

**The Shopkeepers Survey
2021**

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The Town Centre Working Group**

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**Ringwood Neighbourhood Plan
Town Centre Working Group Shopkeepers Survey
(TCWG)
Report**

INTRODUCTION

In line with National Government instructions for the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans, the Town Centre Working Group developed a three-stage programme of research in order to give the residents of the town an opportunity to provide real input to the planning programme from the start.

Town Centre Working Group (TCWG) Research Programme			
1 Shoppers Survey (537 completed questionnaires)	2 Shopkeepers Survey (50 Personal Interviews)	3. Consultation With Investors	4. Concept Testing (yet to be done)

This report covers the results of the second stage of the research – the Shopkeepers Survey.

This report is based on 50 depth interviews with the shopkeepers of Ringwood’s High Street and Market Place. Included in the sample were retail premises providing goods and services, restaurants, cafes and pubs. Interviews lasted on average 45 minutes. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed to ensure the interview covered all the main areas of interest. In addition to answering the closed questions, all interviewees were given time to express their views freely in their own words in their own way on any relevant issues. To encourage them to be frank, they were all given a guarantee of anonymity.

Interviews took place from July to November, 2021

This research exercise is essentially qualitative. The universe of Ringwood shopkeepers is relatively small. Fifty interviews represent a reasonable percentage of the total but we cannot apply confidence limits to such a small universe. While this report presents the answers to the specific questions in the questionnaire in statistical form, more importantly it sets these answers into the context of the wide-ranging discussions which took place between the interviewer and the interviewee **(see Section Two)**.

One objective of the survey was to test the hypothesis that Ringwood town centre faced inevitable decline because of:

- changing work practices, with growing numbers of workers operating some, or all, of the time from home and therefore less frequently commuting into town centre shopping centre
- changing shopping behaviour and in particular competition from online retailers. Clearly, if decline was inevitable, efforts to ensure that the Ringwood shopping centre survived and thrived were doomed to fail.

Against the hypothesis of inevitable decline are the arguments:

- changes in work practices are as likely to benefit Ringwood as to harm it. More people working from home offers real new opportunities for providing more services for those no longer commuting daily from Ringwood to Bournemouth, Southampton or London every day
- changing shopping behaviour is a fact but there is evidence that small towns with independent shops and a wide range of personal services are far less vulnerable than large city centres with chain stores.

There is also the argument that a town without a thriving town centre is a housing estate without a heart.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION: The Shopkeepers Survey comprised 50 personal interviews with Ringwood Town Centre Shopkeepers. Interviewers used a semi-structured questionnaire, designed to gather information on shopkeepers' hopes and fears about the future, the key issues which concern them and, most important of all, their input into the future planning process for Ringwood through the Neighbourhood Plan

The interviewing period was from July - November, 2021

2. MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

2.1 ATTITUDE TO NEW HOUSEBUILDING: The shopkeepers have a positive attitude to the house building plans for Ringwood. They see the increased population as an increase in the size of their market and welcome it.

That said, they are opposed to any conversion of retail premises into residential use because such developments break the flow of retail offers and threaten the viability of neighbouring shops.

Most would prefer to see all house-building located outside the town centre but there is much less objection to city centre developments that provide retail or other entertainments/services (e.g. cafes, restaurants, concerts) at ground floor level

In general, at the start of the interviewing period, the mood of the shopkeepers was positive. They had survived Covid with Government help; they had in many cases widened their customer base by internet activity and they looked forward to a 'new

normality'. The town and its shopkeepers benefit from:

Ringwood's intensely strong community spirit its proud history as an historic market town its prime location in southern England's countryside, with Bournemouth, the Jurassic coast, Salisbury and Southampton and even London all within easy reach.

It is also the Western Gateway to the New Forest, one of England's National Parks.

With these advantages, in normal times, Ringwood Town centre can rely on revenues from holiday-makers and tourists to add to the local support of Ringwood residents.

Unfortunately, these are not normal times. A concatenation of traffic flow problems looks as though it will damage Ringwood even more seriously than Covid. For details, Section 1.

2.2 PROBLEMS THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED:

One outcome of the closure of West Street is that it has turned the Market Place into a cul de sac. This threatens the future of the shops in West Street and the shops and restaurants in the Market Place. Footfall has already dropped, as have sales.

The road works that have necessitated the closure of the slip road from the Furlong on to the A31 for 11 months is now threatening the entire town centre shopping community from West Street to Southampton Road.

There has to be doubt about the survival of some of the shops. The loss of revenues is substantial in

many cases. The recently-formed Ringwood Business Association (RBA) is fighting for some degree of compensation for its members whose business have been compromised through no fault of their own but these are not the best of times for pleading special cases. The days of Government funding for high street rejuvenation seem to be over.

3. PROPOSED ACTION: The Discussion Section of this report provides a long list of measures which would enhance the town and contribute to a better future. Here we will concentrate on three major proposals that emerge from this study.

3.1 Market Place "Shared Space" Concept

What is "shared space"? Below is a quote from The Guardian (28/02/2012):

The starting point behind the philosophy of shared space design is that no single user type should have a clear priority. Instead, decision making is put in the hands of all users. Motorists are encouraged to reduce their speed and to share space more equitably with pedestrians.

In practical terms, this has meant removing excessive signage that clutters and spoils our urban landscapes, removing or not installing railings that dictate designated crossing points and removing kerbs to leave a level surface between pedestrians and motor traffic.

This idea of turning the Market Place into shared space has risen organically from the two surveys we have conducted. It has wide support from all stakeholders we have contacted. There are three main reasons for supporting the concept:

- a) Both surveys gave a high priority to “more events” and “more street entertainment”. The Market Place is by far the best space to accommodate such activities.
- b) Both surveys and all related discussion identified the Market Place as Ringwood’s most under-exploited asset. It is a large space in the centre of Ringwood that was once, and has the potential to be again, the main focus of the town centre. It is currently used by several events each year and is the site of the Wednesday market - but that leaves the Market Place with an empty calendar for most of the year.
- c) The closure of West Street and the conversion of the Market Place into a cul de sac means that something has to be done if the Market Place and West Street are not to decline. Even before the access problems caused by the major A31 roadworks, most of the shops and eateries in the Market Place and West Street were reporting decline in footfall and revenues.

Given the positive response from most quarters to the concept of shared space, the TCWG is preparing a Market Place “Shared Space” proposal for submission to the Town Council.

3.2 Sorting out Ringwood’s traffic flow: One thing is clear from both surveys and from the current situation. An expert in town centre traffic flow management should be retained to sort out Ringwood’s traffic flow arrangements. The expert should be briefed to find the best way of arranging traffic flow, taking into account the interests of those who provide the products and services that underpin

the economy of the town (e.g. the shopkeepers, restaurateurs, hairdressers, beauty salons)

3.3 Marketing Ringwood: In neither of our surveys did we ask about the marketing of Ringwood but it became apparent from both the research and the discussions encouraged by our open questions that there is a very strong feeling that Ringwood lacks a coherent image of itself - or at the least, doesn’t know how to project a coherent image of itself to itself and to the outside world.

Of course, we all say Ringwood is an historic market town. We may add it is the Western Gateway to the New Forest. Both these descriptions are true. But what do they mean and to whom?

The Beaumont Estate has already been built and occupied. There are plans to build 1,000 more houses in Ringwood. And yet research by the Environment working Group revealed that 90% of the newcomers had no connection with Ringwood. Many made little or no use of Ringwood’s town centre, preferring to do their shopping in the places they had come from or in shopping centres where they work. Some were unaware Ringwood had a shopping centre.

If we are not communicating the Ringwood brand to its residents, it is fair to assume that Ringwood’s brand amongst outsiders is very faint indeed.

Of course some might say, Ringwood is what it is. There’s no need to promote it; it speaks for itself.

Sadly, that won’t work. Times have changed. The world is more competitive than ever. Towns like Ringwood are involved in that competition –

competition for resources, for visitors, for holiday makers and tourists, for jobs, and for investment.

The Furlong furnishes an excellent example of what Ringwood as a whole needs. The Furlong is marketed. It knows its target market. It knows their needs and does all it can to satisfy them. It presents an inviting, hospitable aspect, with bunting and a welcoming café in view when you look at its entrance. It is well maintained. The paving is level; the place is kept clear of litter. The Furlong knows what it is and projects its image powerfully through the way it is managed and through social media.

The rest of Ringwood is not managed in this way. We therefore recommend that the Town Council appoints a marketing officer to define the Ringwood brand and coordinate the dissemination of information about Ringwood, both to its residents and a wider audience. The officer, under the aegis of the Town Council, would call upon the resources of the many admirable Ringwood institutions (e.g the Ringwood Society, the Ringwood Business Association, Greyfriars) to join in a campaign to promote the Ringwood brand.

The Marketing Officer should also be responsible for seeking out any and all opportunities to apply for grants from Government and private sources to improve the town.

FOOTNOTE: To make full use of this research, it is necessary to see This Executive Summary in the context of Sections One and Two of this report.

Section One – Questionnaire Analysis

Measuring the mood

Given the hypothesis that town centres face inevitable decline, it was thought important first of all to gauge the mood of the shopkeepers: i.e. were they generally optimistic about the future or pessimistic? They are in the front-line and are best placed to assess shopping trends in their area and the likely impact of these trends of their business.

1. Generally, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of your business in Ringwood Town Centre?

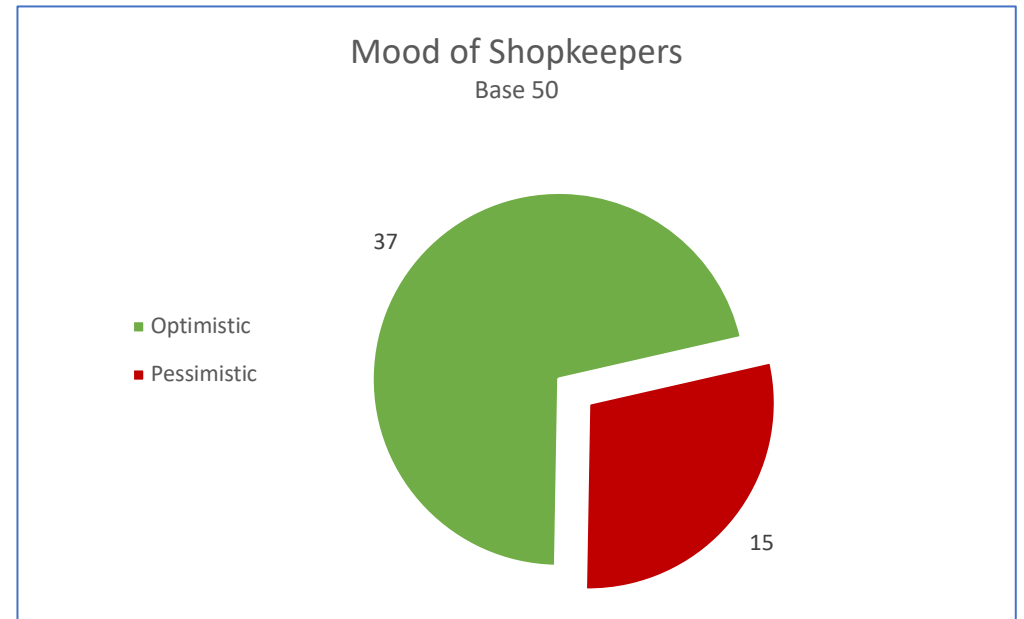
	Number	%
Optimistic	37	74*
Pessimistic	15	30*
<i>Base</i>	<i>50</i>	

NB: Two interviewees said they were both optimistic and pessimistic.

Almost three quarters (37 were optimistic; less than half that number were pessimistic).

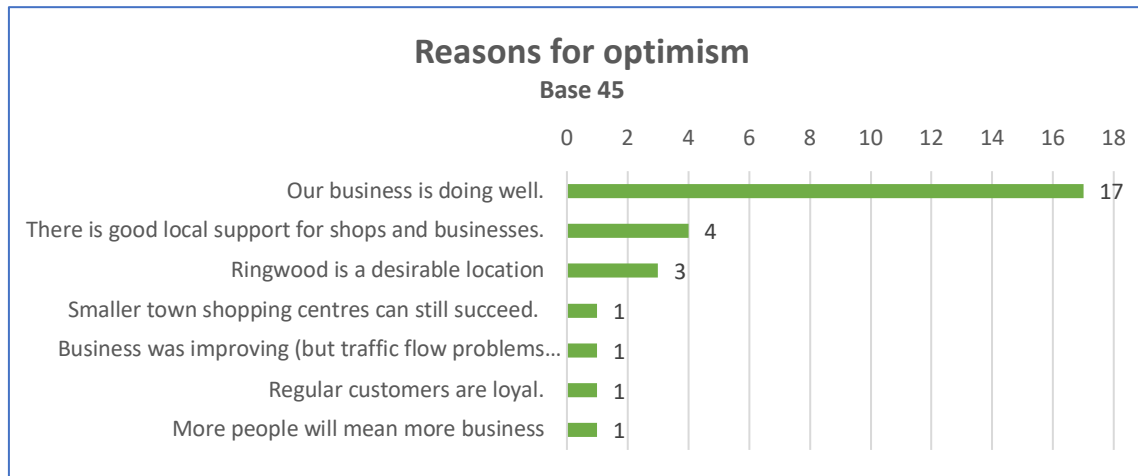
This suggests that, although opinion is divided, a clear majority of shopkeepers believe that the future for Ringwood town centre will be bright.

We must add that the mood of shopkeepers was changed by events that took place in the course of the interviewing period. In the early interviews, almost all interviewees were optimistic. They had survived Covid and were hoping that they could look forward to good times in future. Many had built up their online presence and felt confident they could retain the loyalty of old customers and add new ones from the wider reach of their online presence. As time passed and the events listed in the table below took place and as their effects were felt, optimism waned. There was strong feeling that once shoppers have become frustrated by the traffic flow arrangements, they will find alternative shopping centres. It was pointed out that *retaining* customers is considerably easier than *regaining* them.



Closure of West Street	Closing one of the town's two vehicular access points to the A31, thus converting West Street and the Market Place into a cul de sac.
Changing traffic cflow in Meeting House Lane	Closing vehicular access from the Furlong into the Market Place and reducing vehicular access to the High Street from two access points to one. NB This has been temporarily reversed but most felt the reversion should be permanent.
Roadworks on Mansfield Road	Creating serious congestion for motorist trying to reach the High Street and Market place via the only access point
Plans to close the main access point from the Furlong to the A31	Forcing those leaving Ringwood to re-join the A31 to drive out of Ringwood town to the Poulner flyover.

1. Interviewees who were optimistic were asked why.



The top reason for optimism was that their businesses were doing well, partly because of the second reason for optimism “Good local support for shops and businesses”.

These two answers are the first indication of a factor that permeates the results of this survey. Ringwood people are proud of their town and have a strong sense of social cohesion. This feeling is particularly strong amongst those who were born and bred in the town. It is less pronounced amongst incomers, although those who make the effort to understand the town and appreciate its social history are warmly welcomed by the “indigenous” residents.

Interviewees who were pessimistic were asked why.

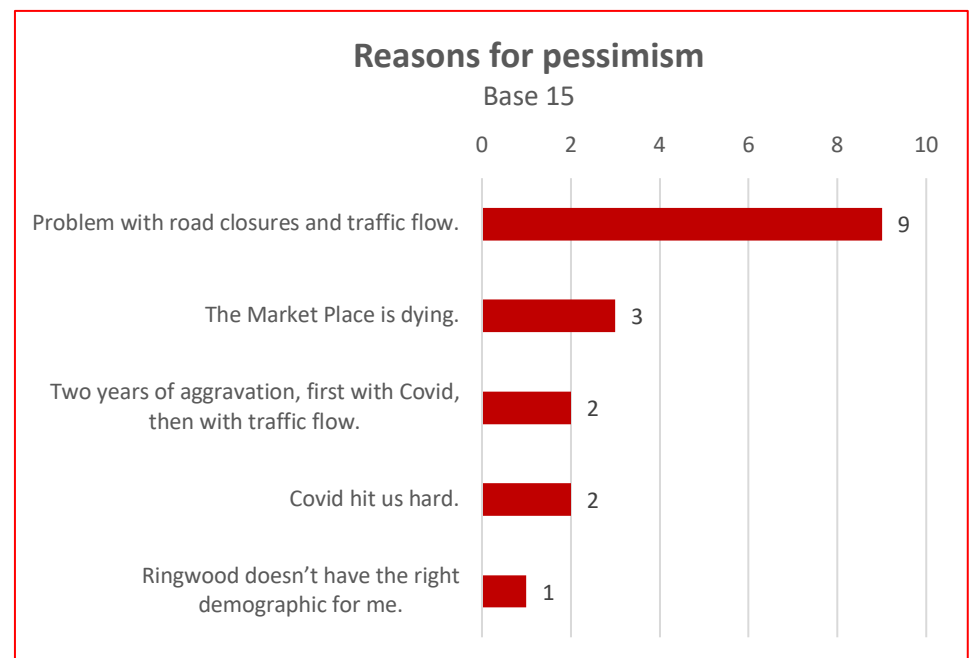
The top reason for pessimism was the traffic flow problems. It is generally felt by shopkeepers that traffic flow arrangements for Ringwood, always problematical because of the topography of the town, have been made immeasurably worse by the factors mentioned on page 2.

When the research was carried out, traffic flow in Meeting House Lane had been reversed, so that there was:

- only one way for vehicles to enter the High Street and Market Place (via a narrow, uninviting stretch of the Christchurch Road)
- three ways for vehicles to leave the High Street and Market Place (up Meeting House Lane, out through Southampton Road and out through Christchurch Road)

making it three times easier to leave the town centre than it is to enter it.

The Traffic flow in Meeting House Lane has been temporarily reversed but If it is put back to ‘from the Market Place to the Furlong’, visitors to the High Street will have to drive around the east side of the town, down Mansfield Road to Greyfriars, up Christchurch Road then into the High Street at Friday’s cross. This means, if they cannot find anywhere to park, their journey is wasted. It is feared that their inclination will be to leave the town, go elsewhere, possibly never return.



2. Around 1,000 new homes are going to be built on three defined sites in Ringwood. How do you think the increase in population will affect your business?

Positive		Negative		No effect/NA	
Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
43	86	1	2	6	12

The result was a strong endorsement from the shopkeepers for the planned increase in housing. They see the increase in population as an opportunity:

increased housing > increased footfall > increased sales

Only one interviewee expressed a negative view but gave no reason for their opposition.

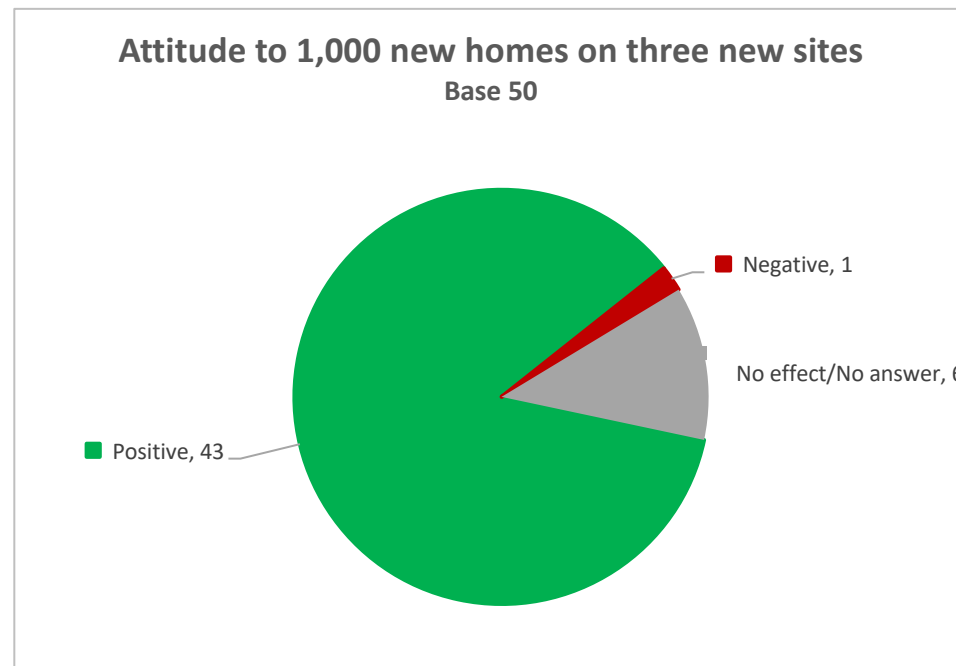
Response	Reason	Number	%
Why positive?	Increased population, increased footfall, more business	34	83
Why negative?	No reason given	1	2
No effect		6	15
Base 41			

This result is encouraging in terms of the future for Ringwood in general.

Most shopkeepers welcomed “new blood” within the town feeling that it added buzz to the retail offer. All shopkeepers felt that if a new shop survived and thrived, it brought added value to the town and hence themselves.

A large proportion of those interviewed suggested that empty shops, such as Martins within Southampton Road, could be offered at a shared or subsidized rent to new start-ups for six months, allowing them to try out their ideas before taking the step of signing a lease. Not only would this help the start-ups, but it would add an ever changing and innovative element to the retail offer. It was suggested that, if Southampton Road offered new start-ups on a regular basis, shoppers might visit in order to “see what was new”. The idea was also expanded into offering areas for small “home-type” start-ups. During Covid, many people began expanding on their hobbies by creating unique products that they wished to sell. An ever-changing “start-up” space would offer shoppers the chance to purchase items that they could not purchase elsewhere.

We should perhaps sound a word of warning. Ringwood town centre will benefit from the newcomers only if the newcomers are welcomed, informed of the benefits Ringwood has to offer and are persuaded to take advantage of them. The positive attitude of the shopkeepers assures us the newcomers will be **welcomed**. The question is whether the town can effectively **inform** and **persuade**. The Beaumont Estate case study is not so encouraging.>>>>>>>>>>



In research carried out by the NP Environment Working Group, it was found that 90% of those living in the recently built Beaumont Estate had no previous connection with Ringwood. Many of them made little or no use of Ringwood’s town centre, preferring to do their shopping either in the places from which they had come or from shopping centres where they work. **Clearly the town needs to market itself to all newcomers if it is to benefit fully from the potential of a growing population.**

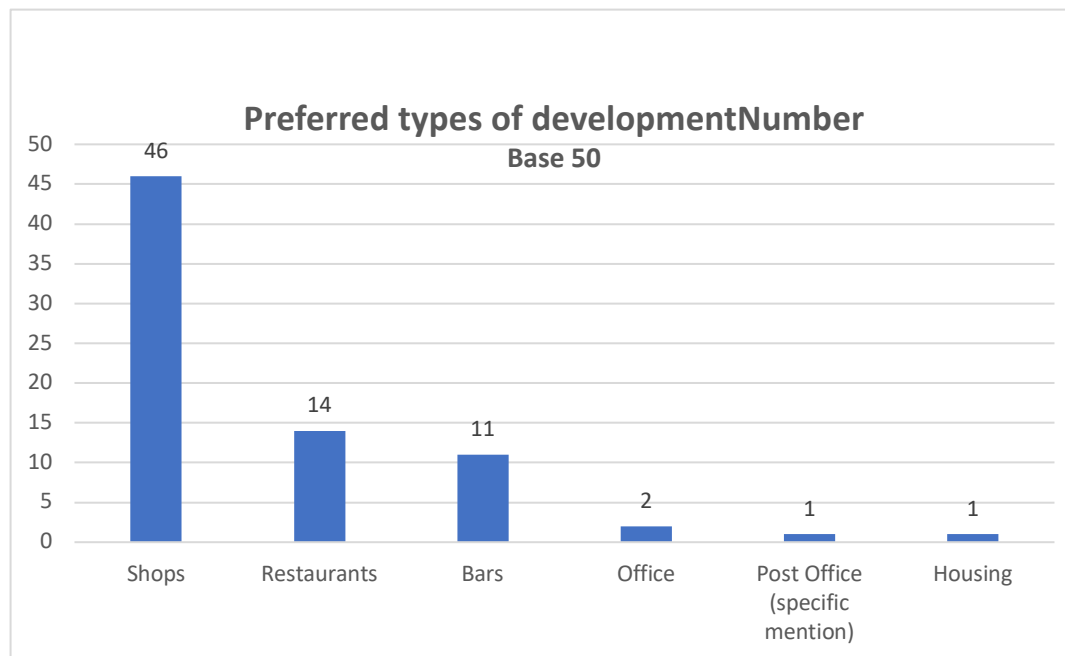
A few questions on the Town Centre – that’s the Market Place, the High Street, Southampton Road to Mansfield Road and Christchurch Road from Friday’s Cross to Greyfriars.

3. If there is to be development in the Town Centre, how would you like to see the space used:

- more shops
- more bars
- more restaurants
- more offices
- more housing

Tick as many boxes as you like.

Type	Number	%
Shops	46	92
Restaurants	14	28
Bars	11	22
Office	2	4
Post Office (specific mention)	1	2
Housing	1	2
Base 50		



Top, by some margin, were shops (46). If there is to be development in the town centre, all but four interviewees gave priority to increasing the number of shops. It follows that any reduction in the number of shops (i.e. by allowing the conversion of retail to housing in the town centre) will have an adverse effect on the town centre as “the heart of the community”

In second place but well behind more shops was a desire for more and varied restaurants (14) and for more bars (11).

Our Great British high streets are at the heart of this country and are the core of what reflects a local area and community.....

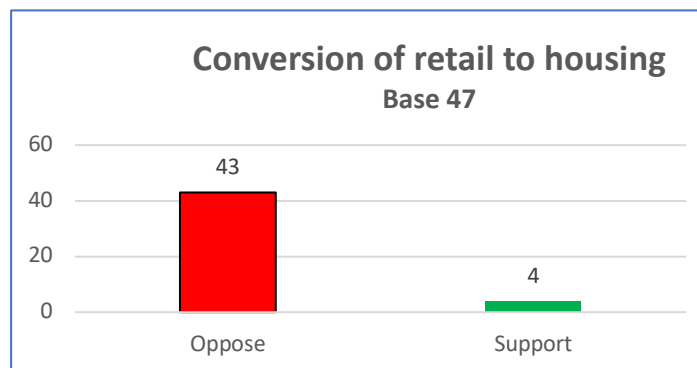
We wholeheartedly believe that communities should be at the heart of every high street, and every funding decision – making sure people have a real say in placemaking in their area, including by being involved in ownership.

Communities Secretary, the Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP July 2021

4. Would you support or oppose the conversion of some shops in the town centre into residential accommodation?

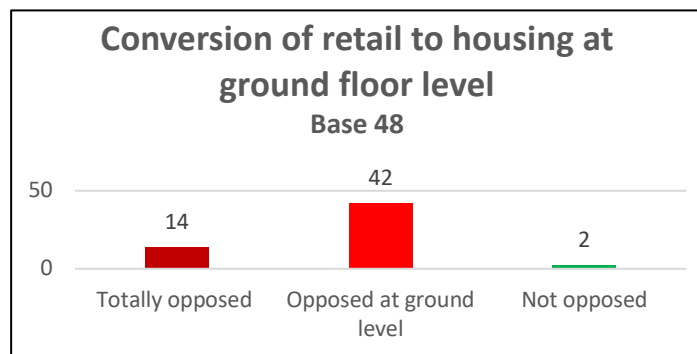
Amongst the shopkeepers interviewed, there is emphatic opposition to the conversion of retail premises into housing at ground floor level. Indeed, two of the four who supported conversion were referring to retail premises at first floor level or above. Only two shopkeepers were not opposed to the conversion of retail to housing at ground floor level. This will come as no surprise to experts in retailing. It is crucially important to keep a continuous flow of retail premises in shopping centres. Even one or two houses or a block of flats in a shopping centre create a dead zone for shoppers and undermine the integrity of the retail offer.

Conversion of shops to houses	Number	%
Support	4	8
Oppose	43	86
No opinion/No answer	3	6
Base 50		



To clarify shopkeepers' views, they were asked whether they were totally opposed to any conversion of retail to residential or whether they were only opposed to conversions at ground floor level.

Conversion of shops to housing	Number	%
Totally opposed	14	28
Opposed at ground level	42	84
Not opposed	2	4
Base 50		



NB: There is some duplication because some who were totally opposed also wished to make it clear they were opposed to conversion at ground level. What is pellucidly clear is the overwhelming opposition of shopkeepers to conversion of retail to residential at ground floor level.

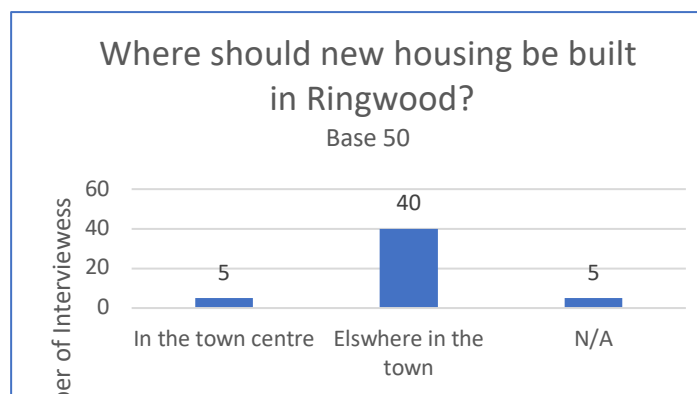
4a) There are definite plans to build more housing in Ringwood.

In general, do you think this increase in residential building should be:

In the town centre? Elsewhere in Ringwood?

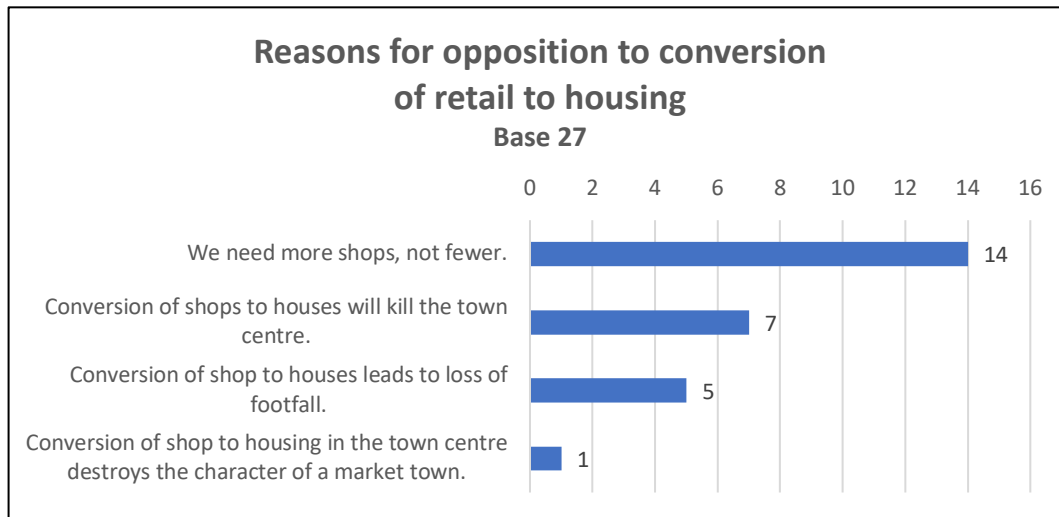
If given a choice on where to locate new house building, 40 out of the 50 were unequivocal in answering elsewhere in Ringwood. Five answered that they favoured town centre house building.

In the course of further discussion with those who favoured town centre housebuilding, three of the five explained that they favoured residential building in the town centre but only at first floor level and above. They, like the other 40 interviewees, wanted ground floor building to be retail.



Those opposing the conversion of retail premises into housing were asked to give their reasons.

	Number	%
We need more shops, not fewer.	14	52
Conversion of shops to houses will kill the town centre.	7	26
Conversion of shop to houses leads to loss of footfall.	5	19
Conversion of shop to housing in the town centre destroys the character of a market town.	1	4
Base 27		



High Streets are a crucial part of our local economies and people care about them because they are also the centres of their community.
Jake Berry High Streets Minister 5th July 2019

All respondents reported that when events were held in the town centre, footfall and sales increased. (The only exception to this was the Wednesday Market, with its parking restrictions.) When pressed on what type of events were most profitable, interviewees repeatedly cited the Christmas event, where extra stalls and shopping were placed in the High Street and an entertainment hub was set in the Market Place. Many shopkeepers favoured pedestrianisation of the High Street all year round to allow them sell their wares in a “market type” on the pavement. Cafes and restaurants argued that if they were allowed to have tables and chairs outside on the pavement, passers-by would stop, sit, eat and drink both outside and within. It was noted that the Furlong, a well-managed operation, has Café Nero at its entrance with seating and tables in full view of motorists arriving at the car park. This feeling of hospitality entices footfall into the Furlong and hence into the retail offer within the Furlong.

A couple of questions on parking

5. Do you think the parking facilities for shoppers in Ringwood are adequate or should there be more parking spaces?

Adequate Need more spaces

Parking facilities for shoppers	Number	%
Adequate	29	59
Need more spaces	20	41
Base 49		

29 thought current parking arrangements adequate. 20 thought that there was a need for more spaces. The main reason given for more spaces was the growth in the population of Ringwood (actual and projected) and the hope that the increased population of Ringwood would mean more visitors to the town centre.

Should there be more or less on-street parking?

More Less Leave as it is

On-street parking	Number	%
More	14	31
Less	12	24
Leave as is	19	42
Base 45		

A three-way split with 19 wanting the on-street parking to stay as it is; 14 wanting more; and 12 disapproving of on-street parking, some of them objecting to any street parking in the High Street.

In general discussions with interviewees on parking, it emerged that, although many shops had some parking to the rear, most of the employees (in the case of one shop, nine employees) had to park in the long-stay car park, paying for an annual permit. It was suggested that there should be **a differential in annual charge** for people coming to Ringwood to work (**a lower charge**) and for those using the long-stay car park to park+ride to banks and other large corporations outside Ringwood (**a much higher charge**).



6. **Shopkeeper motivation:** Why did you set up shop in Ringwood?

	Number	%
It's a market town	29	58
It's my home town	16	32
The business was set up some time/long ago	6	12
Extension of existing business	5	10
The Furlong is an attractor	4	8
Own another business in Ringwood	1	2
Liked the rural location	1	2
Number of banks	1	2
Serendipity	1	2
Base 50		

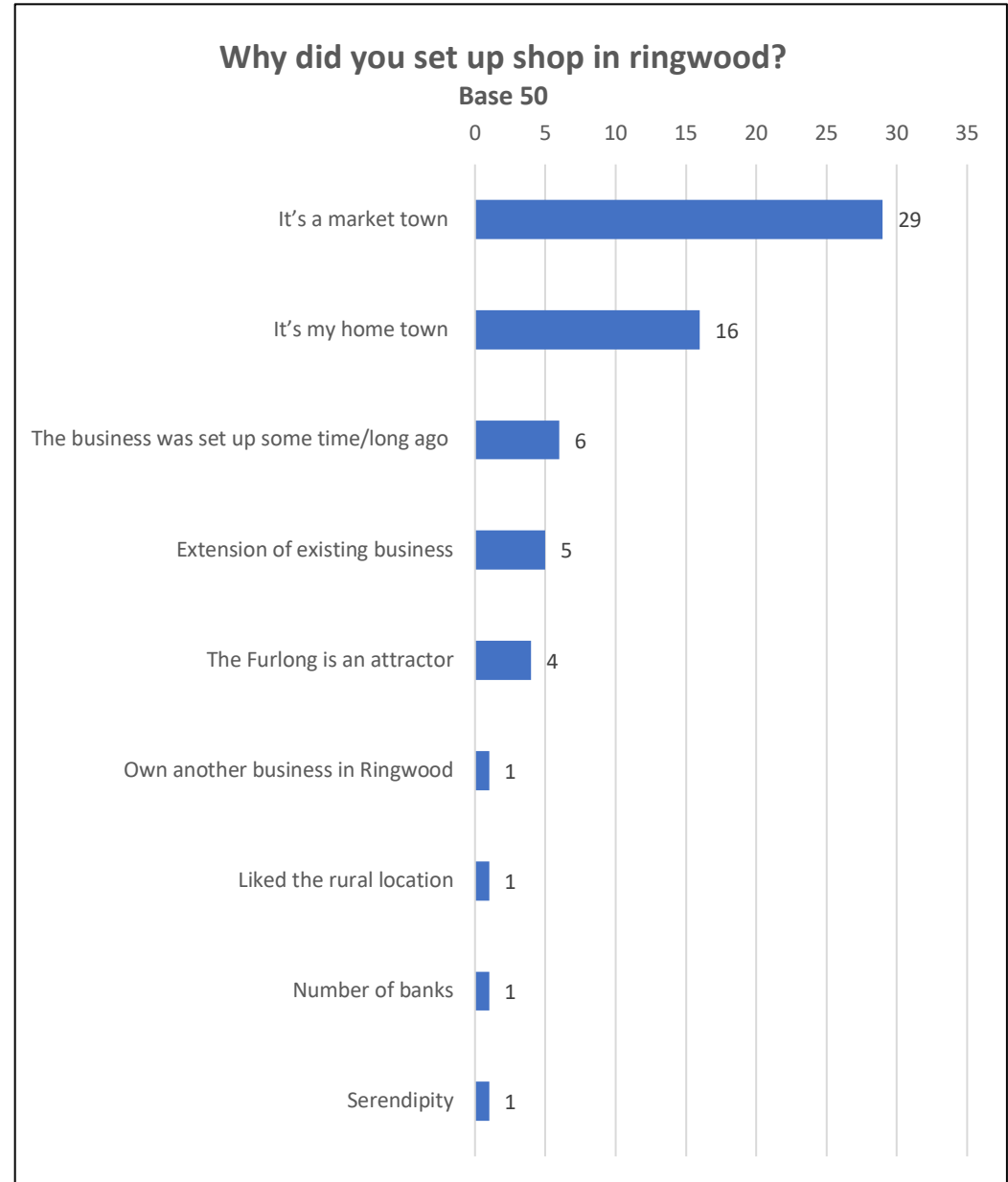
The top answer was that Ringwood is a market town (29 interviewees).

Undoubtedly market towns enjoy a kudos denied those without market town status. Market towns generally can boast a distinguished history, buildings of historical and architectural interest and higher property values than other towns.

According to research from Halifax, homebuyers in market towns across England face a premium of 13% on their county average. Those looking to buy in these attractive locations will need to have an additional £36,116 on average, compared to those buying elsewhere in the same county, with the top ten most expensive market towns all coming in at over £500,000 for the average house price.

Property Reporter June 2021

There are many reasons for defending and promoting Ringwood's market town status but, for those of a purely mercenary point of view, the loss of 13% of the value of every house in Ringwood is probably the most compelling argument. Assuming there are 7,500 private houses in Ringwood, loss of market town status could reduce the value of Ringwood's housing stock by approximately a quarter of a billion pounds (£250,000,000).



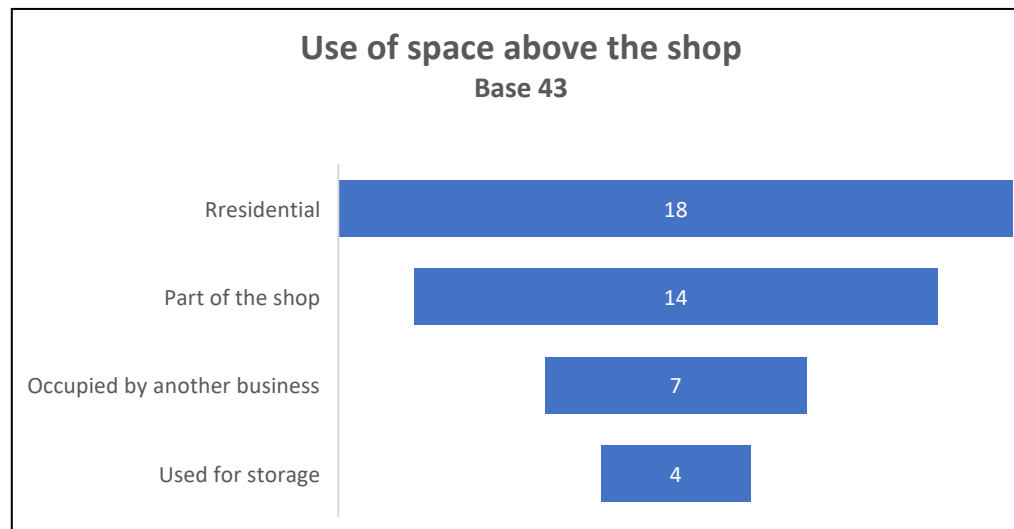
A couple of questions about your shop.

7. Do you have space **above** your shop?

Yes Is it used for storage? Is it residential?
 Other use? _____ No

Space above the shop?	Number	%
Yes, it's residential	18	42
Yes, it's part of the shop	14	33
Yes, it's occupied by another business	7	16
Yes, for storage	4	9
Base	43	
No or no answer	10	

Of the 43 shopkeepers who had space above the shop, 18 reported the space was already in residential use. Of the remaining interviewees, 14 were using the space above the ground floor as part of their shop. In seven cases the space above their shop was occupied by another business. Four used the space for storage.



Finally, just a few questions about you and your staff.

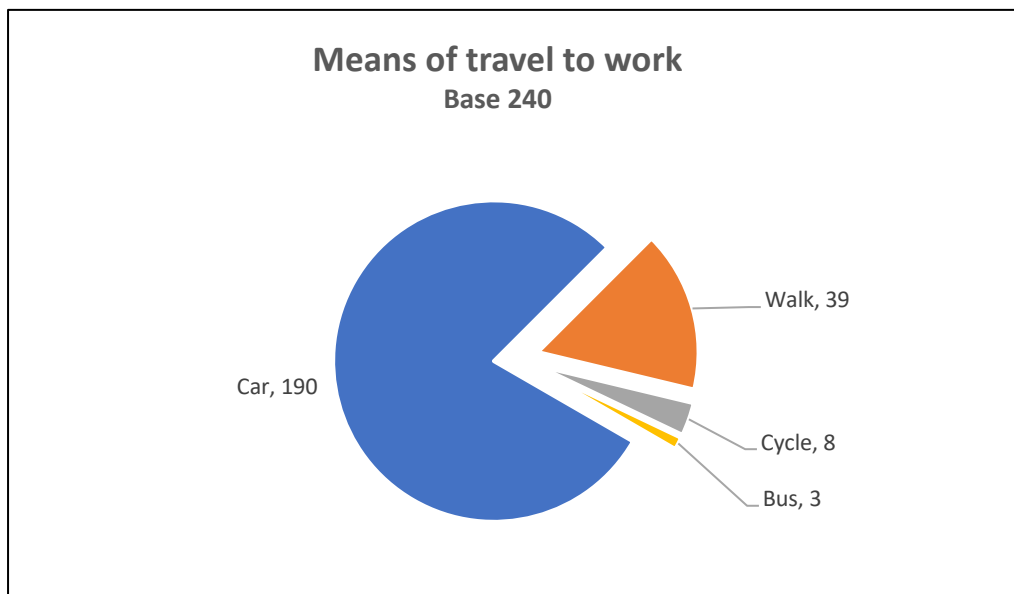
8. How do you and your staff travel into your workplace?

Car Bus Cycle Walk

	Number	%
Car	190	79
Walk	39	16
Cycle	8	3
Bus	3	1
TOTAL	240	

Given the distance most travel and the limited bus services, it is hardly surprising that almost 80% use their cars. Given the geography of the area, for many a car is the only practical means of transport. This means that many full-time and

part-time workers have to pay for annual long-stay parking permits because any parking spaces behind the shops are often occupied by the shopkeeper and there is a time limit of two hours in the main car park.



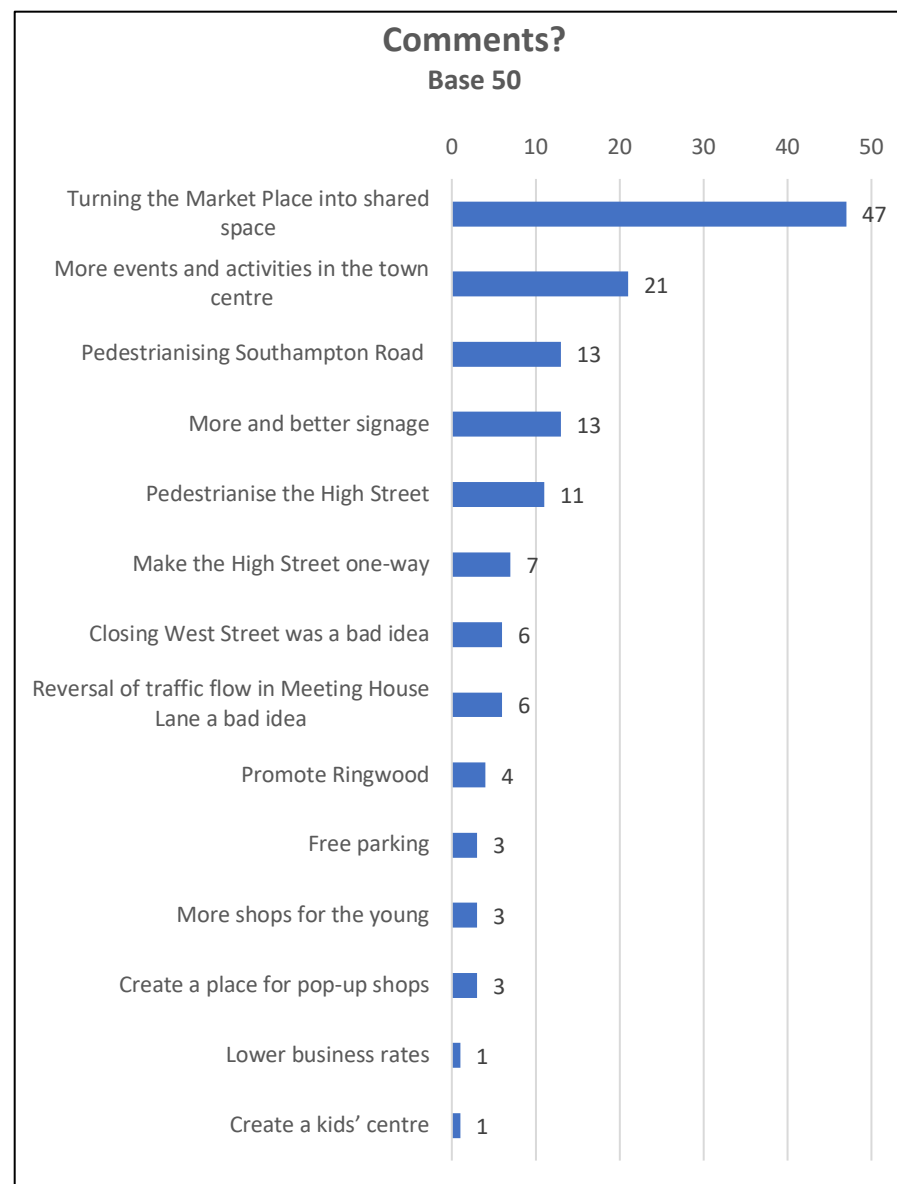
9. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about the future of Ringwood Town Centre?

Comment?	Number	%
Turning the Market Place into shared space	47	94
More events and activities in the town centre	21	42
Pedestrianising Southampton Road	13	26
More and better signage	13	26
Pedestrianise the High Street	11	22
Make the High Street one-way	7	14
Closing West Street was a bad idea	6	12
Reversal of traffic flow in Meeting House Lane; bad idea	6	12
Promote Ringwood	4	8
Free parking	3	6
More shops for the young	3	6
Create a place for pop-up shops	3	6
Lower business rates	1	2
Create a kids' centre	1	2
Base 50		

There was a very high level of support (47 out of 50) for the idea of converting the Market Place into shared space (i.e. for use by the shopkeepers, shoppers and other pedestrians as a piazza-style space, while still allowing essential traffic in and out of the Market Place).

This idea, put forward by respondents to the shopping questionnaire, has now been endorsed by the shopkeepers. The concept of shared space for the Market Place is particularly appealing in that it converts the closure of West Street (that, according to shopkeepers in West Street and the Market Place, has had a profoundly damaging effect) into an exciting opportunity to revitalise the Market Place and rebalance the key components of the town (the Furlong, the Market Place and the High Street).

There was also strong support (21 out of 50) for an associated idea – more events and activities in the town centre.



The importance of independent shops to maintain the vigour of the High Street is well-established, but it is not enough.

Town centres must evolve. They must find ways to attract not just shoppers but all types of visitors:

- those who wish to meet family and friends,
- those who wish to eat and drink
- those who wish to enjoy services (hair cutting/dressing, beauty salons, etc)
- those who wish to be informed (proactive techniques to keep the people informed of what is going on in the town)
- those who wish to be entertained (street entertainments, cinema, theatre, VR experiences)
- those who wish to be inspired (experiences of nature and the New Forest, of the history of a place, of the good works of the people, of the self sacrifice of others, etc)

Ringwood is well-placed to fulfil these desires as a thriving market town, with ready access to the New Forest, with a long and distinguished history and with a vibrant social and community spirit. But it needs vision and a major effort to realise it.

The Footfall Review 2020-2021 also found that places with unique attractions and a range of services fared better since the pandemic than those focusing on high street retail.

Review of High Street Footfall in England 2020-2021



“We can say with confidence that small, local high streets have recovered quickest, and that towns with a defined sense of place and role beyond template retail have shown greater resilience.”

Review of High Street Footfall in England 2020-2021



Section Two - Discussion

The overall impression that emerges from the shopkeepers' survey is one of energy, vitality and determination in the face of serious challenges but underlying optimism that the town can survive and thrive.

First of all, it would be folly to pretend that the town has no problems. Covid has hit everyone. Then, just as Covid seemed a little less of a problem because of vaccines, Ringwood was hit by traffic flow issues..

First, there was West Street. The closure of West Street brought matters to a head. It reduced Ringwood's access points to the A31 from two to one; and it turned West Street and the Market Place into a cul de sac.

This was followed by essential roadworks to improve the A31. These have caused congestion on Mansfield Road and now closure of the slip road from the Furlong back onto the A31. The only way back onto the A31 now is a detour up through Poulner. This situation is to last for 11 months.

Additionally, the majority feeling from the surveys is that the reversal of traffic flow in Meeting House Lane was a serious mistake, providing three ways out of the town centre and only one way into the High Street and Market Place.

All that said, Ringwood is a town of enormous grassroots resilience. Despite their obvious woes, the shopkeepers formed the Ringwood Business Association (RBA) and are becoming an effective, pro-active factor in the town's commercial life. The town also benefits from a plethora of effective and vigorous grass-roots organisations (historical, artistic, sporting, religious and charitable) that, with the shopping facilities (retail and services), make the town what it is.

ISSUES ARISING FROM THE SHOPKEEPERS' INTERVIEWS

The following section summarises the general discussion of Ringwood issues during and at the end of the semi-structured interview. Four points should be made clear immediately.

1. This is qualitative research. It is a technique for gathering a wide variety of views on a subject. It does not set out to quantify the opinions expressed but, in this case, it certainly identifies issues that are of concern to Ringwood's shopkeepers.
2. These are the anonymised opinions of the shopkeepers. They do not necessarily represent the view of the TCWG. Interviewers went out of their way to elicit the opinion of interviewees without bias.
3. There was universal agreement amongst those interviewed that the survey was an excellent idea because they felt that no one had asked their opinion before.
4. Inevitably, if you ask how to build a better future, much of the comments will take the form of criticism of how things are today. These criticisms should not provoke a defensive response; rather they should be seen as a useful way of identifying opportunities to make things better.

The need for action: Across the board, the shopkeepers felt that the Market Place and Southampton Road were underused and would fall into decline if nothing is done. If two key components of Ringwood town centre's structure fall into decline (i.e. they cease to be key elements in Ringwood's retail offer) there are likely to be adverse knock-on effects on the High Street and the town centre as a whole. All shopkeepers expressed the view that the success of their business depends on all parts of the retail offer thriving. If shops are turned into housing, or shops adjacent to conversions fail, then eventually the good health of the town centre and Ringwood itself will be seriously compromised.

The Market Place and the "Shared Space" concept: The Market Place is seen as the area with most potential for revitalisation. It is, or should be, the heart of the town. Ringwood is a market town; the Market Place is its core.

The concept of converting the Market Place into shared space was not an individual's idea. It emerged organically from the two surveys carried out by the TCWG. The top three wishes from the Shoppers Survey were:

- more independent shops (72%)
- more events (27.5%)
- more street entertainment (15.0%)

The ideal place for more events and more entertainment, the only place large enough to accommodate major events, is the Market Place.

The shopkeepers nominated the Market Place as Ringwood's best and yet most underused asset. It is a large space in the centre of Ringwood that was once, and has the potential to be again, the main focus of the town centre. It is currently used by several events each year and is the site of the Wednesday market - but that leaves the Market Place with an empty calendar for most of the year.

The closure of West Street and the conversion of the Market Place into a cul de sac means that something has to be done if the Market Place is not to decline.

All our discussions with the shopkeepers, developers and investors confirmed that we should **explore the possibility** of emulating other towns by turning the Market Place into a vibrant, exciting, attractive and well-used 'shared space' every day of the year.

Exploring the possibility means:

1. Preparing an outline investment proposal
2. Conducting a feasibility study
3. Submitting the proposal, if viable, to a referendum of Ringwood residents

The TCWG is currently working on the Outline Investment Proposal., so we will say no more about the concept here. When the Outline Investment Proposal has been prepared and submitted to the Town Council, it will be up to the Town Council, in conjunction with the New Forest District Council, to decide whether and, if so, how to proceed.

Lack of shopping opportunities for young people: Many shopkeepers highlighted the fact that there was very little retail for the young (also mentioned in the shoppers' survey). They felt that a thriving town needs to meet the need of every resident and visitor. When conducting interviews with the shopkeepers many young assistants added their comments on Ringwood, remarking that although they and their friends loved Ringwood there was nothing for them to do in the town. Clothes shops were too expensive; there were no re-cycling shops as in re-filling with your own container. The Wednesday market was aimed at an older demographic and that there were very few restaurants and bars where they could socialize in the evening. Young people were amongst the first to suggest the idea of a vibrant market place at the weekends which they thought would definitely bring life to the town. Street entertainers and events (such as in the square in Bournemouth or Oxford Road in Southampton) would bring young people into the town. They pointed out that although young people may not be able to afford products sold within the Furlong, their weekly spend on entertainment - as in coffee, light lunches, suppers and bars - was a large part of their budget, a budget currently spent in Bournemouth and Southampton.

Development of the old Cinema Site: This was discussed at length by many shopkeepers. Although some are sorry that it will not be a cinema again, the idea of something being done to it is universally seen as good news. Flats above with retail at ground level is seen as a good thing, although many said that a restaurant (where diners could spill out onto the pavement) would be an even better pull for visitors into the Market Place and, from there to the High Street.

All of those who had seen the proposal for development of the old cinema site held in the Gateway were behind the scheme, although many expressed their dismay that the two "treatment rooms" were to be returned to housing. A continuous retail offer from the Furlong along Meeting House Lane to the Market Place would be a much better choice if the objective is to persuade visitors to the main car park and the Furlong to explore the Market Place and High Street. Those arriving at the main car park would see that shops were also operating all the way down Meeting House Lane to the Market Place. This

would encourage footfall to explore. As one interviewee said: “No-one is interested in other people’s houses”.

The Bus Station: Everyone agreed that the bus station should move but, assuming it could be persuaded to move, opinion was divided on what should replace it. Some felt a small car park would be useful, freeing up the existing parking spaces in the Market Place for other uses: i.e. shared space. (A car park would also help the new Social Club.) Others felt that a youth club, an entertainment hub, an art studio or mini-Furlong aimed at the younger population would be beneficial. That said, the majority view was the bus station will never move and we will just have to live with it, even though it is detrimental to any plans to develop and exploit the Market Place. One shopkeeper remarked it would not be quite so bad if people could get on a bus at the bus depot. But having “Not in Use” buses, spraying out diesel and, on occasions, trying to pass each other in the High Street was a disgrace for both the environment and the well-being of the residents.

Comparison between the Furlong and the High Street/Market Place: The Furlong, a well-managed retail operation has Café Nero at its entrance with seating and tables in full view of motorists arriving at the car park. This feeling of hospitality entices footfall into the Furlong and hence into the retail offer within the Furlong.

All shopkeepers felt that the High Street was “flat” in comparison. If you stand at the end of the street and look down the High Street, all you see is a line of shop fronts. You have no idea, in that instant, what the High Street has to offer. Visitors see people walking down the High Street but there is no indication of what is enticing them into a shop or whether the shop is a hairdresser, a café, a bar, a butcher or an estate agent. If a visitor saw people sitting, talking, laughing etc, browsing the wares on offer out on the pavement, or sitting drinking coffee, the shopkeepers feel that the “draw” would more appealing. The High Street has no flowers, plants, hanging baskets, pretty awnings, or anything designed to entice a stranger to explore the street.

Shopkeepers also expressed the opinion that if the Market Place generated some feeling of “life and hospitality”, as described above, the Market Place could become a destination in itself, and footfall would naturally flow to the High Street as it does when events are held.

Shopkeepers also expressed dismay at the ever-increasing use of the space outside the Gateway for small markets. This means that visitors arrive at the car park, wander around the Gateway market, then walk directly into the Furlong (the pull of Café Nero and outside eating) and into the Furlong area itself, never realizing that a High Street lies behind the Sainsbury area.

It was also noted that if visitors turn into Star Lane from the Furlong, they tend to turn around and walk back into the Furlong. The experience when reaching the Market Place from the Furlong is not encouraging. If you look left, all you can see is the mouth of the High Street in the distance; and if you look right, all you can see is the Letchers building in the distance. Nothing appears to be going on along the left-hand side of the Market Place up to the High Street. It was suggested that “proof of life”, as in tables and chairs and happy people, would encourage visitors to venture out into the Market Place and thence the High Street.

While these interviews were being conducted in the Market Place, the TCWG decided to assess how the parking space in the Market Place were being used. We stationed a volunteer for one hour twice a day mid-morning and mid-afternoon for a week to see where people went when they parked in the Market Place. We discovered that over 80% of car parkers walked up either Star Lane or Meeting House Lane to the Furlong, and then later returned to their cars and left. The TCWG also had volunteers watching what visitors did when they turned into Star Lane from the Furlong. Almost all, walked up to Star Lane, looked down, turned around and went back into the Furlong. Star Lane itself provides no incentive to travel down to the Market Place, and even if one does venture down, when they get to Market Place, they tend to turn around and walk back up to the Furlong. It seems the shopkeepers’ opinion on this need for “proof of life” is confirmed by this research into visitor behaviour.

General concerns about presentation of the town: Throughout the interviews, the shopkeepers were very upset that there was no attempt by “the Council” to put up hanging baskets or place planters in the High Street. They suggested that other towns are beautified, especially during the summer months. Many pointed out that if a visitor drives down Mansfield Road to enter the town centre at Christchurch Road, there are some hanging baskets there but they follow the railings round toward Christchurch, encouraging people to drive on to Christchurch, leaving Ringwood before they have entered. There are no signs of life along the entrance to Christchurch Road at Greyfriars. The Memorial Park on the right is pleasant enough but if there were flowers or hanging baskets along the Christchurch Road (from Greyfriars to Fridays Cross) visitors might be more encouraged to explore Ringwood town centre. Most also felt that more housing down Christchurch Road would mean the retail offer would shrink. Already the entrance to that stretch of road looks like a housing estate with no sign that shopping is available just a little way down towards Friday’s Cross. Further conversion of retail to housing there would just be another nail in the retail coffin.

Poor signage: Many shopkeepers criticised the lack of signage. When it was pointed out that Ringwood has many signs showing where the High Street and Market Place are, most said they had never seen them. When physically shown the signs, the consensus was “pretty but completely ineffective. They’re black and so small you can’t see them”.

Some shopkeepers said that during Covid they had attracted new customers from the internet who had come to visit their shops. On arriving they had exclaimed that they had no idea that there was a High Street and Market Place. They had been coming to Ringwood for many years and believed that the Furlong was the only shopping area in Ringwood.

Many called for large signs within the carpark showing “You are here and this is where you can go”. A map showing all the shops available and where they were situated was suggested, with similar signs to be posted around the town. While some of these suggestions may be impractical, the main point to be taken from this discussion is that there is currently no effort to entice visitors

to explore the town. One interviewee suggested changing the name of Meeting House Lane to Market Place Lane (because that is what it is and because there is confusion about the name anyway with some maps showing it as ‘The Furlong’). Another suggested an arch at the north end of the lane, saying entrance to the Market Place and High Street.

Wednesday Market: Many shopkeepers complained that when the Wednesday Market is over about 2.00 pm, the parking restrictions remain in place. Many of their customers refuse to come to Ringwood on a Wednesday. Shops that take appointments say that only local people and walkers come to them on a Wednesday. Some have parked for a quick “pop in” after the market and have been given a parking fine even though they have been parked for less than 15 mins.

There were also complaints that the Market is geared to a much older demographic. The TCWG spoke to the charter holder about this. He says he lets stall space to those who ask for it, with the rule that he will not have two stalls offering the same products. He added that he has no control on the parking and has never asked for the parking restrictions to be in place on Wednesdays for the whole day. He supports the idea of the Market place having markets other than the Wednesday Market. He is excited about the notion of a shared space in the Market Place because he remembers when it was the heart of the town, and it saddens him to see it so dead.

Pedestrianisation of the High Street and/Southampton Road: Many shopkeepers were in favour of pedestrianisation, but they acknowledged difficulties. If Southampton Road was fully pedestrianised, Ringwood would lose one of its exit points, aggravating the town’s already tortuous traffic flow problems.

As for the High Street, some of those who had said that parking spaces in general should stay as they are or increase were worried that if the High Street were to be completely closed off, then bars and restaurants would lose their custom in the evening. Perhaps a two-period parking regime could be considered:

- closed to traffic during the day
- open with parking from 6pm onwards

NOTE: Deliveries:

All premises in the High Street and Southampton Road have access to their shops from the rear. The Market Place shops do not.

Pedlars Walk: Several shopkeepers remarked that Pedlars Walk needed some attention. As one of the few access points to the High Street from the north of the town, it is “dull” and “boring”. It should be brightened up with signage “To the High Street”. (Because Pedlars Walk has a slight turn in it, you cannot see the High Street until you reach Sue Ryders.)

Meeting House: Those shopkeepers who expressed an opinion did not know what it did and why it was there. They observed that it:

- frequently had litter outside
- was dark
- looked like a prison
- the door was always shut.

The Sun Dial: The few who commented on the sun dial could not understand why it had been placed in the Market Place and did not see it as an attraction for visitors. No one spoke up in its favour.

Potholes in Meeting House Lane: Whichever way traffic flows in Meeting House Lane it is a crucial connection between the Furlong and the rest of the town. There are several potholes in the lane which need urgent attention.