To: The Steering Group

The Business Questionnaire

Forms returned to the Parish Office or individual SG members have been entered into a Filemaker database. The database includes the full text of all responses (except where they are illegible!). A few businesses firmly put their names on the form, and others were quite casual about protecting their anonymity in their answers.

The basic statistics are :

Number of forms – 54 (I do not know how many businesses were contacted)

Q1 Premises

[no information]	0
a) Home based	6
b) Shop/retail outlet	28
c) Pub/Hotel/Tourist attraction	4
d) Factory	3
e) Office	8
f) Agricultural buildings	2
g) Other	10
Total	*61*

The total is larger than the number of forms because several responses give more than one type of premises; ‘shop *and* office’ or ‘home based *and* agricultural buildings’.

Q2 Industry Sector

[no information]	1
a) agriculture, forestry, fisheries	2
b) business services	4
c) computer related	4
d) construction/building	3
e) domestic and garden services	1
f) education and childcare	0
g) estate agent	2
h) financial services	1
i) health and social work	5
j) hotels B&B, bars, catering	3
k) retail	24
l) wholesale	2
m) other	11
Total	*63*

The total is larger than the number of forms because several responses give more than one industrial sector; ‘business services *and* computer related’ or ‘health and social work *and* retail’.

It appears that shops are fairly well represented, with other businesses less so. In retrospect it is perhaps a pity that those responding with ‘Other’ were not asked to say (in general terms) what that other might be

Q3 Number of Employees

[no information]	0
a) sole trader	12
b) 1 - 5 employees	22
c) 6 - 10 employees	8
d) 10 - 25 employees	7
e) over 25 employees	5
Total	*54*

Q4 Where do the majority of your employees come from?

[no information]	10
a) Long Melford	10
b) within 5 mile radius of LM	15
c) within 25 mile radius of LM	20
d) further away	0
Total	*55*

All the ‘no information’ cases are sole traders [presumably resident in LM].
The extra count is for one business that replied both (a) *and* (c).

Q5 How many employees come to work by public transport?

[no information]	12
‘None’	36
One person	3
more than one	3
Total	*54*

The three businesses with one employee using public transport are all ‘shop’ premises.

The three with more than one employee using public transport are a mixed bunch; one each in the industrial sectors (i), (j) and (k).

The results confirm the impression from the Household Questionnaire results that public transport in LM is hardly used at all for work, and is only useful for shopping and leisure. There is one comment that “Buses do not match shifts”, and another that “Public transport doesn't run early enough in morning or late enough in evening to Sudbury.”

Q6 Recruiting Difficulties

[no information]	23
[no difficulty or not applicable]	16
a) Lack of suitable skills	10
b) transport difficulties	2
c) lack of accommodation	1

d) other (specify)	4
Total	*56*

Since the number of reported difficulties (17) is less than one third of the number of respondents, recruiting problems do not appear to be very significant in LM. The most interesting comments in 'Other' were "not willing to work at weekends" and "hours available, working conditions".

Q7 Future Plans

[no information]	15
a) move to new premises in LM	3
b) move to new premises out of LM	3
c) open additional branches	1
d) invest in new machinery/equipment	13
e) increase staff	14
f) decrease staff	0
g) reduce environmental impact	6
h) improve sales or marketing	23
i) start or increase exporting	1
j) expand range of products/services	11
k) reduce the size of business	0
l) major change to type of business	0
m) sell business, close, or retire	9
Total	*99*

When the 15 who did not respond to this question are removed, the remaining 39 businesses have a rather up-beat view on the future; over a third of them planning to increase staff or equipment or both, and more than half aiming to improve sales or marketing. The proportion expecting to move or open additional branches (5/54 or 9%) is also quite high.

On the other hand, it is unlikely that the businesses that did *not* respond would be equally sanguine. It is not, perhaps, surprising, but it does seem suspicious, for example, that not one single business said that it would decrease staff, reduce in size or change to a different type over the next two years.

The other slightly worrying number is the nine businesses expecting to sell out, close down or retire. That is 16.7% of the respondents, and indicates a very significant turnover of businesses in the next couple of years.

Q8 Customer Distribution

Here it is probably essential to distinguish the 30 businesses that are predominantly retail from the rest. 27 of these provided usable data about how their customers are distributed. The range is very wide. One of the larger shops gets 90% of its customers from the village. Another medium sized one gets less than 10% of its trade from the village itself and within 20 miles around, with 90% from the rest of the UK.

Of those with usable data, roughly half are mainly 'local', with at least 70% of their trade from within 20 miles. The rest have a third or more of their custom from beyond that distance. The largest shops (10 to 25 employees) are more likely to be local in scope (4 out of 5) than the medium and smaller ones, but no other differences stand out.

The non-retail businesses are a slightly different story. Here two businesses did not provide usable data. Of the 22 who did, nearly half are ‘local’ with 80% or more of their business coming from the village or within 20 miles. The other half have at least 50% of their business coming from further afield.

Q9 Barriers to Customers

This, the first of the ‘comments’ questions, is a little harder to analyse than the preceding ones!

35	answers were given in total.
17 (49%)	of them mention ‘parking’ as a problem (plus one that says it’s a problem everywhere).
9 (25%)	feel that people are not sufficiently aware of the village. One comment was “Lack of knowledge that Long Melford exists. Most people think that it has only antique shops. They are not aware of its diversity.”
5 (14%)	believe that either more or better shops in the village would help to attract more visitors. Another one says that empty shops put people off.
3 (9%)	claim that transport is a problem
3 (9%)	are bothered by ‘out-of-town’ competition. Tesco is mentioned twice.
2	“signage” [not clear whether this is for the village or individual shops, nor how it is inadequate]
1	“the bypass”

Q10 Crime or Vandalism

[no information]	0
‘Yes’	16
‘No’	38
Total	*54*

So 30% of businesses have experienced some crime or vandalism in the last year or so. There is no significant difference between the retail and non-retail businesses in this respect.

The nature of the offences was 5 cases each of break-in, theft and petty damage, with 3 cases of shoplifting. All but four of the cases were reported to the police (those that were *not* included 3 petty damage plus one theft).

Q11 Physical Security

[no information]	2
a) very important	28
b) important	20
c) Not important	4
Total	*54*

Those to whom security is most important are indeed those most at risk. 12 of the 16 offences in Q10 were committed against the 28 businesses responding “Very important” here, whereas only 4 were committed against the 26 others. There is no clear difference between retail and non-retail businesses in this respect.

Q12 Membership of an Association

[no information]	2
a) active member	8
b) member but not active	25
c) not a member	19
Total	*54*

In this sample, membership of an association is more common than not. There is no way of knowing whether the same proportions apply to those who did not respond, but it seems unlikely.

Q13 Effect of the Street Fair

[no information]	2
a) good for business	6
b) no effect	41
c) bad for business	5
Total	*54*

The most obvious conclusion here is that the Street Fair has very little effect on the businesses in the village. Only one in five reported an effect one way or the other. Those that see a benefit are almost exactly balanced by those that find it harmful. The latter group include three retail businesses and two hotel/pub/restaurants.

Reasons why the Street Fair is Bad (or Good or neither)

There were twelve responses to this question; 2 positive, 3 neutral and 7 negative.

The positive responses consider the Street Fair as an opportunity for good publicity and (from one shop) to stay open late and make some extra turnover.

The neutral responses are of no great significance; ("The street fair is the other end of Melford to us. . . . ")

The negative responses have two main themes :

Disruption of normal business (6 complaints)

Attracting the wrong type of person (3 complaints)

Please note that in this context 'the wrong type of person' simply means those who are unlikely ever to be customers of the businesses making the complaints. The most extensive comment was :

"The nature of the fair is more like a car boot sale /fairground. It attracts the wrong people. Participants set up far too early, take up parking spaces and monopolise the pavements, making it difficult for pedestrians with wheelchairs and pushchairs etc. In the past we have deliberately closed early due to this event. You should look at Lavenham for [an] example [of how to do it better] or hold the event on Sundays."

Q14 Is LM Adequately Promoted?

	[No info]	Yes	No
As a tourist destination	7	30	17
As a shopping/retail centre	15	12	27
For its other businesses	22	10	22

In very broad terms, then, these businesses think that the village *is* adequately promoted as a tourist destination (by a margin of nearly 2:1) but that *neither* the Retail *nor* the ‘Other’ businesses get a fair share of the promotion (by a margin of 1:2 the other way).

The number of missing answers, though, shows a noticeable falling-off in conviction as the question moves from tourism through retail to non-retail promotion.

Q15 Promoting Melford Better

32 responses (out of a possible 54) were received in total.

There are at least 18 groups of suggestions for promoting the village better, though many of the individual ideas have only one advocate. The most popular groups are :

10 calling for advertising, editorial or ‘advertorial’ pieces in magazines to promote the village as a whole,

5 looking for grants and other support from councils and the Tourist Board,

5 suggesting ‘Events’ such as a Xmas Fair, another Summer Fair, French market etc.,

5 in favour of a good web site, three of which appear (without being too explicit) quite critical of the present one, with another one mildly complimentary,

4 who want to encourage TV to do a feature (“Lovejoy” style), a travel programme or at least some news items in depth,

3 feel that more or better shops in the village would do the trick,

2 believe that a good brochure and extensive mailshots are part of the solution, (plus one other that believes they are part of the problem!),

2 see the need for substantial amounts of money for the promotion, but have no suggestions for where it might be found.

Other proposals were ‘one-off’ (though not necessarily the worse for that!)

Q16 Appearance of the Village

46 answers in total. They express a wide range of opinions from “Tatty” to “Wonderful”, often with supporting detail.

It is possible to rate each reply on a five-point scale from unqualified disapproval through qualified disapproval, neutral balance, qualified approval to unqualified approval. This is obviously an imperfect process, but it does give an idea of the balance of opinion. The numbers are :

[no information]	8
Unqualified disapproval (e.g. “Tatty”)	5
Qualified disapproval	8
Neutral balance	4
Qualified approval	18
Unqualified approval (e.g. “Wonderful”)	11
Total	*54*

It can be seen that on each side of the neutral divide, just over twice as many people have positive views on the appearance of the village as have negative ones of roughly the same strength. Rather few are neutral, which is not surprising.

While the positive views are rather general, the negative ones tend to be more specific about the causes. Those most often mentioned are :

- poor appearance of empty shop premises; (Seabrook Antiques and Mullucks are mentioned specifically),
- litter, weeds, and the need for more street cleaning,
- second-hand cars for sale
- A-boards and uncut grass verges get a mention too.

On the other side,

- flowers, particularly in hanging baskets, are considered good, and
- the lights and other decorations at Christmas received several compliments.

Q17 Money contribution to appearances/promotion?

This question was presented as a Yes/No choice, but a few respondents qualified their answer to a "Maybe", depending on the proposal they are asked to support. The numbers are :

[no information]	3
"Yes"	21
"No"	25
"Maybe"	5
Total	*54*

The even balance between possible contributors and definite non-contributors may be considered encouraging. We do not know, of course, what value of contribution they had in mind, nor which of the businesses are on either side. [It is worth noting that the LMBA has been raising money for these purposes from its members at intervals over at least the last ten years. It has always been quite a struggle.]

Q18 Benefit of LM Location

46 replies were received.

The reasons given were very varied. Themes that came up in several answers were :

- local attractions bringing in visitors, particularly Kentwell and Melford Halls.
- attractive good quality shopping area with a high reputation for specialist shops, (with comments to the effect that the antiques image of LM is no longer relevant),
- good & free parking (with some adverse comments as well),
- friendly and supportive community,
- The proximity of other larger towns.

Although most of the replies were positive, two said "No benefit".

Q19 Problems and Disadvantages

41 responses.

The most conspicuous result is that 12 businesses say "None" or the equivalent.

Of the 29 who give reasons for problems, the most common are :

8 lack of adequate parking (in spite of the third item in the list above!)

8 lack of : visitors, footfall, awareness by the buying public

5 declining numbers and range of shops in the village, coupled with increasing competition (particularly from Tesco),

3	poor road access
2	poor public transport (particularly at ends of the day)
2	difficult to find staff within commuting range
2	high rates and rents

Q20 Anything Else

28 responses . . . They cover a range of suggestions, mostly constructive. The main themes are :

5	car parking (particularly for staff or commercial vehicles) to get them off the street
4	rates and rents are felt to be too high, leading to rapid turnover of shops in several premises
3	ideas for promoting the village through advertising, fairs and other events, concentrating on the range of businesses in the village,

Other ideas include better information for visitors (maps and notice boards, signposts to village facilities) and encouraging shops to compete more strongly by keeping open on Sundays. There is also a suggestion that Lavenham does its thing better than Long Melford, and we ought to try and learn from them.

Conclusions

The sample of businesses that responded to the questionnaire seem to be reasonably representative of the shops in the village, with some contributions from the hotel/catering trade as well. The other businesses are much harder to be sure of, and there is almost nothing from the agricultural sector.

Most, but not all, feel that the village as a setting is a positive contribution to their success. It is relatively attractive, safe, friendly, and graced with some free parking.

Employees come from far and wide. Less than 10% of the businesses said that the majority of their people come from Long Melford itself, and nearly half said the majority come from more than 5 miles away (though less than 25 miles). Public transport is hardly ever used for getting to work.

Recruiting suitable staff within commuting distance can be a problem, but is not a general one.

A good proportion of businesses have a positive outlook for the future, expecting to grow in various ways. On the other hand quite a few are planning to sell their business, close down or retire. There are likely to be substantial changes to the business population over the next two or three years.

There are many perceived obstacles to commercial success. For the specialist shops these are mainly the difficulty of continuing to attract customers to a village which is changing from a well-known antiques centre into something else which is less easily defined and (so far) is nothing like so well recognised. The larger, more general shops have different problems, centred around “Out-of-Town” competition, particularly Tesco, but also larger towns within easy driving distance.

Specific problems include lack of parking (a very patchy effect in different parts of the street), a few eyesores (particularly one or two of the empty shops) and worries that the range of shops may fall below some critical threshold and become less attractive to visitors.

The Street Fair seems to be more or less neutral for the business community, though that and similar events (Xmas Fair or foreign produce markets) are seen as a way to raise the profile of the village.

Relatively high business rates and rents make it hard for small start-up businesses to survive. This contributes to a short lifetime and rapid turnover, and detracts from the prosperous village image that other businesses would like to promote.

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