

Dorking Market Town Health Check

Interim Report

August 2006

Introduction

This document is the “snapshot” produced as part of the Dorking Healthcheck programme – known as Dorking DNA (Dorking Needs Action). The background to the healthcheck is described in detail on the DNA website www.dorkingdna.org.uk and this site also contains details of the Steering Group undertaking the healthcheck. [If you do not have access to the internet you can request this information in printed form by calling DNA on 01306-879182, or write to us at D.N.A c/o Bullimores Chartered Accountants, Old Printers Yard, 156 South Street, Dorking, Surrey, RH4 2HF]. As brief background to DNA it is helpful to know that the Government has a policy of encouraging community based “Healthchecks” of market towns in England. A community group, with support, but not direction, from the local authorities, carries out a detailed analysis of how far the needs of a town are being met in terms of the environment, economy, transport, and social and community. They use a standard way of doing this originally developed by the Countryside Agency. The term healthcheck is a useful way to describe and define how people feel about their community, and how it might be improved. The process involves:

- Gathering the facts relating to the community
- Producing a snapshot of the community
- Public consultation & data collection
- Creating a vision
- Prioritising issues & identifying actions
- Creating the draft action plan
- Finalising the plan and its launch
- Implementation
- Keeping the community aware

This document covers the second stage and is a snapshot of Dorking and its surrounding villages. It is organised in four sections which are the same as the structure of the overall healthcheck and cover the environment, economy, transport, and social and community. The numerical references in the individual sections relate to the more detailed standard documentation produced by the Countryside Agency which we will complete as we collect information. The editor and final author for each of the four sections has been the DNA Steering Group member who is leading that part of the programme.

The snapshot has been produced to give us all a common start point and view of Dorking, and highlight some of the issues we face in living here. It will provide a framework for the more detailed work to come and, hopefully, inspiration for the vision of what we agree we would like Dorking to become. It has been mainly written for those who live and work in Dorking and its surrounding villages or are regular visitors. It therefore assumes that the reader has some familiarity with the area.

We hope that all readers, whether or not they are directly involved in DNA will find it thought provoking and informative. It is a “living document” which will develop as the programme moves forward. We are very interested in any comments or thoughts you may have on it, or indeed offers to participate more directly in DNA. Please get in touch with us via the DNA website, phone or mail as shown in our contact details listed in the first paragraph above.

Andy Tanner - Chairman Dorking DNA Steering Group

Environment

The Environment area has 2 interlinked sections:

Environment – Nature, and Environment – Built (which includes services relating to the built side such as recycling, roads and street lighting)

The Nature side has a proliferation of organisations which look after or draw attention to specific areas of interest often using volunteers.

The Built side generally has overall government control through planning and land designation restrictions, but Dorking has a very strong Preservation Society who keep a close watch on what is happening and might happen to Dorking's Heritage.

Overview of Features and Local Distinctiveness - What does make us special?

Dorking's Physical Location:

- Dorking's original sheep market (operating until 1960s?) led to the town's position being at a junction of two A roads and three train lines that link into Surrey, Sussex, Kent, London and Berkshire.
- In the heart of the Surrey, it snuggles between the Greensand Hills to the South and the Chalk Hills of the North Downs, Ranmore and Box Hill, in an important area of landscape, the most wooded with mature trees, and one of the first areas to be designated an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'
- Near to the High Street, the town has many green areas – Meadowbank, Cotmandene, Rose Hill, The Nower, Glory Woods, Devils Den and Deepdene Terrace.
- Dorking is surrounded by large areas of green belt and public access land, owned or managed by the National Trust, Woodlands Trust or Surrey Wildlife Trust.
- Boxhill with the River Mole wrapping round its feet and its historic stepping stones, offers chalk hillsides of European importance with highly diverse levels of bird, plant, and invertebrates.

Unique and/or Distinctive Features – apart from those above.

- The combination of chalk, south facing fields – resulted in Denbies, England's largest vineyard, being in Dorking.
- The views from the hills – to the Coast and from the North of Ranmore to London and beyond.
- The Cockerel – on Deepdene roundabout.
- Pump corner at which the High Street splits into North and South Street – is often a point of congestion!
- The Pippbrook stream and Meadowbank pond.
- The Pippbrook Council Offices with its beehive roofs protruding from the hillside and the leisure buildings opposite.
- The high pavements on the South side of the High Street and South Street.
- West Streets Antique shops (now diminishing).
- Cotmandene's washing lines (all taken in at dusk!)
- The Caves.
- The Old Fire Station – because it is a mess!
- The River Mole, with its “swallow holes” and Oxbow lake in Westhumble.
- Surrounded by abundant green areas and with hedged small fields

- From Dorking centre “Where you look up you can usually walk”
- The Tillingbourne stream offering watercress beds.

Dorking Town’s Conservation areas.

Dorking town centre has one conservation area which is split into subsections and there are conservation areas in Pixham lane and some of the villages.

Dorking has 5 sub-Conservation Areas, many with listed buildings:

1. High Street, South Street, West Street, Dene Street, and Junction Road. (the Y shape converging on pump corner – serpentine streets of changeable width and changes of level, medieval town centre key building Mullins House 17C)
2. Church Street, North Street, the streets north of High Street and West Street (narrow streets and pavements and mix of small businesses, tightly knit fabric, quiet area includes Spring Gardens 19C cottages around rectangular green)
3. Howard Road, Arundel Road, Mount Street and Vincent Lane area. (19c housing in terraces)
4. Rose Hill and Cotmandene (around central grassed areas on lower slopes of greens and hills – fine views over town some important buildings and Victorian arch to Rose Hill House)
5. Wathen Road. (19C eclectic residential mix of styles.)

Impact of man on the development of the character of the town and surrounding villages.

- The big development areas in the towns are Victorian/Edwardian.
- The mix of building types in and around the High Street reflect that of the rest of the town and the surrounding villages.
- The town centre building plots tend to be small, as do the plots for terraced houses in the town and villages, and newer infill developments where they are squeezed into windfall sites. The villages have a mix of terrace and individual plots with gardens tending to increase in size the further the property is from the town.
- New properties in towns can now be built without any parking.
- Local villages have mostly remained within the boundaries of the built up areas from the end of WWII, although pockets of newer development such as Brockham Park have appeared on land which was previously for employment.
- The Green Belt restrictions have preserved the villages, but may have no village shops and little to offer youth.
- Infilling is starting to show physically, but most design is made to blend in.
- The most run down area is around the Vincent Lane Industrial site but it serves its purpose as it is.
- Access roads into the industrial sites need attention – especially Station Road (towards Dorking West Station).
- There are few really poorly maintained properties. However, the Old Fire Station owned by SCC with its many proposals over the recent years, stands out as one that needs attention.

- BIG external impact is proximity of M25 (congestion when accidents close it) and the Airport (now heading for 40 million passengers, without any major changes to any road infrastructure)

Environmental Quality

What we had to begin with – the lay of the land and the feel of the air

- Dorking feels small but spacious, with its own identity.
- There is an awareness of St Martin's church spire being the centre of the town, but the hills are equally important.
- From the centre of the town you are continually aware of or can see the hills that surround it, which are integral to its appeal
- The river is just outside, and not intrusive, but people are aware of it.
- The air quality feels good, even though planes from Gatwick and Heathrow fly overhead and there is a high level of car use.
- There is a problem relating to air movement within the valley.
- A sound problem does exist in the urban areas where the road noise bounces off the buildings in the narrow streets and reverberates back. Inhabitants are so used to it they hardly notice how bad it is!
- There is little flooding from natural causes, only from poor drainage at times of storm, such as the regular flooding of the A24 by N Holmwood roundabout.

Countryside

- The countryside retains its distinctiveness up to the back gardens of the first houses around the town
- Major "rambler" walks cross the town:
 - The North Downs Way, (marked by acorns) follows the Chalk scarp to the North Downs.
 - The Greensand Way runs parallel running through the town itself.
 - The Mole Gap Trail (marked by silver arrows) runs from Leatherhead, along the Mole to Dorking Station.
 - The Pilgrims Way - actually defined at the beginning of the 18th century by the first governor of Ordnance Survey
 - The Trackway – is an old flattish carriage road.
- Cars & cycles give access to the surrounding countryside which is well maintained. Westhumble station provides irregular access to the Box Hill area.
- Grass verges get cut up to 5 times a year - so verges can sometimes look unkempt. Even when "cut", piles of grass can be left.
- The National Trust, Woodlands Trust and Surrey Wildlife Trust play a major role in maintaining the public access land.
- Access into the countryside by public transport is limited, almost nonexistent on Sundays!
- The Explorer Bus is run by NT around their properties in the summer months, but it is not that well used.
- The Vintage Bus runs from Dorking up Boxhill at weekends.

Biodiversity.

- The area around the Meadow Bank pond has high levels of biodiversity with wildfowl, swans recently returned, and Pipistrelle Bats around the pond.
- The town has Foxes, a Buzzard and Sparrow Hawks operating in the gardens. Muntjac Deer come off Ranmore into that side of the town.
- The ancient Cotmandene grassed area has been common land for centuries – in 2006 left uncut to encourage biodiversity.
- The Surrey Hills is one of the most wooded of AONBs with 40% of woodland cover; much is left as untreated woodland with bluebells in the spring.
- Boxhill and Ranmore's chalk grasslands are home for rare chalk liking plants, 2/3 of the various types of British butterflies and moths are found around Dorking, including the Adonis Blue.
- River Mole offers aquatic diversity.
- Green Parquets are coming into the area.

Maintaining for the future?

- Volunteers very important in working with specialist organisations to conserve the land. Younger volunteers are needed!
- Views across AONB at risk from poly tunnels and area designation may go in changes in Local Development Framework.
- NT regularly puts animals on chalklands to crop them, but that is not keeping the scrub from intruding.

Major elements we have added in the last 30 years or so.

- Conversion of old Victorian council office - now an excellent, but somewhat underused Library (parking nearby is becoming difficult)
- The Mulberry Centre - an "underused" Youth Centre – not open every day.
- Schools have changed since the 70s when single sex schools existed - there are just 2 major secondary schools.
- The only obvious toilets in Dorking are private ones (St Martin's Walk and Waitrose), and the South Street toilet is due to be rebuilt. There are toilets in Pippbrook, Dorking Halls, and Dorking Sports Centre, but they are not IN the town, and the public feel they are not encouraged to use them! Toilet provision by councils is not statutory.
- Dorking Halls, the Dorking Sports Centre, Pippbrook Council Offices, and the Medway Health Centre dominate the Eastern end of the town.

Public Amenities

Temporary Markets (environmental impact through visual attractiveness, parking and foot fall)

Once the centre of Dorking life, the Friday and Farmers' Market is now pushed into a car park area a considerable walk away. The car boot sale on Sundays at Dorking station pulls in a dedicated and apparently larger audience than the current Friday and Farmers' Markets do.

- It is worth noting that by the 70s people were turning from weekly markets to the convenience of supermarkets open daily, and that developing St Martin's Walk pushed the market into a less visually obvious, "2 step" off the High Street location.

- The current Friday market has a lot less stalls and variety than the extensive pre-St Martin's Walk market did.
- The Farmers Market is at risk – although one of the first of its kind, it now has competition which leads to fewer stallholders and not sufficient variety to attract sufficient customers (that would make it attractive to more stall holders)
- The Sunday Car Boot is a well-used and busy amenity, although parking problems do sometimes occur.
- The only special town event organised in the shopping area is the Chamber of Commerce financed, Gala Night. There are no organised special market events – e.g. Craft or Food Festivals which involve the whole town.

Artworks

- Section 106 money is obtained from developers where large numbers of properties are built to help provide local amenities. It can be used for artworks. Less money is in Dorking than in Leatherhead as there are less building gain opportunities in Dorking.
- Cockerel (50% section 106 money)
- Statues by Dorking Halls

Street furniture, Footpaths, lighting & CCTV, Signage

- Pedestrian routes could be better, and are usually poorly lit.
- Paths are not often hand swept, plants grow at the base of walls. Most people feel these plants are not that attractive – some feel they should be recorded and retained.
- There are plans to improve the route to the Sainsburys Car Park from the High Street with an ornamental arch at Allen Court (using Section 106 money)
- Not all pavements have the right sort of drop curbs for disabled people and the corrugated strips are actually quite dangerous for less stable able-bodied people!
- Passages and alleys are a special characteristic of Dorking and an asset to the town. Alleys and pavements need a survey!
- There are few benches around the town, but also, other than South Street, not many places to put new ones.
- Police surveillance CCTV is around the town centre and is to be installed in Meadowbank. There are also Mole Valley monitoring cameras which are necessary to give security within an open site.
- The press has stated that there are more cameras around Pippbrook council offices than around the town itself!
- Christmas lights have been provided by a private group of shops, now passed to the chamber of commerce. Public expect this to be council provided! Lights are “modern and quirky” with elegant Christmas trees.
- Many shops have Christmas tree holders permanently attached – which are only used for trees but which could take flags at other times of the year.
- Switch boxes are proliferating round the town (BT and traffic light control)
- Signage around the town could be seen as being both over prolific and ineffective.
- Banners and posters for events proliferate but are temporary – however perhaps there should be some control as they can get “untidy”.
- Graffiti is present but quickly cleaned up. Two known gangs and some problems on tagging windows are occurring, and green BT boxes are often attacked.

- Highways are not good at removing broken signs or bottoms of lampposts where replacements put in.
- Highways not good at cutting plant growth back around eye level signage.

Planted flowers and grass

- Dorking town centre has some summer hanging baskets, suspended from the Victorian style streetlights, maintained by the council.
- Some municipal planted areas exist on incoming roads and around council owned land
- SCC maintained verges are infrequently cut.
- Mole Valley maintains their land slightly better and keeps play areas tidy.
- Both authorities are not that good at cutting back hedges, and overhanging branches, and maintaining trees.

Rubbish and Recycle

At over £2.5 million a year, the biggest spend item for MVDC council after housing.

- Not much reuse of materials other than building materials
- Recycle rate high at 35% due to two bin collection system – bi-weekly rubbish and then selective recycle
- Green Waste (without kitchen waste) is collected from door for £24 a year fee – every other week
- Bring sites collect glass and aluminium is expected – shortages of sites due to neighbours saying don't want noise. Existing ones emptied every other day.
- Recently some were closed due to neighbours objecting to the noise. More are needed, not less.
- There is no council commercial collection. This is done by Biffa and currently it has no recycle collection – despite the fact that most office waste is paper and card and recyclable.
- There are no separate collections for glass or kitchen waste collection.
- Civic Amenity sites collect domestic wider range of items including computers, metal, electrical goods, compostables, batteries and building rubble. This is less than in some authority sites.
- Betchworth Quarry takes in building waste and sorts to use for landfill on their site and other places. A MRF being built there for that purpose.
- Capel may still get an incinerator – impact on Dorking will be 40-ton lorries going through the villages and centre of the town - if they don't use the A3 and A24 which is a longer route.
- Some properties have solar panels - mostly vacuum tubes for hot water.
- No windmills and no noted photo-voltaic panels to generate electricity from the wind or sun in the town or surrounding villages.

What we have built, or may build

Built Environment Architecture, state of buildings & more run down areas, range of building types (shopping, housing, employment), Historic and conservation areas, distinctive landmark buildings,

- The town is irregular in shape – occupancy dictated by the lay of the hills.
- It is quite densely packed to a two floor level – three in the High Street

- Side streets tend to be terraced or semi-detached with an abundance of local red brick.
- A few really old buildings, some flint dwellings and walls, a few houses show a particular decoration of inset pieces of local iron sand nodules (galleting) found in the clay. There are rare incidents of mathematical tiling, (the best is above Johnson's cleaners)
- Larger properties are being split or rebuilt to look like houses which actually house flats.

Development

All new housing is encouraged to use demolition items on site and recycled materials where possible.

Urban:

- Conservation areas control inappropriate building or tree cutting
- Mole Valley has introduced an article 4 (2) direction, to control small-scale changes within residential streets that would affect the character of the conservation area.
- Preservation of trees is very strict in conservation areas.
- New properties are built to high density (to comply with government regulations and some in the town have no parking.)
- Few brownfield sites left that are not one property to become many!
- The majority of housing is owned but there are a few larger areas of social housing and some old people's accommodation in and around the town.
- Affordable housing is required on larger new developments and on rural developments of more than five units. This has tended to be built for shared ownership, but new affordable developments will have a greater proportion of properties for rent. Key worker apartments have been built, but they have not been filled with key workers as they were too expensive for them.
- Many housing units are built on windfall sites – properties demolished or re-designed internally to give more units.
- Brownfield site use is encouraged so that the Green Belt is not used.
- Small industrial sites within residential areas are, or are likely to become, housing.
- Most industry is to the Guildford side of the town in: Vincent Lane, Curtis Road or Station Road
- There is only one low towerblock of offices and 2 domestic tower blocks of flats.
- Apart from the Pippbrook offices there are no really unusual modern buildings. The Sports Centre has an unusual roof structure and an imposing position, but is a fairly standard sports facility.

Country:

- The Green Belt is protected – development is preferred for employment, discouraged for habitation and both have to be proved to be needed. (e.g. exceptional circumstances)
- Exceptions are made for essential affordable rural housing developments.
- Farmers are being forced to diversify, but currently there are no projects that impact on the town.

Development Land Based Industries

- Currently around Dorking the Green Belt protects farming land, so it is unlikely to be used for much housing.
- The Farmers Market is not doing well and this could impact on the farmers.

Who manages what?

DOES anything not get done or need to be improved?

Community involvement – all countryside areas

- Dorking Preservation Society works to sustain the town's buildings & museum.
- The National Trust, Surrey Wildlife Trust, and private owners, especially the larger estates, play a significant part in the management and conservation of the landscape around Dorking.

Management by Local Authority/ Govt bodies:-

- Air, Noise Pollutions, H&S Food issues, Contaminated Land – MV Environmental Health
- Environment Agency - Rivers and Flooding, oversees Contaminated Land (Thames Water foul water, Sutton and East Surrey Clean Water.
- Cleaning/tidying municipal open spaces, play areas and parks – MV Parks – but use Burleys.
- Road lights, repair and maintenance & verge cutting – SCC Highways – using Carillion for maintenance and grass cuts.
- Graffiti, road sweeping, parking – MV Services - The council feels they handle this well, but the public feel it could be done better.
- Cost of parking is increasing and pushing all-day parking of cars onto the side roads.

The Relationship of People and the Environment

Impact of things on the environment and how we feel about it.

- **Travel - taxis and fares**, and parking! All need consideration taxi fares 2nd highest in Surrey, but also more rural so longer journeys.
- Buses 4 U will merge with Dial a Ride, but not sufficient vehicles to meet demand as mostly not being shared on journeys.
- **Tourism vs. locals** use.
- Tourism increasingly important, Denbies is most visited site in Surrey, but do those visitors come into Dorking?
- Special events in Dorking town bring people in from surrounding villages and other areas.
- **Housing?** Do we allow it to expand?
- When does housing development levels effect quality of life?

Possible growth in locality impacts.

- Pollution, Air and Noise – we mostly accept!
- Gatwick Diamond areas – possible extra runway >housing and supported infrastructure Incinerator at Capel – traffic through town and on A24?
- Govt plans for housing in SE – MV 171 a year – we can just find for ten years through infill and reuse of site - what then!

- Potential Sainsbury's Development
- What will happen to the Fire Station.

How we get around the space

Transport area...

Signage perhaps needs attention – see above for Local Authority -

Commercial signage is not that intrusive

Main routes for pedestrians, use of parking & public transport. Main routes in and out of town by vehicle, congestion.

- Survey of cars, where are they parked what routes are walked into core town area is needed.
- Congestion in High Street occurs when 2 cars park to both sides of the road at the narrow areas (by the raised path).
- Street Wardens are stretched to cover Mole Valley effectively

How we use the space – leisure and recreation

- Parks and play areas, Woodland and countryside,
 - Cycling and walking.
 - Informal and formal recreation – (including Culture and the Arts?)
- Mole Valley Community Plan covers this area – should DNA look at again?

What is our attitude towards the space

- Feelings of place and space we call Dorking – how does it make you feel? Crime levels are generally low but South Dorking has a higher crime rate now than in the once worst Goodwyns and Chart Downs areas. This may be an impact of community police or of a successful neighbourhood watch.
- There is a job element that causes a lot of drink-related problems in the Meadowbank area, which police seem to do little about despite the anti-drink order on the area.
- More community police are planned for Mole Valley.
- Dorking as living, shopping, amenities, walking in this area, safety
- Impact of Police - Does more community police & CCTV help make you feel safer?

Economy

Dorking's economy reflects the classic trading pattern of a market town servicing a surrounding village/rural hinterland on to which is superimposed significant in and out commuting patterns – notably 'out' to high value service sector jobs in London and 'in' to support a small number of large employers generally situated on the outskirts of the town such as Kuoni, Unum, and the Highways Agency. Unsurprisingly there is little large scale manufacturing in the area – the Johnston Engineering plant making industrial sweepers being the notable exception. There is a large and diverse small firm base –some lifestyle businesses operating out of domestic premises in the town and hinterland and others based in more conventional business premises. Taking in turn the headings in the Countryside Agency healthcheck methodology: -

Employment

Dorking has a strong employment position with claimant count unemployment being so low that there is not so much an unemployment problem as a challenge, especially for small employers, in recruiting and retaining labour. That said, there are some notable structural weaknesses: -

- much access to high value employment is only by commuting out:
- many low paid jobs are being filled by recent immigration from new EU member countries and it is unclear if this source of skills will prove enduring:
- female rates of economic inactivity are rather higher in the hinterland than the core conurbation; this merits further examination to understand how much this is due to reduced opportunities or other barriers for returners to the labour market and how much to other social factors:
- there may be further pressure from outsourcing to low cost locations in UK or abroad in the high volume service sector:
- despite the low overall unemployment (claimant count) aggregate, there is evidence of some pockets either geographically or socially eg disaffected youth, low skilled.

Business Support

A range of private sector business support is available from banks and other financial intermediaries but public sector business support is only currently delivered remotely - notably from the Business Link in Woking. More specialist services with technical capability are again only available from more distant locations like the SEEDA Enterprise Hub in Guildford which connects to the Leatherhead Food Research facility. Although the Economic Development Unit in MVDC provides some substitute for the local knowledge which an in-town business support provider could offer, the arrival of the Surrey Enterprise gateway in Dorking in July offers the prospect of a more systematic "before and after" study of the impact of local versus remote availability in terms of delivery to very small businesses.

There are a number of more and less formal networks in the area notably the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Breakfast Club (with a BNI chapter due to launch shortly) but these networks do not extend to having e.g. the kind of dedicated analytical capability to explore development and other business issues now available in larger chambers.

Broadband capability is now well established throughout Dorking and the hinterland and the issue here is not so much availability as the softer barriers to take-up. Initiatives like Connected Surrey aim to tackle these barriers.

Training and Education

Dorking has a strong reputation in both primary and secondary education and educational attainment is high. A high proportion of students go on to Higher Education and for many a combination of HE location, follow on employment and the housing market take them outside the area for, at the least, a long period. Graduate qualification rates in the workforce are high though this may reflect more mature returners. The healthcheck will need to explore further the impact of graduate patterns on the composition of the town.

Learning and skills development

Formal training through adult further education and retraining for returners to the employment market has tended to be reduced in recent times as the balance of learning and skills funding has changed. (Check re Dorking learning shop etc offering.). While the larger employers will have well established training initiatives for staff, the barriers to training in small and microbusinesses mean that for many employees there are few opportunities to develop higher skills which could benefit both individuals and their employers individually or collectively. This may be a particular issue for full and part time female employment in the retail sector. Other issues which need further exploration are:-

- availability of intermediate skills particularly given the focus of FE on level 2 skills now
- the employer view of formal training – is it still perceived as supply led?
- the extent of informal training and the gap with formal accreditation/provision/accreditation

Retail

Dorking has a high number of small and specialist retailers but the very scale and format (which often precludes linking adjacent premises) of the great bulk of the town's retail premises mean that they are ill suited to the needs of major high street brands. Its weekly market has been a longstanding feature though it is now very dependent on a small number of key stalls. Like many others, Dorking's Farmers' market has been under pressure from trends like increasing sophistication in supermarket products. Even such classic market town shops as wet fish and greengrocers have over time been squeezed out. This in turn means that a significant amount of consumers' purchasing power is sucked out both to the large supermarkets in Leatherhead, Reigate, and even Broadbridge Heath, or to major retail centres like Kingston and Guildford for clothing and shops catering more particularly for the youth market. Although the core centre of the town has resisted the pressure to convert main retail premises to restaurant and other services, it is unclear whether the current mix is fully sustainable; even historically successful niches like West Street antiques have been forced to diversify to respond to market trends.

Unfortunately the retail debate in the town has tended to be dominated by a rather simplistic pro and anti argument for a large-scale supermarket development off the main high street. Even among those advocating change there are often unrealistic expectations of what a town

of Dorking's size and configuration could hope to provide in its retail offering and of the levers available in a free market. A major challenge for the healthcheck will be to develop a more informed debate about shopping patterns and realistic areas for development.

Property

Dorking has a wide range of premises on offer for retail and business needs. Rents are relatively modest which may actually encourage some of the churn noted in e.g. the café/restaurant sector – barriers to entry are lower. That said, over time there has been pressure for conversion to housing both in terms of large sites like Brockham Park and in small plots e.g. most recently Tutts in London Road. Much less visible is the offsetting growth in businesses operating from home. *Needs facts on occupancy and churn*

Current vacancy rates in the town are low and the EDU devotes significant resource to trying to facilitate re-occupation of high profile empty sites e.g. Mays in South St.

Tourism and visitor services

Dorking has strong tourism offering as befits its positioning at the heart of the Surrey Hills. Natural beauty offering extensive walking and cycling opportunities, nearby National Trust properties, a wide range of pubs and restaurants, and the vineyard as well as cultural contributions from the music and arts festivals make for an effective mix. Much of this is “consumed” by the casual visitor and friends and family, but there is an increasing market for tourism on the back of business conferences etc. Accommodation ranges from large numbers of B&B through to upmarket hotels; recent developments will see e.g. serviced apartments coming on-stream to meet the needs of those e.g. attending short secondments etc. Quality accreditation has been a strong feature.

Visitor information through both electronic and printed media has helped to promote the tourism offering since the last tourism study in 2004. There remain challenges eg travel weaknesses/congestion and overreliance on private car which experiments like the Explorer Bus have only had limited success in overcoming.

Transport

Ease of travel to and from the local area

- Dorking has nearby and convenient access to major, albeit highly congested, motorway routes such as the M25 and M23.
- Two primary trunk routes pass through the town. The A24 connects to the motorway network, some 10-15 minutes to the north, and is a major route to the south coast at Worthing. The A25 provides an east-west corridor between Redhill/Reigate, to the east, and Guildford, to the west. Both roads provide relative ease of movement around and beyond the district, however they occasionally become severely congested as a consequence of traffic diverting from the M25/M23 when traffic disruption occurs on the motorways.
- However, about 20% of households in Dorking itself do not have access to a car, a proportion that falls to between 5% and 10% in the surrounding villages.
- Dorking, and the Mole Valley in general, lies at the centre of the rail infrastructure for the southeast of England and it is possible to access most stations in the southeast, southwest, central and northwest of the country, Scotland and Wales with minimal changes. With the exception of travel to the south, Dorking is well served for rail services most days of the week.
- The mainline station provides four services an hour to London, two to Victoria and two to Waterloo, seven days of the week from early morning to late evening. Dorking Deepdene has two services an hour in both east and west directions, one of each being limited stop express services to either Reigate/Redhill/Gatwick Airport or Guildford/Reading, again early morning to late evening seven days of the week. This latter service allows travel to Guildford and Reading in a shorter time than is possible by car, albeit with platform access limitations. Dorking West lies on the same line but is only served by a limited number of stopping services in the daytime, Monday to Saturday. Services to the south terminate at Horsham, running hourly during the working day Monday to Saturday. Train timekeeping has improved considerably over the last few years and can now be considered good on most services.
- The condition of the stations themselves varies. Dorking Mainline was redeveloped in the 80s, although some aspects of it are beginning to show its age; Deepdene is becoming increasingly tatty, even after having had a face-lift within recent years; whilst Dorking West (often referred to as Dorking Town) is little used and tatty. Both Dorking Mainline and Dorking Deepdene cannot be accessed by disabled, and access can be difficult to other users with limited mobility or heavy luggage.
- Bus services are poor and highly fragmented, with only one regular out-of-area service, the 465 to Kingston. North-south services to Horsham and Epsom via Leatherhead are limited. The Horsham to Dorking service seems to be geared to rural school transport needs, with only one full peak service in each direction along a, principally, A24 based route. The Epsom service is an off peak service, unsuited to work and school travel. East-west services are infrequent and appear to be geared

more to the schools' market (in the case of Guilford possibly due to the regular and, generally, reliable train service). At least three supermarkets run daily services, from the outskirts of Dorking and rural areas south of Dorking, to out-of-town superstores in other districts (WASP and Metrobus services). Other than that there are only spasmodic services at off-peak times, often out of Dorking, rather than into. There are no internal Dorking services.

- There are two, on-demand community bus services, Dial-A-Ride and Buses-4-U. Whilst both are intended principally as mobility and rural support respectively, the latter is a membership only disabled focused service, whilst the former is a public transport service open to all.
- Local companies run an internal work-based bus service serving a number of locations in the Dorking area. These are not accessible to the general public.
- Interconnection between rail services and bus and rail is poor and inconvenient, particularly for non-motorized users. Information on rail services is generally good, although electronic information at stations suffers from poor reliability at times, currently North Downs line information is poor. Bus information is dispersed and poorly integrated, and buses are often inconveniently timed to integrate with train arrivals/departures. Access to the platforms at Dorking Deepdene and Mainline railway stations is very poor for the elderly and lone adults with young children, and non-existent for the disabled. Although a number of bus routes pass Dorking stations there is little in the way of integrated information.

Although individual elements of the public transport provision are good, overall services are fragmented and, often, ill-timed and the range, connectivity and costs of bus services, in particular, little understood.

- Cycle infrastructure is poor. A good off-carriageway cycle route to Leatherhead was built alongside the A24 in the 1950s but, despite regular use and increasing demand, has deteriorated due to poorly implemented modifications and poor maintenance. Elsewhere cycle facilities are badly designed and/or constructed, maintenance is poor and development programmes, notably Safe-Routes-to-School, largely weak, intermittent and ineffective. Cycle parking at Dorking stations is poor and heavily oversubscribed whilst cycle parking in the town centre is often not immediately obvious.
- Westcott, Brockham and the Holmwoods are all villages within easy cycling distance and, over time, various schemes have been proposed by the Cycle Forum and parish bodies, only to have been rejected by the bodies responsible for highways development.
- No major improvements are planned to any infrastructure in the foreseeable future. The only modal change may be amalgamation of Mole Valley's Dial-A-Ride and Buses-4-U.

Ease of access to services

- Bus travel from the rural areas is particularly poor, except possibly for schools, and inconveniently routed/scheduled. Both public and private buses are provided from rural areas for the two secondary schools, but nearby villages of Westcott, Westhumble, Boxhill and Brockham suffer from being too close to Dorking for residents' children to qualify for carriage on these buses. Constraints on pick-up close to Dorking combine with poor pedestrian/cycle infrastructure to inhibit non-car modes, increasing car traffic at peak times.
- There are two Dial-A-Ride services to Dorking, serving the mobility impaired, run by Mole Valley District Council, and serving the rural community, called Buses-4-U. Operating workday hours Monday to Friday, Buses-4-U is a relatively new service and it's not clear how successful it will be. Dial-A-Ride is a somewhat older, membership based, service. However the requirement to book well in advance limits the value of these services to many with transport needs.
- Information on public services is not particularly easy to access and disparate. The local authority, Surrey, does issue a booklet with timetable information, but this not kept up-to-date.
- Access to hospitals, particularly, is poor to non-existent, particularly in the rural areas and, with recent changes announced by Department of Health, this is set to get worse. Dedicated hospital transport is only available for the sick. There is a volunteer service based on private vehicles, for those not qualifying for hospital transport, but it is not known how effective this is. Hospital transport itself can only be booked by the hospital or the local GPs, against strict qualifying criteria.
- Out-of-area supermarkets are organizing their own bus services; Tesco to Broadbridge Heath and Hookwood, and Sainsburys to Burpham; depriving Dorking of potential custom. It is not clear what the response of the town's traders will be.
- Public transport access to leisure services in Dorking from the rural villages is poor to non-existent, with no evening services, although there is a leisure service around the Surrey Hills during the summer.
- Youth transport, other than along rail routes, and then not to the south, is poor, specifically evenings and weekends. Youth in the rural areas are particularly disadvantaged by the lack of public transport; and the lack of good cycle routes between Dorking and even the larger villages exacerbates this....reinforcing car use and pressures on parents' time. There are a couple of youth clubs which operate their own minibus services.
- There are no improvements to bus services planned, although potential exists.

Ease of movement around town

- Dorking is a 16th century style “compact” town, with a network of lanes and alleyways between residential roads and the main retail streets in the town’s core. Roads are narrow and not suited to modern traffic, yet the main A25 passes through the centre of town, and the volume of traffic on both A25 and A24 often inhibits walking and cycling to the town centre.
- Congestion occurs at the junction of the A24/A25 Deepdene Roundabout, at both morning and late afternoon/evening peaks. The one-way (gyratory) system, formed by South Street, Vincent Lane and West Street, is subject to severe congestion at peak times (triggered by traffic flow interactions at the Vincent Lane/Westcott Road and Pump Corner junction) with regular gridlock when M25 motorway traffic is disrupted. A third, but less disruptive, source of congestion is the North Holmwood roundabout on the A24 south of Dorking town centre.
- There are a number of radial routes giving mixed access to the town centre, amongst which are Dene Street, Rose Hill, Cotmandene/Moores Road, Mill Lane, Old London Road, Church Street/North Street, Falkland Road/Coldharbour Lane, Horsham Road/Flint Hill and Ranmore Road/Station Road. A couple of these give rise to rat-running at peak periods, notably Church Street/North Street, Dene Street and Falkland Road
- The density of traffic and constraints of narrow streets with narrow pavements, in many cases with uncontrolled on-street parking, create problems for non-motorised users on many of the above routes. In many streets parked cars serve to limit the manoeuvring space available for pedestrians, disabled and cyclist; and non-motorised user priorities have been eroded over the years, often due to sheer volume of traffic, lack of control on parking and obstruction of footways.
- Poor parking control of illegal parking, particularly in the High Street and South Street, exacerbates congestion.
- In recent years there have been three pedestrian fatalities in the High Street itself and a considerable number of minor accidents. There have also been a number of pedestrian and cyclist fatalities on the A24 Dorking Bypass, between Deepdene Roundabout and North Holmwood, which has prompted Surrey Transport to take measures to improve the situation, although there are major questions regarding the quality and effectiveness of the particular measures.
- The incidence of pavement cycling has increased in recent years and become problematic. There may be some correlation between that and the increase in both traffic volumes and cycle use within the community, combined with the paucity of urban cycle facilities.
- Movement around the town centre, and town in general, is particularly poor for the disabled, with many junctions lacking “dropped kerb” facilities, often where access to services is required (notably mainline stations, schools and shops). The historic nature of the town centre, with a significant number of buildings from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, makes provision of disabled access on a consistent basis difficult. Most

particularly, the proliferation of retailers' "A-Board" advertising is making life difficult for not only the disabled but all pavement users.

- Crossing the major roads is problematic everywhere, and many residents living outside the A24 Dorking Bypass find car use safer and more convenient than trying to use poorly sited crossing facilities. There are a limited number of crossings of the main street (four) of which only two are of sufficient capacity or conveniently located. It is often difficult to cross the main retail streets, High Street, West Street and South Street, except when congestion slows traffic.
- There are a number of junctions where road geometry makes crossing hazardous for pedestrians, particularly the elderly and infirm, notably the A24/A25 Deepdene Roundabout, London Road/High Street, Pump Corner, Horsham Road/South Street, Vincent Lane/Westcott Road, Station Road/West Street, Chalkpit Lane/Ashcombe Road and Flint Hill. Although there have been one or two improvements in recent years, these all present significant barriers to pedestrians of all ages and capabilities.
- Pavement maintenance is an issue, with little attempt to systematically improve pavements in and around the town over the years. Indeed the piecemeal nature of such improvements has often created new hazards.
- Delivery vehicle access is tight but uncontrolled and creates hazards in a number of streets, notably Dene Street, Marlborough Hill, Mill Street, South Street, Vincent Lane and some sections of the High Street.
- Although parking is perceived as a problem, a recent study by a firm of consultants suggests that, in fact, short-term car parking space is sufficient but inefficiently used. Long-term car parking, particularly for those working anti-social hours, such as postmen and supermarket staff, is disorganized and random, often blocking residential streets and town centre access. However, although addressed in the workscope, the above study neglected to identify cycle, disabled and motorcycle parking provision or needs.
- Public transport accesses the town centre through the same streets as general traffic, hence is subject to the same congestion issues at peak times. Bus stops are distributed around the central retail streets of High Street, West Street and South Street, although changing bus routes can be problematic.
- There is cycle parking distributed around the town centre but it is often poorly located or not immediately visible, hence underused. One popular location, Butterhill, fell out of use after a bus shelter, which originally formed a protective barrier preventing cyclists from falling onto the pavement below, was removed.
- Most crossings, signalised or otherwise, feature tactile paving but adherence to standards is poor and blind users may become confused.
- The general lack of seating and, additionally, lack of covered bus shelters adds to the lack of popularity of public transport options. Whilst some bus users can find alternative cover at certain locations, the elderly are often particularly disadvantaged.

- There are minor improvements planned but much waits on a potential large town centre development application.

Other Issues

- Transport Forums. Until January this year Mole Valley DC/Surrey CC organized a public transport forum on a six monthly basis. Due to lack of participation, by both transport providers and public, the decision was taken, earlier this year, to stop organizing them. However poor notification of meetings to both transport providers (lack of contact information) and the public may have contributed significantly to the lack of attendance.

The issue of poor awareness of events/forums, and poor notification of consultations, with inadequate response times, is a perennial problem.

Social and Community

Dorking and its surrounding hinterland is widely considered to be an attractive area to live, within easy reach of London, the South Coast and Downs. On average its residents live longer than those elsewhere in the south east. Many enjoy a wide range of social, cultural and community provision and services. There are however some key elements of community living which need attention if the whole community is to reaching its true potential. Many of these are outlined in Mole Valley District Council's Community Strategy. Although relatively affluent the area includes the Holmwoods which has comparatively high areas of deprivation alongside Boxhill and Beare Green which feature highly on one or more deprivation indices.

The following pages give an overview of each of the Countryside Agency's headings in the Community and Social section of the Healthcheck.

Population

Dorking town has around 11,500 residents and together with its surrounding hinterland as defined by the Healthcheck has a total population of around 34,000 people.

As well as a rise in the number of people aged over 65, Dorking and its hinterland has a higher proportion of over 45s (compared to Surrey general statistics) and is below average level for residents aged under 45.

The rising trend of an increasingly older population will result in even more demand for services to provide for them. Such services tend to require low skilled and low paid employees who are harder to find in the Dorking area. There is evidence of some population growth although this is not rapid at around just 0.4%. Unemployment is not a particularly key issue in the area although specific areas, such as in the Holmwoods, have pockets of higher rates of unemployment, higher levels of unsatisfactory housing conditions, higher numbers of people with poor basic numeracy and literacy skills and lower achievement and participation rates; compared to the rest of the District.

Housing

The area has a wide range of all types of housing available with an over supply of sheltered housing for the elderly and under supply of all other types of housing. One third of our own housing stock will currently fail the government decent homes standard due to a budget shortfall.

There is an issue in that first time buyers cannot generally afford housing. There is an insufficient supply of social/affordable housing available at below market rents. Local Housing policies require there to be 30% available and affordable housing which is not currently being met. The local homebuyer system offers homebuyers 25% starter loans on new property which has to be paid back if residents move on or seek to purchase property. Many first time buyers leave the area and settle in a more affordable one. The area Housing Survey reveals a need for more two and three bedroom houses. There is also much movement in sales of houses with less than four bedrooms whilst many people find it hard to purchase four and five bedroom property in the town itself.

Local people have priority in accessing affordable housing when it is built on green belt land outside the outer envelope of villages. If affordable housing is built inside villages, on

brown belt land, local people do not necessarily have priority. There is also no priority given to local residents in any affordable housing provision made within Dorking.

The council planned provision of affordable housing will not meet future needs at present. The poor condition of some social housing is being partly addressed by the housing department selling their housing stock. This should result in affordable housing being refurbished and improved. When affordable housing is sold by the council or a housing association it goes on to the private market and is thus unavailable for people in housing need on the council's waiting list. A survey of the condition of private housing is planned in the next 2 months.

The relatively low number of statutory homeless people in the area suggests that homelessness is not a particularly significant issue. However, the problem may be masked by people not trying to register themselves as homeless. As far as single people are concerned, for instance, the council has a duty to house them if homeless only in cases where they have vulnerability. Some provision is available for people such as – Pitstop - Leatherhead Night Hostel. There is no such provision in Dorking. We understand that some homeless people decline to take advantage of Pitstop because it provides only temporary accommodation and they fear that they will lose their pitch elsewhere.

The needs of frail, elderly and disabled people deserve investigation, whether these be for care and support in their own home or for provision outside, from better infrastructure such as public seating, lowered pavements, lavatories and street lighting to meals, transport and social facilities. We note that there has been a decline in day centre provision in Dorking over the last twelve months. The number of elderly people will grow and therefore also the numbers having to cope with challenging, chronic conditions from osteoarthritis to sight impairment to dementia.

There is a need to provide more care and support for elderly, frail residents who reside in their own homes and wish to continue having their independence. The fact that the area has an over-provision in terms of retirement housing is largely due to the fact that many residents who currently reside in larger, attractive detached homes do not find the existing sheltered housing appealing, perhaps due to limited parking facilities or size of property. There may be, therefore, a need to provide more attractive retirement units with two or more bedrooms and parking facilities.

The area contains several residential institutions, principally care homes. Investigation could be carried out to establish whether the level and type of this provision is adequate or whether residents, relatives and employees need additional support services

There is not a significantly high level of second home ownership in the area although the number of vacant houses is relatively high mainly due to houses empty for probate or else being “held” in a chain, resulting in many properties being out of the system for a period of time. There is an opportunity to bring existing housing back into use, especially in terms of affordable housing where many two or three bed properties are under-occupied – frequently with only one occupant.

Health and Public Safety

On average the local emergency services do not currently meet their target response times. In general the area has lower mortality rates compared with both regional and national statistics on heart disease, cancer, suicide and accidents.

Residents relying on public transport, particularly from the hinterland, have difficulty getting to NHS hospital for non-emergency treatment with transport often being unnecessarily lengthy and inconvenient. Many residents have to rely on the goodwill of friends and relatives. There is great concern locally over the Government's proposal to close the A and E Dept. at Epsom District Hospital and to encourage patients to attend Sutton Hospital instead.

GP practices consider that they are spending too much time making unnecessary home visits to patients who could get to surgery if transport were available. Transport to the whole range of health facilities deserves attention. Consideration should involve the type of service which might be provided (from traditional bus or dial-a-ride to hospital bus or volunteer driver) and the cost involved – whether of using public transport or of paying parking charges.

Whilst there is an adequate supply of GPs to meet local demands there is a significant shortage of NHS Dentists available to local residents.

Local surgeries tend to provide adequately for family planning but there is a perceived lack of provision in terms of drug and alcohol related support. We also need to consider the availability or otherwise of other key health services, such as those provided by physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dieticians and counsellors.

There are generally less than adequate healthcare services provided in the home particularly in District Nursing services. This seems predominantly due to PCT overspend and resulting cuts in the District Nursing services....resulting in more pressure on professionals such as Practice Nurses to deal with patients who District Nurses would have previously dealt with. Currently there are no mobile health clinics, doctors or dentist units.

The area has a higher than average rate of teenage pregnancy and locally some investment has been made in terms of running an advice centre locally and the employment of a teenage pregnancy social worker.

Dorking has a lower than average but increasing number of ethnic minority residents and the services which could be in place for them, such as interpreters/translated leaflets etc, are inadequate.

Dorking is a relatively safe area to live in with some of the lowest crime rates in the country. There are pockets of higher than average crime rates in burglary and assaults (including domestic violence). There is also an issue of increasing theft from motor vehicles in the numerous local beauty spots. The number of unlit alleys or poorly lit roads in both the town and its hinterland give rise to petty crime, vandalism and graffiti in those areas. In Dorking itself there are some problems with intolerant and anti-social behaviour particularly in the North Holmwood area. The town centre recreation ground "Meadowbank" occasionally has issues of anti-social behaviour but in recent years this has declined.

The fear of crime is far greater than the realistic probability of crime occurring. Much of this is due to local media hype as well as national reports into serious crime such as the assault on Abigail Witchell. Where crime does occur, neighbourhood watch schemes such as the one established in Goodwyns have helped to reduce crime rates. There are also a number of crime prevention measures in place.

There is concern that with little provision for Youth in the town and public transport issues for young people travelling in from the hinterland, petty crime rates are higher than they would be if there were facilities provided which young people would find attractive and also better public transport to enable them to reach the facilities.

Dorking has CCTV in place in its town centre. Many open spaces, roads and paths would benefit from much better lighting.

Local Government and Community Organisations

The main Council offices are located at Pippbrook. As well as Mole Valley District Council and Surrey County Council, Parish Councils exist for Holmwood, Brockham and Wotton.

There is a wide and varying range of community groups including local arts groups, theatre, book clubs, church-based organisations, etc. Many people use the Adult Education Centre, based in Dene Street, although there is concern that the range of classes provided through adult education throughout Mole Valley has declined in recent years.

Many areas have residents associations and local people are involved in forums such as the Local Decongestion Forum, Mole Valley Arts Forum, the Cycle forum, Living Streets and Dorking and District Preservation Society.

Young people participate in Youth Voice which seeks to “get the young people’s voice heard” in Mole Valley.

The Local Strategic Partnership is working on a Community Plan for 2006 – 2016 and has representation from a wide range of participants including council, local forums, Churches Together and CDGNNH Partnership. The LSP highlights six current priorities:

- Leatherhead Children’s Centre
- Smoke free employers
- Developing a Dorking based Youth Café
- Dorking Decongestion Forum
- Extended Schools
- Leatherhead Health Check

A partnership combining police, churches, local residents, community leaders, health professionals, council, churches and other community organizations has been established in the North Holmwood, Chart Downs and Goodwyn’s areas to help build a stronger, safer and happier community.

The Community Learning Partnership highlights the issue that people in the surrounding villages often have difficulty accessing community learning, which is town centred, due to public transport issues. There may be opportunities for better transportation and to take community learning out to the hinterland.

Turn out for the Local Elections was below average at around 50% across the district, and 14 seats were contested.

Sport, Leisure and Open Space

The area enjoys a variety of open space, recreation grounds and leisure facilities.

Overlooking Dorking is Boxhill - an outstanding area of woodland and chalk downland. On the summit, there is a visitor centre, shop with plant sales, servery and a fort (partly open to the public). Leith Hill is the highest point in the south east with an 18th Century Gothic Tower with magnificent views surrounded by beautiful walks. Meadowbank in Dorking, together with the adjoining football ground, provides a key open space in the heart of Dorking. It is much used by local people walking, skateboarding and cycling as they go about their daily lives from early in the morning until late at night - it is the de facto heart of the town. It is also used to an enormous extent for informal recreation, while the children's playground, the skateboard ramps and the facilities for cricket and football enhance its attractions. Its pavilion is seldom open and there are no toilet facilities.

Other open spaces in the town, such as The Nower and Cotmandene, complement Meadowbank. Many of the villages have key open spaces for recreation, such as the Brockham playing fields and its green. However, there may be a need for additional facilities at open spaces, such as lavatories and seating, particularly at Meadowbank which has an important function as a pedestrian routeway. Recently the King George Playing Field has opened in Chart downs and it is hoped will be widely used for sport and events.

All the Council leisure facilities are based in Dorking itself. Many people use the Dorking Sports Centre for swimming, indoor cricket, gym, fitness classes etc and Pippbrook also provides tennis facilities. Since the development of the Leisure Centre visitor numbers have increased from around 200,000 a year to 500,000 people using the facilities in 2005.

It is questionable as to whether the Dorking based leisure facilities are either affordable or easily accessible for many people living on lower incomes. Schemes such as the one in North Leatherhead providing free tickets and transport for local residents could help encourage a wide range of residents to use the local facilities.

Dorking has a local football ground right in the heart of the town which is well supported but is in need of upgrading.

Poor bus services, particularly in the evenings and on Sundays, may hinder people from travelling into Dorking town to use sport and leisure facilities from surrounding villages and outlying parts of the town. Residents also often travel beyond Dorking to leisure facilities such as Spectrum in Guildford for 10-pin bowling, ice-skating and leisure swimming or to Horsham Park.

There are a number of sports clubs across the town and villages including football, tennis, rugby, outdoor bowls, cricket and badminton. Many children participate in thriving local football clubs.

There are a significant number of cycle shops and keen cyclists in the area with many people cycling together in groups particularly at weekends. Dorking with the surrounding Surrey Hills also attracts people from elsewhere who wish to walk. Outdoor pursuits are available at

High Ashurst, Boxhill which attracts a large number of school groups and corporate bookings from the South East. Ashcombe School, in particular, has sports facilities open to the general public outside of school hours. A high percentage of Dorking residents either belong to or have a significant interest in sport. Both financial limitations and available sites may prevent the area from extending its sports and leisure facilities. If these issues were overcome facilities such as a floodlit Athletics track, a purpose built dojo for martial arts, a five a side pitch or bowling facility would help meet local demand, preventing some unnecessary travel beyond the area.

Although the area has a good network of public paths and public open spaces both within the built-up areas and in the countryside, very little has been done to facilitate access to any of this for people with disabilities. Older people as well as young families would much benefit from much greater provision of seating along paths and pavements. Some key facilities present great problems for use by people with mobility problems, from the National Trust's Polesden Lacey to the footpaths leading to the North Downs Way. There are no toilet facilities next to open spaces at present. Most open spaces are regularly maintained with rural open spaces looked after on a purely needs basis.

There are over 20 acres of allotment sites across the district and none of these currently have a waiting list.

Dorking, unlike many other similarly sized towns, has no tourist information office which could provide detailed guidance on the area including public transport, local history, events and tourism facilities.

Culture and Heritage

Dorking and the surrounding area have strong associations with various famous people such as Fanny Burney, George Meredith, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Laurence Olivier, Virginia McKenna and Oliver Reed. In the past, although increasingly in decline, the town has attracted visitors to its West Street – famous for its antique shops. Visitors also come to enjoy places such as Boxhill, Denbies Vineyard and Polesden Lacey. A number of artists, writers and musicians chose to live in the area and there is an evident expression of the population's involvement in the arts, including music and theatre.

Dorking Halls provides a central focus for culture in the area, with a theatre, offering shows, concerts etc and the cinema. The Halls had around 190,000 visitors in 2005 and is increasing in popularity both with artists wishing to perform and audiences alike.

There is also a Dorking Museum (which is applying for a £2million lottery grant). Denbies Vineyard houses Surrey performing arts Library.

There are some local events which have the potential to pull the whole or at least a good percentage of the community together including Dorking carnival, village fetes, school fetes, West St festivals, Mole Valley & Leith Hill Musical festivals, Heritage weekend, concerts in local churches, Mole Valley Cycle Day, various firework displays, Arts Alive Festival and Surrey Open Studios etc.

There are a number of drama groups including a thriving DDOS which has a small 100 seater theatre behind the Dorking Halls and since its public license a couple of years ago has had nearly full to capacity audiences for its Green Room Theatre Shows and continues to put on a large scale musical in the Dorking Halls annually. Local villages such as Betchworth also have drama groups. The area has a rich musical inheritance and many locals are involved in bands, youth bands, choral groups or orchestras. The town has a music shop. Although there are a number of people involved in music there may be a lack of venues available to perform in.

Whilst there are various community centres and village halls in the area, many are only used by a small percentage of the surrounding population and there is room to upgrade centres both in terms of the facilities and the types of community provision available.

The local community can comment on local events and issues either directly to the Council or through forums such as the Town centre forum. Information about local events is often shared through local publications such as Dorking Advertiser and The Challenger. People also use the Visit Dorking Website and the Mole Valley Website to find out about local events. There may be poor awareness of local events, forums and consultations as well as a public perceived lack of transparency in communications.

Many Churches are active in the area with around 8% of the population attending Church regularly. Churches such as St Martin's and St Paul's in Dorking as well as some of the village churches often are used venues for concerts and other public events. Dorking Churches Together takes an active role in the Local Strategic Partnership. Given the high percentage of volunteers found with Church memberships the opportunity for Christians of all denominations to really support local community initiatives is realistic and could make a significant difference to key events if harnessed.