and wayfinding scheme.	To control the extraneous clutter on the street and provide clear communication and direction for visitors and other users.
7	Street furniture.	Evaluate existing provision and assess community requirements in order to establish scheme guidelines. This will help to improve the quality and appearance of the built environment/street scape. It will also provide new amenities such as benches and bicycle racks.
8	Planting and soft landscaping scheme.	This is a very popular element of the streetscape and if trees are planted along North Street will enhance Midhurst's rural setting. This is subject to complete survey of buried services.
9	Utilise walking/cycling attractions in the surrounding area.	Leverage Midhurst's position adjacent to The South Downs with promotion of walking/ cycling routes to bring additional visitors to the town and enhance its reputation as an activity destination.
10	Appraisal of cultural assets and organisations.	Involve local special interest groups e.g. Theatre, arts and sports and develop a programme of public events.
11	Exploit proximity and location of Cowdray in relation to the town centre.	To provide facilities for Cowdray visitors and to combine marketing efforts to attract new visitors as part of a tourism strategy.
12	Promote the link between Cowdray Ruins and the town centre.	Combine heritage walks of the town with visits to Cowdray ruin.

Co-ordinated Management Matrix

No.	Proposal	Description
1	Form a Midhurst Vision steering group.	Following the public consultation events a Midhurst steering group will be formed to undertake development of the Midhurst Vision.
2	Produce the Midhurst Vision.	This is the next essential step and will set the terms of reference for on-going development. Midhurst steering group will be custodians of the vision.
3	Appoint a Town Centre Manager.	To liaise with the appropriate authorities, organisations and individuals to co-ordinate operational aspects of the town centre. Co-ordination and management is key to Midhurst's future success.
4	Planning framework.	Subject to agreement, this kind of measure is a positive step towards controlling the mix of primary retail and other businesses such as Estate Agents and Restaurants in a given area.
5	Business improvement district (BIDs).	This is a good way to generate funding for a specific requirement but is a medium to long term initiative.
6	Manage retail letting.	Support the town's vision to reduce vacant retail premises and set realistic rents based on local market. Promote Midhurst to new potential businesses.
7	Develop retail mix.	Provide a more attractive offer with existing retailers as well as attracting new.
8	Traffic and parking strategy.	To address lack of enforcement of on-street parking and congestion resulting from road width restrictions and delivery vehicles.
9	Managing partnerships.	As item 3, although steering group will play central role.
10	Develop programme of community contact to feed into the Midhurst Vision.	Ensure the steering group engages with the community through the production and implementation of the Midhurst Vision.
11	Create specific programme of engagement with youth/young adult groups.	Engage with youth and young adult groups to gain useful insights and opinions from a representative section of the community to ensure the vision is sustainable for future generations.
12	Develop tourism strategy.	Establish existing tourism strengths and identify potential areas for growth. Identify weaknesses and develop programme to address issues.
13	Best practice/comparative study.	Organise visits for the steering group to successful towns similar in size, position and character to Midhurst where a clear example of success and best practice can be observed.

Realisation

The proposals in this study were influenced by the views expressed through the questionnaire and build on recommendations made by past studies. As such the ideas need further development and approval, but aim to create an attractive environment and a prosperous town.

Realisation, will require several stages, the first is to form a steering group and action plan based on a series of short, medium and long term objectives.

Although the proposals have been presented in a structure which covers three main aspects of the town (sense of place, retail and co-ordinated management), the eventual action plan may suggest a different set of measures and interventions. In any event it is important to accept that whilst some improvements such as the highway will require technical and financial involvement from West Sussex County Council, other initiatives can be implemented directly by residents and businesses easily and at little cost. One example here would be some form of collective retail promotion or improved standards of retail display.

Beyond this study, it is vital that Midhurst Residents and Business people engage to form the action group with support from the Local Authorities and Economic Partnership to create the list of improvements in full co-operation with the different groups, which exist.



Funding

Once the action plan has been agreed, it will then be possible to develop the proposals and relevant budgets for the work. To that end, help and guidance will be required from Chichester District Council and other agencies to access funding from SEEDA (South East England Development Agency) English Heritage, The Heritage Lottery Fund and other funding streams.

Where possible, the programme of works should be constructed to exploit funding already allocated for works such as high way or street-scape improvements. And on an individual basis, Business Links may also be able to support independent retailers with some grant aid for specific issues such as the development of e-commerce, retail presentation and so on.

Longer-term, the idea of a BID (Business Improvement District) may become appealing. As explained earlier, a BID is where an area is defined and those businesses within it agree to vote for an increase in their business rate, by way of a levy. The levy is retained locally and used to fund specific measures agreed by the members. At this stage it is unlikely to succeed. But if the aims of this study are met and Midhurst's foot fall increases, there may be greater confidence in the local retail economy to make a BID viable and attractive.

Midhurst is a Historic Market Town, with a potential catchment of over 80,000 people (CACI 2007). It has an appealing aspect and character and an important number of independent retailers. It is also on a main arterial route, which can bring passing trade. The underlying message here is how to make more of what exists, rather than proposing a complete renewal or development of the town.

As stated in the proposals section of this study, Midhurst does not require a large-scale landmark development... What is required however, is a series of simple but appropriate high quality measures. Midhurst has the potential to support the surrounding area and provide a different offer to neighbouring towns. Improving the quality of the built environment in support of an improved retail offer will enable Midhurst to attract more people to visit and to shop.

Whilst it is vital that the vision is developed by the Steering Group and supported by the people of Midhurst, Chichester District Council and West Sussex County Council shall work closely to help deliver and implement aspects of the vision. In addition there are separate projects underway, outside of the Midhurst Town Centre Improvement Study, which will also be of benefit to Midhurst such as the Inward Investment Database. The database is identifying businesses in neighbouring towns inside and adjacent to the Chichester District, who are looking for a second or subsequent location to open a shop or business. As such the retail mix and quality of Midhurst (along with other towns in the district), could benefit from this initiative.

For some residents, the big issues in Midhurst are the proposed relocation of the Grammar School (and creation of an Academy at Easebourne) and the need (or not) for a relief road. These are important issues that will shape the town, but neither have been the focus of this study. The reason for this is that whatever happens on either count, Midhurst will still have a Town Centre and the issues it faces today still need to be addressed. The townscape improvements and future prosperity cannot wait for the debate over the Academy or the relief road to be settled. So this study aims to unite the community, consolidate the vision and create a realistic programme of improvements.

Aleks Ellis
Senior Business Support Officer, Chichester District Council

CACI

Colin Hughes
Chairman, Midhurst Town Council

Cowdray Heritage Trust

Dave Clark
Assistant Director, CLREA, University of Portsmouth

David Hyland
Senior Community Engagement Officer, Chichester District Council

Dennis Geal
Chairman, Midhurst Society

Ian Webb
Midhurst Tourism Partnership

Jim Green
Chairman, Midhurst Community Partnership

Kenrick Garraway
Economic Development Manager, Chichester District Council

Kerry Kyriacou
Business Advisor, Business Link

Les Ampstead
Rural Towns Development Officer, Action in Rural Sussex

Natasha Young & Tim Young
Midhurst Milers

Paul Over
Director of Employment and Prosperity, Chichester District Council

Robert Windle
Resident Agent, Cowdray Estate

Rowena Tyler
Community Leadership Support Officer, Action in Rural Sussex

Simon Clark
Business Manager, Midhurst Chamber of Commerce

Steve Johnson MBE
Highways Department, West Sussex County Council

Ted Penfold
Chairman, Midhurst Chamber of Commerce

Additional Support:

Midhurst District Council Area Office

Capron House, Midhurst

Midhurst Tourist Information Centre

Midhurst Library

Grange Leisure Centre, Midhurst

The Angel Hotel, Midhurst

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Document written, designed and prepared by BroomeJenkins - South
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