



Dorking DNA - Healthcheck Report

**Dorking
September 2007**

Introduction

Welcome to the report of Dorking Needs Action (DNA). We are a team of volunteers who have carried out a “Market Town Healthcheck” on Dorking and its surrounding area. This has involved collecting and analysing published information in the four areas of transport, the town centre economy, the environment and social and community. We have supplemented this with an enormous amount of help and ideas from local residents through street surveys, a postal questionnaire and consultation events, which some readers of this report may have been involved with. Our progress has been reported from time to time in the local press, at the Dorking Town Centre Forum and on our web-site www.dorkingdna.org. From this work we have been able firstly to identify those issues which you feel need to be addressed to ensure the future for Dorking; secondly to develop a vision for the town, which we believe reflects the views of the whole community and will help us to meet the challenges of the future; and thirdly to collect a list of potential projects which can help to achieve the vision. This report describes in detail how we carried out the exercise and what we discovered. The next stage is to select some of the potential projects and ideas that will help achieve the vision for Dorking and seek the funds and people needed to implement them.

The vision is built on the theme of *Reconnecting Dorking* – in order to create:

- a town whose physical links work better
- an economy which is sustainable and vibrant
- a high quality urban environment which puts people first
- greater social and community cohesion

How to read this report

We have collected an enormous amount of information while doing this and rather than produce a very lengthy, and perhaps difficult to read, report most of this background information is in Annexes to the main report. This main report contains the key findings in each of the four areas (transport, the town centre economy, the environment and social and community), a suggested vision for Dorking, summary details of how the data was collected and analysed, the key conclusions from the research from each of the four areas, a list of project ideas and conclusions and next steps. The whole of this report and a lot more background information about all aspects of DNA are on the DNA website. We have also summarised the key messages from this report in a visual slide presentation. Members of the DNA Steering Group will be making this presentation to organisations and community groups and if you represent a group who would like such a presentation please contact us via our website and we will see what can be arranged. We are also mailing out a simple summary version of the key messages to households in the area covered by the report.

A few clarifications

Before presenting our main report it is important to clarify a few points. Healthchecks are an initiative sponsored by central government and its agencies that have provided advice and a recommended way of carrying them out (See Annex A). They are often supported by their

local government authority, with grants and other logistical and administrative help. As we say below we are grateful for the help and support from Mole Valley District Council, but we would like to stress that DNA was an exercise by volunteers from the community that was completely independent of central or local government or any particular political party. Some 300 healthchecks have been carried out so far in England and Wales, including one other in Mole Valley District which was in Leatherhead, and reported in January 2006. The public volunteers who have worked on DNA were identified through a process that was begun by the Dorking Town Centre Forum. There was not any formal selection process but anyone who could work non-politically and had the time and willingness to be involved, and a concern for the future of Dorking, was welcomed. A Steering Group was set up to oversee the project and details of the members are at Annex B. The group were supported by a part-time paid for project coordinator.

Thanks

DNA would like to thank all individuals and organisations who have supported and/or participated in the Market Town Healthcheck for Dorking and District. A particular mention must be made of Mole Valley District Council, whose officers and members were supportive and encouraging throughout the process, and Surrey Community Action who helped establish the project. We would specifically like to thank our providers of funds who were Mole Valley District Council, Awards for All, Surrey County Councillor Stephen Cooksey (from his councillor's discretionary allowance), Surrey Community Action and The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The full details of where the money came from and what it was spent on in this phase of the healthcheck are at Annex C.

We would also like publicly to thank Bullimores Chartered Accountants in Dorking who allowed us to use their premises and address and provided other help in kind. We would like to acknowledge the help and advice from our near neighbours of the Leatherhead Healthcheck, who have been pioneering the Healthcheck process in Mole Valley. Finally we would especially like to thank those in the individual workgroups in DNA, and all of those residents of Dorking and the surrounding areas who took the time to respond to our surveys and questionnaires or to attend other public participation events.

Andy Tanner
Chairman DNA
September 2007

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Overview of Dorking

Many of the readers of this report will be very familiar with Dorking and the surrounding areas. This brief description of the town and its environment is for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the area.

Dorking is a small historic market town with a population of approximately 11,000, situated in the Surrey Hills and surrounded by attractive countryside. The Surrey Hills are a nationally important landscape, one of the first areas in England to be designated as an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'. The area is a popular location for mountain biking, walking, and other outdoor activities. To the north of Dorking is Box Hill, from which there are extensive views of the surrounding countryside. Indeed the town is promoted as the “Heart of the Surrey Hills.” At the foot of Box Hill is Denbies, England's largest vineyard.

Within the town there are the Dorking Halls, a cinema and theatre complex, along with the Dorking Sports Centre, which has sports halls, a fitness suite and a 25 metre swimming pool. As well as a range of shops, the town centre also has a large number of antiques dealers.

Dorking is situated in a very accessible position in the south east of England. It is at the junction of the A24 and A25 trunk roads, with the M25 London orbital motorway just 15 minutes away. Gatwick international airport is 30 minutes away, and Heathrow international airport about an hour away. Rail services are accessed at three local stations, with direct services to London Waterloo and London Victoria, Guildford/Reading and Redhill/Gatwick, with onward rail to much of the UK, and flight connections plus Eurostar services to the continent.

The following villages and outlying areas have been included in the Healthcheck: Abinger, Betchworth, Brockham, Buckland, Capel, Charlwood, Holmwood, Leigh, Mickleham, Newdigate, Ockley, Westcott and Wotton. However it needs to be recognised that the boundaries are in reality “fuzzy”; adjacent major towns (Leatherhead – North 5 miles, Guildford – West 12 miles, Horsham –South 11 miles, Reigate/Redhill – East 8 miles) exert their own pull in various ways, economic and cultural, on the population of the town and hinterland.

Key Findings

This section sets out a summary of the key findings from our research. The findings are based upon both our analysis of the published data and our analysis of the contributions from residents and visitors to our consultation exercises.

One of the challenges for the Healthcheck from the start has been that, viewed today, Dorking on the surface looks like a town that many would envy – generally prosperous and pleasant to live in. It has coped with modest and incremental change in a pragmatic way. It is a location to which many people would like to move, or return. But there are weaknesses and worrying signs for the future which, if not addressed now in a systematic manner, will threaten that healthy picture. None of them (with the possible exception of peak traffic) have yet reached crisis proportions. That may encourage complacency, but the phrase “could be better” is one that already resonates with many in the community.

The methodology laid down for a Healthcheck divides the process into four areas, and our analysis follows that structure. Of course there are many inter-linkages. For example poor internal transport links undermine social cohesion; lack of investment in the town centre built environment hurts the retail economy. As such the findings need to be read as a whole. With that important proviso these are the key conclusions that come out of the detailed research undertaken by DNA in each area.

Transport

The town is well served with key links to regional and national road and rail infrastructure. International travel by air via Gatwick and Heathrow, and by rail via Eurostar London terminals, is easy. Although two high volume trunk roads (A25 and A24) feed traffic into the narrow streets of the historic town, traffic data suggests long distance and through traffic has remained unchanged for a number of years. Even so, parking and congestion problems within the town have grown in recent years, suggesting that traffic growth has been in the short distance internal journeys. High cycle ownership, short distances and a dense network of footpaths and alleys indicate potential to develop cycling and walking as alternatives for short to medium distance car journeys. In particular:-

1. There is evidence that planning decisions are making the parking and congestion worse by encouraging high density building without making provision for alternative transport and infrastructure links or parking facilities;
2. There are weaknesses in local transport options, such as bus, walking and cycling, and in their integration;
3. Access for disabled, elderly and families with children is poor at Dorking railway stations; and, although good in the town centre, provision of dropped kerb facilities for the disabled is poor elsewhere;
4. There may be scope for infill “hoppa” style bus services, particularly connecting town and railway station with nearby villages close to tourist attractions;
5. High cycle ownership suggests potential for increasing cycle use for short journeys;

6. Use of the existing network of paths in the town could be increased with better maintenance, signposting, and lighting.

Town centre economy and tourism

Although Dorking seems generally prosperous there are worrying signs that the local economy could go into significant decline. In particular:-

7. There is a real concern about declining vitality of the town centre shops. This decline can be seen in the number of empty premises, and the frequency with which some shops change hands or close;
8. Many customers are spending their money in neighbouring towns, because they find that Dorking does not offer what they want for key essential items like food and clothing;
9. The community wants *some* more well known high street brands to open shops here but does not want Dorking to lose its unique character and become a “clone town”;
10. The possible premises for new shops are on the whole not well suited to the requirements of those who would like to open shops in the town;
11. For a market town, the traditional market and the “farmers’ market” or occasional special themed markets have a low profile;
12. Many tourists who visit the attractive surrounding countryside do not spend money in the town.

Environment

Dorking is surrounded by beautiful countryside which is easy to travel into, and the town itself is highly thought of, particularly because of its green spaces and attractive and historical buildings. These are some of the reasons why Dorking is seen as a desirable place to live. However:-

13. The inherent attractiveness and heritage interest of the town centre need bringing out, and not just with short-term cosmetic solutions, although these will play their part;
14. We do not provide friendly environments to attract all types of visitor to the town centre.

Community and social

Dorking has a community which is largely content with its location, character, community feel, friendliness, leisure facilities, heritage and visitor attractions. However, there are threats to the vibrancy and vitality of the local population. In particular:-

15. There is inadequate youth provision as well as care and support for younger families;
16. We are not building enough capacity to care well for the growing numbers of older retired in the population;

17. Despite the efforts so far, we need more appropriate and affordable housing;
18. Although leisure and sports provision is good, there are gaps, and facilities are not generally used by, or affordable for, people on low incomes;
19. Dorking's cultural heritage and attractions could be further exploited. We should more actively promote and celebrate them, through community events, and improved community links;
20. Though absolute crime levels are low, the perception does not match the reality.

DNA's Vision for the Future

DNA have tried to create a vision of what Dorking would look like and what it needs to do in order to preserve what is best about it today and address the concerns that have been identified. The key findings have shown that Dorking is still a great place to live but it faces challenges – particularly in the town centre from:-

- congestion and poor internal transport links
- declining retail demand outside peak periods
- tourism which tends to concentrate on the natural surroundings and not bring value into the centre
- lack of investment in the urban environment
- failure to grasp the sustainability agenda positively
- fragmentation in its social composition

We want to overcome those challenges, and make it an even better place in the years ahead for *all* the community.

So DNA's vision...

We want to see a Dorking that is “reconnected”:

In transport

We want a town whose physical links work better.

That means:

- More use of other means of transport besides the car with better facilities for cyclists and pedestrians
- Improved public transport that people will want to use - including from the villages – and better information about it
- A parking strategy which maximises environmental benefits while meeting user needs

In the economy

We want to see sustainability and vibrancy.

That means:

- Shops which meet the needs and aspirations of the whole community for range, value and quality
- Improved information for visitors so that it is not just the natural beauty of the area which brings people in

In the environment

We want to see a high quality urban environment, which puts people first, and a strong sustainability agenda.

That means:

- A town centre which matches the quality of the surrounding green space
- Putting the needs of people above the needs of vehicles
- Encouraging a green agenda (reduced food miles, reduced landfill and reduced carbon footprint) that connects people with the sustainability of the environment

In social and community

We want to connect up Dorking's different communities.

That means:

- More and varied events to draw different interest groups together
- More provision for youth and the older retired population
- Greater access to community facilities for those currently excluded by lack of transport, lack of means, or lack of awareness
- Our leaders and opinion formers encouraging a stronger sense of civic pride

In summary

Reconnecting Dorking to create:

- **a town whose physical links work better**
- **an economy which is sustainable and vibrant**
- **a high quality urban environment which puts people first**
- **greater social and community cohesion**

Collection and Analysis of the Research Data

This section describes in summary how we collected and analysed the data upon which our key findings and conclusions are based.

The official sources of data

This official data was recorded on standard data capture forms (worksheets) approved for carrying out Healthchecks. However, to ensure a fuller understanding of issues, additional data was sought in a number of areas of interest and concern. This data was used initially to create a snapshot of Dorking (see Annex D) which was used to inform the later more detailed research. Information on reference documents and other sources are included within the worksheets (see Annex G). The data sources used were Mole Valley District Council (MVDC), Surrey County Council, and National Statistics. Information was also obtained from local rail and bus companies, police, ambulance and health services. This was supplemented by contributions from voluntary organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, Mole Valley Cycling Forum, and contributions from local experts in subjects such as care for the elderly or disabled access.

The views of the Public

A number of different methods were used to obtain the views of the public, with information from the initial exercises informing later research work, particularly questionnaire design.

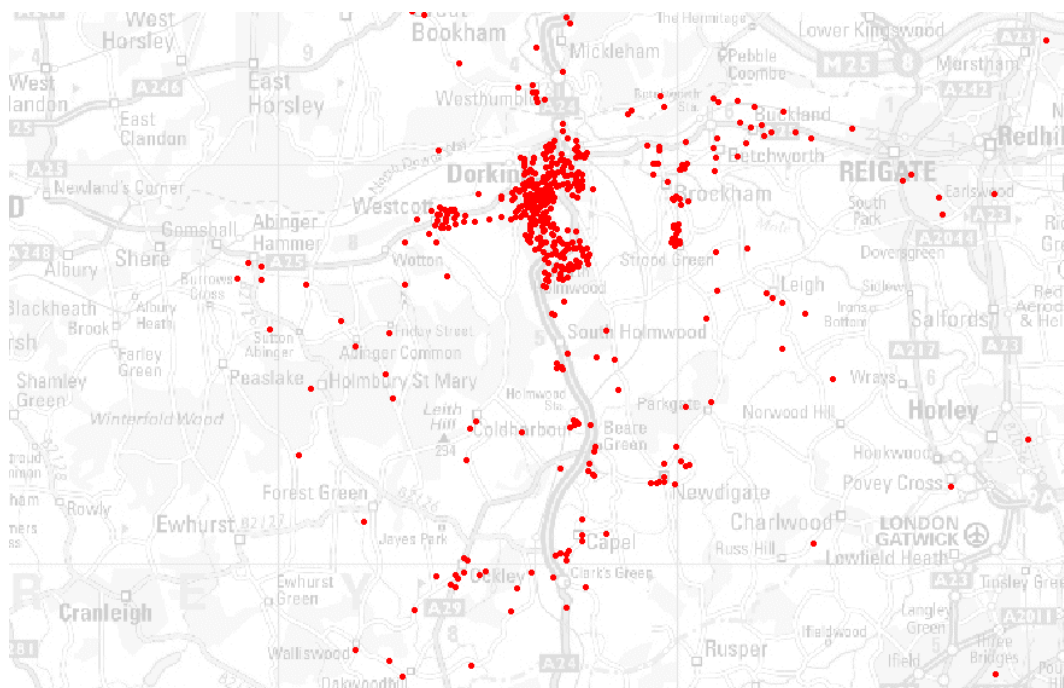
An initial street survey - incorporating a mix of demographic and open questions, was used to frame initial impressions and develop a more detailed questionnaire. On a Friday and Saturday on two consecutive weeks (in September 2006) 400 residents and visitors were asked about where they came from, how often they visit the town centre, how they got there, why they were there, what they disliked most about Dorking, and what improvements (if any) they thought should be made.

Open day – this gave more than 100 local people a chance to give their views at a consultation event and official public launch, where they commented on issues that were prominent in the snapshot of the town.

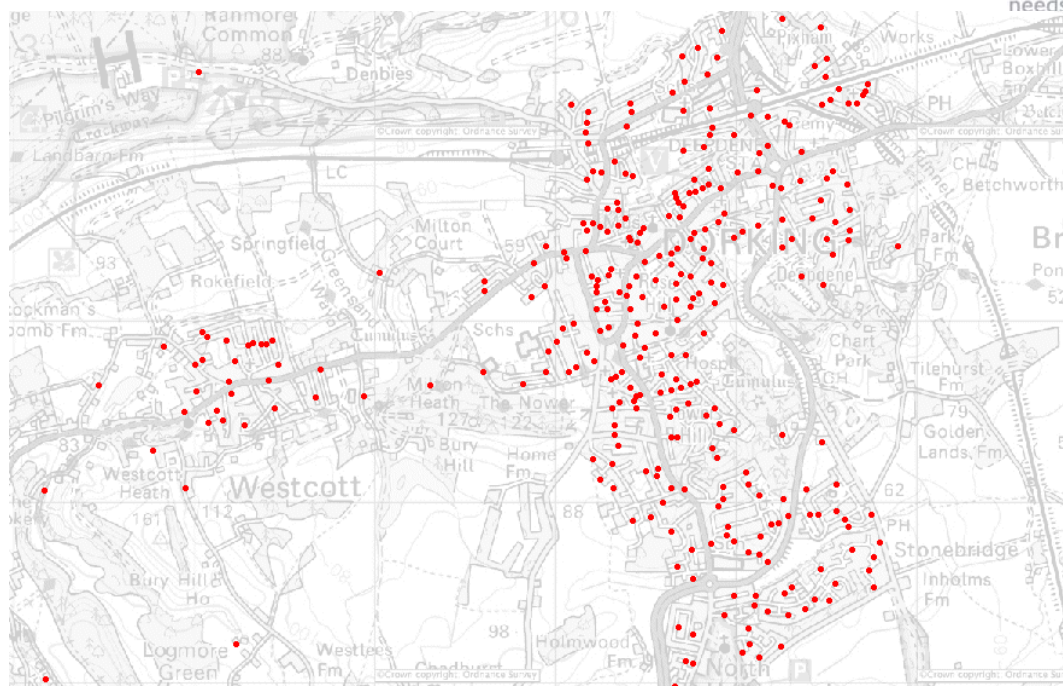
Full questionnaire – this more detailed self-completion questionnaire was designed to gain a much more systematic picture of the views of those who live in and around Dorking, and to enable a more detailed exploration of just what are the features of Dorking which community members really value, and the areas which they think need to be improved. An example of the questionnaire is at Annex E. Questions were based predominantly on issues arising out of the earlier work, and included what modes of transport people used and use of facilities in Dorking in preference to other locations. Questions were multi-choice from a range of ‘tick box’ values, with the opportunity to add freeform comments on the last page. Personal and household details were requested together with postcodes, but not individual names and addresses. This enabled us to check how far the geographical and demographic breakdowns of the responses compared with our earlier survey; and how the breakdown of our respondents by age and sex compared with Mole Valley overall; and how far we had achieved a broad geographical spread of responses.

Questionnaires were distributed widely through groups such as Chamber of Trade, choral societies, sports associations, schools, old people’s homes, churches, doctors’ surgeries, youth centres, and large employers. Copies of the questionnaire were available for collection from Dorking Library and Mole Valley District Council reception. Large print versions were prepared for people with impaired vision. The questionnaire was also available to download from the Dorking DNA website. DNA members distributed questionnaires by hand to commuters at Dorking Deepdene and Dorking mainline railway stations. DNA presented at eight parish council meetings at: Abinger, Betchworth, Brockham, Buckland, Capel, Holmwood, Leigh, and Ockley; as well as to Westhumble Residents Association.

We believe that this exercise did reflect adequately the views of local people, not only from within Dorking itself but in the surrounding area. We were able to achieve an even distribution over town and hinterland village residential areas. (See post code map of distribution of responses below). Of the 7621 questionnaires distributed 1307 were returned – **a response rate of 17%**. Unsurprisingly the responses did not exactly match the demographic make-up of the local community, although the age related distribution did match the High Street Survey. We do not believe that this fact undermines the broad conclusions, or indeed the detail. But it does need to be kept in mind particularly when considering issues of particular relevance to some of the under represented groups. In this survey, as in the High Street survey, teenagers and 20 to 29 year olds were under-represented, the 30 to 59 age groups were over-represented and over 60s comparable with Mole Valley demography. There were about twice as many female as males, 832 versus 404 respectively. There were not great differences in the way in which different sub-categories of respondents (age, sex, household type, etc.) answered particular questions. There is a lot more to be gained from further detailed analysis of the findings. DNA will do this in support of future investigations and projects. Survey results will be made available to interested parties on request.



Distribution of survey responses by postcode for the Healthcheck hinterland area



Distribution of survey responses by postcode for Dorking urban and Westcott

Focus groups

Using a preliminary analysis of questionnaire responses specific groups were targeted for more detailed interviews. These included junior school children, youth, elderly people, and by groups looking at specific areas, notably public transport and the town centre.

Hard to reach groups

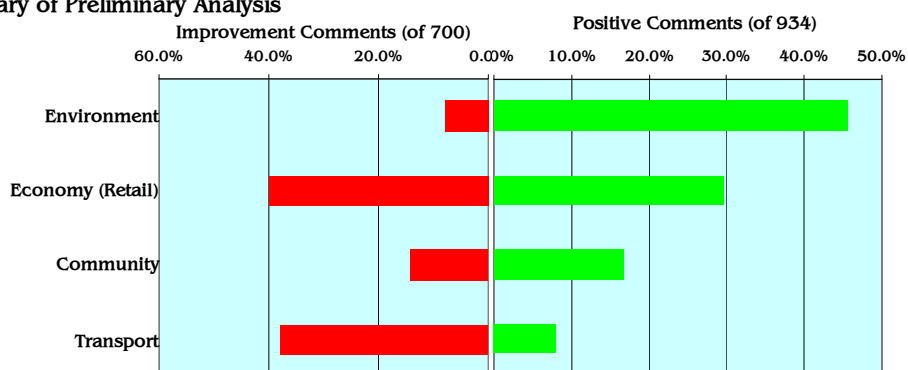
Through the District Council’s gypsy site manager, questionnaires were sent to all site residents. Similarly, assistance was given to a group of adults with learning disabilities to help them to complete a joint response. Large print versions of the questionnaire were prepared for people with impaired vision. Questionnaires were distributed to elderly people through old people’s homes, through a community centre, and to Dial-a-Ride members. Young people were targeted through questionnaire distribution to youth groups.

The Analysis

Both the High Street survey and questionnaire were analysed using Microsoft Excel for both data management and analysis. The “free-format” responses were coded and aggregated to highlight common themes and/or issues, the coding of the High Street survey guiding design and coding of the subsequent questionnaire exercise.

The overall results of the street survey are shown in the table below and indicate a generally high level of satisfaction with the Dorking environment but a generally low level of satisfaction in respect of transport. Not surprisingly, given the attention being paid to it at the time of the survey, opinions regarding the town’s retail offering were widely dispersed, with evidence of polarisation. In respect of community, a similar degree of dispersion is evident, albeit with numerically fewer comments overall.

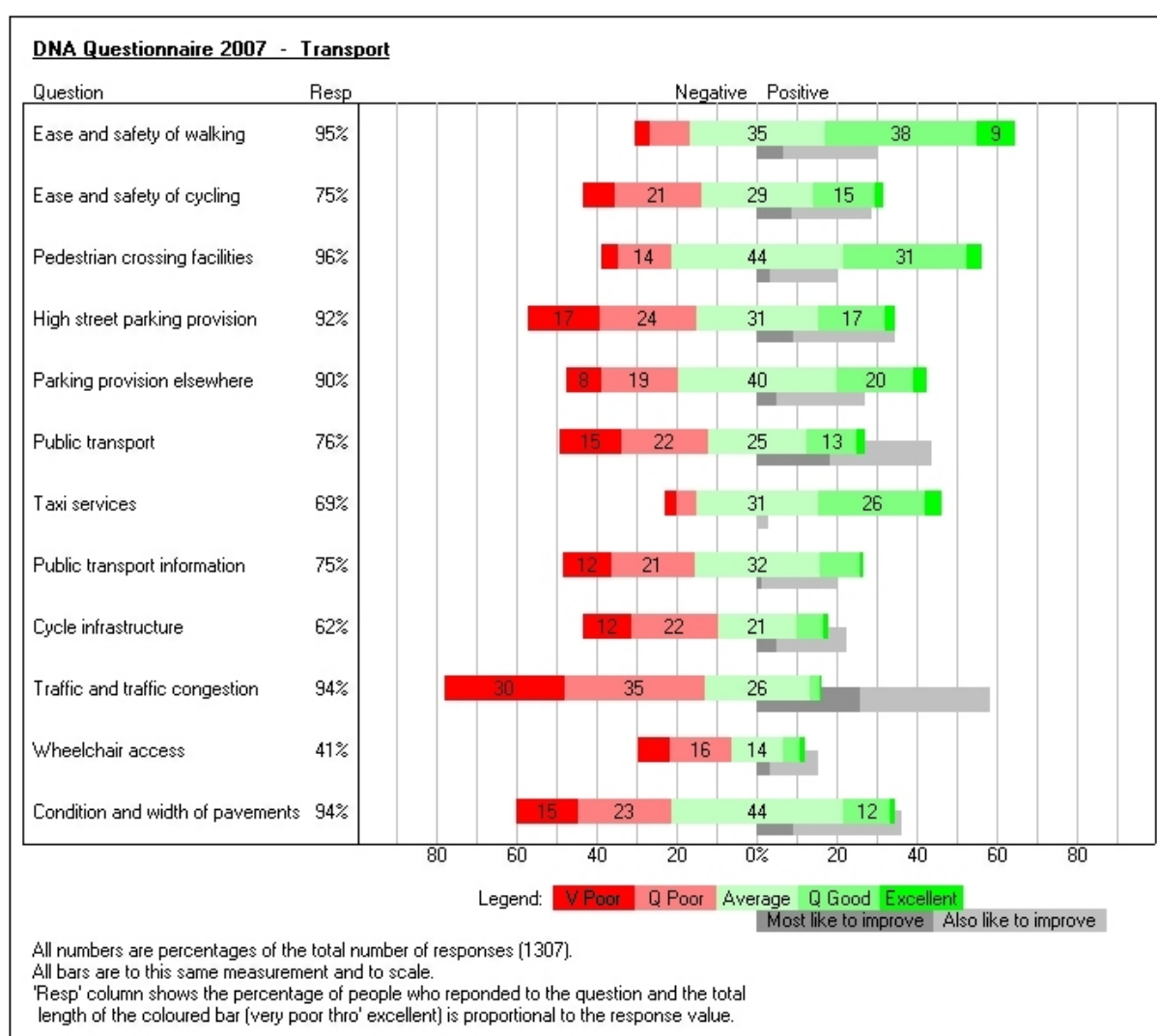
Summary of Preliminary Analysis



Key Conclusions from the Research

This section looks in much more detail at the key conclusions from the research. The analysis of the town centre survey and the postal questionnaires, as described in the previous section, provides one major part of the evidence to justify these conclusions. The graphs shown are based upon analysis of the postal questionnaire. However it should be kept in mind that the detailed information from the official statistics, as documented in the snapshot and worksheets, was also a key part of this analytical process. The official and public data sources were considered together and further refinements to the analysis took account of inputs from consultative exercises such as focus groups.

Key Conclusions – Transport



Background - with its network of lanes and alleyways in between residential roads and the retail streets at the town's core, Dorking is representative of the traditional 16th/17th century style "compact" town. Many roads are narrow, intrinsically unsuited to modern traffic, yet the main A25, the principal route joining Guildford and Sevenoaks, passes through the centre of

town, with the A24 London to Worthing road passing to the east of the town centre through outlying residential areas.

Located in the North Downs, Dorking is well served for those travelling to and from the town and its immediate environs. The town has nearby and convenient access to major, albeit congested, motorway routes such as the M25 and M23; and lies at the centre of the rail infrastructure for the southeast of England. It is possible to access most railway stations in mainland UK from the town's three stations, with minimal changes and without leaving the rail infrastructure. And, with the exception of travel to the south, the area is very well served for rail services throughout the week. The two principal London airports, Gatwick and Heathrow, are no more than an hour away, albeit in the latter case by car, and Eurostar rail services to the continent are not much further away, via Waterloo or Victoria.

Although public transport options are available for many journeys within the area, a number of services are irregular or concentrate on peak/schools travel. Timings are such that interconnection between rail and bus services is hit-and-miss and, as most services run through the most congested junctions, reliability and journey times can be poor at peak times.

Connections to area hospitals are particularly concerning as, aside from on-demand services (predominantly aimed at the elderly and disabled), there are no connections to the two major hospital locations. There are also few, if any, bus services on Sundays, and popular local tourist attractions, such as Boxhill and Leith Hill, are not served at all. So high levels of traffic are present in the area throughout the entire week. A further observation is that out-of-area supermarkets have started their own bus services, depriving Dorking retailers of potential trade.

Volume of traffic (on both A25 and A24), poor crossings, narrow and poorly maintained pavements and lack of provision for cyclists combine to inhibit walking and cycling to and within the town centre. Some residential areas are particularly bad in terms of accessibility to the town, notably West Bank and areas to the east and south of the A24. This applies to the nearby villages of Westcott and Brockham (both on the A25) and the Holmwoods (on the A24).

The dominant mode of transport is the car (ownership levels are among the highest in the country), and congestion within the town has increased noticeably over the years.

Traffic growth - data on traffic flows collected some distance outside of the town, at the edge of the town's catchment area, indicates, somewhat surprisingly, that "long distance" traffic flows (road journeys in, out and through the area) are largely unchanged on weekdays over the last ten years. Yet congestion is noticeably worse in the town and is the biggest negative comment about Dorking in the High Street survey.

Traffic counts within the town have only recently been instituted, so there is no real history to fall back on, but some indication of trends can be obtained from school travel surveys which have been taken, albeit it inconsistently, for a number of years. In the period between 1999 and 2005 pupils travelling by car to the two secondary schools doubled. For primary schools, where monitoring was only instituted in 2003, pupils being taken to school rose by in the region of 40-50% in the two years to 2005. In all, school journeys account for in the region of 6000 car trips per day, i.e. 3000 vehicle round trips per day, in the Dorking area (2005 data), generally at peak travel times. During the High Street surveys, taken on Fridays and

Saturdays, it transpired that 25% of local residents had used their cars to get to the town centre, mostly for shopping. Growth in the number of residents' and non-residents' cars parked on-street is also evident. Because, in general, new housing cannot be built on much of the land surrounding the town, since it is designated as green belt or an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), new building has concentrated on in-filling within the town. This has increased residential density, but, as current local planning policy limits on-site parking spaces, may well have contributed to increasing pressure on on-street parking. Workplace and commuter parking, notably in streets around Dorking's principal railway stations (charges for the principal station car park have reached £4 per day) and in central residential areas behind the main retail areas, has also increased pressure on existing parking space.

This not only causes rising tensions with residents unable to park their own cars but is also beginning, in itself, to cause congestion.

Long run data on parking is however sparse. The recent parking study concluded there was spare capacity in town centre car parks; however there is little hard data on sources of demand growth and the extent of on-street parking issues. There are, however, clearly more people bringing their cars into Dorking for both short and day long visits, often in preference to other modes of travel.

Data for other modes of travel - rail ticket sales to and from the three Dorking stations have fluctuated significantly in recent years (currently they are increasing) and, in line with national data, bus ticket sales continue to fall year on year. There are, however, some contradictions in official statistics, notably Department for Transport's station usage data which, whilst probably accurate in terms of overall usage of the three stations, continues to underestimate grossly the number of passengers using Dorking Deepdene station and Dorking West (Town).

Other than for school travel, data on walking and cycling is sparse. However Mole Valley Cycling Forum monitoring of bicycle parking at Dorking stations suggests growth in demand of the order of 10 – 15% has been the norm for some years, with recent improvements in cycle parking provision stimulating a marked increase in cycles parked at the two principal stations on weekdays. The DNA main survey did reveal that cycle ownership in the area is high compared to national figures, a statistic reinforced by the presence of a large number of bike shops in the town and nearby villages. The area contains six cycle shops, four in the town (one of which is Halfords, currently under re-development), and one each in Westcott and Boxhill.

Key points to note - external rail connections are good, but internal connectivity, whether by bus, walking or cycling, is poor. In terms of buses, the major villages of Westcott, Brockham and along the A24 appear to be well served, albeit subject to the hit and miss nature of service connections at railway stations. The presence of an internal network of back alleys and footpaths creates opportunities to provide alternative routes for pedestrians and the disabled to move around the town. Quality of surface, maintenance, signposting, crossings and lighting are issues which would have to be overcome, but there is potential to increase usage significantly.

High cycle ownership suggests potential to increase significantly the number of journeys made by bicycle in the area. The major concerns, based on secondary school surveys, relate to

lack of infrastructure, crossings and traffic speed, all of which are not difficult to address at the key points around town and between the town and the major villages.

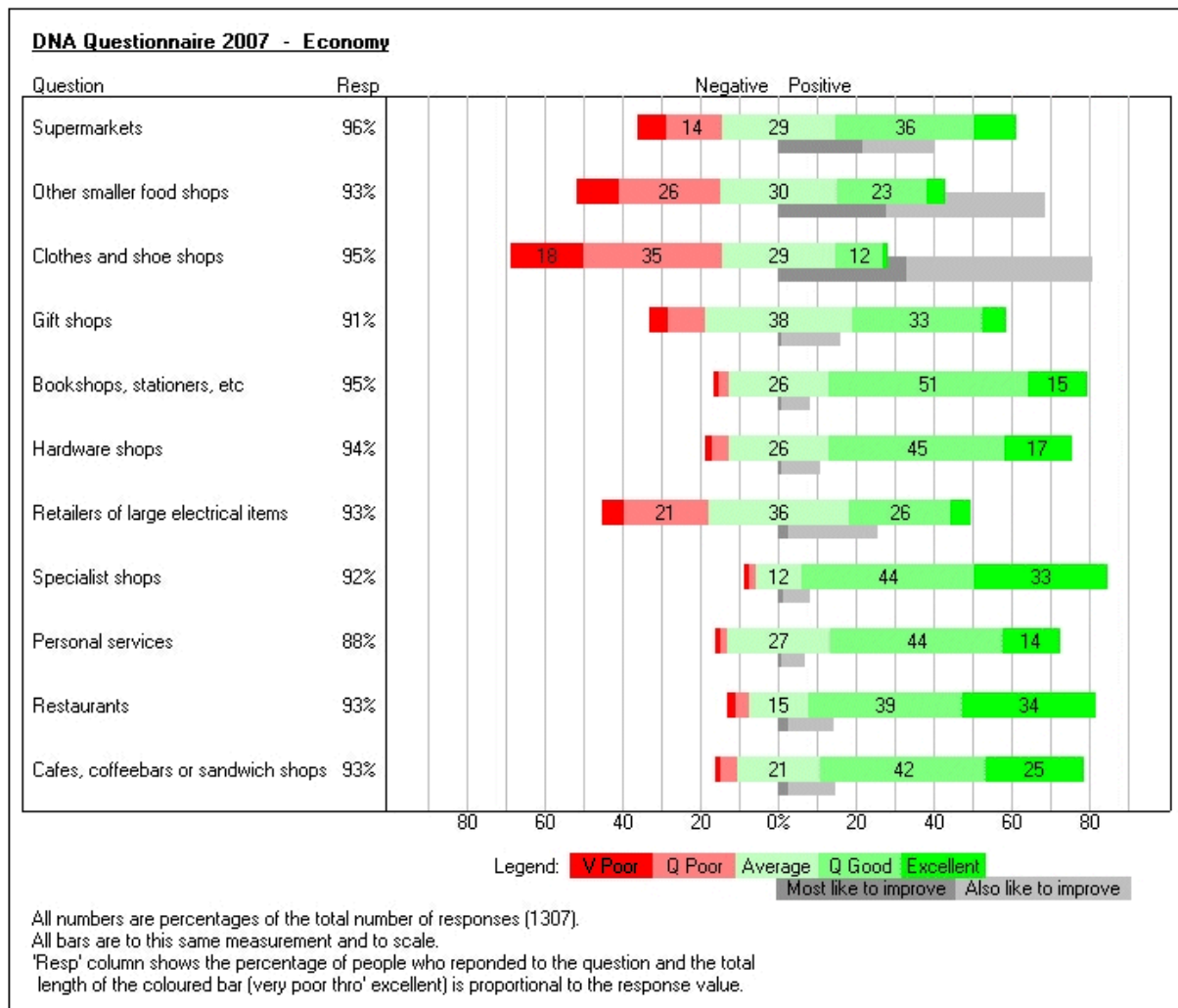
Conclusions - although individual elements of the public transport provision are good, overall services are fragmented, often ill-timed, and the range, connectivity and costs of bus services, in particular, little understood by the general public. Rural areas and smaller villages are particularly poorly served and, although individual demand for bus services to some of the smaller villages may be small, infrequent daytime services and no evening services serves to undermine the attractiveness, and hence viability, of the public transport option. In the cases of Boxhill and Coldharbour (and perhaps some nearby villages) there is potential to increase passenger numbers due to their proximity to tourist destinations. Efforts to harmonise bus and train times, and information provision, may well contribute significantly to improving uptake.

Given the difficulties peak hour congestion causes to bus services, it is hard to see any improvements being achieved without taking a significant number of car journeys off the roads completely...i.e. by targeting cycling and walking. In this respect high cycle ownership, combined with the compact nature of the town and the degree of continuing growth in cycle use for some journeys, indicates capacity for change in that area. There is space, at the more difficult junctions, to construct cycle infrastructure measures to alleviate safety concerns. For pedestrians, the existing network of alleyways and footpaths offers a “parallel” infrastructure, albeit one which many residents know little of and, due to their poor condition, use even less. Not for nothing do local children refer to them as “dog poo” alleys. Basic cleaning, maintenance, signposting, in some cases upgrading with lighting, would increase the attractiveness of these paths, creating opportunities to increase journeys on foot.

Increased cycling and walking would serve to reduce pressure on the roads at peak periods and provide some relief as regards parking. There are also potential route improvement opportunities to cater for cyclists and pedestrians coming into Dorking from Westcott, Brockham and the Holmwoods. These infrastructure investments, whilst not cheap, have the potential to generate high usage on a seven day a week basis.

That said, the apparent increase in incoming workers parking on residential roads needs also to be addressed. There are schemes, such as selling unused space in existing car parks in the form of season tickets, plus expansion of car parking spaces at edge of town locations, which would probably ease such pressures. Better information and signposting may help increase utilisation of existing car parking space (and reduce on-street queuing), public transport and use of footpaths. Access at Dorking stations also needs to be improved, to improve the viability of public transport options for the elderly, parents with children and cyclists, as well as for the disabled.

Key conclusions : the Economy



Introduction – at first sight Dorking’s economy is highly robust and well diversified. Employment rates are high. The town has several well established larger employers generally located around the periphery of the town and trading in different sectors, an extensive collection of both essential and discretionary spend shops, and a high number of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the town and the hinterland. It has a large variety of business premises ranging from small scale single units through to modern purpose-built business park units on the west side of the town. Educational attainment levels are high in terms of providing the workforce of the future.

The challenges - beneath the encouraging surface it is clear that some of the problems noticed elsewhere in the Healthcheck impact on the economy as well. Central to this is the challenge of traffic; congestion adds to the frustration of employees travelling to work as well as making the town centre less attractive to the very visitors whose purchasing power is needed to leverage the demand provided by the immediate residential base of central Dorking. Peak period delays add to business costs of deliveries as well as making it all the more difficult for small local firms to differentiate their offering on the basis of fast responsiveness.

Although not easily tackled within the scope of the Healthcheck, the extremely high value of residential land (caused by the very constrained supply given the green belt location) makes

for constant pressure for conversion of town centre premises from business use to residential – limiting local employment opportunities and making the labour force more dependent on commuting out to jobs, in turn adding to the pressure on infrastructure and yet more congestion. Moreover high housing costs create real challenges both for young people wanting to stay on in the area or return straight after college/university, and for employers wanting to attract people into modestly paid service and public sector jobs. This again adds to the peak period congestion as in-bound commuting meets the school run.

The central issue – the High Street offer - within the economy area it was clear that the issue of most concern by far to the community is the perceived declining vitality of the town centre shops. At least some of the shopkeepers share this view too. In the early months of 2007 there has been a major problem from road works which has impacted particularly on the evening economy (of increasing importance as the town diversifies from traditional small shop retailing). However there seems to be a longer term underlying trend of a decline in people using the town – apart from at peak periods like lunchtimes (when surrounding office workers take lunch breaks), after the end of school (when many parents combine collecting their children with some essential shopping), and on Saturday mornings when some premises “overtrade” – as evidenced by car park and checkout queues.

Detailed quantitative analysis of the High Street trends will need to await the consultants’ study being carried out for MVDC as part of the Local Development Framework, but our own research already indicates a number of qualitative challenges. On the supply side there is an increasing mismatch between the types of premises sought by businesses wanting to move into Dorking and the stock of premises available – a mix of generally small units with complex historical structures making it difficult to combine shops into larger trading floors. That helps to explain why Dorking has both a number of longstanding “hard to let” premises and a waiting list of companies wanting to move in, as well as considerable churn as small, marginal businesses try to establish themselves but are then replaced.

On the demand side there are two distinct and somewhat contradictory sentiments often expressed. The first is that what makes Dorking attractive is precisely that it is not a “clone town” of familiar brand names but has a somewhat eclectic mix of highly individual shops (some e.g. the model shop with a following from well outside the normal catchment area). The second is dissatisfaction with the generally cramped and poor environments of the three supermarkets, and with the absences of familiar brands in key areas – notably mid-price children’s and other clothing. The tension between these two positions was particularly marked at the time of the proposal (since aborted) for a new supermarket at the bottom of Mill Lane. Nevertheless there seems to be a broad consensus that some enhancement of the quality of the supermarket environment is needed; what is not wanted by the community is a big increase in their floorspace to support a major move into non-food items in a way that only adds to pressure on independent shops and ultimately could reduce choice.

For the size of its population Dorking does in fact have a very extensive shopping area – albeit a long and linear one that is not particularly user friendly as it maximises the shoppers’ exposure to the noise and fumes from the trunk road running through the town. With the exception of the St Martin’s walk development there has in fact been relatively little investment in updating the stock of premises for several decades. Shop layouts often look tired. Even where there are branches of well known brands, the ranges they are able to offer often compare unfavourably with those in neighbouring, albeit often much larger, towns. The current Smiths and Halfords site redevelopments offer one potential way forward – involving

the preservation of the facades but the creation of larger state of the art retail premises (as well as updated residential accommodation). Such redevelopments are costly and disruptive in a shopping area like Dorking but do start to address the mismatch between what Dorking can offer and what both shoppers and retailers want to see. Importantly they preserve the historic High Street appearance – something which all regard as one of the town’s real assets.

Some others have suggested a more radical approach to the issue of empty shops – namely actually seeking to contract the overall size of the shopping centre. In fact the way that the planning control regime on change of use has been operated (i.e. with only the most restrictive attitude to loss of A1 space - core retail shops - in operation over a Y shaped area of the High Street east as far as the Post Office and the two arms of West Street/South Street as far as Junction Road) has tended to facilitate some overall diminution of retail space. This may continue – not least as the pressure for new housing creates a strong driver for the sort of changes we are seeing such as apartments replacing car showroom premises at the south end of Vincent Lane. It is not clear that Dorking needs to go further; some have commented that this would be a defeatist and possibly self-fulfilling strategy for turning Dorking increasingly into a dormitory town. The real challenge is thus to create a sustainable mix of retail, commercial and leisure food/drink use which meets the aspirations of the community and thus discourages people from choosing to shop in neighbouring towns.

The powers of the local authorities to bring about such a sustainable mix are limited. The community often has an unrealistic expectation of the ability of public bodies to control rents, to support independent retailers, or even to fine tune the arrival of individual shops to fill notable gaps – like greengrocers and wet fish. Whatever the imperfections, the mix of premises fundamentally represents the outcome of market decisions freely entered into between landlords and lessees. Shops starting up, and at times going out of business, are the manifestation of such a market in operation. Nevertheless the actions of the Town Centre Management team (TCM) do have some influence in where they choose pro-actively to target their efforts on attracting new businesses. To date this has tended to be a process that is relatively closed to the wider community revolving around the TCM team, agents in the town and (generally larger) multiples picked up through retail directories etc. The Head of the Economic Development unit has indicated he would welcome a more active involvement by members of the community indicating from their own experience the sorts of small chains whose branches would be a particular gain for the town.

The markets - during the Healthcheck a number of people have drawn attention to the fact that for an “historic market town” the market(s) have a low profile. The farmers’ market is under pressure - squeezed between farm shops and increasing local sourcing (though not supply chain management) by supermarkets. The very location of the Friday general market away from the High Street makes its profile problematic: the Healthcheck has possible answers to this - both radical and small scale/pragmatic. On the plus side, many have commented how the Italian market (which sold out fast) shows how an innovative offering, well-promoted, can rekindle interest notwithstanding the location.

The radical option for the market is relocation to a high profile on-street location such as the wide section of South Street just East of Waitrose. There is real doubt that such a location would be acceptable to the Highways authorities without extremely intrusive protective measures; nevertheless precedents do exist in e.g. Epsom for split highway/market use and for many this is fundamentally the best way to put the market profile back into the market town of Dorking. This may not however be feasible and at best it will take time to negotiate.

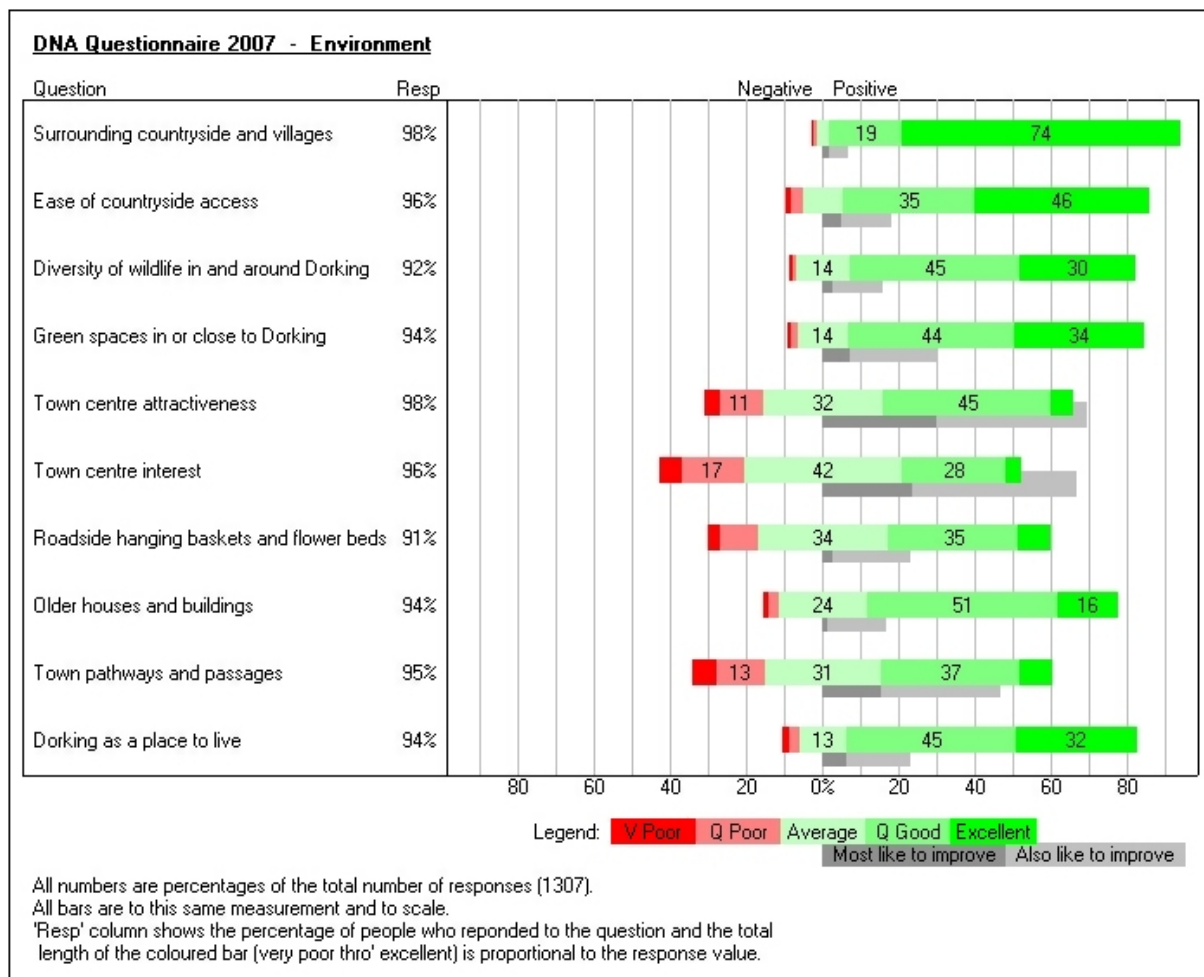
Meanwhile work should be done on other methods of promotion to enhance awareness of trading times and location.

Other ways to reconnect the community to the High Street - it seems likely that one of the groups least satisfied with the High Street offer are those families where both parents are out at work for most of the day. Their shopping time is extremely limited and probably particularly confined to Saturday – precisely when shops are at their most busy and close-by parking, especially at Sainsbury’s and Waitrose, is under most pressure. Particularly if the people concerned are mobile and not living within walking distance to the town centre, the temptation to go to one of the large convenient out of town supermarkets is likely to be overwhelming. One possible way to attract such shoppers’ purchasing power back is to encourage wider scope for evening shopping. While recognising this will not be easy for very small family-run businesses, such an initiative would need wide and sustained buy-in to build the perception that Dorking is broadly open for business on, say, Thursday evenings. One or two food shops open beyond 6 pm and/or occasional events like Gala Night are welcome but no substitute for a wider approach.

Pressure on High Street footfall may increase further as the internet displaces physical presence; Dorking shops which rely on casual browsing may be particularly at risk. This makes it all the more important to address some of the environmental challenges which make the High Street experience less pleasant than it could be.

Tourism – under-exploited in the centre - previous studies have shown the value of the tourism market to the local economy, but it is notable how this is very much positioned in terms of access to the surrounding countryside of the Surrey Hills. Apart from special events like the Leith Hill Musical Festival and the Heritage Open Days, there is relatively little action to attract people into the town. We need to encourage those walking the long distance footpaths, admiring the views from the North Downs or using the network of off-road cycle paths to spend some of their money in the town centre of Dorking. A number of members of the community commented on the lack of tourist information at key gateways like the railway stations, or asked why we did not follow the example of many continental towns and have information boards at strategic lay-bys on the key entrance roads or in the central car park. The existing Tourist Information Centre (TIC) at the Dorking Halls is an excellent resource but it is not easy to locate, particularly for the casual visitor who needs somewhere that can be found easily and quickly. If relocating the TIC is not feasible, it might be possible to increase its impact with remote access information points in the same way that stations like Dorking Deepdene provide an on platform information service at an otherwise unmanned location. The would-be tourist would be presented with a display with basic town map and details of attractions with a press button dedicated dial in during working hours to the TIC.

Key conclusions : the Environment



Introduction - "Dorking is a lovely place to live – far far nicer than larger towns in the area" is a comment from the main DNA survey which reflects that over 75% said that Dorking was quite good or excellent as a place to live. The surrounding countryside and its diverse wildlife were very highly regarded, having the highest positive ratings of all the survey questions. It should be noted that there is a huge amount of volunteer effort through a variety of organisations that helps to preserve this. The ratings for the town centre were on the positive side but not so high; over 60% of people said there is a need for improvement. There is clearly something lacking in the town centre environment, either it isn't attractive or friendly enough.

"Dorking has no town centre" is a survey comment that characterises a missing amenity or heart to the town that would enable people better to connect with town itself. Environment commonly means people's surroundings, and the external conditions that affect development and growth. However, whether people find their environments to be friendly or not is at the heart of whether they want to be in a place and use it. The aim is to have environments that are friendly to all parts of the community, which attract them and our visitors. This section considers the setting and evolution of the town, and why an environment that people are generally happy with is still felt to be in need of improvement. It considers improvements that have been suggested, in terms of attractiveness and interest, and considers those suggestions

with the principle in mind that overall improvements will result from meeting the needs of all potential users.

Rural setting - Dorking's appeal is easily understood. It is situated in the Surrey Hills, an area of outstanding natural beauty, and the town centre has direct views of Box Hill and Ranmore on the North Downs. The Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, green belt, National Trust land and green spaces within the urban boundaries have restrained the growth of the urban Dorking; there is ready access to the surrounding countryside. The Dorking area, although having good transport links, remains essentially rural in character. Visitors enjoy attractive villages as well as the countryside between them. The flora and fauna of the area are well known for their diversity, and in some cases rarity. This is a consequence of the local geology; Dorking is adjacent to chalk downland but the town itself largely sits on greensand. The clays to the south attracted a brick industry. The natural environment is maintained - and needs to be - by the many conservation bodies in order to sustain the diversity of wildlife; important and rare species would otherwise be lost.

The evolution of the built environment - the built environment and many of the old buildings were highly rated in the survey. Dorking is recognised today as an historic market town with over a hundred and fifty listed buildings. The town centre is a conservation area and the town has a further six conservation areas of special architectural interest. It is no coincidence that Dorking has such architectural interest; with the local geology affording brick production, lime kilns and sand; together with wood, much of what a builder needed was to hand. Like many towns of its time Dorking was very much built from its own natural environment.

The High Street contains modern developments and older buildings but is noticeably Victorian, reflecting the time when it, like many other towns, started to expand. The topography of the High Street and many of the buildings standing today are easily recognised in photographs from late Victorian times. To either side of the High Street the domestic properties are also noticeably Victorian, ranging from two-up two-down town cottages through to the large family homes.

Twentieth century architecture of various decades can be recognised, and of course there are examples of the functional 'sixties' developments. There are earlier buildings and the Dorking area has a pre-Roman and Roman history, the town sitting on Roman Stane Street, though its route through the town is now unclear. In the 1930s and following decades there was expansion of building detached and semi-detached houses, close to, but at the time on the periphery, of the town. Council sponsored housing was provided at Goodwyns and Chart Downs, both estates to the south of the town. Housing in these areas has recently been expanded by housing association development to provide affordable housing, of which a significant amount is for rent.

The rural areas contain many old buildings and churches. There are the expected timber-framed and thatched houses and fine examples of nineteenth and early twentieth century private houses. "Joldwynds" in the far west of the district is a striking example of a building in the modern style, dating from the 1930s. Above all, literally, in the town is the spire of St Martin's Church, dwarfed only by the surrounding hills. The spire can be seen from many parts of the town, surrounding fields and hills, and proclaims the town centre.

Attractiveness - the survey responses indicate that the attractiveness of the town centre isn't simply a matter of cosmetics; items such as floral hanging baskets were rated positively. Attractiveness and interest works at two levels; they can be provided ornamentally or functionally. This distinction is important in explaining why people can be very pleased with the town centre at the same time as saying that it needs improving. Responses suggest that Dorking could do more with its assets.

The High Street is said to be a linear experience but is actually Y-shaped with the division into South Street and West Street at Pump Corner. From Pump Corner it is over half a kilometre east to London Road, and there are commercial premises the whole way. What is unusual about Dorking, compared with other town centres, is that there are few shops off the High Street, and where there are, the shopper needs to return to the High Street by the same way that they left in order to continue to other shops. This matters to the environment as pedestrians are channelled to the High Street; there are no convenient parallel routes close enough to the High Street to ease pedestrian congestion on the pavements. Leaving the High Street you are quickly in residential areas, car parks, or St Martin's Churchyard. St Martin's Walk is the most recent large shopping development in the town with a single point of access from the High Street. There is an exit at the back to a car park, but it provides a circuitous route for pedestrians back to any other part of the High Street. To the west of the church there are attractive old streets and passageways, but for the shopper these are detours. For all its apparent compactness, Dorking's town centre requires long walks for the shopper who wants to browse. Shoppers also have to contend with the congestion on the narrow parts of the pavements and with crossing the busy A25 which is the High Street. Time conscious shoppers target the shops they want to visit. A reason given for the reported attractiveness of shopping in other towns is the wider range of shops available, but it could also be that people can make more effective use of their shopping time in these places.

There are indications in the survey that people go to preferred shops in Dorking, rather than going shopping here, a subtle but important distinction. Parts of Dorking town centre are visually unattractive and uninteresting, which again places the focus on the High Street. An example is Mill Lane, which leads directly off the High Street but from there down its length it presents little more than blank brick walls on both sides. It is environmentally cold and no more than a means of access given over to traffic; the pavements are very narrow. Being so close to the High Street, Mill Lane has no attraction and emphasises Dorking as a linear experience for pedestrians. Then almost opposite Mill Lane is Lyons Court, which again is a utilitarian access to a car park. The width of this road is determined by it being a route for large delivery lorries and awkward in places for pedestrians. It is not as stark as Mill Lane but lacks in environmental attractiveness.

Interest - there is a lot that is of interest in Dorking but it needs to be better promoted for visitors and the local community. An information office and sign-posting have been suggested in the survey. These ideas can be further explored. There are now road signs on the approaches to Dorking, proclaiming it is an historic market town, but if visitors are diverted here then the message needs to be better amplified within the town with information and directions as to what is of historic interest.

One of Dorking's assets is its footpaths and passageways, and these can have a role to play in magnifying its other attractions. The town's footpaths were highly rated in the survey but also deemed to be in need of improvement. Improvement is certainly possible and if people can be

attracted to use the footpaths then routes can be promoted between places of interest and provide vistas of the town and countryside.

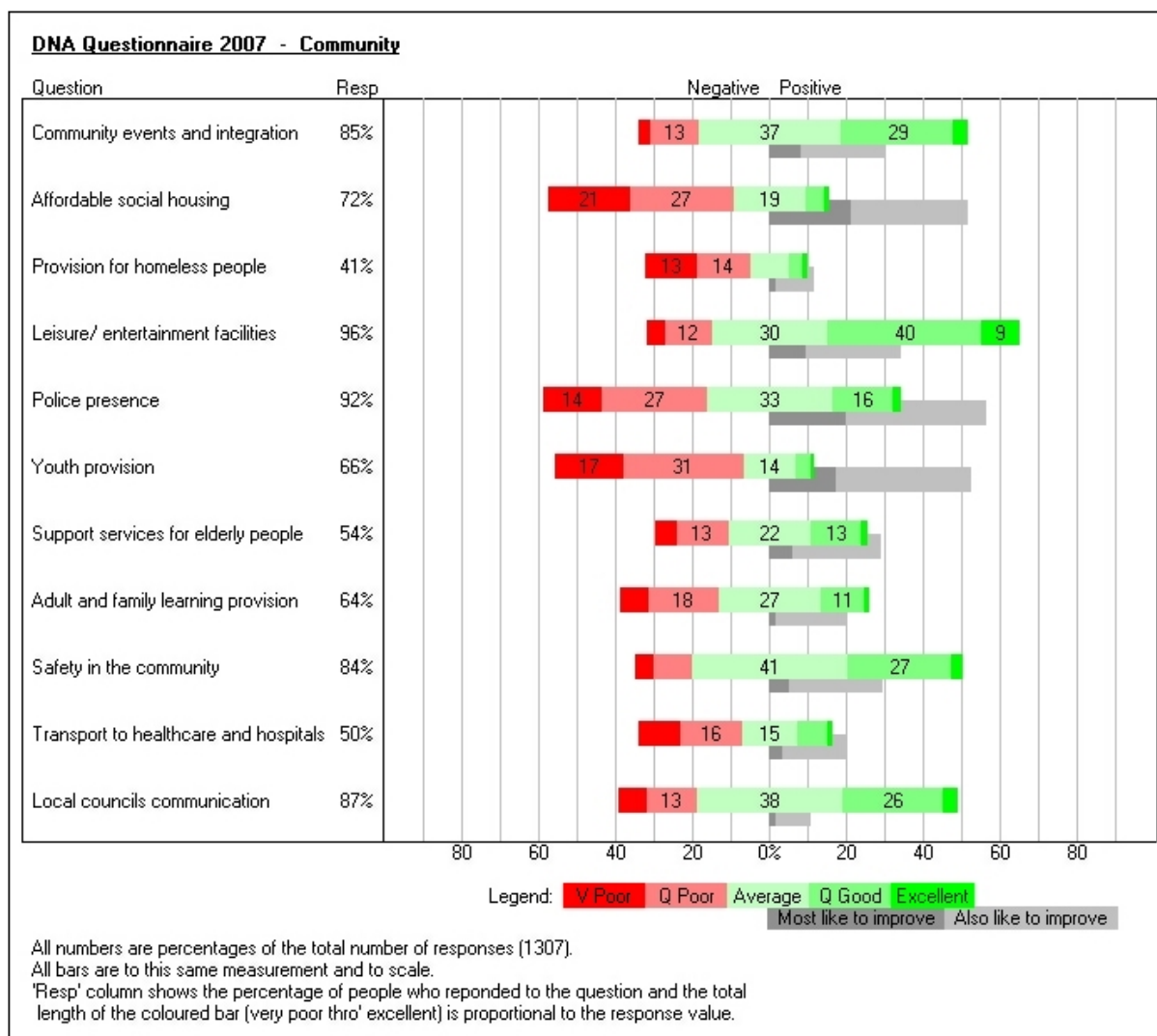
Environmental tensions - environmental tension exists where preserving heritage competes for priority with new developments in support of progress. If an overall consensus can be drawn from the DNA survey on this subject, it can be characterised as a need for the town to develop whilst leaving it as it is. However, it is possible for a town to develop so as to enhance its legacy; this would be part of the improvement called for in the survey.

The other environmental tensions are a consequence of Dorking's greatest reported asset, namely the surrounding protected countryside and its close proximity. This has led to the heart of the town centre remaining compact, and acutely so in places, which places a premium on public space. Environmental questions can be posed. Who or what has Dorking's town centre evolved or been designed to attract; who or what finds it environmentally friendly? Of the people who use the town centre, for whom does it work best? Or is it the case that the different types of users get under each others' feet and are in tension with each other? There are three types of town centre users: those on the pavement, those on the road, and those in buildings. There are good reasons for ensuring that the town centre environment is as friendly as possible for each of these users. Most of us are at least two types of these users, and they are all inter-dependent; traders and shoppers depend on each other and both will often need use of the roads.

What is noticeable about Dorking town centre is the amount of space given to the car and motor vehicles (the word 'car' is used deliberately and is not the same as saying 'the motorist'). In places, the width of A25 in the High Street is constrained by buildings; near Wathen Road, by the high pavement and in West Street. Elsewhere the A25 is disproportionately wide, e.g. in the old market place and South Street, where the space has been given to motor vehicle movement but without giving any vital amenity to the motorist. Better use can be made of this space which is lost to other town centre users and even other needs of motorists. A consequence of the High Street road widths is that the pavements are narrow and congested, and traders and shoppers compete for the limited space. Wares and advertising on the pavement can be attractive, interesting and helpful, but make it more difficult for pedestrians, who also have to contend with road signs and bollards on pavements. Pavement users have a lot to negotiate, added to which are the occasional scaffolding poles.

Reconnecting through design - the environmental tensions in Dorking town centre have evolved because of the pressures on a confined space. Previous design decisions have not helped where they have not taken the needs of all town centre users into account. The problems cannot be solved quickly. However, improvements can be made by ensuring that the needs of all town centre users are considered in future plans. The evidence collected by DNA will be useful and available to the community to respond to consultations in this respect. There are different types of road users, as there are different types of people on the pavements and in the buildings. The aim is to provide environments that are as friendly and attractive as possible for all of them.

Key conclusions: Social and Community



Introduction - 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 residents enjoy a wide range of social, cultural and community provision and services. Research has clearly shown that the community feels very positively about Dorking's location and that most people feel that Dorking is a friendly place to live with a good community feel. There are however some key elements of community living which need attention if the whole community is to reach its true potential. Many of these are outlined in Mole Valley District Council's (MVDC) Community Strategy and reinforced through the DNA research.

Although relatively affluent, the Dorking 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 most prevalent concerns amongst the community are youth provision, affordable housing and the lack of police presence. Factors such as the lack of affordable housing could play a major part in the town attracting younger residents. Dorking, with its increasingly older population, needs to address some of the issues highlighted in the DNA research report if it is to be a vibrant, cohesive and sustainable community in the future.

The vibrancy of our population – there is a rising elderly population, leading to an increasingly aging population compared to the rest of the South East of England. There is also a lower than average population of people aged less than 16 and under 45 compared to both South East and national averages. Dorking faces some significant challenges in order to achieve a healthily balanced community.

Nearly a quarter of people surveyed would most like to improve the support for the elderly in the Dorking area, and those most concerned about elderly provision were in their forties. There are one-third more elderly residents living alone in Dorking than the national average, placing greater demand on care services for the elderly in their homes. Many live alone in large houses and are less inclined to downsize due to the limited availability of the type of houses or appealing retirement accommodation in the area.

Interviews with healthcare professionals have highlighted that the lack of enough public transport, particularly from outlying areas, to doctors' surgeries and hospitals is an issue not only for patients, but also creates undue and unnecessary demand on practitioners' time and resources. Whilst only half of those in the population surveyed by DNA commented on transportation to health services, half of them rated it as either quite poor or very poor. It could be argued that with schemes such as Dorking Good Neighbours and Dial a Ride in operation, the issue is not lack of transport provision but publicity. However, in other areas such as Epsom, neighbourhood driving schemes have proven extremely successful and Dorking would benefit from such schemes being established for particular geographical sectors of the community. It should be added too that people with lower than average incomes also struggle to travel easily to health centres etc.

Housing - one factor which will significantly discourage younger people and families from living here is clearly the issue of affordable housing. Nearly half of those taking part in the survey cited the availability of affordable housing as either poor or very poor, and half see improving affordability of housing as a key area for improvement. The cheapest flats in Dorking cost around £140,000, and a single young person would have to earn in the region of £35,000 to access the housing market. In Dorking there is a substantially higher proportion of people employed in professional and managerial jobs than there is across the region or nationally. This means a substantially lower number of people employed in semi-routine occupations and substantially lower in routine occupations than the regional and national averages respectively. The cost of housing may be one factor which prevents those with lower paid routine employment from living here, and therefore contributes to a less "well balanced" community.

There is also a shortfall in the amount of affordable housing available at entry level. In some regards the cost of housing locally is comparable to many other similar sized towns in the South East, but this should not result in any complacency regarding the issue. Whilst MVDC is working to maximise delivery of affordable housing it will never meet the demand. Housing associations are in the best position to help with this because they have existing sheltered care housing that they can convert. It is also difficult to build new because of the lack of suitable land. 30% of MVDC's social housing fails to meet the Government's Decent Home Standard. The transfer of this housing stock to the private sector will enable capital to be invested to ensure that all social housing accommodation will meet the standard. The new Mole Valley Housing Association will also have the added benefit to the community of bringing in further investment into areas of social housing such as improving the environment, funding a community worker etc. All that said, the fact remains that the high

cost of housing locally is a key factor causing younger people to move out of the area. The resulting trend is that Dorking is getting “older” and the community is not benefiting as fully as it could be from the innovation and active contributions which young adults bring to society.

Youth provision - clearly youth provision is a key concern for local residents with over half saying that it is poor and again over half choosing it as their key area for improvement. One of the main areas for freeform comments in the Healthcheck was youth related provision. Nearly half of those who commented on the range of activities for children rated them as poor, equivalent to one-third of the total sample. There is no doubt that developing more facilities, activities and experiences for young people should be a major priority.

Surrey County Youth Services focus in particular on providing a drop-in at the Mulberry Centre in Dorking and also on Proj-X – a youth outreach work particularly focused on youth in Goodwyns, Chart Downs and Capel - but whilst the youth work is effective, the numbers of young people involved are limited by resources.

The Local Strategic Partnership (a grouping of district and county council officers, voluntary groups and local businesses) has the development of a youth café as a key priority by 2009, and is working with partners including local churches to develop this project. However, the future of Surrey County Council’s Mulberry Centre is questionable, and much may depend on whether suitable property can be found to house a youth café. In the DNA youth focus group young people felt extremely strongly that a youth café was needed in Dorking.

The problem of transport for younger people wanting to travel into Dorking to access facilities such as the Sports Centre and Dorking Halls cinema is a significant one and was also highlighted by the young people themselves. Many rely on lifts from parents, and there is evidence to suggest that those living in social housing are less likely to get into town-centred facilities and provision. In most, if not all, of the outlying areas community halls and buildings are underused and many are in need of updating. These buildings could provide a safe place for youth related activities and clubs, offering young people somewhere to go in their immediate locality. Whilst the council and youth services provide a range of youth activities, the community as a whole needs to find ways to develop provision for youth by training volunteer youth workers, developing local youth facilities in outlying areas, and perhaps youth drop ins in areas where young people are not travelling into more town centred provision.

There is an opportunity for adults to connect with young people through running youth projects and the benefit of the connection will be that a more integrated and cohesive community could develop.

Bridging the gap - Dorking needs to address the need to care well for its older retired population whilst actively encouraging young people to live in Dorking. Further research should take place into specific youth related project ideas following this report if Dorking is to be a town that bridges the gap between young and old.

Building on our Community Success

There is much to celebrate about Dorking. The community, in the main, feels positive about living in the area. Half of everyone surveyed rated leisure and entertainment facilities as good or excellent and half also thought that Dorking’s heritage and visitor attractions are good or

excellent. One-third of those surveyed also felt that community events and integration was good or excellent. However less than 10% of people rated any one of these areas as excellent, indicating that there is room for improvement. One-third rated community events and leisure as only average and over half said that the promotion of Dorking to visitors was only average or poor. More than 4 in 10 people rated police presence as poor with over half wanting to see it improved and a quarter of people would most like to improve community safety. There is room to build on our community successes and to develop a stronger more connected community...

Police presence - despite the fact that Dorking is one of the safest places to live in the country, its residents have significant concerns about the lack of police presence and 1 in 4 want to improve community safety. Young people in the DNA youth focus group also said they felt unsafe in areas of Dorking – in particular around poorly lit alleys and pathways. 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 amongst this age group are higher than they would be if there was more to occupy the youth. Schemes such as Neighbourhood Watch in Goodwyns have contributed to reducing criminal activity, but more could be done to give the community confidence in terms of safety.

The fear of crime is significantly disproportionate to the level of actual crime (which drives policing priorities) and there is a clear information gap in the community accepting that the Dorking area is indeed generally a very safe one. Where possible other agencies, MVDC and public bodies need to work with the police in communicating and regularly publicising the positive aspects of our community safety. Regular positive communication could bring about a reduction in the fear of crime as well as improved lighting in dimly lit pathways and alleys.

Sports and leisure - the community benefits from good areas of open space and sports and leisure facilities. Membership of sports clubs is high and the number of people enjoying the Sports Centre and Dorking Halls is increasing year on year. However, one-third of people surveyed chose leisure and entertainment as one of their key areas for improvement.

There is scope for further development of sports activities. A wider range of classes at Dorking Sports Centre would be welcomed and young people would like to see more classes for their age group. Those on low incomes may be losing out on accessing quality sporting opportunities, and support for low income families accessing sports clubs and Dorking Sports Centre would be of real benefit. Indeed in other areas, Sports Centres offer reduced rates for low income families. There is a call for a multi sports floodlit all weather training pitch, athletics track and a Martial Arts Centre. More publicity and promotion of the area in terms of its natural environment for cycling and walking would also attract visitors to the town.

Many young people are members of theatre arts groups, but the cost of these often prohibits young people in lower income families from joining. An affordable community arts group in an area such as Goodwyns would be of real benefit to the community.

Given the high percentage of people already keen on sports and leisure activities, combined with the fact that many young people are attracted to such activities, Dorking should look to develop itself further as a high quality provider of sports and leisure ensuring that people in outlying areas have sufficient transport to clubs and that those on lower incomes, perhaps in social housing, are actively participating.

Culture, heritage and community events

Whilst one-third of people surveyed rated Dorking's community events and integration as good or excellent, another one-third rated events as average and yet another one-third feel that this is one of the most important aspects to improve in Dorking. Community events such as Gala Night, bonfire displays, Heritage Open Days and Mole Valley Arts Festival "Arts Alive" are extremely popular in and around Dorking but these central events and festivals are few and far between.

The role of festivals and events in benefiting the economy and strengthening local communities is increasingly recognised throughout the UK and worldwide. Festivals, events, and arts are crucial for promoting community cohesion and enabling us to celebrate our diversity. Events and public spaces bring people together and enable people to experience and enjoy many different cultures. Some of the specific social and economic impacts of festivals and events can be as follows:

- showcasing the culture and heritage of the locality
- stimulating community cohesion and developing aspiration
- increasing cultural participation and audience development
- contributing to local pride, sense of place, and enthusiasm
- providing learning and skill development opportunities
- attracting visitors to the area and generating significant associated expenditure
- creating and enhancing a positive image and reputation of the locality
- promoting increased business activity within the private and community sectors
- showcasing the locality as a great place to live, work, and visit – supporting inward investment and talent attraction strategies
- attracting people into venues and open spaces they would not normally visit and stimulating new interests

Dorking has much to celebrate in terms of its heritage and culture but much more could be made of this inheritance. This could be achieved through festivals, events, ideas such as placing sculptured benches in the town, and the arts, and also through the development of a town centre Heritage and Visitor Centre. This Centre could act as a signpost reconnecting Dorking's residents and visitors with their cultural past, history, famous people, visitor attractions, town trails, leisure, entertainment and sporting opportunities. A Heritage and Visitor Centre would act as a hub for promoting all that Dorking and the surrounding hills has to offer and would create a greater sense of value and civic pride. Research should now be done to investigate the feasibility of the Dorking Heritage and Visitor Centre.

In conclusion - the Healthcheck research strongly suggests that Dorking has a community which is largely content with its location, character, community feel, friendliness, leisure facilities, heritage and visitor attractions. There are threats to the vibrancy and vitality of the local population in terms of the need to address the issues of affordable housing, youth provision, care for the older population and awareness of police presence. There are opportunities too, to develop further Dorking's leisure and sporting provision, combat the fear of crime through positive publicity, and to celebrate and promote Dorking's cultural heritage and attractions. There is room to build on our community successes and to develop a stronger more connected community.

Overall Conclusion

In our introduction to the key findings section very near the beginning of this report we use the phrase “could be better” to characterise the way that many people feel about Dorking. This may seem strange to the casual observer who sees a town and immediate area that is particularly attractive and clearly a desirable place in which to live. However we believe strongly that the detailed research and analysis that we have done supports both the fact that people do feel that Dorking “could be better”, and also that they are right to have a concern that it needs to be better. As yet few of the potential problems that DNA identified have a serious impact on the quality of the lives of most of the residents. But if present trends continue we will increasingly have to face the impact of:

- congestion and poor internal transport links
- declining retail demand outside peak periods
- tourism which tends to concentrate on the natural surroundings and not bring value into the centre
- lack of investment in the urban environment
- failure to grasp the sustainability agenda positively
- fragmentation of our social composition

DNA therefore believe that the body of evidence in this report and supporting material make a compelling case for the need to address these issues and to work towards a vision of Reconnecting Dorking to achieve:

- a town whose physical links work better
- an economy which is sustainable and vibrant
- a high quality urban environment which puts people first
- greater social and community cohesion

The Annexes to this report contain the ideas and supporting evidence for some of the key projects that can help both to address immediate concerns and to help to achieve the vision.

What happens next and how you can help

This phase of the DNA healthcheck, as agreed with our funders and stakeholders, was to carry out the analysis and produce and present this report. This has now been completed.

However the Healthcheck process is about much more than just producing a report and the next phase of work will be very different. Those working to help take forward the DNA vision will evaluate all of the ideas and suggestions that have been collected in the course of the work so far (these are listed at Annex F) and any others that are subsequently proposed. Detailed action plans will be developed for the selected projects, which will include validating the community need and ensuring that funds and volunteers are available to deliver them. The projects will then be delivered to help in Reconnecting Dorking.

If you would like to be involved with, or perhaps lead, a project that will help to improve Dorking please contact DNA via our website www.dorkingdna.org and we will be delighted to get in touch with you.